

DISCUSSION PAPER

# TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES, CARE ARRANGEMENTS AND THE STATE IN COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA



No. 33, December 2019

**CAITLIN E. FOURATT**  
FOR PROGRESS OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN 2019-2020:  
FAMILIES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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# SUMMARY

Nicaragua has the second highest emigration rate in Central America, behind El Salvador, and 40 per cent of Nicaraguan households receive remittances. In contrast to migrants from other Central American countries, however, Nicaraguan migrants are more likely to move within the region to Costa Rica than to the United States.

This paper is concerned specifically with the implications of migration within Central America for family life. Focusing on the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the paper argues that the provision of care in Nicaraguan transnational families occurs in the context of multiple insecurities, both historical and contemporary. In this sense, migration represents both a solution to the insecure climate of care provision and a source

of further insecurity. The paper frames this analysis within scholarship on the privatization of care work, caregiving in transnational families and historical patterns of diverse family configurations. It then draws on more than 24 months of ethnographic research between 2009 and 2016, including interviews and participant observation with migrants living in Costa Rica and their families in Nicaragua, to show how Nicaraguan families develop strategies based on a history of informal and flexible caregiving. In particular, marriage informality and grandmother caregiving are highlighted. While these informal strategies allow families to navigate the challenges migration and family separation entail, they also contribute to continued vulnerability and reinforce the gendered burdens of caregiving within transnational families.

# RÉSUMÉ

Le Nicaragua est le pays qui a le taux d'émigration le plus élevé de l'Amérique centrale après le Salvador. Quarante pour cent des ménages nicaraguayens reçoivent des fonds. Contrairement aux migrants provenant d'autres pays d'Amérique centrale, cependant, les migrants nicaraguayens sont plus susceptibles de s'installer au Costa Rica qu'aux États-Unis.

Ce document s'intéresse principalement à l'impact des migrations sur la vie familiale en Amérique centrale. En se concentrant sur les cas du Costa Rica et du Nicaragua, ce document part du principe que la fourniture de soins dans les familles nicaraguayennes transnationales se produit dans un contexte d'insécurité multiples, tant historiques que contemporaines. À cet égard, les migrations représentent à la fois une solution face aux insécurité liées à la fourniture de soins et une autre source d'insécurité. Ce document place cette

analyse dans une étude universitaire sur la privatisation du travail de soins, la fourniture des soins dans des familles transnationales et des modèles historiques de configurations familiales multiples. Il s'appuie ensuite sur plus de 24 mois de recherche ethnographique entre 2009 et 2016, y compris des entretiens, et l'observation des migrants vivant au Costa Rica et dans leurs familles au Nicaragua pour montrer comment les familles nicaraguayennes élaborent des stratégies sur la base d'une histoire de fourniture de soins informelle et souple. Le caractère informel des mariages et les soins prodigués par les grands-mères sont notamment mis en lumière. Si ces stratégies informelles permettent aux familles de relever les défis liés aux migrations et aux séparations familiales, elles contribuent également au maintien des vulnérabilités et augmentent encore le surcroît de travail sexospécifique lié à la fourniture des soins dans les familles transnationales.

# RESUMEN

Nicaragua, país donde el 40% de los hogares reciben remesas, registra la segunda tasa de emigración de Centroamérica, detrás de El Salvador. A diferencia de lo que ocurre con las personas migrantes de otros países centroamericanos, las y los migrantes nicaragüenses son más proclives a desplazarse dentro la región hacia Costa Rica que hacia los Estados Unidos.

Este artículo se centra específicamente en las implicaciones de la migración en Centroamérica para la vida familiar. A partir del caso de Costa Rica y Nicaragua, en el artículo se sostiene que la provisión de cuidados en las familias transnacionales nicaragüenses se da en el contexto de múltiples inseguridades, tanto históricas como contemporáneas. En este sentido, la migración representa tanto una solución al clima de inseguridad de la provisión de cuidados como una fuente de mayor inseguridad. En el artículo, el análisis se enmarca en

las investigaciones sobre la privatización del trabajo de cuidados, la provisión de cuidados en las familias transnacionales y los modelos históricos de las diversas configuraciones familiares. A continuación, se apoya en los más de 24 meses de investigación etnográfica realizada entre 2009 y 2016, que incluyó entrevistas y la observación de participantes con migrantes que viven en Costa Rica y sus familias en Nicaragua, para mostrar de qué manera las familias nicaragüenses despliegan estrategias basadas en una historia de provisión de cuidados informal y flexible. En especial, se hace hincapié en parejas o uniones informales y en la provisión de cuidados que brindan las abuelas. Si bien estas estrategias informales permiten a las familias sortear los desafíos que suponen la migración y la separación familiar, también contribuyen a mantener la vulnerabilidad y a reforzar las cargas de género de la provisión de cuidados en las familias transnacionales.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2014 media frenzy over the ‘crisis at the border’ that resulted from the arrival of large numbers of Central American children in the United States generated popular as well as academic interest in migration from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. This mass movement of Central Americans, who are fleeing not just violence but also economic crisis, contributes to the reshaping of families, communities and States throughout the region.

The human rights abuses occurring under the Ortega presidency in Nicaragua since April 2018 have already significantly affected migration pathways in the region as Nicaraguans flee violence, predominantly to neighbouring Costa Rica. However, there has been little attention given to the diversity of migration pathways within Central America and the importance of intra-regional migration. Nicaragua has the second highest emigration rate in Central America, behind El Salvador, and 40 per cent of Nicaraguan households receive remittances.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to migrants from the Northern Triangle, however, Nicaraguan migrants are more likely to move within the region to Costa Rica than to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, around 250,000 Nicaraguans live in the United States while more than 300,000 live in Costa Rica, where they make up around 7 per cent of the population.<sup>3</sup>

Examining migration within Central America is important because, although around half of all international migration takes place within the developing world, we know relatively little about such flows.<sup>4</sup> So-called ‘South-South’ migration can share many of the same motivations and characteristics as other forms of migration, yet it can also demonstrate significant differences. This paper is concerned specifically with the implications of migration in Central America on family life. Focusing on the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it argues that migration within Central America entails different expectations

for maintaining family relationships, sending remittances and return visits than migration to other, farther destinations such as the United States. For example, during the Easter and Christmas holidays, some 70,000 Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica cross back to Nicaragua to visit family.<sup>5</sup> Relatively short and inexpensive travel between the two countries also facilitates movement, and (until recently) lax border enforcement has made migration without documentation relatively low risk. At the same time, cultural similarities and a common language make integration and settlement relatively easy for Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. This has generated a situation in which there are high levels of both cross-border movement and settlement in the latter, creating strong transnational ties between the two countries.

The paper looks at how the provision of care in Nicaraguan families occurs in the context of multiple insecurities, both historical and contemporary. In this sense, migration represents both a solution to the insecure climate of care provision and a source of further insecurity. In terms of migration being a solution, the paper demonstrates how members of transnational families draw on a history of informal and flexible caregiving to navigate the challenges migration and family separation entail. In terms of migration being a source of insecurity in care provision, the paper shows how these informal strategies contribute to continued vulnerability and reinforce the gendered burdens of caregiving within transnational

1 Monge-González et al. 2011; Orozco 2008.

2 Baumeister et al. 2008; Baumeister 2006.

3 González Briones 2013; Baumeister et al. 2008.

4 De Lombaerde et al. 2014.

5 Solano 2013.

families. In such families, women – both migrants and non-migrants, mothers and grandmothers – shoulder the burdens of transnational family life.

After briefly discussing the ethnographic methods used in the research, I frame my analysis of Nicaraguan transnational families within scholarship on the privatization of care work, caregiving in transnational families and historical patterns of diverse family configurations. I then turn to the context of multiple insecurities that drive Nicaraguan migration, before examining two key family configurations – marriage informality and grandmother caregiving – that are often seen as negative consequences of transnational migration. I show how blaming migration for family separation and marriage dissolution largely ignores the ways in which instability and informality are an

integral part of Nicaraguan family life. Rather, the contemporary flexible arrangements of care seen in the strategies of transnational families should be understood as the continuation of a long history of flexible caregiving in Nicaraguan families in the context of poor state provision of care. Finally, I demonstrate how such flexible caregiving allows transnational families to bypass the state in accessing health care. I look at health care because Nicaraguan transnational families place an enormous importance on access to health care, especially for children, and employ transnational strategies to access care on both sides of the border. Further, in both countries, access to care is highly gendered, with women acting as the primary providers of care and mediators between families and state institutions.

## 2. METHODS

This research project employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach<sup>6</sup> to understand how migration affects family and care relationships as well as concepts of family and gender. I conducted interviews and participant observation with Nicaraguan migrants and their families in Costa Rica as well as their families back in Nicaragua over the course of 23 months between 2009 and 2012, as well as during two month-long follow up visits in 2015 and 2016.<sup>7</sup> In practice, this meant “following the people”.<sup>8</sup>

I began with Nicaraguan migrants living in the San José metropolitan area recruited from local immigrant advocacy organizations. Two of the primary organizations were ASTRADOMES, a domestic workers’ association I have worked with since 2005, and a soup kitchen in Rio Azul, a marginal urban neighbourhood with a large Nicaraguan immigrant population.

From there, I interviewed individual migrants about their immigration histories, encounters with state agencies and documentation procedures, and family life in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I then followed up with participant observation in their homes and communities and conducted interviews with other family members. Interviewees in Costa Rica were asked for access not only to children or other family in Costa Rica but also to their families in Nicaragua. While all the migrants lived in the San José metropolitan area, they came from sending communities throughout Nicaragua. I spent time ranging from several weeks to months in rural and urban communities in the Nicaraguan departments of Carazo, Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, Leon, Managua and Masaya, where I again conducted interviews with relatives of migrants and participant observation in sending households and communities.

Although I conducted more than 100 interviews, I focused my efforts on the transnational experiences of 10 families, which included 47 of my interviewees (30 women, 17 men and 5 children under 18. In each

of the 10 families, I interviewed multiple family members in each country and visited and interviewed them over multiple years of fieldwork. Such repeat interviews and interactions provided insight into not only the spatial movements involved in migration but also changes over time.<sup>9</sup> These multiple interviews revealed that both children and adults moved back and forth between Costa Rica and Nicaragua based on economic circumstances and family needs and expectations. Interviewees included adult children of migrants, which provided valuable perspectives on how children’s perceptions of parent migration changed over time.

The majority of interviewees were women, not only because I recruited among domestic workers but also because women play key roles in managing households and caring for children and the elderly within families and, as I discuss below, men’s presence in households is often intermittent at best.

Interviewees were asked to define family for themselves and identify those family members I should interview in Nicaragua. Participants

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6 Marcus 1995; Fitzgerald 2006.

7 While the fieldwork for this project was conducted prior to the April 2018 protests in Nicaragua and subsequent repression by the Ortega administration, the underlying issues of poverty, family survival, and lack of state services and support for the working poor in Nicaragua provide insight into the conflicts between the Government and citizens in the wake of 2018 pension reforms. Indeed, many of those interviewed in Nicaragua for this project participated in the protests or fled to Costa Rica during the blockades, repression and violence that followed.

8 Marcus 1995.

9 Ryan et al. 2016.

consistently identified parent-child bonds as the primary foundation of family relationships. Based on this, three general types of families emerged: those with children in Nicaragua, those with children in both countries and those with children only in Costa Rica. Although families might change categories over time, in general those with children only in Costa Rica or in both countries tended to be younger and more recent arrivals. Their households often included children who were Costa Rican-born citizens. Those with children

only in Nicaragua tended to have arrived in Costa Rica prior to 2000. The sample is not meant to be representative of the Nicaraguan migrant population in Costa Rica. Indeed, there are few data on the family configurations or marital status of migrants. Rather, the families interviewed serve to highlight the diversity of family configurations and strategies Nicaraguans employ with respect to migration and to denaturalize the nuclear family as the unquestioned typical family configuration.

### 3.

# GENDER AND CAREGIVING IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

Since the 1980s, structural adjustment programmes in Latin America and elsewhere around the world have facilitated the privatization and domestication of what were once public forms of care, including health, education and social security.<sup>10</sup> In Nicaragua, these shifts were accompanied by official state discourse that reinforced the patriarchal nuclear family as ideal, sought to limit women's participation in political and public life and reinforced women's private, domestic roles as mothers.<sup>11</sup>

The promotion of traditional family structures and values coupled with neoliberal discourses around self-care and individual responsibility served both to place the burden of dealing with economic crisis on individuals and to naturalize the family's, and particularly women's, role in the provision of care. In this context, families assumed responsibility for managing public crises such as overburdened health-care systems, unemployment and economic crisis through household strategies.<sup>12</sup> Such strategies were highly gendered, relying on women to take on new care responsibilities through engaging in paid work to increase household income or developing strategies for coping with scarce resources, including sharing care responsibilities within extended families and kinship networks.<sup>13</sup>

Further, the marginalization of family configurations that differed from the ideal patriarchal nuclear family obscured the ways in which Latin American families have always been complex, flexible and dynamic.<sup>14</sup>

This flexibility, including high rates of extended households, co-habiting couples and single mothers,<sup>15</sup> has been key to household strategies families used to weather the consequences of economic and political instability after the end of the Sandinista Revolution. For example, child circulation and fostering, a traditional practice in many Latin American societies, has transformed into a way to ensure resources for children while reinforcing social and economic networks of cooperation and patronage.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, extended family households allow families to weather economic crisis by pooling resources.<sup>17</sup>

Migration represents both a solution to such conditions of insecurity and a source of further insecurity for families. Transnational families – that is, those with core members living in two or more countries – represent a paradox: Migrants leave to create a better life for their loved ones, especially children, but their leaving generates other forms of vulnerability and insecurity for both them and their family members 'left behind'.<sup>18</sup> Members of transnational families struggle with family separation,

10 Babb 1999; Safa 1995; Sassen 2000; Chase 2002.

11 Kampwirth 1996; Montoya 2002.

12 Biehl 2005; Han 2012; Kofman 2014; Ong 2006; Sassen 2000.

13 Gonzalez De La Rocha 1994; 2001; Chant 2003; Winters et al. 2009.

14 Rapp 1987.

15 Rubenstein 1983; Castro Martin 2002.

16 Fonseca 1986; Weismantel 1995; Leinaweaver 2008.

17 Winters et al. 2009.

18 Boehm 2008.

economic needs and social stigma tied to migration. They participate in family life across borders through a variety of techniques, including phone calls, text messages, travel, imagined forms of co-presence and material objects.<sup>19</sup> However, restrictive immigration policies that criminalize migrants and restrict their legal status have a profound impact on individual migrants' well-being and that of their families 'back home'.<sup>20</sup> Depending on the receiving State, those without legal status are often paid less (and thus are able to remit less), lack labour protections and cannot access health care or other social services in the host country.<sup>21</sup> These experiences of vulnerability can have repercussions, both financial and emotional, for family members left behind. Such vulnerability is heightened by families' and entire countries' dependence on remittances. Remittances form one of the key mediators of transnational relationships, providing income and emotional connections to family members back home. At the same time, they have become key sources of income for sending countries, making up for gaps in social service provision in countries such as Nicaragua, where the majority of remittances are used to pay for education, health care and housing.<sup>22</sup>

In this context of transnational family dynamics, ideas about the family and flexible family care arrangements come to take on new significance. For example, pressures to live up to the role of breadwinner may

drive men to migrate.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, migrant mothers are often subjected to social criticism when they leave their children behind.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, day-to-day material practices of motherhood have expanded to include income-earning and remittance-sending activities.<sup>25</sup> However, such remittance-sending may reinforce gender roles by emphasizing women's continued sacrifice for children from afar.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, those who care for children left behind may also exacerbate stereotyped ideas about family structure and gender roles by reinforcing the gendered roles of caregiving and the primacy of bonds between migrant parents and children at home, despite flexible practices of family and household configuration. These 'middlewomen', often grandmothers or aunts, care for children, manage household budgets and remittances and mediate the emotional impact of parents' absences.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, if family networks and informal arrangements have long represented resources to ensure care within families in contexts where state services are absent or inadequate, these arrangements have become more important in the current context of economic instability and transnational migration. In examining transnational family dynamics, then, it is important to understand the broader repertoire of kin and family arrangements on which people draw in constructing families and providing care for loved ones.

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19 Baldassar 2008.

20 Boehm 2008, 2012; Abrego 2014; de Genova 2005; Gonzales and Chavez 2012.

21 de Genova 2002; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; McIlwaine 2015; Willen 2007.

22 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012a; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007.

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23 Pribilsky 2007; Hirsch 2003.

24 Parreñas 2005; Abrego 2009, 2014.

25 Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997.

26 Parreñas 2005.

27 Dreby 2010.

## 4.

# NICARAGUAN MIGRATION

Nicaraguan transnational families are caught between failed or absent public policies in Nicaragua that drive continued emigration and shape transnational caregiving and increasingly restrictive immigration policies and xenophobic public sentiment in Costa Rica that limit their possibilities for integration.<sup>28</sup>

Although Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica has deep historical roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century regional economic developments, contemporary migration is a consequence of political and economic instability during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Contra war, economic restructuring and natural disasters.<sup>29</sup> During the 1990s, large-scale migration to Costa Rica accelerated as it became a key strategy for ensuring family survival.

In this period, Nicaragua's informal sector grew to employ about half the economically active population. Today over 40 per cent of the population lives below the consumption poverty line,<sup>30</sup> and about 10 per cent lives outside the country.<sup>31</sup> Remittances represent the largest source of national income, accounting for almost 13 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and 38 per cent of exports.<sup>32</sup>

Like many Nicaraguans, most families I interviewed employed some combination of internal and international migration, sending multiple members to different destinations. There has been significant migration to the United States and Europe and temporary migration to El Salvador.<sup>33</sup> However, Costa Rica is the most common destination for Nicaraguans, and this flow is comprised of temporary, semi-permanent and permanent migrants. At around 7 per cent of the population, Nicaraguans represent

the largest immigrant group in Costa Rica.<sup>34</sup> They fill low-paying jobs that form the basis of the country's agricultural and service sectors.<sup>35</sup> Remittances from Costa Rica represent one quarter of all remittances received in Nicaragua, despite the fact that Nicaraguans in Costa Rica make much less money compared to those in the United States or Europe.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, although studies show that less than half of all Nicaraguans in Costa Rica send remittances through formal channels, many more send them through informal means.<sup>37</sup>

Over the last 30 years, Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica has also shifted from the temporary movement of male labourers to increased migration of women (today 48 per cent of Nicaraguan migrants are women) and more permanent settlement that includes the establishment of transnational family ties.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in 2015, 15.8 per cent of all births in Costa Rica were to Nicaraguan mothers, which reflects the population's concentration in productive and, hence, reproductive ages.<sup>39</sup> This has created a situation in which many Nicaraguans have children back in Nicaragua as well as children born in Costa Rica. Although Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica has slowed since 2000, the two countries' proximity, short distance and easy transportation, as well as Costa Rica's economic demand for migrant labour and relatively open border, have facilitated cross-border connections. Established

28 Fouratt 2014, 2016.

29 Mahler 2000.

30 Altamirano Montoya and Damiano Texeira 2017.

31 Baumeister 2006.

32 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012a; Programa Estado de la Nación-Region 2008.

33 González Briones 2013.

34 INEC 2011.

35 Castro Valverde 2007.

36 Orozco 2008.

37 Baumeister et al. 2008.

38 DGME 2012; Mahler 2000; Chen Mok et al. 2001.

39 INEC 2015.

social and family networks have strengthened transnational family ties.

At the same time, these transnational ties, which also imply long-term family separation, and Nicaraguan families' dependence on remittances have generated fears among politicians, the media and the public in Nicaragua about family and social breakdown.

Migrant parents, particularly mothers, are subjected to severe criticism for leaving their families behind, even as the economic situation in Nicaragua leaves them little choice but to migrate to support their children. In the following sections, I turn to two key elements of Nicaraguan family-life – marriage informality and grandmother caregivers – to tease out the tensions in discourses of family breakdown and understand transnational family dynamics within broader kinship dynamics in Nicaragua.

## 5.

# JUNTADOS: MARRIAGE INFORMALITY

Politicians and the media in Nicaragua often blame migration for family breakdown and marriage instability. Such discourses serve to blame migrant women and men for ‘abandoning’ children and spouses back home. However, migrants themselves interpret their migration as part of their gendered roles within families. That is, they see the family separations entailed by migration as part of larger kinship dynamics within Nicaraguan families.

Marriage instability and informality are key elements of Nicaraguan family life, with informal unions, divorce and remarriage common occurrences.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in some places, and particularly among the working class, couples are more likely to be *juntados*, that is literally ‘joined’ in de facto unions, than to be legally married.<sup>41</sup> This section examines how such marriage instability is the result of historical political and social influences as well as more recent socio-political factors influencing family formation and the provision of care. I first examine the historical development of marriage informality before turning to how such informality may contribute to decisions to migrate, the stigma migrant women face when they leave children behind and the ways in which migrant women contest such discourses by situating their migration within conceptions of mothering and care work.

## 5.1

### The development of marriage informality

Migration and family separation are legacies not only of recent crises but also of the development of colonial agriculture in Nicaragua, which

required the internal migration of male labourers.<sup>42</sup> Historically, rates of official marriage and households’ resemblance to the patriarchal nuclear family varied greatly with region, class and ethnicity.<sup>43</sup> Other family patterns – unmarried cohabitating couples, single female-headed households, illegitimate children and child abandonment – were seen as aberrations that threatened social stability, but they were also common.

More recently, the instabilities caused by the Contra war of the 1980s and the ensuing economic crisis undermined state efforts to create more stability for nuclear family households. In the 1990s, after the end of the Sandinista Revolution and under the National Opposition Union (UNO) and subsequent administrations, traditional patriarchal family values were re-entrenched and the Government encouraged women to leave the labour force.<sup>44</sup> The ensuing economic crisis contributed to men’s abandonment and absence, driving them to leave their families to find jobs – including migration “to the United States or Canada, where they were far beyond the reach of new family laws and child-support claims”.<sup>45</sup>

Today, half of all unions in Nicaragua take place outside the legal and religious frameworks of formal

<sup>40</sup> Stephens 1988; Fauné 1995; Montoya 2002; Altamirano Montoya and Damiano Texeira 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Castro-Martín and Domínguez-Rodríguez 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Randall 1994; Lancaster 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Dore 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Kampwirth 1996, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Lancaster 1992:19.

marriage.<sup>46</sup> Consensual unions or de facto marriages – *uniones de hecho* or *uniones libres* in Spanish – are often viewed by state officials and religious leaders as less stable than legal or religious marriages and more prone to breakdown. But whilst they are seen as problematic, they are also widespread and socially accepted in both Nicaragua and Costa Rica, especially among the working class and poor, who may find the economic costs of marriage prohibitive. Among almost all the families I have interviewed, those who describe themselves as ‘married’ are, in fact, *juntados*, in de facto unions. Most of the Nicaraguan women and men I have interviewed over the years have been *juntados* several times in their lives. Many have children from different unions but have never been formally or legally married. In Latin America, such informal unions have not represented a transitional or trial period before marriage (as we see in the United States and Western Europe today), but rather “a large segment of unions are never ‘legalized’, implying that a considerable proportion of families are built outside the traditional marriage framework”.<sup>47</sup>

## 5.2

### Marriage informality and migration

Marriage informality, then, is not just a result of migration. Rather, it contributes to decisions to migrate. For example, it is common for men to maintain more than one family, making it more difficult to fulfil the traditional role of breadwinner or to meet paternal obligations. This may encourage fathers to migrate to be able to support their families. Latin American men often see the key cultural markers of masculine identity – for example, land and house ownership, marriage and the ability to support a family – as only accessible through the economic opportunities provided by migration.<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that all men who migrate support their families back home. For instance, scholars have noted that men remit less over time and may stop supporting children altogether if their ex-partners remarry in

46 Castro Martín 2002.

47 Castro Martín 2002: 35.

48 Pribilsky 2007; Hirsch 2003.

the country of origin.<sup>49</sup> However, in most cases that I observed, men’s financial, emotional and physical absence occurred before migration as a result of the dissolution of a de facto union. Indeed, rates of single female-headed households have traditionally been high in Nicaragua, representing one third of all households.<sup>50</sup> That is, the absence that women and children experience is due to relationship instability and men’s infidelity more than migration itself.

Informal relations and relationship instability may also encourage women to migrate when they find themselves without the regular income of a spouse or partner. For example, Mardelí, a Nicaraguan domestic worker who left Nicaragua for the first time in 1997, migrated to Costa Rica to support her children because her husband had ‘abandoned’ her. After 14 years of marriage, he had migrated to Costa Rica and, over the course of two years, cut off communication and financial support for her and her eight children while he started a relationship with a woman there. She explained, “It’s difficult to face the separation of a couple. The distance affected us, but the consequences are suffered by the children. He made his life one way, and I had to remake mine another.” Like Mardelí, many women cited separation or abandonment as the impetus for their own migration.

## 5.3

### Women’s migration as an extension of mothering rather than abandonment

Migrant women are often caught between deep economic need that drives them to migrate and criticism from family and the wider society for ‘abandoning’ their children through physical absence. Similar criticisms are rarely levelled at men who migrate. When men migrate, children are left at home with their mothers, but when women migrate, there is rarely another parent present to care for them. Mothers leave children with their own female kin, opening themselves up to criticism for

49 Abrego 2009, 2014.

50 Chant 2008; Altamirano Montoya and Damiano Texeira 2017; Liu et al. 2017.

abandonment and family breakdown. For example, Aracely, a domestic worker from Estelí who had recently returned to Nicaragua, explained that when she first left, her ex-husband “said he was going to take the children from me because I had abandoned them”. Overall, women faced harsher judgment for their decisions to migrate and greater pressures from families back home to fulfil the double role of provider and nurturer while abroad.

Migrant women contest such discourses by situating their migration within traditional notions of motherhood. One migrant activist echoed the sentiments of other Nicaraguan mothers in Costa Rica by drawing on images of motherly sacrifice: “The expression of a mother’s love is to wait in line for hours to take out and send this little bit of money. To endure the sun, the rain, the lines.” Framing migration as maternal sacrifice has a double effect. First, it reinterprets material support – sending money – as a form of care or affective labour. Second, this framing of maternal sacrifice also justifies women’s absence as part of their mothering responsibilities rather than as abandonment or irresponsibility. Drawing on Marian discourses of sacrifice, suffering and women’s capacity to care reinterprets leaving as caring.<sup>51</sup>

Further, in the Nicaraguan context of marriage informality, migration may generate new resources for women. It does not automatically provide women with social and economic mobility – as those who struggle to find work, obtain documentation and face xenophobia can attest. Nor is it always an emancipatory or empowering experience for all women vis-à-vis household power dynamics.<sup>52</sup> However, some women are better able to take advantage of the opportunities that migration offers depending on legal immigration status, family networks and employment. Migration may give women more control over household budgeting and decision-making as well as more spatial mobility.<sup>53</sup> For women in violent relationships, migration may represent a way out. For Aracely, leaving for Costa Rica represented both a way to provide for her

children in the absence of a responsible father and a way to establish physical distance between her abusive ex-partner and herself. Migration to Costa Rica could also provide assistance with mothering children as stricter and better-enforced child support laws, as well as programmes such as soup kitchens, offered single mothers more resources.

However, the complications of transnational parenting were made even more difficult by Nicaraguan migrants’ lack of legal status in Costa Rica. Although many interviewees were eligible for residency through their Costa Rican-born children,<sup>54</sup> completing the legalization process was costly and complicated. For instance, Gloria, a 35-year-old mother of four Costa Rican-born children, identified the confusing process of applying for residency, the incredible cost to gather the documents needed and the financial strains on her growing family as barriers to legalization. Although many times over the course of the last 10 years she had thought about applying for residency, her unstable economic situation and lack of familiarity with Costa Rican immigration procedures impeded her. Gloria estimated that by the time she could pull together her documents and pay the fees, she would accrue thousands of dollars in fines, an amount impossible to pay on her husband’s \$300/month salary.

For the most part, women bear the brunt of this legal uncertainty. Families prioritize legal status for some members over others, and women are often the last to gain residency. According to interviewees, men are more vulnerable to the attention of migration authorities because they work in highly visible places such as construction sites and agricultural fields. Further, men with legal status can earn more than women, so families often prioritize maximizing income by investing in men’s residency. Women, on the other hand, tend to work as domestic workers inside private homes, where they are not exposed

51 Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Stevens 1973; Navarro 2002.

52 Chant and Radcliffe 1992; Hirsch 1999; Pessar 1999.

53 Hirsch 1999.

54 Under the principle of *jus soli*, any person born on Costa Rican soil is by right a Costa Rican citizen. While the child’s claim is through place (being born there), the mother or father’s claim is through blood (having a biological child who is Costa Rican). In Costa Rica, a parent can claim residency through her Costa Rican-born child from the day that child is born. This contrasts with, say, the United States, where one must wait for the child to turn 21 and petition for the parent.

to the same scrutiny and thus feel less vulnerable to detention and deportation. Women also feel protected in their roles as mothers, believing that immigration authorities will not detain them while with their children. Still, Nicaraguan women restrict their movements, avoiding public spaces beyond their neighbourhoods as well as morally suspect behaviours that might draw the attention of the authorities.<sup>55</sup> Gloria, for instance, avoided leaving her house to sell her tortillas in the neighbourhood, instead sending her oldest son, who was Costa Rican-born, to deliver tortillas to customers.

Although many women I interviewed felt trapped by their lack of legal status,<sup>56</sup> conditions in Costa Rica often gave them more resources for achieving better family stability than in Nicaragua. They also valued their ability to earn more money, which most sent home to children or elderly parents in Nicaragua. In this sense, they saw migration as an extension of their mothering and care work and contested discourses of abandonment and family breakdown. Indeed, careful attention to family configurations prior to migration and in Nicaragua more broadly revealed how migration represented an attempt to create stability in a context of widespread marriage informality and instability. In the next section, I turn to the importance of intergenerational care in families' attempts to create stability by examining the role of extended family households and grandmother caregivers.

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55 Fouratt 2016.

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56 Ibid.

## 6.

# GRANDMOTHER CARE-GIVERS AND EXTENDED FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS

Given patterns of marriage informality explored above, children are often left in the care of other women when mothers migrate, usually grandmother caregivers. Although grandmother caregivers take on new responsibilities and burdens of care provision in the context of transnational family life,<sup>57</sup> these new care configurations must be understood within socio-historical processes of family configurations within Nicaragua. In Nicaraguan families, grandmothers and mothers have long shared care responsibilities within extended households. This section examines the historical importance of extended family households, the continued importance of grandmother caregivers within Nicaraguan family strategies and the adaptation of this role in the context of migration.

## 6.1

### The historical importance of extended family households

Grandmother caregivers, child fostering and reliance on the extended family are not simply responses to transnational migration but part of a larger repertoire of family-making in places such as Nicaragua, where the extended family has played an important role both ideologically and in practice. Nicaragua has one of the highest rates of extended family households in Latin America (41.3 per cent in 2006).<sup>58</sup> Scholars have noted the growth of extended family households in the country in the 1990s as part of an 'accordion effect' in which households expand to pool scarce resources in times of need and contract when access to resources allows members to separate.<sup>59</sup> However, extended households have remained common in Nicaragua since the 1990s, showing that extended

family households may be less a temporary reaction to economic conditions and more a permanent strategy for survival. That is, in a context of chronic economic crisis and marriage instability, extended family households allow families to pool income, share resources and provide care to one another in joint survival strategies. Indeed, the prevalence of extended family households may contribute to women's decisions to migrate because female kin are already present in the household.

While I do not want to suggest that grandmothers and other female kin do not take on additional burdens when mothers or fathers migrate, the experiences of Nicaraguan transnational families point to the flexibility of care relationships within families prior to migration. In many Nicaraguan families, these women have long shouldered such enormous burdens, providing care for grandchildren and buffering various forms of parental absence and instability. Further, practices of child circulation and fostering have been historically common in the neighbourhoods where these families lived. Grandparents often took in

57 Yarris 2011, 2017; Dreby 2010.

58 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012b.

59 Agurto and Guido 2001.

grandchildren after the dissolution of parents' unions, and many women related the importance of this practice in protecting children from step-parents who might not treat children from previous unions as their own.

The ubiquity of extended family households among working class Nicaraguans meant that most of the children of migrants I interviewed in Nicaragua already shared a home with grandparents prior their parents' migration. Ivannia, a 50-something Nicaraguan woman in San José, lived with her mother in Managua before she migrated in the 1990s. This had allowed her to work and to pool resources with her mother (who took on small odd jobs in addition to taking care of the girls) and a sister who lived nearby. Ivannia's three daughters continued to live with her mother when she left for Costa Rica:

“My mom has lived with us forever. Back then, I used to work in Nicaragua. So my kids, most of the time, all the time they had to enjoy, they enjoyed it with my mama because I always, since I was a single mother, I always had to work. So all this time [their childhood] they lived it with my mama. Yes, they were already adapted because she, my mama is their mama. They don't call my mama *abuela*, she's their mama. Yes, so I think the majority of Nicaraguans live almost always with their mama. So, there isn't this big blow (*golpe*) when you leave them [to migrate].”

In Nicaragua, Ivannia's eldest daughter Rebecca agreed, using a phrase repeated by other children of migrants: “I've always lived with my *mamita*”. In Nicaragua, children use the term ‘mama’ interchangeably for mothers and grandmothers or sometimes other female kin who raise them, indicating affection, care responsibilities and inter-generational linkages. Indeed, the use of ‘mama’ to refer to multiple women caregivers reinforced the gendered nature of care work in Nicaraguan families, where cooking, cleaning and child-rearing are synonymous with mothering and with women's work.<sup>60</sup> Further, grandmother

caregiving may reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations because when female relatives take up the work of raising, feeding and caring for children, fathers or other male relatives rarely pick up the slack.<sup>61</sup>

## 6.2

### The additional burden on grandmothers in the absence of parents

For Nicaraguan grandmothers, the shifting responsibilities and expectations they face as caregivers in the context of migration represent new responsibilities within extended family households. Such daily care activities require grandmothers to become ‘middlewomen’, intermediaries between absent parents and children left behind as well as between children and state institutions such as schools and clinics.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the everyday tasks of caring for children – feeding, clothing and ensuring their education and health – grandmother caregivers must also manage remittances. Such remittance management represented a substantial burden on grandmother caregivers, who often struggled with the emotional and financial demands of raising grandchildren.

Many women talked about how difficult it was to make ends meet, especially in the face of unpredictable expenses for children. Scarleth, a 20-year-old woman in Granada whose mother had worked in Costa Rica for 15 years, recalled that her grandmother sometimes drew from her own money when Scarleth or her brothers needed something rather than bother her mother in Costa Rica. “When she saw that we were missing something, she spent her own money so as not to bother my mama. Because she would say, how could we bother [my mother] because she had her own expenses too.” Other grandmothers reported keeping careful accountings of how remittances were spent to demonstrate to migrant parents that the money was used responsibly. As Marina, a grandmother raising two grandchildren in Managua,

60 Nieto 2000; Walmsley 2008.

61 Parreñas 2005.

62 Dreby 2010.

explained, “Raising them has not been easy for me. Even though [my daughter] sends the money, it’s the one who’s at home who knows how to make that money last.” When remittances did not last, they reinforced parents’ absences and disappointed both children’s and caregivers’ expectations. Despite such disappointments, grandmothers mediated the emotional separations between children and parents, reinforcing children’s bonds with absent parents. Marina, for example, often talked to the children about the sacrifices their mother was making in Costa Rica. She often referred to these to encourage her grandchildren to study hard and make their mother proud. At the same time, grandmother caregivers managed their own feelings about separation from adult children. Indeed, Marina felt that when her daughter left for Costa Rica, she had lost her only confidant. Dealing with all these emotions has important consequences for caregivers’ health and well-being, and many reported feeling run down, stressed and overwhelmed.<sup>63</sup>

Most grandmother caregivers assumed care for children without formal legal custody. In the context of migration, these informal arrangements created vulnerability for both children and grandmother caregivers. For example, without legal custody, grandmothers were limited in how they could intercede for children in state agencies, schools and clinics. They were also vulnerable to threats from children’s non-custodial fathers, like in the case of Aracely, whose ex-husband accused her of abandonment and threatened to take the children away from their maternal grandmother. Other grandmothers were vulnerable

to non-custodial parents’ attempts to access money sent for children’s care. Further, such arrangements, combined with marriage informality, reinforced parent-child separation. Without legal custody, grandmothers could not sign for a child’s passport or exit permit. Esther, who was raising her 13-year-old granddaughter Jessy, wanted to take her to visit her father in Costa Rica. However, she had no way of getting a passport for the girl since Jessy’s father had not signed custody over to her before leaving. Such custody issues were common among grandmother caregivers and, combined with parents’ lack of legal status in Costa Rica, served to prolong parent-child separation.

Thus, while grandmother caregiving represented a solution to the insecurities of family life and migration, it simultaneously heightened the vulnerability of grandmothers and children and extended parent-child separation. Yet, grandmother caregiving exists within broader patterns of Nicaraguan family life, including long histories of intergenerational mothering meant to protect children from marriage instability and economic crisis. In the context of migration, however, these tasks became heightened as grandmothers also managed family separation, informal custody arrangements and remittances. One of the major responsibilities of grandmothers in this context was ensuring access to health-care services for children. In the following section, I turn to how migration and the flexible family strategies examined here allowed transnational families to access care for children on both sides of the border.

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63 See Yarris 2011.

## 7.

# SIDE-STEPPING THE STATE TO ACCESS HEALTH CARE

This section looks at how transnational families accessed health care on both sides of the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border because interviewees placed an enormous importance on access to health care, especially for children, but struggled in the face of barriers to access and inadequate services. In the face of these barriers, families turned to the private sector and informal strategies for accessing care, demonstrating how neoliberal reforms in much of Latin America that impacted social spending shifted the burden of care from state-provided public services to families.<sup>64</sup> This section addresses health care access in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua precisely because such access requires transnational strategies for social provisioning.

In both countries, access to care is highly gendered, with women acting as the primary mediators between families and state institutions. In Costa Rica, barriers to access for migrants include discrimination and xenophobia as well as legal and bureaucratic obstacles to gaining insurance. In Nicaragua, barriers are related to the poor coverage and quality of public services. Faced with these challenges, members of transnational families turn to the private sector in both countries to fulfil their needs for care, essentially side-stepping the state in their efforts to care for one another.

### 7.1

## Health care for migrants in Costa Rica

Costa Rica's universal health-care system, a point of national pride, has become a battleground for access and belonging for immigrants and their children. Nicaraguan immigrants, no matter what their legal status, encounter barriers in accessing health care. Before 2010, migrants were able to get insurance relatively easily through employers or voluntary affiliation regardless of immigration status. Cost, more than eligibility, limited their access to insurance

and thus care. However, under current immigration law, those without legal status are no longer able to pay into the system. Without legal status, immigrants cannot register with the social security system popularly referred to as *la Caja* (Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social) and, through this, access health-care services beyond prenatal care. For example, Mariela, a legal resident who had lived in Costa Rica for 15 years, explained that her elderly mother, who had not renewed her residency card, was unable to get treatment when she suffered a kitchen accident. "Her papers expired. She was burned; they didn't give her the medication and treatment she needed because she didn't have her papers." Her mother received emergency care in a public hospital, which she paid for out of pocket, and was forced to pay for medication and follow-up treatment at a private clinic.

Further, as with legal status, incorporation into public health insurance is highly gendered. In my observations, Nicaraguan women obtained insurance after their spouses and children, if at all.<sup>65</sup> As with the calculus of legal residence, families prioritized children's and men's access over women's. Further, those without legal status were more likely to work in the informal sector, without the possibility of

<sup>64</sup> Biehl 2005; Ong 2006.

<sup>65</sup> See Goldade 2009.

insurance coverage through employment. Still, even migrant workers in the formal sector had trouble gaining insurance. For example, many domestic workers reported that employers regularly did not report their full hours, which in turn affected their access to insurance benefits.<sup>66</sup>

Access to health care for children of migrants is also complicated. Costa Rican law guarantees children's access to health care and education regardless of immigration status, so in principle all children should be able to access services in clinics and hospitals regardless of country of birth or immigration status. However, many migrant mothers reported mistreatment and discrimination in clinics. In some instances, such mistreatment included being set extra requirements or steps not required by law to access services. For example, undocumented children without insurance must present an identity document – either their passport or a document issued by the Nicaraguan consulate – to access health services. A social worker in Rio Azul reported that mothers often came to her distressed because a clinic or school officials were demanding extra steps and paperwork to enrol their children or receive care. Others were unable to obtain the documents needed because of the costs of returning to Nicaragua to acquire them.

However, even those with legal status and insurance encounter discrimination and exclusion in clinics due to widespread xenophobia. As Mariela noted, “With papers it’s a bit better, but even with papers there still is [discrimination], just because of our country [of origin]. I have my papers in order, but I have had problems.” Ruth, who had a Costa Rican-born daughter and was insured by the Caja, described the attention she received during her pregnancy in 2010: “The doctor spoke to me like I was stupid. They think that because you’re Nicaraguan, you’re illiterate, ignorant, stupid, and it’s not true.” As these interviewees suggest, the poor treatment migrants encounter in public clinics is more closely linked to nationality than legal status. Such widespread xenophobia may lead migrants to feel that they do not ‘deserve’ to use services.<sup>67</sup>

66 Fouratt and Voorend 2017.

67 Spesny Dos Santos 2015.

## 7.2

### Health care in Nicaragua

Despite these barriers, migrants in Costa Rica frequently contrasted the quality of services in Costa Rica with the lack of services in Nicaragua. Indeed, the Nicaraguan public health-care system has never provided the coverage or quality of services available through the Costa Rican system. The Nicaraguan state plays only a marginal role in public social service provision and depends instead on international cooperation and family strategies.<sup>68</sup> While per capita public social expenditure increased considerably between 2000 and 2009, from US\$91 to \$157, it is still the lowest in absolute terms in all of Central America.<sup>69</sup> And while most social programmes in Nicaragua are universal on paper, in practice they are only aimed at the poor.<sup>70</sup>

The current administration under Daniel Ortega has expanded health and education coverage, but public services are still “not for everyday life”, as one interviewee put it. Nicaraguans often accessed services through clinics staffed by international volunteers or organizations. However, as one woman noted, such clinics were “only temporary”. Women I spoke with discussed having to take their own sheets and purchase syringes or other medical supplies for hospitalized relatives. Families’ strategies represent a form of making do in the absence of comprehensive services and can be a necessity for accessing the inadequate services that do exist.<sup>71</sup> The burden of such family contributions to social welfare has fallen primarily on women in their capacity as caregivers.

## 7.3

### Side-stepping state-sponsored services

In the face of these challenges, members of transnational families turned to the private sector in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua to access care,

68 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2011, 2012b.

69 ECLAC 2015.

70 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012b.

71 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012a.

combining emergency care in the public sector with specialists, ultrasounds, diagnostic tests and medicines in the private sector. That transnational families turn to the private sector in both countries, despite the very different contexts, points to the ways in which they rely on informal, creative measures to provide care for one another when they are denied access to public services. That said, many migrant women used the private sector in Costa Rica as a last resort because it was expensive. Rafaela, a member of a migrant women's network, noted that she struggled to explain this to her children back in Nicaragua, "When we get sick, and it's between going to a doctor and sending a remittance, we prefer to send a remittance. It's that, I sent all my salary and was left with just a tiny part." To minimize health-care expenses, migrant women often self-medicated, either going to the corner store for over-the-counter medications or going to a pharmacy to explain their symptoms to a pharmacist. Other options included having medicines sent from Nicaragua or buying them on the black market in San José.

In Nicaragua, the expense of private sector health care also factored into the decision to migrate in the first place. For example, Kenneth, a 19-year-old in Granada whose mother was in Costa Rica, made his first plans to migrate after his pregnant girlfriend became ill with a kidney infection. He took her to the local public hospital, where medical staff warned them of the chance of miscarriage because of the infection but refused to perform an ultrasound to check on the foetus:

"So there in the hospital they do ultrasounds, but they said that one of the machines was broken and they were only doing ultrasounds for pregnancies in later stages, like 7 or 8 months. So, I didn't know what to do. I went and borrowed money to pay for an ultrasound outside [the hospital]."

Kenneth borrowed money from his employer, took his girlfriend to a private clinic for the ultrasound and then returned to the hospital for treatment of her kidney infection. The debt for his girlfriend's ultrasound and other expenses related to her

pregnancy factored into Kenneth's plans to move to Costa Rica after the baby's birth. While few migrants named health care as an explicit reason for migration, health-care costs and medical debt factored into the economic needs that poor Nicaraguan families faced.

Indeed, remittances, which represented 9.8 per cent of Nicaragua's GDP in the first two trimesters of 2015, played an important role in families' social provisioning.<sup>72</sup> In Nicaragua, half of all remittances are spent on medicine, housing and education.<sup>73</sup> Remittances are particularly important in ensuring the health care, education and other needs for the children of migrants. Marina, a grandmother raising two grandchildren in Managua while her daughter worked in Costa Rica, explained that when the children got sick, she almost always took them to a private clinic:

"When they get sick, I take them...especially since they don't have insurance here. So, I take them to a doctor. If you take them to a health centre, right, a public one, and they don't take care of them, then you have to take them to a paid doctor. I have to take them to a private doctor [who] pays more attention to the illness."

While dissatisfaction with public health-care services in Nicaragua was widespread, migration and the remittances it provided offered a way for families to side-step state sponsored services and purchase care in the private sector.

When migrants were unable to send remittances, it significantly affected children's access to health care. For example, Ester reported frustration that her granddaughter Jessy's father had not sent money recently, even though Jessy had been suffering from recurring headaches and needed diagnostic tests outside the public hospital:

"I don't know. It looks like things are going badly for him economically. That's what I feel. Because Jessy has been very sick, she was in

72 BCN 2015.

73 Martínez Franzoni and Voorend 2012a.

the hospital, and his help has been minimal, almost absent. The difference a CT scan would make. But that costs almost \$200. And he couldn't send that. So, we haven't been able to get the scan for her."

A lack of remittances, then, may translate into a lack of access to health care, especially for children. Key here is that grandmothers took on these additional responsibilities of managing remittances and accessing care for children. As Marina put it, "All of this I have to think about, it's always my responsibility."

For both migrants and their families back in Nicaragua, exclusion from public services drove them to develop informal strategies for ensuring health care,

especially for children. It is particularly interesting that, despite the different circumstances, similar strategies for accessing health care among migrants and their families were observed in both countries, with the use of the private sector as a strategy to deal with exclusion from or the inadequacy of public services. Equally as important is that, given gendered care responsibilities, it was female caregivers who took on new responsibilities when transnational families bypassed the state. It was migrant mothers who delayed or forwent their own health needs to ensure care for children, dealt with xenophobic clinic staff and consistently sent money home. It was grandmothers who took children to appointments, figured out how to stretch meagre budgets and remittances to cover tests and specialists and provided emotional support to sick children.

## 8.

# CONCLUSION

Transnational families represent one of myriad kin configurations that Nicaraguans draw on in their efforts to create and maintain relationships of meaningful care for loved ones they recognize as family. Examining how absence, separation and instability are part of larger kinship dynamics in Nicaragua helps to denaturalize the nuclear family and destigmatize transnational arrangements, placing them within the larger context of kinship configurations Nicaraguans draw on to care for family members.

For both women and men, migration offers opportunities to fulfil parenting roles as well as challenges to their relationships with their children in the face of sometimes competing demands of economic and emotional support. For women in particular, paternal absence and marriage instability have expanded the expectations for mothering to include both emotional and financial support for children. Further, while grandmothers may take on new burdens in raising grandchildren in transnational families, their grandmothering must be understood in the context of intergenerational expectations for care in Nicaragua. Fostering by grandparents is a common strategy that allows families to pool incomes and increase the number of members employed in income-earning labour, to protect children from parents' marriage instability and to strengthen intergenerational linkages. Accounts of transnational family life, then, must attend both to shifting gender and family roles in the context of migration as well as to cultural practices of families in sending communities.

In Nicaragua, reconfigurations of family have long represented a resource of care in a context of failed or non-existent state provision. For my interlocutors, migration represented a key strategy among these reconfigurations. However, the provision of care within these transnational families is highly gendered. The informality of childcare arrangements is linked to the centrality of mothering to Nicaraguan women's lives and identities. Flexible care arrangements that include grandmother caregivers and migrant mothers demonstrate the extension of the physical and

emotional work of mothering across generations as well as national borders.

This reliance on women's care work has naturalized both gendered expectations of care provision and the family as the primary site of caregiving, devaluing this work and shifting the focus from public forms of care to the domestic sphere. In Latin America today, policies that have cut social spending and programmes have placed enormous pressures on families to cope with and make do, generating uncertainty about the future in the face of prolonged crisis. Indeed, migration and the remittances it generates fill gaps in inadequate public care in Nicaragua. It is, at least in part, the flexibility of transnational kin and care that allows public discourses of solidarity and equality to resonate in the national imagination despite deep inequality and poverty.

As thousands of Nicaraguans choose to migrate to Costa Rica as part of family strategies of making the best of challenging circumstances, they encounter new uncertainties tied to immigration policy. In Costa Rica, the legal immigration system has seen increasing restriction and repression, making residency more difficult to achieve for most low-income Nicaraguans. Despite principles that promote family reunification and social integration, current immigration policy creates legal vulnerability for migrants, which in turn affects their access to public services for themselves and children. In creating uncertainty for Nicaraguans, such state policies maintain the vulnerability of the migrant population.

However, Nicaraguans' own strategies show that people do not passively face state policies or institutions. Rather, they employ a range of strategies to develop a provisional sense of security, ensure care for children and access needed services. These strategies draw on gendered care arrangements and avoid official, legal channels. More and more, as families find themselves outside the benefits of uneven economic development, they turn to alternate

ways of making do and making a living. These include drawing on extended family networks, engaging in irregular migration and using hard-earned income to side-step the state and purchase services in the private sector. Yet, as family separations are prolonged because of financial needs and legal insecurity, such informal arrangements become more important and more permanent, further entrenching the uncertainty and instability they seek to address.

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