



# Socioeconomic context and the association between marriage and Mexico–U.S. migration

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyze how the association between Mexico–U.S. migration and marriage varies across socioeconomic settings in origins. Using Mexican Migration Project data and employing bilevel survival analysis with controls for socioeconomic, migrant network, and marriage market characteristics and family size, I find that single people are most likely to migrate relative to those married in areas of recent industrialization, where the Mexican patriarchal system is weaker and economic opportunities for both men and women make post-marital migration less attractive. Marital status is not significant in agriculture-dependent areas, where the bargaining power of husbands might be higher relative to other settings; their age-profiles of earnings flatter; and remunerated female work scarcer, making migration attractive later in the life course.

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## 1. Introduction

Individuals decide to migrate—or not—through calculations in which various social institutions may play significant roles (e.g., Stark and Bloom, 1985; Tilly and Brown, 1967). Most notably, family members can assert various kinds of support (Flores, 2005) and opposition to the move, the latter even in patriarchal contexts with relatively well-established migrant networks, like Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). The manifestation and end product of such assistance and resistance reflect not only family members' preferences but also their bargaining position within the household or family, and hence the normative context that structures their roles, at least loosely, in generational and gendered ways (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992).

Migration decisions are also associated with socioeconomic *milieus* in places of origin. In the case of migration between Mexico and the U.S., which is often temporary, the likelihood of migration may be highest not in the poorest areas but in those with a fair degree of (small-scale) investment opportunities (Lindstrom and Lauster, 2001). Context may matter partly because institutions have a different composition or operate differently across settings. For instance, migrant networks seem to propagate less swiftly in metropolitan areas than in small towns and rural localities (Fussell and Massey, 2004), perhaps because of the greater attractiveness and diversity of urban labor markets or the peculiarities of social organization of neighborhoods in large cities.

In a similar fashion, the composition of families, bargaining position of spouses, or the very benefits of migration for those in different stages of the family life cycle could vary across settings in ways that could imply their association with migration has different orders of magnitude or direction. For instance, female labor-force participation in remunerated activities in a patriarchal society like the Mexican could very well be possible in some settings while not in others given both local economic development and normative context. This could in turn influence the bargaining position of women with regarding a potential move, or the relative benefits of migration for married men *per se*.

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While familial arrangements and socioeconomic conditions do seem to matter in their own right, there is little research on how the relevance of institutions such as marriage and the family could differ with regards to the migration process across socioeconomic settings. From the perspective of a migrant-to-be, marriage and family formation may bring new social and economic obligations that could either discourage (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994) or stimulate movement (Kanaiaupuni, 2000; Massey et al., 1987: Chapter 7). Responses to these obligations may in turn depend on local opportunities and local norms (Aysa and Massey, 2004). Thus, the direction, or at least magnitude, of the association between migration and marriage, which is one of the most relevant markers of changing obligations and bargaining positions for males, could vary conspicuously across socioeconomic contexts.

This paper analyzes variation across socioeconomic settings in the association between Mexico–U.S. migration and marital status/family life cycle for quasi-completed male cohorts, using retrospective labor, migration, marriage, and fertility histories from the Mexican Migration Project database. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the social construction of gender may affect the migration of men and women in different ways (e.g., Curran et al., 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Pedraza, 1991). As such, I focus on the experience of single and married men with a gendered socioeconomic lens in mind while considering how variation in the association between migration and marriage under different socioeconomic conditions in origins may be expressing the different variants of the patriarchal family model prevalent in Mexico or, at the very least, mediating the effects of such patriarchal system.

I find that marital status is not strongly or significantly associated with the likelihood of a first U.S. migration *on the margin*, though having children aged 2–5 is *negatively* associated with U.S. migration in the vast majority of communities. Moreover, the association between marriage and migration varies conspicuously across settings. In (rural) areas heavily dependent on agriculture, the likelihood of becoming a U.S. migrant does not vary significantly before and after marriage. In sharp contrast, men living in moderate-sized urban areas where women have some opportunities in for paid, perhaps less informal labor in manufacturing are least likely to migrate to the U.S. for the first time after marriage. Before presenting and discussing the results, I summarize previous findings on the topic and explain why one should expect the association between marriage and migration to vary across settings. I also introduce the data and analytical strategy appropriate (if not perfect) for the purposes of the paper.

## 2. Background

The literature on the relationship between marriage and spatial mobility has mostly been devoted to internal migration and residential moves (e.g., Courgeau, 1977; Flowerdew and Al-Hamad, 2004; Juárez, 1996; Mulder and Wagner, 1993; Sandefur and Scott, 1981), finding single people are more geographically mobile than married individuals. The evidence with respect to international movement is scarcer but points in the same direction. Analyzing migration choices of Mexican male household heads in a bivariate fashion, Massey et al. (1987: Chapter 7) found a general pattern across the familial lifecycle: the likelihood of migration “begins at a high level among young unmarried men, *falls after marriage*, rises with the arrival of children, and then falls again as the children mature and leave home” (p. 200; emphasis added). This pattern varied somewhat across the four communities studied by the authors. Ambitious young unmarried men were especially likely to migrate to the U.S. in communities with limited opportunities (in their study, a rural town with a high proportion of landless households) while fluctuations over the life cycle were much less pronounced in the two urban-industrial settings studied by Massey and colleagues. Their analysis, however, failed to control for individual differences in exposure to married life, among other confounders.

Kanaiaupuni (2000) compared the migration dynamics of male and female household heads in an event-history multivariate setup, finding that the likelihood of U.S. migration is higher for both single men and, especially, women relative to their married counterparts.<sup>1</sup> However, as Massey and colleagues posited, Kanaiaupuni found that the number of children ages 0–10 in the household was positively associated to male U.S. migration, though the predicted probabilities of migration for married men with children were still much lower than those of single individuals (see Kanaiaupuni, 2000: Table 6). As Kanaiaupuni’s estimates are net of socioeconomic characteristics of both individuals and communities, they further suggest the migration of men does not put them at odds but could even resonate with their expected roles as providers. Still, they also imply mobility is a more complicated endeavor for married individuals –especially women– net of family size and other characteristics.

Other studies have looked at the issue at hand by focusing on gender differentials in migration dynamics while tackling marital status in an indirect fashion. In their study of migration by household position and gender, Cerrutti and Massey (2001) found that *wives* of household heads tend to migrate mostly for family reasons. In contrast, (unmarried) daughters are more likely to move for work-related reasons, responding to similar factors to those their brothers and fathers respond to. As such, both marital status and generation seem to be a rather relevant determinant of gendered patterns of migration in Mexico, at least for women.

Gendered patterns of migration, especially after marriage, seem to be a reflection of the Mexican patriarchal family system, where marital unions tend to be more formal and less unstable but where women tend to have a subordinate role in household decisions to that of their male partners (Oliveira, 1998). For instance, Massey et al. (2006) found that the migratory behavior of married women in patriarchal settings such as the Mexican and Costa Rican is sensitive to the previous

<sup>1</sup> For similar results for the migration decision of Puerto Rican women, see Ortiz (1996).

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