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# Searching for Wages and Mothering from Afar: The Case of Honduran Transnational Families

*This article draws on data from a 2-year two-country study that included 157 people to explore the survival strategies of poor Honduran transnational families. I argue that transnational families, defined as those divided between two nation-states who have maintained close ties, depend on a cross-border division of labor in which productive labor occurs in the host country and reproductive labor in the home country. This article bridges the literatures on transnationalism and families. The transnationalism literature tends to focus on macro processes, whereas the literature on families assumes proximity. This research helps fill the gap in both literatures, exposing the ways in which processes of economic globalization have radically altered family form and function.*

Rosalia is a Honduran mother of five. She has been in the United States for 6 years, and her husband Ernesto and her three children for 4 1/2. Rosalia came to the United Sates from Honduras on a tourist visa as part of a religious delegation sponsored by a New England church. Her family's situation in Honduras at that time was dire. She was working part time managing the upkeep of a local church while Ernesto worked as a bus driver. But even with both of them working, they were barely scraping by, and the opportunities for mobility, especially for their children, appeared severely limited. They had talked for years about making the risky trip north to the United States to seek a better future. Rosalia's church trip proved the perfect opportunity. When the religious delegation was over, Rosalia did not return to Honduras. Instead, she slipped away to the house of a Honduran friend in Boston, with whom she stayed while working a patchwork of jobs to save the money to bring her family across the border. With help from family and kin, within a year and a half, Rosalia was able to support her husband and three youngest children's illegal journey to the United States.

Rosalia and Ernesto's two oldest children remain in Honduras. They make do without their mother and father, for the most part understanding their parents' need to go north and the logic of bringing only the youngest children who could still benefit from a U.S. education along with them. One of Rosalia and Ernesto's oldest children, Magda, had been unemployed since the factory where she had worked for 3 years closed down. Perhaps the closing was a blessing, because soon after, Rosalia left for the States and Magda was made to care for her young sisters and brothers. Without Magda's help, Rosalia never would have been able to leave. Magda's brother Franklin drives a taxi. He harbors some anger toward his parents for leaving, but remains committed to their family. On his slim income alone, they would not be able to meet even their most basic needs. Yet with the remittances they receive from their parents, they are able to get by. They have paid off the family's debts and they recently bought

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a refrigerator for the kitchen, and a television, which, when they can get it to work, allows them to bond with their parents and siblings by watching the same *telenovelas*. Rosalia and Ernesto's family has not been together for 6 years, but they try to maintain closeness via weekly phone calls and a shared understanding that being apart is the only way for them to make ends meet.

The family of Rosalia and Ernesto is typical of many Honduran families who, on account of financial hardship and limited opportunities in Honduras, have transnationalized, negotiating the economic opportunity structures of two nation-states to sustain themselves economically and to pursue their hopes for a better future. Although divided by thousands of miles and by politics and culture, many transnational families maintain close ties across the distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Chavez, 1998). These families vary by race, class, and nation. Elite families may choose to transnationalize in order to pursue career or educational opportunities, whereas poor families, usually with roots in the global south, transnationalize as a means of finding work that pays a living wage (Bryceson & Vuorela).

In this article, I explore the caretaking structures and survival practices of Honduran transnational families in the latter category. I show how processes of economic globalization have radically affected the way poor families function. The concentration of capital and employment opportunities in the north has spurred massive migrations of labor (Sassen, 1998) as poor families increasingly have to decide between sinking further into poverty together and sending one or more members north to find work. The result is a growing trend in families who have little choice but to divide their labor across borders. The struggles they face comprise a major social problem that has been overlooked in much of the literature on both transnationalism and families.

The literatures on transnational migration and on families are seldom in dialogue with each other. This renders transnationalism discussions primarily about politics, economics, culture, and identity (Appadurai, 1996; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Kearney, 1995), whereas discussions about families typically do not consider migration or families living in long-term transnational situations. Drawing on interviews and fieldwork, this article bridges the transnational migration and family literatures by analyzing the ways that poor families increasingly organize their productive and reproductive labor across borders. Using a transnational lens, I look specifically at the role of motherwork, kinwork, and economic remittances in family survival strategies.

## BACKGROUND

The transnational family is not a new phenomenon (Foner, 2000; Glick Schiller, 1999; Ueda, 1994). Many families and communities in Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries depended heavily on the financial remittances of their members who were working in America. Families stayed in touch by writing letters, and they sought reunification, which was often accomplished with eventual return migration to Europe (Foner). Many of the immigrants who did settle in America permanently maintained strong ties to their families, and to the cultures and politics of "home."

Although transnational families are not a new phenomenon, there are critical differences between the transnational families of the late 20th and early 21st centuries and earlier forms. Contemporary transnational families survive in a world in which communication and transportation technology makes it easier for families to stay connected. International telephone service enables families to talk to each other easily and cheaply, and video recordings capture family and community happenings so that those living far away can participate vicariously (Levitt, 2001). Airline, train, and bus services make it possible for those with the legal papers and financial resources to travel to make frequent visits home.

But for migrants to the United States, the greater ease with which families maintain linkages is countered by the economic hardship and marginalization that transmigrants confront. Hondurans have arrived in the United States at a time when opportunities are declining for all low-skill Americans. The shift over the last 20 years from a manufacturing economy to a service-based economy has destroyed a plethora of permanent well-paying jobs that once provided economic security and mobility opportunities for poor and working-class people (Bluestone & Harrison, 1988; Krugman, 1997; Portes & Zhou, 1993). A sharp increase in temporary and subcontracting work, neither of which provides benefits or security, has been integral to this shift (Sassen, 1998). Many new migrants find jobs in the low-wage service sector, where mobility prospects are limited (Levitt, 2001).

The implications of economic hardship in the United States are intensified by economic crisis of the global south. Honduras is among the poorest countries in the global south, with over half the population living in abject poverty (2003 United Nations Human Development Report). Unemployment is high, wages are low, and the social safety net has been withered by economic austerity measures imposed by the Honduran government and international lending agencies. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras's northern coast, causing major, perhaps irreparable, damage to its already weak economy and infrastructure. Hurricane Mitch destroyed many of the banana and pineapple fields in Honduras, motivating multinational fruit companies to close or move. Many Hondurans lost their jobs. Post-Mitch, Honduras's formal economic sector is weak. The informal economy is a place to which many people turn for their livelihoods, but wages and earnings there are also very low. Even the few people who have administrative, bank teller, or retail positions do not make a living wage. Thus, Honduran families with the means to support migration commonly send their member(s) with the highest wage earning potential to the United States with the hope that they will be able to send surplus earnings home. The paradoxical combination of high unemployment and poverty in the global south and few good industrial jobs in the north makes survival for contemporary transnational families a historically unique challenge.

### *Bridging Transnationalism and Feminist Constructions of Poor Families*

*Transnational migration* is "…the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). The transnational pathways between migrants' home and host countries are often survival pathways for poor and unemployed workers. As Rosalia and Ernesto's situation exemplifies, transnationalism is a response to structural inequalities that make it impossible for families to sustain themselves in their countries of origin. It is a means of optimizing security by maintaining a resource base in two places (Levitt, 2001), and of diversifying family income by tapping into two labor markets (Massey, 1999). Transmigrants in the United States commonly send their surplus earnings home to their families. These remittances are the principal means of survival for many households and communities in the global south (Chavez, 1998; Levitt; Mahler, 1995). Growing poverty and lack of opportunity in the global south and the consequent dependence of families, communities, and even nation-states on the economic remittances of transmigrants working in the global north suggest that transnationalism is not a temporary phenomenon (Levitt).

Transnational migration theory is a response to the limitations of conventional immigration frameworks to explain the realities of individuals and families whose lives are rooted socially, politically, and economically in more than one nation-state. Theories that use the nation-state as the hegemonic representation of identity tend to focus solely on immigrant incorporation within the country of settlement. In this vein, *immigrant* suggests a rupture from and abandonment of the culture and ways of life of the home country, whereas *migrant* suggests a temporary stay in the host country (Basch et al., 1994). This conceptualization is no longer adequate (Basch et al.; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Hirsch, 2003; Levitt, 2001; Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003). Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (in press) found that the lives of contemporary immigrants are often characterized by *simultaneity* in that they incorporate into their host society and negotiate multiple transnational connections and identities.

The notion of transnationalism suggests a world of "nations unbound" (Basch et al., 1994) in which capital, culture, and people are deterritorialized. Yet the territorial and cultural unboundedness of transnationalism should not be interpreted to mean that transmigrants are agents without restraint (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Mahler, 1998) or that borders are insignificant. Although international capital is unhindered in many respects by law or policy, there has not been a corresponding globalization of labor. The movement of international labor is impeded by strict immigration laws and by treacherous border crossings. Borders still serve to keep people in and to keep people out. Although transmigrants often subvert borders by entering their host community illegally, they do so at great risk. Those who do successfully cross the border illegally face severe restrictions in their daily lives (Chavez, 1998).

The study of the structure and survival strategies of poor Honduran families demands that we embed theories of family and carework in a transnational framework. As global economic processes penetrate deeper into family life, it is no longer viable to assume Honduran family proximity. White middle- and upper-class privilege and the access that it has provided to a nuclear family structure have long been out of the reach of poor families, and especially families of color (Collins, 1994). Transnationalism pushes this analysis further by showing that not only is the nuclear family structure out of reach for poor families, but increasingly so too is the nationally based family.

I note also the gendered structure of the transnational division of family labor. Men spend more time working for pay in the formal economy and send home a larger portion of their earnings in remittances (Garza & Lowell, 2002), whereas women are wholly responsible for family carework (Ho, 1999) and are more likely than men to be found working in the informal economy (Beneria, 1991).

The gendered patterns of transnational family labor hold true in other contexts of economic marginality. In poor communities throughout the world, women are in charge of most household carework (Aranda, 2003; Cancian & Oliker, 2000; Chant, 1994; Mahler, 1998; Stewart, 1992). Women play an especially critical role as mothers, charged with ensuring the health and well-being of their children and community (Chant; Dodson, 1998; Edin & Lein, 1996). Patricia Hill Collins (1994) terms the productive and reproductive labor that poor women do to ensure the survival of their children and community *motherwork.*

Poor women devise creative motherwork strategies to secure their families. They often work more than one job or piece together multiple part-time assignments to make ends meet (Cranford, 1998). When there are no jobs, many seek employment in the informal economy, where wages are low but few skills are required and work is flexible. Lourdes Beneria (1991) found that during the onset of the Mexican economic crisis in the 1980s, the majority of women managed to secure some income, and that two thirds of them earned it in the informal sector. A similar trend occurred throughout Latin America (Stewart, 1992). In the global north, poor women also use the informal economy to secure wages, commonly doing outsourcing work in their homes or laboring in the informal service industry (Sassen, 1998). In both the north and south, the informal economy is a haven for individuals, the majority of whom are women, who have been marginalized by processes of economic globalization.

In the global south, motherwork increasingly mandates migration. Gender shifts in the demand for immigrant labor, specifically the increase in demand for paid domestic workers in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, draws mothers away from their children in search of survival wages (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parrenas, 2001). They then send the wages they earn back to their families and communities at home, who depend on them for sustenance (Chavez, 1998; Levitt, 2001; Mahler, 1995). Transnational mothers suffer emotionally because they are unable to live up to their own expectations of direct care and nurturing (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila). In her study of transnational Puerto Rican families, Elizabeth Aranda (2003) concluded that the only sure way for transnational mothers to alleviate their emotional struggle was to return home, an option that is only open to those with economic resources and legal protection. Undocumented immigrants rarely have the privilege of return.

Parents who have to work away from home, either for short or long durations, depend on alternative care networks to assist in the raising of their children (Aranda, 2003). *Other-mothers* are the grandmothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, neighbors, and friends who care for family and kin when bloodmothers are absent or unable. They are crucial pillars of poor families and communities (Collins, 1992; Dodson, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). In kin networks of other-mothers, *mothering* is defined by acts of nurturing and caring and not by a biological relationship of the mother to child (Stack & Burton, 1994).

Other-mothering is central in the history of poor communities throughout the world. Kin networks were critical to family survival in the antebellum South as slave mothers were prevented from directly caring for their children (Shaw, 1994). They also helped hold families together in the many decades following the end of slavery, when African American mothers had to leave home to take jobs as live-in domestics, a move that often mandated migration from the south to the north (Stack, 1974). In Caribbean migration circuits, there is a long history of *child shifting* (see Gordon, 1987) from mother to grandmother as a response to economic circumstances (Plaza, 2000). Child shifting most commonly occurs when mothers migrate internationally in search of work, placing their children in the care of their own mothers. Because of the uncertainty of migration, children often remained in the homes of their grandmothers for long periods (Plaza). Whereas child shifting is spurred by economic crisis, caretaking shifts from mother to grandmother has roots in the matrifocal nature of Caribbean families (Ho, 1999). Although Caribbean notions of kinship suggest that whoever is most able should care for a child if the parents cannot, caretaking almost always falls on the shoulders of women (Ho; Smith, 1996).

In addition to ensuring the health and physical well-being of children, other-mothers play a key role in maintaining family unity and in easing the anxiety or emotional burdens borne by children who are separated from their parents. This role is of vital importance in transnational families in which the blood parent is absent for an uncertain or prolonged period (Artico, 2003; Levitt, 2001). Transnational children face many challenges. Growing up in and between two cultures, and always being separated from one of them, they lack cultural fluency and comfort in either (Levitt). This can trigger a host of emotional and behavioral problems (Levitt). In a study of Latino families, Ceres Artico found that caretakers can help ease this emotional strife. If, for example, other-mothers are consistent in presenting the absent parent as a dedicated mother or father who has made a great family sacrifice by going to the United States, the children are more likely to retain or create a positive image of the parent, and to be more at peace in their transnational life. Of course, this is not always possible, and intergenerational dissension is common (Artico).

Other-mother duties extend beyond close family and kin to any community member who may be in need of care. bell hooks (1984) asserted that this form of community other-mothering is revolutionary because it subverts the idea of children and dependents as property, viewing them instead as a shared part of a community. In contexts of poverty, what is revolutionary is also practical. For transnational families, collective survival work makes the most logical sense, further challenging traditional nuclear family ideologies.

Although the body of literature on transnational families is growing, there are still few studies that touch on how these families actually function in their daily lives, and there is no research that focuses on transnational Honduran families. Honduras is a powerful representative of countries in the global south that are in a downward economic spiral with little prospect of that trend changing. For Honduras and much of the global south, transnational migration will likely be a family survival strategy far into the future.

## METHOD

The data for this article are drawn from a multimethod 2-year two-country study that included 157 people. The research was guided by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which I gathered and analyzed data simultaneously, and continually checked and revised the research process as new theoretical ideas emerged. The research consists "of a set of interpretive, material practices" that aim to make the world of the transnational family "visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Using observation, time diaries, interviews, and interpretive focus groups, I immersed myself in the world of my respondents, trying to understand the transnational family from the perspective and experience of the families themselves.

I began the research with a year of participant observation in a Honduran community organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a Central American enclave on the outskirts of Boston. From the start, I was committed to doing participatory research that is "rooted in the community" and "encourages citizen participation" (Sclove, 1997, p. 541). During this first year, I worked closely with a Honduran women's group, translated documents for the organization's Spanish-speaking staff, and attended local cultural events and political rallies. I derived the themes that guided the next phases of research from the notes I took on these activities. My research themes thus emanated directly from the Honduran community itself. The connection I made with the Honduran community during this time solidified the trust and access necessary to move the research forward.

I continued participant observation throughout the entire research process, my tasks in the organization becoming more diverse and plenty as my relationship with the community grew stronger. Within this 2-year period, I observed 50 mothers and fathers who are separated from their children, and talked with them about their life stories.

During the second year of data gathering, I recruited 34 Honduran transmigrants in Massachusetts (18 women and 16 men) to maintain a weekly time diary and to do in-depth semistructured interviews. Because of the precarious and insecure conditions in which many Honduran transmigrants live, especially those who are undocumented, a random sample was not feasible. Instead, it was necessary to use purposive snowball sampling. Purposive sampling, unlike random sampling, seeks out places and people where and for whom the phenomenon under study is currently happening (see Charmaz, 2000). I used the Honduran community center in Chelsea to recruit men and women, both documented and undocumented, who are financial caretakers for family in Honduras and who have been in the United States for at least 2 years. I chose a 2-year period so that each participating family would have a history of transnational experiences to draw on. I then used snowballing to further build my sample, asking participants if they could recommend other Hondurans who met the criteria for participation. Using multiple informants to recommend friends and family helped protect against bias by enabling me to tap into a diversity of Honduran networks, but as is true with any snowball sample, the risk of bias can never be wholly eliminated. In this case, snowball recruitment was the only practical option.

My decision to use care diaries was inspired by Jody Heymann (2000), who used daily diaries in her study of caretaking responsibilities and labor mobility among working Americans. On the basis of the care diary data about how men and women structure their days, and more specifically about how they distribute their time and energy, I investigated the role that transnational communication and caretaking play in transmigrants' daily lives. I managed these diaries on a daily basis by a phone recall of the participants' activities.

I followed the diaries with in-depth interviews, structuring each interview around variables drawn from the literature on families and transnationalism and themes that emerged in the care diaries (work and income history, social capital, English-speaking ability, education experience, labor participation, maintenance of transnational ties, financial and cultural remittances, division of family labor, family responsibility, aspirations). As part of the interview process, I administered a questionnaire to my respondents to get precise information on age, labor participation rates, level of education and literacy, number of children, family structure, number of years in the United States, and rate and amount of remittances. I administered the interviews and surveys in Spanish.

Following a preliminary analysis of the care diaries and interviews, I traveled to the north coast of Honduras, where I interviewed 12 family members of my Massachusetts respondents, and 6 others whose family ties had been severed. Interviews in Honduras centered on how the migration of family member(s) has affected their families, the labor participation and education background of the family members who have stayed in Honduras, the role that economic remittances play in their daily lives, the images that they have of their family members' lives in the United States, and their hopes and fears for the future.

In addition to the interviews in Honduras, I spent extensive unstructured time with family members, 30 in all, sharing meals, watching *telenovelas*, and talking informally. One family hosted me in their home for a week. The time I spent with these family members provided a valuable opportunity to observe daily life in a transnational context.

For the final phase of this research, I recruited 25 Honduran transmigrants who had not participated in the care diary study to participate in two interpretive focus groups in which a Honduran community leader and I facilitated discussion around the major themes that emerged in my data. Interpretive focus groups address the well-documented complexities and difficulties of White middle-class academics doing work within marginalized populations, especially populations with a history of interrogation and a survival-based habit of coding or hiding information (see Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2004). The point of interpretive focus groups is to ease these difficulties by breaking through coded speech and shifting the analytical role of the "expert" from the academy to the community.

I did the research in Spanish. I and another fluent Spanish speaker transcribed and translated all of the interviews and care diaries. The names that appear in this article are Spanish pseudonyms.

## FINDINGS

### *Strategies and Structures of Transnational Care: Kinwork and Other-Mothers*

Whereas transmigrant remittances sustain transnational families materially, other-mothers actually enable migration, providing a critical subsidy to family income. Blood parents cannot migrate if they do not have someone with whom to leave their children. I found that Honduran women most often play the role of other-mother. If a father migrates, it is most common that he leaves his children with his wife or partner (many Hondurans do not legally marry). If a mother migrates, she most often leaves her children with her mother or mother-in-law. If there is not a living mother or mother-in-law, an aunt, sister, or even an older daughter will take over for the absent mother.

Dona Rosa is 75 years old and lives in Porterillos, Honduras, a suburb of San Pedro Sula, the country's unofficial industrial capital. Three of her children have migrated to the United States, and she has since raised five of her grandchildren. I stayed with Dona Rosa for a week while I was in Honduras. In Dona Rosa's house, there is never a peaceful moment, as streams of extended family come and go at will. At the end of her long day selling lingerie from an open-air stall in San Pedro's informal sector, she is faced with the chore of cooking for her two daughters, three grandchildren, her own mother who is almost 100 years old, and her brother who lives up the street. Her four sons come by intermittently with their wives and children to grab a bite to eat as well. Dona Rosa always keeps a pot of rice and beans on the stove. On weekday evenings, Dona Rosa's family crowds on the couch to watch *telenovelas*, the same ones that family members are watching in the United States. In the other room, Dona Rosa's granddaughter Jenifer tries to study. I am amazed at her ability to concentrate among the noise and chaos. With tuition help from her mother in the United States, Jenifer is studying at the Technical University in San Pedro Sula. Her mother left for the States when she was only a baby. Since receiving her papers in 1986, her mother visits once a year and calls every week. Jenifer understands why her mother had to leave. She knows that she would not be in school if it were not for the money she receives from the United States. Still, she feels that Dona Rosa is more a mom to her than her "real" mom. Dona Rosa brims with pride as she tells me that Jenifer is the only girl in the class studying engineering. "I've raised her well, no?"

Frances is also raising her grandchildren. After working for 23 years in a banana factory and raising seven children of her own, she now has three of her grandsons living with her, the oldest of whom is only 7. She imagines that they will stay with her until they are old enough to try to get to the United States themselves. Although she is almost 70 years old and her health is not good, she accepts the responsibility of caring for grandchildren as an inevitable part of life.

Carla, whose sister is in the United States working, is raising her two children, plus a niece, a nephew, and the son of her cousin. Carla calls herself the "mom in the meantime." She, like Dona Rosa, Frances, and the many other other-mothers in this study, provides direct mothering to her young niece, nephew, and cousin while their parents provide their financial support. Her mothering extends beyond the basic tasks of feeding and clothing her nieces and nephews. She also guides them in their school decisions, demanding that they study English so that "they can compete for the good jobs," and she helps them to comprehend why their parents had to leave. Because Carla herself has a good job by Honduran standards, she is able to be a "good" mentor and role model, making sure that the children understand "how hard you have to work to make it," and that "you have to work even harder still if you are a woman."

Other-mothers in Honduras commonly extend their motherwork beyond the household into the community. For example, in addition to caring for her two young children while her husband works in Boston, Magda is also one of the organizers of a community cafeteria that offers free meals on Sunday. The makeshift cafeteria feeds many hungry children and some families. Most of those they serve do not have access to support from family or kin in the United States. Magda sees her work with the cafeteria as part of her responsibility as a mother and community member.

Dona Rosa also plays the role of community other-mother, hosting neighborhood meals weekly on her small patio. During the weekly gatherings, Dona Rosa's grandson plays the guitar, and different people lead the group in prayer. It is a festive yet serious ritual in which people give thanks for the little they have, while praying that the future will be better. Most of the people who come to the meals are alone, having been abandoned by family members in the United States. Dona Rosa feels that it is her obligation to share the money she receives from her daughters in the United States to help those who are less fortunate. Because the government does little to help the poor, Dona Rosa believes that individuals must do what they can: "And what my kids give me, I share that, so the Lord blesses them as well."

Lourdes, who lives next door to Dona Rosa, is the only one in her family who remains in Honduras. She never knew her father, but she thinks he was an Italian who left Honduras soon after she was born. Her mother went to the United States when she was 15, leaving her in charge of her two younger brothers. Two years later, Lourdes's brothers too set out to find work in the United States. By this time, she was pregnant and unable to make the trip. Her mother and brothers sent money for a while, but soon her brothers got married and their remittances ceased. Her mother's poor economic situation meant that she could send no more than \$30 or \$40 a month. Lourdes married. When her children were toddlers, her husband left for the United States with the promise of getting work, saving money, and then bringing the whole family north to join him. He never followed through on his promise. Instead, he divorced her, married an American woman, and cut off all financial support. Lourdes tries to scrape by selling pastries outside the *maquiladoras*, the free trade zone on the edge of town. But as is true in most informal activity, the earnings are very low. Dona Rosa makes sure that Lourdes and her children have enough to eat, and that her son can afford the books necessary to go to school. She understands, she tells me, that the people's poverty is no fault of their own. There is no work in Honduras, and "without family, people have nothing."

Gloria also acts as a community other-mother. She lives in a small, tidy house in Tela with her four sons. Her husband works in Chelsea, MA. After losing her job with the local municipality, she set up informal shop selling basic sundries from her stoop. She knows everyone in the community and watches out for those in need. While I was visiting with Gloria, two children from the neighborhood wandered into her house, and with a nod from Gloria, opened the refrigerator to pull out a Coke and a snack. She explained to me that they lived down the street.

> Their older sister takes care of them, but she has to work all the time, and so they often come here for a bit to eat, or just to visit. You know in Honduras, *mi casa es tu casa*, my house is your house. That's what we believe.

There is a shared sense among the mothers and other-mothers with whom I spoke in Honduras that responsibility to the community is an extension of family responsibility. Those who receive support from family in the United States feel lucky to have access to dollars in such dire economic times, and they know how tough life is for those who are not so lucky. In Honduras, families commonly share food, phones, and television watching space with their neighbors. Community other-mothers make certain that everyone is taken care of, knowing that if something was to happen to them, they too would rely on kin to take care of their own children and household.

### *The Emotional Challenges of Transnational Carework*

For parents who must live far away from their children, emotional struggle is a daily part of life. Parents express the greatest distress about trying to maintain connections with children who were very young when they left. Young children have more difficulty understanding why their parent(s) had to leave, and they often do not remember the parent well: "When we talk on the phone," says Omar, the father of a 5-year-old daughter in Honduras, "sometimes she doesn't remember me. This is one of the most difficult things."

In Frances's house, photos of her son Diego decorate every room. But her youngest grandson still does not remember his father. Diego tries to maintain a connection with his son by sending him toys. Yet, although his son has developed a new love of video games and motorcycles, he still does not understand where or who his father is.

Transnational parents are also challenged when their children inquire about when they are coming home, or when the rest of the family will be able to come to the United States. Many told me that they answer these questions untruthfully but lovingly, with a version of "soon; we will be together soon."

> She always asks me, "How are you, Papi?" "Here I am, daughter, working!" I say, "Here I am resting and watching TV." And she says, "When are you coming?" And I say, "Any day now I'm going to come to see you."
>
> —David

> I talk with my daughter on the phone every 8 days. Every time we talk she says, "Mami, I want to be with you. Why don't you take me with you?" She doesn't understand that you have to have a lot of money to come over. Right now it would cost about $6,000 to bring her here.
>
> —Elena

Others tell their children the truth, that it is too expensive or dangerous for them to make the journey. The truth-tellers bear the burden of their children's disappointment and sadness.

> My conversations with my son are very bad … difficult. He always tell me that he wants to come here, and then I have to tell him that he can't.
>
> —Paula

Going home to visit children is a difficult proposition. Even transmigrants with the legal papers to travel rarely have enough money to visit their children on a regular basis or to arrange for them to visit the United States. The respondents in my sample who can travel legally visited Honduras on average less than yearly. Sporadic visits, which most concur are better than no visits, present their own set of challenges. They can be confusing for children and painful for everyone upon departure. The visits put an added emotional burden on the mother or other-mother residing with the children, because she is the one who has to explain the abnormal arrival and departure of the transnational parent. Mothers and other-mothers also describe the difficult position of wanting and encouraging the children to bond with the visiting parent, while knowing that this bonding will make it all the more difficult when the parent leaves. Claribel, whose husband David is now a U.S. resident working for a meat-packing company in Massachusetts, explained the difficulty that her children have relating to and making sense of their transnational father.

> The kids spend all their time with me … so sometimes I can tell they care more for me than him. He talks with them on the phone, but he only sees them once a year. When he comes it's difficult for them to adapt to having him here. When he leaves it's sad. … With time, you have to get them to understand that he has to leave, because his job is there, and here he can't do anything … it's also very different when he's here. The atmosphere is different. Even they feel it. When he leaves … they feel an emptiness. Because they are young, it will be that way until they understand how things are … I have the job of making sure they are doing well, because I spend more time with them. They have gotten to the point of being scared of him, because he hasn't spent much time with them. I tell them they shouldn't be scared of their dad. I tell them that they should respect him but shouldn't be scared of him. When he comes to visit, they just keep looking at me. They say "Mami, do I do what he says or not?"

Transnational structures can challenge the authority of both the direct and the long-distant parents because children become confused about who is actually in charge (also see Levitt, 2001). When Diego visited his son for the first time last year, his son would not talk to him, treating him as if he were a total stranger. This proved not only to be heartbreaking, but also to be disruptive to the household, because Diego's mother tried to step back from her regular grandmothering role so that Diego could play dad. When Diego tried to tell his son what to do, his son ignored him. The visit resulted in hurt feelings all around and a disoriented child. Frances told me that it was not until a couple of weeks after Diego's departure that the household was back to normal.

### *Economic Carework and Family Survival*

The direct carework done in Honduras is partnered with the economic carework of transmigrants working in the United States. The Hondurans in my sample send a significant portion of their wages, an average of $242 every month, home to support their families. In many families, these remittances provide the sole source of income. Money wiring services mark the center of all of the Honduran towns and villages I visited, exemplifying the centrality of these economic flows to the survival of transnational families and communities. Families use financial remittances to buy food and medicine, to pay school fees, to make house repairs, and even to support informal businesses.

The transnational division of family labor is gendered. Whereas women do the majority of the carework, men work significantly more hours in the formal economy. The men in my U.S. sample average 50 hours per week, the women 38. Although both men and women work in temporary jobs, it is predominantly women whose work is part time. The women also tend to have more sporadic work schedules than men, working 8 hours one day and none the next.

In the United States, transmigrants endure great sacrifice in order to accumulate a surplus to send to their families. They face the emotional burden of separation from their families and home country, and the economic and physical insecurity that comes from working in low-paying jobs that have no benefits and terrible working conditions. My respondents told me of living in cramped, rundown apartments and skimping on food and goods for themselves in order to have the necessary extra money to send home. Ignacia, a housing organizer in Boston who has a daughter and many other family members in Portrerillos, Honduras explains,

> I've been stretching my dollars … The school that my daughter attends in Honduras is very expensive. … And I have a big family … 23 nephews, and 10 brothers and sisters … I don't always help all of them every month, but if they are in need I lend or give them money. I have to. Imagine. Every one of them has 2 or 3 kids and they are struggling. They ask me for money when they are in need.

Material and economic remittances are rooted in the values of motherwork. Most of my respondents feel that it their responsibility to give what they can to their families. Securing family survival is as important as securing individual survival. My respondents do not expect that their giving will ever be reciprocated at the same level, but they believe that sending what they can to family and sacrificing in order to keep family and kin well is the "right thing to do," and "the only way *para seguir adelante*, to move ahead."

Elena said that because she makes such a low wage, she jeopardizes her health to remit money every month. But still, she could never tell her family no. It would not be right. And so Elena endures "many difficulties, like not being able to pay the rent or … buy food for several weeks." Because she is undocumented and not eligible for food stamps, she often has "to go to certain places where they give away food." Diego similarly told me that his commitment to help his mother is the most important commitment in his life, and that he will find a way to help her "no matter what."

This strong commitment to family often means giving up the chance to save money or to live a dignified life in the United States. Ernesto, who supports his children and mother, told me, "I can't make money because everything I make is for them, here I just keep enough to pay the bills and the rest goes there, especially for the kids. … "

And Daniela, a former folklorico dancer in Tegucigalpa who now works in human services in Boston said that she has suffered through abuse just so she could maintain her commitment to her daughter's future.

> I needed money for my daughter and for my house in Honduras. So I started working in the house of an American Jewish woman. It was horrible. She paid me $100/week. I worked five days. I had to clean the house. I had to do everything. … And she didn't give me food. It was hell. But my daughter is so important. For her I would have done anything. … And I knew that without my money she wouldn't have anything.

The economic situations of many transnational families are such that missing one remittance transfer can trigger hunger and deprivation. Patricia comes from a very poor family in Puerto Cortez. She told me that although she is fully committed to supporting her family, sometimes she finds it difficult to keep up with their needs because her siblings in Honduras rely fully on the money she sends.

> My sister only earns maybe $15 a week, and that's not enough. So I send her $110 each month. … And sometimes when my sister asks for help, or someone else in my family needs help for their child, like last month when a nephew died, I have to send more. … For the funeral I sent about $400. When my other sister came to the United States, I had to give her $700 for the trip. And sometimes I just can't do it. It's hard. But you have to help by giving a little money so they can buy some clothes, buy some shoes. And for food, because now they don't even have money for food, and it's very tough.

Elena expressed similar stress. In addition to supporting her children in Honduras, Elena pays for her sick sister's medicine and doctor care.

Without the money she sends, the family would fall apart. Elena worries about her family constantly: "They told me they didn't have enough money for the funeral and I didn't know what to do to help them. I couldn't sleep last night, I was tossing and turning thinking what I could do."

No matter how tough things are for her in the United States, she always finds a way to send money. Julio says that his mother uses the money he sends "to survive," and for nothing more. If he stopped sending money she would not be able to buy food. Because she is getting old, he worries that she will soon need more money to pay for medicine or doctor care. Luckily, Julio has another brother who sends money to his mother as well, which relieves a bit of the pressure. Still, it is difficult to keep up.

David is better off than most. He sends $400 a month to his wife and his mother. With this, they are able to buy food, pay for the phone and the bills, and "put a little bit away for emergencies." Having any sort of a safety net is uncommon among the poorest families in my sample. The few who do have a surplus after paying for their basic needs will more often than not spend the money on home repairs or on commodities that increase their daily comfort. For these families, remittances help to live a more dignified and less stressful life.

Nora uses the remittances she receives to pay for her basic needs, and also to make life a bit more comfortable.

> My mom sends me money monthly, between $100 and $500. I always need the money.... The minimum wage just isn't enough. It's not enough for the food, electricity, or the transportation... and then there is the gas and taxes and everything. And the electricity costs maybe 400 or 500 lempiras. So the money from the United States... it's for our survival.... And our lives have improved a lot too... mostly economically. We can pay our debts. And we bought accessories for the house. It's all a little bit easier.... And we have a television.

Life in Honduras is expensive, especially for families who want to "live like Americans" in terms of food, commodities, and entertainment. "American things" can strain a family's budget. Food costs are especially high if a family strays from the staple diet of rice, beans, and tortillas. Coca-Cola, chips, and white bread are typical parts of transnational diets. And in every home I visited in Honduras, there was a television, and in most cases, cable television. I was told that the $9/month cable payment was part of the basic family budget. Not only does television provide entertainment to the unemployed and underemployed, but it also is a means of connecting with family in the United States. In Nora's house, every night at 8 p.m. she and her cousins gather to watch a telenovela. When her mother calls at the end of the week to check in, they talk about how the storyline is progressing.

Telephone service is another expense that remittances afford. Family members cite having a phone as critical to maintaining their connections with others. In some cases, family members in Honduras even carry cell phones so that they can be reached anywhere and anytime.

Family members in Honduras say that they are better off, at least in the short run, because of the economic support and material comfort that remittances bring. Family survival in Honduras can be secured with a couple hundred dollars a month. With more support, a family can invest in improving their quality of life in ways that were previously unthinkable. My respondents celebrate tile floors in previously dirt homes, television sets, flush toilets, a refrigerator, or a car. Families who do not receive support from the United States are the poorest of the poor. Thus, the sacrifices that transmigrants make in terms of their individual mobility are certainly not made in vain. The importance of achieving secure survival and increased comfort should not be underestimated.

In addition to the material and economic benefits that remittances enable, they also fund future migrations. Very few Hondurans are able to migrate to the United States without the financial help of family and kin. Beatriz described the way her family supports each other in their migration efforts.

> My aunt was the first one here. Then she brings her sister, then her brother. Each helps each other. Because we have a big family, and from each family they bring one child. Then I have one aunt in Honduras who has seven kids. She has one child here, and she's planning on bringing one of her sisters. And we always help. Like they helped me come, because my mother has four kids. And they helped my brother. They left two of my sisters. And now I bring one of my sisters. And the other one is staying over there with my mother. To get each person here, we all get together and everyone give a little money until we have all the money we need, and then we send it.

Edith's family followed a similar migration pattern. Migration is an extremely expensive endeavor and would not be possible without a diversity of support.

> I arrived first. I worked to bring Paty here and helped my mom bring my other brother over, and then we all worked to bring my other brother over. My trip cost about $3,500. My brother's trip cost $4,000 and Paty's was $7,000 because she got hurt on the way and she had to be attended to by doctors for almost two months.

### *Family Tension and Problems*

Because this article focuses on poor families who have maintained close connections across great distance and in spite of economic hardship, much of the data suggest heroism and unfettered commitment. Yet dissension within transnational families is common. The extreme occurs when transmigrants completely cut themselves off from their families at home. Lourdes was hurt and angry when her brothers left her alone and pregnant in Portrerillos. She told me that although she sometimes misses her brothers, she has never forgiven them. In her mind, they are deserters and no longer family. And even within families who have stayed together, resentment is not unusual. Franklin confessed that although he understands his parents' reasons for only taking his youngest siblings to the United States, he still harbors some bad feelings because he will never have the opportunities to study and work that his siblings have.

Just as resentment brews among family left behind in Honduras, so it is present among transmigrants in the United States. Although transmigrants make many sacrifices for their families, it is not always without frustration. Several of my respondents told me that they did not think their family in Honduras understood the difficult life they were leading in the United States. Several transmigrants reported being tormented by the false images that their families have of their lives in America because these images put pressure on them to send more money. Omar, for example, told me that,

> … all my family in Honduras believes that we are living well here, and that we are going to be millionaires. And it's a lie. It's been brutal for us. They don't know that at times we don't even have the money to eat.

When Omar tells them that he does not have the money they want him to send, they simply do not believe him. It is so bad, he explained, that he now understands why some immigrants choose to cut ties to their family altogether. Dorotea echoed Omar's sentiments when she talked about her frustration in trying to make her mother understand the sacrifice that remittances entail.

> I tell my mother, look, these things that we send you, you can't imagine the sacrifices we make to send them. The children are still little. The truth is that they don't understand. The truth is that sometimes one deprives oneself of a lot so that her kids can have a better life. We can now give our kids things that we never could have given them there. But they do not always appreciate what it takes.

## DISCUSSION

The conventional literature on work and family is based largely on a middle-class experience (Harrington, 1999; Hochschild, 1997). Recently, the work and family lives of "other" families, such as lower income, single parent, and families of color, have gained more attention. These families must cope with less than living wages (Heymann, 2000), inadequate child care (Cancian & Oliker, 2000; Dodson & Dickert, 2004), and lack of social mobility (Shulman, 2003). With the decline of public welfare assistance, parents, who are often single mothers, face the daunting task of caring for children while working for wages (Munger, 2002). Transnational families are confronted with these challenges in addition to facing the unique barriers to well-being that are implicit in living poor with family responsibilities and needs divided across borders.

The data on transnational families challenge researchers who study work and family to further broaden their base of analysis to include family situations other than the usual proximate and legal ones that have dominated the debate. Transnational families are outside the standard middle-class work/family mold. Indeed, time and space cannot be taken for granted in their lives. Thousands of miles and a heavily guarded border prevent transmigrant parents from engaging in the direct care of their children, while the politics and legal mandates of immigration make it impossible for most families to know when or if their reunification will be possible. Yet without transnationalizing, poor families often cannot secure their survival. Out of necessity, millions of families are living in a permanent transnational limbo. They represent a new family form born out of the inequality in the global economy and reproduced by means of dependence on a transnational division of labor.

### *Directions for Future Research*

The gendering of transnational "survival circuits" (see Sassen, 2002) is deserving of more research. Changes currently under way in the global economy are continuously altering family form and function. The recent shift, for example, in the demand for immigrant labor in the United States from manufacturing to low-wage services, especially the expansion of the care industry, has spurred an increase in female migration. This signifies a potential change in family care structures, because women, who historically migrated for reasons of family reunification, are now moving to seek work (Hochschild, 2002). I am concerned about who will take over child-care responsibilities in the home countries of the global south as fewer adult women are available and as grandmothers, who are the current other-mothers, have passed on. Changes in the gendered patterns of child shifting appear possible because men are increasingly the parents who stay behind.

The focus of this study on family survival strategies encourages further exploration of the durability of transnational family ties over the generations. Although there is no indication that the economic situation in Honduras will improve in the near future—and therefore that family and community dependence on remittances will lessen—long-term transnational support is uncertain. The future survival of transnational family members in Honduras may depend on the financial loyalty of the second generation in the United States, a generation that has grown up away from their homeland. Will the second generation in the United States continue to support family members who are in many respects strangers?

Similarly, there is good reason to be concerned about the transnational second generation that remains in Honduras. Because of family remittances, many of these children have been afforded a Honduran education, yet few employment opportunities await them upon graduation. We need to know more about this educated yet unemployable adult population. If they follow the migration paths of their parents, we will likely begin to see a more educated undocumented Honduran labor force in the United States.

Overall, this study encourages scholars to home in on the needs and survival strategies of the poorest families in the global economic system, many of whom are living transnational lives. Greater attention to this population would open up new spaces for dialogue between family scholars and scholars of migration and globalization, serving to deepen and broaden the family literature in terms of race, class, and nation, and grounding the family and migration literatures in the realities of the most vulnerable, who are all too often overlooked.

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