

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Doing family: Nicaraguan transnational families' narratives on motherhood

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**Abstract**

This article explores transnational motherhood from the perspective of Nicaraguan migrant workers in Spain and Nicaraguan family members caring for migrant women's children. Our sample included families with children who have special needs, to explore how economically disadvantaged families draw upon migration as a strategy to address educational and physical needs not provided by a weak 'exclusionary' social policy regime. Applying the notion of the family display to migrant mothers and their families, our research reveals how gendered expectations of parenting shape their experience and the ways in which they explain and justify the migratory project. Migrants and family members, with certain reservations and limitations, actively reinvent motherhood by (re)constructing financial contribution as a type of caring. Our research also unsettles the classic notion of the 'other mother', as respondents describe caring as distributed over extended kin networks.

**KEYWORDS**

care, gender, global care chains, transnational families, transnational migrants

**INTRODUCTION**

This article uses qualitative data to explore the experience of transnational mothering from a dual perspective—that of Nicaraguan mothers employed in Spain as domestic workers and of family members and friends in Nicaragua who care

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for children of women who have migrated. How do people, mostly women, in these situations do family, that is, how do they present relationships and decisions taken based on what is socially expected of women, mothers, and carers? A great deal of research has focused on maternal migration in a variety of origin and destination country contexts (Bahna, 2015; Castilla & Miguel, 2016; Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2012; Salazar Parreñas, 2010)—in part to examine and challenge popular and media representations of deteriorating family relations and inadequate care in 'mother-away families' (Salazar Parreñas, 2005) for 'left-behind children' (Hoang et al., 2015) placed in the care of 'other mothers' (Schmalzbauer, 2004) in transnational 'global care chains' that 'tend to assume, rather than a document, the obstacles to family life caused by separation' (Madziva & Zontini, 2012, p. 429).

Our study is focused on mothers who migrate alone while the fathers of their children are completely or largely absent from childcare responsibilities. This gendered perspective permits an analysis of how roles and experiences of motherhood are felt to shift throughout the migratory project, as expressed by the migrant mothers and those (almost entirely) women who have taken responsibility for the children left behind. In addition, the strongly gendered labour niche available to these women in the Spanish context provides informal, unregulated and precarious working conditions that affect their migratory experience in general and international family relations in particular.

Our sample was selected to include families with children who have special needs, to explore how economically disadvantaged families draw upon migration as a strategy to address educational and physical needs not provided by a weak 'exclusionary' social policy regime. To better understand the ways in which participants discursively construct their transnational families, and motherhood in particular, we draw upon the notion of the family display as applied to migrant families (Walsh, 2018). Family is not just something people have or belong to; rather people strategically *do* family based on perceived norms and expectations. Walsh's study concluded that migrant families to the United Kingdom 'display in line with State-defined familial norms, to minimise their position as other and to promote connectivity, and to "belong"' (2018, p. 80).

Our cross-national study design allows us to extend this analysis to include other family members, examining in detail the perspectives of mothers who have migrated and those who care for migrant mothers' children (the so-called 'other mothers'). The central research question is: How do migrant women and those caring for their children describe, express and justify their transnational family experiences?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational parenthood has been a major topic of research within migration studies for at least the past two decades. Carling et al. (2012) point out that intangible factors like social norms and expectations must be considered alongside material and structural factors such as finances, physical conditions, legislation and public welfare systems. Many societies maintain a gendered double standard around absence—families with migrant fathers resemble a traditional family structure where the father is away for longer periods of time, while absent mothers' care is never enough and must be accompanied by extra-intense distance mothering and surrogate care by female relatives (Salazar Parreñas, 2005).

Migrants employed as domestic workers face particular challenges posed by the precarious and low-status nature of their work—the home is not recognized socially or legally as a true workplace, and caring is not a legitimized form of work (Moorhouse & Cunningham, 2012). These women participate in a feminized global care economy where middle-class women outsource domestic and care responsibilities (housework, children, elders) to migrant women, who in turn entrust their own caring responsibilities to female relatives in the sending country. These situations have been described as global care chains (Yeates, 2009), although the heuristic potential of this metaphor has been criticized as reifying existing ideologies of caring as dependent on biological maternity and physical proximity (Brown, 2016).

Schmalzbauer (2004, p. 1320) argues that kin networks of 'other-mothers', where 'mothering is defined by acts of nurturing and caring and not by a biological relationship of the mother to child', have been a coping strategy of poor communities internationally and throughout history even in the absence of migration. In Latin American countries, this role, usually assumed by the maternal grandmother, has been naturalized and taken for granted by social expectations

of family loyalty and duty; nevertheless, these intergenerational mothering triangles can be uncomfortable and lead to conflicts within the extended family (Mummert, 2019). Nicaraguan grandmothers interviewed by Yarris (2014) were found to obsess over current economic difficulties, worry about an uncertain future, and long for a former family unity that was no longer possible—all of which resulted in somatic distress including headaches and insomnia.

There has been a great deal of research documenting the family stress resulting from maternal absence. The ease and flexibility of virtual communication have been found to create 'inverted power relations' where the involvement of constantly vigilant absent parents in the daily lives of their older children undermines caregivers' authority (Poeze et al., 2017). The different responses of families to maternal and paternal migration have also been widely explored. Research with migrant Ecuadorian fathers has found that the family's gender roles may shift throughout the migratory project, with the men learning to care for themselves and their wives managing finances and making more decisions at home. Nevertheless, most fathers' relationships with children remained distant and simply perpetuated the traditional paternal authoritarian role (Pribilsky, 2004). While fathers simply reinforce their gender-stereotypical role as breadwinners when they emigrate, mothers must adopt this new role while continuing to carry out their expected role as carers (Carling et al., 2012).

Gil and Torralbo (2012, p. 45) note that much research has demonstrated how gender inequalities contribute to the stress of distance mothering, while at the same time they consider that with the emergence of 'transnational maternity' as a specific field of study 'we may be falling into a certain scientific naturalization, taking for granted the "natural" link between women and maternity and between biological maternity and supposedly instinctive motherly feelings'. Along with social traditions in specific origin and destination countries, broader narratives of family disintegration and dysfunction have been perpetuated by international media and some academic discourses, which have been accused of unquestioningly perpetuating Western biases about motherhood and the idealized nuclear family (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012). Research with Senegalese migrant women in Spain has shown that they do not experience guilt at leaving their children, as collective mothering practices are common in the country of origin (Vives & Vazquez Silva, 2017).

Participants themselves may have internalized such expectations of the supposedly universal trauma associated with absent mothers. Research with Ecuadorian mothers has concluded that they tend to justify their migration to Europe in terms of providing for children rather than other intergenerational and conjugal factors such as gender violence. In Ecuadorian society, the nuclear family unit continues to be reified in public discourse, even though it does not correspond with social reality (Boccagni, 2012; Lagomarsino, 2014). By downplaying what Madianou (2012) has referred to as hidden motivations, such as relationship problems and the desire for increased social status, mothers themselves may be unconsciously contributing to the maintenance of these gendered social norms.

Some research has examined how women have defended their decision to migrate, (re)defining themselves as good mothers. Peng and Wong (2016) found that Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong highlighted the financial contribution to their children's welfare. Salazar Parreñas (2010, p. 372) refers to this strategy as the 'commodification of love', concluding that the emotional strain of separation is exacerbated by patriarchal ideologies that cast men as the breadwinner and women as the caregiver. In these cases, then, breadwinning is redefined by these mothers as a kind of maternal caring, rather than a separate (paternal) responsibility. Research with Latina nannies in the United States has revealed a kind of provisional incorporation of breadwinning as an aspect of good mothering under adverse economic conditions (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Peruvian and Paraguayan mothers domestic care workers in Argentina described covering children's basic necessities—such as food, clothing, transport and access to health and educational opportunities—as an integral part of their maternal responsibilities since these needs are not sufficiently addressed by fathers or social institutions (Castilla & Miguel, 2016). Migrant women in Lithuania respond to media scripts that discredit them by displaying new scripts of good mothering that include providing economically for their children, self-denial and modern mothering through distance communication practices (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018).

These studies suggest that researchers must examine more closely the experiences of transnational families to explore how they adapt to and make sense of the separation caused by migration. Particularly in the case of maternal absence, research must address the ways in which these women and their families respond to popular stereotypes

**TABLE 1** Characteristics of migrant women in Spain

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Arrival in Spain	Occupation	Type of child disability
Martina	46	Single	2007	Cleaner—various houses	None
Isabel	24	Single	2011	Domestic help	None
Alejandra	40	Single	2011	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Daniela	40	Single	2017	Domestic help	Developmental
Carla	52	Single	2013	In-home elder care and domestic help	Developmental
Lucía	39	Single	2014	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Sara	25	Single	2016	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Claudia	41	Single	2013	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
María Elena	47	Separated	2011	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Sofía	37	Single	2011	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Yolanda	37	Single	2011	In-home elder care and domestic help	None
Valeria	25	Single	2015	In-home elder care and domestic help	Motor

of bad mothering associated with patriarchal constructions of family and motherhood. Finch (2007, p. 66) argues that ‘families need to be “displayed” as well as “done”’, a practice she describes as a fundamentally social strategy of conveying the legitimacy of one’s actions in light of broader social meanings. When applied specifically to migrant mothers, we can use this concept to examine how they and the rest of their families dialogically engage with assumptions about the moral validity and quality of distance mothering.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected as part of a broader research project<sup>1</sup> that involved a collaboration among three key institutions: researchers from the University of A Coruña (Spain), the Spanish NGO *Sólida* and the Nicaraguan non-profit foundation ILLS (*Instituto de Liderazgo de Las Segovias*), which specializes in community development and empowerment projects involving historically marginalized groups, with a particular emphasis on women and youth. The organizations helped with identifying and recruiting potential interviewees.

Data were collected in the form of extended audio-recorded semi-structured interviews during 2017 and 2018. After signing an informed consent form,<sup>2</sup> each participant was interviewed once, and individually, with an average recorded time of about 77 min for Spanish interviews and just under 40 min for those in Nicaragua. In Spain, 12 Nicaraguan mothers who were currently living as migrant workers in northern Spain were interviewed by a research team member of Nicaraguan origin. As a journalist and activist, she drew upon professional and personal networks, using a snowball sampling technique. They were between 25 and 52 years old and had been living in Spain for a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 11 years. All were single but one, who was legally married but separated, and they all had left between one and four children in the care of family members or friends in Nicaragua. Of these children, three were identified as having some kind of disability: Down Syndrome, microencephaly and a facial disfigurement. All of these women were care and domestic workers: nine provided live-in care for an elderly person, two were domestic workers and one cleaned various homes (see Table 1). An interview template was designed previously to include basic information such as household composition and characteristics of children, carers and migrant mothers, as well as broad thematic blocks of discussion, including experiences with educational and health care institutions and how the organization of children’s care changed as a result of the mothers’ migration.

**TABLE 2** Characteristics of CARERS in Nicaragua

Pseudonym	Location	Relationship to migrant	Migration destination	Type of child disability
Tamara	Mozonte	Mother	Panama	Developmental and motor
Alba	Mozonte	Friend	Spain	Motor
Paula	Mozonte	Mother	Internal-Estelí	Motor
Magdalena	Santa María	Mother	Internal-Ocotol	Motor
Miriam	Ocotol	Sister	Panama	Behavioural
Celia	Totogalpa	Niece	Spain	Motor
Milagros	Totogalpa	Mother	Spain	Developmental and motor
Eulalia	Mozonte	Mother	Internal-Estelí	Developmental
Ana Patricia	Santa María	Mother	Spain	Motor
Laura	Santa María	Sister	Panama	Developmental
Mario	Ocotol	Father	USA	Motor
María Carmen	Ocotol	Mother	Spain	Epilepsy
Fernanda	Ocotol	Mother	Spain	Sensory
Maribel	Ciudad Antigua	Aunt	Costa Rica	Developmental and motor

In Nicaragua, key informants from medical and educational institutions helped the research team to identify families that corresponded to the selection criteria.<sup>3</sup> The 14 family members interviewed were caring for children of women who had migrated to Spain (six), Panama (three), Costa Rica (one) the United States (one), or a distant region of the same country (internal migration—three). All but one of these designated caregivers were women: eight were the maternal grandmother, three were maternal aunts, one was a maternal cousin one was a friend of the mother and one was the child's biological father (see Table 2). This sample was not directly linked to the Spanish one, although in one case the migrant mother did form part of our Spanish sample. All of these children had a diagnosed learning difficulty, behaviour problems, or a physical or intellectual disability. While the social and economic impact of these special needs is not the subject of our analysis, we will address how they intersect with other realities experienced by the participants in the migratory project. As with the Spanish interviews, researchers prepared interview guidelines that included a collection of basic information such as mothers', children's, and carers' characteristics and living conditions, as well as broader topics to address that included their migration, employment, and social experiences in the host country, and the organization of children's care from a distance.

Data were analysed with an emphasis on emergent thematic coding and discourse analysis, as we wanted to focus on issues that were particularly relevant to the interviewees (an emic perspective) and the ways in which they conceptualized experiences and justified decisions and actions (i.e. how they displayed their family). The highly flexible nature of the interview permitted some issues that received especial emphasis from families and migrant mothers to emerge as concrete and recurrent themes, and the one-to-one open-ended conversational style also seemed to elicit quite emotional and personal responses, particularly on the part of the women interviewed in Spain, some of whom seemed eager to share experiences that caused them to worry, pain, or frustration with someone willing to listen. The data extracts we include here are identified by the speaker's pseudonym, type of participant (migrant or carer), destination country and number of children involved. Where applicable, the family relationship of the carer(s) and the child's disability is expressed in the terms used by the interviewee, as we did not have direct access to this information.

## DATA ANALYSIS: *DOING* FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF MATERNAL MIGRATION

### Shifting family roles and responsibilities throughout the migratory project

While much research has examined the shifts in traditional gender roles when women migrate, the women's role of breadwinner was already established before the migration in the vast majority of the families that participated in our study. Immigrants and Nicaraguan family members of emigrants spoke of absent fathers and working mothers both before and during the migratory project:

I wouldn't say he's bad because I don't know his living situation, I don't know what he does. But he helps them very little. He calls them, I can't deny that he loves them. But as the saying goes, you can't live off love, but all responsibility for care falls to me. [Alejandra, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her parents]

He just came to give [the child] his last name and then never appeared again. He's never helped out [...] Supposedly he's in prison. [Ana Patricia, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her grandson with limited mobility]

Even when they remained physically present, many fathers were described as ineffective or uninvolved:

My mother [took] the girl and he stayed with the boy, he took responsibility for him because really it was his mother who took care of him, the paternal grandmother, and economically it was me. [Sofía, migrant mother in Spain whose two children are cared for by her mother and mother-in-law]

Most of the men whose wives are here [in Spain] go along with the idea that it's the women who have to take responsibility for the house [...] He takes care of the children sporadically. I can't kick him out because he serves as a support, as a respect for my children, although he doesn't contribute anything [...] he's a symbolic figure. [Claudia, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her mother]

One migrant woman told us that her children were living with their father, but when she described in more detail the organization of care, it seemed that he had a relatively minor role compared with her mother (who died while she was working in Spain) and her elder son. Even before she left, she depended strongly on her mother, who lived across the street. Change in this family was largely attributed to the mother's death and the increasing responsibility of the son as he grew older:

I practically don't talk to him at all. I find out things about the girl when I talk to her or when her brother tells me, but with him there's no relationship and no communication [...]. Before when [my mother] was alive she stopped by the house every day, opened the refrigerator and told me what was needed. But now the responsibility has fallen to my 23-year-old son. I send him the monthly money to buy provisions, food, he buys things for the girl. [María Elena, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her husband and older son]

Among the families interviewed in Nicaragua, there was just one father who was caring for his disabled son. He explained that his duties were largely limited to nights and weekends, as he received considerable support from a paid specialist and the maternal grandmother:

We hired a girl to come here and give therapy for 2–4 hours and care for my son [...]. And my son's grandmother, that is, the maternal grandmother, the woman who died just over a year ago, she was also the one responsible for him here at home. If I was here in Ocotol, I slept here in the house, so then I took over his care at night. If I was out of Ocotol, I came back once a week, so then I cared for him on the weekends. [Mario, ex-husband of emigrant to the USA, who cares for his son with spastic quadriplegia]

Of the other 13 families, only two were in contact with the children's fathers. These had little or no direct contact with their children, and only one contributed financially on a regular basis:

Sometimes, because he works. He doesn't collaborate in her care, financially little, he visits her every 15 days, he helps her out with some needs that arise. [María Carmen, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her granddaughter with epilepsy]

No, he just supports him economically. He never takes care of him. [Laura, sister of emigrant to Panama, who cares for her nephew with Down Syndrome]

Upon migration, the women we interviewed in Spain told us that they generally entrusted the care of their children to their own mothers, sisters and even older daughters, and in some cases the fathers' female relations. While much research tends to conceptualize the 'other mother' as an individual who takes full responsibility, we found many cases where this 'other motherhood' was distributed among various relatives. These were mostly women—although male relatives (brothers, cousins, brothers-in-law, fathers, older sons) were mentioned as part of the broader distributed care networks described by these women:

My mother is retired and she devotes herself completely to the boy. My mother, my brother, my father, despite all their own difficulties, have done everything for him. [Isabel, migrant mother in Spain whose child is cared for by her parents]

My older children are the ones who help my mom and my cousins who are older now, 26, 23, and 18 years old. The baby of the house is my son. My eldest daughter is the one who takes care of going to school, going to meetings and taking him to activities, to the doctor. [Claudia, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her mother]

In some cases, these care networks are not stable but shift over time. One interviewee described a long list of carers for her two children, each of whom turned out to be inadequate in her judgement: a sister (who was not sufficiently vigilant); a male cousin ('It's not the same leaving a child with a man as with a woman'); another sister (whose husband mistreated them); her mother (they fought too much, so they had to be separated); her 12-year old daughter was sent to an unspecified female relative (who was not able to control her); and finally both children went to live with another male cousin ('but I want to find someone who will take care of them in the home and to be there with them, a woman') [Lucía, migrant mother in Spain]. Whether in the form of collaborative care networks or serial primary carers, all of our respondents described some form of distributed responsibility ranging from occasional assistance to support shared by multiple relatives living in the same house. The children's fathers were normally not part of these care networks for various reasons: in many cases, they were voluntarily absent from their children's lives, in others the women were trying to weaken or break relation with their children's father by migrating, and in some cases they were seen as unfit carers by the children's mothers.

While the role of female breadwinner is nothing new to the families who participated in our study, the woman's migration did bring on a shift from direct care provision to care management. As the previous case of serial caring illustrates, many of the mothers we interviewed monitored closely and carefully evaluated the quality of attention

their children were receiving. We found, however, relatively few conflicts with respect to the allocation of remittances. Some family members in Nicaragua received additional funds as recompense for their service, while others spoke of scarcity, 'I think it amounts to about 70 per cent of what is needed' [Laura, sister of emigrant to Panama, who cares for her nephew with Down Syndrome]. The vast majority of expenditures described by migrants and family members were clearly assigned to particular aspects of children's direct care—medicine, transport to medical and therapy appointments, privately contracted specialized care, etc:

This orthopedic car that you are looking at here was sent by his mom [...] the basics, she pays for all the basic services and food. [Mario, ex-husband of emigrant to the USA, who cares for his son with spastic quadriplegia]

For the boy's care, food, pampers, health [...] she sends him medicine that sometimes you can't find here, and she gets it there. Clothes, shoes, all of that she carries on sending from time to time. [Isabel, migrant mother in Spain whose child is cared for by her parents]

While some respondents described home repairs and other costs that benefitted the wider family circle, most expenses were designated for specific aspects of childcare, leaving little room for negotiation. This may be related to the number of children in our study with special needs. This tendency may also be interpreted through the theoretical lens of family display: mothers may have highlighted the pragmatic necessity of their migration, while family members may have chosen to minimize any benefits received by themselves or other carers.

## Changing relationship with children

The women migrants we interviewed unanimously expressed distress at the loss of physical intimacy with their children, 'I wanted my children to be economically better-off [...] To cover these necessities we lose the best there is, to be with them there because there is nothing like being with your children' [Lucía, migrant mother in Spain whose two children are cared for by sister, nephew, and grandmother].

Many of the internal migrants and their families spoke of the importance of occasional visits that allowed mothers to experience periods of intense contact, including sleeping with their children to make up for a lost time. For migrants in Spain, these home visits were extremely rare, limited by legal status and/or the cost of long-distance travel. The women's domestic care work provided both economic and time constraints, as their wages were low and they were allowed very little free time, even for virtual communication. Many of these women described their affective bonds with children as strained or diluted over time:

Here we earn money, but we lose the affection. Many times in our work we experience violence because there's no time to be in contact with our family or they call you and maybe [the employer] needs you at that moment and you tell [you family] 'I can't because I'm working,' and that is something very violent. Many times, my elder daughter can see that it's not that I don't love her, just that I can't. My daughter [who is with me in Spain], has had days when I didn't see her. [Martina, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her sister and brother-in-law]

Many women told us that they felt a loss of control, as their parental authority was usurped or undermined:

These people [the biological father's family] may be very good, they take good care of him, but they're really sexist and they are raising my sons the same way they raised theirs, sexist little momma's boys. They can't pick up a broom or anything, my male children. Why? Their penises are not going to fall off



if they pick up a broom! They're spoiling them. [Valeria, migrant mother in Spain whose three children, one of whom has facial paralysis, are cared for by their father's parents]

Aside from the pain of separation, an element of guilt was often evident as respondents expressed concern that their physical absence might emotionally damage children. One migrant described her son as suffering as a result of her leaving at a critical time in his development:

My [younger] daughter was hardly affected at all because she grew up thinking that my mother was her mother, but [my son] has suffered a great deal, they even got him a psychologist but it's not as if it's having much effect. [Sofía, migrant mother in Spain whose two children are cared for by her mother and mother-in-law]

Another migrant attributed her hyperactive son's problems in school to her separation first from her husband and then from the child himself, repeating the argument provided by one of the child's teachers. The situation has improved recently through the intervention of her older daughter, while the father remains uninvolved:

His dad took him to be with his grandmother, not even to be with him [...] In the school he became violent and in the end the teachers told me it was that, seeing the disintegration of his family. And now that my daughter, the older one, is in Ocotol, she's looking after him more. [Claudia, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her mother]

The family members we interviewed in Nicaragua described the maternal separation in similar terms, as painful and confusing for children:

When my son's mother left, he spent two whole years continually asking for her. When he finally forgot her, I thank God, when I guess he started to see the figure of his grandma as mommy as well. Because when his grandma died it hit him really hard. [Mario, ex-husband of emigrant to the USA, who cares for his son with spastic quadriplegia]

While we found little evidence to suggest that family members resented or blamed the mothers themselves, there was a strong undercurrent of conviction that maternal separation was detrimental to the child and should be avoided except in case of absolute necessity:

A child is happier with their mother, because I can see it with her, that she wants her mamma. When she hears some child saying 'mamma', she says 'mamma', too. [María Carmen, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her granddaughter with epilepsy]

This grandmother considers it a general inviolable rule that children simply are happier with their mothers. She told us that while her granddaughter calls her 'mommy' in front of her peers, she knows that she is actually her grandmother. The evidence she provides for this belief is, therefore, open to another interpretation: the girl has learned from her peers that maternal absence is unnatural and calls her 'mother' in a childish attempt to fit in with social expectations. Nevertheless, this idea that a mother's love is irreplaceable was expressed in many family members' testimonies:

As much as you care for them, they need the mother because the mother is maternal, is love. Every human being needs a mother, even though you take care of them as you do, the mother is something, is an emotion that comes from inside. [Fernanda, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her granddaughter with hearing, speech, and visual deficiencies]

The difference is that if she [the migrant mother] is with him here, she's giving him love, watching how he grows up, but being away it's not the same. This happens with children who don't have their mothers, nothing is the same. [Paula, mother of internal emigrant, who cares for her grandson with limited mobility]

On the one hand, we see here the pain of separation, a loss of affection which Martina describes as a kind of violence. On the other hand, we see a degree of guilt and a sense of the irreplaceability of maternal love, which suggests an essentialized understanding of maternal caring as biologically situated in the mother-child bond. These kinds of understandings have two important implications: (1) The care provided by 'other mothers', no matter how warm and diligent, will always be insufficient; (2) biological mothers' are harming their children through their absence, no matter how valid the cost-benefit calculation that leads them to emigrate.

### Justifying distance mothering

All of the migrant women we spoke to explicitly justified their decision to migrate in terms of the benefits to their children and/or other relatives. The children's fathers, when present, had apparently no influence on the decision-making process:

To give my children a better level of life, to get out of debt, to prepare my children professionally. Being a single mother, it was up to me to take on all three. [Martina, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her sister and brother-in-law]

Given the high number of disabled children in our study, it is not surprising that many explained their migration in terms of the high costs of the special care required, 'I'm from Ocotal and the motives for which I came to Spain are for the illness of my son, who has microcephaly, and because in Nicaragua I couldn't cover the expenses' [Carla, migrant mother in Spain whose four children, one of whom has microcephaly, are cared for by her parents]. One woman justified her migration by invoking the economic hardships of her own youth, suffered as a result of her own mother's decision *not* to leave in search of better prospects abroad:

The girls were little and I decided that they had neither voice nor vote, but it's very painful. Because when I was a girl my mother told me, 'I'm going to Costa Rica to work' and I clung to her skirts, I got down on my knees and I said 'Mamma, don't go, don't go, I don't want to be alone'—and my mother didn't go, and we were poor [...] And I didn't give my daughters the chance to say 'Mamma, don't go'. I left, and that hurts me, because being without your daughters is the most painful (begins to cry). [Alejandra, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her parents]

As we have explained above, most of the women served as breadwinners before they migrated, given the absence or unreliability of the biological fathers. Some of the younger women we interviewed were newly initiated into this role of economic provision when they migrated to Spain. Among their motivations, they described a desire to stop depending on their mothers and other (female) relatives for financial support:

I was underage and my son was a burden on my mother, and so I was also a weight on them. Seeing them loaded with debt I had to find something to do because I wasn't doing anything. So I made the decision to come [to Spain]. [Isabel, migrant mother in Spain whose child is cared for by her parents]

They often made specific reference to the personal sacrifices their migration entailed, at times specifically in response to false beliefs about high salaries and luxurious living conditions enjoyed by migrants working abroad. They tended to highlight their difficult living and working conditions in Spain:

You get a live-in job, in a house, and you can't leave, only two hours a week. When I started to work here [...] I was working as a complete live-in, I didn't have a free hour, not even an hour, nothing, it was very hard. There was a time when I felt like I would explode from being closed up in a house, taking care of a person with dementia or Alzheimer's. It's very hard; you have to be prepared and that's what we women don't know when we come from Nicaragua, what it is we are coming to do [Alejandra, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her parents].

At the same time, reading more carefully into some of these narratives we can detect a certain ambivalence: some mothers also made reference to their own needs, which included independence and self-sufficiency. These rather oblique references to personal motivations were rare and always strongly intertwined with the importance of providing for their children:

To give my son a better life and to get ahead myself as well [...] To have a good economic level, to have my things, you understand? Become independent, to be an independent woman. But I wanted to be independent. I wanted to say that I support my son, I want to get ahead on my own, with my son. [Sara, migrant mother in Spain whose child is cared for by her sister]

The home was often idealized through the lens of homesick longing and migration presented in terms of an unavoidable sacrifice, despite the fact that many of these women lived in difficult conditions in Nicaragua, including, poverty, raising children with disabilities and usually without the support of the father and a weak social support network that left them vulnerable in these circumstances. Scenes of disintegrating domestic relations and gender violence were described by most of these women. At the same time, personal motivation to escape these toxic relationships was notably absent from their narratives, and reasons were limited to protecting and providing for their children or setting a positive example for them:

I was also experiencing a bit of intra-family violence, at the psychological and economic level. He would come home drunk and wanting me, and then came the blows and my children were also seeing this, and I didn't want that for my children. [Claudia, migrant mother in Spain whose three children are cared for by her mother]

The tendency to frame these benefits from the children's perspective rather than in terms of the mother's own well-being may well tap into broader social narratives of the good wife/partner versus that of the good mother. While there may be some ambivalence in terms of whether and when a woman should abandon a toxic romantic relationship, her role in protecting her child is less socially ambiguous. While both reasons (self-protection and child protection) may have played a role in these women's decisions to leave abusive partners, the latter provides a stronger and clearer justification.

One of our interviewees specifically invoked the different social expectations with respect to mothers and fathers as reason for finding work far from home. She explained that she was afraid of the social criticism she would face for leaving her children's father and becoming pregnant with the child of another man. In her description, these fears culminated in the worst nightmare of a good mother—that her children might be taken away from her:

It's crazy to say, from one day to the next, that I'm going to my mother's, and nobody can know that I'm pregnant again, nobody can see me. I'm going to work for my children, and this was the only way

out that I saw, to come [to Spain]. The family of my children's father will criticize me—since there all men are sexist, the women are also sexist, they're going to criticize me, they're going to put me out on the street. I thought they were going to take my children away, and that was the option I saw. [Valeria, migrant mother in Spain whose three children, one of whom has facial paralysis, are cared for by their father's parents]

On the whole, families in Nicaragua were quick to justify their migrant relatives' decision to migrate and to volunteer details about how these women continued to carry out their maternal duties from abroad. These duties included those traditionally associated with maternal caring, such as providing affection via virtual communication and the occasional visits:

By videoconference she sees him, she talks to him, she plays with him, every other day [...] Despite the long distance she is still watching out for him. [Alba, friend of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her friend's child with limited mobility]

They also included ideals of good parenting usually associated with the paternal role, such as financial support and involvement in decision-making processes:

She takes care of him so that he lacks for nothing at home or in school. Yes, we talk, every 15 days, when she talks to me or with my parents, she also talks to the boy [...] She is informed when he is ill, and with her we decide what to do. [Laura, sister of emigrant to Panama, who cares for her nephew with Down Syndrome]

In their defense of the good motherhood of their migrant relatives, these carers often revealed the gendered expectations to which they implicitly responded. One grandmother was careful to explain why her daughter has never returned to visit her disabled child left in her care. We reproduce here the full extract of the interview, as her interaction with the interviewer reveals her discomfort and reluctance to disclose the extent of the mother's absence:

Interviewer: And she comes often to Nicaragua?

Interviewee: No, she hasn't come, because the girl has class and until she gets out of class...

Interviewer: How long has it been since the last time [she visited]?

Interviewee: But she hasn't... I'm going to tell you that she hasn't come, always for the girl. It's that since the girl, well, she hasn't come because of the classes, as we were saying, and over there, well, they go to meetings and they say that everything gets delayed.

Interviewer: But... a year ago, two years ago, how long ago?

Interviewer: It's been quite a number of days since she's come, but still she's faithful, she sends whatever [is needed]... Now that it's [the child's] birthday, she sent [money] for clothes, to buy her shoes, for training...

Interviewer: And what does she do when she comes, with the girl?

Interviewee: No... it's that she, since she left, she hasn't come back, I'm not going to lie to you [Milagros, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her granddaughter with multiple disabilities]

As we can see from this excerpt, Milagros is reluctant to reveal that her daughter has never visited the child, and at the same time she is quick to justify her absence, in terms of her daughter's professional demands and the child's own schedule. She is also quick to volunteer information about her daughter's financial support, which she defines as being 'faithful'. The question here is not the quality of maternal care, but the way in which Milagros feels compelled to defend her daughter's mothering, specifically her physical absence.

Another relative more explicitly invoked the spectre of maternal abandonment in her justification of her daughter's migration, and openly denounced the injustice of the double standard for parenthood, 'It's not that she has abandoned him. She went away because the father of the child did not support her' [Magdalena, mother of internal emigrant, who cares for her grandson with limited mobility].

In two cases where the family member was caring for the absent mother's disabled child, the absence was excused on the grounds of exceptional circumstances, implicitly criticizing other mothers for whom these circumstances did not apply. Fernanda, for example, contrasts the case of many 'irresponsible' mothers with that of her daughter, who 'supports' the child through frequent video-based interaction:

The girl, since she was born, I've had her, I'm practically her mother and her grandmother. But in the case of other women who leave their children with other kinds of people who are family members, yes, you need to find a way to support these children. Because imagine, there are children whose mothers leave, and they are left here abandoned. And this also happens, that there are many people who are irresponsible, because there are a lot of women who have gone to Spain and the children... And with this girl, she's receiving a lot of support from her mother in every aspect, because her mother says 'I want to talk to the girl' and she gets on the telephone. They do videocalls, they are seeing each other, [the girl] shows [her mother] her dolls, she shows her what she buys. [Fernanda, mother of emigrant to Spain, who cares for her granddaughter with hearing, speech, and visual deficiencies]

Eulalia expresses her belief that mothers of disabled children, in general, should not leave; she justifies her own daughter's absence on the grounds that her grandson's disability is relatively mild:

[Another female carer] has to take care of a child and this child should not have been left by his mother, because this child doesn't walk. It's alright for [the informant's grandson, currently in her care] because he studies and walks around playing [...] The mothers shouldn't leave, because these children who stay here in the hands of others, [it's] worse for the disabled ones. Not like others who walk and reason well, because [my grandson] reasons well. [Eulalia, mother of internal emigrant, who cares for her grandson with learning difficulties]

As they provide an argument to defend the good motherhood of their own children, these women inadvertently reinforce the social stigma experienced by women migrants, especially those who do not meet the specific conditions established as exceptional. At the same time, while absent fathers figured prominently in the majority of our interviews, we found little evidence of a parallel discourse concerning the detrimental effect of paternal absence on the emotional well-being of children.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Some of the life experiences expressed by our respondents help to shed some light on how gender and moralities intersect in interesting ways with some of the other prominent current topics in transnational parenting (Carling et al., 2012). For example, care arrangements seem to be gendered and reflective of moral expectations of the community—

Who is available for care? Who is deemed trustworthy and capable? We found a strong thread of absent and/or uninvolved fathers. Male relatives (fathers, brothers, cousins, and so on) were often listed as caregivers. However, their role was always subordinated to that of female relatives, and they were assigned more administrative tasks, such as accompanying children to school or the doctor albeit usually in roles. The father who appears among our sample of Nicaraguan primary caregivers seems to provide an exception; yet he explains that his responsibility was limited to weekends until his son's grandmother died. This may suggest a gendered hierarchy of perceived reliability and capability of caring: men will do for specific tasks if they are available, but not for fulfilling the role of primary caregiver. This perception is not surprising if the stories of paternal financial and emotional abandonment told by these participants represent a widespread social phenomenon.

Gendered expectations of parenting shape the experience of these migrant mothers and those who care for migrant mothers' children, not only in practical terms (who takes the children into their home, who makes decisions) but also in terms of their relationships with their children and the ways in which they explain and justify the migratory project. The effects of maternal absence are understood through the lens of social constructions of motherhood, while the decision to migrate is partially motivated by other socially mediated understandings, such as the value of self-sufficiency and perceptions of the destination country. Based on the theoretical framework of family display, the interview with the researcher, an outsider with respect to the immediate family and community, acts as another conditioning factor. The information shared with us was selected and presented, perhaps to some degree unconsciously, in order to construct a particular narrative about their family. This does not mean that we consider our respondents to be untruthful. The notion of display highlights a methodological given that all interviewers should account for: respondents construct their realities for the researcher, even in the most transparent of conditions where we might expect they are doing their best to fully and accurately disclose all relevant information. The interviewer, as interlocutor, evokes the social expectations recognized by the speaker. As reflected by many of the interview extracts, for example Fernanda and Eulalia's defense of their daughter's absence, these social expectations are revealed in the ways in which the arguments are constructed.

At the same time, our research suggests that these women are not simple victims, but actively reinvent motherhood in their family display discourse (Finch, 2007). In reality, the mother as breadwinner and the other mother(s) are familiar figures in Nicaraguan, where a high percentage of female-headed households with absent fathers depend on extended (feminized) family networks and migrant remittances in the absence of an effective public welfare system (Franzoni & Voorend, 2011). In this sense, the role of migration in processes of female empowerment emerges as an area for future exploration. These realities clash with more traditional gendered expectations of motherhood, so that these women and their families, with certain reservations and limitations, are carefully and gradually chipping away at ancient binary gender roles by (re)constructing financial contribution as a type of caring, merging motherhood and fatherhood expectations when fathers are incapable or unwilling to adopt their assigned role. At the same time, our research shows that these roles were already well established before the migratory event, so that migration is presented as the only, or at least best, strategy to allow women to fulfil this dual role.

The role of the families is crucial in these social (re)constructions. While other studies have found discrepancies and conflicts with respect to the allocation of remittances, our research found that families were quick to defend the moral and gendered correctness of their migrant relative. This is not to say that these conflicts were not present, but we interpret this finding through the lens of family display—it may be that what happens in the family stays in the family, and what is conveyed to researchers is more carefully selected to display a correct and coherent performance of family. The family display is not just the responsibility of the mothers themselves. In fact, while migrant women are physically removed from the community gaze, the families in origin are more directly subject to social vigilance and potential criticism.

Our research also unsettles the classic notion of the 'other mother' and supports Schmalzbauer's (2004) observation that, especially in marginalized communities, mothering has historically been distributed across extended kin networks.

The image of the unitary substitute mother simplifies the complexities of the reorganization of care for transnational migration and is also biased in the expectation that there will be a woman in the country of origin who would be available, capable, and willing to fulfill this role.

Zentgraf and Chinchilla (2012) suggest that the assumption of universal trauma resulting from maternal migration not only reflects a western bias but may also reinforce gendered stereotypes within migrants' own communities. Our participants did indeed express a great deal of personal grief and trauma at separation—perhaps amplified by tacit shared understandings of the emotive strength and singularity of the maternal bond. Nevertheless, this was not translated into negative consequences for children, who were generally presented as healthy and thriving. The mothers and mainly female caretakers are portrayed as heroes in this complex scenario—bearing the pain and uncertainty of separation so that the children might benefit in the long run. If this is the family narrative presented by our respondents, it is constructed within a broader social narrative where the integrity of these women and their families is called into question by essentialist notions of motherhood.

The conditions for the kind of maternal migration experienced by other interviewees have been created and supported by transnational social inequality (Lutz, 2018). Women who left their families to care for other people's children described these decisions as strategic but difficult bids for upward social mobility. Without ignoring genuine hardships resulting from extended family separations, we echo Zentgraf and Chinchilla's (2012) productive questions—'What role can the media and educational and religious institutions play in 'normalising' transnational families, creating consciousness of the forces that result in family separation, and validating the gender role changes that may result?' We recommend that further research recognize and examine the ways in which transnational motherhood is socially constructed, as we explore ways to make it possible for these women and their families to make difficult decisions without the further stigma associated with distance motherhood.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Our institutional IRB was not formed until 2019, after this research took place. In the absence of this institutional guidance, we followed the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines, available here <https://www.bera.ac.uk/resources/all-publications/resources-for-researchers>
- <sup>3</sup> The interviews with Nicaraguan families were meant to be conducted by a university researcher paired with an ILLS worker. However, our partner organization was subject to serious threats and persecution as part of the regime crackdown on popular protests beginning on 18 April 2018. When targeted workers and the university field researcher were forced to leave the country, the volunteers took over and succeeded in completing this phase of data collection under extremely difficult circumstances. This, along with the fact that Spanish interviews were conducted by a journalist rather than a specialist in research interviewing, may be seen as methodological limitations.

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