

CAREGIVING IN PANDEMIC TIMES: PERSPECTIVES FROM WOMEN HEADS OF
TRANSNATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS IN
RURAL MEXICO

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Global Studies
and the Division of Graduate Studies of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

JUNE 2022

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Caregiving in Pandemic Times: Perspectives from Women Heads of Transnational Households in Rural Mexico

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Degree awarded June 2022

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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June 2022

Title: Caregiving in Pandemic Times: Perspectives from Women Heads of Transnational Households in Rural Mexico

This thesis explores how women heads of transnational households in one rural Mexican village in Querétaro, Mexico experienced the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis their gendered family roles. From June 2021 to February 2022, I conducted remote semi-structured interviews with twenty-five mothers actively receiving remittances to understand how the pandemic and related outcomes have manifested with their caregiving roles that already expand upon their husbands' labor migration. Situating my findings in the literature on the social science of migration, I argue that the social conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic have intertwined with the social conditions of migration to compound caregiving responsibilities for the women in my study. In turn, the tremendous caregiving burden women in my study bore throughout the pandemic had detrimental consequences on their mental health. I situate the distress the women in my study experienced throughout the pandemic as an outcome of the distress associated with transnational family life that intertwined with the caregiving burden they were expected to provide throughout the pandemic and the social conditions of the pandemic they were subjected to. Ultimately, I show how various axes of marginalization directly shaped their lived experience throughout the pandemic.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the twenty-nine women who willingly participated in my study and entrusted me with their stories. Their openness and strength that transpired across interviews have and continue to inspire me, both as a first generation Mexican American in the United States and as a researcher. In addition, special thanks to Dr. Kristin Yarris, Dr. Lesley “Jo” Weaver, and Dr. Julie Weise for their guidance in the preparation of this thesis and for their support as I applied to PhD programs. I also wish to thank my cohort-mate, Grace Wright, who stood beside me as we both navigated the uncertainties associated with starting and ending a master’s program during a global pandemic. This study was funded by the University of Oregon Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies (CLLAS), the George & Conni Slape Fellowship, and the University of Oregon Global Studies Thurber Award.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on traditionally disadvantaged populations, including documented and undocumented immigrants. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, 84% of undocumented immigrant workers in the United States held jobs where telework was impossible, including 3.4 million workers in the service sector and 1.3 million workers in the construction sector (Krogstad, Lopez, and Passel 2020). Hence, undocumented immigrant workers were among the first to face unemployment and experience the economic repercussions of the pandemic while simultaneously being excluded from federal and state assistance programs. Being barred from participation in public safety net programs greatly magnified the effect of the pandemic on immigrant families in the United States. While this inequity is starting to garner attention from the media and researchers alike, the pandemic's effect on transnational families remains largely unexplored. Notably, the experiences of women who remain behind in sending communities caring for children, dependent on remittances, and who serve a critical role in sustaining transnational family life are absent from conversations quantifying the transnational effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike any other crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic brought immigration policy to the forefront of global political agendas. As a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide closed their country's borders and issued travel bans, severely limiting the flow of people. In the United States, President Trump issued Proclamation 10014 on April 21, 2020, which outlined "restrictions, limitations, and exemptions" to foreign labor (Trump 2020). By and large, this Executive Order prevented foreigners from obtaining entry visas. A

notable exception was temporary workers that supplied labor for meatpacking plants and agricultural fields (Weise 2020).

In April 2020, the World Bank predicted that worldwide remittances would decrease by 20% due to the pandemic's economic fallout (World Bank 2020b). This prediction was largely informed by COVID-19 restrictions and closures that resulted in massive unemployment, a decline in international labor demand, and an end to current sponsorships that ultimately forced many immigrants to return home (Kochhar and Bennett 2021). In the case of Mexico, this grim prediction turned out to be inaccurate. According to the Mexican Bank, remittances jumped by 11% from 2019 to 2020, surpassing \$36.9 billion in the first 11 months of 2020 (Banxico 2020). In part, this can be attributed to Mexico being the largest recipient of H-2A visas (Temporary Agricultural Workers) which were exempt from immigration restrictions. According to data from the United States' State Department, 198,000 or 98% of H-2A workers came from Mexico and overall H-2A visas increased by 4% between 2019 and 2020 (USAFACTS 2021).

While these figures call attention to the resilience of remittances during times of crisis, I argue that an analysis of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational family life cannot rest solely on an analysis of remittance flows. Moreover, while remittances have increased nationally, this may not hold at the community or even household levels. Thus, a closer investigation into how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted remittance flows at the household level is warranted to fully grasp the transnational implications of migrants' precarious situations in host countries.

Despite the documented success of migration as a livelihood strategy, high human and social costs are associated with sustaining transnational migration (Delgado Wise and Marquez 2007). Often, women who remain behind in sending communities bear the brunt of the costs as

they are left to raise children alone and manage all aspects of social reproduction and regeneration in their partner's absence (Boehm 2012). Furthermore, the ways migration challenges while simultaneously upholding gender roles and ideologies has deep implications for the mental health of women that remain behind as faithful partners and caregivers (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019). Thus, looking simultaneously at both remittance flows, and women's experiences provides a more cohesive picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted transnational families.

Overarchingly, women in my study did not feel that the instability of remittances and inflation impacted them in their role as household managers. While they had to carefully monitor expenses and make tough decisions, many reported being well-accustomed to the irregularity of remittances, and some, those whose partners had longer stays of migration, had the safety net of savings. Additionally, 88% of my sample (22 women) reported their partners being currently in the United States or them having proximate plans to migrate. Although there were periods of reported low employment and subsequent low remittances, these did not last long. But women whose partners were in the US without authorization or whose work contracts had been rescinded shared a drastically different perspective.

While the impact of the pandemic on remittance flows had varying consequences for the women in my study, women's accounts revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating many preexisting care gaps left by migration. In Chapter V, I illustrate how the social conditions of the pandemic compounded women's caregiving labor which is already compounded when their husbands and partners migrate. In Chapter VI, I continue my discussion on compounded caregiving by underscoring how women in my study navigated the responsibility of ensuring their children's education since the Mexican Department of Education's (Secretaría de

Educación Pública) decision to close schools and transition to remote learning in March of 2020. The transition to remote schooling was singled out as the greatest impact of the pandemic and a close analysis of the challenges women faced provides insight into how their identity as women heads of transnational households in rural Mexico directly shaped their lived experience throughout the pandemic.¹ In Chapter VII, I conclude by discussing how the social conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic intertwined with the social conditions of migration to have profound mental health implications for the women in my study.

In this thesis, I forefront the experiences of twenty-five women heads of transnational households in rural Querétaro, Mexico to provide a small glimpse of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational Mexican families. My intent is not generalization. Instead, I seek to elucidate some of the distinct ways the COVID-19 pandemic and related outcomes have compounded caregiving responsibilities for women in my study who already fill the care gaps left upon their husband's labor migration. Through this research study, I hope to spread awareness of the distinct challenges women heads of transnational families experienced to inform relief efforts as we collectively move towards recovering from the global COVID-19 pandemic. In my concluding chapter, I outline avenues for future research to build a greater understanding of how transnational families fared throughout the pandemic and its long-term ramifications.

¹ All women were asked the following question: If you could only name one thing, what has been the most challenging impact of the pandemic for you?

CHAPTER II

MEXICO-US MIGRATION DYNAMICS

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the factors that have facilitated Mexican labor migration to the United States across time and space. Then, I delve into a discussion of how migration reconstructs the notion of family in transnational households and subsequently redefines gendered identities and roles. It is important to understand these dynamics to fully grasp the gendered consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic as they pertain to women heads of transnational households in rural Mexico.

Mexico-US Migration Over Time

According to the 2010 US census, 59% of the unauthorized population in the United States originated from Mexico (Passel and Cohn 2011). In 2017, this share dropped to 47%, representing the first major decline in Mexican unauthorized immigration since the end of the Bracero Program and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Passel and Cohn 2019). Passel and Cohn attribute this decline in unauthorized Mexican Migration to changes in how unauthorized immigrants arrive in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2019). They argue that a growing share of unauthorized immigrants no longer cross the border illegally, but instead arrive legally on visas and then overstay their required departure date (Passel and Cohn 2019). These contemporary trends are reflective of the strength and history of Mexico-US migration. Although its history is marred with abuse and exploitation, underscored by the xenophobia woven into the very fabric of the United States (Lee 2021), past historical moments paved the way for the migration flow we see today between Mexico and the United States.

A pivotal moment that shaped migration between the United States and Mexico was the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 where Mexico surrendered half its land to

the United States to officially end the Mexican American war. With this treaty, the Rio Grande became the official boundary line between the two countries, and Mexicans previously settled in the annexed area were offered “all the rights of citizens in the United States” or the chance to relocate within the newly defined borders of Mexico (Lee 2021, 149). For the first time in the country’s history, Mexican families were separated by political borders, a pattern that was only augmented as these countries became more globalized.

While Mexicans that decided to remain in the land annexed by the United States were given some citizenship rights, including the right to land ownership, their otherness was never forgotten. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, Mexicans, regardless of citizenship status, were scapegoated due to their perceived dependence on the welfare system and blamed for taking away jobs from “true” Americans (Lee 2021, 148). Historian Lee, through a collection of life histories, documented the violence of the forced repatriation where Mexicans and Mexican-Americans became the target of racism, nativism, and xenophobia (Lee 2021). The violence of this forced repatriation left deep wounds and served as a cruel reminder of what could be expected from the United States. Historian Ana Rosas, in her study documenting the transnational human suffering brought about by the Bracero program, documented how elderly women drew on this time period and all the heartache it created to discourage sons and sons-in-law from participating in the Bracero Program, another decisive period for Mexican American migration (Rosas 2014).

The Bracero Program, enacted from 1942-1964, remains the largest guestworker program in American history (Loza 2017). It was derived from a series of bilateral agreements between the United States and Mexico, and the program welcomed over 4.5 million Mexican guest workers into American agribusiness (Loza 2017). At its inception, the Bracero Program aimed to

address the United States' World War II labor shortage while simultaneously providing Mexico a development pathway through modernization. Mexican laborers were branded *Braceros*, translating to "arms of labor," since they were envisioned to be the perfect docile stoop laborer (Cohen 2011). While both countries put forth safeguards to protect all parties involved, they were, for the most part, ignored once the program got underway. As labor activist and historian Galarza put forth, agribusiness molded the Bracero Program to meet its interest at the expense of Braceros, who while searching to secure their livelihoods became victims of exploitation and oppression (Galarza 1964).

Through collections of oral histories, historians have documented the human costs of the Bracero program. Historian Gamboa, in his study of Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, found that Braceros faced physically intensive labor conditions and heavy policing (Gamboa 1990). In life history interviews, Braceros recalled being up before sunup and working past sundown, with minimal if any breaks, and some were even denied the mandatory day off. Furthermore, labor burnout was intensified by Bracero's inaccessibility to leisure activities. Due to mounting social tensions and anti-Bracero sentiment by domestic farmworkers and the public, farmers sought to limit Braceros' interaction with citizens via the strict policing of their movement. In social settings, the animosity manifested in physical attacks against Bracero's and their segregation from public establishments like parlors and pool halls. This led to a "culture of captivity" which combined with exposure to discrimination, culture shock, and family separation - that go against Mexican cultural values of family unity - forced deep suffering among Braceros (Gamboa 1990, 95).

The exploitation associated with this program was not limited to Braceros' time working. Historian Deborah Cohen documents how prospective Braceros faced immense exploitation and

abuse, often at the hands of Mexican officials, on their way to securing a contract and making the trek to the United States (Cohen 2011). Additionally, Cohen, through first-hand accounts, reveals the extensiveness and intrusiveness of the medical examinations Braceros were subjected to that resulted in widespread humiliation and challenged a man's masculinity (Cohen 2011). These medical examinations had far-reaching consequences. Historian Rosas notes how these arduous examinations were a basis for Braceros to seek longer contracts, thus staying away from home and prolonging the program's costs on transnational family life (2014).

The effect that the Bracero program and its accompanying mass migration had on gender and family is an important analysis to include in this thesis as it serves to inform how migration became conceptualized and understood in Mexico by both migrant families and the public. To begin with, Bracero program organizers established that only male patriarchs that had a family could participate in the program. The Bracero Program manifested in such a way that men had to secure a contract and properly provide for their families in order to defend their manhood and maintain social status (Cohen 2011). However, as historian Cohen notes, the Mexican patriarchy exemplified a paradox. Braceros were portrayed as family men and maintained their status even when they fell to temptations of a sexual nature. According to Cohen's ethnographic research, these activities were seen as widely acceptable as long as the Bracero continued providing to his family through remittances (Cohen 2011). To be the proper Mexican patriarch, one's manhood, established through remittances, could not be in question. Braceros' inability to change their economic situation through remittances and the difficulty of obtaining a Bracero contract and passing the medical examination prolonged their participation in the program, maximizing the program's costs onto the Bracero and, by default, his transnational family (Rosas 2014).

Transnational families are “familial groups with family members living some or most of the time separated from each other [that maintain] a sense of collective welfare, unity and familyhood across national borders” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 3) and in the context of Mexican American migration, the history of this migration pathway alongside globalization and nationalist immigration policies, have paved the way for the prevalence of Mexican American transnational families across time and space. While Braceros did face harsh conditions and were subject to culture shock and anti-migrant sentiments, the experiences of women that remained behind in sending communities cannot be ignored. As historian Rosas puts it, “waiting in love was hard yet underestimated work” (Rosas 2014, 131). During this period women faced the emotional struggle of being separated from their partners while also adhering to gender norms and expectations. They were heavily policed by extended family members.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the forced repatriation of Mexicans during the great depression, and the Bracero program cemented the strength of Mexican American migration. Each instance in history, while separating families across borders, created strong community networks that today fuel continuous cycles of migration and the creation of transnational families.² The Bracero program may have ended in 1964, but its termination did not bring an end to Mexican guestworkers as Mexican laborers are now recruited for H-2A visas (Loza 2016b) . Historian Loza sustains, “H2-A laborers not only walk in the historical footprints of the braceros that came before them but many are the children and grandchildren of braceros, creating one more link in the century of Mexican guest workers in America” (Loza 2017).

² Sociologist Alberto Palloni and colleagues establish that migrant social networks are interpersonal ties that link migrants, nonmigrants, and former migrants through a shared sense of solidarity and that in turn these networks increase the likelihood of migration as they increase the net returns of migration (Palloni et al. 2001).

In *La Magnolia*, a majority of the labor migration happening is on H-2A visas for agricultural work in Georgia and Florida.³ None of the women in my study were directly familiar with the term “Bracero,” but they did recall parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents migrating seasonally just as their husbands do now. Ultimately, the program under which their past relatives migrated does not matter or take away from the cost temporary labor migration had on their transnational families. As historian Cindy Hahamovitch sustains, “guestworker programs will remain what they have always been: the means to create a class of perfect immigrants who live in a no-man’s land, outside the bounds of nationhood and the house of labor” (Hahamovitch 2003, 94). Intergenerational histories of labor migration exemplify how deeply rooted current labor migration is in historical migration flows. In the next section, I will discuss the sociopolitical dynamics that serve as push factors for Mexican labor migration, including in *La Magnolia*.

Economic Development in Mexico

In the last four decades, Mexico's political economy has been transformed by neoliberal policies that have contributed to the decline of the national agriculture economy. The 1982 debt crisis brought about by over-expenditure in government-funded welfare programs and a drop in oil prices tanked the value of the Mexican Peso. As a result, Mexico was unable to repay loans that had been all-too-readily provided by the Bretton Woods Institutions in the 1970s. To address this challenge, the Bretton Woods organizations offered a more manageable debt repayment plan, but it was contingent on Mexico undergoing a neoliberal political and economic restructuring. Key to this transformation was Mexico's 1994 integration into the North American

³ *La Magnolia* is the pseudonym assigned to my research site to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which completely opened its agricultural economy to highly subsidized American and Canadian imports.

This transformation, coupled with a reduction in government support through subsidies, seriously imperiled rural subsistence farming households (de Janvry, Sadoulet, and de Anda 1995). Since smallholder farmers had to compete with prices set by the international market that was often volatile and meant to benefit mass producers (Martin 2005), they had no choice but to seek income-diversification livelihood strategies outside agriculture. One outcome of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico was migration (Riosmena and Massey 2012).

Globally, from 1960 to 2000, the number of international migrants grew from 77 million to 174 million, and by 2050, that number is expected to surpass 343 million (Chamie 2020). According to the UN Population Division, the United States is the largest receiver of outward migration, with approximately 51 million immigrants in 2019, while Mexico is the second-largest source country globally, with approximately 12 million Mexicans migrating abroad in 2019 (Chamie 2020). Complementary to migration growth is a growth in remittances – money sent home by migrants working abroad. From FY 2020 to 2021, Mexico's remittances grew by 27%, from 40.6 billion to 51.6 billion USD (Banxico 2021a), denoting 8 consecutive years of growth in remittances (World Bank 2020a). This is a direct contradiction to the alarm issued by the World Bank at the onset of the pandemic that predicted a 20% decrease in global remittances (World Bank 2020b). Currently, remittances even out to be 4% of Mexico's GDP (World Bank 2020a), and 94.9% of Mexican remittances in 2021 came from the United States (Ng 2022).

The prevalence of remittances in Mexico has led to what researchers identify as a remittance-based development model that is highly encouraged by development organizations like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (Delgado Wise and Marquez

2007). This development model focuses on “regulating migratory flows, using remittances as an instrument of development, promoting remittance-funded savings and credit schemes, the poor’s economic empowerment, and encouraging human capital formation” (Delgado Wise and Marquez 2007, 105). The argument is that through an investment of remittances, local, regional, and national development will be catalyzed. Thus, governments in low and middle-income countries, Mexico included, are encouraging and to a degree facilitating the outward labor migration for the sake of remittances and national development (Overbeek 2002).⁴

However, a major critique of the remittance-based development model is that it does not consider the social and human costs of an outsourced labor economy. Of interest to this thesis, are the notable costs on caregiving and social reproduction in sending communities. This includes the impact on women who remain behind as heads of transnational households. In the next section, I delve into how migration reimagines gender identities and roles.

Gender and Migration

In the late 1900s and early 2000s, migration scholarship shifted towards examining the experiences of women that migrate and those that stay behind in sending communities to better understand the effect of migration on transnational families (Pessar and Mahler 2003). Through a gender analytical lens, researchers can identify how gender, in combination with other systems of oppression, dictates the migration experience for both men and women.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, in her study of twenty-six immigrant households in northern California, contends that migration processes undermine the Mexican patriarchy and in doing so

⁴ Although Overbeek (2002) references “developing countries,” I stray away from this language as it is not indicative of any substantial distinction between countries.

women take on expanded social and public roles (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). She defines patriarchy in the following way:

... a fluid and shifting set of social relations where men oppress women, in which different men exercise varying degrees of power and control, and in which women collaborate and resist in diverse ways (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 3).

Hondagneu-Sotelo speaks to the fluidness of patriarchy, gender identities more broadly, and how they are constructed within family relations. She elucidates that as women expand their activities within and beyond the household they “develop identities that are both enabling and increasingly independent of their husband’s patriarchal control” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 66). For example, Hondagneu-Sotelo found that women’s reconstructed identities facilitated the migration of new immigrant women through the creation of female social networks that allowed new migrants to circumvent reliance on male-dominated migration networks. These female-headed social networks served influential in spearheading the “feminization of migration” where women migrate as independent workers (D’Aubeterre Buznego, Lee, and Rivermar Pérez 2020).

Just as sociologist Hondagneu-Sotelo argues, Hirsch cautions that the social changes migration brings to both gender roles and identities should not be seen as a unilateral shift towards gender egalitarianism (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). In a study of Mexican American transnational families, medical anthropologist Jennifer Hirsch found that the social conditions of migration have pushed people to adopt new gendered identities that they act out in their intimate relationships (Hirsch 2003). Hirsch documents the development of companionate marriages to show how transnational marriage ideals have shifted from *respeto* (respect) to *confianza* (trust) where a women’s independence, albeit closely monitored, is not seen as an attack on men’s masculinity (Hirsch 2003). In this ethnographic study, Hirsch shows how both men and women navigate the fluidness of gender as an outcome of migration as well as

modernization, working together to construct new ideals of masculinity and femininity (Hirsch 2003).

Migration between Mexico and the United States has traditionally been gendered, where men are the ones to migrate, and women remain behind in sending communities. In part, this is reflective of historical events, i.e., the legacy of the Bracero program, where men were prioritized for participation based on the cultural expectation of men being economic providers (Cohen 2011). To understand gendered migration, it is useful to draw on theories of masculinity and femininity.

Anthropologist Deborah Boehm, in a pioneering study of Mexican transnational families, found that as men and women navigate transnational family life they embrace shifting masculinities and femininities (Boehm 2012). For adolescent boys and men, migration is a rite of passage that allows them to achieve manhood (Boehm 2012). Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann, in his landmark study of masculinity and machismo in Mexico, found that a key determinant of successful masculinity is a man's ability to support his family (Gutmann 1996). For places where economic restructuring has made this impossible *in situ*, migration serves as a pathway for masculinity assertion, because through remittances men can fulfill the gendered expectation of being economic providers. However, masculinity requires constant reassertion, so adolescent boys and men find themselves dependent on continuous cycles of migration to preserve their masculinity and fulfill gendered expectations of being economic providers.

While migration is critical to the assertion of masculinity, it also creates a paradox (Boehm 2012). Labor migration and subsequent remitting may symbolize masculinity, but in the transnational labor market, men are not free from feelings of emasculation. On the one hand, men must migrate to safeguard their masculinity. However, the policing they face in the United

States emasculates them. For example, while *rancho* men often answer to no one and set their own work hours, undocumented workers in the U.S. can face grueling work conditions and exploitation from employers.⁵ Moreover, immigrants often work in the service sector (Krogstad, Lopez, and Passel 2020), waiting on the needs of others. This is a role typically ascribed to Mexican women.

Due to the constant emasculation Mexican migrant men are subjected to in the U.S., they are left to find new ways to assert their dominance. Anthropologist Nolan Kline in his ethnography of undocumented families in Georgia found that the government's *pathogenic policing* of immigrants pushed migrant men to reassert their masculinity through alcohol and domestic abuse (Kline 2019).⁶ In particular, Kline documents how the government's attack on men's masculinity results in grave instances of intimate partner violence (Kline 2019). This finding aligns with anthropologist Gutmann's argument that men who struggle achieving masculinity express their anger and frustration by acting violently to reassert their dominance (Gutmann 1996).

Since migration in migrant-sending communities is equated with masculinity, men that do not migrate also experience shifting gender subjectivities and often put on exaggerated displays of masculinity to protect their manhood. For example, Boehm found that some non-migrating men resulted to *albures*, drinking, domestic abuse towards partners and children, and

⁵ *Rancho* is the Spanish word for a village or community in rural Mexico. It connotes both rurality and traditionalism.

⁶ Anthropologist Kline defines *pathogenic policing* as an “analytical frame that specifically indicts law, policy, and law enforcement agents in perpetuating poor health and health inequalities that fit into a larger rubric of health inequity shaped by race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other social markers of difference” (Kline 2019, 13)

aggressive behavior towards other men to safeguard their masculinity (Boehm 2012).⁷ Similarly, men that find themselves thousands of miles away from their homes also find ways to remind their female partners who is in charge. Researchers have noted how migrant men leverage remittances and rely on extended families and gossip policing to maintain close control over their partners' actions in sending communities (Boehm 2012; Cohen 2011; Donato et al. 2006; Dreby 2009; Loza 2016a; Rosas 2014).

The Expansion of Caregiving

The way migration reimagines masculinity simultaneously “liberates and puts new controls on women, redefining femininity and what it means to be a woman” (Boehm 2012, 72). In part, this is due to the expansion of caregiving that occurs upon male labor migration. For example, researchers have found that women take on roles outside traditional caregiving, including agriculture, grazing, overseeing house development projects, and remittance allocation (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Hennebry 2014). Hennebry and colleagues call this expansion of women's caregiving “migration work” because although burdensome, it facilitates male labor migration (Hennebry 2014). While these new roles and responsibilities give women certain flexibility in how they go about their daily chores, being responsible for a range of gender roles, in combination with their migrant partners' evolving dominance, culminate in what anthropologist Boehm calls emergent constructions of womanhood (Boehm 2008; Castellanos and Boehm 2008).

The effect of male labor migration on gender subjectivities of masculinity and femininity has deep mental health impacts on women. Boehm frames this within a juxtaposition of *deseos* (desires) and *dolores* (suffering) (Boehm 2011). Although women's life prospects as well as that

⁷ *Albures* are Mexican double entendres, usually of a sexual nature.

of their families increase with access to remittances, the hope they may experience is dampened by fears of family fragmentation, marital infidelity, and abandonment (Boehm 2011; Echevoyén Nava 2013; Nobles, Rubalcava, and Teruel 2015; McGuire and Martin 2007). Scholars have found that these fears and pressures manifest in poor mental health outcomes, including stress and depression which have psychosomatic symptoms (Bojorquez, Salgado de Snyder, and Casique 2009; Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019). Due to these fears, women often feel added pressure to exemplify the ideal wife and caregiver, and as a result may be quicker to heed their partner's dominance, even from afar. These new forms of dominance do not go unchallenged. Women too express their own understandings of household power dynamics through informal everyday interactions, once again highlighting the fluidness of gender autonomy in the face of migration (Boehm 2008).

The Gender Paradox of Migration

Thus far I have discussed gender in the context of gendered migration patterns, but in recent years female migrants have been bridging the gender gap in transnational migration. As of 2020, 48% of all international migrants were women (United Nations 2020). While women that engage in labor migration are challenging predefined gender roles, they too experience the fluidness of femininity, and womanhood more broadly (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Parreñas 2005). Anthropologist Boehm argues that migrant women are transgressing gender realms, but that they remain subject to evolving ideas of masculinity and patriarchy (Boehm 2008). For example, in her ethnography, Boehm found that migrant women in the United States were burdened with a “double day” where after a full day of paid labor, they were expected to return home and complete traditional forms of women's work such as cleaning and cooking (Boehm 2012). Furthermore, Boehm notes that in some instances, this is a primary motivator for men to

facilitate their partner's migration (Boehm 2008). By having a woman at home to do the household's cleaning and cooking, they do not have to engage in this aspect of women's work and can reassert their masculinity. These actions of simultaneous gender transgressions and reification are reflective of the gender paradox that sociologist Rhacel Parreñas argues defines transnational family life (Parreñas 2005).

The gender paradox of migration is exemplified in how transnational families navigate the caregiving gap left by migration. As I established in the previous section, migrant men meet their caregiving roles by providing remittances, while women that remain behind in sending communities take on all aspects of social reproduction including those previously ascribed to men. In the context of female migration, specifically mother migration, men are not expected to provide the same level of proximate care to children as mothers do prior to migration. Rhacel Parreñas, in her study of Filipino children with migrant mothers, found that children relied more heavily on grandmothers and aunts for their daily needs than their non-migrating parent (Parreñas 2005). Anthropologist Kristin Yarris found a similar dynamic in her ethnography of Nicaraguan transnational families where migrant mothers preferred women in extended kin networks, rather than biological fathers, to be the designated caregiver in their absence (Yarris 2017).

In situations where both parents migrate, the views of family members that remain behind continue to reflect conventional gendered expectations of motherhood and fatherhood (Dreby 2010). Sociologist Dreby in her study of children with two migrating parents found that mothers were held to a higher standard in their provision of caregiving from afar (Dreby 2010). Fathers were mainly expected to provide remittances, but mothers, aside from remitting, were expected to preserve ties of affection across borders (Dreby 2010). In Dreby's ethnographic study, this

was accomplished through phone calls and the purchase of gifts. Furthermore, children were found to be much more understanding and forgiving about their father's migration than their mother's migration, often expressing feelings of abandonment towards their mothers (Dreby 2010).

Prolonged periods of separation have detrimental effects on transnational families' interpersonal relationships and women bear a disproportionate burden in sustaining transnational family life (Chávez, Paige, and Edelblute 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic once again upended these gendered roles and responsibilities, magnifying the burden of partner migration. Although female labor migration is a growing phenomenon, many communities in rural Mexico continue to embody strictly gendered migration, as is the case at *La Magnolia*. Thus, synthesizing the nuances that the social conditions of migration bring to gendered roles and responsibilities allows for a greater understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged women vis-à-vis their gendered family role. For the purposes of this thesis, I limit my discussion to the experiences of women that remain behind in sending communities, but it can equally be surmised that migrant women's experiences throughout the pandemic were also shaped by their gender.

Purpose of Study

I situate my exploratory study in literature on remittances and the gendered costs of migration and caregiving to underscore how twenty-five Mexican women in a rural migrant-sending community in Querétaro, Mexico have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis their gendered family roles. I also interviewed four teachers to provide context, from an outsider's perspective, of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the broader community. I pay particular attention to the dynamic ways the COVID-19 pandemic and related outcomes

have expanded these women's caregiving responsibilities. From the outset, I did not go into this study with priori expectations of what women would identify as major challenges, although I did hypothesize that unstable remittances would be identified as a major concern. More broadly, I wanted to understand how their daily lives, as told by them, had changed throughout the pandemic and how being in a remittance-dependent household shaped their experience. Albeit exploratory in nature, my study and its findings address the following research questions:

1. What economic effects are Mexican women in remittance-dependent households experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How are Mexican women in remittance-dependent households experiencing their children's transition to remote schooling?
3. What mental health implications is the COVID-19 pandemic having for Mexican women in remittance-dependent households?
4. What strategies are Mexican women in remittance-dependent households employing to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?

In the following chapter, I outline the methodology I utilized to answer these questions.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and a consideration of ethical research practices, I conducted my research in a remote manner. While the University of Oregon authorized research travel to Mexico at the end of summer 2021, I decided against traveling because I did not foresee the benefits of my research outweighing the risks. During the start of my data collection period, I learned from community contacts that they had yet to receive access to COVID-19 preventative care, including testing and vaccines. As of my last follow-up interview in February 2022, only those ages 25 or older had been given the option to get vaccinated. I concluded that the risk I posed by traveling internationally to a remote village, especially in light of evolving virus variants, was too high and not worth the potential exposure to my study population.

This study was approved by the University of Oregon IRB Review Board on June 04, 2021 (IRB #: 00000112). From June to August 2021, I conducted remote semi-structured interviews with twenty-five women heads of transnational households in *La Magnolia* that fit my inclusion criteria.⁸ In January and February 2022, I conducted follow-up interviews with five of these women to gain insight into key themes I identified during my data analysis. I unsuccessfully attempted to reach male partners, either in the U.S. or in the community, so I resolved to inquire about the male experience through the lens of female partners and wives in my study. To better understand the remote schooling situation, I conducted remote interviews with the kindergarten teacher, two teachers in the elementary school, and one teacher in the middle school during winter 2022. Lastly, I relied on secondary sources published by different

⁸ *La Magnolia* is the pseudonym assigned to my research site. It is a small village in the rural highlands of Querétaro, Mexico.

agencies, including the Mexican government and the World Bank, to provide greater context on key themes identified throughout my study.

I conducted interviews via WhatsApp or Messenger audio calls, dependent on the participant's preference, and interviews ranged between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes. All interviews took place during the evening time, per participants' preference. The interview guide for mother caregivers included 20 open-ended questions that discussed the following themes: migration history, remittance flows, caregiving, gender roles and ideologies, and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Questions included: "how has the migration of your loved one(s) changed your life and that of your children?"; "what challenges has the pandemic brought to your day-to-day life?"; "how has the pandemic challenged your daily life and responsibilities?". I did not set out to inquire about how these women were experiencing the transition to homeschooling, but after the first 5 interviews, I recognized this as a primary concern. Hence, subsequent interviews, including the interviews with teachers, delved more in-depth into the topic and explored the effect this care gap was having on these women's everyday lives. Interviews with teachers focused on their perceptions of the challenges migration, remittance-dependence, and remote schooling have on mothers.¹⁰ Lastly, my follow-up interviews were retrospective and aimed to look at how women's experiences had or had not changed after a period of several months with the return to in-person learning for their children.

Setting

La Magnolia is a small rural community in Pinal de Amoles, Querétaro, México, one of the country's most impoverished municipalities. According to the 2020 Census, the population of

⁹ The interview guide for interviews with women head of transnational households is included in [Appendix A](#).

¹⁰ The interview guide for interviews with teachers is included in [Appendix B](#).

La Magnolia is 351 with 185 females and 166 males and there are 132 houses in the community (INEGI 2020).¹¹ 85 of these 132 houses are currently occupied, which is indicative of the many families in the community that have resettled abroad and only return to the community for visits (INEGI 2020). All of these houses have access to electricity and water, and all but 4 have a sewer system in place (INEGI 2020). Additionally, at the time of the census in early 2020, 35 of these homes had at least 1 cellphone and 7 homes had an established internet connection (INEGI 2020). I surmise that current access to cellphones and internet is more widespread due to the challenges of remote schooling I identified in my study.

In *La Magnolia*, there are limited opportunities for employment and most men of working age migrate to the United States on a seasonal basis. There are no community-level statistics on remittances, but at the municipal level, Pinal de Amoles received \$5.08 million USD in remittances in 2021 (Banxico 2021b). In *La Magnolia*, 35% of people ages 12 years and older were reported to be economically active, but there are no data on the number of people employed in country vs. those employed abroad (INEGI 2020).¹² Those that do not hold salaried jobs in the community tend to dedicate themselves to agriculture and grazing in ejido land.

Limited economic opportunity can be attributed to the community's isolation amid the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve. The closest town, *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*, where remittances can be collected, is an hour's drive down an unpaved mountain road.¹³ To get from the

¹¹ These figures include family members that are laboring away from the community. The number of people physically present in the community may be significantly lower.

¹² 91 of the 259 people ages 12 or older reported either currently working, previously working, or looking for a job (INEGI 2020).

¹³ *Zacatlán de Guadalupe* is the assigned pseudonym for the nearest town to my study site where remittances can be collected and where there is a broader selection of goods for purchase.

community to this town, there is one daily transport vehicle that comfortably seats twelve people.¹⁴ This vehicle leaves every morning at 7:45 am and returns to the community around 3:30 pm and costs \$60 MX round trip. This is the most cost-effective way to get to town. Calling a taxi costs \$140 MX each way. From *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*, it is a 5-hour bus ride along winding roads to the capital city of Santiago de Querétaro. Figure 1 is a map with the general location of my research site.



Figure 1. Map of Mexico identifying location of research site. Adapted from Geology.com. Retrieved February 15, 2022, from <https://geology.com/world/mexico-satellite-image.shtml>

While the community is geographically isolated, it sits in a central location on the mountain through which people from even more remote communities travel to get to the nearest town. Figure 2 illustrates how homes in *La Magnolia* are built along the main road and are

¹⁴ The community transport is a pick-up truck with benches on the edges and a canopy. Although it only seats twelve people, it is often crammed with twice as many people.

surrounded by deep forests on all sides. Thus, the municipal government placed a preschool/ kindergarten [*Kinder*], elementary school [*Primaria*], and a middle school [*Telesecundaria*] in the community.¹⁵ There is one teacher assigned to the preschool, two teachers to the elementary school, and six teachers to the middle school. The middle school serves the entire region, so children from neighboring communities make the daily trek to school, sometimes walking up to 2 hours through mountainous trails to access an education. In *La Magnolia*, the average schooling attained is 6.63 years, with females reporting 7.02 years and males reporting 6.21 years (INEGI 2020). This equates to roughly an elementary school education, but it lags behind the municipal average of 7.23 years and the state average of 10.48 years.



Figure 2. Google Earth capture of *La Magnolia*

Transnational migration occurs predominantly through legal channels, where men are sponsored for 6 to 8-month H-2A visas to harvest produce in Georgia and Florida. From my qualitative interviews, it became evident that seasonal labor migration is a pattern that has been

¹⁵ The Telesecundaria program is a Mexican national program aimed to provide distance learning to rural areas through advanced use of technology. Maestra Tencha, assigned to the middle school, shared that when the school first got certified it was provided smart boards, laptops, and educational DVDs, but that after the first year these items went unused. She shared that without internet access and poor guidance, the whole system was useless and quickly became outdated.

occurring in this community for generations. Some participants reported having family in the United States that received citizenship under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, further facilitating out-migration. For example, Doña Magdalena shared that many people in the community, including her in-laws, received citizenship through IRCA and subsequently helped their sons, including her husband, obtain a green card. On the other hand, sponsored labor migration serves as a gateway for undocumented status. There are known instances where village men have entered the U.S. on a work visa but then decided to abandon their contracts to pursue higher-paying opportunities. In the short term, these alternatives lead to greater remittances. However, they prolong family separations as once back in the community, men that have breached their contracts are barred from legally obtaining a work visa again.

Sample Selection and Demographics

My sample is comprised of twenty-five mothers that meet the following inclusion criteria: 1) identify as female, 2) currently in a marital or conjugal relationship, 3) have experienced separation due to partner labor migration at some point in the past 5 years, 4) have at least one school-aged child enrolled in one of the community schools, and 5) are over the age of 18.

Table 1 displays the demographics encompassed in my sample. The age range for participants is from 23 to 47 with the mean being 34 years of age. Twelve of the participants are married, while the rest are in conjugal relationships. In this thesis, I use the terms husband and partner interchangeably to represent *marido* which directly translates to conjugal partner but is broadly used to describe both marital and conjugal partnerships. Eighteen of my participants reported having at least a middle school education and one mother reported completing high school. The number of children each mother had ranged from 1 to 6, with the mean being 3

children. Additionally, many women had children enrolled in more than 1 school. Lastly, fourteen of the participants reported their partners being in the community at the time of the interview, while the rest reported them currently working in the United States. Only three of the men home did not have proximate plans to migrate. Two of them were injured during a previous migration, preventing them from migrating again, and the third man had an ongoing legal issue.

Name	Age (Years)	Migration History (years)	Number of Children	Education Attained
Antonia	35	18	3	middle school
Beatriz	33	14	4	middle school
Brenda	36	17	3	middle school
Carina	35	15	2	middle school
Carmen	23	5	2	middle school
Cecilia	44	28	3	elementary school
Damaris	45	13	5	middle school
Dayra	38	9	2	middle school
Eloisa	33	9	2	high school
Emilia	32	10	2	elementary school
Guadalupe	25	7	2	middle school
Hortencia	25	7	3	middle school
Isabel	28	9	2	middle school
Josefina	36	10	2	middle school
Julia	33	9	2	middle school
Lourdes	47	29	5	elementary school
Lucia	27	11	2	middle school
Luz	44	24	6	elementary school
Magdalena	25	10	2	middle school
Maritza	40	15	3	elementary school
Paola	29	7	2	middle school
Rosalba	43	19	3	middle school
Sandra	28	7	2	middle school
Ximena	29	11	3	elementary school
Yovanna	39	10	1	middle school

Table 1. Basic descriptors of women heads of transnational households in my study

In addition to women heads of transnational households, I also interviewed four teachers. I interviewed Maestra Matilda who has been working in the preschool for 12 years, Maestra Yolanda who is the principal at the elementary school and has been there for three years, Maestra Catalina who has been working at the elementary school for under a year, and Maestra Tencha who has been in the middle school for 17 years. Maestra Matilda, Maestra Yolanda, and Maestra Catalina are all married and have young children that were enrolled in remote schooling during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

I recorded and then transcribed interviews verbatim utilizing Sonix transcription software.¹⁶ I also collected field notes during interviews to document things happening in the background of calls, lines of inquiry that created pause or brought up emotion among participants, and general reflections I had at the end of an interview. All interviewees as well as locations were assigned a pseudonym to protect privacy in compliance with IRB protocols.

Once digitally transcribed, I reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy. As a native Mexican Spanish speaker, I did not translate my transcriptions to English and proceeded to analyze my data in Spanish. For publication purposes, I translated specific quotations and excerpts included in this thesis. Rather than providing the original Spanish quotation as a footnote, I opted to include it directly after my English translation. I am aware of the limitations of translation in documenting human experience, and I believe the words shared with me are powerful and hold meaning beyond what I can directly translate. Thus, any errors in translation are my own.

¹⁶ Sonix automated transcription service, 2022. URL: <https://sonix.ai/>

Once my transcriptions were finalized, I imported my data into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program, and coded it utilizing a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014).¹⁷ I employed both line-by-line coding (open coding) and focused coding to identify major themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Through iterative coding (Saldaña 2016) and analytical memo-writing (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011), I began drawing connections between codes and identifying the major themes that became the foundation for this thesis. The challenges of remote schooling and limited access to medical services arose as key themes during the first subset of interviews and as such, subsequent interviews prodded more directly at these themes. As this thesis is exploratory, I did not set out to test any hypothesis nor to make any generalizations. Instead, through empirical accounts, I sought to capture a range of experiences lived by women in one community in rural Mexico that shed light on the broader systems at work that influenced the way transnational families fared throughout the pandemic.

Considerations and Positionality

I selected this community as my research site because I hold strong community ties that greatly facilitated remote research during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of 2018 until the pandemic broke in March of 2020, I was stationed in this community as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was assigned to work in the capacity of a teacher and community organizer, so my work greatly lent itself to developing long-lasting relationships with women and their children. I recognize that my positionality gives me singular access to a population that may not readily share their experiences with other researchers. Additionally, my familiarity with the community and people allowed for a general openness, in spite of remote methods, and allowed me to supplement my data with general background understandings.

¹⁷ Dedoose Desktop App Version 9.0.46

Moreover, my identity as a woman of Mexican heritage with fluent language skills allowed for conversant interviews where topics far beyond anything in my interview guide were discussed. Throughout my research process, I was transparent in my research aims and reminded participants that they could share as little or as much as they wanted. While at times it became difficult to separate my identity as a friend to my interviewees from my position as a researcher, I remained mindful of my power and my responsibility to not cross the line to exploitative research practices. The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for many people and some of the painful moments the women in my study lived through and shared with me did not make it into this thesis simply because those moments do not belong to me and are not my story to tell.

CHAPTER IV

A TRADITION OF MIGRATION

As I came to understand throughout my interviews, the women in my study have been exposed to migration and transnational family life their entire lives. All the women in my sample, with one exception, originated in *La Magnolia* or neighboring communities. They grew up without the proximate care of their fathers, witnessing their brothers' subsequent migrations, and learning from their mothers the expectations that come with becoming heads of transnational households. Doña Magdalena was the only woman in my study that grew up away from the region, in rural Veracruz, but she too was familiar with the processes of migration as her family had migrated to the city of Querétaro in search of greater economic opportunity.

Twenty of the twenty-five women interviewed reported their partners traveling or having traveled on a yearly basis on work visas that could span anywhere from 3 to 8-month contracts. Two spouses reported their partners having permanent residence through family members that were able to gain U.S. citizenship through earlier family reunification laws. The other three spouses reported their partners overstaying their work visas and currently being in the United States without authorization. I did not directly ask the status of partners, but it was shared voluntarily at times when asked about lengths of separation. The women whose spouses were in the United States without documentation reported longer lengths of separation which is reflective of the enormous costs, both financial and physical, associated with unauthorized entry into the United States (De León 2015).

In this chapter, I provide a small glimpse into these women's migration histories. I do this by outlining their responses when asked: "how has migration changed your life?"; "what are the costs of migration?"; "what are the benefits of migration?"; and "how do you feel about your

partner's migration?". Through these reflective questions on migration, I sought to understand how the women in my study made sense of migration and transnationalism as these perspectives shape their everyday actions that sustain transnational family life.

Low Economic Prospects

When asked why her husband migrates, Doña Beatriz, a 33-year-old mother of five, whose partner has migrated on a seasonal basis for the past 11 years, stated quite simply, "greater income, greater opportunities" [*Pues más ingresos, más oportunidades*]. This sentiment was pervasive throughout my interviews. Time and time again, women referenced the opportunities that became available with remittances, not just in terms of physical capital, but also in terms of the human capital they could make available to their children through education.

Decades prior, *La Magnolia* was an agricultural community. However, Mexico's neoliberal restructuring had profound implications for smallholder farmers' livelihoods in rural Mexico who had to compete in an open market with United States' priced goods and suddenly found themselves without the subsidies and credit they had become reliant on (Bonniss and Legg 1997). To become resilient and gain the adaptive capacity required to be successful under neoliberal globalization, Mexican farmers had to either intensify agricultural activities to compete in the global market, something widely unattainable for rural smallholder farmers, or diversify their livelihoods to become less attached to the agricultural sector's variability and uncertainties. Unfortunately, for most smallholder farmers in rural Mexico, only the latter was a viable option leading to remittance-dependent livelihoods (Eakin 2005).

Women called attention to both the unavailability of jobs and low wage ceilings as reasons why their partners initially migrate. Due to *La Magnolia's* geographic isolation in

Mexico's Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve, there are very few jobs available.¹⁸ The few available jobs are delimited to the construction sector, usually the building or expansion of homes, and the harvesting and clearing of small agricultural plots. These jobs would usually be carried out by male heads-of-households, but because they are abroad working, they send remittances in their stead to have another man complete the task. In *La Magnolia*, I found that these jobs are usually carried out by non-migrating men because they tend to involve long-term commitments. Additionally, because these jobs depend on remittances, they are constantly fluctuating.

Doña Carmen, a 23-year-old mother of two with an 8-year migration history exclaimed, "Here there are no jobs. There are none, none. There are no jobs and if there are, they are very badly paid. That's why he has to go out and find work away from us" [*Aquí casi no hay trabajo. ¡No hay no hay no hay trabajo! Y si hay trabajo, está muy muy mal pagado. Entonces tiene que salir a trabajar más lejos, lejos de nosotros*].¹⁹ It quickly became evident that migration was not the desired outcome but was borne out of pure necessity. Doña Julia, a 33-year-old mother of two with a 9-year migration history recounted how she and her husband had tried to keep him in the community for a year during her difficult pregnancy, but ultimately, she recalls telling him to leave because wages were "rock bottom" [*por los suelos*] and they were not surviving.

Even when a male laborer can get a job in the community, the pay is minimal. As of August 2021, the pay for a full day's labor was 250 to 300 pesos for a construction worker. According to a report by the Mexican National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), the average cost of the *canasta básica* in January 2020 for

¹⁸ *La Magnolia* is 6 hours away in public transport from Santiago de Querétaro, the closest city.

¹⁹ In this thesis, I define migration history by the number of years that a male spouse has migrated since the formation of intimate relationship.

rural areas was \$1149.18 MX per person per month (CONEVAL 2021). The *canasta básica* is a list compiled by the Mexican government of forty items and their associated costs that meet the basic nutritional standards for the average person for one month (Secretaría de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural 2022). The average household in *La Magnolia* was comprised of 4.16 people (INEGI 2020), meaning that a household would need to earn at least 4,7080 MX per month to meet their basic needs.²⁰ Thus, in *La Magnolia* where only 35% of the population is economically active (INEGI 2020) and even fewer people find consistent work, meeting basic needs on local wages is extremely difficult.

Doña Lucia, a 27-year-old mother of two with a 15-year migration history framed this challenge in similar terms, “Well the truth is, here the work-life, they get paid very little. We wouldn’t get ahead. The people that work here only make enough to live day by day, only earn for the day, and like us who have plans to build a home and save for our daughters’ education well, it is the opportunity he has to go there. Here we would not achieve our goals” [*Pues la verdad acá si, aquí la vida de trabajar, les pagan muy poco. Ósea no saldríamos adelante. Las personas que trabajan acá solo salen día a día pues como que les pagan para el día al día y entonces como nosotros tenemos planes de hacer nuestra casa, tener un dinero ahorrado para nuestras hijas, pues es la oportunidad que él tiene de ir allá. Aquí no lo lograríamos*]. In our conversations about the reasons for migration, women without exception explained migration as an opportunity and lack of migration as stagnation.

Like Doña Lucia, referenced above, women across my sample framed the desire to secure a higher education for their children as the principal motivator for their husbands’ migration.

²⁰ This number was calculated by multiplying the average number of people in a household in *La Magnolia* by the cost of the *canasta básica*.

Notably, this desire extended beyond excelling in school. Mothers constantly reiterated their hopes that their children be spared from living a transnational life in their own futures. Doña Antonia, a 35-year-old mother of three boys reflected on her and her husband's hopes, "Well we hope that they study longer, that they pursue a career, that they train so that they aren't over there struggling. Like their father tells them, study, pursue a career where you are paid well, doing what you like, so that you aren't like me struggling all day in the hot sun" [*Queremos lograr que ellos estudien más, que agarren una carrera, que se preparen para que no anden batallando. Que como les dice su papá, que sigan, que estudien y que agarren una carrera donde les paguen bien, que les gusta y no anden allá, así como él en el sol todo el día batallando*]. In the above statement, Doña Antonia expresses her and her husband's desire for their children to not follow in her husband's footsteps. While migration is a necessary sacrifice for her husband, their children would make their sacrifice worthwhile by pursuing an education in Mexico and building roots at home.

Doña Ximena, a 29-year-old mother of three boys, shared similar hopes.

Ximena: Well, what we want is to be able to, thanks to my husband's labor and hopefully he always has a job, is to try and build savings for our sons, so that the day of tomorrow they can continue with their studies and achieve a career, something my husband and I could not. My Santiago [son] sometimes tells me that he already wants to start working, that he feels pressured to help. It's like he believes the tradition is like this, grow up, go to the United States, and then that's it. I tell him no. I tell him that he can study, find a career, and work very hard so that the career he chooses leaves him with something of benefit. So, I think that what my husband and I want most is to build savings for them so that in the future they can progress in their education.

Ximena: Lo que queremos es poder que gracias a su trabajo, y ojalá mi esposo siempre cuente con un trabajo, tratar de hacerles un ahorro a mis hijos para que ellos puedan el día de mañana seguir con sus estudios y que ellos logren una carrera ya que nosotros no la pudimos tener. Fíjese que mi Santiago me dice que él ya quiere trabajar, que él también se siente presionado. Como que él piensa que la tradición es así, crecer, irse para Estados Unidos y todo. Le digo no. Le digo puedes estudiar, buscarte una carrera y hecharle muchas ganas para que esa carrera que agares sí te deje algo de provecho. Entonces yo pienso que lo que mi esposo y yo hemos estado platicando y queremos es

hacerles un ahorro a ellos para que en su futuro ellos se puedan movilizar con sus estudios.

Doña Antonia and Doña Ximena in their above statements are both alluding to the compelling draw of migration and its gendered dimensions. While female labor migration is occurring in many Mexican communities, some communities continue to exhibit strictly gendered migration which speaks to the degree of traditionalism embraced in the community.

Overall, children's educational opportunities are a primary driver of migration (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Yarris 2017). While consumerist desires such as home building and the ownership of goods, including cars and appliances, did surface in interviews, the vigor with which they were spoken of paled in comparison with how women expressed their desire to ensure higher educational outcomes for their children. This finding aligns with most of the extant migration scholarship.

Expectations While Separated

As I established in Chapter II, labor migration shifts gender roles and responsibilities in transnational households. To gain a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics in *La Magnolia*, I asked women about the expectations they held for their migrating partners while they are in the United States. In lieu of interviewing men on their corresponding expectations, I asked women what they thought their husbands expected of them while they were absent from the household.

When mothers discussed their expectations, they highlighted the importance of their partners maintaining emotional bonds with them as spouses and with children as fathers. Doña Lucia, a 27-year-old mother of two, shared her expectations:

Lucia: Well, I hope, what I've always told him is to talk daily with my daughters. For him to ask them about their day. To ask them how they are, how things are going. Just as I work very hard here to take care of them and save money so that he can come back

soon, I hope he does the same as me. So that we can save for what we need. So that he can come back soon. And to do something for our house because little by little, we did not have anything when we got together, and little by little we have bought furniture, things we needed here in the house. We had practically nothing and I hope he takes advantage of the time he is not here with us to save and accomplish what we have planned.

Lucia: Pues espero, siempre lo que yo he hablado con él, que él hable del diario con mis hijas, que les pregunte ¿cómo están? ¿cómo les fue? Así como yo le hecho muchas ganas aquí a cuidarlas, a ahorrar dinero para que él pueda venir, espero que él haga lo mismo que yo, que ahorremos para lo que nos haga falta aquí y para que él pronto regrese. Y para hacerle algo a la casa porque poco a poco, nosotros no teníamos nada cuando me junté con él, no teníamos nada, y poco a poco hemos ido comprando muebles, cosas que nos hacía falta aquí en la casa. No teníamos prácticamente nada y espero que el aproveche el tiempo que no puede estar con nosotros, lo aproveche para ahorrar y hacer lo que nosotros tenemos en plan.

Doña Lucia expects more than a superficial connection between her husband and her daughters when they communicate. She wants her husband to show interest in their daily lives and have conversations of substance. Through open and unbroken channels of communication, Doña Lucia hopes that her husband can maintain an emotional connection with her daughters across space and time (Baldassar 2007). In the above statement, Doña Lucia also conveys her expectation that her husband save and remit as much as possible to make the separation worthwhile and their dreams a reality. Hence, Doña Lucia's husband is expected to provide financial caregiving via remittances and emotional caregiving through regular calls. These expectations underscore the nuances of the gendered divisions of caregiving identified in transnational migration scholarship (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010).

Seventeen of the twenty-five male spouses in my sample were financially dependent on seasonal cycles of migration so remittances were carefully budgeted to sustain the family during the off season and to fund their next migratory journey.²¹ Doña Lourdes, a 47-year-old mother of

²¹ Three spouses did not have proximate plans to migrate, three were undocumented in the United States, and two spouses had a green card.

five, shared that for her husband's journey, they save \$400 USD and \$5,000 MX. This money secures passage from *La Magnolia* to Reynosa, Tamaulipas, where his visa is processed, and he is granted entry. Additionally, this initial sum is meant to sustain the migrant until he earns his first paycheck from his American employer. Overall, the emphasis on the need for savings and frugality was ubiquitous in the expectations of both male and female partners.

When asked what they thought their partner expected from them, women framed their responses in relation to their roles as caregivers. Doña Antonia, a 35-year-old mother of three, posited that her husband expected her to "... carefully budget his money and not spend it on unnecessary items" [...*que le administro bien su dinero y que no lo gaste en cosas innecesarias*]. Across interviews, women embodied a deep sense of pride in their budgeting decisions and readily affirmed that they were not a *gastalona*.²² I found it interesting that every woman referred to remittances as belonging to their partners and them just charged with administering them, once again highlighting how migration simultaneously challenges and upholds gendered roles and responsibilities.

During our interview, Doña Eloisa, a 33-year-old mother of two, reflected on conversations between her husband and her. "What he always tells me is that he expects me to take good care of his children, that I educate them well, that I make it so that they don't feel his absence as badly" [*Lo que él siempre me ha dicho es que espera que cuide los niños, que los eduque bien, que trate de que ellos no sientan mucho su ausencia por mientras que él está allá*]. Through this and other accounts, I understood that guaranteeing greater educational opportunities for children was a decisive motivator for migration among these transnational families. Men

²² *Gastalona* is the Spanish word for "spendy" and colloquially defines someone that spends or consumes a lot.

sacrifice the right to see their children grow up and women take on the new responsibilities for children to attain an education and have a shot at a better life. As a result, both men and women try to maximize remittances by saving as much as possible, both in-country and abroad, to ensure children have all they need to be successful in school long-term.

Beyond just an expectation, women shared a deeply rooted desire for their spouses to remain on their work visas. Doña Damaris, a 45-year-old mother of five, shared that she always encourages her husband to remain on his contract, regardless of the low wages:

Damaris: I encourage him because he sometimes says, I'd be better getting out of here and going somewhere else where I will earn more. I tell him no that even if he earns a little more now, later he won't be able to get a contract again. I encourage him. I tell him there are only two months. You are almost done.

Damaris: Pues a veces yo le doy ánimos porque a veces dice aquí no sirve, mejor me voy a salir, me voy a otro lado. Y yo le digo no, pues, aunque sea un poquito aguanta porque después no te vas a poder ir de contratado. Aguántale. Y pues yo lo animo. Ya nomas faltan dos meses, hombre, ya casi te la volastes.

Doña Damaris understands that her husband could make more money elsewhere, but she also understands the negative outcomes it would have for her family. Ultimately, she is adamant about not increasing the length of separation and utilizes her agency to encourage her husband to see things from her perspective. *La Magnolia* has a strong network of labor recruiters, especially for H-2A visas. Thus, it is common knowledge that if anyone breaches their contract, they will permanently be banned from sponsorship.

Underscoring the expectation to maintain strong communication and stay within visa contracts, was these women's desire for their husbands to not forget about them or their original reasons for migrating. Researchers have captured the fear of abandonment as a major source of distress for women that remain behind as caregivers in sending communities (Echegoyén Nava 2013). Doña Ximena shares her expectations:

Ximena: I expect this of him. I hope that when he is over there, he work very hard for his children, because sometimes when they are over there, they forget the purpose for which they go. I think it is the first thing they should think about. That they are leaving their family. And for him to work hard because some seasons it doesn't go well for him and I try to save the most I can so that when he is here, we are not struggling as much economically. That's what I expect. That he keep it very clear that he is going for his family and that he works hard, and that he returns in good health.

Ximena: Yo espero de él que cuando él esté allá, le heche muchas ganas por sus niños, porque a veces cuando están allá se olvidan del propósito por el que van y yo pienso que es lo primero que deben de ponerse a pensar. Que dejan a su familia. Que le heche ganas a su trabajo porque por ejemplo a veces que no les va bien cuando él está allá y yo trato de ahorrarle lo más que puedo para que cuando él esté acá no estemos batallando tanto económicamente. Entonces yo espero eso. Que él tenga bien en claro que va por su familia y que le heche muchas ganas a su trabajo, que regrese con bien.

Doña Ximena expects her husband to always keep their children front and center. Like the other women in my study, Doña Ximena has seen abandonment first-hand and can only hope to not suffer the same fate. Spousal abandonment is a common occurrence in *La Magnolia*, especially among those migrants that overstay their visas and have no way of easily moving between the United States and Mexico.

A close community contact that supported me in contacting participants and providing context shared that she has not seen her husband in 17 years. After overstaying his visa, he had no way to return to the community and over the years his remittances and contact became nonexistent. She has heard from others that her husband is now married to another woman and has parented more children with his new wife. Meanwhile, she was abandoned, left to support her 7 children on her own. She is not alone. However, because many women in similar situations are not currently receiving remittances, per my inclusion criteria, their experiences are not captured in this thesis.

Burdens of Migration

While the benefits of migration are notable, women also revealed the deep emotional costs of migration. Doña Carina, a 35-year-old mother of two, calls transnational family life “the saddest most impactful thing we live” [*es lo más fuerte que se vive*]. When asked about the first migration, many women shared deep anguish that was evident in their words and tone of voice. Some recalled the pain they felt at being separated for the first time from their partners, at the desperation of not hearing from them for weeks at a time, and many women noted being pregnant when the first migration occurred. Doña Dayra, a 38-year-old mother of two, was 4-months pregnant when her partner migrated for the first time and she shares, “When you are pregnant, you feel an immense sadness. You feel it very deep, so you really need the love of your partner” [*Cuando uno está embarazada se siente una tristeza muy grande. Se siente como que uno muy sentimental. Y como que a uno le hace falta mucho el cariño de su pareja*].

The women that did not originate in the community acknowledged that limited social connections amplified the feeling of loneliness. For example, Doña Lucia, a 27-year-old mother of two, who originates from a community forty-five minutes away from *La Magnolia*, shares her feelings at being left in the care of her mother-in-law only weeks after getting together with her husband. She reflected, “The loneliness, the loneliness ate at me, very ugly. I don’t know, I wanted to catch up with him, make him return. I felt very alone. It felt horrible” [*La soledad, me comía la soledad, muy feo. Yo quería no se irme a alcanzarlo o ir a regresarlo. Que se regresara. Se siente uno muy solo, muy feo se siente*]. Doña Lucia speaks to the isolating conditions of migration which is well documented in migration literature (Mckenzie and Menjívar 2011). Many times, women rely on their social networks to buffer the impacts of their

partner's migration (Rosas 2014; Silver et al. 2018), but when those are nonexistent, it has devastating consequences for women.

Medical anthropologist Mark Nichter, in a landmark case study of Havik Brahmin women in South India, found that relocations into patrilocal residences and the social regulations and duties daughters-in-law were subjected to as well as growing distance to kin resulted in great stress and anxiety for women (Nichter 1981). Unable to directly express their displeasure at their treatment, Havik women resorted to “idioms of distress” as an indirect means to express their dissatisfaction (Nichter 1981). Anthropologist Julia Pauli, in an ethnographic study of the mother-in-law system in Mexico, found that women living and suffering under the control of their mothers-in-law in patrilocal residences leveraged heavily the need to have their own home built via their husband's remittances (Pauli 2008). For these Mexican women, the transition to virilocal homes was a demonstration of their agency and they expressed their distress at living with their mothers-in-law by designing homes of a higher tier than their mother-in-law's home (Pauli 2008). Twenty-three of the twenty-five women in my study reported beginning their relationships in their in-laws' home and all but one now have their own family home. From women's accounts, I gathered that having a house to show for the sacrifices of transnational family life served as a powerful reminder that their sacrifices were not in vain.

The expansion of caregiving responsibilities amplified the emotional loneliness women felt from their partner's migration. In particular, women in my study shared fears of being alone in providing care for their children in times of medical emergencies. Doña Beatriz, a 33-year-old mother of four, shares her fears of her children getting sick while her husband is abroad:

Beatriz: It feels more difficult, because as a mother, you end up with all the responsibility of your children and that is what is most difficult for me. For example, if one of my children got sick, I was more scared, because who could I turn to? But when he is home, I do not have that fear, because we can move in diverse ways.

Beatriz: Se siente más difícil, porque uno como madre, tiene uno toda la responsabilidad de sus hijos. De uno solo y pues si es un poquito más, más pesado, es lo que a mí se me hacía más difícil. Por ejemplo, si se me enfermaba uno de mis hijos, me daba más miedo, porque ¿a quién recurría? Y pues cuando él está, pues no, porque pues él ya está, ahí nos podemos mover de diferente manera.

It became evident that once men migrate, women feel a greater responsibility as they have to ensure their child's wellbeing, both emotionally and physically, but are left without the support of their partner to make this happen during an emergency. Although women are the primary providers of basic care for their children, they rely on their partners in times of difficulty. For example, since *La Magnolia* is about an hour's drive from a clinic and 1.5 hours away from the municipal hospital, women would typically rely on their partners to coordinate transportation. Doña Ximena shares:

Ximena: When my husband goes to the United States, I am left with the double responsibility of my children. For them, while he is in the United States, I am mother and father. I have that double responsibility and it is very tough.

Ximena: Es pesado. Porque cuando mi esposo se va para Estados Unidos, que es el tiempo en que migra, a mí me queda la doble responsabilidad de mis hijos. Para ellos, en el tiempo que él está en Estados Unidos, yo soy papá y mamá. Entonces tengo esa doble responsabilidad y si es muy pesado.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women shared a similar feeling of unease at not knowing what they would do if they or their children got sick with the virus. I will discuss this fear more at length in Chapter VII.

The greatest challenges women bear upon their partner's labor migration are associated with an expansion of caregiving responsibilities. Women not only mentioned the physical costs of migration but also referenced the emotional burden passed onto their children. With pain in their voices, women shared the impact of fathers missing key moments in their child's development, including birthdays. It was up to mothers to do the best they could so their children

didn't feel their father's absence. Interestingly enough, fathers did make an added effort to be home for school graduations, once again highlighting the importance of education in transnational family life. Doña Sandra, whose undocumented husband has been gone for four years, is hopeful that her husband will return for the kindergarten graduation of her eldest son. She expressed, "I want him to already be here [during the pandemic], but he tells me that he will return when Alan finishes preschool. So, I have the hope he will return in one year based on what he has told me" [*Yo ya quisiera que estuviera aquí, pero por lo que él me dice que va regresar cuando Alan salga del kínder pues tengo la esperanza de que venga en un año. Por lo que me ha dicho*].

Women in my study were more willing to withstand the burdens of migration during the COVID-19 pandemic because the remittances made the sacrifices worthwhile. Notably, Doña Sandra was the only woman in my study who said that she wished her husband had been home in the community during the pandemic. In part, this is because she and her two children got sick and had trouble accessing care. They did not get the COVID-19 virus, but the stigma of the virus and the marginalization of rural people made it difficult for her to access care for the common flu. Moreover, unlike many women in my study, Doña Sandra did not consistently benefit financially from her husband's absence. As an undocumented construction worker, Doña Sandra's husband was laid off at the onset of the pandemic and has since struggled to obtain a consistent job. When other women shared that they preferred their partners being in the US during the pandemic, they referenced how much they depended on remittances during this difficult time. Doña Sandra did not benefit equally from her husband's absence, and therefore felt it was much less worthwhile to withstand separation than other women in my study did. This

unusual case highlights how deeply women perceive their partners' absences as a tradeoff made worthwhile only because it provides support and opportunity for their children.

While the costs of migration are heavy for these women, they see beyond the emotional burdens and support their husbands' continuous migration. Doña Josefina, a 36-year-old mother of two, whose husband is home two months out of the year reflects on her feelings:

Josefina: I tell you it is sad, and it is complicated, because I have to accept that he has to leave for us to have a better life. And it is sad, but I have to accept it, I have to understand that it is for our own good, because him being here or working here would not generate the same income that there is over there. Him being over there makes it so we can be better over here economically. But yes, it is difficult to accept for him to be so far away and that we can't see him very often.

Josefina: Es triste y es complicado, porque pues uno tiene que aceptar que se tiene que ir para mejorar nuestro futuro. Y sí es triste, pero uno tiene que aceptarlo. Uno tiene que entender que es para nuestro bien, porque estando aquí o el trabajando aquí no genera los mismos recursos que hay allá, entonces ya que él está allá, pues nos va mejor a nosotros acá económicamente. Pero si es difícil aceptar que esté tan lejos y que no podemos verlo tan seguido.

I came to understand that Josefina, like the other women in my sample, has reimagined migration as an opportunity to be maximized. When I asked women when they thought their partners would stop migrating, many affirmed that it would take them no longer receiving a work visa. As long as there is an outlet for migration and they remain able-bodied, they will migrate. The influence of remittances has made transnational family life part of the life course for these Mexican families. Given the beneficial outcomes of migration and the prevalence of remittance-dependent households, it is evident that migration in this Mexican community serves as a tradition that women fully embrace as a part of their culture and identity (Boehm 2012).

CHAPTER V

THE EXPANSION OF CAREGIVING

As I established in previous chapters, male labor migration expands women's roles and responsibilities as they make the transition to heads of transnational households. Women's traditional caregiving responsibilities that may have previously been delimited to cleaning, cooking, and child-rearing expand to supplant their partner's roles in daily family life. In this chapter, I forefront participants' accounts to show how the social conditions of the pandemic have manifested with the social conditions of migration to compound women's caregiving responsibilities. Namely, I look at how the pandemic and related outcomes have manifested with two predominant homemaking roles: housework and budgeting. In my concluding section, I discuss the actions women in my study have taken to address the challenges brought forth by the pandemic.

The Rise of the Double Day

In *La Magnolia*, women are responsible for a range of caregiving responsibilities, such as cleaning, cooking, and child-rearing. Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn defines caregiving as “the relationships and activities involved in maintaining people on a daily basis and intergenerationally” and she elucidates the three types of caregiving labor:

First, there is direct caring for the person, which includes physical care (e.g., feeding, bathing, grooming), emotional care (e.g., listening, talking, offering reassurance), and services to help people meet their physical and emotional needs (e.g., shopping for food, driving to appointments, going on outings). The second type of caring labor is that of maintaining the immediate physical surroundings/milieu in which people live (e.g., changing bed linen, washing clothing, and vacuuming floors). The third is the work of fostering people's relationships and social connections, a form of caring labor that has been referred to as "kin work" or as "community mothering" (Glenn 2010, 5).

I draw on Glenn's definition to identify the diverse forms of caregiving labor the women in my study are expected to provide.

As I established in the previous chapter, women take on new roles and responsibilities upon their partner's migration. At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to recount a typical day in their lives and it grew evident that daily they provided all three types of caregiving labor. Doña Emilia, a 32-year-old mother of two, describes a typical day in her life:

Emilia: My typical day, well practically every day. I get up, do my morning ablutions, prepare breakfast for my children. I put them to do schoolwork from 10 to 12. From there they stop studying and have lunch. Once I feed them, I complete my chores which are to mop, sweep, wash clothes, make tortillas. Sometimes I also take my lambs out to the fields to graze. Then I play with my children for a short while. I try to complete an activity with them here in the house. For example, a game of *ronda* or a ball game on the street in front of my house. And in the evening, I bathe them, so they go to bed clean and then I feed them dinner.

Emilia: Bueno, mis días típicos, porque es prácticamente todos los días es levantarme, asearme, preparar el desayuno para mis niños. Yo a ellos los pongo a estudiar lo que es de 10 a 12. De allí le paran al estudio y almuerzan. Yo me dedico ya que les doy de almorzar, hago lo que es mi quehacer, que es trapear, barrer, lavar ropa, hacer tortillas. A veces también salgo como al campo a cuidar mis borregas. Y luego juego un poco rato con ellos. Trato de hacer alguna actividad con ellos aquí en la casa, como por ejemplo jugar, no sé, un juego de una ronda o jugar pelota. Aquí en el pasillo, así, en la calle que está sobre mi casa. Y pues tratar de asearlos en la tarde para que se duerman limpios y luego su cena.

In the above example, we see how Doña Emilia forefronts the needs of her children in providing all three types of care. She provides the first type in feeding them and grooming them. She provides the second in cleaning the house and doing laundry. Finally, she provides the third by ensuring her children complete schoolwork and by having the family play together in the evenings. Doña Emilia, like two others in my sample, always makes homemade tortillas regardless of her partner's location. This is a grueling task that takes 3 to 4 hours every other day, but because it is emblematic of good nutrition, she makes sure to make them for her family. Additionally, when probed further about her tasks with livestock, Doña Emilia shared that for 3 to 4 hours each day she takes her lambs out to the fields for them to feed on fresh grass.

When prompted about added responsibilities related to their partners' migrations, women in this study mentioned 1) caring for livestock, 2) receiving, managing, and allocating remittances, as well as 3) caring for aging parents and grandparents as three forms of additional labor occasioned by their partners' absences. These responsibilities were added on top of women's already limited time and already heavy caregiver roles. For example, women responsible for cattle had to each morning guide them deep into the forest to feed and then, right before sunset, had to locate and cage them up for the night. This process is repeated daily. To pick up remittances, women reported leaving the community at 7:45 am on the morning transport to make the 14 km trek on unpaved road down the mountain to the nearest town, *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*.²³ Figure 3 is a satellite capture of the distance and terrain between the community and the town. Altogether, these tasks expand the boundaries of "caregiving labor" for the women in my study.

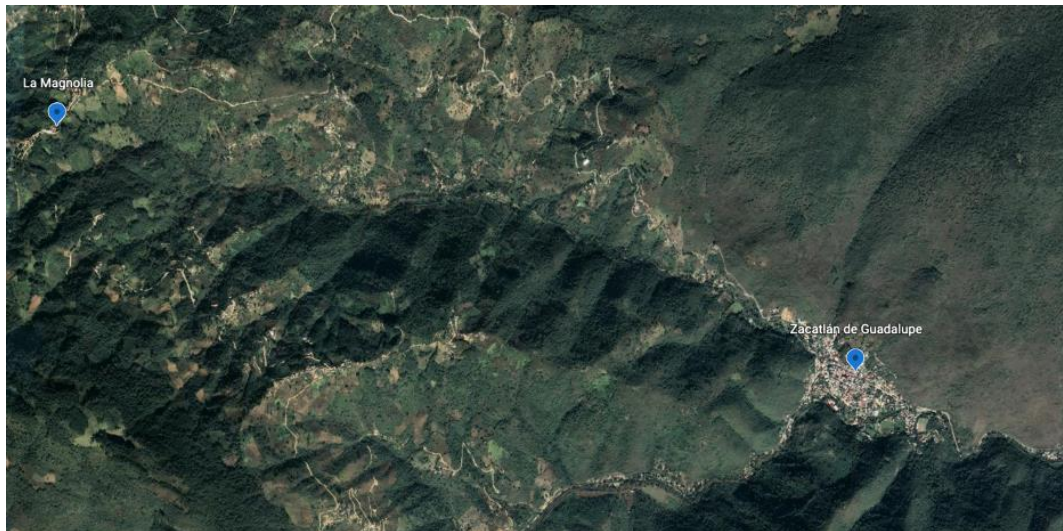


Figure 3. Google Earth capture of the distance and terrain between *La Magnolia* and *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*.

²³ From the community to the town, there is only one daily transport that leaves at 07:45 am and returns at 3:30pm. This option costs \$30 pesos each way.

I conceptualize this expansion of caregiving as “migration work” since it is indispensable in sustaining transnational family life (Hennebry 2014). Sociologist Jenna Hennebry, in her ethnographic study of guestworkers in Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), found that through their “migration work,” female spouses in Mexican communities facilitated their husbands’ temporary labor migration (Hennebry 2014). Hennebry found that when spouses were unable to fulfill their “migration work” at home, temporary workers would return home and at times decide not to migrate again (Hennebry 2014). Hence, women in *La Magnolia* are expected to provide both “caregiving labor” and “migration work,” culminating in a “double day” for them (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010).

Interestingly, while a partner’s migration results in a greater time demand on women’s busy schedules, men’s return did not ease the burden. Some women indicated that they took things in a “more relaxed” [*más relajado*] manner when their partners were abroad. In particular, women in my study highlighted their spouses’ expectation to be served three distinct meals a day. When their husbands are migrating, women prepare simple meals, eat the same food for multiple meals, and most importantly, purchase store bought tortillas. Nineteen women reported making tortillas when their partners are home as opposed to three women who always make them. Anthropologist Boehm understands this dynamic in tortilla-making as a symbol of men reasserting their dominance once they are back home (Boehm 2012). Altogether, these expectations amplify cooking responsibilities. Doña Lucia, a 27-year-old mother of two, shares:

Lucia: It changes a lot because we are adding one more person to the family. It is a lot of work, a lot to launder, more to cook. It is like more, like much more than when one is alone. I tend to my daughters much better, I brush their hair, when he is not here. When he is here, I no longer have time to even brush their hair. I do not know why if it is only one more family member.

Lucia: Cambia mucho porque simplemente es una persona más que se integra a la familia. Y es mucho que hacer, mucho que lavar, mucho que hacer de comer. Es como

más mucho, más arto que cuando uno está solo. Yo atiendo a mis hijas como más mejor. Yo las peino, yo las traigo así cuando él no está. Cuando él esta como que ya ni tiempo tengo de peinar ni de peinarlas. No sé porque si nada mas es un simple miembro mas.

Doña Lucia affirms that the workload is heavier when her husband is home but underlying her response is a sense of bewilderment as to why she feels this way if her husband is only one person. It is particularly interesting that when her husband is home, she feels that she cannot offer the same amount of care she usually gives her daughters. For Doña Lucia, the act of brushing her daughters' hair was an aspect of her caregiving that she felt was neglected when her husband was home. She was not alone in this feeling. Doña Paola, a 29-year-old mother of two echoed this sentiment "When he is not here, I focus more on my children, like I try to give them more attention, make sure they are not sad, that they do not feel alone, that they feel my support at every moment" [*Cuando él no está, yo me enfoco más con mis niños, como que les pongo más trato de darles más atención, de que no se sientan tristes, de que no se sientan solos, que sientan mi apoyo en todo momento*].

Women also reported that when their partners are absent, they have more time to foster social networks, which are critical in sustaining transnational family life (Silver et al. 2018). Doña Isabel, a 28-year-old mother of two, shared, "When he is not here, I feel like I spend more time with my mom and dad. I have more free time to spend with my friends, and when he is here well not very much" [*Pues porque cuando no está, yo siento que convivo más con mi mamá y papá. Tengo más tiempo libre con mis amigas y cuando él ya está pues no mucho*]. I will discuss the isolating dimensions of migration more in-depth in Chapter VII. While men might take some tasks back from their wives while at home, for example, the care of livestock, some women felt that they were expected to provide even more caregiving labor, so their partner's presence made no net difference in the demands on their time and even in some cases exacerbated caregiving

demands. It became evident that regarding child-rearing women encountered a paradox. While they were expected to be the best caregivers in their partner's absence, their partner's expectations while back in the community made it difficult for them to continue providing the same degree of care to their children.

Despite this general trend, there were a few women in my study that felt more relaxed when their partners were home. For example, Doña Carina, a 35-year-old mother of two, shares her perspective:

Carina: Well, it is very relaxed for me when he is here, because he helps me with everything. I do not have to get up to put on the water for coffee because he does it. He gets up, makes the coffee. Sometimes he brings coffee to watch TV and when my children tell him they want coffee, he goes and makes it for them. Or they tell him they want something to eat, and he goes and makes them food. In a way, it is more relaxing when he is here because I do not feel the weight of being solely responsible for our children that I feel when he is gone. Although he is attentive, even if he is far away. If they get sick, he asks how they are, if they are recovering, if something happens. He is attentive and there is support, but it is not the same. It is not the same as him being here. When he is here, I feel like we share all the work because he helps me with everything. He does help me with everything.

Carina: Pues es muy relajado para mí cuando él está, porque él me ayuda en todo. Y entonces yo no me tengo que levantar a poner la agua para el café, porque lo hace él. Él se levanta, hace el café. A veces se trae el café a ver la tele y cuando los niños luego le dicen que quieren café él va y se los hace. O le dicen que quieren algo de comer y él va y se los hace. Ósea, por un lado, es más tranquilo porque tengo más ayuda y no me siento con ese peso de que yo soy la responsable de nuestros hijos, porque cuando él no está siento más el peso que está sobre mí. Aunque él está pendiente, aunque esté lejos él está al pendiente de que, si se enferman, de como están, de si ya se están componiendo, si algo les paso. Él está al pendiente y está el apoyo, pero no es lo mismo. No es lo mismo al que él esté aquí. Entonces como que cuando él está aquí, yo siento que comparto todos los trabajos, porque él me ayudó en todo. El sí me ayuda en todo.

Doña Carina's husband provides all the types of caregiving labor previously outlined, so when he is home Doña Carina feels like some of the burden of caregiving is taken off her shoulders. This was not the case in other empirical accounts. While eight other women reported receiving assistance from their partners, most partners were less involved in caregiving, confining it to

taking children to school and assisting with their homework, rather than helping with household work.

In some senses, this dynamic reflects the rise of companionate marriages in rural Mexico that anthropologist Hirsch documented in the late 1990s (Hirsch 2003). In her ethnography of transnational Mexican marriages, Hirsch found that partnerships were moving towards a companionate model of marital relations where women were able to leverage their needs without challenging their partner's masculinity to form marriages based on *confianza* (trust) rather than *respeto* (respect) (Hirsch 2003). Doña Carina's husband relocated from a nearby community to *La Magnolia* and moved into her father's home. In turn, her parents provided land for them to build a home and their current home is directly adjacent to her parents' home. When I inquired why he moved to *La Magnolia* as opposed to her moving to his home village, Doña Carina said she would not have been happy away from her parents. This form of matrilocal residence allows Doña Carina to avoid the distress associated with living with in-laws and provides her with greater kinship support to buffer the effect of her husband's migration. Doña Carina is the only woman in my study that did not report living with her in-laws at any point of her relationship. Additionally, she reported the greatest equality in how she and her husband distribute caregiving responsibilities when he is home. Thus, Doña Carina's ability to leverage her own wants and needs with her husband speaks to the fluidness of gender and tradition experienced by women in *La Magnolia*.

Remittances and Budgeting

In the previous section, I documented the "migration work" that women in my sample became responsible for upon their partner's migration. In this section, I delve deeper into how these women manage the sole responsibility of receiving, managing, and allocating remittance

funds. Per my inclusion criteria, all women in my study had to currently be or have been receiving remittances from their partners within the past five years. To understand this expanded caregiving responsibility, I inquired about sources of income, including remittances, and budgeting decisions.

Average Remittances

To begin with, I asked all the women in my sample how much they typically receive in remittances. Women reported receiving remittances bi-monthly while their partners are in the United States. In terms of specific amounts, they provided a range, calling attention to the endemic precarity of remittances. The average bi-monthly remittances reported by women was \$9,756 MX (\$487 USD) which is comparable to the mode, \$10,000 MX (\$500 USD).²⁴ However, these averages do not adequately reflect the responses I received. Responses ranged from \$2,000 MX (\$100 USD) to \$25,500 MX (\$1275 USD), signifying wide disparities in the community in terms of how each household was able to maximize migration as a livelihood diversification strategy. [Figure 4](#) illustrates the range of remittances received by women in my study before the pandemic.

²⁴ In 2020, the average exchange rate between the dollar and the Mexican peso was 21.49 (“US Dollar to Mexican Peso Spot Exchange Rates for 2020” 2022).

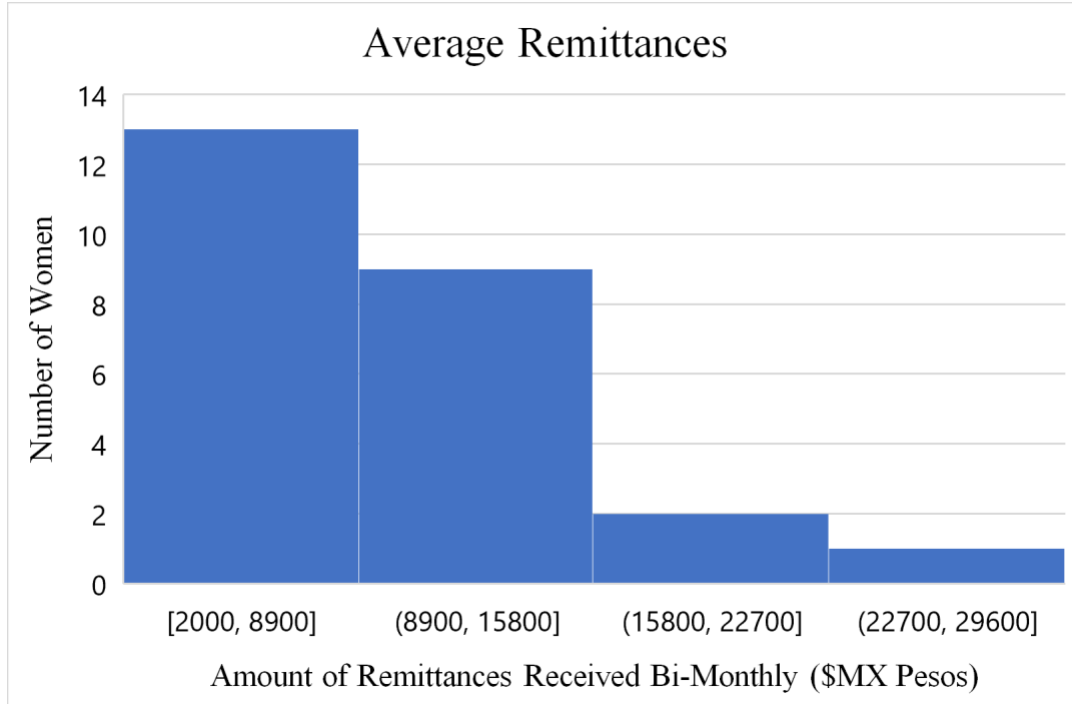


Figure 4: Histogram illustrating the range of average bi-monthly remittances received by women in *La Magnolia*.

Doña Magdalena, who reported bi-monthly remittances on the lower end, \$2,000 – \$3,000 MX, shared that her husband has been away for six years and that although he is now a resident and in theory should be making more and remitting more, he has not fulfilled his responsibilities. With disillusionment in her voice, she stated, “Well, I expected a lot, but at the same time I no longer do because he has had enough time to make something of himself and he has not done so. He has misused money and time” [*Pues esperaba mucho, pero a la vez ya no, porque ha tenido el tiempo suficiente de hacer algo y no lo ha hecho. Ha malgastado el dinero y el tiempo*]. Doña Magdalena further explained that even though her husband has a green card, he has not worked his Social Security Number (SSN) and paid taxes and has instead opted to work on and off in the construction sector with under-the-table payments. Doña Sandra, the 28-year-old mother with hopes her husband will return in time for her son’s kindergarten graduation, also

reported remittances on the lower end, \$3,500 to \$5,000 MX. Her husband originally went to the US on a work visa but decided to overstay his contract and is now undocumented. If he returns to *La Magnolia*, he will not have another chance at returning to the US without illicitly crossing the desert. It has been almost four years since she last saw him, and he has not met their youngest son.

My sample is too small to make any widespread generalizations, but my data suggests that women in La Magnolia whose partners are abroad on a work visa, and especially those who have a long history of migrating on work visas receive the highest remittances. On the higher end of remittances reported was Doña Ximena. She reported her husband remitting on average \$25,500 MX every two weeks. Her partner migrates seasonally on a work permit for 6 to 8 months yearly and has done so for the past 11 years. When I enquired about the high amount, Doña Ximena shared that her husband is generally frugal and chooses to spend very little both abroad and at home.

Women & Paid Labor

While the majority of women reported remittances as their sole source of income, four women in my sample contributed to household income through paid labor. Doña Rosalba, a 43-year-old mother of three, for example, sells homemade bread every weekend. She shares, “I like it. I like doing something and I like earning money that way. Now I can earn something, even if it’s a little bit, but I can earn something and well it makes me feel good” [*Si me gusta. Si me gusta hacer algo y me gusta ganar dinero así. Y ahorita pues puedo ganar, aunque sea poquito, pero puedo ganar y ya pues se siente uno bien*]. She shared that she makes around \$600 pesos per weekend and that she has been doing it for going on two years. More recently, Doña Beatriz, a 33-year-old mother of four, has also begun selling bread around the community. Doña Beatriz

is a close relative of Doña Rosalba's, and she shares that she was first inspired by the success of Doña Rosalba's venture. Currently, Doña Beatriz makes around \$320 pesos per weekend, but she has high hopes of expanding her business in the coming years.

Doña Rosalba first took on bread selling when her partner got injured in the United States and was unable to secure another work visa. Along the same lines, Doña Beatriz did so when her partner's work contract was canceled because of the pandemic. Interestingly enough, Doña Rosalba and Doña Beatriz both have elder daughters, who are enrolled in online high school studies. They shared that because their daughters are home to care for siblings and assist with housework, they can dedicate themselves to the bread-selling business. Through these accounts, it is evident that economic precarity coupled with an outlet to share caregiving responsibilities, greatly supports women in pursuing income-generating activities.

The two other women who reported paid labor operated small *bodegas*.²⁵ Doña Eloisa's home sits in a prime location along the road that connects the middle school and elementary school. She proudly shared, "I sell popsicles, ice cream, freezies, prepared pork skins, and I also sell catalog shoes. It is little, but I do earn my own money" [*Vendo paletas congeladas, helados, BONICE, hielos, chicharroncitos, y de hecho también vendo zapatos por catálogo. Es poquito, pero si gano mi dinero*]. Doña Eloisa earns approximately \$60 pesos per day on the goods and \$40 pesos per pair of shoes she sells. Although the amount is little, like the other women mentioned before, she expressed pride about being able to earn her own money.

Doña Yovanna, whose partner has been away for seven years and from whom remittances have greatly dwindled, operates a small shop [*papelería*] and reports the highest income (pre-pandemic) among the women at approximately \$4,000 - \$5,000 per month. She sells

²⁵ *Bodegas* are small convenience stores usually operated out of or as an extension of someone's home.

all sorts of school supplies and got together with an internet provider to sell codes to access internet connectivity. Like other mothers, Doña Yovanna stepped up and sought paid labor when she realized she could not depend solely on her partner's remittances anymore. I highlight these women's economic ventures to show how beyond "caregiving labor" and "migration work," there are women in *La Magnolia* that extend themselves into the paid labor force. These economic ventures epitomize a push towards greater autonomy as these women expressed a desire to have greater purchasing power. As I will discuss later in this chapter, income that was independent of remittances was impacted in diverse ways during the pandemic.

Social Services

Aside from these income-generating activities, some women reported receiving social assistance from the Mexican government. Seven of the women I spoke to receive *BIENESTAR*, previously known as *PROSPERA*.²⁶ *PROSPERA* was in place from 2014 to 2020 and was the Mexican government's conditional cash transfer program aimed at improving the nutrition, education, and health of children in marginalized rural communities (Winters and Davis 2009). Under this program, mothers received direct payments from the government if they complied with sending children to school and attending informative workshops (Winters and Davis 2009). As I noted in Chapter II, many of these social programs have dwindled as a result of neoliberal restructuring and women reported a great sense of disappointment with the changes. Under the *PROSPERA* program, women received scholarships for each member of the family, with children in school receiving more as they progressed in their education, and they also received grants for food, electricity, school supplies, and to subsidize the international increase in the cost

²⁶ *PROSPERA* was previously known as *Oportunidades* (2002-2014) and *PROGRESA* (1997-2003) (World Bank 2014).

of food (Martínez-Martínez, Coronado-García, and Orta-Alemán 2020). However, under *BIENESTAR*, all participating families get \$800 MX (approx. \$40 USD) for each of the ten months of the school year, regardless of the number of children enrolled in school and their age (Gobierno de Mexico 2022b).

Women expressed great dissatisfaction with this change and were disappointed that the government chose to take away the other areas of funding.

Brenda: When they gave us [PROSPERA], they would give for me. They would give \$890, almost one thousand pesos only for me. For my children they gave us, depending on their school grade. For the one that was in middle school, they gave me, I don't remember anymore, but for the grade that she was in they gave me about \$600 and for my Hernán I think they gave me \$400. For my youngest daughter, but during that time it was just without her going to school. I think she was in the preschool, she was part of a program, and they gave me \$200 for her. Yes, but during that time, it was a greater resource because they gave us per student, depending on their grade. They gave us more.

Brenda: Cuando nos daban [PROSPERA] nos daban este por mí. Me daban \$890, casi mil pesos por mí nada más. Por mis niños me daban, dependía el grado de cada niño en la escuela. Como por la que iba a la secundaria me daban como, hay ya no me acuerdo, pero por el grado en el que se quedó este nos daban como por ella, como unos \$600 y por mi Hernán parece que me daban \$400. Por la niña, pero en ese tiempo nada más era así. Sin ir a la escuela. Parece que iba en el kínder, entro en un programa, y me daban \$200 por ella. Sí, pero en aquel tiempo pues si era más la ayuda porque nos daban por escuelante dependiendo el grado. Sí nos daban más.

Doña Maritza, another recipient of both programs, felt that *PROSPERA* was more reliable in terms of payment times, as currently, her *BIENESTAR* payment is months overdue.

Women's major critique of these programs is the eligibility criteria. According to public outlets, the *BIENESTAR* scholarship is available to all families whose children attend public school, through middle school, and to those that previously received *PROSPERA* (Fideicomiso Educación Garantizada 2022). However, young women in my sample affirmed that only originally participating households in *PROSPERA* who still had children of school age were able to receive *BIENESTAR* support. My data support this critique, as everyone currently receiving

BIENESTAR was between the ages of 35 and 44 years of age. Younger mothers shared that they were deemed ineligible for it. This shift from *PROSPERA* to *BIENESTAR* and its criteria for participation once again highlights how women's caregiving labor goes unacknowledged in the global chain of commodified labor (Parreñas 2005).

Budgeting Decisions

As I established in Chapter IV, one of women's new tasks upon their partner's migration is the administration of remittances. Throughout my interviews, the notion of not being *gastalona* surfaced as a source of immense pride for these women.²⁷ Doña Sandra, a 28-year-old mother of two, who receives on the lower end of remittances shared, "I am not one to spend just to spend. I am frugal, I spend only on what we really need" [*Es que yo también este dirá por ay no soy de las que gastan nada más así a lo bruto. Ósea no soy malgastada, diría yo porque yo solamente gasto en lo que realmente ocupamos*].²⁸

In general, women reported great autonomy in their budgeting decisions. Women shared that they mutually established general parameters of how much money is allocated to household expenses and to savings with their partners, but when it came to how the former amount would be used, it was left largely to the discretion of women. Generally, savings are allocated the greatest percentage as they are meant to support the household while the male partner is home during the off-season and to pay for the migrant's trek back to the States during the next work season.

²⁷ *Gastalona* is the Spanish word for spendy.

²⁸ Doña Sandra, referenced in Chapter 4, has not seen her husband in four years because on his last migration he decided to overstay his visa and is currently working without authorization.

Most of the money allocated for household expenses went to purchasing food and basic hygiene items. Women split up their purchases between what could be bought in the community and what was more cost-effective to buy in town. Going to town is an expensive and time-consuming trek, so most women only made it when picking up remittances and took the opportunity to stock up their pantry. While they could get these goods on commerce trucks that pass through the community, they are significantly cheaper in town. Additionally, some households paid for electricity, gas, and satellite services, including cable and internet.

Doña Josefina, a mother of two who reported receiving between \$10,000 to \$12,000 pesos every two weeks in remittances, reported keeping around \$3,000 MX each time for household expenses. I noted that even with access to higher remittances, regardless of the number of children, this amount for household expenses stayed relatively consistent across interviews. A large portion of this is spent in town purchasing produce, bulk dry goods, and cleaning supplies. Doña Josefina recounts, “I buy beans, rice, pasta, fruit, vegetables, soap, and cleaning supplies. I try to buy a little bit of meat, because I am not going to lie and say I buy a lot, but I try to buy a little bit and I think that is what I buy” [*Pues compro lo que es frijol, arroz, sopas, fruta, la verdura, jabón, cosas para lo de la limpieza. Trato de comprar un poco de carne porque tampoco no le voy a mentir, compro bastante carne pues no, es un poco nada más. Creo que es lo que compro*]. Additionally, she reported spending about \$200 to \$300 MX each week purchasing produce from agricultural trucks that pass through the town selling farm goods. For Doña Josefina’s family, remittances allow them to diversify their nutrition by incorporating meat into their diet.

Regardless of remittances received, women remained mindful of their spending decisions. They know the sacrifice their family is making to access remittances and they refuse

to make this sacrifice futile by not maximizing the potential of these remittances. These accounts of how remittances are allocated challenge other researchers' arguments asserting that remittances in sending communities are spent aimlessly on consumer goods (Reichert 1981). As I will discuss in the next section, the mindful allocation of remittances was made extremely difficult during the pandemic.

Compounded Caregiving in Pandemic Times

As other researchers have found (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010), I maintain that in the present moment, in places that exhibit gendered migration patterns, male labor migration results in an expansion of caregiving burdens for women that remain behind in sending communities as caregivers. In the following sections, I will show how the social conditions of the pandemic have greatly compounded caregiving responsibilities for these women heads of transnational households in rural Mexico.

Clean at all Costs

To begin with, women expressed how pandemic-related media coverage and the Ministry of Health's campaigns have made them re-center, and prioritize over anything else, the need to keep their homes clean at all times. While conversing about the topic with Doña Eloisa, a 33-year-old mother of two, she shared that health officials and teachers have told her that the best way to protect her family from the virus is to keep her home clean, to make sure everyone in her family is wearing clean clothes, and to consistently ensure that everyone is washing their hands and using hand sanitizer. [Figure 5](#) is a compilation of infographics released by the Mexican Ministry of Health on its social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook.



Figure 5. Infographics released by the Mexican Ministry of Health on social media. Source: (Secretaría de Salud 2022b)

The infographics visualize the gendered social expectation of women being tasked to ensure COVID-19 preventative measures are being followed at home. The internalization of these beliefs was echoed across interviews and showcases how women in this community were tasked with being the first line of defense in preventing the virus from spreading. The added responsibility of maintaining spaces sanitary placed a higher demand on women's time that compounded the caregiving labor they are already expected to provide in their partner's absence.

As a result of these added expectations, many women, including Doña Eloisa, resulted to deep cleaning their homes on a daily basis and have increased their use of bleach in their cleaning routines. Additionally, mothers reported washing bedding every other day and making sure their children bathed and put on clean clothing daily. Only six women in my study had a washing machine, so the augmented demand of washing linens and clothing was particularly taxing, physically and mentally, for women that had to spend hours laundering by hand.

Women also referenced the stay-at-home orders as a reason why they clean more. Doña Magdalena shares, “Well, it is that we spend more time at home because since they closed schools, the chapel, well we spend the day locked up at home. What else would we do other than chores, stay here” [*Pues es que nos estamos más tiempo en la casa porque como nos cerraron lo de las escuelas, lo de las misas, pues entonces no la pasamos encerrados. Pues que hacíamos más que quehacer, estar aquí*]. Doña Magdalena, prior to the pandemic, was very engaged in the school community and in the church. Now with everything closed, she finds herself with unstructured time and utilizes it to clean her house, a feat that is greatly challenged by her two sons that are home all day and do not clean up after themselves.

During the pandemic, the cost of cleaning supplies, particularly bleach, increased greatly. According to a community contact, the liter of bleach went from \$20 to \$30-\$35 pesos in the early months of the pandemic. The price of hand sanitizer and face masks, \$50 pesos a piece, was equally high. Thus, women found themselves pitting their need to clean and maintain cleanliness against their need to be frugal and save as much as possible.

Limiting Movement

As established in the prior section, mothers relied heavily on their visits to town to stock up on basic necessities. However, this task became very difficult during the pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, children were not allowed on the transport vehicles or in shops. This meant that mothers had to find someone that could care for their children while they were away in town. When going to town, unless their partners were home or they had their own vehicles, women left on the morning transport that left the community at 7:45 am and returned to the community around 3:30 pm. This option costs \$60 MX. This was the most cost-effective way to get to town, otherwise, they had to pay a taxi priced at \$140 MX each way.

Many women struggled with these pandemic restrictions as they did not have someone to care for their children. This meant they had to limit their visits to town and therefore had to spend more money on food staples at small local shops or from traveling salespeople. For example, Doña Rosalba, who runs her own business selling bread, shared:

Rosalba: The most difficult thing was that sometimes I had to go out to *Zacatlán*, and I couldn't, well they wouldn't, let me take my child. In some stores you still can't go in with children and that's difficult because sometimes only one person [of the family] can go to town and I can't go into some places with my child. For example, in stores because there is a lot of people. And even if I leave him outside the store, there is still a lot of people. Sometimes I would say I would go, but I could not leave my child. That is difficult for me because I CANNOT leave him, he won't stay and so. Or there isn't anyone I can leave him with and that is difficult.

Rosalba: Pues lo más difícil era pues que yo tenía que salir a veces a *Zacatlán* y no podía bueno no me dejaban que llevara a mi niño. En algunas tiendas todavía no puede uno entrar con niños y eso es difícil porque a veces se necesita ir de una sola persona y a veces me toca ir a mí y no puedo entrar con mi niño a algunos lugares. Por ejemplo, en las tiendas porque se junta mucha gente y luego pues si lo dejo allí afuera de todas maneras hay gente y entonces pues a veces decía yo pues voy a ir yo, pero no puedo dejar mi niño. Y eso es difícil para mí porque NO lo puedo dejar, no se queda, y entonces... o no hay a quien dejárselo y eso si es difícil.

As a result of the challenges of traveling to town, many reported limiting their visits to town. While before the pandemic they may have made the trek down to town if the need arose, in pandemic times they only traveled to pick up remittances. This meant they had less access to the items in town and had to pay the higher prices that salespeople that came to the community sold their goods for. This limitation of movement in conjunction with rising inflation posed significant challenges to these women who sought to save as much as possible, especially with all the uncertainty of the pandemic. Additionally, it pitted the expectation to be frugal against the expectation of being good care providers, especially to young children. Doña Rosalba relied on her eldest daughter to care for her son while she traveled to town, but she shared being very uneasy about being away from her 2-year-old child for so long. On the days she had to travel with him, leaving him outside the store left her equally uneasy.

Disruptions to Remittances

Women did note changes to their household income, but it was neither permanent nor something they were unaccustomed to. Doña Damaris shared, “Well there was a difference because last year he did remit more or less, let’s suppose \$12,000 MX bi-monthly but this year more like \$6,000 or \$5800 MX. Yes, there was a difference” [*Pues antes pues si diferenció porque le digo que el año pasado pues si me mandaba más o menos, vamos a suponer \$12,000 MX por quincena y pues en este año \$6,000 MX o \$5800 MX. Sí, sí diferenció mucho*]. This was a common scenario where everyone noted a decline in remittances. However, most reported receiving at least something still on a bi-monthly basis. Doña Josefina shared, “I think that his work hours were cut, but even if it was a small amount, he still sent me something every two weeks, every time he was supposed to remit” [*Como que si les disminuyeron las horas de trabajo o eso, pero aunque fuera poquito, pero él me mandaba cada quincena, cada que me*

tenía que mandar]. Like Doña Josefina, women attributed a decrease in remittances to fewer hours worked in the U.S. during the pandemic. The fact that the majority of men in this community were employed in the agricultural sector may account for why women did not report fluctuating remittances as a major concern. In the United States, farmworkers were deemed essential so they were authorized to maintain their normal work schedule throughout the pandemic (Department of Homeland Security (CISA) 2020). Based on participants' discussions, everyone noted a general decrease in remittances on the onset, but not as significant as I originally hypothesized.

At the onset of the pandemic, women reported that remittances were only enough to cover the household expenses. Doña Damaris shares:

Damaris: This year it didn't go very well because there was less work, but last year it went well more or less, and we bought ourselves the car that I had long been wanting. But this year we couldn't buy anything because it didn't go so well. Because with orange, he only picks oranges and sometimes he had to get [money] for his food. He sent me the little he made, but it was barely enough for our expenses. We weren't able to achieve something more.

Damaris: En este año no le fue muy bien porque estaba el trabajo lento, pero el año pasado pues más o menos le fue y nos compramos nuestro carrito que tanto yo había querido. Y pues este año no pudimos comprar nada porque no le fue tan bien. Porque la naranja pues ya como él se va a la naranja ya pues ya nomas a veces agarraban para su comida de ellos. Eh pues lo poquito que ganaba me lo mandaba, pero apenas para los gastos, no alcanzamos a hacer algo más.

Doña Damaris juxtaposes this migration to previous migrations and indicates not having anything concrete to show for it this time around because of the pandemic. She also calls attention to her partner's precarious situation in the United States, when he had to pay for his expenses throughout the pandemic whether or not he was working and earning money. Through empirical accounts it became evident that the decline in remittances did not last more than a few months, and, in many cases, people turned to their savings.

Doña Beatriz, a 33-year-old mother of four, was one of the few women in this study to describe great economic difficulties during the first year of the pandemic. Her husband was supposed to migrate when the pandemic hit in March of 2020, but his visa was ultimately rescinded. She further elaborated on the centrality of savings, those garnered over years of migration, in mitigating the economic fallout of the pandemic. In a follow-up interview conducted in January 2021, Doña Beatriz shared that her husband had recently secured a new contract and had proximate plans to migrate. Thus, even for those that had a contract suspended, the situation did not entail permanence and closely reflected seasons, outside pandemic times, when a male migrant is simply unable to secure a contract. This is a possibility all households are well-aware of and try to be prepared for. The other four women with whom I had follow-up interviews similarly reported that remittances were back to pre-pandemic levels.

The major issue with remittances during the pandemic was the replenishment of savings for when migrating partners are in the community. Doña Ximena shares, “There were changes because we weren’t able to build our savings. What we were able to save, we finished in four months” [*Cambió porque casi no le pudimos meter dinero al ahorro que tenemos. Lo que alcanzamos a juntar no lo acabamos como en cuatro meses*]. Usually, Doña Ximena and her husband try to save enough to live off during the off-season and add to their greater savings account. However, this past season they were unable to save enough to sustain themselves during the off-season and had to dip into the savings they are building for their children.

Those who worked in the community also struggled to find labor. Doña Rosalba, whose partner got injured last time he migrated and has since attempted to make a living as a bricklayer [*albañil*] in the community, shares, “The most challenging aspect is that now he can’t easily find work. Or that the people that pay for jobs here were left without work. If they are unemployed

over there, we also won't have jobs here because those (jobs financed with remittances) are the only jobs available" [*A veces lo más difícil fue pues el trabajo que a veces ya no se encuentra tan fácil. O algunos días duraron la gente sin trabajo, las personas que dan trabajos aquí mismo. También si los desemplean a ellos pues no tenemos trabajo los que están aquí, pues son los únicos trabajos*]. Since these jobs depend on remittances, the precarity of remittances during the pandemic made it so remitters prioritized building savings as opposed to home construction.

Apart from male labor, the pandemic also disrupted local women's paid labor. Doña Yovanna, with her *Papelería* and internet business, shared grave challenges:

Yovanna: My income is very very reduced because with the pandemic all my business ended. I had my small papelería and well right now I don't have any sales because school is remote. I also had my Wi-Fi business and well it also ended because almost everyone now has their own connection installed. So now my base wage, which I don't really have, is \$2,000 MX monthly.

Yovanna: Ahorita bien, bien reducidos, porque ahorita prácticamente con la pandemia todo se acabó. Yo tenía mi pequeña papelería y pues ahorita no tengo ventas porque ósea se acabó todo lo de la escuela. Yo también tenía lo del Wifi y pues ahorita también ya se terminó todo porque pues ya metieron, ya todos tienen. Entonces ahorita mi sueldo base que se podría decir que no tengo son dos mil pesos al mes.

Previously, she shared her income as being \$4000 to \$5000 MX, indicating more than a 50% decrease. As someone who can no longer count on her partner's remittances, she shared feeling desolate at seeing how everything she worked for fell apart. Doña Eloisa, with her little shop, shared a similar story. Since there are no children going to school and moving around the community, she has no customers for her little shop and thus has minimal income.

Price Increases

Disrupted income and the inability to freely travel to town during the pandemic were major challenges of the pandemic that were greatly magnified by growing inflation. Doña Magdalena shares, "The costs of things increased a lot, and it was really unjust because there was

not a lot of work. The cost of eggs, beans, rice, the basics, tortillas, sugar, corn all increased” [*Subieron mucho las cosas y realmente se hacía injusto porque no hay mucho trabajo. Subieron lo que es el huevo, el frijol, el arroz, lo más básico, las tortillas, la azúcar, el maíz fue todo eso lo que subieron*]. Women expressed great despair at the inflation that made it difficult for them to have access to basic goods. For example, a kilo of tortillas increased from \$12 to \$18 pesos and rice and beans were reported to cost \$10 pesos more per kilo. According to a study by the Universidad de Guadalajara, the cost of the *canasta básica* increased by 19.2% between January and July 2021 (Serrano Jauregui 2021). Since travel to town was limited and women were unable to take children to town with them, many were only able to purchase goods from vendors that passed through the community who listed their goods at even higher prices.

Doña Antonia with three school-aged boys shared how her expenses have increased since her children are home doing remote schooling.

Antonia: When my children went to school, I would buy less because they weren't at home a lot and so they didn't eat a lot. Now in pandemic times I buy more because they eat more, more fruit. If before I would buy \$200 to \$300 worth of food, now during the pandemic I am buying \$500 or \$600 every two weeks.

Antonia: Es que cuando ellos iban a la escuela compraba menos porque casi no estaban aquí en la casa y no comían mucho. Y ahorita en el tiempo de pandemia pues sí compraba más porque pues si comen más, más fruta. Que si antes compraba lo de unos \$200 o \$300 pesos, ahorita en lo de la pandemia sí compraba hasta de \$500 o \$600 por quincena.

Doña Antonia was my last interviewee and the only one that directly brought up the financial burden of feeding children due to remote schooling. She continues, “...all of us being here, we eat more because of maybe the despair of not doing anything. The despair makes us want to eat more” [*...estando ya todos aquí, pues ya uno come como que más porque será la desesperación de no hacer nada. Le dan más ganas de comer a uno*]. Other mothers mentioned that the fruits and snacks they bought did not last long, but they did not report purchasing more to make up for

this challenge. Doña Antonia draws attention to the *desesperacion* she and her children experience at not doing anything and attributes this distress as leading them to eat more. I will continue this conversation in Chapter VII, where I conceptualize women’s expressions of being *desesperada* or feeling *desesperacion* as symbolic of the multidimensional distress they experienced throughout the pandemic.

In concurrence with the need to purchase more food to meet the needs of children staying home from school and the need to purchase more cleaning supplies, women had to make tough calls about their purchases and squeezed themselves to not increase their expenses very much because of the uncertainty of remittances. This made the “migration work” of receiving, managing, and allocating remittances funds very difficult and stressful for the women in my study.

Since I collected my data, inflation has increased nationally. Figure 6 captures Mexico’s annual inflation rates since the market crash of 2008.

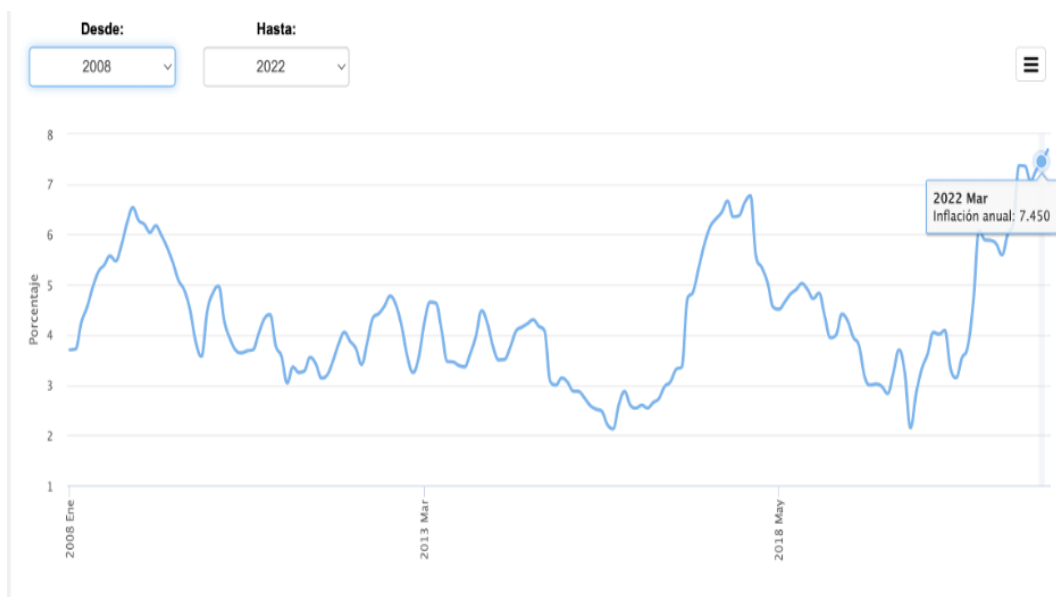


Figure 6. Mexico’s annual inflation rate from 2008 to 2022 (INEGI 2020). Adapted from: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/indicesdeprecios/Estructura.aspx?idEstructura=112001300030&T=%C3%8Dndices%20de%20Precios%20al%20Consumidor&ST=Inflaci%C3%B3n%20Mensual>

In April 2020 the annual inflation rate was 2.15% and in March 2022, the annual inflation rate was 7.4% (INEGI 2022). I can surmise that the challenge of administering and allocating remittances has only gotten worse.

Easing the Impact

When it came to coping strategies, borrowing money from family members in the US was highlighted as a principal strategy. Doña Dayra, whose husband has a relatively short history of migrating shared that during the past season they did not accumulate much in savings and sought loans. She shares, “The pandemic affected us a lot. The time he was here in the community he was unable to work because people weren’t hiring day laborers. Because of the stay-at-home orders, we had to stay in our own home. That is when we borrowed more money because they didn’t want people to travel for work” [*Si nos afectó mucho. El tiempo que estuvo acá pues casi no ocupaban trabajador la gente porque pues decían que debíamos de estar encerrados, deberíamos de estar cada uno en sus ahogares. Y fue cuando conseguimos más dinero, porque no, no querían que uno saliera*]. Here Doña Dayra discusses how a poor work season and no employment in the community pushed them to borrow money from family members. She shared that in total they borrowed 50,000 MX (~\$2,500 USD) in the off-season and that their first priority now is to repay that amount. While this strategy provided some relief during the pandemic, it is causing significant strain on their potential to build savings for the next off-season.

Outside borrowing funds, usually done by male heads-of-households, women took several steps to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on their family’s financial situations. It quickly became evident that women tried to spend the same amount they always have on household goods, regardless of inflation and growing demand at home. Instead, they sought to

simply buy less wherever possible. Doña Guadalupe put it simply, “Sometimes, even if I wanted to buy other things, I had to budget carefully, buy only a little bit, and only the most necessary things” [*A veces, aunque uno quisiera comprar otras cosas, pues teníamos que tantear el dinero, comprar nada más poquito, lo más indispensable*]. For example, Doña Damaris made some changes to her family’s subsistence to mitigate the hiking prices throughout the pandemic:

Damaris: Well, it affected us because we are not used to eat just... they [daughters] would ask me for meat. I want meat. Sometimes I bought meat, but most times I did not. They were affected because they were so used to eating meat. My daughter would open the refrigerator and would tell me, you have nothing in there, it is empty. They were used to finding yogurt, a snack or fruit. Yes, they were affected.

Damaris: Pues sí, afectó, porque ya ves que pues no estamos expuestos a comer nomás así. Y ellas me pedían yo quiero carne. Yo quiero carne. Y pues a veces si les compraba carne, pero la mayor parte de las veces no. Y ellas pues sí les afectó porque están impuestas. Luego mi niña abría el refrigerador dice mamá, es que no tienes nada en el refrigerador, está vacío. Están impuestas a que hay yogurt o cualquier cosa o fruta. Pues si les afecto.

Her tone, while she was sharing this challenge, betrayed great unease at being unable to provide her daughters the things they had grown accustomed to. For Doña Damaris and Doña Ximena, referenced previously, remittances allow them to diversify the nutrition of their families through meat consumption. In times when remittances are unstable, changes to nutrition help buffer the overall economic effect.

In terms of income-generating activities, some women also sought new outlets. As referenced above, Doña Beatriz’s husband’s contract was canceled, and they spent the whole first year of the pandemic dependent on their savings. This was difficult but she too sought to sell bread to contribute some income to her household. While not enough to replace her husband’s labor, it was enough to keep them afloat. However, not telling what would have happened had her husband been unable to secure a contract the following year. Doña Yovanna, with her sinking *Papelería*, resulted to crafting and selling crafts to get some income. She shared that if she could

not make it work, she would be migrating to the city and seeking paid work outside the community. She hates this possibility. It would mean leaving her son behind, and it would prevent her from providing great aspects of both caregiving labor and migration work, but necessity is pushing her to this outcome.

During my two rounds of interviews, the role of the government and its failure to provide aid was identified as a major critique of the pandemic response. There was a general belief that the government was going to be distributing food resources to the community, but no one in my sample reported receiving said support. Doña Magdalena shared her initial hope and eventual disappointment, “No one gave us any support. They said they would give each family a food resource. No, not even per family, but per house. Because here we are three families, and they were only going to give us one resource. But we completed and turned in the required paperwork, but in the end, we got nothing” [*A nosotros acá nadie nos apoyó. Se supone que acá nos iban a dar una despensa por familia. No, ni por familia, por casa porque aquí se supone que somos tres familias y solamente nos iban a dar una. Pero metimos, nos pidieron papeles y todo, pero al final no nos entregaron nada*]. As she states, this was inadequate aid, but even after completing all the paperwork, they still did not receive it.

Overall, there was little reported government support during the initial round of interviews. During a follow-up interview in January of 2022, Doña Magdalena shared that she had received the *BIENESTAR Benito Juárez* scholarship. According to the official government website, this scholarship is a monthly payment for the 10 months of the school year, with max eligibility of 30 months, of \$840 given to families with children enrolled in a public school (Gobierno de Mexico 2022a). This is a separate scholarship from the *BIENESTAR* scholarship some mothers, who previously received *PROSPERA*, are now receiving. However, according to

Doña Magdalena, only 16 women in the community received it. An exact reasoning was not provided. She shared that government representatives unexpectedly arrived one day and called all the women they could reach to the basketball court in the community. Not everyone was contacted, and many were out in the fields when they arrived, so they missed out. Then, there was a lottery system, and 16 women of the 23 women that were reached that day were awarded the scholarship beginning in November 2021. This is a stark contrast to how this program is supposed to work.

CHAPTER VI

EDUCATING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

On March 23, 2021, the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP) enacted an immediate closure of all public schools in Mexico and began the swift transition to remote learning (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2020). As in other countries, this transition proved particularly difficult in areas with limited access to technology and connectivity. For example, in Mexico, there were vast disparities in how this transition occurred in urban vs. rural communities (Phillips 2020). Not only that, but prevailing sociocultural norms designating women as caregivers made it so that women bore a disproportionate burden in fulfilling this caregiving gap created by the pandemic (McGrew and Finnegan 2021).

In this chapter, I underscore how women in my study experienced the transition to remote schooling to elucidate the ways that this responsibility compounded the caregiving labor and migration work they are expected to provide upon their partner's labor migration. Answering sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' call for an intersectionality framework in studies of marginalized groups (Collins 2008), I underscore how these women's unique positions as heads of transnational households in a marginalized community in rural Mexico shaped their experience. I begin by outlining the challenges encountered in this transition as told by them. Then, I discuss the rampart consequences these challenges had, and the steps women took to mitigate the impact. Lastly, I illustrate the profound influence teachers had in the experiences women lived during the shift to remote schooling.

La Magnolia is home to a preschool (*kínder*), an elementary school (*primaria*), and a middle school (*telesecundaria*). As reported by mothers in this study, once the pandemic hit, the schools closed and there was no further information until April 18th, the scheduled return to

classes after the Holy Week break. Since the onset of remote schooling, teachers in the three schools met their teaching responsibilities by dropping off worksheets every Monday morning at a home in the community and then collecting them the following Friday. Then, they returned graded worksheets the next Monday and began the process again. Originally, this method was only supposed to remain in place through the end of May 2020, but it ended up being the method of instruction through the rest of the 2019-2020 school year, the 2020-2021 school year, and half of the 2021-2022 school year. According to community contacts I spoke with for this research, schools opened back for in-person instruction on January 10, 2022. However, even this return was limited as schools did not return to full capacity.

While implementing worksheets as the principal mode of instruction facilitated education in areas with limited technology and connectivity, it had drawbacks. Doña Ximena, a 29-year-old mother of two children currently enrolled in the elementary school, despaired at the cost of these worksheets, roughly 30 pesos per child, per week. When discussing these costs, she adds, “The books, I would have liked for them to continue using the books as opposed to these worksheets. The books were left in schools brand new. Now we get worksheets, about 18 to 22 pages of activities. It is almost 18 copies per child per week and each copy has two or three activities” [*Yo me quedo así, hijole entonces ¿los libros? Para mí hubiera sido mejor que continuaran con los libros. Ósea, los libros se quedaron nuevos, son de 22, son casi 18 copias de cada niño por semana y cada copia trae como dos o tres actividades*]. Others similarly reiterated that they would have liked to have their children’s schoolbooks to access more examples to follow when completing the worksheets. In my interviews with teachers, they shared that it would have been easier to work from textbooks, but the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP) instructed teachers

to not use textbooks and instead utilize the worksheet booklets they distributed. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this order posed its own challenges for teachers.

The Ministry of Education's decision to have teachers instruct through the assignment of worksheets and maintain a limited presence in the community posed significant challenges for mothers who were entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring their children completed these worksheets. By discussing the experiences of these women, I do not intend to place blame on any one individual. Instead, I seek to shed light on how they navigated one challenge brought about by the pandemic and how multiple axes of oppression along their class, gender, location, and dependence on remittances, made them exceedingly vulnerable to the outcomes of the pandemic.

Challenges of Home Schooling

As I established in Chapter IV, the main reason for labor migration in transnational families is to secure educational opportunities for children. In places like *La Magnolia* that exhibit gendered migration patterns, fathers fulfill their gendered responsibilities by migrating and caring for their families through remittances. In turn, women that remain behind meet their gendered responsibilities by making sure their children are well-equipped to succeed in school. The COVID-19 pandemic and related shifts in the public education system significantly challenged the ability of women in my study to achieve their gendered responsibilities of securing their children's educational success. I did not originally set out to examine how women were navigating this transition to remote schooling, but it quickly surfaced as the central challenge of the pandemic for all women in my study.

Time Burden

When discussing how their daily lives changed during the pandemic, mothers consistently identified the responsibility of having to complete daily homework worksheets with

their children. Previously, mothers in my sample recalled full days of cleaning, cooking, caring for livestock, and caring for infants. Now in pandemic times, they have to stretch their limited schedule to help school-age children complete schoolwork. This was in addition to the added cleaning and disinfecting responsibilities they assumed throughout the pandemic.

Doña Ximena has two boys enrolled in the elementary school, ages 7 and 11, and a toddler at home. She was one of the most vividly upset at the current schooling system and she shared her dilemma, “I tell him [son] to do his homework. We sit down to do his homework. When I sit down with him, he does his homework. But if I have to step away, for example, to do my chores because in all reality I cannot be doing homework all day with him and disregard my home, letting it get filthy. So, I tell Damian (son) do your homework, but he is unable to do it if I’m not sitting next to him” [*Yo le digo has las tareas. Nos ponemos a hacer tarea. En el momento en que yo me pongo a hacer tarea si la hace, pero si yo tengo por ejemplo mi quehacer. Vamos yo tampoco no puedo estar enfocada todo el día en tarea y dejar mi casa que se me caiga todo el cochinerero. Entonces en ese sentido yo le digo a Damian has tarea Damian, pero él solo no logra hacer su tarea*].

Doña Ximena exemplifies how for women in this community the responsibility to help children with schoolwork is pitted against the responsibility to maintain a clean and organized home. Doña Ximena, like many others, does not have a choice of doing one or the other and instead stretches herself very thin to meet her ever-expanding responsibilities. Because Doña Ximena has two children enrolled in different school grades, she experiences a high workload. The gendered expectation to fill the education gap left by the pandemic alongside the expectations of providing care for her toddler, maintaining the home, and raising livestock,

created significant distress for Doña Ximena that impacted her quality of life. I will delve deeper into the mental health implications of the pandemic in later sections.

The amount of time spent on homework varied among respondents. Doña Carmen, a 23-year-old mother with a daughter in the first year of preschool reports spending about 30-45 minutes daily on schoolwork. On the other end of the spectrum is Doña Magdalena, a 25-year-old mother of two who has a son in the 4th year of Primaria and reports spending roughly 4 hours daily just on schoolwork. The reason for the disparate time commitments can be due to many factors, including, but not limited to, the number of children, grade level, the quantity of work, the amount of support, and the educational backgrounds of mothers. Because this study was exploratory, I cannot make a concrete argument about which factor had the greatest influence in mothers' experiences. However, I can put forth a discussion of the most common factors identified throughout my interviews.

To begin with, mothers persistently argued that since the transition to remote schooling occurred, their children are assigned more work than if they were in school. Doña Magdalena, who has a child in the elementary school, expressed that they were assigning more work during remote schooling than they did prior to the pandemic. For example, she shares that at home they have to cover worksheets for three or four subjects daily, but before they would only cover one or two subjects. Doña Magdalena despaired at having to cover so many topics each day.

Magdalena: Well, I think school is the hardest part. The most stressful because they leave us worksheets that include the work of one month, but they [the teacher] assign it for three weeks, so even at the beginning you are already one week behind... and if it is supposed to be four worksheets per day and adding in the extra week's work then you have to complete 5 worksheets daily and they cover different subjects. Sometimes Spanish, history, geography, mathematics, arts, civic engagement and so yes, it is complicated. When it was history sometimes, we had to read a 10-page passage to understand the culture and Francisco [son] would read it once, twice, even three times and still not get the right answers. So then, in order to explain, I had to read the 10 pages myself first and then try again. That was what was complicated.

Magdalena: Pues yo creo que la escuela es lo que se me ha hecho más difícil, estresante porque te dejan guías a veces que se supone que trae el trabajo de un mes y a veces te las dejan para tres semanas entonces ya llevas una semana retrasada y si son cuatro hojas por día más aumentándole una semana ya te hechas unas cinco hojas por día y luego de diferente materias. A veces español, historia, geografía, matemáticas, artes, y civismo. Entonces si es un poquito complicado porque hay que ver un libro y luego. Cuando es historia a veces nos tocaba leer una lección de diez hojas para poder entender la cultura y Francisco leía una, dos, tres veces y no me daba con las respuestas y había que explicar. Entonces tenía que leer yo otra vez diez hojas para poderlas explicar y entonces es lo que ha sido más difícil.

In the above excerpt, Doña Magdalena calls attention to her difficulties in keeping up with each day's assignments and her ever-present feeling of barely keeping up. During our conversation, she was resentful at her son being expected to complete more work at home, with their help, than when he attended school. Additionally, she alludes to how part of the challenge in managing remote schooling is the requisite of teaching herself first in order to even be able to teach the material to her son.

The belief that there was more work assigned during pandemic times than previously was also echoed by students themselves. Doña Lucia, a 27-year-old mother of two enrolled in the elementary school recalled her daughters' view, "They tell me it's a lot of homework. I feel like it's the only thing that they complain about, that it's a lot more work because at school they didn't do as many activities as they are expected to do here at home" [*Siento que lo único que se les ha hecho difícil también es como que sienten mucha presión porque luego me dicen, es que es mucha tarea. Siento que es lo único que ellas me reniegan, que es pues mucha tarea que porque en la escuela no hacían tantas actividades como las que le mandan acá*].

Her two daughters are 8 and 10 and she remarked on how difficult and stressful it has been having them home all day and trying to make them be nice to each other. She exclaims, "Sometimes it's like they want to drive me crazy because one moment they can be very happy,

playing and smiling. And the next they are just fighting and crying. They are just waiting for the other to do something to start a fight. That is stressful. It stresses me” [*Pues a veces como que quieren volver loco a uno porque a veces andan bien contentas, juegue y juegue, riase y riase, y a veces pelea y pelea, chille y chille. Nomás están cuidando, con un gesto que haga la otra ya chilla y así. Estresa eso. Me estresa*]. Both mothers and their children felt pressured and stressed out by the quantity of work they were expected to complete daily. While women had limited outlets to release their stress, women shared that their children, upon feeling pressured, would get angry at them, refuse to complete the schoolwork, and incite fights with siblings.

Complexity of Content

In addition to the workload, many mothers reported struggling with the complexity of the content covered in each worksheet, which often resulted in even more time being dedicated to schoolwork. To some extent, mothers blamed this on having a limited education themselves. For example, Doña Josefina, a 36-year-old mother of two, expressed, “There are things on the homework that I do not understand, and so in that respect it does affect me because I feel that it is complicated to complete the homework because I cannot explain what I do not understand and when I try, I just confuse my son even more” [*Hay cosas que uno no entiende de la tarea, entonces como que a mí en ese aspecto si me afecta o siento que si es complicado de explicarle la tarea, o de porque hay cosas que no entiendo yo que él no me entiende y no sé cómo explicarlas*]. Doña Damaris, a 45-year-old mother of five, shared a similar sentiment. “I helped Elisa [daughter] with the little I could, but there were many things I was unable to explain because they taught them to me a different way than they are teaching her, and so I only served to confuse her more. That was the biggest challenge for me” [*Yo pues ayudaba en lo que podía,*

pero muchas cosas no se las sabía explicar porque a mí me lo enseñaron de un modo y a ellas de otro modo, y yo más las confundía. Y a mí en eso es lo que más me afectó].

Doña Lucia, mentioned above, shared that when she gets together with her friends, they chat about the unfamiliarity of the material they are charged with teaching.

Lucia: Well, we talk about how we don't know how to do homework with our children. How we don't know anything. These are things very different from what we do know, from what we learned when we went to school, and we want to teach them [our children] the same way we were taught and I think now we learn more from our children than what they learn from us because they tell us, no, mom, that is not how you do this, I was told it was this way, and so we talk about how this [our children teaching us how to do something the right way] has happened to all of us.

Lucia: *Platicamos de que ni sabemos hacer las tareas con los niños. Ya ni sabemos nada. Son cosas muy diferentes a lo que nosotros sabemos, a lo que nos ponían cuando uno iba a la escuela y uno se los quiere enseñar a la manera como se lo enseñaron a uno y yo creo que aprende más uno de sus hijos que los hijos de uno porque ellos te dicen ¡no, no mamá, así no es! A mí me dijeron que era de esta manera y de esta manera y de eso nos platicamos que a todas nos pasa.*

The above narratives of Doña Josefina, Doña Damaris, and Doña Lucia call attention to the difficulty these mothers experienced trying to teach unfamiliar material and how this difficulty often resulted in greater confusion for their children. The limitations these women had in terms of education are a product of intersecting axes of oppression namely class, gender, and rurality that prevented them from accessing higher and a better-quality education.

The majority of women in my study reported a higher level of education than the average woman in Pinal de Amoles, Querétaro which is 7.41 years (INEGI 2020). Eighteen out of the twenty-five women had completed middle school and one held a high school certificate. In large part, this is due to the middle school being in the community which makes accessing this level of education much easier for women originating in the community than in other rural areas. However, these data fail to account for how much the Mexican educational curriculum changes with each presidential administration. Nor do they consider the disparity in quality of education

between urban and rural environments throughout Mexico. For the women in my study, the quality of education they received was an outcome of their class and location. In pandemic times, women's limited content knowledge challenged their ability to assist their children with schoolwork, amplified the amount of time they spent on it, and ultimately magnified the burden they experienced in managing remote schooling.

Battling Burnout

Mothers also reported struggling to keep their children focused for long periods of time. Due to the heavy workload, mothers had to spend anywhere from 1 to 4 hours a day completing schoolwork. Doña Brenda, a 36-year-old mother of three, shared her experience doing homework with her young daughter enrolled in the elementary school:

Brenda: Well, we sat down to do homework for two hours, but of those two hours, very little time actually went towards completing homework because she is very restless. She didn't really pay attention. She was just going back and forth playing and it was very difficult for her to listen to me when I asked her to pay attention. So then, you can say, that it was much less time that actually went towards doing work.

Brenda: Nos sentábamos a ver como dos horas, pero en esas dos horas se aprovechaba muy poquito del tiempo porque ella es muy inquieta. Ella casi no pone atención. Andaba para allá y para acá jugando y como que me costaba trabajo para que ella entienda de que se esté aquí poniendo atención. Entonces era, se puede decir, que era pues más poquito tiempo el que se aprovechaba en el estudio. Porque si pasábamos como dos horas, pero no, era muy difícil de que se aprovechara todo así en que me pusiera atención.

Here, Doña Brenda illustrates that a big reason she has to spend so many hours completing schoolwork was due to her daughter's inability to focus. She was not alone. Doña Sandra reported that she was forced to work in several small chunks of 30 minutes because otherwise her son, Adan, enrolled in the preschool, would get bored and refuse to do work. Throughout my interviews, it was evident that mothers adopted the strategy of working in small chunks of time to prevent their children's burnout. This, however, did nothing to prevent a mother's burnout as

they constantly had the task of completing schoolwork on their minds. Doña Lourdes, a mother of 5 with 3 currently enrolled in school, shared “Well sometimes I do despair. It has become too much for me to give them classes at home” [*Pues a veces uno sí se desespera. A mí ya se me hizo mucho que uno les da clase*].

Towards the end of an entire school year of remote learning, it became difficult to prevent burnout from children and parents alike. Doña Ximena shared, “They [her children] too are stressed out, they no longer want to hear talk about homework, much less do homework... this has been very hard on all of us” [*Ellos también ya ni quieren hablar de, ya no quieren hacer tareas, ya no quieren que uno les hable de tareas. Ha sido bien pesado para todos, yo pienso que para todos*]. Mothers shared that their children became very angry at being forced to do so much homework by them which fueled bad attitudes and resentment. Mothers expressed that as time went by it became more and more difficult to get children to listen to them and complete the assignments.

When I conducted these interviews, at the end of the 2020-2021 school year, parents shared that their children were tired of the current system. This was especially problematic for children in middle school who have more autonomy in deciding whether they want to continue attending school. Doña Martiza, a 40-year-old mother of three shared that her eldest daughter contemplated dropping out. She sighed, “My daughter did not want to go to school anymore. She would say why, if the teachers don’t come, I am not going to school until the teachers return. It was difficult for her because there were a lot of things she did not understand and there was no one that could help her.” [*Ya no querían sobre todo Adriana ya no quería estudiar porque decía que para qué, si no vienen los maestros, que ella iba ir a la escuela hasta que vinieron los*

maestros. Se le hacía complicado, porque a veces había muchas cosas que no entendían y pues no había quien la apoyara].

The seven mothers in my study that had children enrolled in the middle school did not report sitting down to do homework with them. Instead, they would simply remind them to get their work done. Doña Maritza said it was mostly due to the complexity of the material that she could not understand with her elementary school education. Thus, children in middle school had very little support to fill the care gap left by the closure of schools. This is specifically problematic as school enrollment in La Magnolia starts decreasing after elementary school. Adolescent boys start filling in for their fathers at home and prepare to migrate themselves, and young women begin dating and engaging in amorous relationships. There are currently only two students in the community enrolled in the high school. Doña Antonia, a 35-year-old mother of 3, who has a son in his third year of middle school, similarly shared that it was very hard to motivate her son to complete schoolwork. She reported her son becoming more and more temperamental and despaired at the thought that her son might soon drop out.²⁹

Although mothers were expected to fill the roles of teachers, they did not have many resources at their disposal and their children did not afford them the same level of respect as they did for their teachers. Overall, the challenges mothers faced to meet the requirements of the new schooling system augmented their existing caregiving responsibilities. As part of their caregiving during the pandemic, mothers had to assume the work of teachers and ensure that their children received an education that made their spouse's migration worthwhile. For many, because their partners' migration was so closely tied to children's educational opportunities, having their

²⁹ In Chapter IV, I discuss Doña Antonia's hope that her sons be spared living a transnational family life in their futures.

children drop out would imply that all the sacrifices they had made around one partner's migration were in vain. The threat of school dropouts was therefore more than just a practical concern for children's future; it was also a deeply symbolic fear for the women in my study – a potential indictment of one of their biggest life sacrifices.

Support Networks

To mitigate some of the challenges around educating their children at home, mothers sought support from teachers, family members, and other community members. According to my interviewees, at the start of the pandemic teachers provided their contact information to all mothers so that they could reach out for help when needed. The degree to which teachers responded and the degree of assistance offered varied significantly from case to case, however. Some mothers reported not receiving responses, others reported receiving links to online resources, and others mentioned receiving step-by-step instructions on how to complete activities.

When asked about the type of support she receives from the preschool teacher, Doña Carmen conveyed, “She tells us we can call her or send her a message if we have any questions, or she shares links with helpful examples” [*Lo que hace la maestra es decirnos que le podemos hablar o marcarle para aclarar cualquier duda. O nos facilitan enlaces de videos*]. With a similar experience, Doña Hortencia reflected, “Well what the teacher did a lot is that almost every day she sent a message asking how we were doing or to explain a topic of one of the worksheets. She also would tell us you can find information about this or that in the following links. Overall, we had a lot of support from the teacher” [*La maestra casi todos los días nos ponían mensajes para decirnos cómo íbamos o nos explicaba algún tema de alguna tarea. Nos decía en tal lugar pueden encontrar información sobre esto o aquello. De hecho, sí teníamos*

apoyo de la maestra]. Doña Eloisa too shared, “She is very responsible. She is online daily. If I call her or send her a message or send her a picture of an activity I don’t understand, she sends helpful examples so I can better understand” [*Es muy responsable. Está en línea casi diario, porque si uno le habla o le escribe un texto, le manda una foto de las actividades que no entiende, pues luego manda ejemplos o ayuda con ejemplos para que uno pueda entender mejor*]. These mothers all referenced their experiences working with the preschool teacher and how the open communication she extended made them feel supported and like they had someone to turn to when they needed help.

Others, on the other hand, did not feel as supported by their children’s teachers. Doña Carina exclaimed:

Carina: I feel that the teacher in the elementary school left us very abandoned. With my son Isaac, yes, she left us very abandoned because she would come, drop off worksheets, a week’s worth of worksheets. And just like she left them here for me to distribute, I would distribute them to the other mothers, but she never explained anything to us. It was left up to us and whatever we were able to explain to our children. She never took the time to start a call to explain anything or provide guidance. Not to us nor to our children. That is, there was never any instruction from her and so it was just about turning in the completed worksheets to her as best as we could do it. I do in that sense feel very abandoned by the teacher in the preschool, I did, and I continue feeling this way.

Carina: Pues yo siento que la maestra de la primaria nos dejó muy abandonados. Con Issac si nos abandonó mucho porque venía y dejaba trabajos. Dejaba trabajos para una semana y pues venía y así como me los dejaba yo los repartía a las demás mamás, pero ella nunca nos explicó nada. Ósea, era como a lo que nosotros entenderíamos explicarles a los niños. Ella nunca se tomó el tiempo de decir una videollamada para decirle a ver, te voy a explicar esto y ya tú lo haces. Pero ni con nosotros, ni con los niños. Ósea nunca hubo ninguna explicación de su parte y pues nada más entregarle los trabajos contestados y ahora sí que como nosotros lo entenderíamos. Entonces yo siento que por parte de la maestra de la primaria yo si me sentí muy abandonada y me sigo sintiendo abandonada por ese lado.

Based on my interviews, mothers felt most supported by the teacher in the preschool, as was the case for Doña Carmen, Doña Hortencia, and Doña Eloisa, than the teachers in the elementary school as was explained by Doña Carina. Moreover, mothers were frustrated, and at

times resentful, at the hands-off approach of teachers in the elementary school. During her interview, Doña Carina, who also had a child in the preschool, constantly compared the support she received from the preschool teacher to that of the elementary school teacher.

To understand these differing levels of support, it is useful to examine the level of *confianza* (trust and comfortability) between mothers and each of the teachers. Early on, it became evident that not all mothers had the same level of *confianza* to reach out to teachers. Doña Josefina shared, “Yes, yes they are available for when we need help, but sometimes one does not have the *confianza* to reach out” [*Sí, sí, está disponible para lo que necesitamos pero a veces uno no tiene la confianza*]. Thus, even though the teacher’s contact information was readily available to mothers, not all mothers felt comfortable or as if they could reach out.

For some, like Doña Lucia, the amount of *confianza* was based on previous interactions.

Lucia: With these teachers that are here now I feel myself with a lot of *confianza*. They give me a lot of *confianza* that if I need something from them and I call them, they answer with a lot of respect, with a lot of patience, and with the time necessary until I tell her, teacher I understand. They help me. They are very good people.

Lucia: De estos maestros que están ahorita me siento que con mucha *confianza*. Me dan mucha *confianza* que si yo necesito algo de ellos y les hablo me contestan con mucho respeto, con mucha paciencia y el tiempo que yo necesite hasta que yo le diga maestra ya lo comprendí. Ellas me atienden. Son muy buena gente.

Doña Beatriz too affirms, “They tell us to reach out and ask with *confianza* about any questions or concerns we have. They are available for whatever question we have about the worksheets” [*Nos dicen que cualquier cosa, alguna duda, pregúntennos con confianza. Ellos están ahí para cualquier duda que tenga uno sobre los trabajos de ellos*]. Doña Julia “...reach out with *confianza*...” [*vengan con confianza*] recalled how the teacher’s verbalization of existing *confianza* made her more comfortable to reach out and ask for help. These women’s views imply

that a key factor on how much support mothers sought from teachers depended on the amount of *confianza* (trust, comfortability) they shared with their child(ren)'s teachers.

The preschool teacher and one of the teachers in the elementary school have been assigned to the community for decades, and as such, some mothers have greater *confianza* reaching out to them as opposed to the new teacher that just arrived at the community this past school year. While it is possible that the varying levels of interaction could be due to past working experiences, it may also be a product of time. In my interviews, there identified a general trend that mothers felt most comfortable reaching out to the preschool teacher, Maestra Matilda, and Maestro Reymundo in the elementary school. Maestro Reymundo, the teacher who had been in the village for 38 years, and who was the teacher of many mothers in my study, just retired on April 24 of 2021. This means that the elementary school now has two relatively new teachers as Maestra Yolanda just began her tenure in August of 2019 and Maestra Catalina joined shortly after Maestro Reymundo's retirement. This shift in instructors can have even more devastating consequences for mothers that already have limited outlets for assistance.

Apart from teachers, mothers also sought help from others in the community, friends, and family. For example, Doña Eloisa mentioned, "If I don't understand something then I sometimes ask the other mothers that also have a child in the same grade as my daughter Grisel" [*Si no entiendo algo luego le pregunto a las demás mamás que tienen en el mismo grado que Grisel*]. Similarly, Doña Julia voiced,

Julia: Well, if I don't understand something then I look for help from someone of *confianza*. I have my friend Lucia or Doña Beatriz's eldest daughter and then well I ask them. But I only ask for an example of how to do something. I don't only ask for the answers because I need to be able to explain and teach the example to my daughter.

Julia: Pues ya cuando no entendemos algo, pues este buscamos alguien de *confianza*. Tengo mi amiga que es Lucia, acá la hija de Doña Beatriz y ya luego les pregunto. Pero nomas díganme un ejemplo, como vamos a hacer esto. Para que yo también le expliqué a

mi niña. No le voy a pedir luego la respuesta que ya va entonces nomas es un ejemplo para mí para yo también pueda brindárselo a mi niña.

Here, Doña Julia illustrates how mothers sought assistance not only to complete the worksheets but also to understand the material to be able to then teach their children. This elucidates the genuine want mothers had to truly understand the material. If they could learn it well, then they could teach it in a better way to their children.

Other mothers found themselves relying more on extended kin. Doña Sandra, whose son was enrolled in the 1st year of preschool, sought help from her sister-in-law, Doña Hortencia, whose son the previous year had just begun preschool. Others sought assistance from older children. For example, Doña Beatriz relied on her eldest daughter, who is currently enrolled in the high school, to assist her 3 children enrolled in the elementary school. And even others, like Doña Josefina, depended on daily communications with their migrant husbands to receive help. For this challenging situation, social networks, in combination with access to connectivity, proved critical in managing the challenges associated with the transition to remote learning.

By the conclusion of my study, I found that all the women had had a private internet connection installed in their homes. Before the pandemic, only 7 reported having a permanent connection, and they had one because they had made deals with internet providers to host internet antennas on their land in exchange for free access. The motivation to pay for an internet connection, even with a tight budget, was brought about by the difficulties of managing remote schooling. This decision allowed women to receive some support and to better access their social networks. A closer examination is warranted to examine how the pandemic and related outcomes impacted social networks as these accounts suggest that they were strengthened by the solidarity of navigating remote schooling. As I will discuss in Chapter VII, the social conditions of the pandemic had many isolating dynamics.

Fears and Insecurities

The added pressure mothers faced to try and replace teachers resulted in negative feelings that augmented their fears that children would fail in school. A shared exasperation in my interviews was “it is not the same” [*no es lo mismo*]. With this expression mothers vented their frustration at the vast differences in the education they could provide for their children compared to the education their children used to receive at in-person school with teachers.

To begin with, mothers felt very insecure about their own abilities. Doña Eloisa recalled, “My daughter Grisel sometimes does not understand me very well. I feel like I am not trained enough to be teaching or explaining things to her” [*Con Grisel a veces siento que a mí no me entiende mucho o como que yo no soy capacitada mucho para estarle explicándole y explicarle cómo que no*]. Taking these statements even further, Doña Julia shared, “I think a teacher has more capacity than a mom. Because a mom is thinking about what she still has to do after helping her child and teachers. I think a teacher, even though they have a family at home, they have another way of working. I think” [*Yo pienso que un maestro tiene más capacidad que una mamá. Porque una mamá está pensando en lo que va a hacer todavía después de que le da sus clases a sus niños y los maestros, yo pienso que un maestro, aunque tenga en su casa su familia, pero ya tiene otra forma de trabajar. Yo pienso*]. In the above excerpts, Doña Eloisa and Doña Julia draw clear distinctions between the role of teachers and that of mothers due to the belief that mothers have other preoccupations outside schoolwork.

Doña Hortencia echoed a similar sentiment, “I am not a teacher. I only taught my son what I could, and I felt that it wasn’t enough so that he did good in school” [*Uno no es maestro. Y pues solamente le enseñaba lo poquito que yo sabía y sentía que no era lo suficiente para que el fuera bien en la escuela*]. Likewise, Doña Damaris expressed, “Well I feel the education I

gave my children was not enough, because they needed their teacher, because a mom is not enough” [*Pues yo siento como que el aprendizaje que les brinde no fue suficiente, porque ellas necesitan de los maestros, porque uno como mamá no es suficiente*]. In the above lines, these mothers are expressing their belief that they are unfit to teach their children because they are moms and were not trained as teachers. A mother’s belief that they were an inadequate proxy for teachers magnified their fears that their children were failing in school.

Specifically, mothers reported fearing that their children were not learning anything new. Mothers believed that their children were only completing the worksheets with the knowledge they had prior to the start of the pandemic and not gaining any new knowledge from the assignments. Doña Rosalba held, “They do not learn more from the worksheets, they just continue with what they already know to receive the grade, to not fail” [*No aprenden más. Solamente están con lo mismo que ya sabían. Nomás como para obtener calificación, para no perder la calificación, pero mas no aprenden ellos*].

Along the same lines, Doña Beatriz shared, “I believe the children have fallen behind a lot because [*no es lo mismo*] when they complete the worksheets here at home to when they do them in-person at school, where the teacher can help and explain. And I. Well, I think we as parents only complete the assignments to meet expectations” [*Yo pienso que se han atrasado mucho porque no es lo mismo a que hagan sus hojas aquí que estar allá en presencial, que les explique la maestra esto o lo otro. Yo pienso que ya uno nada más hace los trabajos por cumplir*]. In these statements, Doña Rosalba and Doña Beatriz highlight how mothers are constantly in tension about the requirement to complete worksheets by the deadline to receive a good grade alongside their sincere desire for their children to actually learn. Many mothers shared that they reached a point where the latter won out. A community contact shared, and

teachers confirmed, that as long as the worksheets were completed, teachers gave out full credit and passed students with a 10, the equivalent to an A.

The belief that children were falling behind persisted throughout my interviews. Doña Brenda, a 36-year-old who has a young daughter in the elementary school shared:

Brenda: Well, I, as a mom I feel that my daughter that was already a little behind, fell even more behind. Like her teacher used to tell me, your daughter is falling behind and well that's how my daughter stayed. And so, that is where I feel it impacted me most because it felt awful to see my daughter staying behind while her classmates did learn. My daughter did need her teacher in order to learn a little more.

Brenda: Yo como mamá yo siento que mi niña que no sabía, pues así se quedó porque. Como me decía la maestra, su niña va muy retrasada y pues así se quedó mi hija. Y entonces allí es donde yo siento que más me afectó a mí como mamá porque pues también me da así de ver que todos los demás compañeros sí aprendieron. A mi hija pues le hizo falta tener su maestra para que así le enseñara un poquito más.

In Doña Brenda's case, the teacher verbally acknowledging that her daughter was falling behind amplified the despair she felt. However, for others, a teacher's reassurance went a long way in easing these negative thoughts. Doña Dayra shared her experience communicating her fears that her child was falling behind with the preschool teacher:

Dayra: Well, this was what I was feeling and so one day I called Maestra Matilda, and I told her that I felt that my son was not learning anything. I told her that I felt that he needed for her to come to the community... because I had heard that some teachers did go to the communities and explained things in the schools... I told her that I believed it would be better if she could come, but she would say no, that she was prohibited from coming. And then she would ask me, what is your worry Doña Dayra? I would tell her that I wanted my son to learn and for him to continue studying in school. I want him to study a career. And I feel that he is not learning anything. And then she told me that my son is one of the most advanced children in the preschool. He is doing very well. But I told her that I wanted my son to already know how to read. And she told me no. We have time Doña Dayra... Do not *desesper[arse]*. And she said, he has a very good grade. Everything is okay. And so that made me feel like I should calm down. That I should not *desesperarme* a lot. If my son is doing well then, I should be calm.

Dayra: Era lo que yo sentía y un día le hablé a la Maestra Matilda y le dije que yo sentía que mi niño no estaba aprendiendo nada. Le digo siento que le hace falta que usted venga porque yo me enteraba que algunas maestras si iban y les explicaban allá en la escuela. Y le digo creo que, yo digo que mejor fuera si pueda venir, pero ella digo que

no, que se le prohibían. Y entonces ya dice que cual es su preocupación Doña Dayra. Le dije que yo quiero que mi niño aprenda y que él estudie. Y yo espero que estudie una carrera. Y yo siento que no va aprendiendo nada. Y ya me dijo, su hijo es uno de los más avanzados en el preescolar. Va muy bien. Le dije, pero yo quiero que ya sepa leer. Y ella me dijo no. Estamos muy en tiempo Doña Dayra. No se me desespera. Y dijo es muy buena la calificación la que él tiene. Todo tranquila. Y ya eso fue como que ya dije me voy a tranquilizar. Ya no voy a desesperarme mucho. Si el niño va bien ay con calma.

In the above exchange, we see how the reassurance from the preschool teacher allowed Doña Dayra to take a step back and alleviate her fears. Instead of Maestra Matilda telling her to continue looking for more resources as was common with other teachers, this teacher told Doña Dayra that she was doing great, that her child was doing fine for his grade level, and that there was time. What was constantly reiterated was that there was time.

For Doña Dayra, these fears manifested in *desesperacion* and in the next section I will discuss the implications of these strong feelings. A lot of these fears and insecurities came from the belief that even a small hiccup in children's present education would have long-term consequences. Doña Dayra's son was in preschool, yet she feared that him falling behind now would prevent him from having a career. Other mothers similarly alluded to fears about the devastating impacts their children's ill preparation this past year would have on their future. Underlying these fears and insecurities is a mother's enduring hope that their children pursue an education and take advantage of the opportunities brought forth by their fathers' migration and subsequent family separation.

Estresada y Desesperada

The added pressure mothers faced as well as the fears and insecurities they were subjected to while working to ensure their children's education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many negative mental health outcomes. All twenty-five women used the word *estresada* to describe their feelings. Fifteen of the twenty-five mothers interviewed

described their feelings in terms of *desesperacion*. These terms translate to being stressed out and to being in despair. However, in the context of my interviews, these western translations do not encompass the magnitude of the distress women experienced throughout the pandemic.

While discussing the struggles of remote education, mothers stated that they felt *desesperada* when 1) their children did not understand something, 2) they did not understand it either and were unable to help, 3) when they explained something multiple times and their children still did not understand, 4) when they thought about their children advancing to the next grade level without mastering the objectives of their current grade level, and 5) when they had no options to seek help. For example, Doña Magdalena shares how her son is simply advancing in grade level without mastering the knowledge of each grade.

Magdalena: They really went from third to fourth grade without mastering many of the requirements of third grade, because well you can see that the pandemic took hold of us since last March and now they will go on to fifth grade and the same will happen with them passing two grade levels with only what they were able to learn here at home from us, what one was able to teach them because the teacher only sent the worksheets and he said to contact him for assistance but it was the same thing because he sometimes did not answer or he answered and was in a bad mood. Then well I just let it be and based it on what I understood and how I could explain it and even so at times my son still did not understand... then I ended *estresada* and *desesperada* and the kid remained the same. I feel that the children need a lot more instruction. A lot of practice because they keep advancing, they cover perimeter, areas, division. I feel that they need a lot because the kids are going to pass to the next grade level. I feel that they went from primaria to secundaria overnight.

Magdalena: Realmente pasaron de tercero a cuarto sin saber muchas cosas de tercero porque pues ya ve que nos agarró desde marzo entonces ahorita van a pasar a quinto e igual con solo lo que aprendieron de tercero para acá en casa. Pues es lo que realmente uno les ha podido explicar porque con el maestro nomas los mandaba la guía y si te decía si no entienden márquenme, pero era lo mismo porque a veces si no te contestaba o estaba de mal humor pues mejor haci le dejábamos. Entonces a lo que uno les pudiera explicar y a veces ni haci lo entendían. Y a veces acababa uno estresado desesperada y los niños igual. Yo siento que a los niños les hace falta mucho aprendizaje. Practicar mucho porque siguen avanzando. Van viendo que perímetro, áreas, que divisiones. Yo siento que les falta mucho a los niños porque pues van a pasar de grado igual yo siento que salieron de la primaria a la secundaria.

In the above excerpt, Doña Magdalena calls attention to these stresses as she reiterates her fear that her child, who was in the third year of elementary school at the start of the pandemic, will advance to middle school without mastering the basics that will be required for him to continue being successful. Doña Magdalena further states that when she tries multiple times to explain a topic to her child and he still doesn't get it, she ends up feeling *estresada* and *desesperada*. Additionally, this mother mentions how not receiving a reply when she reaches out to the teacher or when he is in a bad mood and replies rather curtly, she feels even more *desesperada*. From this and other interviews, I gather that teachers play a significant role in how *estresada* and *desesperada* a mother feels. It also becomes clear that when using the word *desesperada*, mothers mean something beyond just being stressed out or in despair. In the next chapter, I will discuss how these expressions of *estresada* and *desesperada* are emblematic of the multidimensional distress women experienced throughout the pandemic.

An anomaly that arose in my interviews is the experience of Doña Carina who expressed a sense of empowerment at becoming responsible for her children's education.

Carina: I tried to brainstorm ways for my children to not fall behind and for me not to stress. But there were those that didn't do the same. There were families that did stress a lot and to this day there are those that tell me their child has not progressed in their studies. I ask why not. They say that their kid is dumb and does not learn. But I saw that students do progress at home. I think that if a parent puts in effort in their child's schooling, the child does learn. I did hear of those that struggled a lot during the transition to remote schooling, but I think that it based on personal decisions.

Carina: Yo trate de buscar la forma de que ellos no se atrasaran y de qué y de no estresarme de todo eso. Pero hubo quienes sí. Ósea, hubo familias que sí se estresaban mucho y hasta la fecha hay quienes me dicen es que mi niño no avanzó. Pues como que no le dije, tienen que avanzarle. Es que el niño es bien burro y no aprende. Bueno, yo ya vi que se avanzan, yo ya vi que, si uno se pone con los niños, si aprenden. Pues si se sabe de quienes sí se les afectó más fuerte, pero le digo ya eso fue como que decisión muy personal.

Doña Carina felt that her children did not fall behind and she attributes this to her hard work and efforts to teach them the best way possible. For the summer months, she has already spoken to a teacher acquaintance about providing her with schoolwork practice to continue this work over the break. When asked why she didn't feel stressed, while many others had, Doña Carina continued:

Carina: It is a very personal decision if one decides to stress or not. It is based on personal strategies. At the beginning I did stress a lot because I would say things like... I need to do laundry in the morning. Today there is a lot of clothes and today I have to wash them. Later, I changed my view and said I would wash them in the evening, study in the morning and wash in the evening. And if I don't have time, I could always wash in the weekend. That has been my individual decision. You have to find strategies not to stress or you stress over everything.

Carina: Es muy personal si uno decide estresarse o no. Son estrategias de cada quien de estresarse o no. Yo al principio me estresaba mucho porque yo luego decía... es que yo en la mañana tenía que lavar, es que hoy ya tengo mucha ropa y tengo que lavar. Después cambié mi idea y dije bueno, pues lavo en la tarde, estudio en la mañana y lavo en la tarde. Porque me voy a estresar por eso. Bueno, al final de cuentas si no, pues lavo hasta el fin de semana. Entonces le digo esa como que ha sido decisión de cada uno. Si le buscas estrategias para estresarte o de plano te estresas por todo.

Doña Carina was the only woman in the study that reported foregoing housework for schoolwork. Some factors that might have facilitated this decision is that she lives in the same house as her mom and dad. Her mom assists with all the housework and cooking. Her dad manages the livestock and agricultural plots. Additionally, when her husband is home, he equally assists with all the chores.

I will continue my discussion on *desesperada* and *estresada* in the next chapter where I analyze the many factors that contributed to women's distress throughout the pandemic. In teacher interviews, it was confirmed that no child would be held back due to the pandemic and interestingly enough, this did not bring relief to mothers. Doña Ximena, for example, shared that she would have preferred her children to be held back and be forced to repeat the school year. In

the next section, I will discuss a limited perspective of how one teacher saw the challenges of remote schooling to provide a more cohesive understanding of the dynamic forces at play in managing the transition to remote schooling in one rural Mexican village.

A Teacher's Perspective

Until now I have discussed the role of teachers in managing remote schooling from the perspective of mothers. Some mothers felt supported by the ways teachers managed remote schooling, while others felt abandoned. In this section, I seek to illuminate the nuances that shaped the teacher-mother relationship throughout the pandemic. I do this by foregrounding the experience of Maestra Yolanda, whose method of instruction received the greatest critique from the mothers in my study.

Maestra Yolanda is a 38-year-old woman, with 14 years of experience as an educator. She is a married mother of two, ages 6 and 9, and lives in *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*. Maestra Yolanda is the assigned principal for the elementary school, so in addition to having a full teaching workload, she also holds administrative responsibilities. She arrived in the community in August of 2019 and was the teacher with the least seniority when the pandemic broke 6 months later. When I inquired about her experience teaching in pandemic times, her responses echoed the despair and fatigue I had previously heard from mothers.

During the first year of the pandemic, Maestra Yolanda was responsible for 28 students enrolled in first through the third grade of elementary school.³⁰ Like mothers, she reported that working through worksheets was extremely challenging, but due to the outdated material

³⁰ The elementary school in *La Magnolia* has two teachers and each teacher instructs three different grades simultaneously in the same room.

USEBEQ provided, she had no other choice.³¹ In particular, she noted the problem with the instruction materials she obtained from USEBEQ that would have made remote schooling more cost-effective for parents and less laborious for herself.

Yolanda: USEBEQ did send workbooks. The problem was that they arrived with a significant delay. Sometimes they would arrive one or two months delayed. Thus, the material in the workbooks was material I had already taught because the education system has content benchmarks I have to meet within a certain timeframe and the workbooks would arrive outside that timeframe. So many times, the workbooks weren't utilized because they weren't helpful. I brought this issue up to my supervising entity for them to stop sending the workbooks and instead support us in a different way. For example, I asked for them to send us just copy paper so we could arrange something with the owners of the copy center so that we would provide the paper and they could discount the price of copies. This would bring down the cost for parents, but my supervising entity did not respond favorably. They didn't want to do this.

Yolanda: Estuvieron mandando cuadernillos de trabajos. El detalle era que llegaban muy desfasados en tiempo. A veces hasta con un mes o dos meses de retraso. Entonces los contenidos que ya venían en esos cuadernillos, tú ya los habías trabajado porque venían las evaluaciones, lo que te pide el sistema educativo y los contenidos que tenías que ver en tiempo y forma, y esos cuadernillos ya venían fuera de eso. Entonces muchas veces no se ocupaban. O sea, no, no te eran útiles. Entonces gestione ante nuestras autoridades que pues que nos dejaran de mandar eso y que se nos apoyara de otra manera. Por ejemplo, con paquetes de hojas para que uno pudiera imprimir los trabajos o hacer un acuerdo con la gente que se dedica a lo de las copias que nosotros le proporcionamos las hojas y que ellos nos cobraran un poco menos para que así también redujera el costo con los papás. Pero su respuesta no fue nada favorable con respecto a las autoridades. O sea, no quisieron.

Maestra Yolanda recalls how the workbooks she received from USEBEQ often arrived after she had already covered the material with her students. She is obligated to lesson plan around dated benchmarks established by the ministry, so she could not afford to wait for the workbooks to arrive. To recall from earlier sections, mothers too despaired at the cost of these worksheets, but as Maestra Yolanda here underscores, her attempt to mitigate this challenge was thwarted by the Ministry of Education's policies.

³¹ Unidad de Servicios Para la Educación Básica en el Estado de Querétaro (USEBEQ) is the state ministry of education from whom teachers in my study receive instruction (USEBEQ 2022) .

Just as mothers with children enrolled in different grades struggled to complete multiple sets of worksheets, teachers too struggled to make worksheet packets tailored to the needs of each student. The content of these worksheet packets was developed by individual teachers who utilized an array of resources, including textbooks and the internet, to compile the activities found in each worksheet. Maestra Yolanda shared the working strategy she and her colleagues developed to mitigate the time burden they faced in completing this task.

Yolanda: We were tasked with developing and assembling these little workbooks. So that it wasn't so complicated, because schools here are multi-level where the teacher instructs two or three grade levels at a time, and that is here in the La Magnolia's school. But there are other schools where a single teacher instructs all grade levels. So, imagine having to develop and assemble workbooks for each grade level. In reality, it was very difficult. So, what we did among the school zone here was form working groups, that got together weekly, so that some teachers developed the workbooks for first, others the ones for second, and others the ones for third. But even then, I had to arrive home and un-staple the things I didn't like or the things that were not applicable to the level of my students. It was very very laborious for me to work this way.

Yolanda: Pues ahora sí a estar realizando, elaborando los cuadernillos. Y para que no fuera tan complicado, porque son escuelas multigrado donde el maestro atiende dos o tres grupos al mismo tiempo, y eso es en la escuela de La Magnolia. Pero hay otras escuelas donde un solo maestro atiende a todos los grados. Entonces, imagínese tener que realizar un cuadernillo para cada grado. Era realmente muy pesado. Entonces lo que nosotros hicimos en la zona escolar fue hacer grupos de maestros y juntarnos cada semana para que unos elaboraron los cuadernillos de primero, otros los de segundo, otro los de tercero. Pero aun así tenías que llegar a casa y depurar lo que a ti no te gustaba o lo que sentías que no, no se adaptaba al nivel en el que estaban tus niños. Se me hizo muy, muy trabajoso trabajar de esa manera.

Maestra Yolanda relied on her network to split up the work of developing content for these worksheet booklets. Instead of being responsible for developing three different sets, she only developed those for a single grade level and then printed and stapled enough copies for all her students and those of her colleagues.

A teacher's work did not stop with the creation of workbooks. As Maestra Yolanda mentions, she took the portion of workbooks created by her colleagues and then adapted them to

better meet the needs of her students. Then, the hardest part of working through the assignment of worksheets began. Maestra Yolanda shares that the hardest part was having to gauge a student's learning from completed worksheets and then trying to adapt her teaching plans to accommodate the distinct needs of each of her students.

Yolanda: It was having to be revising the worksheets and checking to see if students were able to achieve the learning benchmarks and identify which things had to be taught again. For a period of time, I opted against returning graded worksheets because it got to the point where I was revising every workbook, because each student had different needs. So, it was difficult, in truth it was very difficult.

Yolanda: Luego aparte el tener que estar revisando los y checar que si habían logrado los niños consolidar en su aprendizaje y cual cosa de plano se tenía que retomar. En un tiempo opté por no regresar esos cuadernillos porque tenía que estar como que revisando como que otra vez el cuadernillo de cando de niño, porque eran diferentes cosas, lo que necesitaba cada uno. Entonces fue difícil, la verdad, muy difícil.

From my conversation with Maestra Yolanda, I gathered that she understood the limitations and difficulty of working through the assignment of worksheet booklets. But she opted for this plan because it was the only way, in her viewpoint as an experienced educator, to make schooling accessible for her students. When I asked her about the challenges moms faced, she responded, “Some mothers struggled because they did not know how to teach their children and the other challenge was understanding the content, because it was difficult for them to teach things they did not understand. I also felt that they were growing tired, annoyed” [*Algunas estaban realmente muy perdidas de no saber cómo enseñarles a los niños y otro era el dominio de los contenidos, al no conocerlos se les dificultaba. Y también yo ya las sentía cansadas, como fastidiadas*]. The central challenges Maestra Yolanda identified mirror the findings of my research. While the isolating conditions of the pandemic may have made mothers feel alone in navigating their child's education, teachers remained aware of some aspects of their distress and sought to help. Maestra Yolanda recalls, “I tried to keep lines of communication open as best as I

could” [*traté de mantener lo mayor posible la comunicación*]. She shared that at times she would spend so much time answering calls and responding to audio messages with helpful resources, that she would fall behind in other responsibilities.

As I underscored in the first part of this chapter, navigating remote schooling was very taxing for mothers, but it also took a toll on teachers. With exhaustion evident in her voice, Maestra Yolanda recounted how tiring her typical day was in pandemic times.

Yolanda: There were days that were very tiring, very stressful, and full of things I had to do. I had to push myself, tell myself I had to get things done. In the mornings, I had a lot of administrative paperwork that my supervising entity required. I also had to review the worksheets my students turned in. Then, in the afternoon I worked with my children on the homework they were assigned. After working with my children, I dedicated time to searching for activities or content to add to the following week’s worksheet booklets. I begin preparing content for my meeting on Fridays with my colleagues where we review the themes, activities, and download content from the internet to make the workbooks.

Yolanda: *Había días donde era muy cansado, o sea, muy estresante y simplemente lo hacías. O sea, era algo que tú decías se tiene que hacer, se tiene que sacar. En las mañanas era entregar papelería de lo que me pedía el supervisor o cosas que nos mandaban. Y también era checar los trabajos que mandaban los niños y ya en las tardes era a las tareas con mis hijos. Ya después de las tareas con los hijos era dedicarle un rato para ver qué actividades o qué contenidos se iban a implementar la semana que entraba, o sea, ir preparando ese material para cuando nos juntábamos los viernes con los maestros para ver qué temas, que actividades y bajar la información de internet para ir haciendo el cuadernillo.*

Maestra Yolanda too experienced compounded responsibilities not only in the caregiving she provided her students, but also in the caregiving she provided to her children. Ultimately, supervising remote schooling for her 28 students alongside her other roles and responsibilities had a direct impact on her wellbeing.

Yolanda: There are costs that are not visible. The pandemic had a mental and physical toll for teachers because one spent many hours sitting, revising, and it became like a chronic pain in my wrists and also in my coccyx, because of the hours of being in the same position that was very difficult for the body. It really affected my coccyx. To this day I still have problems. Now that I returned to the classroom, I no longer sit down. The time I spend in the classroom I am standing because when I return home, I return to sitting to do homework with my son. It still hurts, my coccyx hurts, my wrists.

Yolanda: Hubo cuestiones que no se ven. Hubo un desgaste mental por parte del maestro y también físico, porque pasaba una muchas horas sentado revisando y ya era como un dolor crónico en las muñecas y también en el coxis, porque horas de estar en la misma posición resultaba ya como que muy molesto para el cuerpo. Realmente lo que a mí más me afectó fue mi coxis. Hasta ahorita sigo teniendo problemas. Entonces era como que ahorita que ya regresé con los niños yo no me siento. El rato que yo estoy ahí con ellos ando parada porque llego aquí a mi casa y es a sentarme a hacer la tarea con mi hijo y todavía me duele, me duele mi coxis, mis muñecas.

Even months after being back in the classroom, Maestra Yolanda still feels the lingering physical costs of how she navigated the responsibility of teaching in pandemic times. This perspective serves as a critical reminder that the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout will have long-term ramifications for everyone.

Through Maestra Yolanda's account, and that of the other teachers in my study, I came to understand that teachers also faced their own type of distress throughout the pandemic. While they were aware of the challenges mothers were facing, they had little choice other than to continue implementing policies set by USEBEQ. All the teachers in my study were female, reflective of larger demographics, and their caregiving burden throughout the pandemic is symbolic of the extended web of women's labor that made social reproduction possible in pandemic times.³² In the end, mothers and teachers did the best they could with the limited resources at their disposal and both will face long-lasting consequences as a result.

Looking Onward

As of January 10, 2022, schools in La Magnolia returned to in-person instruction, but the return to classes has not brought the expected relief to mothers and teachers (Excélsior 2021). In part, this is due to the *Filtro Escolar*, a plan established by the Mexican Ministry of Education

³² According to World Bank data, 68% of Mexico's primary education teachers and 51% of Mexico's secondary education teachers are female (World Bank 2021a; 2021b)

that establishes guidelines schools have to abide by to return to in-person instruction (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2020). [Figure 7](#) includes two infographics by UNICEF Mexico that demarcates the main tenets of the reopening plan for schools (UNICEF Mexico 2022). In *La Magnolia*, due to limited school resources, the burden of ensuring these measures are being followed falls squarely on the shoulders of mothers.



Figure 7: Two infographics released by UNICEF Mexico illustrating the main tenets of the Filtro Escolar. *Source:* <https://www.unicef.org/mexico/informes/salud-en-tus-manos>

Maestra Yolanda shared that the operating plan consists of three basic filters. The first filter occurs at home where mothers make sure their child is not presenting symptoms before sending them to school. The second filter occurs at the door of classrooms where mothers stand taking temperatures, distributing hand sanitizer, and determining if any children show or communicate signs of being symptomatic. The third filter occurs inside the classroom where

students' use of masks is enforced at all times by mothers, including during recess. Additionally, mothers clean and disinfect with bleach the entire school daily and in between groups entering and exiting the classroom.

Throughout my five follow-up interviews, I learned that the *Filtro Escolar* required mothers to be present in the school from 8 am to 3:30 pm two times a week. This created its own type of burden as mothers once again experienced compounded caregiving responsibilities. I got the sense that mothers welcomed this new burden as long as their children returned to in-person learning. For these mothers, the return to classes assuaged fears of children continuing to fall behind in school and brought a sense of normalcy that they desperately longed for.

Many mothers, however, were very right in fearing that their children were falling behind. According to the UNICEF, depending on age, gender, and socioeconomic level, along with other markers of disadvantage, a long closure of schools leads to high dropout rates and loss of learning (UNICEF 2020). Maestra Matilda confirmed that this would be a problem in *La Magnolia* for years to come. “There is a lag very very noticeable in all grade levels... there will be generations that will be dragging themselves through school... as if they had skipped a few years of school” [*Hay un rezago bien bien notable en todos los niveles de educativos...van a salir generaciones que van a ir arrastrando...como si no cursaron algunos años en la escuela*]. The way the COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to disrupt education outcomes for children globally and particularly those in transnational families is an important focus for future research. Due to its centrality in motivating transnational migration, children's education is pivotal to the bargain that transnational families make to justify the tremendous sacrifices of transnational family life. Given the ways the pandemic has interrupted children's education, I anticipate that

women, especially those head of transnational households in rural Mexico, will bear a disproportionate burden in bridging the learning gap created by the pandemic.

CHAPTER VII

WOMEN'S DISTRESS

In previous chapters, I argue that the social conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic have intertwined with the social conditions of migration to compound caregiving responsibilities for women in rural Mexico. In this chapter, I argue that the compounded caregiving women were expected to provide throughout the pandemic in combination with the social conditions of the pandemic created great distress for the women in my study. I draw on women's expressions of being *estresada* and *desesperada* and situate them as symbolic of the multidimensional distress they experienced throughout the pandemic.

COVID-19 in Mexico

Between January 03, 2020, to April 29, 2022, there were 5,740,080 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Mexico and 324,350 related deaths (WHO 2022). According to a report by the Institute for Global Health Sciences (UCSF), Mexico's high fatality rate can be attributed to poor and outdated infrastructure, labor shortages, inadequate training, drug shortages, and restrictive criteria for hospital admission (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). Sánchez-Talanquer et al. further argue that large inequalities in access to testing, diagnosis, and proper care along socioeconomic lines increased the burden of disease for people of marginalized socioeconomic groups (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). This study calculated a socioeconomic marginalization index based on income, education, residential crowding, rurality, and access to basic services, like electricity and water, and found that higher levels of socioeconomic exclusion corresponded with less testing (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021).

Researchers from the Pan American Health Organization similarly found that municipality socioeconomic marginalization coincided with an increased risk of contracting and

dying from the COVID-19 virus (Ortiz-Hernández and Pérez-Sastré 2020). This finding is evident in the high percentage of COVID-19-related deaths delimited to municipalities in the southern states with the highest poverty and percentage of indigenous people, once again highlighting how intersecting axes of marginalization increase the burden of disease (Ortiz-Hernández and Pérez-Sastré 2020). Notably, Ortiz-Hernández and Pérez-Sastré found that municipality of residence was a better indicator of disease than any pre-existing chronic condition (Ortiz-Hernández and Pérez-Sastré 2020).

Since December 24, 2020, when Mexico first began administering vaccines (AP News 2020), there have been 198,511,220 vaccine doses administered (WHO 2022). However, the distribution of vaccines has been marred by delays and miscoordination from the onset, and places with the highest risk of disease, due to socioeconomic vulnerability, are not being prioritized in vaccination campaigns (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). Hence, Mexicans subject to more than one axes of marginalization, for example, the women in my study and their families, were less likely to receive full recommended vaccinations, leaving them at increased risk of contracting and dying from the COVID-19 virus.

Apart from the physical burden of disease, the pandemic has had harmful mental health consequences for Mexicans. On March 30, 2020, the Mexican Ministry of Health declared a national health emergency and ordered the immediate suspension of all non-essential public and social activities (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). Although this measure was aimed at curtailing the spread of the virus, it brought great disruptions to people's lives and livelihoods and ultimately magnified the distress Mexicans experienced throughout the pandemic. Sánchez-Preliminary studies by the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Institute for Global Health Sciences report that 76% of Mexican children 6 to 12 show evidence of anxiety, 62%

show discontent, and 51% aggressiveness in the first three months of the pandemic (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). The authors of this study attribute these negative mental health outcomes among children to the isolation they have experienced with the closure of schools (Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021). As I will discuss in the next sections, children's negative mental health outcomes magnified the multidimensional distress mothers were feeling (Yarris 2017). Another report estimates that 30% of the Mexican population suffers from severe levels of anxiety and depression since the start of the pandemic and that these illnesses are greatest among the lowest socioeconomic levels (Casar et al. 2020). Overall, high levels of anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic corresponded to income and food insecurity resulting from lockdown measures and poor government support (Casar et al. 2020; Sánchez-Talanquer et al. 2021).

Pinal de Amoles, the municipality in which *La Magnolia* is located, is one of the most marginalized municipalities in the state of Santiago de Querétaro (Secretaría de Economía 2022). There are no community-level public health metrics, but as of April 29, 2022, there had been 474 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the municipality and 22 deaths (Secretaría de Salud 2022a). This number represents a small percentage of the national total, which may be an outcome of testing disparities or gaps in reporting. The municipality mortality rate may be much higher than these reports indicate. Participant accounts from my study align with findings from the aforementioned reports. During my first round of interviews, women in my study reported no access to COVID-19 preventative care, including testing and vaccines. They also reported receiving no social support from the government to buffer some of the economic effects of the pandemic. Furthermore, as of my last follow-up interview in February 2022, only those community members ages 25 or older had been given the option to get vaccinated. This included 24 of the 25 women in my study but excluded their children.

The pandemic posed very real threats to the physical health of the women in my study, as well as that of their families. However, in this chapter, I limit my discussion to the mental health outcomes they experienced that were shaped by their identities as women heads of transnational households. Specifically, I look at how being head of a transnational household, and subject to the social conditions of migration, alongside living in a rural and socioeconomically marginalized Mexican village, magnified their distress.

A Paradox of Hope and Fear

In places that exhibit gendered migration patterns, male labor migration and family separation have devastating mental health outcomes for women that remain behind in sending communities as faithful wives and caregivers (Bever 2002; Echevoyén Nava 2013; Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019; McGuire and Martin 2007; McKenzie and Menjívar 2011; Torres and Carte 2016). Labor migration in transnational families creates a paradox of hope and fear for the “left-behind,” where the hope for a better life built through remittances is dampened by the fear of family fragmentation (McGuire and Martin 2007). Anthropologist Boehm frames this paradox in terms of *deseos* (wants, desires, needs) and *dolores* (pain or sorrow), where women desire their partners to migrate in order to improve their lives in Mexico, but simultaneously bear the pain of separation and the uncertainties of their marital futures (Boehm 2011). I heard a similar sentiment echoed in my interviews as women expressed gratitude for their husband’s migration but also hope that they would not forget about the reasons they migrated in the first place. As I outline in this thesis, the fear of abandonment serves as a powerful motivator for women to fall in line and be the best caregivers possible. The pressure this social condition of migration puts on women has strong consequences for their mental health.

In a statistical analysis of data from the Gallup World Poll, that encompassed responses from individuals in 114 countries, Ivlevs and colleagues applied a “subjective well-being” framework to understand how remittances affected both material and non-material aspects of life for recipients in sending countries (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019, 115).³³ Overarchingly, they found that recipients of remittances were statistically more likely to suffer from stress and depression (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019). These outcomes speak to the isolating conditions of migration that are well documented in migration literature.

In an ethnographic study of Honduran wives and mothers that remained behind in sending communities, researchers found that partner migration resulted in more work and loneliness for women which manifested in stress and anxiety (Mckenzie and Menjívar 2011). Interestingly, Mckenzie and Menjívar found that remittances served as a symbol of a husband’s love and brought women reassurance that they had not been forgotten (Mckenzie and Menjívar 2011). Along the same lines, utilizing data from 2813 women from the Mexican Family Life Survey, researchers found that mothers reported greater symptoms of distress – loneliness, sadness, crying, difficulty sleeping, and obsessive thinking – when their partners were abroad in the U.S. as opposed to when they were in the community (Nobles, Rubalcava, and Teruel 2015). In particular, Nobles and colleagues found that the probability of reporting loneliness increased by 60% when partners migrated and greatly abated upon their return (Nobles, Rubalcava, and Teruel 2015). These findings speak to the costs of transnational family life and the paradox of hope and fear experienced by those that depend on remittances.

³³ According to the authors of this study, the Gallup World Poll has many subjective well-being questions and information on whether the respondent received remittances in the past five years (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham 2019).

During the pandemic, the caregiving burden for women heads of transnational households was compounded, and they faced extreme difficulties in living up to the cultural ideal prescribed to them. Their strong feelings manifested in a distress that was amplified by the social conditions of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the following sections, I continue the previous discussion on women feeling *estresada* and *desesperada* while managing their children's remote schooling to examine how the social conditions of the pandemic intertwined with the social conditions of migration to create great distress for women heads of transnational households in *La Magnolia*. I aim to show how women's distress was not just the sum of singular conditions, but the sum of the multiple adverse conditions they were subjected to that exacerbated the distress they experienced throughout the pandemic.

Multidimensional Stress

Doña Magdalena is a 25-year-old mother of two, a 4-year-old and a 9-year-old. Although her husband is a legal resident of the United States, she reports remittances on the lower end and during our interview, she relayed resignation at not having much to show for her husband's migration. She framed the causes of her stress in the following way:

Magdalena: It's one thing the stress of school and then another the stress of the house. And then not going out and being locked up and if you go out, wear a mask, use hand sanitizer, and keep social distancing. Yes, it was stressful. Instead of saying I'm going to go out to town for a little while to destress, it was that you arrived with a headache, annoyed at having the mask on all day and stressed about keeping social distancing... because say someone has the flu or someone has a cough, but everyone says its COVID and to not bring children. And if you don't have someone to leave your children with, obviously that's why you have to take them with you.

Magdalena: Es una el estrés de la escuela y luego otra el estrés de la casa. Y pues el no salir y estar encerrados y si sales andar con tu cubre boca echándote gel y pues teniendo la sana distancia y si era estresante. En lugar de decir voy a salir un ratito para distraerme al pueblo era que llegabas con dolor de cabeza... fastidiada de traer el cubre bocas y si estresados de que pues mantener distancia porque alguno trae gripa o alguno trae toz y ya dice tiene COVID y luego no traigan niños y si no tienes con quien dejar tus niños pues obvio por eso se los tiene que llevar uno.

Doña Magdalena is responsible for the education of both of her children. Her 4-year-old started preschool during pandemic times and her 9-year-old started his fifth year of elementary school. She is also responsible for her father-in-law's cattle and his small corn plot. Because her mother-in-law migrates, she is left alone to complete this work alongside her caregiving labor.

However, what exacerbates Doña Magdalena's stress is the isolating dimensions of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Doña Magdalena was actively involved in community affairs. She was the head of the *Comité de Padres de Familia* and served as a liaison between teachers and parents.³⁴ She was also in charge of organizing community events. Now, in pandemic times, she spends all day at home assisting her children with homework or completing chores. Moreover, Doña Magdalena used to de-stress during her visits to town and saw them as a reprieve from her busy life. During our conversation, she recalled how she used to make a day out of collecting remittances. She would leave the community early in the morning with her children and spend the day in town looking at shops, having lunch, and treating her children to the occasional treat. Now, in pandemic times, she describes feelings of anxiety at having to be vigilant about her levels of exposure. She also shares unease at traveling to town, because whenever she does, she has to leave her children in the care of someone else for most of the day.

Through this and other accounts, I grew to understand that the stress women were feeling was multidimensional. While the impact of managing remote schooling was a strong contributor to their distress, it was exacerbated by the added responsibilities of the home and the isolation both they and their children were subjected to. Moreover, the preventative safety measures put in

³⁴ The *Comité de Padres de Familia* is the school's parent committee.

place by the government made the virus omnipresent in their daily lives and increased feelings of anxiety.

Isolation

The isolation women experienced during the pandemic emerged as a key determinant of their distress. During our interview, Doña Eloisa, the 33-year-old mother of two that used to run a successful *bodega* before the pandemic reflects:

Eloisa: Before, I used to walk to the school, I liked to converse, smile, to move throughout the community with my children and now I spend my day on the daily just doing chores, just being locked up here... without seeing neighbors... very alone.

Eloisa: Antes yo salía a la escuela y andaba y me gustaba platicar, sonreír, como de andar de aquí y allá con mis hijos y ahorita nada más se la pasa uno como que del diario en el puro quehacer, en el puro estar encerrada aquí... sin ver a veces a los vecinos... como que uno muy solo.

Doña Eloisa's reminiscence of the free mobility she partook in is reflective of many women's experiences. Prior to the pandemic, women would walk from their homes to the schools every morning and afternoon to drop off and pick up their children. During this time mothers would connect with each other, sometimes walking together. This small ritual was a moment of connection and reprieve from their daily tasks and responsibilities.

With the transition to remote schooling, women spend most of their time cooped up at home. Similarly, children had limited, if any, opportunity to play with friends and decompress. Inevitably women were left to deal with the mental health outcomes of their children's isolation which was magnified by their own isolation and their struggles to fulfill their ever-expanding responsibilities. Doña Lourdes, who has five children, shared the following:

Lourdes: Everything is done at home. They study at home, and I feel like children get depressed. Just like we [mothers] do in giving them classes. They too in having to take all their classes here at home and do everything at home and not seeing their friends. Us too, because we have a routine and all of a sudden, we have to be locked up at home.

Lourdes: Todo se hace en casa. Estudian en casa y yo siento que los niños se han estresado mucho, tanto ellos como uno en darles clases y ellos también tomar todas las clases aquí adentro de la casa y hacer todo dentro de la casa y dejar de ver, pues a la demás gente y a sus compañeros como que sí los deprime. Pues a uno también, porque uno tiene su rutina ya estable y de repente ya nada más encerrarlos uno en su casa.

In the above statement, Doña Lourdes underscores how her children are also stressed by the isolation and disruption to their daily lives and that these changes have made them all depressed. While women were able to leave the house to run errands, i.e., to pick up school worksheets and groceries, children's movement was carefully controlled. From my interviews, I got the sense that mothers were internalizing culpability for their child's distress because ultimately, they were the ones prohibiting children from going out and playing with friends. This finding is symbolic of the transnational "mother blame" mothers are subjected to when they are charged with ensuring their children's wellbeing even when broader systems, in this case, a global pandemic, make it impossible for them to do so (Gálvez 2019).

Doña Lucia with her two young daughters similarly reported the entire situation as something very sad. Her house is at the far end of the community with no nearby neighbors. Thus, her daughters had very little interaction with other children during the entirety of the pandemic. She shares, "It is this of only being at home and not having classes. They do not interact with their friends or classmates and that, that has made them more depressed, sadder, and to have more of a bad attitude which is stressful to deal with... stressful for all of us" [*Nada más están aquí en la casa y no, no tienen clases. No conviven con los demás amigos y compañeros, como que, como que se volvieron más deprimente, más triste y con más mal carácter y eso es estresante... es estresante para todos*]. Many women reported their children being depressed and it was evident that these changes to their children's mental health weighed heavily on them.

To address the pandemic's effect on children's mental health, women in my study have stepped up and prioritized play with children in their limited free time. Doña Rosalba, who runs a bread-selling business, reports that she will spend any free time she has playing with her toddler, as he doesn't have a young sibling to interact with. Doña Ximena spends the evenings organizing family games with her three boys. Doña Carina goes on evening walks with her aging mother and her two boys. In all my interviews, women discussed coping strategies based on how they felt they could best support their children's wellbeing, once again highlighting how central caregiving is in these women's lives.

Additionally, women reported feeling even more stressed out when they did not receive support from their partners. Eight women in my study reported receiving assistance from partners, and it was mostly delimited to helping with children, rather than helping with household work. Doña Ximena was one of the women who reported not receiving any assistance from her husband.

Ximena: It's as if it was only chores and completing schoolwork and that's it. I am stressed. In the evenings I am annoyed. And my kids are even worse because if I get mad, if I start screaming, it's obvious that we are all stressed out. Sometimes my husband is too calm, too easy going with my children. I tell him no! You have to put limits because sometimes they don't listen to me. Put limits, but also make them feel supported by you, that you care for them. I tell him not to just leave me the responsibility, because the responsibility belongs to both of us. Sometimes we do end up annoyed.

Ximena: Es como si solamente fuera quehacer, estudiar y hasta allí. Ya me estresé. Yo ya en la tarde termino fastidiada. Y mis niños pues peor también porque si yo me enojo, si yo les empiezo a gritar, es obvio que todo nos lleva a un estrés. A veces este él [husband] como que se la lleva, a veces mi esposo como que se la lleva así más bien calmada y le digo ¡No! ponles límites porque le digo a veces ellos no me hacen caso a mí, entonces ponles límites tú le digo, pero también que ellos sientan tu apoyo, también te intereses por sus cosas. Le digo no solamente que me los dejes a mi le digo la responsabilidad, porque es de los dos y este si a veces terminamos fastidiados.

Here Doña Ximena shares how she feels alone in her role as a parent when she always has to be the bad guy pressuring her children to do schoolwork. She laments at the fact that her husband

does not take greater initiative in disciplining her children, especially because when he is gone, she struggles to get them to obey her. Like other women, Doña Ximena alludes to the interpersonal challenges the pandemic has brought to her marital relationship. When probed on this, she shared that she and her husband had been fighting the entire time he has been home. She attributes the fighting to the fact that everyone has to be locked up at home all day.

The disruptions that the pandemic brought to the lives of these women and their families resulted in many negative mental health outcomes including stress, anxiety, and depression. For some women, these outcomes resulted in physical symptoms including headaches, migraines, and hair loss. I did not conduct any clinical assessments of depression, but women self-assessed their distress and that of their children in terms of how they understand depression. That, on its own, is telling.

Convivencia

In exploring the ruptures of the pandemic on social cohesion, I learned that many women lamented a general change in *convivencia* [time spent with one another]. Women shared that they no longer visited with each other. Prior to the pandemic, women would visit one another and support each other in chores. Sometimes they would cook together and share a meal. For example, Doña Guadalupe, who is Doña Magdalena's mother-in-law, shared, "When I used to visit Magdalena, we played with our children. I helped her with her chores. We did not go out to other places. Just there in her house. Same when we visited my grandmother. We helped her clean her floor, wash her dishes, make something to eat, and just spend time together" [*Cuando iba allá con Magdalena, jugábamos un ratito con las niñas. Le ayudaba un ratito a hacer su quehacer. Pues no salíamos a ningún lado. Nomás allí en su casa. Igual cuando íbamos a visitar a mi abuelita. A ella le ayudábamos a lavar su piso, o sus trastes, hacer algo de comer y convivir*

nada más un ratito]. In pandemic times, neither Doña Guadalupe nor Doña Magdalena visits each other or anyone else in the community.

Apart from not spending time with each other, women reported a shift in their mode of communication. Before the pandemic, women would walk to each other's houses to convey information or simply to catch up. In pandemic times, women find themselves relying more on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp to communicate. Most times it is done through text, as opposed to audio or video calls. During our interview, Doña Julia, a 33-year-old mother of two, shared her feelings on how communication has shifted in the community. "One no longer has the same communication with other people. We do communicate, but it is not the same. It is now by phone even between people in the community. If before you used to visit a person, now you send a message instead. One no longer goes out" [*Uno ya no tiene la comunicación con otras gentes, si la tenemos pero ya no es la misma. Ya es por teléfono, a veces aquí mismo en la comunidad. Pues ya si tú ibas a ir a visitar a una persona ya le mandas mensaje para lo que tú la querías. Y ya entonces, ya no sales*]. This shift in the mode of communication corresponds to the stay-at-home orders, but also the increase in homes with internet access. By the end of my study, all women in my sample had a home internet connection. A lack of *convivencia* and limited interpersonal communication throughout the pandemic amplified feelings of isolation and loneliness among the women in my study.

No Tengo Amigas

I asked women how the pandemic changed their friendships, and I soon learned the error of my assumption. Throughout interviews, women conveyed *no tengo amigas* [I do not have friends]. Upon closer prompting, I realized that women used to *convivir* with extended family only, but that these family members are not considered friends. In particular, I women

differentiated between who was a friend and who was an acquaintance based on levels of trust. Doña Maritza, a 40-year-old mother of four, who shared she doesn't have friends nor enemies, shared that her closest contact was her sister-in-law (wife of her husband's brother). When asked why she doesn't consider her a friend, she responded, "Well I think that a friend is someone you always have a lot of trust with. But I tell you that I do not have someone I consider a very intimate friend, but I also don't have anyone I get along badly with" [*Pues yo pienso que una amiga es cuando uno ya siempre le tiene mucha confianza a esa persona. Pero le digo pues así bien, bien íntimamente, que sean amigas pues no pero tampoco que me lleve mal con nadie*]. A similar reason was given by Doña Brenda, "Well here in the village where we are among everyone. It's to avoid problems, misunderstanding, gossip" [*Pues acá en el rancho como estamos entre todos. Entonces pues para evitarnos problemas, malos entendidos, chismes*].

Through these accounts, I gather that women thought of a friend as someone they could share any secret with and know that the secret would be kept. A friend was someone to be trusted. While the majority of women reported not having friends, they did report having women they talk to from time to time about their daily lives and struggles. While not described as friends, they are described as someone who stands in solidarity with them and understands the struggle. This dichotomy between friends and acquaintances supports claims that women often feel surveilled by others in the community (Dreby 2009). Additionally, these claims of *no tengo amigas* are reminiscent of the isolation brought about by migration (Mckenzie and Menjivar 2011; Nobles, Rubalcava, and Teruel 2015). During the pandemic, the feeling of constant surveillance may have augmented the pressure these women felt to be the best caregivers, particularly in light of the very real threat the COVID-19 virus posed to them and their children.

Moreover, the isolating characteristics of pandemic-related lockdown measures increased the feelings of loneliness experienced by the women in my study.

Spirituality

In addition to the closure of schools, the hold on spiritual services further isolated women in *La Magnolia*. While the community does not have a church, it does have a chapel and prior to the pandemic, a priest would rotate around rural villages in the region to hold services on a weekly basis. In many ways, including the strictness of Catholicism practice, women in this community adhere to traditional social norms. At times, they walked 3+ hours with their children, in any weather condition, to access these services and they did so willingly because of the centrality of faith in their lives. When the pandemic hit, these services were canceled for over a year. At the time of the first round of interviews, summer of 2021, service had just restarted in the town of *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*, but people from rural villages were only allowed to attend during designated times. During follow-up interviews, I learned that many women still had not returned to attending weekly mass because of limited transport options. To recall, the one transport that services the community leaves at 07:45 am and returns at 3:30 pm each day. Otherwise, they would have to pay for a private taxi, which according to my interviewees, is too costly.

Doña Rosalba, the 43-year-old mother of three who runs her own bread-selling business, is a pillar of faith in the community. She and her husband have been godparents for numerous confirmations, first communions, baptisms, and weddings. Additionally, she leads Pre-Cana and teaches catechism to the community.³⁵ Her experience sheds light on how the pandemic has challenged women by pitting different aspects of their identity against each other.

³⁵ Pre-Cana is a series of classes couples complete in order to be married in the Catholic church.

Rosalba: The first days when mass was canceled, I felt the days to be long because if it's Sunday then I was used to always going to a mass. At any hour, as long as I went to mass. And now well that's no longer the case. I liked being a reader, I have been a reader for about three years. And now I haven't gone, all this time I haven't gone because there are no longer celebrations, and everything has changed a lot. Celebrations now are on Saturdays. Like tomorrow there will be mass, but tomorrow I won't go because I have to bake bread and so I almost don't go anymore.

Rosalba: Los primeros días que se empezó de que ya no había yo siento los días largos porque si es domingo entonces estaba yo siempre acostumbrada a ir a alguna misa a la hora que fuera pero iba ir a una misa y pues ahorita pues como que ya no. Antes a mi me gusta leer y yo he sido lectora...tengo como tres años yendo a leer entonces pues ahorita ya no voy ya todo este tiempo ya no he ido porque ya casi no hay celebraciones y ya pues todo eso ha cambiado mucho y luego ahorita las celebraciones son el sábado... como mañana va a haber misa, pero pues mañana no voy a ir porque mañana voy a ir a hacer pan y ya pues ya casi no voy.

Doña Rosalba was raised in faith and has raised her family in faith. However, because mass is being held on Saturdays, the day she bakes bread to sell and a workday in Mexican society, she and her husband have been unable to attend once. This weighs heavily on them, but the need to provide for their family in this case supersedes their desire to be good Catholics. Women in this community recall previously anticipating Sunday mass and now find their Sundays to be long. Mass was an important event in the community as everyone took a break from their chores, dressed in their Sunday best, and connected both with God and others. Now, they no longer have this reprieve.

The pandemic also had a big impact on how these women were allowed to deal with the death of loved ones. Prior to the pandemic, per Catholic tradition, after death, a body is embalmed and then transported to where a vigil of prayer will be held for 72 hours. The vigil is done with an open casket and everyone in the community and beyond is allowed to pay their final respects. After the vigil, there is a mass followed by the burial. Once a body is buried, family and loved ones practice a *novenario* where they pray the rosary for nine nights to support their loved one's journey to heaven. All these events involved large gatherings of people from

many communities. Once the pandemic hit, these rituals were banned, and the bodies of deceased loved ones were cremated and returned in ashes. They had no choice in this outcome.

Luz: The most difficult thing has been to lose people. In the community there were people that lost family. Here we are a community where everyone knows each other. So, when something happens to someone, everyone feels it because we know them in one way or another. You see them, greet them, and then you are left wondering, how is it they are no longer here? And based on that no longer being able to see them one last time. That was very ugly, very sad. My mom lost a brother, it wasn't due to COVID, but because of COVID she could not be with him. She could not be with him in his last moment. It was something very ugly, very sad, very sad and very painful for everyone that lost family. I feel like that was the ugliest, the most difficulty, the most painful thing of all this. Then ashes arrive, when someone died during the pandemic. Here there was a case where a man arrived in ashes. We no longer get to see them, we are left with the memory, with the disbelief. In a way, I feel that when you see the body and say your goodbyes then you resign yourself that it is him, but with ashes you are left with doubt.

Luz: Lo más difícil ha sido perder gente. En la comunidad hubo quien perdió familia. Aquí somos una comunidad en donde todos nos conocemos. Entonces le pasa algo a alguien y como que uno también lo siente porque son conocidos de alguna forma. Tú los ves, lo saludas y como qué dices, ¿cómo que ya no está? Y a causa de eso ya no poder verlo por última vez. O sea, eso fue muy feo, es algo muy triste. Y bueno, mi mamá perdió un hermano, no fue por COVID, pero a causa del COVID pues no pudo estar con él, ósea no pudo ir a estar con él en el último momento. Fue algo bien feo, es algo muy triste, muy feo y doloroso para todos los que perdieron familia. Como que siento que eso fue lo más, es lo más feo, lo más difícil, lo más doloroso de todo esto. Pues luego llegan cenizas, como cuando han fallecido así. Bueno, aquí se dio el caso de un señor llegaron sus cenizas. Ya no los vuelve a ver uno, ósea, se queda uno con el recuerdo y como con la idea de que como, ósea que cosa que uno no puede creer. De alguna forma yo pienso que cuando ves a alguien y te despidas de alguien físicamente o vez su cuerpo. Pues dices, bueno, pues da la idea de que, si era él, pero así, como que hasta queda la duda de que si es o no es.

Because *La Magnolia* is a tight-knit community where everyone knows each other, the impact COVID-19 had on the ways families grieved created a lot of pain for everyone in the community. The knowledge of what could happen in the case of death augmented the overall fear of the virus. Thus far, I have detailed how the social conditions of the pandemic further isolated the women in my study and made the COVID-19 virus omnipresent in their daily lives.

In the next section, I will discuss how these negative outcomes were further compounded by women's limited access to medical care throughout the pandemic.

Accessing Medical Care

Yet another factor compounding women's stress, was the changes the pandemic brought to their access to medical services. In many interviews, women shared fears of not knowing what they would do if their child got sick during the pandemic. Referencing my findings from Chapter IV, women identified that a major concern of their partner's absence was not being able to mobilize quickly enough in the case of a health emergency. This concern intensified as the fear of the virus grew and women felt their access to medical services was limited.

Lucia: The hardest thing of being at home, locked up, it's like we spend the day just thinking about what we will do if our children get sick. Because the doctors don't want to help when it's about a fever or something like that and so that is my worry. If my child gets sick, what am I going to do because kids that have a fever or one of those symptoms, the doctors do not want to help them. They give them back and what is one supposed to do.

Lucia: Lo más difícil es estar en casa, encerrados, haga de cuenta que nomas esta uno pensando como en si se enferman los niños o algo. Como que los médicos no los quieren atender cuando es de calentura o de algo así no los quieren atender y entonces esa es mi preocupación mía. Y si se me llegan a enfermar y que voy a hacer porque a los niños que tienen calentura o algún síntoma ya no los quieren atender. Te los regresan y haber uno que hace.

Doña Lucia, the 27-year-old mother of two girls enrolled in the elementary school, expresses how because she spends all day at home, she does nothing more than worry about her children's health. Before the pandemic, she felt that she could depend on doctors, in her partner's absence, to help her if her child got sick, but after hearing about the experiences of other mothers in the community trying to access healthcare for their children, she now feels entirely alone and even more scared of the virus.

At the onset of the pandemic, the medical caravan that visited the community once a month to provide basic care, including immunizations and medications at no cost, closed.

Women in my study shared that the medical caravan was a government resource provided to the community in order to mitigate some of the travel costs associated with accessing healthcare and for women that received *PROSPERA* to adhere to the program requirements more easily. During the day of the caravan visit, women would get up early, travel to where the caravan set up, make an appointment for themselves and their children, and get treatment on any issues. Once the pandemic hit, this government service stopped abruptly. During pandemic times, women had to go down to *Zacatlán de Guadalupe* as early as they could to secure an appointment and had to wait in town until the time of their appointment. Since this health center (Centro de Salud) now served the town, and all the neighboring rural villages, it was very hard to get an appointment, and the service provided was perceived as inadequate.

Doña Rosalba, my third interviewee, was the first one to bring up this challenge. As she shared her emotional experience seeking care at *Zacatlán's* Centro de Salud, I realized how central having access to medical care, particularly for their children, was for their mental health.

Rosalba: It is bad over there, my son once got sick with an infection in his throat and he became feverish, he felt pain in his bones, almost the symptoms of COVID. It felt awful because to my son and another girl of his age they gave them a consultation from afar, they did not get near them because of fear that it was COVID. They didn't even help us inside the Centro de Salud. It was way outside, far, and apart from the other people, from the doctors. Only a nurse came out and took their pressure with one of those that look like a small gun, and she took it from afar to not get too close. They were sick but it wasn't of that. The children had a cold, like an infection in the throat. That was the first and last time that I took my son to the Centro de Salud. I did not like how they tended to my son, they gave him medicine, but it was a treatment I did not like. It felt awful. It felt weird because they marginalized us over there.

Rosalba: *Allá es feo, mi niño una vez se enfermó de infección en la garganta y le dio calentura, le dio dolor de huesos, casi los síntomas del COVID. Entonces se siente feo porque a mi niño y otra niña casi de su edad le daban consulta, pero como que de muy lejos como que no se les arrimaban que porque fuera eso. Ni nos atendieron adentro del*

centro de salud. Fue por allá afuera por un lugar lejos apartado de la gente de los médicos solo salió una enfermera y les tomo la presión con una de esas que parecen una pistolita y se las toma de lejos para no arrimárseles. De todas maneras, estaban enfermos, pero no era de eso... los niños estaban enfermos de gripa... como infección en la garganta. Entonces esta fue la primera y última vez que lo lleve al centro de salud. No me gusto como me lo atendieron así que los apartan... los orillan...no se...yo sentía feo y entonces este pues ya me lo atendieron, le dieron medicamento, pero como que una consulta que a mí no me gusto...pues se siente feo... se siente raro porque lo orillan a uno por allá.

Doña Rosalba recalls deep dissatisfaction and distress that her son was mistreated and not given proper medical treatment. Moving forward, when her son got sick again in pandemic times, she opted to go to a private clinic. Although she had to pay significantly more, she felt her son received a better treatment.

Others shared a very similar experience with *Zacatlán's* Centro de Salud. Doña Sandra recalls once going down at 07:45 in the morning and being given an appointment until 2:30. This meant that she would miss the last transport to the community. Instead, she opted to pay for a private clinic. Private clinics charge for the consultation and for medications, both of which are free at the Centro de Salud. The fact that women in many cases decided to pay for the service indicates how women's expectations to be frugal and also be good caretakers were so often pitted against each other during the pandemic. In the end, ensuring the immediate needs of children are always at the forefront in the decision-making process for the women in my study.

Women also had a difficult time accessing medical services for themselves. Doña Brenda, 36, explained to me why she felt uncomfortable seeking help in *Zacatlán de Guadalupe*.

Brenda: Here they treated us better because the doctors already know us, and they know. Sometimes we go each month and so they already know the problem we have. Sometimes we go and tell them we are here for the same thing, the same problem, or you told me come, you gave me an appointment to return and so they treat us more well I feel they give better attention to the problem one has. When the doctors used to come if one felt any ill. Well, me like an older woman sometimes we have problems that are *achacosos* [gross, uncomfortable] and they give us medicine. And now sometimes it's

better to withstand it, rely on a homemade remedy to not spend. There isn't money to be out over there. Better to make a homemade remedy.

Brenda: Aquí nos atendían más bien porque los doctores ya nos conocen y ya saben. A veces está uno va cada mes y entonces ellos ya saben el problema que uno tiene. A veces uno va y les dice pues yo vengo otra vez por el mismo, por el mismo problema o me citó, me dio cita para volver y pues nos atienden más como que yo veo que le ponen más atención este al problema que uno trae. Cuando venían los doctores aquí si uno se sentía hasta un mal. Bueno, yo como mujer así grande pues a veces uno trae problemas por allí achacosos y ya le dan a uno la medicina. Y ahorita a veces uno se tiene que aguantar mejor este se hace por acá en el rancho un remedio que a uno le dicen. ¿Pará qué? Pará no ir a hacer el gasto. No, no hay como para andar por allá. Así mejor uno se hace los remedios caseros.

Since the medics in the caravan have been coming to this community for years, women feel greater trust in openly sharing their health concerns with them. Like Doña Brenda, other women also did not trust seeing a new doctor and instead went without care. A few women shared that they used to receive contraceptives from these doctors but have now decided to go without because of the hassle.

During my first round of interviews, in summer 2021, the caravan was just returning, and women expressed great relief that they would soon be able to have greater access to healthcare. During follow-up interviews in winter 2022, I learned that the caravan has returned on a monthly basis, but that the doctors treat fewer people per visit and have less medications to distribute. During our first interview, Doña Dayra shared that she had been looking forward to the return of the caravan to get treatment for a lesion she identified in her eye and that had been bothering her for months. She found the trip to town too costly and decided to wait. During my follow-up interview, I asked if she had received treatment. She shared, “Yes, I did go. But because they also told me my son was underweight, I left my problem for later and had my son treated instead” [*Si, si fui. Pero también, como me dijeron que mi niño estaba un poquito bajo de peso, entonces pues ya dejé lo mío para después y mejor que atendieran primero al niño*]. Like Doña

Dayra, when women have to choose between getting an appointment for themselves or their children, they will choose their children.

Distress

In this chapter, I underscored how the distress women in my study were experiencing extended beyond the compounded caregiving responsibilities they were expected to provide throughout the pandemic. Specifically, women called attention to the ways the social conditions of the pandemic magnified their distress. Notably, the isolating dynamics of a global pandemic compounded the isolation that migration brings to transnational families. Additionally, these women's inability to easily access health services magnified their fears of being unable to mobilize if their child gets sick. This is a fear that first develops when their partner migrates and leaves them alone to manage all aspects of social reproduction for their children.

Women used words like *estresada* and *desesperada* to communicate their distress. In English these words translate to “stressed” and “in despair,” but as I have shown in this chapter, these western translations do not adequately reflect the multidimensional distress women in my study were experiencing throughout the pandemic. I did not conduct a thorough empirical survey of my sample, but the words *estresada* and *desesperada* were used consistently across interviews by women to index many dimensions of the distress they were feeling. While these words are not specific to the women in my study, as other researchers have documented, they are specific to the current time and place, and they index more than their direct meaning. Thus, it is useful to understand these words as “idioms of distress” (Nichter 1981).

Mark Nichter, in his case study of Havik Brahmin women in South India, documented the physical manifestations of these “idioms of distress.” More recently, researchers have built on this area of inquiry to document the ways “idioms of distress” are verbally communicated across

cultures. For example, medical anthropologist Kristin Yarris found that grandmother heads of transnational households in Nicaragua expressed their dissatisfaction at the systems of migration that rupture family life through the verbal expression of *pensando mucho* (thinking too much) (Yarris 2014). By using words like *estresada* and *desesperada*, women in my study communicate their dissatisfaction at the situation they are living during the pandemic that disproportionately burdens them as women heads of transnational households in rural Mexico. Some of these dimensions existed pre-pandemic, but pandemic-related measures amplified these intense feelings of distress. Through these verbal expressions of being *estresada* and *desesperada*, women are calling attention to the pandemic-imposed impossibility of living up to the cultural expectations for their gendered caregiving roles.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the World Bank prediction in April of 2020, global remittances increased by 7.3% throughout the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank 2020b; 2021c). In the case of Mexico, remittances grew by 27%, from 40.6 billion to 51.6 billion USD (Banxico 2021a). While remittances are certainly crucial in sustaining transnational family life, remittance flows alone do not capture the dynamic ways transnational families fared throughout the pandemic. In particular, they do not account for the experiences of women heads of transnational households that often bear a disproportionate burden in sustaining transnational family life (Chávez, Paige, and Edelblute 2021). Through my study, I provided a nuanced understanding of how transnational Mexican families fared throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic by underscoring the experiences of twenty-five women heads of transnational households in a rural Mexican community. I argue that the caregiving labor provided by these women was indispensable in buffering the negative outcomes of the pandemic on their transnational families.

In Chapter II, I synthesize migration literature to show the distinct ways the social conditions of migration challenge and uphold gendered roles and responsibilities. For women that remain behind in sending communities, traditional caregiving labor of cleaning, cooking, and childrearing expands to include the “migration work” that replaces their migrant partners’ role in everyday family life and ultimately sustains transnational family life (Hennebry 2014). Women heads of transnational households in Mexico, including those in my study, take on agriculture, animal husbandry, home development projects, and household budgeting upon their partner’s migration (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010; Hennebry 2014). While these new

responsibilities do give women some autonomy in their daily lives, they still remain subject to their partner's evolving forms of dominance (Boehm 2012).

In Chapters III and IV, I outlined my research methodology and provide important contextual information about my research site and study participants. *La Magnolia* is a small and isolated rural community in Pinal de Amoles, Querétaro, Mexico. Through an analysis of public government data, I identify aspects of socioeconomic marginalization in my study site and the different factors that dictate these trends. Then, I delve deeper into the backgrounds of the women in my study by providing a brief analysis of the ways they make sense of the costs and benefits of migration. Women's accounts identify the sacrifices of transnational family life as part of the bargain they strike to provide a better life for their children. For them, migration, while painful, is a tradition that they fully embrace as part of their culture and identity.

In Chapters V and VI, I place my findings in conversation with migration literature and statistical data to show how the social conditions of the pandemic have compounded caregiving responsibilities for women heads of transnational households in my study. I illustrate how public messaging by the Mexican government has tasked them with being the first line of defense in preventing the virus from spreading. As a result of gendered and targeted media campaigns, they have transitioned to cleaning more often and more robustly. Furthermore, the responsibility of receiving, managing, and allocating remittances has become exceedingly difficult as pandemic-related restrictions limit their movement and prevent them from accessing their basic needs at reasonable prices. This compounded labor women provide is in addition to the expanded caregiving they already provide upon their husband's migration.

In Chapter VII, I further delve into how women's caregiving in pandemic times now encompasses filling the learning gap left by the closure of public schools in rural Mexico. In

pandemic times, women in my study became solely responsible for their children's learning. Teachers dropped off weekly worksheet packets, and mothers were charged with making sure their children completed them and learned the material. The challenges they encountered in managing their children's remote education further compounded the caregiving they were expected to provide throughout the pandemic. Moreover, the resulting insecurities they experienced in their role as teachers highlighted the distinct ways the pandemic has put in jeopardy the central driver of transnational migration - children's education. By foregrounding qualitative accounts, I show how women's distinct identities as women heads of transnational households in a rural and marginalized Mexican community directly shaped their lived experiences.

The tremendous caregiving burden women in my study bore throughout the pandemic had detrimental consequences on their mental health. Women consistently expressed their distress in terms of being *estresada* and *desesperada*. Through close analysis, I found that while the caregiving burden was a prominent component of their distress, the isolating conditions of the pandemic further amplified their distress. Additionally, their lack of access to medical services during a global health emergency further amplified the uncertainty they experienced throughout the pandemic. Overall, the distress the women in my study experienced throughout the pandemic was an outcome of the distress associated with transnational family life that intertwined with the caregiving burden they were expected to provide throughout the pandemic and the social conditions of the pandemic they were subjected to.

In this thesis, I situate my findings in literature on the social science of migration and argue that the social conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic intertwined with the social conditions of migration to compound caregiving responsibilities for the women in my study. In

turn, the compounded caregiving that women heads of transnational households in my study were expected to provide throughout the pandemic created a multi-dimensional distress for them that was magnified by the social conditions of the pandemic. I further show how various axes of marginalization directly shaped their lived experience throughout the pandemic. While my data is limited to the experiences of 25 women in one Mexican village, *La Magnolia*, there are many villages, in Mexico and beyond, that face similar structural conditions. Thus, my findings, illustrating how women heads of transnational households bore a disproportionate caregiving burden throughout the pandemic, serve useful in understanding the lived experiences of a broader population.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

This study points to many areas for future research. To begin with, my study only captures the experiences of women in transnational households that predominantly had partners in the United States on H-2A visas. The distinct ways a migrant's documentation status in the United States shapes the experiences of partners who remain in sending communities deserves a closer analysis. The three women in my study that had undocumented partners in the United States shared greater economic duress during the pandemic which impacted many dimensions of their lived experience. Moreover, the experiences of single mothers in rural migrant-sending communities in Mexico, who often are the product of transnational migration-induced abandonment, would provide important insight into the gendered consequences and vulnerability of a migrant's precarious situation in the U.S.

My data collection ended in February 2022 and captured the experiences of twenty-nine women that met the outlined inclusion criteria. Even though limited in scope, my study shed important insights into many transnational migration outcomes that shaped the lived experiences

of women throughout the pandemic. For future research, long-term ethnographic methodology would be better suited to capture the distinct ways transnational families, and communities more broadly were affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

I am particularly interested in building on this research study to understand the long-term effect the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the educational outcomes of children in transnational families. As is established in migration literature, a big motivator for parent migration is to secure a better education for children (Boehm 2012; Dreby 2010). In my interviews, women shared great fear and distress at the possibility of their children falling were falling behind in school. Many even expressed a sense of internalized responsibility for their child's poor educational outcomes throughout the pandemic. Teachers echoed a similar concern. My interviews with teachers took place a few weeks after the return to classes, and already teachers were seeing the impact of the pandemic on their students' learning. It will be important to understand how the burden of the educational lag created by the COVID-19 pandemic will fall on the shoulders of mothers and teachers in rural Mexico.

In the future, I hope to pursue an ethnographic study of the experiences of teachers and mothers in rural Mexican villages as they work towards bridging the learning gap created by the pandemic. It will be important to incorporate the experiences of children to get a more cohesive understanding of the ways the pandemic has and continues to impact children's education. How will teachers and mothers navigate the responsibility of bridging the learning gap left by the pandemic? Is there a difference between children's learning gap in households that depend on remittances and those that do not? What role will remittances play in bridging the learning gap left by the pandemic? How will the experiences of women heads of transnational households differ from those of other women in rural Mexico? How do transnational families continue to

make sense of the importance of education in a post-COVID-19 world? Answering these research questions will only be a start to understanding the long-term consequences of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN

Spanish

1. Para empezar, quisiera platicar acerca de su día a día. ¿Cómo es un día típico para usted?
 - a. ¿Qué quehaceres tiene que realizar diariamente?
 - b. ¿Le ayuda alguien?
 - c. ¿Qué es lo que más y lo que menos le gusta hacer?
 - d. ¿Hay alguna cosa que le gustaría hacer y que no suele tener tiempo para hacer? (En caso afirmativo): ¿Qué tipo de cosas? ¿Qué es lo que le impide tener la oportunidad de hacer estas cosas?
2. Típicamente, ¿con quién convive?
 - a. ¿Con qué miembros de la familia suele pasar más tiempo?
 - b. ¿Qué hace con ellos?
 - c. ¿Quiénes son sus amigas más cercanas?
 - d. ¿Qué suele hacer con ellas?
3. ¿Cómo ha cambiado su vida la migración? ¿Qué tal su matrimonio? ¿En la vida de sus hijos?
 - a. ¿Cómo fue la primera vez que su señor fue para el otro lado?
 - b. ¿Qué fue lo más difícil?
 - c. ¿Quién la apoyó?
 - d. Cuénteme sobre migraciones siguientes. ¿Con que frecuencia y por cuanto tiempo se va su señor para el otro lado?
4. Cuénteme sobre sus pensamientos acerca de la migración de su señor. ¿Cómo se siente respecto a la migración de su señor? ¿Qué espera de él cuando está en el otro lado?
 - a. ¿Cómo cambia su día a día cuando su pareja está aquí a diferencia de cuando está en el otro lado?
 - b. ¿En qué se diferencian sus quehaceres? ¿Tiene usted más quehaceres?
5. ¿En qué tipo de cosas se ocupa su pareja cuando está aquí?
6. ¿Qué espera su señor de usted mientras él esta del otro lado? ¿Cree que estas expectativas cambian cuando él está aquí? ¿Cómo?
7. ¿Cuáles son los motivos de la migración de su señor? ¿Qué han podido lograr con gracias a la migración de su señor? ¿Cree que es necesario que migre? ¿Por qué o por qué no?
8. ¿Por cuánto tiempo cree que seguirá migrando/ trabajando en el extranjero?
9. Ahora me gustaría hablar un poco sobre los gastos de su hogar. ¿Qué fuentes de ingresos tiene su hogar?
10. Mientras su pareja está en el extranjero, ¿cuánto recibe de envíos? ¿Con que frecuencia? ¿Cómo usa estos envíos? ¿Quién toma las decisiones sobre cómo se van a usar los envíos?
11. ¿Gana usted alguna vez dinero? (En caso afirmativo): ¿Cómo gana dinero? ¿Quién le da dinero? ¿Cuánto dinero recibe? ¿Qué hace con el dinero que consigue/gana?
12. ¿Con qué frecuencia habla con su señor cuando está él esta del otro lado? ¿Quién inicia el contacto? ¿Qué método de comunicación? ¿De qué hablan?
13. ¿Cómo se apoyan usted y su señor mientras están separados? ¿Reciben apoyo de su familia? ¿Qué tal amistades?

14. Durante la pandemia, ¿cómo cambiaron las fuentes económicas de su hogar?
 - a. ¿Cambiaron los envíos de su señor? (En caso afirmativo): ¿Cómo? ¿Cómo la hicieron sentir estos cambios?
 - b. ¿Reciben apoyo económico de otras fuentes?
 - c. ¿Cambiaron los gastos del hogar? Por favor, explique.
15. Si ha habido un cambio en los ingresos/gastos del hogar, ¿cómo han afrontado estos cambios usted y su familia?
16. ¿Cómo ha cambiado la pandemia sus quehaceres y responsabilidades diarias? ¿Cómo está afrontando estos cambios?
17. ¿Cómo se siente con respecto al aprendizaje de su(s) hijo(s)? ¿Qué retos ha supuesto este cambio para usted y su familia? ¿Cómo está afrontando estos cambios?
18. ¿Qué ha sido lo más difícil de esta pandemia?
19. ¿De quién o quiénes ha sentido más apoyo a lo largo de la pandemia? ¿Qué han hecho para que se sienta apoyada?
20. ¿Qué espera para su futuro? ¿Para su matrimonio? ¿Para su familia?

Hasta ahora hemos hablado de muchas cosas importantes y no tengo más preguntas, pero quiero preguntar si hay algo más que quiera decirme. Gracias por tomarse el tiempo de hablar conmigo.

English

1. To start, I am interested in hearing about the things you do on a daily basis. What does a typical day look like for you?
 - a. What chores do you have to accomplish daily?
 - b. Does anyone help you?
 - c. What are your favorite/ least favorite things to do?
 - d. Are there any things that you would like to do that you do not usually get a chance to do? (If yes): What sort of things are these? What is it that keeps you from having a chance to do these things?
2. Who do you usually spend time with?
 - a. Which family members do you usually spend time with?
 - b. What do you do together with them?
 - c. Who are your closest friends?
 - d. What do you usually do with your friends?
3. How has migration manifested in your life? In your marriage/ conjugal relationship? In your child(ren)'s lives?
 - a. What was it like the first time your partner migrated?
 - b. What was the hardest part?
 - c. Who supported you?
 - d. Can you describe the frequency and duration of subsequent migration experiences?
4. How do you feel about (name of partner)'s migration? What are your expectations for him while he is abroad?
5. How does your day change when your partner is here as opposed to when he is in the United States?
 - a. How do your household chores differ? Do you have more chores?
 - b. What sort of things does your partner occupy himself with when he is here?
6. How do you think your partner expects from you while he is abroad? How do you think these expectations differ when he is here?
7. What are the motives for your partner's migration? Has progress been made towards migration goals? Do you think it is necessary for him to migrate? Why or why not?
8. For how long do you think he will continue migrating/ working abroad?
9. Now I would like to chat a bit about your household finances. What sources of income does your household have?
10. While your partner is abroad, how much do you receive in remittances? How do you allocate these remittances? Who makes the decisions on how to allocate these funds?
11. Do you ever earn money? (If yes): How do you earn money? Who gives you money? How much money do you get? What do you do with the money you get/ earn?
12. How often do you talk to your partner when he is abroad? Who initiates contact? What method of communication? What do you talk about?
13. How do you and your partner support each other while separated? Do you receive support from your extended family? What about friends?
14. During the pandemic, how did your household income change?
 - a. Did your partner's remittances change? (If yes): How? How did you feel about the changes?
 - b. Did you receive economic support from other sources?

- c. Did household expenses change? Please explain.
15. If there has been a change to household income/ expenses, how have you and your family coped with these changes?
 16. How did the COVID-19 pandemic change your daily chores and responsibilities? How are you coping with these changes?
 17. How do you feel about your child(ren)'s remote learning? What challenges has this shift brought to you and your family? How are you coping with these changes?
 18. What has been the hardest part about pandemic life?
 19. From whom/ who have you felt the most support throughout the pandemic? What have they done to make you feel supported?
 20. What do you see for yourself in the future? For your marriage/ conjugal relationship? For your family?

So far, we've talked about a lot of important things, and I don't have any more questions, but I'm wondering if there is anything else you'd like to tell me? Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Spanish

1. Desde su perspectiva, ¿cómo cree que la migración ha dado forma a la comunidad?
2. ¿Qué desafíos ha traído la pandemia a la educación de los niños en la comunidad?
3. ¿Qué desafíos ha traído la pandemia a las familias de la comunidad?
4. ¿Cree que las familias que reciben envíos y cuyo padre de familia está en los Estados Unidos la están pasando mejor o con más dificultades? ¿Por qué?
5. ¿Cómo cree que se sienten las madres de familia al tener que enseñar a sus hijos en casa?
6. ¿Cómo cree que se sienten los alumnos sobre el cierre de escuelas?
7. ¿Cree que los niños se están quedando atrás en su educación? ¿Qué cree que pueden hacer los padres de familia para minimizar las consecuencias?
8. ¿Qué desafíos cree que planteará el cierre de escuelas para el futuro de los alumnos?
9. ¿Cómo va a abordar la brecha de aprendizaje una vez que se reinicie la escuela en persona?

English

1. From your perspective, how do you think migration has shaped the community?
2. What challenges has the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the education of children in the community?
3. What challenges has the COVID-19 pandemic brought to families in the community?
4. Do you think families that receive remittances and whose male patriarch is in the United States are having an easier or harder time? Why?
5. How do you think mothers feel about having to teach their children at home?
6. How do you think students feel about the closure of schools?
7. Do you think children are falling behind in their education? What do you think parents can do to minimize the fallout?
8. What challenges do you think the closure of schools will pose for student's futures?
9. How are you going to address the learning gap once in-person school restarts?

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