

MIGRATION

Not Going to the Chapel: Women in Migrant-Sending Communities

by Sarah Lynn Lopez

A long history of predominantly male emigration from Mexico to the U.S. has resulted in lopsided gender ratios in Mexico. In an electoral democracy, a decrease in the male population might lead women to increase their political participation and representation. However, male–female gender ratios do not mirror political participation; women’s power in numbers does not equal political power.

Migration scholars have largely focused on the social and political worlds of migrants in the United States, with scant attention dedicated to how migration impacts sending communities, women’s daily lives and regional gender relations.

Jorge Bravo argues that male-heavy migration has had important and surprising political consequences in Mexico. More specifically, in his recent talk at CLAS, he detailed the ways in which migration has changed domestic life, political will and participation, spurring a gendered politics in Mexico. Bravo maintained that lopsided gender ratios in specific localities have had dire consequences for female domestic life and diminished women’s participation and representation in the political arena.

In the 1990s, over 80 percent of Mexico’s emigrants were males. In high-migration areas, there were 138 females for every 100 males between the ages of 18 and 29. These numbers have had critical social outcomes for local marriage markets.

Bravo drew several conclusions based on a 2003 Mexican Census Bureau survey involving 30,000 respondents entitled “Mexican National Survey of Intra-Household Relationships.” As a result of the dwindling pool of potential mates caused by out-migration, females have been forced to lower their standards and cast a wider net as their bargaining position weakens. Migration not only impacts the pool of available male mates but also calls the eligibility of those who remain into question. Their education levels and job status are critical to their desirability. Bravo finds that many women are most interested in men who emigrate. This is because migration is a self-selective process, and migrants are

viewed as men who are actively trying to increase their standard of living.

Lopsided gender ratios also impact domestic life by heightening male violence and abuse against their female partners. In areas with more uneven sex ratios, there are higher levels of physical, emotional and economic abuse of women. There is also evidence that decision-making within the household is increasingly male dominated in such localities.

The survey’s breadth is limited, however, by the fact that it contains no information on whether or not households received remittances or had any members in the United States.

The impacts that lopsided gender ratios have on local marriage markets and domestic space spill over into the political realm. In a 2007 study “Migration, Remittances and Politics in Mexico,” which entailed over 1,000 individually-based surveys, Bravo addressed women’s political engagement at the mass level. Mass level political behavior and local-level political activism shape political engagement, local governance, the construction of the public good and the gendered nature of political outcomes. Bravo investigated whether or not women were informed about political issues, if they talked about politics and what they did to protect or confirm their interests. Today, in towns with uneven gender ratios, women are less represented on the municipal councils and less politically active than in localities that are more gender balanced. This is due, in part, to unfavorable local marriage markets.

On average, at the national level, 12 percent of Mexicans born in Mexico are in the United States. Yet, some areas have 50 percent of their population in the U.S., while others have none. Only 13 percent of those surveyed by Bravo received remittances. Those who received remittances were less likely to vote, and those who expressed a desire to migrate were less likely to be politically engaged. Thus, to generalize from Bravo’s findings, high migration areas are likely to experience less political engagement overall.

Regional differences in party politics and political activity might also impact women's political participation in important ways. For example, in areas that are embroiled in particularly close races between Mexico's three leading political parties — the PRI, the PAN and the PRD — parties try to get out the vote to increase participation in the election. The recent turmoil in Oaxaca is another example in which local politics might influence Bravo's findings about women's political participation.

This study has caused Bravo, and others, to ask how policy can address rising gender inequalities across Mexico. Equally prescient is Bravo's concern that local "gender gaps," differences in men's and women's political and social needs, are either amplified or muted in local governance due to gendered politics. Policy makers and migration scholars can now begin to understand how changing demographics influence behavior from the domestic to the political realm.

Women's strategies for coping with a diminished marriage market and an increase in domestic abuse in localities with lopsided gender ratios are not only cause for alarm but also important areas for fine-grained, ethnographic research. The out-migration of males continues to have an important impact on women's personal experiences, voice within the community, viable life options and emotional vitality.

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A Mexican bride.
Photo by Alejandro Mejia-Greene.

