

Summary Report
CLAG Field Study Award

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Research Site: Oaxaca, Mexico

Project: Gender and Remittances: Lived experiences of women in Oaxaca, Mexico

Overview

My doctoral dissertation studies the point of negotiation where women's agency and remittance governance intersect in Oaxaca, Mexico. Remittances are money or goods sent by migrants to their families and friends in their place of origin. In 2016 remittances to Mexico reached an all-time high of almost \$27 billion USD (Banco de México, 2017). Remittance governance is a concept designed to capture official state policies aimed at channeling remittance flows and a range of less formalized social practices around how remittances are transferred and used. In Mexico, the federal government and individual states have put in place policies seeking to channel remittances into investment in productive projects and thus contribute to economic development. At the local or the municipal level¹, town authorities often have their own agendas for influencing how remittances are spent.

I draw on analyses of remittances in development, transnational families research, and feminist geography to answer two overarching questions: How is remittance governance formulated and negotiated in migrant sending communities? How do negotiations and struggles over remittances shape the lived experiences of women in migrant sending communities?

My project is significant because a deeper understanding of women's civic engagement with remittance governance has the potential to contribute to more inclusive remittance policy at different levels of government. The process of allocating money, whether it is in the household or in the community is gendered. Women's access to, and ability to make decisions about, the spending and investment of remittances has ramifications for the health of children, investments in the built and agrarian environment, and the exercise of political power. This research is directed at the lived experiences of women in order to engage the people who are actively participating in managing remittances and their developmental impacts.

Fieldwork Experiences

The Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG) supported preliminary research that helped me to establish field sites for my doctoral dissertation research. Building on recurrent trips to Oaxaca since 2015, I traveled to Mexico City, Oaxaca City, Puebla City, and three rural towns from June 9-August 19, 2017. The money from CLAG was used to purchase a round-trip plane ticket from Cincinnati, Ohio to Mexico City as well as pay for travel within Mexico and cover most of the expenses (food and lodging) for the 10 weeks that I was there.

Upon arrival in Mexico City in June, I attended the [Law and Society Association](#) international meeting in Mexico City June 20-23. There I was fortunate to meet with [Xóchitl Bada](#) from the University of Illinois, Chicago. Her work over the last decade+ has been crucial to my understanding of remittances. Dr. Bada gave me feedback on my research questions and methodology, as well as connected me to data sources on remittances at the municipal level. The conference was also fruitful because I heard presentations from several scholars doing work on bridging feminist, intersectional, and decolonial research. Before leaving Mexico City and

¹ The state of Mexico and federal government have smaller administrative divisions beginning with states and then municipalities.

heading to Oaxaca, I re-connected with [Ana Melisa Pardo Montaño](#) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México where I have had an institutional affiliation since 2016. Dr. Pardo provided me with a second round of feedback on my research proposal and connected me to government databases on remittances. While in Mexico City I continued studying the work of Mexican and Latin American scholars on remittances using the resources at the [National Library of Mexico \(UNAM\)](#).

In late June, I relocated to Oaxaca City, and this was my home base for 8 weeks. There I met with [Holly Worthen](#) at the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca. She and [Tad Mutersbaugh](#) (from the University of Kentucky, and based in Oaxaca 2016-2017) were my liaisons to other researchers and community leaders at several potential field sites in the Sierra Norte and Isthmus regions of the state. From Oaxaca City I planned week-long trips to three possible field sites and continued to study the works of Mexican scholars at various institutions such as the [Welte Institute for Oaxacan Studies](#) and the [Center for Social Anthropology Investigations and Studies](#).

I visited three potential field sites in Oaxaca and Puebla. Using ethnographic methods like participant observation and interviews, I learned more about the town where I will likely be doing fieldwork in 2018². I observed human interactions at town meetings, festivals, and other public spaces like basketball courts and health clinics. In these spaces, I spoke with town authorities and women receiving remittances.

Research findings and next steps

Six months ago, I proposed comparative research between two towns, one in Oaxaca and one in Puebla. After this summer, I believe that my research is better suited for a single site. Remittances and how they change family relations is a sensitive matter. Through my discussions with scholars as well as preliminary interviews with women receiving remittances and town authorities, I learned more about the intricacies about how money is received, spent, and what kinds of decision-making processes are behind these actions. I will be able to collect better data on family finances if I do an extended ethnography (about a year) in one research site.

The other area where I made major advancements in my research is in developing a typology of remittance exchanges within a family. The purpose of the typology is to create a starting point for collecting data during fieldwork. The typology helps me to identify how remittance patterns are gendered and how remittances shape gender. Through the typology I trace all the discrete events that go into a remittance exchange from the decision to migrate to the obligation to send money, the requests for money, the sending of remittances, and how they are marked for use. Paying close attention to intersectionality (age, marital status, immigration status, family status) and different dynamics that go into remittance sending, receiving, and decision-making is crucial to understanding remittance behavior.

CLAG allowed me to return to Mexico for a third consecutive summer and continue to lay groundwork so that I can begin a full year of fieldwork in 2018. I achieved the goal set out in the project proposal I submitted last spring: I returned to several potential research sites and I did participant observation, preliminary interviews, and established permission from town authorities to return to the site for research purposes. The timing of the CLAG field study award was critical because it allowed me to continue fieldwork uninterrupted as I transition from doctoral student to candidate.

² I am not releasing the name of the town because my research is still in the preliminary stage. I may not use the real name of the town in order to protect the identity of research participants.