

## Gendered Internal Migration in Oaxaca, Mexico

By taking into account how gender roles inform different gendered migrations while, at the same time, redefining gender roles, this research shows how women's internal migration often allows men's transnational movements.

by Iván Sandoval-Cervantes, PhD candidate,  
Department of Anthropology

In the summer of 2011, during my first research trip to the Zapotec town of Zegache in Oaxaca, Mexico, I engaged in multiple conversations with Zegacheños and Zegacheñas who narrated their experiences living in Oaxaca, in Mexico City, and in Oregon. These conversations revealed how femininity, masculinity, and gender roles define who is considered a “migrant.” As I prepared to interview Tomasa, a woman in her late thirties, she warned me: “You should know that I’m not a migrant.” Five minutes into our interview she told me that she had lived in Mexico City for ten years and had recently returned to Zegache as a single mother. Tomasa’s history was not an isolated case; in fact, it was part of a pattern of gendered migration that emphasized men’s transnational movements while underplaying the experiences of some women who had migrated within Mexico. My dissertation project—“The Intersections of Transnational and Internal Indigenous Migration: Gender, Kinship, and Care”—seeks to analyze the dynamics that construct, reproduce, and challenge these gendered migration patterns. I am especially interested in understanding the ways in which femininity, masculinity, and gender roles influence migration patterns through kinship and care relations. Here I want to emphasize the importance of looking at internal migration.



Zegache is located in the central valleys of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. The state of Oaxaca, which is home to at least sixteen indigenous ethnolinguistic groups, is the Mexican state with the highest ethnic diversity, and it is also one of the poorest states in Mexico, along with Guerrero and Chiapas. The economy of Zegache could be described as “mixed” because it combines subsistence agriculture and remittances sent from other parts

of Mexico and from the United States, especially Oregon and California. Numerous scholars have analyzed the change in migration movements that followed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and that significantly increased transnational migration from agricultural communities like Zegache; however, the histories of male and female migrants from Zegache is not exhausted by looking at transnational migration. Transnational migration, at least in the case of Zegache, has to be studied in relation to internal migratory movements that are not often analyzed in connection to transnational migration. Exploring this connection between transnational and internal migrations forefronts gender roles and how they influence migratory movements.



Above: Paula working on a restoration project at the Talleres Comunitarios of Zegache. Below: Iván Sandoval-Cervantes (foreground) doing fieldwork in Santa Ana Zegache, Oaxaca. Standing next to him is his host in the community, Nicolás.

My research consisted of ethnographic participant-observation and interviews with people from Zegache in Oaxaca, Mexico City, and in Oregon. In Zegache, it was not uncommon to find families who simultaneously had male relatives living in Oregon and female relatives living in Mexico City. This divergence in migration trajectories has to be understood in relation to kinship and care roles that see women’s main responsibilities as care providers, while men are seen as “breadwinners.” Therefore, women’s migration to Mexico City is thought of as a temporal solution, because women are expected to return to take care of their parents, or to marry. It is also thought of as a spatial solution to the economic pressures faced by families in Zegache, because moving back and forth to Mexico City is less time consuming, less risky, and less dangerous than moving to the United States. Women’s migration to Mexico City started since the 1950s, during the so-called “Mexican Miracle” that saw industrialization and urbanization as a solution to Mexico’s economic problems. Women who migrated to Mexico City were employed as domestic employees, often serving middle-class mestizo families in the city.

Women’s migration to Mexico City had unintended consequences, however, as women often relied on women’s social networks to find jobs and to get around the city. This created spaces where women could challenge gender roles, while at the same time obtain experiences that changed the ways in which they saw themselves and their community. Even if internal migration was seen as a temporal and spatial solution for families in Zegache, women who migrated to Mexico City often created relationships of care that defied what was expected of them, and many of them refused to occupy “traditional” gender roles in their community. This is reflected in my own research experience, as it was often women, like Tomasa, who were more willing to speak with me about their experiences while women who had not migrated were reluctant to do so.

In my dissertation I will analyze the experiences of women who migrated to Mexico City and contrast their experiences with those of women who migrated to the United States or who have remained in the community. By doing this, I hope to show that internal migration is not only simultaneous to transnational migration, but also an integral part of the ways in which rural indigenous communities are continually negotiating gendered kinship and care roles through notions of femininity and masculinity in the multiple locations they inhabit. ■

—Iván Sandoval-Cervantes, a PhD candidate in the UO Department of Anthropology, is the 2015-16 CSWS Jane Grant Fellowship Award recipient.