

## article

# Family separation and emotional bonds: women of Chiapas and Yucatan, Mexico, facing male migration to Quebec, Canada

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Scarce attention has been given to the social-emotional problem that men in the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program undergo during the migratory process. Even less attention has been placed on their romantic partners. In this article, we inquire into the emotions felt among women from Yucatan and Chiapas, Mexico, while their partners are working in Canada. Our analysis is based on a postcolonial and intersectional perspective, as well as on a socio-anthropological and geographical approach to emotions. The strategy of inquiry is based on the qualitative approach, using a novel method of the evocation of emotion through images (photo-evoking), proposed by the authors.

**key words** labour migration • emotions • postcoloniality • photo-evoking

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## Introduction

The questions that guide this article are: what emotions do women express concerning the temporary migratory labour of their husbands and sentimental partners? What emotions do they evoke about their families' care-taking tasks? We set out from the assumption that the context of capitalism, especially in countries of the Global South, situates family care as the task of women, an idea through which the function of wife and mother is 'naturalised'. The activities of social reproduction are devalued, although they are also simultaneously deemed necessary to support the productive and income-generating work performed by men.

We begin by reviewing theoretical discussions that allow for reflection on the care work that women undertake in the family environment, and turn first to conceptual perspectives from feminist economics, the critique of coloniality and theories of

emotions. Our data were produced using a technique that we call ‘evoking emotion through images’ (‘photo-evoking’), an approach that begins with photography, although not focusing upon it, and aims to promote orality. The technique is designed to evoke emotions, while preventing (to the extent possible) the rationalisation of the issues addressed. The analysis is based on ten interviews with women from Yucatan (five) and Chiapas (five) whose husbands were participating in the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (CSAWP). These men had been working in Canada for an average of six consecutive years and had stayed a median of six months per annum. We defined the analysis categories after having conducted the interviews and then named those categories from the interviewees’ testimonies.

We chose an indigenous region (Mayas from the Yucatan Peninsula) and a non-indigenous community because they were contexts in which one of the authors was already undertaking research. We consider it relevant to show two different cultural contexts of Mexican temporary migration.

Emotions of distress (sadness, loneliness, anguish) were expressed by the women more often than those of well-being. These emotions of distress nevertheless create bonds that strengthen the relationship between couples and families. Sadness is experienced because something or someone matters. Loneliness is felt when someone you love is not present. People feel anguish about things that could disturb the peace of their loved ones. Emotions and their rules are ordered according to the gender normativity that prevails in the cultures of the interviewees.

### **Beyond epistemological and methodological colonialism in the study of family dynamics in migratory contexts**

To analyse the data, we drew on discussions about the physical and emotional work that women do while men migrate to engage in wage labour. In our research, and like many other women in the world, these women are immersed in an ideological system that ‘naturalises’ women’s work, to the extent that the work they perform remains unremunerated.

Using the postcoloniality critique put forward by De Sousa Santos (2006) and Espinosa et al (2014), among other authors, we question traditional knowledge about migration, which describes and explains family dynamics using an ethno-Westernised conception of countries in the Global South. The vast majority of women in the regions studied live in poverty, with low educational levels, cultural and family traditions that impinge on their decisions, and little or no capacity to control their bodies and sexuality (Mohanty, 2007, 2008). In Mexico, since colonial times, the categories of ethnicity and social class have been deeply imbricated; even today, most of the people who belong to an indigenous ethnic group are poor. The spouses and sentimental partners of the CSAWP workers were immersed in this latter reality, finding themselves in contexts of precariousness and exercising gender patterns and roles focused on domestic work and care and attention to family, and thus part of a gender, class and ethnic division of labour.

Activists, intellectuals and academics of the Global South have contributed new knowledge in a perspective they call *Feminisms from Abya Yala*<sup>1</sup> (Espinosa et al, 2014); this perspective questions the coloniality not only of knowledge and power, but also of being and gender. We bring three *Abya Yala* contributions into our analysis. First, we adopt their critique of the concept of gender, analysing coloniality and imperialism

to emphasise the additional suffering to which the indigenous women of America, Africa and Oceania were subjected when treated as loot of war, raped by colonisers or labelled as witches for performing healing practices, such as *yerbateras* (women who used herbs for their healing practices). *Abya Yala* feminists have also shown the process of coloniality suffered by men. European men established a 'racial division of labour' whereby native peoples were placed in situations of slavery and servitude. Labour relations generated by temporary or definitive migration today translate into another type of coloniality, one in which remunerated work performed by men of ethnic groups from the South is marked by precariousness, a situation that also impacts their families. Third, the feminists of *Abya Yala* brought the topics of domestic labour and unpaid family care tasks into the discussion (issues also addressed at the conference of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [Cepal, 2010]).

Over the years, much academic work has explored the implications of the reality of migrant workers' families (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Dreby, 2006; Ullmann, 2012; Wells et al, 2014; Mummert, 2015). One area that has attracted particular attention is the private and depoliticised nature of the housework performed by women, opening a discussion about the possibility of considering care<sup>2</sup> more as a right than as a duty. This leads to asking whether a right not to care for another person can be considered a personal decision and, if so, who is able to make such a choice.

Merla and Baldassar (2016) argue that there is a 'circulation of care' in trans-migrant families, which does not contradict, but rather complements, the notion of 'global care chains' proposed by Hochschild (2003, 2008). Their circulation of care concept accepts that relationships between members of a family separated by labour migration may be strengthened and, simultaneously, that this experience can generate differing emotions among its various members:

Care is given and returned at different times and to varying degrees across the life course and, in this way, care can be described as circulating among family members over time as well as distance. A care flow framework helps to capture all the actors involved in family life as well as the full extent of their care activity, including practical, emotional and symbolic, that define their membership in a family. (Merla and Baldassar, 2016: 276)

Emotions have been studied in different disciplines. James and Lange's theory of emotion claims that emotions are products of physiological reactions (James, 1958 [1899]), although some of them are reactions of escape, or simply facial expressions. James and Lange qualify love, fear, hatred, joy, anger, affliction, shame and pride as 'the coarser emotions, being coupled as they are with strong bodily reverberations' (James, 1958 [1899]: 241). Vygotsky (1999 [1934]: 121) criticised the tendency in psychology to approach emotions as dyads and stated that social scientists needed to 'analyse the relationship between intellect and affection ... avoiding reductionist dualisms'. However, it was the theory of emotions in the field of social psychology, developed mainly by Scheff (1983), which put greater emphasis on highlighting the circumstantial aspects of emotion, and underlined the role of interaction and human communication in the emotional arena (Bericat, 2000).

Hochschild (1979, 2003) has studied love as an emotion in the field of care and migration. She states that in their private lives, women perform more 'emotional work' than men given that 'as traditionally more accomplished managers of feeling

in private life, women more than men have put emotional labour on the market, and they know more about its personal costs' (Hochschild, 2003: 11). Hochschild's concept of 'emotional work' arose from findings in her interviews, where informants often spoke of 'acts *upon* feeling', that is, of *trying* to manage feelings or trying to manage emotions, such as expressing gratefulness, controlling anger or attempting to feel loved. This concept has been widely used in studies focusing on transnational migration (McKay, 2007; Svašek and Skrbiš, 2007; Merla and Baldassar, 2016), and is thus relevant to our analysis.

## Methods

Although there are different types of 'visual methods', which put images at the centre of the research, including *photovoice*, *photo documentation* and *photo-elicitation* (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2012), in our ethnographic work, we employed an adapted version of Harper's (2002) *photo-elicitation* method, which we call 'photo-evoking'. For Harper (2002: 14), photo-elicitation 'is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview'.

As shown in the work of the authors cited earlier, a multiplicity of methods involve using an image to facilitate data gathering. Presenting an image stimulates the generation of information but also, for Harper, affects the type of narrative produced. Results will differ from those generated by oral interview techniques, without using a visual image, because the brain processes words and images differently (Harper, 2002: 13).

The use of visual supports is often considered contentious given that the social sciences are 'disciplines of words' (Mead, cited in Banks, 2001). In our case, following Pink (2007), the use of a visual method arose from our data-collection process, and was driven by the need to obtain 'less intellectual and more heartfelt' responses about sensitive issues. During May 2016, Campos-Flores collected data from a Mayan community in Guatemala whose native language is Kaqchikel (not Spanish). After the first encounter in a 'focus group', and despite the support of a bilingual person, it was evident that participants had difficulty putting the emotions associated with the migratory labour experience and its consequences for those who remain in the community of origin into precise words. As a second meeting a week later was agreed, in a *serendipitous* process (Pink, 2007), Campos-Flores replaced the interview questions with easily identifiable images that included elements likely to kindle emotions based in experience. In 2017, Rosales-Mendoza applied a similar approach with Mayan women from Yucatan, using photographs with the themes selected by Campos-Flores. We aimed to corroborate the answers obtained in the Guatemalan Kaqchikel language, and (from that information) develop a comparative analysis. In total, 20 images were used. Their selection was based on the coherence between the question 'What do you feel/experience when you see this image?' and the fact/action researched (unknown places, views of the hospital, the cemetery or men working in the fields, a father playing with his child). The images were used to explore different feelings, such as sadness, loneliness and anguish (all linked to the discomfort produced by migration), as well as joy and contentment (related to the well-being derived from migration). Seven of the images focused on workspaces: men planting and harvesting in the fields; a group of men eating during their lunch break; men wearing chemical safety gear; agricultural machinery; and a food production line.

Subsequently, three additional images, of recreational activities, were shown: men playing football (soccer); men riding a bicycle; and agricultural workers participating in a local celebration. Four other pictures used were intended to contextualise the Canadian environment (forest, snow). Finally, six other images depicted men in a supermarket, a group of women cashing in remittances in Mexico, a lonely man in deep thought sitting on his bed, a man using his phone, a car accident on a highway and a sick man in a hospital. When we showed each photograph, we asked our interviewees ‘What do you feel when you see this picture?’, and from there, we guided the conversation towards the meaning of each image: sadness, loneliness, anguish, joy, contentment.

Due to the differences between our approach and the way in which photographs have traditionally been used in the ‘photo-elicitation’ method, we offer the term ‘photo-evoking’, based on the use of pre-selected printed or digital images as ‘containers’ for known and unknown experiences, memories, spaces and experiences: the photograph of a known beach (frequented by the interviewee) could trigger archived memories; or a view of a snowy landscape could stimulate her imagination when trying to describe the emotions produced by a place never seen, but ‘inhabited’ by her companion or spouse. As Rose (2012: 304) explains, ‘most photo-elicitation studies ask research participants to take some photos and it is their photos that are then discussed in the photo-elicitation interview’. In ‘photo-evoking’, however, we use pre-selected images to ‘evoke’ or ‘trigger’ emotions in the interviewee. At the beginning of the interview, the participant was informed that a series of photographs would be shown, and that we were interested in the feelings/emotions they evoked. For example, when seeing a picture of a woman receiving money (from a transfer sent by her husband), we expected to hear about how the couple negotiate the spending of the money, how the gender role is affected by the husband’s absence and the woman’s deeper feelings in this process. Once the interviewee had answered and explained her feelings and emotions triggered by the image, we continued the verbal interaction, adding a few questions to clarify what was shared. (As part of the ethics process, we obtained verbal informed consent at the beginning of the interview and applied clear ethical guidelines so that the women would feel that they could stop the interview at any time and avoid questions that they perceived as intrusive.)

When the ten interviews had been transcribed, classification codes were selected into categories of analysis. These highlighted the central themes of this article and refer to emotions of sadness, loneliness and anguish (linked to the discomfort produced by migration), and of joy and contentment (related to the well-being derived from migration). These emotions were expressed in the spaces of virtual communication in which agricultural workers are linked with their wives, and in which gender roles that both have internalised in their culture are evident. We identified these topics within the interviews, and later treated them as categories of analysis.

## Evoking emotions: women of Chiapas and Yucatan

### *Virtual communication*

As Faist (2010), Baldassar (2016) and Glick-Schiller (2017) have argued, mobile phones and Internet access play an important role among trans-migrants who, when

separated for long or intermittent periods, know that they can communicate on a daily basis whenever they want:

‘He calls in the morning and in the evening. He has his cell phone there. He talks by video call, sees the children, his dad, his mom. They [the children] are happy to talk to their dad and say, “Come back dad because we want you here.”... He asks me how we’re doing. If I need to take the children to the doctor, he says “Take them.” At night, he talks to see how the children are doing, how we are, how his mother is. He says, “I worry when I see that someone is sick over there, please take them to the doctor. My mom if she needs it.” He worries.’ (Candelaria, 28, Laxka, Yucatan<sup>3</sup>)

‘My husband calls me every day. He takes his cell phone and I have another here. He talks to everyone to ask how they are, how they feel, because he isn’t here. My daughter, Anita, tells him she and her little brother are sad when he is not here and when he comes, they don’t recognise him anymore ‘cause it’s eight months they haven’t seen him. She [pointing to a baby in her arms] is six months old, when he comes back in eight months, she will already be walking and most likely, like the others, when she hears him speak, she will cry, because she won’t recognise him.’ (Julia, 24, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

‘He calls every day [laughs]. Well, it’s OK he calls me every day, but there are times when I’m working and he’s talking, why doesn’t he call at night when he’s done with work too? No. He calls every time he comes out on his break. He says he makes a quick call to find out how the children are doing. If they aren’t sick, and that’s the kind of things he’s asking.’ (Mariana, 25, Laxka, Yucatan)

Virtual communication is the space where emotions can be expressed despite distance. Through telephone calls or videoconferences, families display their well-being or distress. For agricultural workers, these conversational opportunities represent the only time they can be ‘close’ to their wife and children, and, to some degree, can exercise paternity and the bond of partnership. For these women, this is a setting in which they express the regrets that distance causes and talk about their feelings and daily problems. Through such communication, gender roles are also reaffirmed, with the man as family guide and the woman as carer of children and property. The so-called virtual (co-)presence (Baldassar, 2016) is thereby experienced, through which the emotional support of ‘being there’ is manifested for the other, becoming what Baldassar calls ‘the glue’ that holds transnational families, particularly couples, together.

### *Gender roles*

As mentioned, Hochschild (2003, 2008) has pioneered exploration of how emotions are managed in the context of care and migration. We concur with her that in their private lives, women do more ‘emotional work’ than men, and that this work is also gendered, that is, it is expressed differently by men and women:

This specialisation of emotional labour ... rests on the different childhood training of the heart that is given to girls and to boys. (‘What are little girls



made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice. Which are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.’) Moreover, each specialisation presents men and women with different emotional tasks. (Hochschild, 2003: 163)

Indeed, women and men are socialised differentially and oriented towards a sexual division of labour that favours a gender-based specialisation with similarly differentiated emotional work. Faced with men’s labour migration, they must double their efforts by simultaneously assuming the roles of mother and father, as well as performing tasks that would generally be done by husbands. All the women interviewed agreed that daily life was better when their men were at home. They greatly respected the figure of husband and father, and because they felt their partner’s absence so heavily, they experienced a lack of authority and masculine presence:

‘When he is not here, I have to do the shopping; I have to find someone to help me with that. It just isn’t the same, not even with another person who comes to do the same thing, it’s so different. [His absence] has made me more secure, but it’s still better when he’s here, even though [when he’s gone] we’re better off [financially] because we don’t lack for sustenance.... Look, my little girl got sick, and I had to solve everything on my own. It’s true, I sold my animals because it helped to pay, but as I was saying, even so, it’s better when he’s here.’ (Julia, 24, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

‘I have to take care of the house when he’s away. It’s hard, and sad, it’s heavy because when he’s home, he’s the children’s pamperer; he corrects them, but he’s patient with them. I get impatient quickly, they know me, I already spoke to them and am not as patient as him. I lack the masculine authority; they listen more to him.’ (Rosario, 28, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

‘He tells me, “You’re the mother, you’re the father, you’re responsible for everything that happens to my children because you’re with them day and night.” “Oh, [that’s] alright”, I tell him. He also said that I have to take care of my children: at what time they get home from school, at what time they should be there. I’m watching over them. Not anymore when he comes back. They ask him for permission: “Dad can I go out?”, and he says, “Yes, what time will you come back?” “[I’ll be back] in half an hour”, and in half an hour, he’s back. Thank God they aren’t stubborn boys, or anything, they’re quiet, so far.’ (Amairani, 35, Bernardino, Yucatan)

Much has been said by others about the pernicious effects of alcohol and how its consumption has risen among the men of the families separated by seasonal migration to Canada. We found a difference between the Yucatecan and Chiapanecan families. Among the Yucatecan families we studied, alcohol consumption by men did not generally represent a major problem, while among Chiapanecan men, it was spoken of as a source of acts of violence against women. We suggest that although stress (sadness, loneliness) may play a main role, these differences may arise because certain religions call for moderation, while others, as in Yucatan, call for abstinence. Deeper research on this topic needs to be done. One Chiapanecan woman said that she not only had to take responsibility for both maternal and paternal roles in child-rearing, but was also responsible for productive work as her partner sent no money while in Canada:

‘I don’t know why he stopped coming [home]. He came back from Canada and he stayed in a room at his grandmother’s house.... While he was away, I took care of his livestock (there was a rancher, you know), but I rode the horse to watch everything, back in the paddocks at the risk of someone grabbing me out there – those are lonely places – or, you know, a snake, an animal.... I sold perfumes from catalogues or cut hair.... He didn’t even send as little as a thousand pesos<sup>[4]</sup> twice monthly.... He was drunk all the time and wanted to hit me.... After I finished taking care of the animals, I would run back, wash my face, my arms, and go to my children’s school parent–teacher meeting.... I had to take care of everything all alone.’ (Celia, 52, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

In the interviewees’ lives, gender roles are strongly defined by the dominant normativity. When in Mexico, men carry out agricultural work and construction work (on their own homes), drive trucks and tractors, and do heavy lifting, and they are considered to be the ‘head of household’ in both economic and moral terms. In some cases, like Celia, just quoted, women have to endure ‘emotional work’ that includes physical and psychological violence. When husbands are in Canada, generally all tasks (domestic, family care, agricultural and so on) are performed by the wife; only exceptionally is a third party hired to do certain jobs:

‘[When he is away] I look for someone to do his work in the cornfield, sowing and weeding. I have to find people to watch out for the animals, like the badger. I pay the people who look after the cornfield so that we can save a little [on the harvest and money] what we’re investing.’ (Jacinta, 47, Laxka, Yucatan)

‘After I give [my children] their breakfast, they go to school. Then I go to raise my pig, later, when I finish caring for my pig, if there isn’t any water, I’ll fill my cistern. From there, I go to my plot, I have some corn plants, and I have my squash too.’ (Emilia, 40, Bernardino, Yucatan)

Moral leadership, and other gender roles, are still exercised at a distance by husbands or fathers, who do not need to be present to be accorded maximum authority and know what goes on back at home. It is he who grants the wife and children permission to leave the house, determines what activities are forbidden, and authorises what may be bought. This type of communication is maintained virtually, using information technology (IT) such as cell phones or WhatsApp, Facebook or Skype:

‘We talk on the phone every week, especially when he sends money to ask if I got it. We take up to an hour, I tell him how things are going here at home, and he tells me *how we’re going to spend the money, what debts have to be paid*.... Then he asks to talk with his children. With them, he talks about everyday matters, what they’ve done, whether they’re behaving, how they’re doing in school, if they obey me and so on.’ (Rosario, 28, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)



## Sadness

Sadness, as an emotional state caused by an unfavourable event or by the temporary or definitive loss of loved ones, was the emotion most referenced by the women in this study. This emerged during the presentation to interviewees of different photographs depicting Canadian farmhouses or agricultural fields, a motor vehicle accident on a highway, a sick man in a hospital, or a group of men eating during a work break. Like other emotions, sadness is not a merely private act, but also expressed in interaction with others:

Feeling rules are what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges. This emotion system works privately, often free of observation. It is a vital aspect of deep private bonds and also affords a way of talking about them. It is a way of describing how – as parents and children, wives and husbands, friends and lovers – we intervene in feelings in order to shape them. (Hochschild, 2003: 56–7)

The state of sadness is deliberately expressed to the partner to let him know that he is an important person, and that life loses meaning without him. As time passes, however – that is, when the husband's trips have been repeated for several years – there is an 'anaesthetic' effect on the women as they say they get accustomed or habituated to the situation:

'Now I'm used to it, it's just been so many years since we separated, he's going to work, and I stay here at home. At the beginning, it was really hard, worse when there wasn't communication like there is now, only letters, and if they came at all because they usually got lost along the way. I didn't know anything about him, nor he about us, until he got back. I had a boy first, and then the girl, and I remained sad, sad because from the beginning, he always left for long stretches, several months. And now, both are grown up.' (Graciela, 46, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

A Yucatecan woman said, "once again we got used to living like this", which can be interpreted as becoming accustomed to sadness, to knowing it is an emotion that comes and goes, depending on the husband's departure and return – a sadness announced or anticipated:

'Well, we feel sad because he is not with us much of the time. When the time comes for him to leave, *we get used to living like this again*. When he is here, we go out together, go around with him, and then the moment comes when he leaves, we become sad again because he's leaving again.... [When we celebrate birthdays,] I feel very sad because we're celebrating and he isn't here, even though we know he too is OK where he is, and that he will come back.' (Jacinta, 47, Laxka, Yucatan)

Another woman spoke of her husband's concern for their sadness, asking her and their children not to be sad when he is not home:

‘My husband is not here. When my son graduated from junior high school, [on the last day of school] his father called us and said, “I am proud of you, even though I am not there with you. Take a little time for enjoyment while I’m in Canada. Don’t worry or feel sad, I’m always thinking about you, so you’re as well as possible.” “I am proud of you [he told our son] that you finished your studies, and I hope you keep thinking right, and continue studying.”’ (Candelaria, 28, Mayan woman, Laxka, Yucatan)

The participants also referred to popular sayings to diminish their feelings, indirectly pointing out that it is not just them, but rather something that happens to everyone:

‘My husband says what happens to us is like what the song says, “the woman stays crying and the man goes off suffering”, because at first it’s hard, it feels painful here [pointing to the heart].... I miss him so much and if he asks me, sometimes I start crying, because it hurts to be so far, so long.’ (Julia, 24, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

### *Loneliness*

Weiss ‘differentiated between emotional loneliness, stemming from the absence of an intimate figure or a close emotional attachment (a partner, a best friend), and social loneliness stemming from the absence of a broader group of contacts, or an engaging social network (friends, colleagues and people in the neighbourhood)’ (Weiss cited in De Jong Gierveld et al, 2006: 486). Here, we refer to the loneliness caused by the absence of the women’s most central emotional figure, their husband:

‘To not feel lonely, I went out to stroll in the fields with my father-in-law and brother-in-law, who watched over my husband’s plots.... I looked for a way to entertain myself to not feel so lonely that he wasn’t there.... We were both so young (I just 19 when he started going). When the two children were small, I gave them a lot of attention and so didn’t feel so alone.’ (Graciela, 46, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

‘I feel I’m alone too because I need his help, but it’s different [from what happens to him] because I’m here with his family and my family, and with my children I don’t worry so much because I’m talking all the time, playing and laughing with the kids. I think it feels different there because he doesn’t have anyone to pass the time with. He’s alone; instead, I’m used to being here with the kids, and sometimes I worry only when they go to school or when I see they’re sick, and I think [about] why Maximiliano isn’t here with me, helping me to take the children to the doctor, to do the fieldwork. Even though I know that with God’s blessing I make do with my children.’ (Candelaria, 28, Mayan woman, Laxka, Yucatan)

Loneliness is the emotion perceived as the most ‘solitary’. It is also experienced and expressed in interactions with other people. A person cannot feel alone if he or she has not experienced someone’s presence. The interviewees said that they did not feel alone because they were in the company of their family, although the emotional rule affirms that they feel alone in the absence of their partners.

## Anguish

Anguish is related to the tension and uneasiness caused by events occurring in the present but is also linked to uncertainty (anxiety, stress, fear) about negative situations that may happen in the future: 'Descriptively, worry involves a predominance of negatively valenced verbal thought activity. When we worry, we are talking to ourselves a lot about the negative things, most often about negative events that we are afraid might happen in the future' (Borkovec et al, 1998: 563).

We cite only a few examples from the statements of women participating in our research, but almost all the women in the study, and their husbands, verbalised that anguish, born of the impossibility of knowing what may happen, is one of the expressions of emotionality in their daily lives. What happens to the children during his absence? Is he well? Has he suffered an accident? These are questions that they have to learn to live with until they reunite:

'We've been lucky nothing has ever happened to him, even though it's easy to see he's been going there for so many years. He tells me if someone gets sick or feels ill, they themselves look to find what to give him, they ask one another what he can take. Not 'til they brought a phone here so one can call, I was so worried all the time, and he too 'cause he didn't know how the boys were, especially when the second one was born, the girl, he said he was tied up in knots [anguished] about not knowing anything.' (Graciela 46, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

'Lucinda's husband [she is referring to a neighbour] came back with an injured arm, they didn't cure him right, and as far as I know, he still doesn't work. From what I knew, I worried more and more about health, that my husband might have an accident, that they might phone me to tell me something's wrong with him, dear God! If I think about it, I carry that anguish [stress, fear] around all day until we talk on the phone, 'til I get news of him.' (Julia, 24, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

'Well, the hardest times I have to live through when my husband's gone are when my children get sick 'cause there's two of them, and sometimes it's hard. Sometimes, I have to leave one and I take the one who's sick [to the doctor], and if one's already better, the other comes down with something, things are hard. Those are [moments] that seem really hard [stressful, anguishing] to get through. While they're healthy, I'm alright because I don't have anything else on my mind. When they get sick and their dad is away, *I feel more anguish.*' (Amairani, 35, Bernardino, Yucatan)

Although the women interviewed mostly expressed emotions of distress (sadness, anguish, loneliness), emotions of well-being (such as solidarity) were also elicited (such as when Jacinta said "so that we can save a little [on the harvest and money] what we're investing"), suggesting the 'joy of giving' to the family, of being 'content', in short, of feeling happiness. The women expressed feeling well because they were able to provide their relatives with love and affection more than with material goods. Specifically, one interviewee said that "it is more important that our family stays together ... more than having things like a car or new furniture because you cannot buy love" (Candelaria, 28, Mayan woman, Laxka, Yucatan). In contrast, according to

other interviewees, happiness for migrant working men lies, above all, in being able to provide the money needed to buy goods or pay for services (health, education) that could not be acquired with the income that men earn in Mexico.

### *Joy and contentment*

Some of the women interviewed referred to the joy produced by fulfilling the *role of motherhood*, and being recognised for it, and expressed pride in having a providing husband who sacrifices himself for his family. According to us, that happiness is a state of well-being produced by certain life events that lead a person to 'be content'. Transcending the classic definition of happiness as an increase in pleasure and reduction in pain, we agree with Aristotle (1962: 21–22), who asserted that happiness connotes 'to have these feelings in the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way'.

In the case of women and men involved in the seasonal migratory process, happiness is an effect of the 'sacrifice' of being separated due to work, and of meeting each gender role: for women to be a good mother and wife and carry out role-based tasks. For men, the effect of the 'sacrifice' is feeling happiness, satisfaction and contentment by performing the role of breadwinner; it is the way to express love to the family. Women expressed this perception but men also said it directly when interviewed:

'[She feels] like a supermom if her daughter or her son compliments her on how well she did something; you feel flattered, you know, it feels good that way. We don't usually celebrate Mother's Day, or birthdays, because every day one should give their best for others at home (I already told you I'm a Jehovah's Witness)... [We participate in] graduation ceremonies because we pitch in money, and because one as a mother feels happy when they give recognition to our children since it's as if everything one has given is in some way returned.' (Ema, 47, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

'As he says, "I haven't seen the best of times; I haven't lived with my children." For instance, when [the children] leave kindergarten, he isn't there. Then they go to primary, leaving after grade six, and he isn't there either. Then they [register] for junior high and he still isn't there. And it's as he says, "Well, these are very beautiful times during which I can't be with my children, but what I do know is I'm very happy for what I can give them, what I wouldn't be able to give them being there [in Mexico]. For example, because I am here [in Canada], I send you money and you buy what they need, but if I'm there, how do we go about it?" That's what he says, and, well, I tell him he's right.' (Emilia, 40, Bernardino, Yucatan)

'When my children ended school, I was content, very happy they had finished. My husband wasn't here; he didn't have the chance 'cause he was working over there. I would have liked him to be here, but that wasn't possible, and what can we do about it? He did phone to ask how the school ball [graduation] had gone because he also feels good, proud that, for example, when my boy graduated, he had gone from junior high school to high school, even though afterwards he didn't continue [studying].' (Ema, 47, Colonia Buenavista, Chiapas)

‘The week when they called my husband from the Ministry of Labour and he was told he better find some papers to go to work, we were partly happy ‘cause even though he would be going far away [from the family], we won’t have to sell the house or the land. Since we don’t have enough money to live on these days, and things happen for a reason.’ (Jacinta, 47, Laxka, Yucatan)

## Conclusions

Our study of seasonal, cyclical labour migration to Canada from Chiapanecan and Yucatecan men enrolled in the CSAWP highlights the existence of intersections of oppression against women. Throughout the analysis, the exercise of the gendered production and reproduction of labour was evident. There was also a low-level recognition of the productive tasks carried out by women who assume activities considered to be ‘for men’ during men’s absence. For their life partners and those responsible for public policy, it is ‘normal’ for women to take care of the family (upbringing, education, health) when men travel to Canada, and to take charge of the tasks of farming, animal husbandry or home maintenance without remuneration or acquiring any rights in exchange.

Due to their belonging to patrilineal ethnic groups and to highly patriarchal rural and semi-rural communities with traditional gender values, these women undergo conditions that confirm the relevance of discussions carried out by the *Abya Yala* feminisms. On the one hand, it is evident that men who leave for the Global North carry out tasks that place them in a precarious, dependent situation. On the other, it is clear that women are obliged to carrying out tasks that add to their female obligations (with no possibility to question the norm), without acquiring greater freedoms, decision-making authority or empowerment.

Another aspect that caught our attention from the first moment of analysis was the persistence of emotions of distress. Throughout their narratives, the women expressed a series of emotions that Turner (2011) describes as contrary to bond building, such as sadness or fear (the latter expressed as anguish/being afraid of receiving bad news). In the context of the transnational families that participated in our research, however, the results point to different conclusions.

We argue that these *negative* emotions contribute significantly to consolidating bonds, perhaps because they confirm the costs that both parties pay in accepting cyclical separation. These emotions ‘must be felt’, as we indicated in the case of sadness, and, at the same time, are part of the *emotional rules* implicit in the culture.

Although emotions of well-being were expressed less frequently, we observed that it was the emotions of joy, pride and the satisfaction of giving that motivated, inspired and functioned as the *leitmotif* for accepting the sacrifice of cyclical separation to which all members of the family group submit year after year. In other words, the results demonstrate the joy of granting progeny access to secondary education, food security, decent housing and material goods enabling them to live better (which, without migrating, would be impossible). Our research reveals that women are expected to perform the emotional work to maintain family bonds, and they accept this expectation as a ‘natural’ endeavour. The separation and sacrifice that the migration process entails is sealed by love for their families, helping to reproduce the social role of being wives and mothers.

One of the main limitations of our study is the small number of participants and the time factor, which impeded doing more fieldwork. A longitudinal study from the emotional perspective regarding left-behind families, as well as on women, is a matter for further research.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the language of the Kuna people (living in Panama and Colombia), *Abya Yala* is the name for the territory that Spanish colonisers called 'America'. It means 'land in full maturity' or 'land of vital blood' (Espinosa et al, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The 'economy of care' debate in feminist studies (Gargallo, 2013) argues that the unpaid domestic work and direct care work carried out by women migrating from the Global South for families living in the North enables women in the North to acquire a degree of 'autonomy' through the work of women in the South.

<sup>3</sup> All names, including those of villages, were modified to prevent participants from being identified.

<sup>4</sup> About US\$50 at the prevailing exchange rate (2018).

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