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What is This?

WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN A MEXICAN SENDING COMMUNITY:

Migration as Crisis and the Struggle to Sustain an Alternative

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Early research suggested that migration changed gender roles by offering women new wages and exposing them to norms of gender equity. Increasingly, however, scholars have drawn attention to the role of structural factors, such as poverty and undocumented status, in mediating the relationship between migration and gender. This article takes such insights a step further by showing that migrant communities' reactions to structural marginality—and their efforts to build alternatives in their home villages—may also draw women into new gender roles. I demonstrate this mechanism through the case of San Miguel, a Mixtec sending community in Southern Mexico where, in the context of U.S. migration, once-excluded women came to predominate in civic affairs. In response to harsh conditions in the United States, migrants from San Miguel returned to their village. To make this economically feasible, they sought state development resources. Men, who often stayed in the United States as breadwinners, relied on sympathetic women back in the sending community to advocate on their behalf. Meanwhile, women's own rejection of

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migrant life gave them new interest in sustaining their village. For both, incorporating women into politics offered a strategy to secure needed resources and avoid assimilating into an undocumented underclass.

Keywords: *gender; return migration; political participation*

Until the 1990s, women in the Mixtec village of San Miguel, Oaxaca, Mexico, were excluded from community politics. Under indigenous custom, only men participated in town elections and civil service (Danielson and Eisenstadt 2009; Velasquez 2004). As one village president described, "Women could not even approach the town hall. They did not come to the community assemblies; they did not go before the judge, not even to the schools." Rather, husbands represented their wives in civic affairs.

Yet, as ever more migrants from San Miguel went to work in California, women's position changed. They began to serve on committees, attend meetings, and vote for the first time; in fact, in the span of just ten years, they came to outnumber men. "Their participation was an explosion," the former president went on, "so much that the school committees are now dominated by women; the health committees are dominated by women, the government social programs, too." This article traces the mechanisms behind this radical shift.

Early research suggested that migration altered gender relationships because it offered women new wages and exposed migrants to egalitarian gender norms (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Mahler and Pessar 2006). More recently, scholars have shown that migrating to the United States may not always be liberating, especially for women who are undocumented, poor, or socially isolated (Dreby and Schmalzbauer 2013; Parrado and Flippen 2005; Schmalzbauer 2009). These scholars have shed light on how intersectional constraints can reinforce men's domination. However, few have explored the gender implications of migrants' *responses* to social and economic exclusion, particularly the decision to forsake the United States and return to their communities of origin. This article extends existing research by looking at how return migration reshapes gender relations on the sending side. As net migration from Mexico to the United States falls below zero (Passel, Cohn, and González-Barrera 2012), this process demands more attention.

Looking at the implications of return also helps rethink existing research about gender on the sending side. Studies of sending communities tend to focus on how men's migration impacts "women left behind."

Often, they argue that women take on new roles when pressed to "fill in" for economic and political duties abandoned by migrant men (e.g., Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007). Yet, existing frameworks do little to consider how women's willingness to fill in may be shaped by their *own* migration experiences—and by migrant men's intentions to return.

Here, I shed light on the mechanisms of this process by examining women's *political engagement*, which I define as attending village meetings, voting, and holding public office. Scholars of migration have paid less attention to gender relations in the civic arena than in the household, despite the fact that gendered politics have changed rapidly and often reverberate beyond the home. The political arena also offers distinct analytical insights from the domestic, highlighting ways women's agency may be directed not only at their husbands but also at broader sources of oppression. And, this lens illuminates the possibilities for men's collaboration in gender change. I use the case of San Miguel, because it exemplifies the difficulties migrant communities may confront. First, its migrants were undocumented, facing hostile receiving conditions in the United States; second, the village's indigenous self-government was directly threatened by emigration. To illustrate the importance of these factors, I draw on 51 in-depth interviews, a community survey, and a year of participant observation.

I argue that in San Miguel, women took on new political roles as a strategy to forestall "crisis." This crisis had two parts. First, in the United States, migrants' undocumented status, political exclusion, and economic exploitation undermined their ability to lead tranquil, safe lives. We might expect women from patriarchal communities to benefit from emigrating. Yet, in this case, poverty and fear of deportation compelled both men and women migrants to seek an alternative life back in San Miguel. Often, men postponed this hope and stayed in the United States to fulfill their breadwinning roles (Broughton 2008). Many women, however, returned home.

Second, given the economic crisis of the Mexican countryside, migrants had to find an alternative means of sustaining themselves in order to make return feasible. Having rejected migration, they became reinvested in seeking state resources, which provide the primary funds for "development" in rural Mexico. To obtain these resources, however, they had to contend with political elites who had historically controlled state money flowing into the village. Because migrant women often returned before men, they played key roles in this effort. Men migrants, longing to return from afar, encouraged women to serve as their proxies in this political fight.

While this case appears to echo studies of women who "fill in" for migrant men, here, women's own harsh experiences in the United States made them willing to take on new political roles. They entered civic affairs not to accommodate men's migration and their own immobility, but to actively build lives they had reason to value, in the face of structural marginality. They saw civic involvement as the only alternative to going back to work in the United States. In sum, faced with exclusion and exploitation on the U.S. side, women returned to Mexico to avoid assimilating into an undocumented underclass. Once home, they took on new political roles in order to secure needed resources and sustain an alternative way of life.

THEORIES OF GENDER, MIGRATION, AND "WOMEN WHO STAY"

Traditional research on gender and migration focused on the household and suggested that migrant women gained status as they earned new wages and saw egalitarian gender norms in the United States (Curran and Saguy 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Milkman 2010). As a result, researchers believed, women's connections to the sending side diminished over time. Rather than examine binational *interactions*, such studies often used sending communities as a "control" against which to gauge changes in migrants' domestic relationships (Hirsch 2003; Parrado and Flippen 2005). This analytical framework, I argue, predisposed them to associate men's domination with the sending side, while linking women's empowerment to cultural assimilation in the United States. Studies of return migration echoed this framework, suggesting that families who returned reverted to "Mexico's" patriarchal norms (Guarnizo 1997; Pessar 2001). When gender relations in sending villages did shift, scholars often attributed the changes to "social remittances," arguing that migrants had sent back egalitarian gender ideas from the United States (Levitt 2001; Smith 2006).

Meanwhile, studies of political participation—while fewer—focused on differences between men and women. They argued that women participated more than men in U.S. institutions (Hardy-Fanta 1993) and attributed this contrast to the improvements in women's domestic status on arrival in the United States (Jones-Correa 1998). Men, they suggested, remained more connected to sending communities because they hoped to reclaim the social status they had lost on the receiving end (Curran and Saguy 2001; Goldring 2001). Albeit unintentionally, such gendered contrasts affirmed

the notion that assimilating to the United States empowered women. In contrast, I focus on political participation because it draws attention to *collaboration* between men and women and to the actions of women who do *not* feel empowered in the context of the United States.

My approach builds on recent studies, informed by theories of intersectionality, that question whether migration benefits women (Crenshaw 1991). This newer research notes that structural factors such as class, race, legal status, and social networks may hinder migrant women's empowerment in the United States and even make their lives worse (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Zentgraf 2002). In the household, they show, isolation, undocumented status, poverty, and lack of social services can intensify men's domination (Menjívar 1999; Schmalzbauer 2009). For instance, Kibria (1990) and Salcido and Adelman (2004) note that migrating can exacerbate domestic violence, while Joanna Dreby (2010) argues that migrant women suffer great emotional burdens when separated from their children. Dreby and Leah Schmalzbauer (2013) add that migrant women's autonomy varies with their geographic and social location in the host state. In particular, for undocumented women the growing criminalization of migrant "illegality" (De Genova 2002; Menjívar and Abrego 2012) can provoke fear and override the gender benefits of migration (Parrado and Flippen 2005). While these studies consider the constraints migrant women face in the United States, I add to the literature by looking at those who give up and go home.

By highlighting women's return migration, I bring U.S.-side studies into conversation with research about migrants' communities of origin. On the sending side, scholars show that women partnered with migrant men often "fill in" for men's duties in farming, wage labor, and community governance (Aysa and Massey 2004; Rees 2006). While these new responsibilities may bring burdens (Le Espiritu 2003; Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007), scholars argue that women can also gain power when they take on men's economic and political roles (Gulati 1992; Parreñas 2005). Still, this sending-side research tends to look at women who have never migrated and imply that they accommodate men's absence "by default," because they lack mobility of their own (Salgado de Snyder 1993). Few consider how women's migration experiences condition their hometown engagement. Meanwhile, studies that look at returned migrants' involvement in community politics have said little about gender (Fox and Bada 2008; Portes 2007).

I build on recent works that underscore the agency of "women who stay." Archambault (2010), for instance, argues that nonmigrant women

actively choose to stay in sending communities, to gain autonomy from their husbands. I extend the focus on women's agency to political engagement, noting that women may intentionally stay—or return—home in order to pursue lifestyles they value vis-à-vis their social positions in the United States and the globalized economy. As they respond to the experience of social marginality, they may also collaborate—rather than jockey—with their husbands. These responses to migrant life provide a more complex picture of "social remittances" than we have seen in the past (Levitt 2001): rather than adopting and bringing back U.S. ideas about gender, these women take on new positions because they are trying *not* to live as they did in the United States.

This argument brings migration scholarship into conversation with broader feminist theories that question the assumption that women's political engagement is driven by integration into capitalism, liberal rights, or Western norms (Ray 2006; Silvey 2007). For instance, scholars such as Blackwell (2012) and Hernández Castillo (2001) highlight how women can gain political influence through resisting neoliberal globalization, as in the case of Mexico's Zapatista Movement. Likewise, women may become political actors through collective duties, social obligations, or their positions as mothers, as in the case of Argentina's Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* or other Latin American social movements (Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000; Safa 1990). Similarly, women may advocate gender changes in the service of "traditions"—like San Miguel's indigenous community governance—that appear from a Western vantage point to be linked to patriarchy (MacLeod 1992; Mahmood 2005).

Finally, to help explain women's reasoning and collaboration with men, I use the concept of crisis. Scholars show that during public emergencies, when shared values or resources are threatened, both men and women become particularly willing to alter gender boundaries. World War II America, when women stepped into the workforce as "Rosie the Riveters," offers a classic example (Milkman 1982). In these contexts, men—as "gatekeepers" (Connell 2005)—may be especially amenable to altering gender roles as part of a "strategy" to confront other threats. While others have noted that women "left behind" can experience migration as a crisis, inasmuch as it interrupts their lives, imposes emotional pain, and disintegrates their homes (Menjívar 2011), I add that their coping strategies may also form part of a response to a second crisis: the lived experience of migrant "illegality" abroad.

METHODS

This analysis requires shifting the lens typically used in research on gender and migration. First, my approach is binational. I look at migration as a back-and-forth, rather than a linear phenomenon, and I consider how migrants' experiences of marginality in the United States inform sending community dynamics. Second, I take political engagement as my object of analysis and examine the community level rather than the household. In politics, women articulate logics for action that would not be visible in the domestic arena. Looking at the community as a whole also illuminates the collective nature of strategies to avoid marginality and reveals collaboration between the sexes. Third, I extend literature on migrant women's poverty, exclusion, and constraint by looking at how they act agentically in response.

In order to reconstruct the historical process of women's political engagement in San Miguel, I use 51 life-history interviews with 29 women and 22 men and hundreds more informal conversations, gathered during ten months of participant observation in San Miguel and its primary destination of Vista, California, from 2009 to 2010. While some scholars use surveys to explore the relationships among women's migration, employment, and participation in politics, quantitative studies remain confined to existing variables, such as those indicating household balances of power. Qualitative research highlights logics understood by migrant communities that may not be intuitive to researchers (Mahler and Pessar 2006).

For formal interviews, I selected leaders, activists, and public figures who could provide insights or played key roles in women's entry into civic affairs. I also interviewed a cross-section of the community in order to understand various members' experiences of migration and reasons for engaging in politics. Although I began with women, I included men once respondents alerted me to their important role in women's engagement. Though individual respondents' recollections can be suspect, the fact that I was examining a public process—and not aggregating individual cases—enabled me to triangulate across interviews, news reports, and ethnographic observations. Conducting participant observation simultaneously with interviews helped me build trust, observe ongoing political negotiations and gender relationships, and discuss community history.

To supplement these data, I used village archives, newspaper reports, and a 2011 survey conducted by the University of California San Diego's

Mexican Migration Field Research Program in San Miguel and Vista, California, in which I collaborated along with Garcia and Keyes (2012) and Hernández Díaz (2009, 2011). The survey included everyone in the home community ages 15–65 (n = 717) and a snowball of relatives in California (n = 121). It asked about migration history, gender, and political participation (see Fitzgerald et al. 2013 for details). Finally, I used secondary sources to compare my findings to similar cases (Barrera-Bassols 2006; Worthen 2012).

BACKGROUND: GENDER AND MIXTEC MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Women's empowerment in San Miguel seems surprising because Mixtec villages are lower than mestizo communities on just about all gender-related indicators, including rates of domestic violence, educational disparities, and importantly for this study, representation in local politics (Barrera-Bassols 2006; Danielson and Eisenstadt 2009; Instituto de la Mujer Oaxaqueña 2010).[1] Despite universal suffrage in Mexico and indigenous women's prominent roles in local activism (Maldonado and Rodriguez 2004; Stephen 2007), indigenous self-governance allows men to represent their wives and daughters in local civic affairs. As a result, women in 91 percent of indigenous villages have never held political office; in 75 percent, they do not participate politically in practice; and in 19 percent, they remain legally excluded from voting (Barrera-Bassols 2006; Velasquez 2004). In such circumstances, we might expect U.S. migration to promise women greater influence and autonomy.

Yet, the cohesive civic traditions in indigenous communities help us rethink how women's "empowerment" can emerge in defense of non-Western practices historically associated with patriarchy. Economically, San Miguel resembles most Mexican migrant-sending villages; it is poor, rural, and historically dependent on subsistence corn farming. As of 2005, it had a population of 1,500 people, with nearly two thirds living in houses with dirt floors (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Geografía e Informática 2005). However, distinct from Central and Western Mexico, where most theories of gender and migration developed, indigenous Oaxacan communities are known for their corporate political systems and internal solidarity (Nader 1990). In a set of practices called *Usos y Costumbres* ("Ways and Customs"), observed informally since the colonial era and legally recognized in 1995, adult men had to attend community assemblies and serve in

the village government on a rotating basis. Therefore, emigration was particularly destabilizing to indigenous villages.

Migration from rural Oaxaca to the United States increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, as Mexico's debt crises, structural adjustment, North American economic integration, and pressure to privatize land undermined the price of Mexican corn and, with it, rural communities' subsistence livelihoods.[2] Meanwhile, the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 provided new opportunities for earlier immigrants, opening space at the bottom of the labor hierarchy. While Mixtec families had long migrated for work within Mexico, they now began to seek jobs in California as strawberry pickers, day laborers, and housekeepers.

On the U.S. side, however, Mixtecs have endured deeper economic and social marginality than mestizo groups (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Runsten and Kearney 1994). Not only do they face discrimination from other Mexicans, but also, they have been undocumented for longer and in a more hostile context than earlier migrants. Because Mixtecs arrived later, they lacked access to legalization through the 1986 U.S. amnesty (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). Therefore, though many Mixtecs have lived in the United States for more than a decade, most still lack authorization. Among survey respondents from San Miguel, 95 percent entered the United States without papers and 70 percent remained unauthorized as of 2011, despite having lived in the United States an average of 17 years. As a result, Mixtec workers have been confined to the lowest rungs of the U.S. labor market, particularly farm work, facing rampant labor abuses for which that sector is notorious (Holmes 2007; Mines, Nichols, and Runsten 2010). They have also tended to integrate more slowly, settle less, and be more likely to return to Mexico (Zabin et al. 1993). While the economic crisis during my fieldwork in 2009 and 2010 may have increased Mixtecs' rate of return, past studies show that this is an ongoing pattern; even in the 1990s, 85 to 95 percent of families in Mixtec migrant-sending communities included returned migrants (Ortiz Gabriel 1992). Undocumented status has also become more of a liability for contemporary migrants like Mixtecs than it was for earlier migrants, because of growing violence against immigrants (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2003; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). This is particularly true in the politically conservative border region of San Diego County, where most migrants from San Miguel lived (Varsanyi 2010). There, because of aggressive immigration policing, many respondents felt terrified—including of public services—setting the stage for their return.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE
FIGHT FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

Reacting to Migration as "Crisis"

Many migrants from San Miguel saw life in the United States as a "crisis" because, being undocumented, they faced economic exploitation and perpetual threats from the police. Surveys show that 67 percent feared driving and 64 percent feared walking in public (Garcia and Keyes 2012). Therefore, many avoided public events, including meetings of the San Miguel hometown association. Meanwhile, interviewees' experiences of labor abuses—which are closely correlated with undocumented status (Brownell 2010; Gleeson 2012)—sealed their aversion to life in the United States and their interest in seeking more tranquil lives in Mexico. Feeling discriminated against, immobile, and exploited, 89 percent of migrants from San Miguel hoped to return home, and only 30 percent stayed in the United States more than five years.

For instance, in 1993, Milagros Garcia—then in her early 30s—went to Bakersfield, California to pick grapes with her husband, who had already done several short-term sojourns there. Soon, Milagros forsook the United States:

> I ended up working in the fields, and it was awful. I only lasted a month and a half before coming back, but it was so degrading. I was there in the heat, and it's so dirty. You couldn't even see the color of my tennis shoes. . . . Have you seen how they [workers] cover themselves when picking grapes? I did that, too, one handkerchief on the mouth, another on the neck, another on the head—because you get soaked with your own sweat, and then it cuts the heat a little bit . . . and they're always pressuring you to hurry, hurry.

Milagros escaped the United States by returning to San Miguel, adding that she never wanted to go again.

For women migrants, living in the United States imposed constraints above and beyond those faced by men. Although 90 percent of women respondents in California held paid jobs—traditionally seen as mechanisms of liberation—more than two thirds said they lost domestic autonomy and influence upon arrival in the United States.

Men from San Miguel tended to have been in the United States longer and be more familiar with public spaces than women, so their wives and daughters depended on them for information about risky areas and immigration patrols. For instance, Lupita moved to Vista, California, in

1998, at the age of 18. When she arrived, her husband had already been a strawberry picker there for seven years. Although Lupita was employed as a housekeeper, her husband controlled her mobility:

> When I arrived, I felt despair sometimes, and I would sit in the house and cry. I wasn't familiar with anything, and I was afraid to go out. Then, he [my husband] would tell me, "Don't go out much, because immigration control hangs out down there at the corner." . . . I was afraid to walk outside alone. It was very hard. . . . Except when I went to work, I just stayed locked in my room. I'm not really informed about where [it's safe] to go, so I waited for the weekends to go out with him.

Feeling confined, Lupita longed to go back to San Miguel. She added, "I want to return to Mexico. I like my village; I like it a lot. There, you don't have this fear of going out, like here. There, no, because you're free."

Similarly, Mercedes explained that coming to live with her husband—particularly in a context of poverty and stress—exposed her to greater domestic violence. In 1994, Mercedes, then 34, joined her husband in Vista, California, where he had already been working for several years. She said, "In the U.S., I came to live a life of abuse. I lived in poverty in San Miguel, but in the U.S. I came to suffer even more." Harsh immigration control immobilized women like Lupita and Mercedes within the household and deepened their dependence on their husbands, as has been shown to be the case in other scholars' accounts, particularly of women in rural contexts (see Dreby and Schmalzbauer 2013).

The combination of men's control and fear of public policing also made it hard for migrant women to participate in politics on the U.S. side. For example, Paloma, an undocumented respondent in her mid-30s who cleaned homes in Temecula, California, recounted that her husband—who had permanent resident status—refused to let her participate in events run by the San Miguel migrant community. She explained, "I used to like to participate in [civic] events. Now, I would like to be involved, to be part of things. . . . But, it is one of those things that I can't decide for myself. He [my husband] always has to decide for me or give me permission to do something or not. He doesn't let me feel free." Paloma worried that if she left her husband, he might retaliate by trying to get her deported. Because she and her husband had different legal status, her mobility remained on his terms. In short, fear of immigration enforcement compounded women's subordination to men, while men's control at home magnified their confinement. This intensified gender dependency made women, especially, want to return.

Migrants chose to return to San Miguel as an alternative to such abuse. As of 2011, most adults over age 30 in San Miguel—including 57 percent of women and 88 percent of men—had migrated at least once. Women like Lupita, Mercedes, and Paloma, fed up with harsh treatment and less responsible than men for family earnings, often returned more promptly. These migrants' return had a ripple effect, as women in San Miguel who had never been to the United States came to see migration as a hardship. During my participant observation in the village, women—including those who had never worked in the United States—regularly made spontaneous comments that illustrated their aversion to the United States, such as, "Why would I go to the United States? Only to suffer." For instance, Angela, a 48-year-old mother of five, refused to seek work in California. Like more than 60 percent of adult women living in San Miguel as of 2010, Angela had migrated within Mexico to do farm work when she was young. Then, starting in the 1980s, her husband got a job in California's strawberry fields, where he shuttled back and forth, often living in caves dug out alongside farms. In light of his stories and her own experience of internal migration, Angela stayed in San Miguel:

> I never dreamed about going to the U.S. It was really hard, I think. Not to cross, but to live. Like I told you, I had gone to Culiacán [Sonora, Mexico], and I didn't like it. . . . We went to pick tomatoes, to work, and they treated us so badly for any little thing. We were always hustling, and still they abused us. "If you don't want to work, go to hell," they yelled at us. . . . I didn't want to go to the U.S., because I didn't want to suffer anymore. . . . So I said to my husband, "Oh, no, I will not go around like that with my children. It's so sad. If you go to the U.S., so be it. But, I do not want to migrate anymore."

Such women's suffering as internal migrants conditioned them to be receptive to negative accounts of life in California, even though they had not gone themselves.

Men, meanwhile, often continued to work in the United States to make money. As Carlos, a long-time migrant to Vista, California, put it, "In the village there's little hope of supporting your children. . . . So, with [economic] things as they are currently, it will be better to stay [in the United States]—to fight with immigration control, to fight with the police, to fight with the racists, but to stay." They continued working in California in hopes of earning enough money to return home to San Miguel one day.

Men, Women, and the Struggle for Development Resources

Migrants' disempowering experiences in the United States inspired both women and men to invest in obtaining development resources back home. Given the economic crisis that hit the Mexican countryside in the 1980s and 1990s, the people of San Miguel had to either migrate or secure development funds to survive. In San Miguel, almost all such resources come from the state, funneled through the village government.[3] Yet, for decades, San Miguel had been dominated by the ruling PRI Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), which, in collusion with a few local elites, had pilfered the majority of resources intended for the village. As migrant men and women rejected life in the United States, they began to object to the political and economic control of the PRI and fight for more access to state resources. In the 1990s, they began actively organizing to eject the PRI mayor and promote greater redistribution in the village.

Because more women than men had returned home, they played a key political role in this fight. Migrant women's return—and nonmigrant women's refusal to migrate—produced a demographic arrangement in which 67 percent of families were divided across borders and more than 70 percent of migrants working in the United States were men. While men lingered in the United States as breadwinners, women forged the possibility for an alternative way of life in Mexico.

The predominance of women in San Miguel set the conditions for their engagement in town leadership, school committees, and public works. As men's social status became increasingly linked to migration, community service also lost prestige. Martín, who served as village president from 1996 to 1998, recalled, "People [men] did not want to participate anymore; they did not want to contribute," and Margarita, a woman leader, explained, "The men did not want to be on the committees, because it was a waste of time." This absence and devaluation of San Miguel's participatory, indigenous system diminished the village's capacity to function. We might presume women entered San Miguel's government passively—by default. Dora Lopez, the first woman to serve on a town committee, explained that in the 1980s, "Women had to be on the committees, because all the husbands went to the United States, and there were just women alone, so the only ones that went to the meetings were mothers." Yet, while the relative lack of men offered a key opportunity for women to enter politics, it was not sufficient. Men's encouragement and returned women's renewed investment in the village proved vital to the gender shift.

As long as migrant men remained in the United States, they relied on women on the ground in San Miguel to struggle against the PRI and

obtain economic resources. Migrant leader Domingo Garcia explained, "We [migrant men] wanted women to go [to the village assembly] because it was necessary. . . . We thought, women are the other force, the other half of our power." Such men's encouragement spurred the first women activists to participate. Tamara Ríos, one of the first six women to attend the village assembly in 1996, recalled, "They [migrant men] told us, 'You know what, you women are invited to the assembly.' [We replied] 'But, how, if they don't accept us women?' 'No,' they said, 'They are going to accept you. We spoke with the president.'"

Migrant men also helped solicit "women's rights" trainings from the Mexican state in order to mobilize women activists. Rosa Delgado, another leader, explained,

> Domingo [the male migrant leader] got us involved. He said the government was sending resources for women, and he brought people to train us, about the law, about the government, about human rights. We didn't even know that we could complain about our husbands' abuse. Rather, they [migrant men] would go and denounce our husbands for us.

By promoting "women's rights," migrant men drew women into their cause.

Over time, as men saw women's success in garnering resources, more and more of them urged women to participate in politics, and many began sending their wives to community meetings as their emissaries. For example, Adelina Juarez, one of the village's women leaders, remembered that though her husband was not in the United States, migrant men helped convince him to let her participate in politics. The men told him, "The people say that they need help, but there is no one to lead them. And, Adelina is smart." Her husband conceded and then he, too, began to encourage Adelina's participation. She went on,

> I didn't want to go to the assembly. I felt really afraid. . . . But my husband said, "Go! Go, because they're sending help. Support is going to arrive for the village." . . . I felt out of place, but I said, "It's for a just and noble cause that we're going, because it's not acceptable for just a few people to control us and put whoever they want in as president."

By attending, Adelina could displace the "few people" controlling the village, access government funds, and influence resource distribution, for the couple's mutual benefit.

In the late 1990s, migrant men in California and returned women in San Miguel, in collaboration, succeeded in ousting the local PRI elites. When

the new, non-PRI government took office—the one brought to power by women's advocacy—it mandated that, from then on, women be involved in village affairs. The new president formally summoned not only returned migrants but *all* women to community assemblies, informing the village, "[Women] have a right to participate in the elections, too, to have a voice and vote." While it is unclear whether such ideas about "women's rights" initially came from California, what is interesting is that the people of San Miguel *used* these ideas to support an antimigration agenda—and to gain access to development resources that promised an alternative to living in the United States.

Women's Political Engagement

In conjunction with men's encouragement, women's own harsh experiences in the United States made them revalue the sustainability of their community, compelling them to accede to men's requests and take on new political roles. While existing theory might expect women to prefer the United States, 100 percent of the returned migrant women I interviewed wanted to avoid migrating again. Rosa Delgado offers an example. She worked in California for a few years before returning to San Miguel to escape exploitation and discrimination. She recalled, "When I returned, I felt great! Life was sadder there [in the United States] . . . I saw more stress there, more pressure, and more racist people. Because they discriminate against us a lot in the United States, even the bosses and the Mexicans that have already been there a while." She explained that, by contrast, San Miguel represented freedom from this kind of stress.

Women's anti-migration stance compelled them to take on new political roles in San Miguel, even when those roles felt uncomfortable. Every single woman who became a key political leader in the village had worked in the United States at least once. During interviews, one after another explained that, although attending community meetings and leading committees caused fear and embarrassment, they felt they had no choice. As Rosa, one of the first women to attend the village assembly in 1996, recalled, "We would have preferred to cover our heads and faces with our shawls, and we didn't say anything. We didn't even speak up to say, 'Yes,' we would serve." Yet, she added, during that very meeting she was nominated to manage a roofing project run by the state government. Had she refused, she and her companions would have lost the much-needed program, and the PRI would continue to control village resources. If women like her did not want to migrate, helping to run the community was their

only choice. This inspired them to endure shame about violating existing gender norms that disparaged women's participation in politics.

Likewise, other women added that if they failed to participate, they might lose even more state resources to the pockets of PRI elites. Isabel, who became a prominent leader in the anti-PRI effort, recounted how she motivated other women to engage in civic affairs:

> I used to tell the women, "You have to go [participate]! How are we going to help San Miguel get ahead [economically] if we don't say anything, if we don't speak, if there are meetings and we don't go?" . . . I told the women they didn't have to let anyone take advantage of them. "Stop being abused. You have to fight for what is yours. If you see that something is not working well in San Miguel, you have the right—you know?—You have to go to the government, form a group, and ask about the corruption. You have the right to have the village be different. . . . Don't let yourselves be cheated by the people who are high up in [PRI] politics, because the only thing they do is just come to the village to trick people. And then in the end, the ones who benefit are those people, and our village remains the same."

On the surface, Isabel's language of abuse resonates with Western feminist discourses. Therefore, theories of "social remittances" might presume she adopted the language of abuse in or from the United States. Yet, Isabel's reason for urging women to participate was the risk of economic stagnation at the hands of manipulative politicians. This clientelism, she believed, deprived most villagers of the only resources that might enable them to avoid migrating. San Miguel's women, Isabel felt, must defend the economic well-being of the community. While she may have used discourses from the United States, Isabel adapted those discourses to fit an antimigration agenda. In the end, such women's involvement indeed proved decisive in subverting PRI control and promoting leaders who promised to distribute resources more fairly.

Furthermore, when the first women activists succeeded at obtaining state resources, it helped them convince other women to engage. Soliciting state funds, particularly those targeted at women, they pieced together grants for "productive projects," such as establishing small stores, creating crafts programs, or building chicken coops. The early leaders then realized that encouraging more women to participate in politics could help attract further development resources. In 1997, the year after women first went to the village assembly, women organizers began going house to house to encourage others to join, even if they did not have absent husbands for whom they needed to "fill in." Rosa Delgado led this effort:

> We began to organize [women to demand state resources]. We were six women, and men of the village tried to bring us down, calling us whores, streetwalkers, a ton of things, and we stood for all of that in order to organize. It came to violence sometimes. . . . There were women that said they wouldn't participate, because their husbands hit them. And, there were women that got mad and told us, "No. Get out. You women are crazy and your husbands are jerks for giving you permission. Our husbands don't give us permission [to go out]." There were many houses in which the husbands threw us out with sticks. Yes!

Rosa and her fellow activists faced entrenched opposition to women's participation. They withstood this treatment not out of commitment to "women's rights" per se but in order to attract resources and defend community autonomy from outside manipulation. Tamara Ríos, another member of this group, added, "[The roofing project] gave us the basis to start organizing people, [telling people] that money had come, that it was a good project. . . . Once economic support started to come, that year, men set their women free to join." As women secured resources, men also began to change their attitudes, "setting women free."

Women's participation changed the gender dynamics of politics in San Miguel. Ironically, returned migrant women's advocacy proved so effective that, over time, the PRI *also* began using "gender rights" as a tool to involve women in counterresistance campaigns. As Rosa and Tamara advocated for redistribution, the PRI encouraged elder women—horrified by the "licentious" behavior of these young activists—to enter politics. In the late 1990s, a middle-aged woman named Esmeralda, who had been born in San Miguel and moved to Mexico City as a girl, returned to San Miguel to lead the PRI. By organizing women—and, counterintuitively, the conservative, elder women who were most supportive of traditional gender roles—Esmeralda rebuilt the defeated party's power:

> The older ladies (*las señoras grandes*) . . . would come to me crying that their daughters-in-law, had no . . . that they had problems, because their sons were in the U.S., and their daughters-in-law were headed down the wrong path. So I got together 150 families. . . . I would give them talks, saying we don't want that to happen here—that women go around whoring themselves, their husbands in the United States.

By portraying women's radicalism as an issue of social degeneracy, even prostitution, Esmeralda and her PRI allies converted village politics into a fight among women. By the early 2000s, as one villager put it, "Esmeralda

had all the señoras under her control." In 2007, the PRI retook the village government. Through Rosa, Tamara, and others' advocacy—and the PRI's response—women became the most politically organized members of the village, their participation decisive in struggles for control (Hernández Díaz 2011).

As a result, in spite of the fact that San Miguel had excluded women from community politics until the 1990s, by the 2000s, women were the majority of voters, key voices in public debates, and a focus in local political campaigns, which spent large portions of their time and budgets targeting women. When I attended the village election in November 2010, women crowded the central plaza, demanding fair distribution of state resources and reprimanding men in village government posts for poor financial management. Adelina Juarez, planted at the center, grumbled when the emcee did not call on her, "It's because I'm a woman; he's ignoring me because I'm a woman." By this time, women like Adelina had come to demand political voice *as women.*

Eventually, women also stood up to the very men who had initially elicited their involvement. For instance, in 2010, when Domingo Garcia—who first got Rosa involved—insisted on a recall election that would advantage him, she spat, "I am not somebody's dirty socks or underwear—to allow that." She added that, in response, "All the women said, 'We are not going to vote anymore, because we are not somebody's underpants,' and they refused to come [to the recall assembly]." Women now swayed politics as a block. Participating also gave women influence over municipal and state development funds. Though women had still not held top village positions such as president by the time of my fieldwork, their participation proved decisive in every village election of the 2000s (Hernández Díaz 2011). As Adelina Juarez put it, "Since 1995, it has been the women that run things."

As women of San Miguel secured greater political voice, they also helped dismantle practices that favored men in arenas like domestic violence, divorce, and rights to property and children, and they reported feeling greater self-esteem. While during my 2009–2010 fieldwork, women in similar villages lacked recourse to report domestic violence (Barrera-Bassols 2006); those of San Miguel regularly went to the district court to denounce abusive husbands. Maria Robledo, who ran a small store near the town square, quipped, "In the old days, almost all the men used to beat women. But now, no; now it's the reverse. Women control the men!" (*laughs*). Despite the burden of serving the community, women who participated in politics also came to feel a stronger sense of their capacity as

women. They described feeling an "awakening," saying that they could now "see themselves" and would no longer tolerate abuse by men, employers, or outside political interests (Maldonado and Rodriguez 2004).

Yet, for respondents, prior household-level relationships were not the only point of comparison—or even the most important. Rather, women of San Miguel measured their quality of life against their experiences in the United States. They felt "strong," as they put it, not just because they gained influence over their husbands but also because they avoided exploitation, abuse, and discrimination, sustaining lives they had reason to value. In San Miguel, respondents faced ongoing economic pressure, subsisted on few resources, and often took on great burdens to support village-level programs. Nevertheless, most echoed Rosa Delgado's sentiment: after suffering in the United States, life in the village "felt great!"

CONCLUSION

In the case of San Miguel, as I have shown, women and men experienced migration as a "crisis." On the U.S. side, living as undocumented migrants confined them to exclusion, fear, and exploitation. In hopes of leaving the United States and remaking their lives back in the village, migrant men and women began to advocate for a redistribution of Mexican state development resources within San Miguel. As women returned to Mexico, they took on new political roles to promote this cause and to attract additional development funds for their town. They did so not to make the village *more* like the United States—as the social remittances literature might presume—but to protect an alternative to the U.S. way of life. Throughout, they acted agentically and in collaboration with men.

This article calls attention to three, underconsidered factors in the relationship between gender and migration. First, analyzing the political sphere reveals how gender relationships can shift as migrant communities struggle to avoid U.S. marginality and prevent community decline. Women in migrant-sending communities—like women of color in other studies (Collins 2000; Mahmood 2005)—may gain influence not only through household negotiations with men counterparts, but also through broader struggles for better, richer, more dignified lives. Here, men may collaborate in altering gender relationships, as they, too, fight to sustain their hometowns. Enlarging the focus from the household helps reconsider the assumption that women's empowerment requires opposing men or rejecting non-Western, sending-side traditions.

Second, I underscore the importance of return migration. As the net flow of Mexican migrants to the United States drops below zero, migrants face harsh U.S. immigration control, and more migrants return home, it is crucial to pay more attention to reverse migration. Recent studies have drawn attention to the abuse, isolation, and "downward assimilation" (Portes and Zhou 1993) that poor, undocumented women experience in the United States. I extend this analysis by linking such groups' suffering in the United States to their actions on the sending side, showing how some marginalized migrant women reject the United States altogether and return home.

Third, I build on a growing interest in the ways women act agentically in the context of their once patriarchal hometowns. While literature on women "left behind" may imply that they are passive or have not migrated themselves, I show that in some migrant communities a major subsection of women has experienced migration and chosen to "stay home." A binational understanding of the process by which such women reject the United States, return, and engage in village politics highlights how migrants—fed up with abuse and mistreatment—actively work to generate different kinds of lives.

To what extent does this analysis reverberate elsewhere? The mechanisms of women's political engagement in migrant-sending communities unfold in historically and geographically contingent ways. A migrant community's patterns of movement, demographics, and experiences in the receiving site set the parameters of gendered agency on both ends of a migration stream. To understand how women enter politics in a given community, we must pay attention to the context from which migrants come and also to the circumstances in which they arrive. Undocumented migrants may be more excluded in the United States than other groups—particularly in restrictive receiving sites such as North County, San Diego, and abusive labor sectors such as farm work. Such hostile conditions in the United States, my findings imply, may keep women tied to their hometowns in ways unexpected in previous literature. Meanwhile, indigenous communities may be more cohesive and participatory than their mestizo peers, setting higher stakes for community disintegration and tying members more closely to their villages of origin. Still, empirical data suggest that similar processes may be at work in other communities (Kearney and Besserer 2004; Velasquez 2004).

My findings also extend to other cases theoretically. Many migrant women and men are concerned with protecting lives of dignity, autonomy, and tranquility. The fear, marginality, and exploitation associated

with migrant "illegality," along with the disintegration migration provokes in sending communities, threaten their well-being. These "crises" may inspire both men and women to struggle to protect their ways of life. As they do, they may strategically accept new gender roles. Thus, even where women's rights are not the professed *ends*, they may be a key *means*. For instance, in other antiglobalization protests, we might also expect to see women taking on new gender roles, allowing them—in collaboration with men—to defend the lives they value.[4] Counterintuitively, these new gender arrangements may even offer a means to *defend* the kinds of non-Western political practices that some presume are indelibly patriarchal.

In further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether similar impulses for a better quality of life compel women migrants to become active in other public spheres, even outside of cohesive sending villages. Subsequent studies might also test the propositions presented here in other cases and explore how this case differs from sending communities where patriarchal domination persists. This article provides a starting point for such inquiry by insisting that in future research on migration and gender, scholars look at men's and women's strategies to avoid structural exclusion. In so doing, we might recognize that it is not only external, Western "opportunities" that change gender relationships, but also migrants' own efforts to defend valued traditions and lead dignified lives.

NOTES

1. While contemporary Mixtec communities are deeply unequal, other indigenous communities, such as Zapotecs in the Isthmus region of Oaxaca (Stephen 2002), show greater gender equality. Mixtecs may also have had greater gender equity prior to Spanish conquest (Spores 1997).

2. In 1982, Mexico defaulted on its debt, cutting real wages in half. In response, the International Monetary Fund began structural adjustment, pushing the Mexican government to roll back agricultural subsidies and privatize land. Then, in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) terminated corn subsidies and flooded the market with cheap U.S. corn, fostering a rapid decline in farm incomes (Barkin 2003).

3. Because of the remoteness of the region, the number of active NGOs is limited.

4. As Levien and Paret (2012) note, women comprise the majority of antiglobalization activists worldwide.

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