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**Left-behind men in Nicaragua: The rise of the Padre-Luchadores**  
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**Title:** Left-Behind Men in Nicaragua: the Rise of the *Padre-Luchadores*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to understand the impact of women's migration on the lives of the men left-behind. Based on a qualitative research methodology the study consists of twenty interviews conducted with men across three different areas in Nicaragua. These interviews were used to understand changes to household decision making and how the man perceives his own sense of masculinity. The results suggest that in contrast to previous studies which have shown a reluctance of men to partake in work traditionally associated with women, the men in this study did not avoid partaking in domestic work or childcare. It was also found that none of the men – even those in receipt of remittances – stopped working and instead placed even greater symbolic importance on their work, allowing them to maintain their identity as the main breadwinner in the house. The study proposes that more work needs to be done to better understand the challenges and changes faced by men (an understudied group of the left-behind) as the number of women migrating for work continues to rise.

**Keywords:** Migration, Gender, Left-behind, Masculinity, Machismo, Nicaragua

**JEL Classification:** F22, J13, J16

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## **Introduction**

The profile of people migrating in search of economic opportunities is a reflection of changing labour demands in destination countries. Changing labour demands, especially in the areas of care and domestic work, have led to increasing numbers of women migrating autonomously, including from Central America. Along with the increasing feminisation of migration<sup>1</sup>, is an accompanying rise in the number of male spouses that are left-behind. The purpose of this paper is to delve into the understudied area of men left-behind by presenting a case study from Nicaragua investigating the way in which the migration of a wife or partner impacts on the lives of the men left-behind.

The new economics of labour migration (NELM) theory presents migration as a way to diversify household income and not rely solely on one income generating activity (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). This theory can be used to help explain the growth in the number of women migrating from rural Nicaragua; with a challenging labour market in the agricultural sector, which has traditionally been a male dominated sector of work, many households are considering other opportunities. The feminisation of migration in Nicaragua represents not only a change in the demographic of those migrating, but also the countries and labour market to which they are moving.

### **The feminisation of migration in Nicaragua**

For many years, the migration discussion was predominately focused on the male migrant with women being measured as a dependent of her spouse or as part of family reunification (Martine, 2000). Much less attention has been paid to the motivations behind women's migration and the changes that may take place in the household, such as the way it

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<sup>1</sup>The feminisation of migration has been widely defined, however, in the context of this paper the feminisation of migration refers to an increase in the number of women captured in national statistics as residing and/or worker in a country not of their birth. This can be owing to many reasons but the case studies presented in this paper are identifying only cases of movement for the purposes of work.

may influence decision making between the migrant and her left-behind spouse (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001; Massey, Fischer, & Capoferro, 2006) Although this paper is not looking specifically at the migratory experiences of women directly, what it does aim to do is understand more closely the motivations leading to their migration, who made the decision, and the impact of this on the household, specifically on the men left-behind.

The number of women involved in labour migration from Nicaragua has been steadily rising over the last ten years and the destinations to which they are migrating clearly reflect specific labour needs in destination countries, with the growing middle class in Costa Rica, for example, driving up demand for domestic workers. In a household study conducted by the ILO on women who have migrated to Costa Rica seeking employment, around 80 percent of those surveyed were in domestic work (Portocarrero, 2001). According to Macours & Vakis (2007) the economic returns for women can be higher than those of men, seasonal women migrant workers from Nicaragua can earn on average C\$6976 (Nicaraguan Cordobas) over a three month period, whereas for men it is C\$6028. They also found that women, upon their return, will tend to bring back 10 percent more of their income than men. Despite these potential economic advantages and positive effects on women's empowerment that can be brought about through migrating (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011; Taylor, Moran-Taylor, & Ruiz, 2005), it is also important to understand how their departure may affect those family members that remain in the country of origin. The World Bank conducted a study which identified that when women are responsible for the distribution of household resources, there is a higher rate of investment in children's human capital as well as greater expenditure on health and food (The World Bank, 2012), subsequently it may mean that women's migration negatively impacts on the household if she is not present and directly responsible for the distribution of resources.

## **How the revolution helped shape women's migration**

The growing feminisation of migration in Nicaragua is not only a result of the changing labour demands in destination countries but has also been facilitated by the social and historical context of the country. The effects of the civil war (1979-1990) on Nicaragua's social and political landscape are something that prevails to this day. One unexpected consequence of this dark period of Nicaraguan history is the part it has played in reimagining the role of women in society, which subsequently has been a catalyst for the gradual rise in women's labour migration. With so many men having left for the army during this period, there followed a restructuring of society that led to women, alongside their role as the caregiver within the household, assuming the responsibilities of other tasks that were traditionally associated with men, such as farming and the participation in cooperatives. Such work gave them a new sense of self, an affirmation that they too could, and indeed should, play their part outside of domesticity. '[T]he Sandinistas effectively linked traditional female responsibilities to similar functions in national life outside of the home, thus fomenting a change that endures in present times and is reflected in the country's continued high rates of female labour force participation' (Jenkins, 2008).

It is this context that makes Nicaragua such an interesting case study; it is a country of contrasts: on the one hand, there is a strong sense of conservatism which upholds certain traditional family values and on the other hand there has been a societal shift that has led to a reimagining of what it means to be a woman, no longer limiting her to the spheres of the family and the home. However, this gradual evolution of gender roles within society has not yet extended to men, and within Nicaragua – as with many Latin American countries – there is still a rigidly accepted view of what it means to be a man, something that the sociologist Raewyn Connell refers to as hegemonic masculinity. This concept expresses the idea of a hierarchical structure against which men measure themselves, based on idealised notions of

masculinity which includes strength, authority, heterosexuality and emotional restraint. Hegemonic masculinity proposes an explanation for the way in which men maintain their social dominance over women (and other gendered identities such as 'homosexuality' which are perceived as less masculine) (Connell & Messerschmidt , 2005). Within this paper, any reference to hegemonic masculinity will be referring to the traits incorporated by this definition as a point of comparison for the research.

### **The left-behind, masculinity and gender: A review of the literature**

Any study of human behaviour and actions cannot be studied independent of gender as they are intangibly intertwined, as Rhacel Parreñas found in her study of transnational families, '[...] society continuously enforces gender boundaries to uphold norms through the monitoring of daily practices. A person's crossing of socially inscribed gender definitions is often met with dismay and faces obstacles' (Parreñas, 2005:4). There have been several studies which have shown that when women are left-behind following the migration of a husband or partner they will often take on a more autonomous role with regards to the household decision-making (Chen, 2006; Desai & Banerji, 2008; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011). However, refuting this idea, Antman argues that bargaining power is rooted in income shares and therefore the migration of a husband or spouse may have a negative effect on the woman left-behind (Antman, 2012). It is the aim of this paper is to uncover the extent to which men left-behind may experience emancipation from traditional gendered expectations or whether their sense of masculinity is too much of an inhibiting factor to take on roles that would otherwise be traditionally associated with women.

## **Migration and left-behind wives**

Despite increasing attention being turned towards the feminisation of migration<sup>2</sup>, there is almost no empirical study that has been carried out which looks specifically into the effects of this migration on the male partners or husbands left-behind, and the way in which they may assume the household responsibilities left after the woman in the household has migrated (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). This section provides an overview of some of the literature pertaining to cases of households in which the men have migrated, providing a context to develop our study on the men left-behind.

There have been several different angles taken in the literature relating to the effects of migration on those that are left-behind: the wider socio-cultural implications and the changes to intra-household bargaining (Antman, 2012; Gibson, 2011; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011). Remittances are often considered as one of the positive outcomes of migration on the sending household (Gibson, 2011), with the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) theory citing remittances as one of the key factors for a household's decision to migrate (de Haas, 2010). Nevertheless, this theory places a lot of emphasis on the role of the household as part of a combined decision making process, and this is in contrast to the results of several studies on the left-behind. In Gibson's study on the experiences of the left-behind family members in Tonga, his results found that despite the economic returns being lauded as one of the main factors accounting for an individual's decision to migrate, Gibson found that these benefits may not be immediately present, '[...] results suggest that at least in the short run there may be some adverse consequences for those left-behind when a subset of their household migrate to New Zealand. Income falls by approximately 20-25 percent, whether measured per capita or per adult equivalent, with a rise in net remittances not offsetting a large fall in labor earnings' (Gibson, 2011:2). However,

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<sup>2</sup> According to the UN, as of 2015 women represent 48.2% of world international migrant stocks



looking at the benefits in a broader context, Gibson found that those people left-behind were able to adapt to the challenges presented by the migration of a spouse or family member, for example by making adjustments to household spending or increasing labour market participation. These traits of adaptability can make a household more resilient to economic shocks in the longer term and be seen as a positive spillover of migration.

Other such spillover effects can include the role that migration may play in changing gender dynamics and facilitating the breakdown of traditional gender norms, which some studies have shown can provide women with the opportunity to take autonomous decisions where they otherwise would not have been in a position to do so (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011). In his study on the effects of migration on family life in Ecuador, Jason Pribilsky found that being left-behind gave women a new sense of identity, it created a communality amongst left-behind spouses of migrant husbands and increased the time they spent with other women for mutual support as well as the sharing of meals and resources (Pribilsky, 2004). Interestingly several papers have noted the way in which women have adapted to the changing household dynamics by taking on roles that would otherwise have been the responsibility of the husband or partner (Chen, 2006; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011). Such transformations are significant to the extent that they break the strong ties of normative social rules which suggest that, although these social norms and defined gender roles can be very limiting, people are not strictly bound to them.

### **Men and masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity has become the benchmark to which all other definitions of masculinity are compared, embodying a notion of maleness that all men are expected to share (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and within this definition is the associated idea of power and control. The pervasive characteristics of what it means to be a man within society based on the hegemonic definition means that much of the literature relating to men left-behind,

will often fall back on to these stereotypes without seeking to delve deeper into the reasons behind decision making or behaviour. Examples of this include the assertion that when women become the main breadwinner in a household, a man's sense of self would be eroded to such an extent that he would look for other ways to reassert his masculinity such as alcohol, gambling and violence (Welsh, 2001; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). It could be argued that by turning to such activities, the man is reasserting a sense of control over his life; many ideas of what it means to be a man return to the belief that, '[w]ithin the family they [the men] are the bosses, they make the decisions, are the legal representatives and provide for the family through paid work' Welsh (2001:26). The combination of losing their status as the main breadwinner coupled with the idea of having to fulfill the roles traditionally carried out by women in the wake of the wife or partners departure was found to lead to increasing isolation or distance from the family home. In her study from the Phillipines, Rhacel Parreñas found that only those men left-behind who carried a gun at work, were likely to be involved more heavily in the care giving role as well as the domestic chores at home (such as the cooking and cleaning). This, she concluded, demonstrated the way in which they were able to use these very masculinised roles (security guard, policeman) to enforce their masculine identity even when their migrant wives become the main breadwinner, and thus embody a more masculine trait (Parreñas, 2005).

One of the most challenging aspects of studying the way that a man defines his own sense of masculinity and changes therein, is being able to determine which aspects of a man's identity are indeed his own and which are projected on to him by society. As Welsh has noted, 'inherent in men's socialisation was a series of prohibitions that prevented men from developing characteristics associated with women: sensitivity, tenderness, the expression of feelings, and so on' (2001:28). This internal conflict means that masculinity can act as a societal barrier indirectly preventing him from taking part in certain tasks or jobs that he fears

may lead to ridicule or ostracisation by his peers (Welsh, 2001:49). The way in which society has implicitly defined masculinity in this way means that men are faced with something of an internal conflict regarding their changing role within the household.

### **Migration and gender**

For many years, women's migration was only considered by scholars as part of family reunification, with the assumption that any independent migration carried out by the woman herself would be largely as a passive actor at the hands of traffickers or smugglers (de Haas, 2007). However, this is not an accurate reflection of the reality of migration, with women representing approximately half of the estimated 258 million international migrants (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2017).

The changing balance of power when a woman has greater economic autonomy in the household may have a significant impact on intra-household bargaining. Cornwall & Lindisfarne (2003) argued that it is not the biological provisions of sex that determine power structures within a household but rather the 'masculinised power' associated with those who have control over resources. Therefore, by becoming the main breadwinner, the question stands as to whether the woman would also end up inheriting the higher status within the household, subsequently confining the man's position to one which is more subordinate, or whether this simply is not enough of a factor to overcome these social norms (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 2003; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Macours & Vakis, 2007). In their paper on the effects of transnational migration on Guatemalan lives, Taylor *et al* (2005) found that although there were signs of individual attitudinal changes for both men and women, these changes were rarely long-lasting, only superficially carving away at the traditionally held views on gender roles, '[...] this American exposure provides male migrants with a novel understanding of women's roles in their places of origin in Guatemala, albeit for a brief period upon their return'. The country context in which migration is taking place – both

origin and destination – is an important determinant of how impactful social remittances<sup>3</sup> will be on the receiving society. There are studies from Mexico and Ecuador that have found that as a consequence of migration there have been more substantive changes in men’s behaviour when they return to the origin country. This is particularly true with regards to their attitudes towards cooking and cleaning – tasks traditionally considered in many societies to be in the sphere of women’s work – with migrant men having to take on these roles when they are living away from the family home if they do not have the financial means to hire someone to do it for them (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Pribilsky, 2004).

The notion of control and intra-household bargaining is an important component of migratory decision making. There are some clear distinctions between men and women and the extent to which they have autonomy over the decision to migrate. The propensity for a woman to migrate is increased if they are coming from a more matrifocal<sup>4</sup> society– such as Nicaragua or the Dominican Republic – as their migration is much less tied to that of their husband or partner than in more patriarchal countries such as Mexico or Costa Rica (Massey, Fischer, & Capoferro, 2006). In these more patriarchal societies it is still considered a stigma for women to migrate on their own without their partner or husband (Malkin, 2004). However, for many women, migrating offers them the opportunity to be economically independent as well as to help emancipate them from abusive spousal relationships (Taylor, Moran-Taylor, & Ruiz, 2005).

It is evident from the literature that in those societies with a strong presence of *machismo*, a man’s sense of identity is intrinsically linked to his role as the main breadwinner and decision maker in the house. When this is removed, it can result in men rejecting their

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<sup>3</sup> Defined by Peggy Levitt as ‘the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities’ from her article *Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion*

<sup>4</sup> There are discrepancies in the way that matrifocality is defined, the broad definition is that it refers to households in which the mother is the head. This definition has been expanded by González (1965) to include the psychological stability the mother provides and the influence she has on determining how the household budget is spent.

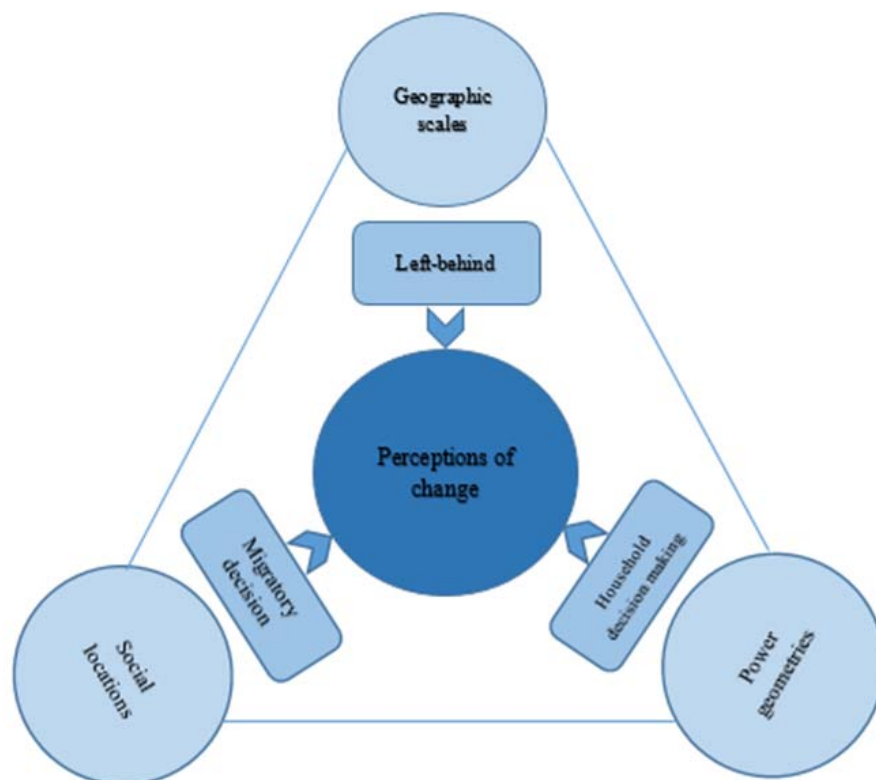
responsibilities in the home, and instead showing an increased involvement in ‘vices’ such as alcohol and gambling or a heightened likelihood of domestic violence towards the partner (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Parreñas R. , 2005; Welsh, 2001).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Gender is not distinct from the migration process and it is important that there is a conceptual framework that considers how gender can impact on this – both the individual migrating and those who are left-behind – in order to analyse the process holistically. As a response to this, Mahler and Pessar created their Gendered Geographies of Power framework (2001). The aim of this framework is to bring gender to the forefront of the discussion on transnational migration and how gender roles and the balance of power may shift across different spaces. There are three key areas from this framework which this paper will build upon to study the impact of women’s migration on the men left-behind and the perceptions of change thereof. The first is geographic scales. This term refers to the way in which one’s gender exists simultaneously in different social scales (as an individual, within the family and at a societal level) as well as transnationally across locations. This is directly linked to the left-behind as it is here that gender roles may be challenged. For example, when a woman is the migrant in the household it elicits the question as to whether the man left-behind (in the case of this study) maintains his role as the main breadwinner or whether this is diminished in favour of taking on those roles left behind by the woman who has migrated (such as child care and domestic work in the home). The second of these areas is social locations which are the historical and cultural factors which determine an individual’s position in power hierarchies. This paper uses social locations to analyse how the country context may have played a determinant role in facilitating women’s migration such as the amount of agency women have within the origin country, and the factors – both economic and cultural – which led to the migration. The final element of this framework used in this study is power

geometries. Power geometries relate to the way in which cultural and historical factors can impact on someone's access to resources and the way these resources are used by the household. This paper will utilise this element of the framework to understand the extent to which the man's role as the main breadwinner has been superseded by his wife, and how this changes his role in the power hierarchy of the household. The following figure offers a model showing how these areas relate to one another to help build a picture of the way that change is perceived and thus the role that gender plays in the discussion of the left-behind:

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Using this framework this paper seeks to establish how a migratory experience – both of the migrant and that of the person left-behind – may be affected by their gender and how gender roles are configured within a transnational context. The rise in women's migration could be a sign of a shift in power geometries, and by conducting interviews with the men

that are left-behind, this study was better able to understand the decision-making process behind the spouse's migration and the amount of agency both the man and the woman have.

Previous research has shown that women that are left-behind are often tied to their domestic, subservient role in the household (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999) and subsequently are heavily dependent on the husband's allocation of resources, 'the women often find themselves beseeching financially-strapped, migrant partners first to accept their collect phone calls and then to remain on the line while the women plead for increased levels of remittance support' (Mahler & Pessar, 2001:449). In contrast, this paper seeks to understand whether there is a parallel sense of dependency felt by the men left-behind or whether their innate sense of masculinity prevails, thus inhibiting any sense of reliance on their wife or partner.

Despite the evolution of a woman's position within society as a result of the political revolution in the late 1970s early 1980s in Nicaragua – emancipating them beyond that of solely a mother or wife – such a development has not been extended to Nicaraguan society's conceptual understanding of what it means to be a man. Matriarchy remains at the heart of families in Nicaragua, nevertheless, *machismo* and the notions of hegemonic masculinity are still rife. In contrast to the findings of those papers looking at women left-behind (Pribilsky, 2004; Chen, 2006; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011), we would hypothesise that the societal pressures of *machismo* are too pervasive in Nicaragua to lead to any substantive changes in the man's sense of masculine identity. Therefore, we would argue that being left-behind will decrease the man's propensity to get involved in domestic and care work – roles traditionally associated with women – owing to the inhibiting assumptions about masculinity and the traditional role of the man as the main breadwinner.

## Methodology

For this study a qualitative research design was used based on an interpretivist paradigm. A semi-structured interview guide was produced which builds on the previous literature and theoretical framework to guide the questions, however, the parameters of the questions were not rigid and while they ensured a level of consistency amongst the respondents they simultaneously offered a degree of flexibility on the part of the interviewer allowing adjustments and omissions to be made as necessary.

Despite the rise in the numbers of women migrating, both globally and from Nicaragua, the overall percentage of those migrating through official documented channels is relatively small. Consequently, locating and gaining access to those men – whose wives may be in a precarious legal situation – was one of the major challenges associated with this research. In order to overcome this, two organisations were approached to work with on this project: *Servicio Jesuita de Migrantes* (SJM) and Octupan. These were selected not only for the close connections they have with migrants and their families but also because of the locations in which they work, with both organisations having offices in two of the departments which have the highest rates of women's migration recorded in Nicaragua: Managua and Chinandega<sup>5</sup>.

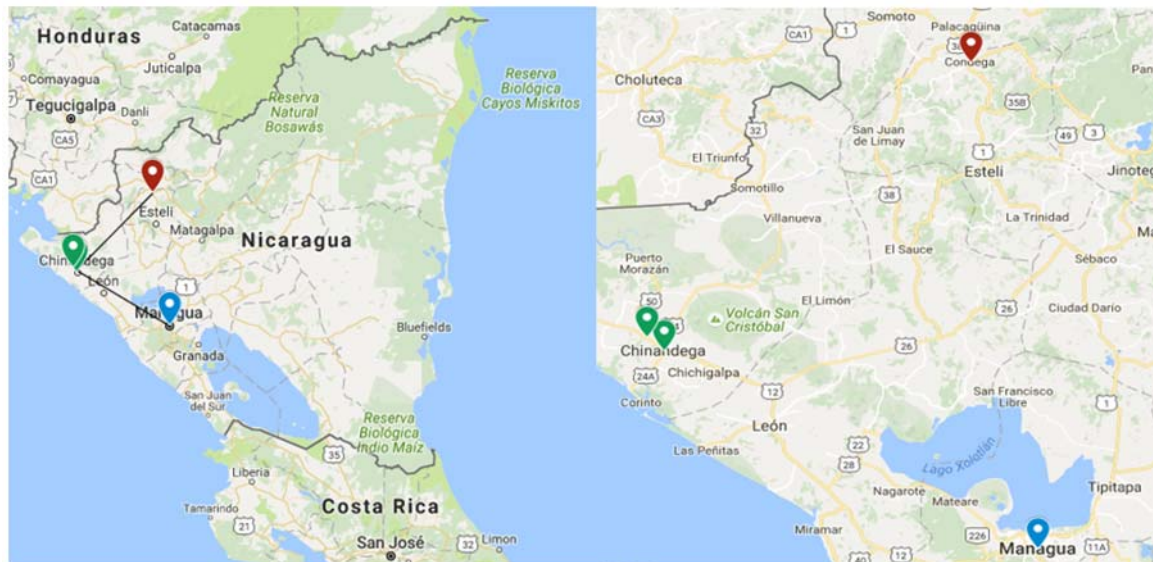
In total twenty interviews were carried out during four weeks of field work in June and July 2016: five in Managua, eight in Chinandega and seven in Condega. The map below outlines the regions in which these interviews were carried out:

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<sup>5</sup> From the last government census taken in 2005, there were 19,397 people who had emigrated from the department of Chinandega (8,845 of them women) and 44,221 who had emigrated from Managua (23,016 of them women)



Figure 2: Interview locations



The interviews were conducted with men between the ages of 27 and 60 years. The majority of the men were in work aside from one man who was recovering from an operation at the time of the interview and three men who had retired. The sample consists of men who were fathers and those who were not, as well as men who had separated from their partners since the migration. Although by definition these men are no longer ‘left-behind’ as the union had already dissolved, it was evident that the separation was almost always symptomatic, to some extent, of the partner’s migration and even though they were no longer a couple at the time of the interview, the man was able to talk retrospectively about his experiences.

Of the sample of men interviewed, 80 percent were fathers and of those, 44 percent of their children were under the age of 18 years at the time of the interview. The remainder had one or more children under the age of 18 at some point during the period of the partner’s (mother’s) migration. This means that in all cases the father has been the main care giver for some portion of their childhood.

The destinations of the spouses were fairly uniform within each of the departments and reflected trends which were gleaned from the background literature, with the main countries of destination being: the United States, Costa Rica and Spain. The following figure provides an overview of the main profiles of the respondents and their spouse:

Figure 3: Characteristics of respondents

INTERVIEW CODE	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	CHILDREN (YES/NO)	MIGRATION DESTINATION	REMITTANCES (YES/NO)	MIGRANT DECISION	TYPE OF WORK (MAN)	SOCIAL ACTIVITIES	COMMUNICATION	HOUSEHOLD CHORES?
Gondegas_016	40+	Married (separated)	Yes	Costa Rica	No	Woman's	Agriculture	Yes	initially	Yes
Gondegas_003	40+	Married	Yes	Costa Rica	Yes	Joint	Agriculture	Yes	Daily by telephone	No
Chinandega_008	40+	Separated	Yes	Costa Rica	Yes (to the children)	Joint	Shop	Yes	Calls family weekly	Yes
Chinandega_004	50+	Married (separated)	Yes	Costa Rica	No	Woman's	Retired	No	No	Yes
Chinandega_005	40+	Married (separated)	Yes	Costa Rica	Yes (in the beginning)	Woman's	Carpenter	No	initially by phone	Yes
Gondegas_005	56	Married	Yes	Costa Rica	Yes	Joint	Agriculture	Yes	Yes weekly phone	No
Managua_005	36	Married (separated)	Yes	USA	Yes (5 or 6 times)	Woman's	Unemployed	No	Yes sporadically	Yes
Managua_003	56	Married	Yes	USA	Yes (sometimes)	Joint	Repairs appliances	Yes	Yes weekly	No
Managua_001	27	Married	No	USA	No	Her father	Repairs computers	Yes	Yes regularly	No
Chinandega_005	60	Married (separated)	Yes	USA	No	Joint	Factory	Yes	Yes occasionally	Yes
Managua_004	42	Married	Yes	USA	Unknown	Joint	Repairing vehicles	No	Yes daily phone	Yes
Chinandega_007	50+	Married	Yes	Spain	Yes	Joint	Retired	No	Yes	Yes
Chinandega_008	50+	Married	Yes	Spain	Yes	Joint	Carpenter	No	Yes weekly phone	Yes
Chinandega_001	39	Married	Yes	Spain	Yes (sometimes)	Joint	Taxi	No	initially Whatsapp	Yes
Londregas_001	50+	Married	Yes	Spain	Yes	Joint	Farmer	Yes	Yes daily Whatsapp	No
Gondegas_004	31	Married	No	Spain	Yes	Joint	Repairing vehicles	Yes	Yes daily Whatsapp	No
Gondegas_002	50+	Married	Yes	Panama	Yes	Woman's	Local government	Yes	Yes daily Whatsapp	Yes

A point of saturation was reached for some of the topic areas after conducting twenty interviews. These areas are substantiated in the following section with an overview and analysis of the main findings.

## Results – The rise of the *padre-luchadores*

Referring back to Mahler and Pessar's Gendered Geography of Power framework, it is important to consider how gender relations and the balance of power shift across transnational spaces. These changes include not only the decision making that took place prior to the partner's migration, but also the intra-household bargaining – so the negotiations that take place between household members – and whether there is a shift in the balance of power as a result of the migration. The results of these interviews show that the men recognised the woman's role in the household decision making that took place prior to the migration, defending his diminished influence on the process as not wanting to be '*egoísta*'

(selfish). In some instances, this desire of not wishing to be selfish was directly linked to other motivations for the woman's migration such as reunification with the women's children who had been sent for by their birth father through the *Ley NACARA*<sup>6</sup>, 'yes, yes, we came to an agreement. We came to an agreement because if I hadn't have wanted it or something she would have gone anyway and ended the relationship' (Managua\_003). The change in social location can be a factor that changes existing power relations in a household. In the case of the woman that has migrated, Pessar and Mahler (2003) note the way in which the acquisition of legal status in the destination country can improve the opportunities available to migrants, and simultaneously undermine those of the individual left-behind, 'If it's going well for me I can bring them back here but if they don't want to and they [the wife and children] are adapted to the system over there, okay, it's their decision' (Managua\_004). However, such an altruistic approach was not always apparent with many of the men using the migration as a way to reinforce gender distinctions, creating a sense of us and them, 'I had nothing to lose [from his wife migrating] because the debt is in her name, all the bills are in her name' (Chinandega\_001).

One area of intra-household bargaining which appeared to contrast the findings of previous literature relating to women left-behind was in relation to remittances. Although half of the households were found to be receiving money from the partner, this was never found to be the main source of income (or was never admitted to as being the main source of income), instead it would be supplementary to the man's own, helping to pay towards a specific project in the house or would be sent directly to support the children, 'what she sends is very little and what she earns is very little. It is hard, it is hard but we carry on fighting' (Chinandega\_003). By removing any dependency on his wife's remittances, the man is able to maintain his role as the provider in the household and thus reinforce his own sense of

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<sup>6</sup> A family reunification law that offers a permanent resident or citizen from Central American countries the right to bring to the United States certain family members under certain conditions.

masculinity. In contrast to this, within the literature on women left-behind, remittances often acted as a way to minimise their agency and reinforce their subordinate position in the household, ‘the wives are beholden as well to the receipt of remittances, which binds them yet again to fidelity lest they risk abandonment and destitution’ (Mahler & Pessar, 2001:453). For the men, their masculinity was too closely tied to their work, and to lose this would be to relinquish a fundamental aspect of their identity, ‘she started sending [remittances] in the first year, that I kept for the children, but I kept working, I never stopped working. Working so that if she doesn’t send anything for the rest of the month I can get the food; working to keep them in school and all that’ (Chinandega\_005). This statement ‘I kept working, I never stopped working’ is one that permeates throughout the interviews, as it reinforces their position as the provider in the home. Working also allows the man to counter this change in geographic scales; by continuing to earn and provide for the family he is denying the woman the chance of positioning herself as the main breadwinner which would fundamentally undermine his sense of masculinity.

One further way that the men tried to reject the notion that they – as the left-behind – were in a position of dependency, was through reverse remittances. This is a term that is being employed by this paper to refer to the sending of money to the migrant wife in the destination country, ‘in terms of work she has very few hours and they don’t cover everything because sometimes I have to send her money from here’ (Managua\_003). This reinforced the man sense of dominance in the household hierarchy by creating a sense of – perhaps artificial – dependency on the part of his wife. However, based on the discussions with the men and the many cases of women who went onto eventually leave their partners following the migration, it could be theorised that the woman’s separation is symptomatic of the change in social location; the experience of being in a country in which societally and politically she may have more opportunities and a sense of independence (captured by the concept of Power

Geometries) this may act as a catalyst for detaching herself from her former life. Nevertheless, by maintaining a sense of dependency on her spouse during the initial period of the migration, she was able to elicit monetary support whilst concurrently redefining her own sense of self by gaining employment and building up her own social network. One respondent noted these gradual changes in the relationship, ‘also, she said that she was busy, that she was working and when I called her she didn’t have time although I noticed she was online chatting with someone else’ (Chinandega\_001).

Despite many of the women taking on domestic care jobs in the destination country, the economic independence associated with having paid employment may offer the women a sense of liberation from the gender roles they had been assigned by Nicaraguan society and their apparent refusal to be dictated to by their partners further supports this idea, ‘so come back I tell her. Come back and help me look after them [the children] and I’ll go. I’ll go and work in another country, in another place. Because over there in Salvador I earned and sent back constantly; every five weeks, every five weeks I was sending [money] back. Come back here I tell her, if you are not doing anything. But she stays there, she doesn’t answer me or she puts the phone down’ (Chinandega\_005).

In several previous studies of the left-behind, women were found to take on many roles traditionally associated with men (Chen, 2006; Oramas, Pimental, & Vallejo, 2011). However, in the case of the men left-behind the evidence was less clear cut. In one of only a few studies relating to men, Parreñas (2005) found that only those men who were employed in more masculine fields (policeman, security guard and other roles involving the carrying of a gun) would the man take an active involvement in domestic work at home. Nevertheless, the results from this study show that for the majority of the respondents, domestic work does not have a clear gendered association and they would instead absorb this work into their own household obligations, ‘when she left it became my turn to do everything. Having to bathe

the little girl, having to bathe the little boy and wash their clothes. Cooking, ironing, taking them [the children] to class and bringing them home [...] all the obligations that she left for me to take on' (Chinandega\_008). There are also some domestic chores which are considered more prestigious than others, which we have termed a hierarchy of domestic work. Many more of the men made references to cooking and sweeping the patio than they did to doing the washing and ironing, which suggests that there are still some tasks which are considered to be more feminine and thus emasculating. It should be noted that the men only absorbed these tasks as part of their own obligations in those circumstances when the man did not live with another female relative (such as their mother or sister). In those instances, it was common that the other women in the household would then be responsible for this work rather than have a paid job herself.

For many men, it was the challenge of juggling paid employment with household responsibilities that they described as being most '*duro*' (hard). As was previously mentioned, 80 percent of men that were interviewed are, or have been, the main caregiver for their children at some point during the wife's migration, which contrasts with literature from previous studies which showed that men who are left-behind have a tendency to reject child care responsibilities, instead placing the responsibility with other female relatives. The hypothesis that men would engage less with those roles traditionally associated with women was based on the theory of hegemonic masculinity and the expectation that any involvement would be seen to call their masculinity into question. What was discovered in this research was the establishment of a new sense of belonging through the association with two distinct – yet related – tribal identities: *padre-madres* (mother-fathers) and *padre-luchadores* (father-fighters, in reference to a metaphorical struggle), 'so this is how I've stayed and this is how it has been the experience that I have lived. Fighting, a *padre-luchador* and... I don't regret anything and I know that I can keep moving forward' (Chinandega\_005). This notion of

fighting on and moving forward were common threads throughout many of the responses, with this belief that as a man they had a certain responsibility they must uphold, 'it got me thinking that they need me, I can't turn my back on them, it is still my obligation, still being their father I must try and keep things calm' (Chinandega\_001). It reinforces the pervasive masculinity that exists for these men, the need to express agency in a situation over which he has much less control.

At times, the man's ability to uphold this sense of dogged determination to 'keep things calm' and 'move forward' left him emotionally burdened, with several descriptions mirroring those which may describe the death of a loved one, with an overbearing sense of loss and longing, 'the hope that one day we will be reunited once more, that is all, every day thinking the same and of her, thinking of nothing else than wanting her to come back' (Chinandega\_003). Where the men's sense of male identity shone through most clearly was when they described their difficulties in talking openly about how they felt; perhaps because of feeling ashamed or not wanting to show signs of weakness but this struggle revealed itself during the interviews with many of the men getting visibly upset, unable to contain the hurt they had been suffering. The interviews allowed them to confront these emotions and gave them a chance to '*desahogarse*' (to unburden themselves), as one respondent commented, 'what you are doing is very interesting because in a certain way you have helped me to unburden myself despite what I feel or what I have maybe repressed inside' (Managua\_005).

## **Conclusion**

One of the main motives for investigating this topic is owing to the lack of previous studies that have been carried out specifically dealing with the men left-behind and the implicit assumption that men will cope negatively with their partner's migration. With the rise in women's migration from Nicaragua, it seemed pertinent to take the opportunity to

better understand this situation. The cultural context from which the migration is taking place is an important factor to consider, not only the role that masculinity and *machismo* play in Nicaragua, but also the way the revolution re-shaped Nicaragua and strengthened the role that women have in society. This paper has argued the case that the increased autonomy and civil engagement of women – compared to neighbouring countries – is partly because of the successful revolution, and the Sandinista's subsequent promotion of programmes supporting the empowerment of women (Jenkins, 2008).

One of the cornerstones of masculinity is the man as the provider, the main breadwinner, and as one man described it, 'the fundamental pillar of the household' (Chinandega\_005). As Macours & Vakis (2007) found when women migrate, they can earn more and subsequently send greater amounts home than men, which would potentially place into doubt the man's standing as the 'fundamental pillar' in the home. Nevertheless, the results from this study refute this suggestion, the men continued to work even and seemed to earn sufficient money, and any money sent back by the wife was considered to be supplementary. This reflects similar findings in a study carried out by Hoang & Yeoh (2011) in Vietnam, which highlights the symbolic importance men place on their work, not wishing to look like 'a sponger' whilst their wife is working hard to earn money for the family, which may go some way to explain why there was also an insistence on the part of the men in Nicaragua that they continued to work and earn money, irrespective of whether in actual fact the wife was earning more.

The expectation that the change in a man's economic status in the household would lead to an increase in other activities as a way to reaffirm his masculinity (such as socialising with male acquaintances, higher alcohol intake, increased participation in team sports) was not found in this study. Nevertheless, the jobs that the men had could be almost exclusively



categorised as typically masculine: taxi driver, labourer, farmer, mechanic, which may offer further evidence of the importance that a man's job has on his sense of identity.

However, this does not necessarily account for the men's willingness to take on the additional role as the main care giver in the household. The results of this new role led to a display of self-awareness and empathy towards family members. This awareness of others appeared to go hand in hand with being left-behind as there was a growing realisation that for many of them, they no longer had someone who was taking care of them. As a consequence of this, the men talked about having quit or reduced the amount of alcohol they drink, no longer going out with friends as often, and trying to cut down smoking with the knowledge that they have to think about more than just themselves.

The lessening opportunities to socialise with male friends – which helps form and cement masculine identity – was instead replaced by the creation of a new sense of belonging which manifested itself through two distinct groups: the *padre-madres* and the *padre-luchadores*. This common sense of identity bridged the gap between the roles traditionally associated with women and masculine identity, allowing them to reimagine what it means to be a man in Nicaraguan society and thus avoid the possibility of ostracisation and ridicule from his peers, which Welsh (2001) found to be one of the main barriers for men taking on these roles.

Despite taking ownership of these new identities, the man's perception of himself did not extend to him being more open about his feelings or experiences in his daily life. The omnipotence of the belief that men should embody strength, emotional restraint and authority meant that the idea of showing pain or sadness following their partner's migration was not considered to be socially acceptable, and it was only during the interviews that these emotions came to light offering them this chance to '*desahogarse*' (unburden himself).

The limited time available to conduct the field work for this study meant that it was not possible to obtain a homogenous sample population. Therefore, it could not be determined the extent to which the experiences of those men differed between those that had children and those that did not, and for those men who were still in a union and those whose union had since dissolved. Such distinctions would offer an interesting point of comparison for a future paper on left-behind men. There are many options for further analysis to be carried out. For instance, the rise of the *padre-luchadores* is a phenomenon that warrants greater exploration, in particular to determine whether this is a unique occurrence in Nicaragua or whether this is also taking place elsewhere.

## **Policy Implications**

- This research has implications for national immigration policy, including bilateral arrangements, to help facilitate circular migration. It recommends improved regular migration pathways and better access to information to ensure that women can easily return to countries of origin to reduce to prevalence of long-term left-behind.
- The Nicaraguan government should be assisted in the collection of comprehensive data on men left-behind to ensure they do not remain a forgotten group recognising their growing prevalence with the rise in the number of women migrating autonomously.
- The development of a social media campaign which seeks to address the shifting notions of masculinity would help reduce the societal stigma associated with domestic work and caregiving. Examples include the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) 'I am a migrant' campaign.
- Further, local governments/NGOs should seek to offer inclusive services to men left-behind to provide interventions and support. Noting that services currently available

have a large uptake of women but few men owing to a lack of information and limited targeted outreach.

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