

DISCUSSION PAPER

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



No. 33, December 2019

CAITLIN E. FOURATT

FOR PROGRESS OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN 2019-2020:
FAMILIES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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SUMMARY

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

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

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

RÉSUMÉ

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

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

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

RESUMEN

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

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

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

1.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

Examining migration within Central America is important because, although around half of all international migration takes place within the developing world, we know relatively little about such flows.⁴ So-called ‘South-South’ migration can share

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

The paper looks at how the provision of care in Nicaraguan families occurs in the context of multiple insecurities, both historical and contemporary. In this sense, migration represents both a solution to the insecure climate of care provision and a source

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