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Gendered (im)mobility: Rooted women and waiting Penelopes

ABSTRACT

In rural Mexico, as in many other locations worldwide, women's mobility is depicted as less natural or more problematic than men's. Simultaneously, women are perceived as less mobile than their male peers. Does this mean that they move less? Where are these images derived from? Using ethnographic data, this article explores the social construction of (im)mobility in the context of a small village in central Mexico. Mobility and immobility are socially constructed and imbued with different meanings according to gender. Such differences rely on the fact that the borders are not equally significant for men and women. Borders become meaningful partly due to the reasons of border crossing, which are, in this ethnographic case, different according to gender.

KEYWORDS

immobility
gender
Mexico
social desirability
nation-state
meaningful boundary

Introduction

In 1885, Ernst Georg Ravenstein presented his much-cited Laws of Migration. He used census data to analyse migratory patterns within the United Kingdom and stated that 'woman is a greater migrant than man. This may surprise those who associate women with domestic life, but the figures of the census clearly prove it' (Ravenstein 1885: 196). In 1889, he expanded his inquiry to include the

main countries of continental Europe, the United States and Canada, where he also found that 'women certainly are greater migrants than men, but they go shorter distances' (Ravenstein 1889: 242). Given that such statements were made by a recognized figure in such an early stage, it is surprising that we have had to wait a century to witness what has been labelled the 'feminization of migration' (Morokvasic 1984). The recognition that women are also birds of passage has more to do with a change in the explanatory paradigm than with an increase in the numbers of women migrating (Oso and Ribas-Mateos 2013). The gender approach in *Migration Studies* has clearly stated that 'migration is not an exclusively male phenomenon; that female migrants are not appendices of male migrants and that women's migration can have distinctive motivations' (Arias 2013: 93). Nowadays, it is well established that migration is a highly gendered process. Many studies have focused on the mutual relations between migration and gender, acknowledging the active role of women in their own migratory projects, as well as in their relatives' (the literature on the transnational family has been particularly useful to highlight the latter).

Similarly to migration, immobility is gendered. Differently from migration, immobility has not deserved the same academic attention. Understandings of immobility as a default, homogeneous and unproblematic state, still linger in some academic work. Research on how immobility is socially constructed and imbued with meanings, as well as how different groups of people in different locations experience immobility, is unjustifiably limited. Recent ethnographic research has shown how immobility, like migration, is a complex category of analysis that requires disaggregation (see Hjälms (2014) in the case of Sweden; Mata-Codesal (2015) in Ecuador, or Schewel (2015) in Senegal).

It is widely regarded by now that both mobility and immobility are proper and relevant research topics for the Social Sciences (Sheller and Urry 2006). However, more research is needed in order to show how movement and stasis are not self-evident realities, but socially constructed ones. This article focuses on how gender plays out in this construction, by opening for inquiry the well-established link between 'being a woman' and 'staying put' (Freeman 2001; Nair 1999). It does so using ethnographic data from a Mexican village.

The article proceeds in five sections. In the next section, the underlying sedentary logic of the nation state is explored, as well as how the territorialization of belonging is gendered. The research site and the methodology are presented in Zacualpan: Immobility in a high mobility village. The section Social desirability: Waiting penelopes deals with the issue of the desirability of mobility and the construction of immobility. The section on Meaningful borders and rooted women focuses on the processes that 'root women'. The final section summarizes the main arguments of the article and articulates a claim for a defeminized understanding of immobility.

The nation-state sedentary logic and the incentives to root

In her work on refugees and national identity, Malkki (1992) highlights the sedentary bias inherent to the logic of the nation state, which permeates much of the academic work on mobility and human migration of recent decades. Given that the nation state relies on understandings of identity as encompassed within national borders, under the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1992), mobility is perceived as a dangerous and threatening situation. Simultaneously, immobility is conceived as the normal state, needed to guarantee political and personal security (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013: 2).

The nation-state ideological apparatus stems from and relies on an underlying logic of territorialization of belonging (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In doing so, such ideology privileges sedentary readings of social realities and generates incentives for the populations to present themselves as rooted. However, the rooting process does not deploy its effects homogeneously over the whole population. Who is perceived as mobile and whose mobility is considered socially abnormal is a highly gendered issue. As Carla Freeman states 'travel, with its embodiments of worldliness, adventure, physical prowess, and cultural mastery, is widely constructed as a male pursuit' (2001: 1018). Gender ideologies of what being a woman versus being a man entails are key to understand the differential representational processes women and men are subjected to regarding immobility.

The literature on globalization first, and transnationalism later, has questioned the apparently unambiguous link built by the nation state between identity and territory, as well as complicating the local-global divide. However, the 'gendered discourse of diaspora that etymologically implies the scattering of seed, rooting women while making travel the privileged terrain of the errant male' (Nair 1999: 185) still remains. Some of the accounts of globalization reproduce the locality versus movement dichotomy, as they 'depicted women and femininity as rooted, traditional, and charged with maintaining domestic continuity in the face of flux and instability caused by global movements that, explicitly or not, embody a quality of masculinity' (Freeman 2001: 1017). The dichotomous ordering – global/local, modernity/tradition, public/private, production/reproduction – and the gender ideology that associates the masculine with the first part of the dichotomy and the feminine with the second (although much debated by now) still heavily shape our way of depicting the world (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).¹ Stasis and movement are dichotomously constructed as female and male practices, respectively.

Controlling the mobility of specific groups – that is selecting who can or cannot be mobile and under which circumstances – is a way of exerting power (Franquesa 2011). This power is exerted in a direct way by the migratory regime of the so-called immigration countries.² It can also be done in more subtle ways through the (im)mobility imaginaries attached to certain groups based on their nationality, class, age, gender, etc. As stated by Ravenstein (1885), the common association of women with domestic life has led to the perception of women as being less migratory than men.

In Mexico, as in many other locations in Latin America, the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother who stays at home caring for their children is commonplace, along with a somehow vaguer image of a provider father (Aguirre 2009: 23). Such ideal is closely linked in the region with the importance of the Catholic Virgin Mary and the emphasis on her mothering features, which reinforce the expected social role of women as mothers and wives. Fuentes and Agrela (2015) have studied the role of *Marianism*, and how it interweaves along patriarchal ideology, to discipline Bolivian women who have migrated internationally. The archetype of women as caring mothers is crucial to an understanding of the imaginaries associated with those women who stay put and those who migrate, as the image of the women-mother who stays put is central in the construction of the social desirability of immobility. The ethnographic data in this article show how the construction of female immobilities as being socially desirable is a way to control and discipline women in contexts that are, nonetheless, defined by high mobility. The model of the 'staying-put mother-woman' sanctions deviant mobile behaviour followed by women, thus

1. I focus in this article on the gendered dimension of the construction of immobility. However, such binary oppositions have also been naturalized according to class and race/culture (Clifford 1997: 84).
2. Carling labels the requirements, risks and costs created by the migratory regime of the immigration countries, the immigration interface (2002: 13). The interactions of the migrants-to-be with particular immigration interfaces determine if, and how, they will be able to migrate.

increasing the incentives for women to consider and present themselves as immobile and rooted.

In addition, there are mechanisms at play that overshadow the mobilities most frequently followed by women. Methodological nationalism gender-biases our understandings of migration. Institutions give meaning to the political-administrative boundaries that define the territory over which they have sovereignty. Nation states are key bordering actors. The logic of the nation state has also been prevailing in the Social Sciences, as too often studies have taken the limits and categories of the nation state as units of analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Taking the State borders as the natural delimiters of our research units zooms in on the mobility patterns more often followed by men while hiding women's mobilities (Ravenstein 1889). To avoid the trap of the methodological nationalism, there is a pressing need to analyse, in specific ethnographical situations, which borders are relevant, which variables endow significance to certain borders and not to others, and to embed these variables in broader power structures.

Zacualpan: Immobility in a high-mobility village

Zacualpan is a small village in the Mexican state of Morelos – 3500 inhabitants according to the latest available population census (INEGI 2010). This village is located in a region known as the East of Morelos. It is next to the border of the state of Puebla and two hours away from Mexico City. The village is neatly divided into two by a road: on one side of the road, there is the oldest part of the village with its colonial-style big houses; on the other side, new quarters of recently built concrete houses. This division is a geographical separation, as well as a socio-economic one. Inhabitants of the oldest part of the village have traditionally had privileged access to further education and venues for accessing qualified jobs within Mexico. The inhabitants of the newer and poorer quarters rely to a greater extent on agriculture. The seasonality and the unforeseeable nature of agricultural production, in the absence of formal insurance mechanisms and limited access to credit, force peasants to resort to complementary sources of income (Guzmán and León 2005). Irregular migration to the United States is one such source. Locally, construction – fuelled by dollars sent from the United States, as well as by Mexican *pesos* sent by villagers who have migrated to other parts of the country – provides a work opportunity for male villagers who have no or limited education. Uneducated women from the poorer part of the village often work locally in informal, badly paid and labour-intensive jobs, such as street food vending, cleaning houses by the hour or raising small livestock.

Zacualpan's population engages with a wide variety of mobile practices in terms of destination (local, regional, internal and international), duration (with or without change of residence; temporary or permanent migration) and reasons for the movement (for work, education and family reasons). Women's migrations follow different routes than men's. Their migratory projects have also different aims. In terms of international and internal migration, Zacualpan mobility trends are similar to Mexico's as a whole. National statistics report that most international migrants to the United States are men (Albo 2012: 37). However, within Mexico, women have consistently higher percentages of residence in states other than their birth state (INEGI 2010). Young men from the newer part of the village often engage in temporary irregular migration to the United States (CONAPO 2012). The following two quotations illustrate well

how relevant temporary male migration to the United States is for recently established new families in Zacualpan, particularly for poor ones,

I went to the US. Five years.

-Why did you decide to go?

Because unfortunately the countryside in Mexico is neglected. The government does not support it. It is not as supportive as other countries are. So we cannot get ahead from working in the fields as much as we would like to. Or at least as much as other people can with their jobs. So, I needed to have my own stuff, and I didn't find other way than going to the other side [to the US].

-When you say your stuff...

My fields, my house, my car. What everyone aims to have, isn't it? A home. Something to move around. To live more comfortably.

(Julio, 31 year old, married with two children)

I was able to build my well, and my house, because my husband went to the other side [to the US]. Otherwise, I would have done nothing. We had our first kid and my husband left for three and a half years.

(Montserrat, 38 year old, married with two children)

Migrating abroad – mostly in an irregular manner – has traditionally been a male activity in Zacualpan, but women have early, albeit shorter, migratory trajectories (Negrete 1980). Female internal migration from this village was already documented in the 1970s with women migrating to Mexico City to work as domestic workers (Negrete 1980). Both, men and women – particularly those from the oldest part of the village – move for the purposes of education. The state capital, Cuernavaca, Cuautla, Mexico City or the city of Puebla stand out as destinations to pursue further education. Besides moving for work and educational reasons, women also migrate for family reasons. Interviews revealed two outstanding family reasons for migration: to marry, and to take care of older or disabled relatives. Women from nearby states move to Zacualpan after marrying local men.

Methodologically, research for this article is based on 50 interviews carried out in 2014. Interviewees – 24 women and 26 men, between 18 and 80 years old – were selected on the basis of self-identification as being from the village. Interviews were semi-structured, most of them recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although the interviews did not contain sensitive information that could possibly harm interviewees, their names have been changed for reasons of privacy. Data from interviews were supplemented by informal conversations and ethnographic insights from 1 month of living in the village. Access was facilitated by a local artistic group. Many people from Zacualpan hold this group in high esteem due to the workshops it regularly runs in the village. It facilitated my work by providing access and speeding up trust building.

Social desirability: Waiting penelopes

It has been well acknowledged – as well as criticized – that women are often portrayed as rooted to the soil, charged with the physical and cultural continuity of the group (for an early reference, see Anthias and Yuval-Davis [1987]). They are expected to give birth and to pass on the supposedly central values of the group to their offspring. Because of this frequent association between women

3. The so-called Odysseus and Penelope syndromes are particularly illustrative of this: the former to name the feeling of displacement experienced by migrants, while the latter refers to the sense of abandonment experienced by migrants' relatives (González et al. 2015).

and roots/soil, the relationship between being a woman and not migrating is naturalized: female immobilities are socially constructed as natural (Jónsson 2011: 11). Women, particularly those with children, who fail to comply with this imaginary, are discredited as denaturalized and bad mothers. Several studies in different Latin American locations acknowledge processes of stigmatization in the shape of public and alarmist discourses about family destruction brought about by international female migration (Pedone 2008; Lagomarsino 2014; Fuentes and Agrela 2015). Male migration, on the contrary, is not portrayed as a social problem: men migrating for work does not question the prevailing gender ideology that presents men as the household breadwinner (Pedone 2008: 48). According to this ideology, women are expected to carry out the actual physical tasks of care by themselves. Their physical presence becomes a prerequisite for the proper development of their mothering tasks. In Zacualpan, it is common for males from poorer families to migrate to the United States in their first years of marriage. They often leave behind small kids, as in the case of Montserrat's husband, but this has not led to any local discourse about family destruction. I did not encounter any cases of women migrating under the same circumstances.

Such prevailing gender expectations explain why the image of Penelope (from Homer's *Odyssey*) is popularly attached in Mexico to women who stay put in transnational families, as mothers and wives of migrants (Gaspar 2006; Mediavilla 2013). The image of Penelope, who waits for her traveller Odysseus, helps to overcome the social invisibility that migrants' wives are sometimes subjected to. Not only does Odysseus travel in rural Mexico, the *penélopes de rancho* (López 2007) also wait for him.³ As Mediavilla (2013) states in his project on Mexican Penelopes, the myth of Penelope, who waited twenty years for her husband, represents the patriarchal tradition of the submissive and obedient woman who, throughout history, has been taken in Art and Literature as the image of faithfulness. The impossible situation of waiting is sublimated and poeticized in this ancient epic, where love and faithfulness are able to overcome twenty years of separation. Penelope as the 'left behind' is commonly portrayed as passive, subordinated and lacking agency in their relatives' mobility decisions. However, the invisible roles fulfilled by the left behind play a central function, particularly in current irregular international migration. The migratory project of Montserrat's husband was only successful because Montserrat stayed put and took care of their small child, as well as taking care of building their house and well. This active and necessary role of staying put women has long been ethnographically acknowledged in Mexico. In a 1988 article, Gail Mummert showed the role played by women in sixteen different villages in the state of Michoacán, whether as migrants' wives or as migrant women, and how they were a key piece in family strategies for social reproduction (Mummert 1988: 281). Underlying gender ideologies would explain why concepts such as enabling immobility or transnational immobility, which perfectly fit the situation of many migrants' female relatives, are still to make their way into the academic jargon in mainstream *Migration Studies*.

The pressure imposed by images of social expectations and desirability not only discourages women from engaging in specific mobilities – for example migrating internationally – it also shapes the form of the mobilities undertaken as it can be seen in the following quotation:

I worked near Cuernavaca. I travelled every day. More than anything else, I did it for my children. At that time my children were young. So I had to travel a lot, I got up at 5 am. I left the house at half past five and

travel back and forth every day. I returned from work at three, half past three. It was tired, but I did it for my children.
(Marisol, 36 year old, married with two children)

Marisol endured exhausting daily journeys to reach her work place. It took her more than two hours and involved several modes of transport. However, by doing so, she was able to work while keeping up with her expected mothering obligations, which involved her physical daily presence.

In Zacualpan, as in many other locations, female immobilities are read differently from male immobilities. (Im)mobility plays out differently in the construction of local ideas about masculinity and femininity. Hence, while young married men are expected to migrate – or at least not discouraged from doing it – women are expected to stay put and wait for their migrant relatives like self-less Penelopes. Rites of passage to local social adulthood often involve different mobility practices, and there is ample evidence that such rites are gendered (Ali 2007; García 2008; Pérez 2012; Wilson 2010). As stated by Freeman (2001), ideas of male and female have been constructed in relation to movement and stasis, respectively. This means that mobilities are perceived differently if performed by men or women, irrespective of the distance involved. Young males often migrate temporarily to the United States or within Mexico. Young females also engage with internal migration for work, education or family reasons (for instance, to take care of relatives who are living somewhere else in exchange for food and accommodation). However, female mobilities are not portrayed as equally relevant for the establishment and maintenance of new households. So, when I asked Monserrat if she has ever lived somewhere else, she replied:

-Have you always lived in Zacualpan?

Yes.

-Always, always?

I was only in Mexico City, but I was there just for a year. But I came back every eight days. I was there helping out one of my sisters. But actually I have always been here [in Zacualpan].

This is a common response pattern among the female interviewees. When asked about their past migrations, women tend to dismiss these as irrelevant. This was also the case with women who claim not to have migrated, but who turned out to have been born in a different state and moved to Zacualpan to get married. The overlooking by women themselves of their own mobilities stems from, and reinforces, the social expectations derived from the existing rites of passage. So while young men are expected to move in order to become fully fledged members of the group, women's adulthood relies on understandings of marriage and motherhood that involve the provision of physical care and thus immobility.

Meaningful borders and rooted women

Although we are constantly moving, not all our movements are equally significant (Cresswell 2011). Conventionally, only mobilities that cross certain borders have considered as socially relevant. The processes by which certain areas are defined as meaningful boundaries are neither accidental nor harmless. They are embedded in the logic of power, which include gender ideologies. In the national order of things promoted by the nation-state, national

borders have been erected as the meaningful borders par excellence. Given that men have traditionally outnumbered women in international migration, both in Mexican migration as well as worldwide (United Nations 2015), the disproportionate academic importance given in the last decades to international migration (King and Skeldon 2010: 1620) has contributed to overshadowing the mobilities women more often engaged with.

In order to avoid falling into the pitfall of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), which produces gender-biased accounts of mobility, we need to overcome the idea of national borders as the only meaningful boundaries and to look at the processes that locally imbue movements with different meanings.

Along with the deceptive academic separation between internal and international migration (and the attention given to the later), the common understanding of migration as a predominantly work-driven activity also gender biases migration accounts. In Zacualpan, the social relevance of migration is defined not only by the distance involved, but also by the reasons for the movement. These reasons are closely linked to the features of the person who is moving. In this village, there are mobilities that cross the border between states that nonetheless are not socially perceived as migration and therefore not internalized as such by the people involved. In Zacualpan, as in many other locations worldwide, there is a pattern of virilocal residence after marriage, and women are expected to move into their husbands' family. Lupe tells us about her desire for her daughter to marry locally:

I tell her, no *mija*. She also says: no, no, I will build my house here. I tell her, when you marry, you'd better marry someone who is local, because if you married away I will visit you because you are my daughter, but I will visit you just for a day or two. But I am returning to Zacualpan. And if you are sick, I cannot help you. But, here, like me with my mum [both live in Zacualpan], I go [to her mother's house] whenever I feel like it, and when my husband comes back home, I am already back.
(Lupe, 37 year old, married with two children)

Moving to the husband's home after marriage means that even if this movement involves changing residence permanently to a different Mexican state – for instance from the state of Guerrero to the state of Morelos – the reason for the movement, which is related to the social characteristics of the moving subject, erases the border's significance. A change of residence that otherwise would have been socially considered as migration because of the crossing from one Mexican state to another is not perceived as such. Moving for family reasons in Zacualpan is not considered migration. As women are more prone to move for family reasons, their mobilities are dismissed socially. This explains why the interviewed women in Zacualpan responded negatively when asked about their previous migratory experiences. Only by elaborating their life stories, the residence changes they have gone through surfaced, including those for educational and family reasons. As 'migrants are frequently perceived through the conceptual lens of their "mobility" and work-related activities' (Mata-Codesal et al. 2015: 1), migration is often perceived as labour migration. More recently, the New Mobilities Paradigm has expanded the types of mobility that are academically relevant (Sheller 2011). By doing so, it has helped to acknowledge the multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations for migrating which complicate the straightforward construction of most migration as labour migration.

The process of assigning meaning to movement goes beyond the features of the movement itself (usually considered as the distance involved) and includes the features of the people moving. Data from Zacualpan have shown how borders become significant differently based on the reasons for the crossing, which are different for men and women. This means that crossing a significant border does not have the same connotations for men and for women. The process of assigning meaning to borders is neither a closed process nor does it deploy its effect equally to everyone. It is therefore unavoidable to analyse how mobility becomes socially relevant through exploring how borders become meaningful.

Conclusion

Long ago, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari asserted that State ideology has the 'pretension to be a world order, and to root man' (1987: 24). Such ideology, however, roots women more deeply than men. The sedentary logic of the nation state, which normalizes immobility, couples with patriarchal ideology aimed to control and regulate women's behaviour. There is, thus, a double process of naturalization in place which targets men and women differently: the sedentary ideology of the nation state and the immobilization of women by patriarchal ideology. As Jaume Franquesa states 'power is not so much an attribute of the "mobiles", but an attribute of those who can decide who is mobile and who is immobile' (2011: 1024). I have argued in this article that such power is exerted through the gendered social desirability of (im)mobility, and the construction of the exceptionality of female mobilities. Gender ideologies are key in shaping the process of stating who is desired to stay put, which in turn influences who is perceived as immobile.

The representational processes women and men are subjected to regarding (im)mobility are different. This is particularly true in spaces with long migratory traditions, where rites of passage to social adulthood involve gendered expectations regarding mobility. In line with ideas that equate womanhood with motherhood – closely linked in Mexico with *Marianism* – in places like Zacualpan, women are expected to fulfil their care-giving role as mothers and wives of migrants in a physical way. In order to limit and control women's migration, in contexts of high mobility like Zacualpan, the extra problematization of women's mobility through stigma, it is common by constructing women as in charge of continuity and rooted to the soil.

As the ethnographic data in this article have shown, there is a tendency to invisibilize or dismiss female mobilities. The academic importance given to international migration and the methodological nationalism of much academic work have gender-biased our understandings of mobility. By overshadowing mobilities more often followed by women, women's mobilities have been socially constructed as more unusual than men's. By constructing women's mobilities as exceptional, women become rooted.

Patriarchal gender ideologies continue to associate staying put with women. This process of naturalization stems from and reinforces the sedentary ideology of the nation state to further immobilize women. Working on mobility–immobility articulation may allow for true gender understandings of (im)mobility. In the construction of immobility as a relevant object of study for the Social Sciences, and especially for the sub-discipline of *Migration Studies*, we need to carry out a simultaneous process of defeminization.

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