

*Varones al son de la migración:  
Migración internacional y masculinidades  
de Veracruz a Chicago*

Carolina Rosas, 2008, México, El Colegio de México

Patricia Zamudio Grave  
*Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores  
en Antropología Social, Golfo*

This book concerns the way in which international migration participates in the transformation of *masculinities* in a rural community in the central region of Veracruz, through the exploration of three mandates of masculinity: provision, control over women, and courage. Its main purpose is to investigate how constructions of masculinity—that govern and lead men in society, according to Bourdieu—are reaffirmed or questioned by the migratory process: the ways in which males confront these dispositions, the degree to which they comply with them, the ways they use to defy or exchange them for others, and the consequences of doing this.

Why does Rosas employ the plural term: *masculinities*? Because, as she explains, there is neither a

unique way of being a man that is socially legitimate, nor is there a sole array of expectations to which to respond in order to be considered one; the diversity of expectations will depend upon factors such as social class, age, context, marital status, family arrangements, or place in the life cycle, among others. However, there is usually a hegemonic conception of masculinity that demands that males be strong, capable, trustworthy, and in control. In times of crisis, however, there can be a lack of correlation between what is desirable and what is possible: the agricultural production crisis in El Cardal, Veracruz, currently presents males with the necessity of searching for alternative ways to fulfill their obligations. International migration affords them

with the possibility of both responding to the demands imposed upon them and, at the same time, of questioning the very elements that define their masculinity.

The book explains the methodological design that guided the research: this was a qualitative study that takes men as its unit of analysis, complemented by aggregate data that provides us with the context required to understand the process better. Chapter one presents the theoretical approach, clearly explaining the advantage of exploring masculinities by means of the three aforementioned mandates to break down the analysis and to be able to observe the details of the dynamics involved. Chapter Two provides the context within which the *Cardaleños* are acting: recurrent crises of coffee and sugar cane production accompanied by a relative absence of the state, and emerging international migration in Veracruz. Chapters three, four, and five analyze each mandate, giving a voice to the protagonists—men and women—and interweaving the argument in a vivid and respectful fashion.

The first mandate explored is that of provision. According to Pedro, one of the author's informants, being a provider means

that a man accepts his responsibility to supply everything that his wife and children need. However, during the last few years Pedro had to look for alternatives to fulfill his duty:

The situation forced me to go to the other side. Yes, because I like to work, I am a hardworking man. But I do my best here, and [I do not get much]. If you put forth your best effort and you cannot get more, you should look for a place where you do your best effort but get more (p. 107).

Working hard and providing for the family is a basic part of a man's self esteem. Rural labor is hard and poorly compensated. Thus, many make the decision to cross the border and to demand some dignity for themselves with better payment and, as they go, they achieve their economic goals. Admiration is another reward for this, because migrants in the U.S. know that others speak of them with respect, and this makes them feel good.

Another mandate that Rosas explores is control over women. Even if the male is the best provider, the judgment that others have of him also depends on his partner. He needs her to obey his instructions and to behave properly:

Migration debilitates the mandate of control over women; that is, it weakens the capacity to impose masculine desires over feminine ones, as well as the strategies deployed to check on the women's behavior (p. 143).

International migration means distance and prolonged absence, and creates a space for women to *breathe* in another way, perhaps more freely, but also more ambiguously. They receive remittances and must administrate these; they can spend the money for their children's support. However, many decisions remain in the hands of the men; for example, decisions on house construction, buying a plot of land, or using money for savings. In any case, some women *se desmandan*, that is, they challenge the authority of their husbands and utilize part of the money in the ways they consider best.

A main concern of both is related to fidelity. Both men and women wish that their partners would remain faithful, but know that distance affords opportunities for the opposite. Accordingly, both display strategies of control over each other. Ideologies of gender provide social "understanding" for the males' unfaithfulness—"men have their [sexual]

needs"—but condemn women's breaking of their vows. To protect the union, relatives are willing to act as watchmen to avoid "temptations" for women. As for themselves, women also implement certain strategies of control over migrant men, fomenting competition among them to "keep them busy and avoid bad thoughts."

The third mandate of masculinity is courage. International migration can be a very propitious terrain for displaying this: crossing the desert is an exceptional situation that shows a male's valor. In addition, arriving at his destination, procuring employment, and experiencing the suffering due to the absence of his loved ones are occasions to show courage by persevering, by working hard, and by sending money to their families.

One feature of the courage of the *Cardaleños* pertains to coherence between discourse and actions, particularly with regard to migration. It is not considered proper for a man to "announce" his migration and to back out later. Thus, it is better to maintain the decision a secret and to implement it when the right time arrives. Interestingly, expressing pain or profound feelings of sadness or fear, even with tears, does not invalidate the condition of being cou-

rageous. Bidding good-bye to his wife and children, knowing that they will not see each other for a long time, is a very strong experience that renders crying legitimate, but not in front of others, only in solitude.

Rosas shows that behind the competition among males to carry out each of the mandates, there are elements of care and of love. Behind the strategies of control there is not only an interest in vouchsafing masculine authority and virility, but there are also loving interests of protection by those who are perceived as vulnerable as well as the conviction to safeguard the conjugal bond. Behind the mandate of provision, there is also love: its purpose is to build a better life for the family and, each time the man sends his family money, his concern for his love ones is re-affirmed and his commitment to ensure that they have a better future is re-established.

All of these experiences contribute to the reconfiguration of masculinities in El Cardal. Migrants and their wives, their relatives, and other members of their communities are using the migration experience as a way of both reaffirming its mandates and, at the same time, exploring different ways to comply with or, even,

challenge, these. Transgressions also form part of the reconfiguration of masculinities:

divergences and areas of conflict highlight the possibilities for social action to make the conditioning elements of gender more flexible. Migration makes possible a process of the relative transformation of some masculine ideas and practices, which [...] have shown notable effects in the lives of the actors (p. 258).

There is a type of transgression exhibited in the analysis, one that contrasts the migrants with *los arrepentidos* (those who retreat from migrating). While migrants are proud of their success in confronting the dangers of crossing the border without documents, the remaining males justify their repentance by appealing to other mandates, mainly that of the responsibility of provision; in the words of Norberto, “fear has always saved lives” (p. 243).

The author wishes to ensure that we do not get the idea that *Cardaleños* are prisoners of masculinity and completely conditioned by their gender. Periods of crisis, of change, evidence the framework in which social action is woven; these also provide opportunities for actors to reorient the

path or way. International migration affords them opportunities to do precisely this. *Cardaleños*, migrants and non-migrants, women and men, single or united, from uptown and from downtown, old and young, can decide to act the role that the gender script demands from them in different ways, in an attempt to deceive the mandate or to construct new mandates, for their incorporation into their universe of possibilities, into their *habitus*, other ways of being males or females that are less confining.

*Varones al son de la migración* shows that, beyond the urgency of men to demonstrate that they are that—men—their experience with migration, directly or indirectly, is opening possibilities that were unthinkable before. It will be these males, in their infinite comings and goings between what is desirable and what is possible, who will decide to dance to the *son* (music) that others play, or to take up the baton and conduct the dance.