

Impact of Male Out-Migration on Female Empowerment in the Western Highlands of Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

Male out-migration is a highly prevalent social phenomenon in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, but there is limited understanding on how it impacts the women left-behind, in particular with their empowerment. To determine its impact, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with indigenous women in this region. Through thematic analysis and a discussion built on previous research, it was found that male out-migration has a limited impact on female empowerment due to several contextual factors, including in-law influence, gender norms, and limited educational attainment. Future research must be conducted on the impact of male out-migration on those left-behind across Guatemala as well as how education empowers women.

Background

Since its 36-year civil war, weak institutions and corruption have fueled inequality in Guatemala (Duffy, 2018), with indigenous groups, which account for roughly 42% of the population (Gobierno de Guatemala, 2019), experiencing disproportionate poverty, malnutrition, and death rates (Del Popolo et al., 2014). Furthermore, *machismo*, a Latin American patriarchal subculture that emphasizes male authority (Obinna, 2021), continues to shape modern Guatemalan society. Accordingly, indigenous women are subjugated by the intersection of their racial, gender, and ethnic identities.

Indigenous communities are concentrated in the Western Highlands of Guatemala (WHG), a region characterized by extreme poverty, lack of access to health care, and violence (*Integration of USAID in the Western Highlands*, 2013; Peca & Sandberg, 2018; Taylor et al., 2006). Data from the Guatemala's National Statistics Institute (2015) indicates that in 2014, poverty rates in departments from this region far exceeded the 53.7% national average: Sololá (80.9%), Totonicapán (77.5%), Quiché (74.7%), Huehuetenango (73.8%), and San Marcos (60.2%).

In addition to dire economic conditions, environmental abnormalities (Avelino et al., 2015; Milan & Ruano, 2014; Sivisaca et al., 2021) have destabilized an economy dependent on maize and coffee production (Isakson, 2014; Schmitt-Harsh, 2013). Moreover, violence, extortion, and indicators of structural violence have increased rates of out-migration (Adams, 2015; Gonzalez-Barrera et al., 2014).

The majority of north-bound migrants are male; once in the United States, they often send back remittances to their family members left-behind (Orozco et al., 2006). While the experiences of migrants are widely studied (H. N. Gartaula et al., 2012; Maharjan et al., 2012; Ullah, 2017), the impact on those who remain behind are often unexplored. Therefore, this study aims to understand how male out-migration impacts the empowerment of indigenous women left-behind in the WHG.

Literature Review

1. Male Out-Migration (MoM)

MoM refers to the social phenomena in which males migrate—often in search of economic opportunities—and leave their family behind. With improved technology facilitating long-distance communication, Gartaula and colleagues (2012) indicate that migration studies must go beyond the Harris and Toledo push-and-pull model (Amano, 1983) and focus on the “social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the migration experience” (H. Gartaula et al., 2010; H. N. Gartaula et al., 2012; Kaur, 2020), justifying the need to study the left-behind women’s experiences as key components of this multifaceted process.

2. Geographical Focus

MoM is an emerging area of study in the literature. South and Southeast Asia (SSA), followed by Africa, are the primary geographical focus of the literature, however, South and Central America have received minimal attention.

2a. South and Southeast Asia (SSA)

Several studies have examined the impact of MoM on women in SSA, and some have studied how the female empowerment of the left-behind women in this region is impacted. Although Fakir and Abedin’s (2021) quantitative analysis indicates that there is no agreement on the impact of male out-migration on women and gender roles, the overall literature suggests there are similarities in this region. Recent studies in Nepal show improved economic conditions from male remittances (H. N. Gartaula et al., 2012; Pandey, 2021). However, Maharjan and colleagues (2012) found that larger remittances increase empowerment while small, inconsistent remittances have adverse effects as women have to not only fulfill traditional tasks, but also learn and act upon new roles, leaving them overworked. This is corroborated by Paris and colleagues (2005), who found that in Indian rice-producing villages, women receiving small remittances fulfilled domestic responsibilities *and* worked in rice farms. Studies in Thailand and Vietnam, however, have shown that increased “work burden and managerial responsibilities” actually enhanced women’s skills, allowing them to ensure food security and alleviate poverty (T. R. Paris, Chi, et al., 2009; T. R. Paris, Luis, et al., 2009).

The literature highlights the importance of considering contextual factors. Hadi’s (1999) study in Bangladesh illuminates the importance of understanding family context, which Pandey (2021) explores when analyzing the difference between the women who become a *de facto* household head or women who live with their in-laws. Sinha and colleagues (2012) denote that if women become a *de facto* head, their decision-making power notably increases, while the opposite is true if they live with their in-laws. However, a study from India found that wives in nuclear families “suffered worse health” from the excess burden that would have instead been delegated in an extended family (Lei & Desai, 2021). Furthermore, Sultana and Ur Rehman’s (2014) qualitative study in Pakistan shows that younger women were more likely to be under the control of in-laws while those older than 35 and with children were able to maintain their independence.

Overall, there is a consensus that MoM in SSA has a positive impact on the “primary female member’s ownership of major assets” (Fakir & Abedin, 2021), but factors such as religious affiliation (Sinha et al., 2012), impact whether or not women can make decisions on how to utilize their assets. While remittances and the male’s absence economically benefit the woman, additional burdens, such as in-law oppression, and other factors can inhibit empowerment.

2b. Africa

Fewer studies examine the impact of MoM on women in Africa. Studies in Ghana show that left-behind women are not only expected to participate in agriculture and raise a child, but also financially support extended family members (Wrigley-Asante & Agandin, 2015), supporting findings from SSA. Garza and Roldofo's (2010) study in Ghana similarly found that women did not feel more empowered from their increased decision-making capacity but rather suffered from greater workloads. These adverse effects are further observed by Gunnarsson (2011), who found that women in Gambian villages relied solely on male relatives to receive the remittances because of their inability to fulfill all responsibilities. Furthermore, Archambault (2010) indicates that previous literature focusing on Southern and Eastern Africa also found that MoM had negative consequences due to increased stress levels. The greater negative impact observed in Africa is likely due to distinct gender roles, religious values, and family structures.

2c. Central and South America

The impact of MoM on women in Central and South America remains largely unstudied. A study conducted in Mexico found ambiguous results, as increased mobility was often restricted by *themselves* and other family members: in essence, women are experiencing both "empowerment and disempowerment, due to social and cultural norms of being out of 'in' and 'out' place" (McEvoy et al., 2012). As Stephen's (2007) seminal study shows, there is also concern in this region of male counterparts not sending remittances because they have started a family with another woman. Interesting comparisons are drawn between Guatemala and Armenia in Menjivar and Agadjanian's (2007) study, most notably concluding that in both regions, while women continue to live in patriarchal societies, the men's migrations to regions with more resources and opportunities further cements their position in the family as the dominant head. Additionally, a study by the World Bank in the eastern agricultural region of Guatemala shows that men continue to exert control over decisions in the household through constant phone calls (Stanley et al., 2015). Overall, the literature exhibits similar trends on the negative effects of MoM between Africa and Central and South America.

3. Female Empowerment

The impact of MoM on female empowerment remains relatively unknown (Fakir & Abedin, 2021). As such, empowerment must be clearly defined; this is challenging considering the term's culturally-specific, context-bound, and latent nature (Alkire & Seymour, 2013). Knowing this, the most cited definitions of empowerment in the literature include (Kabeer, 1999), (Alsop et al., 2005), and (Narayan, 2005). Naila Kabeer (1999), previous president of the International Association for Feminist Economics, defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Conversely, Ruth Alsop and colleagues (2005), from the World Bank, emphasize how proper institutional establishments can facilitate the agency of women. Deepa Narayan (2005), of the World Bank, defines empowerment as one's increased ability to prepare for and conduct actions that shape their lives.

Kabeer's definition is most suited to analyze the effects of MoM, which is supported by its frequent use in the existing literature (Alkire & Seymour, 2013; Fakir & Abedin, 2021; Sraboni et al., 2014). In addition, Kabeer's (1999) definition has three main indicators of empowerment: resources, agency, and achievement. In Guatemala, female empowerment is observed through factors such as microfinance, education, reproductive rights and access to health care, and participation in politics (Cepeda et al., 2021; Heise, 1995; Poelker & Gibbons, 2018), all of which align with Kabeer's indicators. Importantly, Fakir and Abedin (2021) emphasize the importance of selecting effective empowerment indicators—in particular, ones that consider empowerment's immeasurability and multi-dimensionality.

4. Contribution to the Literature

Previous studies on MoM and its impact on women have almost exclusively focused on South and Southeast Asian countries. Central and South American countries, however, are also characterized by large numbers of emigrants, yet have not received the same attention. In addition, the specific impact of MoM on female empowerment is largely unknown. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature by bridging a gap in our understanding on the impacts of MoM on the empowerment of indigenous women in the WHG, a region distinguished by its large indigenous population and increasing migration rates.

Methodology

This qualitative research study was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews with purposive, snowball sampling. Eight indigenous women (six from Quiché, one from Sololá, and one from San Marcos) whose male counterparts migrated to the United States in the last 2-12 years were interviewed, and their responses were thematically analyzed.

1. Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methods were chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, recognizing that female empowerment is latent, as Patton (2002) shows, a qualitative study will provide a comprehensive, personal account of those who are experiencing it. Secondly, Leedy and Ormrod (2005) find that qualitative approaches, through their emphasis on saturation, help contextualize complex topics, such as the impacts of MoM.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because of the in-depth information they provide. The ability to ask additional questions ensures that a thorough understanding of each participant can be reached. Furthermore, it ensures a balanced power dynamic by giving the participants significant control of the interview process (Corbin & Morse, 2003), which also addressed interview hesitancy.

2. Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is often used in papers concerning the impacts of male out-migration (H. Gartaula et al., 2010; Lundström & Morén, 2017; Radel et al., 2012; Sultana & Ur Reeman, 2014) because it ensures that all participants have experienced their male counterparts' absence within relatively similar contexts, allowing for comparisons to be drawn and saturation to be reached. Therefore, the following inclusion criteria, with a corresponding justification, was developed:

Table 1. Participant criteria and corresponding justification

Criteria	Justification
The participant must be an indigenous woman who resides in the WHG	Indigenous communities are chosen because they are highly discriminated against, which is more likely to influence migration as a means to financially support a household. The WHG is chosen for its increasing migration rates and its vulnerability to weather changes that impact agriculture.
The participant's husband has migrated 2-12 years ago	A specific time frame was chosen because women whose husbands migrated for an extremely limited amount of time may not have had the opportunity to experience the change that would lead to their empowerment (or loss of). On the contrary, additional years raise the risk of too many other variables impacting empowerment, making it difficult to draw valuable comparisons between the responses.

The participant's husband migrated to the United States. A specific destination was chosen because the household dynamics—politically, economically, and socially—are different in those that migrate to Guatemala City compared to the United States. This creates a more similar sample, allowing for saturation to be reached.

Table 2. Participant demographics

#	Name	Age	Place of residence	# of children and their ages	Translator required	Interview length (minutes)	Years since male's migration	Educational attainment
1	Lilian	29	Chexpuc, Pachalum, Quiché	M13 F10 M7 M3	No	57	3	9th grade
2	Mari	27	Uspantán, Quiché	F5	No	35	3	N/A
3	Floridalma	34	Joyabaj, Quiché	M7	No	51	2	High school
4	Mayra	35	Pachalum, Quiché	F9 M5	No	47	5	High school
5	Gladys	N/A	Joyabaj, Quiché	F2	No	34	2	High school
6	Elena	33	San Juan Cotzal, Quiché	M14 F13 M12 F10 M7	Yes	53	3	None
7	Marta	33	Cantón Xajaxac, Sololá, Sololá	M9	Yes	124	12	3 years ¹
8	Martha	24	San Miguel Ixtahuacán, San Marcos	F9	No	49	4	6th grade

Note. N/A is noted for information that was not retrieved.

¹from 9 to 13 years of age

3. Interviews

The semi-structured interviews took place virtually through Zoom meetings or telephone calls. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed by school officials in Quiché and Sololá and NGO leaders in San Marcos, ensuring that initial contact was always done by a trusted individual. All participants granted oral consent. Translators who were known to the subjects were provided for participants who did not speak English. This also provided the women with a sense of security as they were reassured by the interpreters that they could safely talk about their own experiences. Raworth and colleagues (2019) indicate that interviewees should be in comfortable locations when the interview is taking place, the preferred location being their own home, which was possible for telephone interviews but not for those conducted through Zoom (as participants were using a computer from the educational institution). The types of questions asked can be divided broadly into three types of empowerment:

Table 3. Empowerment categories and corresponding guiding questions

Category	Main guiding questions
Economic	Do the women have more access to money after the male's migration? Can they now generate more money from their own endeavors?
Political	Do the women now have the ability to involve themselves in local politics? Do they advocate for themselves and their rights?
Personal household	Do the women see an increase in authority within their households? Can they now make decisions pertaining to their children, food consumption, etc. without the interference of the male?

These categories were selected because they align with Kabeer's indicators of empowerment and coincide with the specific measures that were most present in the literature when examining female empowerment in Guatemala. Sinha and colleagues' (2012) study in India analyzed empowerment through decision-making power, restrictions placed on them, and mobility. They remark that India's heavily patriarchal society mandates that an emphasis be placed on the female's freedom pertaining to empowerment. While this is largely true in Guatemala, there is also comprehensive research in the domains of microfinance, political involvement, and motherhood.

On average, the interviews lasted 56.25 minutes, allowing the women to give sufficient and detailed answers to the questions posed by the interviewer.

4. Ethical Considerations

In addition to oral consent, privacy concerns, in particular with their names and phone numbers were clarified, explicitly mentioning that their complete names would not be published and their phone numbers would never be disclosed. Finally, an institutional review board approved the study.

5. Thematic Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The full transcripts were then translated from Spanish into English. Thematic analysis was conducted using Quirkos, a digital software that helps analyze qualitative data. Similar to Lundstrom and Morén's (2017) approach in their qualitative study looking at female empowerment among Kaqchikel women, parts of the translated transcript were categorized into 'meaning units', which became 'condensed meaning units.' Subthemes emerged from these condensed meaning units, and several of these joined together to form a theme. These themes allowed for data to be compared, contrasted, and analyzed.

Results

Three themes and one pseudo-theme emerged from the semi-structured interviews with interviewees. Each theme is composed of various sub-categories. The themes are aligned with empowerment categories the general interview questions were based on:

Table 4. Themes and sub-categories

Theme 1 (pseudo)	Reason for migration
Migration context	Migration process
	Local factors
Theme 2	Economic (or lack of) autonomy of the woman

Economic (dis)empowerment	Discrimination in the workforce
	Sense of strength and authority
	The role of education
Theme 3	Access to local organizations
Political (dis)empowerment	Obstacles preventing access
	Systemic gain from participation
Theme 4	Role of the mother (and father)
Household (dis)empowerment	Long-distance communication
	Household decision-making

Theme 1: Migration context

Theme 1 was chosen as a pseudo theme because it does not directly answer the research question at hand. However, it does provide background information necessary to analyze the context of subsequent themes.

Reason for migration

All eight participants indicated that their male counterparts migrated due to economic reasons.

“It was truly because of a need, you know? To seek new horizons. He practically had no opportunity to become financially stable here, and there was a need for him to generate an income. That’s why he had to migrate and start something there [United States] and live a more peaceful life.”
 (Participant #3)

Other participants (including #7 and #8) indicated financial issues stemming from debts and consequent threats to the family’s wellbeing as reasons for migration.

“You know, to be completely honest, we were indebted and he was not able to find a job, so he had no option but to migrate. And well thank God because he made it because if he hadn’t, we’d have another loan.”
 (Participant #8)

Migration process

All women expressed that the migration process was emotionally draining because of the uncertainty it brought; all of their husbands were not documented, and they were not sure if they would make it alive.

“Yes, he was undocumented, and it was so worrying during his journey up north, but thank God he didn’t suffer.”
 (Participant #4)

Additionally, there were some women (#2, #6, #8) whose husbands had not fully established themselves financially in the United States.

“Sometimes he sends back money, but when he can’t find a job or anything to do, he doesn’t send anything. I don’t know when I will receive money because he hasn’t talked to me in over three months.”

(Participant #6)

Local factors

Lastly, all women indicated that MoM was an extremely common occurrence in their towns, and that they had several neighbors, and even family members, whose husbands had left.

“Ah yes, I would say so. The majority of husbands in my town have left for the United States already.”

(Participant #8)

Theme 2: Economic (dis)empowerment

Economic considerations were most prevalent in the women’s responses and provided the most concrete idea of whether or not women felt and were more empowered after the migration of their male counterparts.

Economic (or lack of) autonomy of the woman

Participant #8 expressed her discontent with the fact that even after her husband’s migration, he controlled her and made all the economic decisions through their phone calls.

“You know, well in that case, he always makes the decisions by himself and well for myself, I have nothing to do with it. To put it shortly, I’m simply nothing.”

There were other women (who tended to be those who received an education) who showed, however, that they were gaining significant economic autonomy in the household.

“Now that he’s not here, his responsibilities have become mine, and well it’s time to give it my all to make sure that I fulfill all of them.”

(Participant #3)

Discrimination in the workforce

The women who had not received a solid education indicated that they faced discrimination in the workforce that inhibited their ability to partake in jobs.

“They [men] want women to be under their control all the time, and that’s why there are no opportunities for women to have jobs. If a woman had a job and was independent, they would be in the same playing field as us, and obviously they don’t like that.”

(Participant #1)

Sense of strength and authority

Economic empowerment brought a sense of strength and authority greater than any other category of empowerment. Only some (#6, #8) participants expressed that their increased responsibilities and ability to execute tasks they were previously denied the right to has made them feel strong.

“After my husband left, I learned how to weave because of necessity. Now I feel very happy that I can make my own income and support my family and my kids.”
(Participant #6)

The role of education

Education played an immense role in women's economic empowerment. This privilege is something that Participant #4 recognized as a current full-time teacher.

“If I hadn't received an education, my life and my job would be completely different. I would've been exploited and mistreated, I would have less income, and my mentality would not be the same. My life would be different for the worse because I wouldn't be financially stable.”

Theme 3: Political (dis)empowerment

Women's ability to choose whether or not they want to step into leadership positions provides us with a distinct perspective of empowerment.

Access to local organizations

Although the types of organizations in each town are different, there were some region-wide similarities: the Community Councils for Urban and Rural Development (COCODES), committees that organize community events, and water committees. Female participation in each varied, but there were some who were able to participate more easily now that their husbands were not present.

“Essentially, when the husbands are no longer there, many of the women I've seen felt more free to participate. If he is here in Guatemala, they usually don't let them participate.”
(Participant #4)

Additionally, Participant #8 indicates that she lived with her in-laws. Before, when her husband didn't allow her to participate, she had no choice but to oblige. However, she shared that she now feels comfortable to participate in these organizations despite her in-laws' disapproval.

“Well, now that he's not here anymore, I feel a lot more free, but sometimes, I leave without permission [from him and my in-laws]. For example, I go to the projects and that's something I decided for myself because I need to be free and depend only on myself.”
(Participant #8)

Obstacles preventing access

In addition to the control exerted by in-laws, women have expressed that the male leaders from these organizations view female participation as a threat to their power.

“There was one woman in my village who wanted to participate in COCODE, but the leaders, who are men, said that they didn't feel comfortable with a woman working with them. They believed the most important organization in the region couldn't be led by a woman.”
(Participant #5)

Systemic gain from participation

A major benefit from participating in these organizations and workshops is that the women tend to share what they learn with other family members, creating a domino effect that encourages empowerment.

“The involvement of women like myself is important because when I finish the meetings, I communicate what I learned with my family members. That’s why my family members learn as well.”
(Participant #8)

Theme 4: Household (dis)empowerment

The absence of the male inevitably alters household dynamics and responsibilities, and it is important to analyze the changing perceptions of their children towards their mothers and their authority.

Role of the mother (and father)

The participant’s responses demonstrated women's increased roles because their sphere of influence over their children, household duties, and other responsibilities inevitably increased.

“Well, to be honest, it really does affect when the men leave because the life of a woman now has two roles: to be the mother and the father.”
(Participant #4)

The expectations of the mother are also highly context-bound, particularly with the state of their child. Participant #2 indicated that her youngest son has struggled with pediatric hepatitis, which dramatically changed her role as a mother.

“I’m always busy because my young son is very sick so most of my time is spent on that.”
(Participant #1)

Long-distance communication

After males migrated to the United States, they maintained communication with their wives through telephone calls, and more recently, social media.

“We’re always in communication but it’s basically for him to tell me what to do, you know, about money, the house, and our children and their education.”
(Participant #1)

For the women whose relationships with their husbands were symbiotic and cooperative, this geographic split was a significant obstacle that threatened the stability of their relationship, and long-distance communication was often not sufficient in fostering the ideal healthy dynamic.

“We always try to communicate with each other and for him to have an opportunity to talk to his son. However, I have seen and am often worried about familial relations being disintegrated. I’ve seen many wives abandon their husbands and leave their children alone.”
(Participant #3)

Household decision-making

An additional factor that facilitated the ability to make decisions was the changing perception of the mother in the household.

*“My children trust me as a parent more because when my husband left, they were all very young and they barely remember him and what he looked like.
(Participant #8)*

In terms of smaller decisions that need to be made, such as food consumption, all women felt comfortable enough to make those decisions entirely themselves without any involvement from outside factors.

*“The food we eat during the week is a decision I can make myself now, as well as some norms and rules in the household that my daughter has to follow—now that it’s only her and I, I can make the decision myself.
(Participant #5)*

Discussion

The results from this qualitative analysis demonstrate that MoM can both positively and negatively impact the empowerment of indigenous women in the WHG, and is, to the author’s knowledge, the first of its kind to employ a solely qualitative method in the WHG. The migration experiences of all participants confirm the relevance of MoM in the WHG and highlight that economic need is the primary reason for migration with an expectation that remittances will be sent, demonstrating the importance of analyzing all results within a context of financial instability and need.

The economic autonomy of women, more than any other domain, was critical in facilitating empowerment. For the participants who did not have a job prior to their husband’s migration (#1, #2, #6-8), the male’s absence increased their influence on how capital is gained and used, supporting the findings from Fakir and Abedin’s (2021) study in Bangladesh. Participants #6 and #7 even integrate themselves into the workforce (in the textile industry) due to their husband’s highly inconsistent remittances, contradicting findings from a study in Gambia which indicates that women were less likely to pursue jobs after the male’s migration (Gunnarsson, 2011). This may be explained by contextual factors; despite the highly machista society in the WHG, the strong presence of microfinance organizations in rural communities has changed the landscape of female involvement in the workforce. Furthermore, while the women shared that workforce discrimination inhibited economic empowerment, aligning with Stanley and colleagues’ (2015) study, their lack of experience, education, and knowledge posited a greater obstacle in their integration in the workforce.

Accordingly, the participant’s educational attainment should be further analyzed. The three participants who received a complete high school diploma (#3-5) are also the only ones who had stable jobs (as teachers) prior to their husband’s migration. Evidently, education fosters economic empowerment through the acquisition of Spanish, which is often required for high-paying jobs; an awareness of their rights, which they can use to defend their rights; and other contextual factors. These factors include (1) the reality that women who were educated tended to come from households that granted them the freedom to choose their own partners and (2) the fact that they were more likely to be surrounded by men who were also educated. This may explain why these three participants expressed having highly cooperative relationships, which contrasts to the abusive, distant relationships the other five (less educated) women portrayed. These findings reiterate the importance of education—in both women *and* men—in facilitating empowerment in the WHG, which has already been established in a study by Lemon and colleagues (2017), where adolescent childbearing by Kaqchikel women was negatively correlated with increased educational attainment. Interestingly, regardless of the women’s educational acquisition, all women used parts of the remittances on their children’s education, supporting

findings from a quantitative study in Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam, which found that after alleviating hunger and poverty, education of children was the next greatest expense (T. R. Paris, Luis, et al., 2009).

Political empowerment is not often examined as a separate domain of empowerment in the literature but was important to consider in this study because of the rising number of non-profit organizations in the WHG that provide educational, leadership, and microfinance workshops. Despite these opportunities, an unavailability of time was the participant's greatest obstacle in becoming involved, even beyond that of social norms and their husband's disapproval. The intense schedule they had to follow corresponds with Garza and Rodolfo's (2010) study in Ghana that indicates that women actually become less empowered due to the stress that this causes them. Within the context of political empowerment, the influence that in-laws have can be observed. Participant #8 lived with her in-laws after their husband's migration; the challenges she faced due to the control they exerted over her and her decreased ability to participate in local politics supports Sinha and colleagues (2012) and contradicts findings by Lei and Desai (2021). This study does shed light on a systemic impact of participating in local politics, as the women who did have the time to participate mentioned how they shared what they learned with other women in their households. This positive cycle remains largely unexplored as a benefit of male out-migration.

The area where all women experienced empowerment, regardless of their educational attainment and influence from their in-laws, was household empowerment; after the male's migration, the participant's ability to choose what food to consume, how to raise their children, and what clothes to purchase increased. Within household empowerment, the concern of control through long-distance communication arises, especially because Stanley and colleagues (2015) found that phone calls from males decrease women's self-perceived ability to become empowered. Although Participants #1, #2, #6-8 indicated that their husband's continued making major economic decisions from a distance, they usually didn't involve themselves with the smaller decisions. However, an unexpected dynamic arose in the relationships of the women who were educated and had stable relationships with their husbands, as they often sought more constant communication in hopes to be able to co-parent their children. Indubitably, women who had abusive or unstable relationships were not as interested in seeking out this sort of communication—though they were often forced to.

This qualitative analysis demonstrates that economic empowerment is highly context-bound, and that education is essentially required for a woman to gain a concrete sense of economic freedom and autonomy. The women's ability to partake in jobs as well as in local politics is negatively affected by the emotional and physical damage that comes from MoM. Partaking in local politics, however, did create a positive, systemic impact. Finally, all women's household empowerment increased, even in cases where the husband maintained a level of control through long-distance communication as he seemed more interested in large-scale financial decisions.

Conclusion

In this qualitative study, it is concluded that MoM has an overall negative influence on indigenous women's empowerment, with the exception where the woman was highly educated (women were already empowered) or the husband was highly abusive (women no longer faced abuse). It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct a comparative qualitative analysis between the different regions in the WHG studied, and it is recommended that this is further explored to reach a better understanding of the context-bound nature of MoM in the WHG. Furthermore, using a mixed-method approach is encouraged, when possible, to be able to compare the personal assessment of women on their empowerment with empirical data. Considering the critical role education plays in the empowerment of women, it is advised that further research is done on both understanding how increased education impacts indigenous women's empowerment and what can be done to implement sustainable educational opportunities in societies defined by patriarchal superiority.

Limitations

The solely qualitative nature of this study raises the concern of bias in the process of interpreting and thematically analyzing the responses, decreasing the validity of the conclusions drawn about how the participant's empowerment changed. Furthermore, the lack of empirical data to compare the participants' personal assessment of their own empowerment makes the results less concrete. Indigenous populations in the WHG are highly interview hesitant, and even more so because many of their spouses migrated without documentation. Therefore, a larger geographic region was chosen than intended. Considering the context-bound nature of migration and empowerment, the varying geographical focuses decrease the extent of saturation that was reached. Meaningful insights, however, were still gained from the interviews, especially because responses were analyzed within the migration context each woman shared.

The literature also suggests that in-person interviews are most effective for a qualitative study, and the lack of physical interactions may have created another dimensional barrier between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, Lechuga's (2012) seminal study on the use of telephone interviews in qualitative analyses concluded that phone calls created a sense of anonymity that increased the participant's comfort level. Regardless, it is still recognized that an ideal qualitative study looking to reach saturation employs in-person interviews.

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