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# Adapting Spousal Relations and Transnational Family Structures: Responses To Mexican-Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Migration

## Adaptación de las relaciones de pareja y de las estructuras familiares transnacionales: respuestas a la migración agrícola temporal mexicano-canadiense

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### ABSTRACT

By examining the families and supporting social structures of Mexican “temporary” migrant workers in Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), this article explains how these transnational families modify their structures in an evolving context of neoliberal transnational regionalization. The authors discuss how migrants and their family members respond to changes associated with circular seasonal migration in order to both reduce threats of family breakdown and strengthen their families. They also analyze key contradictions associated with these responses, including those in which new behaviors contribute to greater autonomy and significant changes to gender roles, simultaneously creating greater stress for families.

**Key words:** Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, strengthening families, Mexico-Canada migration, transnational families, migrant workers.

### RESUMEN

Al examinar las familias (y su base en las estructuras sociales) de los trabajadores migrantes temporales inscritos en el Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales de Canadá (Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, SAWP), este artículo explica cómo estas familias transnacionales

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modifican dichas estructuras al hallarse en un contexto evolucionado a causa de la regionalización transnacional neoliberal. Los autores discuten cómo los migrantes y los miembros de sus familias responden a cambios asociados con la migración temporal circular también para reducir las amenazas de desintegración de la familia como para fortalecerla. También analizan las contradicciones clave asociadas a esas respuestas, incluyendo aquellas en que los nuevos comportamientos contribuyen a desarrollar una mayor autonomía y cambios significativos en los roles de género, al mismo tiempo que se observa cómo esas contradicciones provocan a las familias mucho mayor estrés.

**Palabras clave:** Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales, fortalecimiento de las familias, migración México-Canadá, familias transnacionales, trabajadores migrantes.

## CONTEXT

Patriarchal family structures have changed noticeably over recent decades in both rural and urban areas of Mexico. These changes typically have far-reaching consequences for family relationships, roles, and functions among family members. Related to these changes has been a decline in fertility (Wahyuni, 2005) and marriage rates (OECD, 2011); the postponement of childbearing; increased life expectancy rates; increased educational levels (Farooq and Javed, 2009; Kumari and Shamin, 2007); and higher divorce rates (OECD, 2011; Esteinou, 2004; Silver, 2006; Ribeiro, 2002). These changes are significantly related to ongoing transitions in the economic system, notably the increasing participation of women in Mexico's formal labor market and the higher numbers of women and men working abroad to support their families. Especially consequential have been break-up of "typical family structures" caused by the absence of one parent for the sole purpose of working abroad. A key result of the neoliberal economic system has been the acceleration of precarious migrant work, whereby families are split up "temporarily" at the national and transnational levels. Family separation is a structural outcome of globalization forces and immigration policies (Bernhard, Landolt, and Goldring, 2008).

A growing focus on the family as a unit of analysis has emerged in the scholarly literature on migration. According to Berumen and Hernández (2012), "family" as an analytical category has become increasingly important in migration studies generally, and particularly central to studies of gender and transnationalism. Ariza (2014) analyzed 40 academic studies related to the family and migration written in Mexico from 2007 to 2012. The main foci emphasized in these papers include gender, migration, family roles, household structures, and family strategies. She also noted an emerging field examining the links between migration, emotions, affectivity, and children.

In the main body of Mexican migration studies, various research projects focus on family and migration, most centering on the primary migrant receiving country, the United States. By contrast, the family as a unit of analysis in Mexico-Canada migration studies is relatively unexplored. A few studies have analyzed migration from the perspective of family relations. For example, Bernhard, Goldring, and Landolt (2005) and Bernhard, Landolt, and Goldring (2008 and 2009) focus on the experiences of Latin American families who have faced separation and reunification during their migration to Canada. Other works note the impacts of migration on families (McLaughlin 2009), particularly through a focus on women (Encalada Grez, 2017; Hennebry, 2014; Hennebry, Grass, and McLaughlan 2017; Preibisch and Encalada Grez, 2012). Our research team's other publications emphasize the impact of remittances resulting from the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) on families' material needs and poverty reduction (Wells et al., 2014) and on family cohesion (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

## IMPACTS OF MIGRATION ON SAWP FAMILIES

Transnational migration has become increasingly ubiquitous in North America and in the globalizing economy. While much attention has been paid to understanding the causes for these population flows and to analyzing migrants' working and living conditions, little is understood about the impacts of continuous circular transnational migration on families who are separated annually over many years. By focusing on spousal relationships between worker-fathers and their partners, this article helps to fill this gap.

As elsewhere, in Canada the increasingly competitive demands of agribusiness have been used to justify the recruitment of men and women from overseas to work as cheap, flexible, easily controlled agricultural workers. Basok (2002) argues that the integration of such workers has become a "structural necessity" in Canadian agriculture. Our study focuses on Mexican participants in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, a bilateral initiative that recruits workers from Mexico and the Caribbean Commonwealth countries to work legally in Canada on temporary contracts. The workers arrive in Canada without their families through both the SAWP, in place since 1966, as well as through more recent streams of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program, which also employ agricultural workers from any country and for longer periods. In 2015, over 50 000 agricultural worker positions were approved in Canada, of which nearly 42 000 were through the SAWP (ESDC, 2014). Mexico is the leading participant country in the SAWP. In 2016, 23 131 Mexican men migrated

to Canada to work under the SAWP (STPS, 2017), most leaving their female spouses with primary and often sole responsibility for their families during their absence.

SAWP workers are not permitted to migrate with their families. The majority work in Canada for multiple seasons, some for decades. In Ontario, the province with the highest SAWP participation, 72 percent of Mexican workers spend much of each year—between six and eight months—in Canada. About half (47 percent) have been participating in the SAWP for at least 10 years (STPS, 2017, based on 2016 statistics). The Mexican government gives preference to applicants with families to support, either married men with children or single mothers (McLaughlin, 2010). Workers with families are seen as more likely to return to their countries of origin following contract completion.

The focus of our analysis is on Mexican fathers who leave their spouses and children to work in Canada under the SAWP. Although some women also migrate, they make up only three percent of program participants and face unique issues that warrant separate study (Edmunds, 2016; Encalada Grez, 2017; Preibisch, 2007). The consequences of migration for these families are generally profound, including emotional distress, depression, and loneliness, among others (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Silver, 2006; Hurtado et al., 2008; Grinberg, 1996). Following Ariza and D'Aubeterre, we can identify long-distance marriage in these types of migratory cycles in particular, “recognizable by the break in cohabitation in married life” (2009: 229). In response to these challenges, people often adapt their family structures in order to strengthen families in a context in which men become not just temporary workers, but also temporary husbands and fathers.

Despite the centrality of families to the participation of workers in the SAWP, very little attention has been paid to understanding and mitigating the negative consequences of migration on them. Our aim was to produce research that could inform public policies and institutions to build a framework to support transnational families in both Canada and in Mexico.

This research draws on DeFrain and Olson's integrated model of couple and family systems (2006), based on the international family strengths model (IFSM) and the circumflex model of marital and family systems (CMMFS) (Asay and DeFrain, 2012; Olson, 2000), to analyze changes and responses of SAWP workers and their families. The IFSM model identifies six family strengths measured by core traits that characterize family relations based on research in 18 countries in major world regions: appreciation and affection; commitment to family; positive communication; time enjoyed together; spiritual well-being; and ability to effectively manage stress and crisis.

The CMMFS model, designed for clinical assessment and treatment of couples and families, employs a “relational diagnosis” and is based on three dimensions of family relationships: cohesion, flexibility, and communication, all considered highly relevant to a range of family therapy approaches and family theory models (Olson

2000, 144). Its therapeutic goal is to foster more functional “balanced couple and family systems” that are neither too “disengaged” (“extreme emotional separateness”) nor too “enmeshed” (where “an extreme amount of emotional closeness and loyalty is demanded”). This balance allows family members to be “both independent from and connected to their families” (Olson 2000, 145). DeFrain and Olson’s integrated model builds on these two earlier frameworks, using CMMFS’s three broad categories and incorporating IFSM’s six family strengths (DeFrain and Olson, 2006, 63). See Table 1.

**Table 1**  
INTEGRATED MODEL OF THE IFSM AND THE CMMFS  
(DeFrain and Olson, 2006)

**Family Cohesion**

Commitment

Time Enjoyed Together

**Family Flexibility**

Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively

Spiritual Well-Being

**Family Communication**

Positive Communication

Appreciation and Affection

Although this model did not guide our initial research, it offers a fitting framework for analyzing the results, because it allows us to identify key elements that help families with “transnational parents” to stay together in response to the challenges and family impacts of fathers’ repeated migrations. In the following sections, we highlight how the challenges associated with transnational migration undermine families’ ability to maintain each of these aspects of family well-being, while demonstrating how workers’ integration of these dimensions may assist their efforts to retain cohesion. We return to a summary of these issues in our discussion section.

Families with a migrant father/spouse living in Canada for most of the year face very difficult issues and challenges when they try to pursue sometimes conflicting aspirations related to family emotions and work requirements. Family organization as one dimension of marriage (Cienfuegos, 2011) is at risk, especially with regard to covering intangible needs such as emotional and socialization requirements. Nevertheless, following the DeFrain and Olson’s integrated model (2006), we identified how families with a migrant spouse/father use the dimensions of cohesion, flexibility,

and communication to create strategies to keep families together. Mothers, fathers, and children change habits and sometimes assume new roles that involve performing tasks that they had not done previously. While these new roles frequently generate problems for their physical and mental health and challenge family cohesion, as we discuss below, they may also encourage the acquisition of new skills, independence, and empowerment.

Our research findings are drawn primarily from interviews with workers, their spouses and adult children in Mexico, and teachers and principals at schools the workers' children attend. The interviews were conducted in two states: Guanajuato, a state with a long-standing history of labor migration both to Canada and the U.S., and the State of Mexico, an emerging state regarding this migration. In 2014, the State of Mexico sent 2 936 migrant workers, the largest number of SAWP workers, and Guanajuato sent 1 231, the fourth largest number (STPS, 2015).

Fifty-four participants were interviewed in Mexico: 24 male SAWP workers, 16 spouses, 10 adult children, and 4 teachers and school principals<sup>1</sup>The interviews took place in workers' homes and, in the case of teachers, in their offices. They were based on open-ended questions and usually lasted 60-90 minutes. Each group (workers, spouses, adult children, and school teachers) answered different sets of interview questions. Interviews were transcribed in Spanish and translated into English, after which the data were analyzed using themes and coded into NVivo software. Additional observations have been incorporated from over 12 years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo and Janet McLaughlin with migrant workers and their families in Mexico and Canada.

## RESULTS

### Family Cohesion and Flexibility

Together with components of the integrated model discussed above, we understand family cohesion more generally as "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" (Olson et al., 1989: 48). The notion of family flexibility refers to "the amount of change in its leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules" (Olson, 1999). More useful for our study is the related concept of "family adaptability," the "ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress" (Olson et al. 1989: 48).

<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted by Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo.

The family dynamics of SAWP migrants have been changing significantly, particularly with regard to spousal roles and parent/child roles. Our study focuses on nuclear families comprised of a migrant father, a mother, and children, with extended family members (for example, grandparents, aunts, and uncles) often playing important roles, such as assisting with childcare and house maintenance as well. In this section, we focus on how workers, spouses, and children demonstrate flexibility in their changing roles during migratory periods.

### Spouses' Changing Roles

Previously, most primary leadership positions within Mexican families were dominated by men, but in practice they are often being modified as women become the effective heads of households during their husbands' absences, thereby changing family power structures, at least temporarily. For many women, taking on these new roles, especially in the early years of their husbands' migration, imposes burdensome responsibilities that they struggle to meet. This, coupled with feelings of loneliness, has generated severe stress among many women. Some resort to public health services for support, but for many others these public supports are not readily available. Others adapt by regarding these stresses as temporary obstacles to which they must adjust, doing their best to solve the problem. However, their new responsibilities and the stress they create often become constant, not only when their husbands are working in Canada, but also when they return home.

Two of these spouses/mothers, Esperanza and Delia, describe the changing roles in their families, and the resulting difficulties they have had to face. Esperanza, who has four children at home, explains that when her husband first began to migrate to Canada to work under the SAWP, the children were young and all in school. "I had to take them to school and then go to take care of the cattle, to the field," she explained. "I had to come back in a hurry to cook, to help them do their homework." Speaking of Delia's experience as well, she continued,

When [our] husbands are here, they help a little with the children. When you're alone you have to do everything. If they're sick, it's the same. You have to be two or three days at the hospital, and you're worried about the rest of your children, and the cattle.... Before I had to go to work in the field, and then come back to be with my children. The next day the same: take the children to school, take care of the cattle, go work in the field. It's hard. When [our] husbands are here, we split the work.



As the children grow into adulthood, they face new anxieties. Esperanza continues:

Now that my children are grown up, the younger one goes and comes back around 11 or 12 at night. You're wondering, 'What's happening? What time will he be back? How can I go to look for him that late at night?' When [our] husbands are here it's easier, for example if my husband goes to look for him. That's what I mean when I say it's double responsibility when I'm alone.

These new responsibilities can negatively affect wives' health. As Esperanza explains,

I had to go to the doctor because of that. It's stressful to be alone. It's exhausting for your body, for your mind, for everything physical. I got depressed because of his absence. I felt so bad I didn't want to live anymore.

Esperanza's sister-in-law took her to a doctor. "[The doctor] told me that I was getting depressed. She wanted to know why and I told her it was because of my husband's absence. I felt the house was empty." Esperanza told her husband that "every corner of the house reminds me of you. So, that's why I felt like that, so bad. It took great effort," she said, "to come out of the depression."

As Esperanza and Delia have explained, they have to adapt to new roles imposed by their partners' migration. Especially in rural communities, little credit is usually given for handling this stressful double-parenting role that regularly produces stress. Sometimes not even husbands help reduce stress levels of their wives and children, because they think that their essential responsibility lies in sending remittances.

Jimena, another spouse, adds.

[My husband] said, "Wait for me, pay attention to the children; I'll provide for you. Whatever they need at school, I'll send money to you for whatever you need. I'll be there for you, and you have to help me with them, educate them. Do what it takes. I don't want to hear complaints." Can you imagine that kind of responsibility on my shoulders? If my son went to [a] dance, I couldn't sleep until he came back home. If something bad happened, it was my responsibility, because my husband said, "I don't want to know anything. Do what you have to do. You just tell me everything is fine and don't worry me. What can I do here [in Canada]?" So, I didn't tell him anything. It was my responsibility.

A prominent finding of our research has been the centrality of these mothers as the principal actors maintaining family cohesion. In their husbands' absence, mothers

become responsible for managing all aspects of the household, including taking on non-traditional gender tasks such as finances, repairs, building, or making decisions about agriculture. They learn and apply different mechanisms to guide their families. This includes their role in delegating responsibilities to children, mainly to the eldest male child who assumes part of the role of the father in certain practical activities (such as caring for the younger children and some work in the fields or in the house), and also in symbolic ways (such as to “be the man of the house”, and “be the example for the brothers and sisters”).

SAWP fathers also have to adapt roles to help strengthen their families. In the context of their lengthy, repeated absences, these men typically learn to adapt their parenting styles to protect their emotions and those of their family members. For example, migrant father Omar explains that he changes the ways and degree to which he shows affection to his children, so they will be less harmed by his absence when he is in Canada: “I show my love to them, not giving them [my love] all at once, because then they get used to it, and they’ll miss you when you leave, especially the young ones. I try to be a good father. I’m loving and caring, but not too much.”

This manner of expressing their love somewhat guardedly is common among seasonal agricultural migrant workers from Mexico. While some fathers do not freely express their affection to their children because this is not considered a “male role” and would be inconsistent with *machismo* (Giraldo-Nerón, 1972), younger migrant workers are more likely to change their ways of expressing their love for their children.

While husbands experience the pain of being separated from their families, friends, country, identity, traditions, and habits for long periods of time, their spouses experience loneliness and frustration. Most did not expect to live in intermittent relationships. Although some wives have experienced fathers, grandfathers, or brothers going to work in the U.S. or Canada, many encounter new and unexpected challenges. As newly married women left on their own, migrant spouses learn new rules of behavior. In traditional patriarchal Mexican communities, where we conducted our research, women are generally expected to marry and fulfill traditionally gendered family roles. When these women live without their husbands’ in the home, they often find themselves under increased scrutiny by members of their husbands’ and their own families, particularly to ensure their celibacy during their partners’ absences. For example, in rural Mexican communities it is generally frowned upon if wives go out alone or ask for help from other men outside their families. They are usually expected to solve their problems by themselves or with their own or their husbands’ families. Many women report that the constant pressure of their husbands’ families’ monitoring them causes a lot of stress. Some women speculate that this stress contributes to the breakdown of their physical and emotional health in their husbands’ absence,

with illnesses often increasing in their absence and diminishing upon their return. Women often adopt strategies to minimize these problems while negotiating new forms of empowerment and independence. For example, if they are still living in their in-laws' homes or they are very dependent on them, some women seek to negotiate the possibility of building or renting their houses in spaces beyond the range of their in-laws' oversight to establish greater independence.

The main family commitment of migrant men and their wives who stay behind alone in Mexico is to strive for better lives. Their sacrifices are viewed as necessary to promote the welfare of their children, who represent hopes for success that their parents did not have. For migrant families, migration represents the ability to fulfill family dreams, especially for material things. The children's education, in particular, is seen as a major way of preventing future poverty and giving children economic opportunities.

Within the context of building future success, gender-inscribed roles are expected to be carried out both within the family and the broader community. The expectation is that fathers must support the family financially, and migration is often necessary to achieve this. Women are expected to stay at home and take care of the children. However, in practice, women's responsibilities go beyond the role of traditional motherhood.

Many women have assumed roles that were formerly typical of men. During their husbands' absences, they become responsible for working or managing the land, a demanding task that often increases during the seasons when men are away. Women cope by sometimes hiring additional laborers to work the land, or they supervise older children to do it. In other cases, families prefer not to work the land because of the problems this entails. Likewise, wives are responsible for resolving problems in which their husbands were involved before leaving. For example, if the husband took on a debt, women are often responsible for administering the remittance money to pay it off. In emergencies, women are regularly required to make decisions on their own. If a child gets sick, women are expected to know how to find help. In taking on these additional roles and responsibilities because their husbands are away working, the women/mothers contribute significantly to the family's stability, and in many cases, such changes empower women to become more independent and assertive. Yet at the same time, sometimes the pressure is so great that women suffer extreme stress or physical illness. Particularly when men begin participating in *SAWP*, these situations are very challenging for the entire family, but from season to season the women often grow more experienced and confident in their new roles.

## Extra-Marital Relationships

In some cases, male migrants establish romantic relationships in Canada with other migrant women from Mexico, and sometimes with Canadian women or those from other national backgrounds. Sometimes the migrant farmworkers have double lives, spending winters with their families in Mexico and the rest of the year with their partner in Canada. In other cases, they completely abandon their original families in Mexico. In these situations, the children are almost always left in the care of their mother, who is usually supported by her family. Sometimes, those migrants who remain in the SAWP voluntarily support their children financially. Women almost never carry out legal proceedings to sue the fathers of their children for child support due to the lack of financial means to do so and the difficulties in navigating complex legal channels. In addition, many impoverished small-scale farming communities view the legal process as inaccessible and, in order to avoid further conflicts between themselves and their former partners' families, they do not pursue legal action.

In some cases, especially when women take less submissive roles in marital relationships, they may start romantic relationships with other men while their husbands are away in Canada. This is less common, partly because women are surveilled by their families and others in the community. Women have fewer resources to leave home, and it is usually hard to establish relationships with other men who will accept the responsibility of caring for children who are not theirs, especially when they are small. Women who are unfaithful to their husbands and who leave their children are widely stigmatized, making it difficult for them to continue living in their communities. Nevertheless, our fieldwork suggests that such extramarital relationships are becoming more frequent, especially in families where men migrate for longer periods and have young wives. High levels of stress, loneliness, and sadness among wives, partly in the context of a loss of a sense of being in normal relationships, sometimes lead to a search for companionship outside the marriage. Some wives leave the town with other men. Silver (2006) found similar extramarital relationships among transnational families where one spouse was living in Mexico and the other in the United States.

Yet most people—whether husbands or wives—choose not to pursue such relationships. Religious and other norms strongly influence these choices. The majority of people in the communities we researched identify as Catholic, and religious values such as fidelity, self-sacrifice, and family well-being are central to their world-views. These beliefs are reinforced by priests who serve Mexican communities in Canada. Sermons regularly emphasize the importance of well-behaved couples and the virtues of personal sacrifice for the family.

Community and family rituals also help unite families. Among migrants, the most significant rituals are religious, particularly those associated with the sacramental acts, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Such events are scheduled wherever possible during migrants' stays in their home communities. It is common to observe baptisms, confirmations, first communions, marriages, and *quinceañeras* (young women's fifteenth birthday celebrations) taking place in the last or first months when migrants are home. Preparing the large parties associated with these events usually takes several months due to their lavishness. Wives are usually responsible for this work, generally with support from other family members and godparents. Upon migrants' arrival in their home communities, most of the work is already done, leaving only final details to be completed (including some of the payments). What matters most is that all family members are able to be present and participate in these key events.

### Children's Changing Role

Cohesion is also sometimes strengthened through the commitments and actions of children who also take on parental roles. Sometimes they do not do this by choice, but rather following direct orders from their father or based on pressure to fulfill the traditional expectation of eldest sons being their fathers' surrogates. This notion of paternal power is transferred to the eldest male child, who, once a teenager, is expected to take on the role of father, protecting his mother and younger siblings, in his father's absence.

However, such transfers of parental responsibility to the next generation are frequently disrupted, as migrant children increasingly behave rebelliously, exerting their independence, while focusing on modernist individual consumption and enjoyment, constantly rejecting the traditional values they view as archaic. Some migrant fathers feel they have become distant sponsors of their children, as they are not involved on a daily basis in their education. When they call home their children often don't want to talk with them, except to ask for special gifts, such as brand-name clothes and shoes, tablets, computers, cell phones, and other expensive items they cannot afford in Mexico.

These trends disappoint and bewilder many migrant fathers, who regard the children's actions as disrespectful and irresponsible. Many observed that today's children have easier access to consumer goods, and, as they do not see the work their fathers endure to attain them, they have become detached from the value and importance of hard work. For example, migrant wife and mother Gloria complained,

When there were not many migrants, the youngsters were all quiet, relaxed, respectful, hardworking, exactly what they aren't now. They're lazy; they don't feel like doing things; they don't care about their future. They only live for today because they're living a good life. I don't know what they think about their future. Before, there were no gangs; perhaps one or two would have a beer or something, peacefully; now they do gather in gangs, let's say, and drink. They come back home at 2, 3 in the morning and some of them just don't show up....They weren't like this before ... when I was young.

### Changing Family Norms and Community Controls

The larger community also often plays an important role in shaping family cohesion. Some community members, including neighbors, become sentinels who help ensure that family ties do not weaken by setting and enforcing norms to maintain the family as a social institution, including inequitable gender roles within it, despite changing gender dynamics. Traditional patriarchal norms reinforce women's vulnerability inside and outside the home. Only in rare cases are norms modified to allow women to attain more power and reduce inequities between men and women. For example, this may be seen in cases of young wives who have had the chance to study at university or have had experiences in life that made them rethink women's expected roles in the family.

Based on our observations, most women have not achieved significant empowerment regarding their additional responsibilities in their husbands' absence. Men are still considered the heads of households, and women still feel obliged to ask their husbands for permission to make many family decisions. Even small decisions, such as whether to attend a party, often require the permission of the husband abroad.

Increasingly, however, some movement toward greater autonomy for women is evident. Many women gain confidence in activities away from their husbands and assert their independence even if it contravenes their husbands' wishes. For example, some women who began dance classes while their husbands were away continued to take these classes even after their husbands returned and indicated they did not want their wives to do so. In addition, some men, after being exposed to more progressive gender dynamics in Canada, become supportive of these changes and marital dynamics move toward greater equality. For example, some of the husbands supported the women continuing to do the activities that they began in their absence. Such dynamics are more likely to occur among younger migrants who grew up in a less traditionally gendered context.

## Family Communication

In the integrated model, *communication* is “measured by focusing on the family as a group with regard to their listening skills, speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, continuity tracking, and respect and regard” (Olson, 1999). As Olson and his co-authors argue (1989), the communicative dimension is critical to family cohesion and adaptability. Our findings demonstrate that communication is key for maintaining relationships across distances, but workers and their families’ ability to communicate is greatly influenced by circumstances beyond their control.

For nearly three decades, SAWP families used letters as a primary means of correspondence, allowing for only very infrequent and delayed communication activities of other kinds. However, over the past decade, landline and then cell phone technology have reached more rural locations in Canada and Mexico. Gradually, as more families acquired telephone services in both countries, letters have become less frequent in transnational family communication. More recently, with the increasing use of cell phones, migrants can more easily maintain regular telecommunication with their families. Nevertheless, family communication is often impeded by lack of adequate access to good telecommunication infrastructure (for example, not enough landlines per worker, the cost of cell service, or insufficient access to internet services) in Canadian and Mexican rural areas. In addition, a lack of privacy in workers’ accommodations, demanding schedules of workers and their families, and a lack of the technical skills and familiarity needed to make the best use of these communications devices pose additional challenges.

Moreover, none of these long-distance technologies affords the same kind of close emotional communication that is possible in direct person-to-person contact. This is particularly apparent on special occasions such as births and birthdays, the beginning and end of children’s school terms, illnesses, deaths, and funerals. Electronic communication is not enough to fully express happiness, sadness, and other emotions on both sides of separated families. While communication between mothers and children is reinforced by their proximity in daily life, communication between children and their absent fathers tends generally to be more superficial. Over a long period of repeated separations, this superficiality of communication weakens the quality and strength of their relationships. Emerging and better access to technologies may assist migrants in maintaining better communication with their families in the years to come.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings have shown how our research participants struggled to maintain each of the dimensions of family strength and well-being of the integrated model amid the challenges of translational migration. With respect to *family cohesion*, workers demonstrated to their *commitment* to their families by migrating and remitting income, but their *time enjoyed together* was severely curtailed by their inability to be physically present for much of each year they were gone. With regard to *family flexibility*, migrant workers and their spouses showed varying degrees of adaptability to the changing roles that migration thrust upon them, with women, in particular, adjusting to many new responsibilities in their husbands' absence. Sometimes these adjustments generated new stresses and tensions, while other times they contributed to personal growth and empowerment. *Spiritual well-being* acted as a catalyst for family unity; workers who were more integrated into spiritual and religious belief systems demonstrated greater commitment to their spouses. Religious services also offer a system of social support during long absences. Making a priority of scheduling religious festivals and rituals when migrant families could be together was a catalyst to strengthen ties and instill memories that were important for family bonding. Finally, *family communication* is key for maintaining family unity, but this is undermined by insufficient and inconsistent communication technologies and time available for families to have private conversations to maintain regular contact. Demonstrations of *appreciation and affection* are critical in promoting family closeness, but again, are often undermined by the challenges of constant, prolonged separations. Many migrant families demonstrated resilience in the face of myriad challenges, but clearly, transnational migration poses a major challenge to family cohesion, and little is being done to address these concerns.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In an ideal world, no person would need to separate from his or her family in order to provide them with economic support. A number of changes, however, could help strengthen the cohesion, flexibility, and communication of SAWP families while they endure these difficult circumstances. Our research participants emphasized that SAWP employment is extremely important to their families' economic futures, and they were hesitant to suggest any changes that could potentially jeopardize the program's future and, thus, their job opportunities. We believe the proposals suggested here would improve the experiences of SAWP workers and their families without undermining the viability of the program on which their livelihoods depend.



First, maximizing remittances would help support families by reducing the duration of the separation needed to send the same amount of money. While raising take-home wages would be an obvious way to increase remittances, income can be maximized in other ways. Workers asked for fewer wage deductions and greater access to benefits from their existing pay and for greater control over and consistency in their working hours. Among the most crucial recommendations is that the Canadian government provide migrant workers access to full benefits under the Employment Insurance (EI) program, into which they contribute millions of dollars annually, and which could provide crucial income in between work seasons.

Second, we recommend strengthening workers' rights and protections. Protected workers are more likely to return home safe, healthy, and in a state of mental well-being *vis-à-vis* their loved ones. Several key changes could reduce workers' vulnerability to rights violations and health risks. First, Canada should sign and enforce the UN Migrant Workers Convention, which recognizes the need to protect the unity of migrant workers' families. Open or sector-specific work permits, an appeals process prior to repatriations or program removals, increased access to existing employment rights, and the full right to unionize in all provinces would be major improvements. Multilingual support services, mandatory health and safety training, and seniority/recall rights for workers would also promote worker empowerment and job security. More information on workers' rights could be provided in Mexico prior to workers' departure and upon arrival. In addition, workers could have more say over their contract duration and destinations. Choice of contract duration would empower workers to balance their families' income needs against the harm to their families caused by prolonged absences.

Other measures could also be taken to strengthen migrant families. The importance of family communication while workers are in Canada is grounds for enhanced use of communications technology, for example, through mandatory phones placed in worker housing, in private locations, and increased access to internet for e-mail and video calling communication systems. Allowing family members to visit Canada and workers to visit their families partway through their contracts would also help maintain family connections and allow them to demonstrate commitment to each other. Providing support groups, social work, and/or counseling services for both migrants and their families could help build important spiritual, emotional, and coping skills to manage the challenges of repeated separations. Workers and their families could be counseled in positive communication strategies, the importance of affection and appreciation, and how to handle negative emotions that emerge over the course of long absences. Providing greater spiritual support for those with spiritual or religious inclinations may also help some workers and their families

cope with the sadness and difficulties that are inevitable with prolonged separations from their loved ones.

Although our research focused on fathers, migrant mothers' needs should also be considered. In particular, women migrants could be granted greater protection during pregnancy, including the right to safe work, prenatal care, and protection from premature employment terminations based on reproductive status. Specific support systems could be put into place to assist the children of single migrant workers who are left without a parent for much of the year.

Finally, we join many others in calling for SAWP workers to be provided the right to permanent residency and family reunification in Canada for those who wish to remain there. Repeated long absences from their families as temporary "visitors" could be replaced by a system of permanent immigration and family reunification, recognizing and welcoming migrant workers and their families as valued and respected contributors to Canadian society.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the context of growing regional and global neoliberal economic restructuring, the repeated migration of husbands and fathers under the SAWP and the emergence of important, albeit partial, changes in traditional patriarchal structures in much of rural Mexico challenge the cohesion of these transnational families. This study has analyzed key impacts of shifting gender and parental roles and changing relations between children and their parents, especially when fathers are absent working in Canada, and has shown how these changes have been reshaping transnational family relations and family cohesion. Faced with new, increasing, and often daunting pressures that threaten the strength of their transnational families, mothers, fathers, and children are modifying some of their roles and performing new tasks. While these new roles and tasks impose to varying degrees new burdens and transfer responsibilities within families in ways that are deleterious to the physical and mental health of family members and families as a whole, in some cases they also promote greater autonomy for women. In particular, they may contribute to women developing new confidence and decision-making capacities by taking over, even if temporarily and partially, roles that have been traditionally assigned more exclusively to fathers and husbands.

<sup>2</sup> These recommendations are adapted from our previous publication, McLaughlin et al. 2017, where they are discussed in more detail.

The study has analyzed the often prodigious efforts that both parents make to keep their families together while pursuing dreams of better lives for them, particularly for their children. At the same time these efforts entail sacrifices, burdens, and stresses that may weaken family relationships, in some cases even contributing to family break-up.

During our observations in different family environments, we realized that feelings of absence caused by the father's departure are never fully resolved in the family environment. Under these circumstances, the father's absence often ends up irreparably damaging relationships between spouses and between fathers and children. Despite the important economic benefits that migration affords families, rarely is a more harmonious family relationship restored. In this sense, the fact that parents migrate becomes a watershed moment for children in their family relationships, particularly with their parents. Children often speak of two periods in their relationships with their parents: one before migration and the other, after. To counteract some of these challenges, most families are flexible in trying to promote cohesion. Policy changes may help ameliorate some of the challenges, but ultimately, repeated, prolonged family separations will continue to put strain on migrants and their families.

The SAWP provides much needed employment to approximately 24 000 male and 700 female migrant workers from Mexico annually. It also provides them with salaries of about Can\$1 500 a month, well above what they might receive doing similar work in Mexico. These wages become the remittances that SAWP workers send home, helping them to meet basic needs, including food, clothing, education, medical treatment, and housing, all of which are foundational to family cohesion (Wells et al., 2014). At the same time, however, the SAWP harms family cohesion by weakening spousal relations and relations between migrant parents (particularly fathers) and their children. Thus, the family adaptations that have arisen in the context of the formation of these transnational families under the SAWP have mixed, often competing tendencies to both strengthen and weaken these families' cohesion. Such is the contradictory nature of the impacts of the SAWP on these Mexican families.

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