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Reassessing the role of partnered women in migration decision-making and migration outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on women and internal family migration has tended to conclude that women are usually passive, subordinate, followers, or victims in the migration process because of the nature of their relationship to men. This study focuses on the independent (unsponsored) migrant rather than the corporate mover, which allows us to see how partnered women initiate and benefit from migration because of their sense of control over the process. While some women may still follow men in relocation, partnered women have their own labor-force interests at the destination and relational issues are critical in the migration process. Active participation in migration decision-making by women contributes to greater satisfaction with relocation.

KEY WORDS: decision-making • internal migration • migration • unsponsored migration • women
The dominant focus in the analysis of internal migration has been on the measurable outcomes of income or career from place of origin to destination (e.g., Cooke & Bailey, 1996; Lichter, 1980). When analysis discovered that migration was not gender-neutral, but a process that reflected gendered family relationships (Boyd, 1989), the door was opened to assessing migration as an interpersonal and interactional activity. Therefore, the relationship between the migrants themselves must become part of the investigation. Migrant families’ relationships had not been ignored, however, women were assumed to typically follow their male providers (Jacobsen & Levin, 2000; Nivalainen, 2004). There is reason to suspect that women play a far more complex role – especially in migration within advanced capitalist countries where women are more likely to have more specialized roles in the economy.

Rather than viewing gender as an aggregate level variable, this article proposes to understand migration meanings, motives, and outcomes by hearing the voices of women concerning the decision-making process. Such a focus will allow us to determine whether women’s relationship with men necessarily makes them victims or subordinate in relocation. In this study, partnered (i.e., married and unmarried) women attached to men are the target group. Occasional comparisons are made with single women. New ground is broken in this analysis by analyzing domestic migrants whose move is unsponsored; i.e., the move occurs without any employer relocation direction or assistance.

The role of women in family migration

Relationships traditionally received less attention in the migration process because the assumption was that when women migrated with men, they did so as ‘followers’ or ‘in association’ with men (Bielby & Bielby, 1992; Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Gender then was largely ignored as women were subsumed under the category of family migration (Boyd, 1989) so that they were treated more as migrants’ wives than female migrants (Brettell & Simon, 1986). The patriarchal model of gender/family relations assumed that the true migrant was a male in search of economic betterment, placing women in the position of being merely accompanying family (Houstoun, Kramer, & Mackin Barrett, 1984). Such an economic perspective was reflected in Mincer’s (1978) pioneering study that introduced the concept of the ‘tied partner.’ Such a partner moves because the relocation is assessed in terms of the family’s net economic benefit in the male partner’s earnings. Since Mincer’s work, there has been much research that has pointed out that male-induced migration disadvantages women because of patriarchal gender norms in family relations (Bonney & Love, 1991; Halfacree, 1995; Markham, 1987).

Much of the thinking about couple relationships in internal migration in the western world was shaped by company-paid relocation. Corporate employers promised upward mobility, increased pay, and higher job status (usually to their male employees) with little regard for families (Kanter, 1977; Pinder, 1989). The impact on women of being a tied mover implied a
sense of powerlessness that suggested that the move was either forced or was being made with much reluctance but accepted by women acquiescing to traditional roles (Lundy, 1994). Hendershott (1995), for example, understood male-induced moving for work as producing harmful effects for women such as psychological dysfunction, which she labels the ‘spousal mobility syndrome’. Building from the myth that homemakers were transportable, married wives and mothers were shown to bear the emotional and social costs (often described as trauma) of the move (Ammons, Nelson, & Wodarski, 1982; Leon & Dziegielewski, 1999).

Women’s increased participation in the labor force, and, particularly, their presence in full-time jobs and professional careers, has generated a growth of dual income or dual career couples/families (Hardill, 2002). Given women’s increased economic power, at least some of the negative migration effects might have been due to the ‘trailing mother’ with young children rather than simply ‘the trailing wife’ (Bailey & Cooke, 1998; Cooke, 2001). Women now may forego or delay childbearing, have fewer children, or may themselves have labor-force interests. These developments suggest that women, as adjuncts to the labor force, may no longer be merely victims, accessories, passive, facilitators, or reluctant/negative about the move. On the contrary, partnered women may have their own labor-force interests at the destination, which may lead them to be active migration decision-makers, embracing migration more positively.

Decision-making in migration: The unsponsored migrant

For relationship partners, migration must contain at least some negotiation. Jacobsen and Levin (2000) suggest that although a higher earning spouse may have a bargaining advantage, migration is best represented as ‘intra-household bargaining’. Like other decisions relevant to work/family roles, migration can reveal patterns of power in marital relationships (Zvonkovic, Schmiege, & Hall, 1994). Power in these instances is usually invisible or hidden and may involve acquiescence to gender roles such as a belief in the preeminence of a husband’s career or acceptance of the rationality of corporate decision-making by the spouse’s employer. However, what may emerge as ‘apparent consensus’ (Komter, 1989) between partners in relocation may conceal underlying contention. For example, Whitaker (2005) discovered that women in husband-induced corporate-paid moves tended to view the decision process as consensual even though they did not agree to relocate and were unhappy but decided not to refuse to move. It is unclear whether independent decisions about migration differ from those that are employer-induced.

Most studies group all migrants together without specifically controlling for whether the move was independent or sponsored. A sponsored move is one that is largely at the request of, and paid for by, the employer. While there may be some choice in such a move, the corporate relocation is largely constrained by exogenous forces, such that the other spouse is expected to acquiesce. By contrast, the independent move is largely unsponsored, i.e., in which decisions about whether to move, when to move, and where to
move are made by the potential migrant(s), even though exogenous factors (e.g., poor employment conditions) may be present. One potentially important difference between a sponsored move and an independent one is that there is a greater sense of control in the latter case. Bearing all the costs and risks of relocation in the face of an uncertain outcome places the responsibility for the move on the shoulders of the migrant(s) who simultaneously feels both vulnerable and in charge. This notion of migrant control is considerably different from the idea of ‘woman as victim’ and suggests that migration potentially can be an assertive act.

One of this study’s distinctive contributions is the exploration of women’s experiences in unsponsored internal migration. Previous studies did not differentiate between sponsored and unsponsored movers. When such a distinction is made, only the corporate mover whose expenses in relocation have all been paid is identified (Sell, 1992; Whitaker, 2005). The dynamics of employer-sponsored domestic relocation are surely different from independent migration and yet there have been no controls for such a difference in the literature – not even in terms of estimates of percentages of migrants in either category. We do know that young adults are more likely to be migrants (Nivalainen, 2004) and they are probably less likely to be sponsored movers than middle-aged migrants. Consequently, domestic migrants may be more likely to be unsponsored than sponsored. Because the study of unsponsored migrants adds a new dimension to the literature on internal migration, the present research should provide an important window on a particular subcategory of migrant, i.e., unsponsored women migrants in relationships with men.

The interactional nature of migration, and particularly the roles that women play, is often obscured by the use of survey or aggregate data in panel studies in which gender is considered a statistical category (Abdo, 1997; Pedraza, 1991). Previous research has not considered either motivations and meanings of migration behavior, or the impact of relationships or linkages between men and women (Boyle, Cooke, Halfacree, & Smith, 2001). Given that our goal is to understand how women migrants perceive their behavior, greater depth is required through qualitative interviews to understand the complexity of migration as a negotiated process that is not simply reducible to economic costs and benefits (Jobes, Stinner, & Wardwell, 1992).

**Methods**

**Participants**

Detailed interviews of 1 hour or more in length were carried out with 341 migrants throughout the Canadian province of Alberta using a maximum variation sampling technique to ensure a range of origins (rural, small towns, cities) and destinations (all urban though some small urban centers). Given the lack of a sampling frame, public service announcements in local media and snowball methods within communities of significant growth were utilized throughout the province. Potential participants called a toll-free number and a call-back
preliminary interview established eligibility for participation based on date of arrival, minimum age at arrival (i.e., 20 to eliminate those who had just graduated from high school), and whether the move was independent (i.e., people who bore the costs of relocation personally). No offer for participation was rejected if eligibility requirements were met, and there was no requirement that all persons migrating together had to participate in the study.

The goal was 30 respondents from each province (Phase I), which became a minimum, as there were some provinces that had more participants because their populations were larger. Women from the larger sample (50.7%; \( n = 173 \)), representing all provinces, represent the sample for this report (see Table 1). A majority (73%) of the women in the study were under 40, but 14% were over 50 years of age.

Women study participants were contacted again in 2003 for a supplementary telephone interview that focused on gender issues in migration (Phase II). Gender roles had not been a primary focus of Phase I but the data gathered in that phase suggested interesting and unanticipated interpersonal dynamics expressed by women migrants. Given that many participants had moved and could not be located, interviews were completed with 40 women. Married women were somewhat less likely to have moved since the first interview and therefore were overrepresented in the subsample. Only the two authors performed the interviews, utilizing Phase I themes, but with more careful attention directed to understanding women’s motivations, struggles, and goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I</th>
<th>Selected characteristics of all women in-migrants to Alberta and the study sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All women in-migrants to Alberta(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age on arrival</td>
<td>35.8(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% in age categories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Marital status on arrival</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attached</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Moved with children</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( N )</td>
<td>39,927</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^b\) Includes only women over 20 years of age to match the full sample/subsample but includes more women at older ages than in the sample.
The larger sample included women who migrated, including those who were single and unattached to a male (47%, \( n = 81 \)), those who were married to a male (40%, \( n = 69 \)), and a category of women with some degree of attachment to a male (boyfriend or cohabitation), which we labeled ‘attached’ (13%, \( n = 23 \)). Although no question specifically focused on sexual orientation, no women referenced a female partner. Of those who were married, one third (\( n = 23 \)) had children (most of whom were young), and two thirds (\( n = 46 \)) had no children. None of the attached migrants had children. Women who were in a relationship with men (married or attached) are called partnered women.

In the subsample, 55% (\( n = 22 \)) were married, 18% (\( n = 6 \)) were attached, and 28% (\( n = 11 \)) were single. The data presented in this article focuses primarily on partnered women but also occasionally refers to single women as a comparison.

Approximately 80% of the sample had some form of post-secondary education. Fewer than 10% identified themselves as homemakers (though some also had post-secondary degrees). Independent migrants were far less likely to be highly paid professionals (although there were professionals in the sample) because such persons were more likely to be recruited and relocated with expenses paid. The most typical participant had some type of specialized education (e.g., graphic design, nursing), which qualified them for entry level or advanced specialized positions in their field. They identified themselves as administrative assistants, therapists, managers, customer service representatives, program developers, and teachers. In short, these migrants brought human capital with them ensuring their competitiveness in an expanding economy. While the sample may be somewhat biased towards middle class women, the Alberta labor market supported the selective recruitment of persons with these characteristics. Persons without such advanced skills were less likely to be found in the sample as reports were received that many with fewer skills returned home and did not stay. Given the mixed impact that migration had on family relationships, participation in the study for many was therapeutic because both positive and negative evaluations of the relocation could be expressed.

The characteristics of the sample and subsample can be compared with the characteristics of all women migrants in Table 1. The modal year of arrival of all women in-migrants was 1998. The mean age on arrival was 33 years of age for both the sample and subsample, which compares favorably with the mean age of all women migrants, especially in view of the fact that women under 20 were not included at all and elderly women were poorly represented in the sample. Women between 20 and 29 were slightly overrepresented in the sample in comparison with all women migrants. Single unattached women were a larger group in the sample than married women, but married women were the larger group in the subsample. In sum, respondents in this study appear to be reasonably representative of women migrants to Alberta.

**Interviews and analyses**

Between 1996 and 2001, due to an expanding oil-based economy, the Canadian province of Alberta experienced a dramatic population growth as the result of domestic interprovincial migration. During that period, more people moved to Alberta from within the country than to any other Canadian province (Statistics Canada, 2002). What was not known was precisely how migrants understood and interpreted their relocation. As a consequence, face-to-face interviews were
conducted over a 2-year period (2001–2002) with people who had migrated to Alberta since 1996.

The focus of the interview was on how the decision to migrate occurred and how relocation was interpreted and negotiated. While responses contained retrospective rationalizations, participants were often eager to reflect on their migration experience because it had changed their lives. Interviews were semi-structured. An interview guide provided a sequence of questions to ensure that the interview stayed on track but that allowed for flexibility in follow-up and further probing. The interview was organized around four themes: the decision to leave the region of origin, the decision about where to relocate, experiences in relocating/adjusting at the destination, and the evaluation of the decision to relocate.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and responses were coded and stored in categories (nodes) using the computer program NUDIST, which allowed the data to be retrieved and compared along common themes among all cases. Eight persons, including both authors, performed the interviews but only were the two authors coded the data using a collaborative process of independent and joint consultation. The data was coded into 12 major nodes, the most relevant of which for this study were how respondents came to the decision to leave the place of origin (node 2) and how they retrospectively evaluated the migration decision (node 12).

Results and discussion

Migration as relationship change
The first major conclusion drawn from our data is that the women in this study, whether partnered or single, and regardless of age, understood migration as not just about employment and income, but in the context of changed relationships. These changes were almost always associated with relationship losses and, as a consequence, they were almost always expressed in emotional terms. Many women expressed concerns about leaving parents (e.g., an elderly mother), while others, on the contrary, described feeling released to go because a parent had died. Some expressed that their family in the place of origin had made them feel that they had betrayed or abandoned them by moving. Others felt they needed to distance themselves from their parents, in-laws, or old friendship networks that were stale. Relocation had its painful aspects and created many persisting dilemmas which were often reconciled by promising eventually to return. In short, women embraced these relationship changes in a manner that reflected personal goals rather than only understanding themselves in relation to work and the economy.

Young adult women expressed the need for change in a manner consistent with coming of age.

There comes a time in your life when you have to go away and not depend on your family. I needed time to develop me. Yes, I needed a good job but that was not ultimately why I left. It was time to go and be changed.

Some claimed that migration was even supported by their family as an act of independence. ‘I was very close to my family, but it was time to break from that mold, and they encouraged me to make a new life for myself.’ The fact that migration was not just a job search but something deeper was expressed this
way. ‘It has been important for us to come here as a couple because we have been able to discover ourselves apart from our family. I have learned and grown so much about who I am.’ A somewhat older but single woman put it,

I thought about leaving for about a year and I felt I needed a change in my environment. I felt I was stagnating. I had been around the same people for so long, and if I changed my surroundings, that would be the impetus to make some decisions. I needed to make a big change. I was tired of my city and I wanted different opportunities.

One woman from a small town stated, ‘Most people at home were caught in a rut and couldn’t leave, so we decided to leave before that happened to us . . . It was just time to experience something new. We had outgrown our community.’ Those who did not have such a positive attitude towards relocating probably did not migrate or had already returned home. Even one retired woman who moved to Alberta because her daughter was there saw the relocation as the opportunity to enhance their mother–daughter relationship rather than emphasizing the relationships lost in the move.

These quotations illustrate that there are many relationship-related reasons for migration, which extend beyond the typical explanations of migration for work. Push factors create what Mincer (1978) calls ‘locational disequilibrium’ and include relationship changes involved in graduating, getting married, divorcing or breaking an engagement, being laid off or being underemployed, or other family issues. By the same token, pull factors were also related to relationships such as having contact with people at the destination who offer assistance or the exciting prospect of developing relationships with new people. The point is that migration was always interpreted in the context of relationship change, and these changes were typically viewed more positively than negatively.

The role of work and career in female migration
In contrast to women who were compelled to move because of their husband’s work, the most consistent finding in this study was that, with the exception of retired women, about 80% of the women viewed migration as a mechanism for personal improvement, if not social mobility, through new employment options. Such a finding held true for all women regardless of marital status and even stay-at-home mothers felt good knowing that work opportunities were there if they wanted them. Such perceptions were rooted in feelings of blocked mobility in the region of origin, and relocation offered a sense of hope for the future. Women with post-secondary education, in particular, talked about moving ‘to advance my career,’ ‘to find a job in my field,’ ‘to do what was best for me professionally.’

Almost one-half of the study participants lamented the fact that they were unhappy with their jobs at origin because there was ‘no room to move up and that was not what I had gone to school for.’ The dissatisfaction with their former employment often was that it was not a ‘real job’ meaning that either participants could not work as many hours as they would have liked or, more likely, that it was not a job on which a career could be built. One married professional woman stated,

I was in a very low paying job that was related to my field but was more technicians’ work, so it was level one with no place to go and very low pay. I was working in a position that was well below what I was qualified to do . . . . I had been applying for professional positions that were related to my background for about 4 years with no success.
Often frustration was expressed with the fact that positions in their field were occupied with incumbents who were not retiring quickly enough. A 30-year-old woman expressed her concern in these terms:

My goal was to be a probation officer. There were three probation officers in my town and they’ll be there forever till they drop so there was no chance. Every profession back home, the people who have been there for twenty years will be there for another twenty years, and the chances of you getting in there with them was impossible.

Blocked mobility, then, seemed to be a major factor in the decision to move. Employment itself was not the issue. What was important was the significance of the work for which they had received training, work for which they had a keen interest, or work that was more meaningful which motivated their move. Migration to ‘get ahead’ was necessary because perceptions of the region of origin were that ‘if you stayed, you could only go so far,’ or ‘if you wanted work at home, you needed experience, so you go away to get experience in your field.’ A 50-year-old woman noted ‘We sold everything and moved out here. It was a big decision to leave the family behind. But there were no opportunities for ME there.’ Another woman said ‘He wanted to move so I began to look into what there was for me there. That is when I came to accept the idea when I could see how I could benefit too.’ Women then evaluated the success of the relocation in terms of their own career interests.

Employment was critical to the women’s evaluation of migration. They discussed how fast they found work or how they started at the bottom and worked up from one job to another. A 40-year-old woman said ‘coming to Alberta was a very happy time for us because I had a job and he had a job after too much unemployment and uncertainty.’ Notice that this woman’s own job was just as important as his job. ‘We considered going back home but there was only a job for one of us.’ To relocate to an economy that is expanding with lots of job possibilities is interpreted as very affirming to women. One woman in her late twenties had eight jobs in 5 years in Alberta, claiming that each one was better than the next. She claimed that ‘The job situation here really makes you feel wanted, and it gives you a sense of confidence.’ At the same time that women may feel that the move had a very satisfactory employment outcome, partnered women still understood that the male partner’s employment was critical in the relocation. As one woman in her thirties noted, ‘I was happy to come and was unemployed for only 3 weeks. But it would be laughable to think that we moved just for my job.’ Partnered women, then, were under no illusions that interests of their partner could be ignored.

Migration as a process of negotiation
In most cases, the actual migration decision went through an incubation period in which an idea was planted that required time to germinate. Many reported thinking about relocation seriously over a period of a year or more. Some women were very systematic and organized in making their decision through using newspapers, library research, and the Internet to check economic conditions and job ads at the destination. Others were more influenced by social contacts. For partnered women especially, migration was very rarely a sudden impulsive decision. Occasionally a woman would express surprise that suddenly an opinion was expressed by their male partner that they should leave, but typically such a decision was made in the context of repeated discussions about relocating as an idea or an option. Underemployment was
almost always a catalyst to these discussions. Many expressed feelings of depression about their circumstances, which led the couple to conclude jointly that a change was necessary (‘We had no choice. We had to move’). A 43-year-old woman stated:

I followed him because there was not work for him at home. I had a job as a legal secretary but it was not secure so I followed him. It took 6 months to make up my mind but then I felt comfortable with it. And I am happy with my job here.

These women almost always expressed their acceptance of the decision to move as one in which there was a rationale in which they had a voice and their interests were considered.

Many women felt they had skills that were easily transferable which helped them accept the implications of their partner’s feelings about the move. A 27-year-old rationalized her role in the decision in these words:

In my field, I can find work anywhere. I had a job and was quite happy but my husband could not find work. Things were going OK for me but I couldn’t look at just me. I had to look at the two of us. I saw it as an opportunity for us to grow together.

Some women accepted the fact that they might soon be leaving the labor market to have children and used that as a rationale for why their partner’s interests had to be considered first. But there was always the lingering theme about choosing the right destination so that if the woman wanted to work later, there would be opportunities.

Women whose husbands were employed in construction and who often worked away from home represented the most explicit occupational category of women ‘moving because your husband moves.’ Construction worker families were accustomed to moving where construction was occurring. Women who were part of these male-initiated moves almost always accepted the move in terms of what they considered to be in the interests of the family or the children. A 42-year-old migrant said, ‘I moved here because my husband moved here. I lost my career but it was a step up for my husband so it was better for all of us.’ Or to put it another way, women would consider the impact of their husband’s unhappiness on their own happiness, which convinced them to move. ‘I had a good job that I really enjoyed but he was so unhappy that it made me unhappy.’ Clearly, women in relationships with men had to consider the interests of those with whom they were partnered and had to assess how relocation would affect their relationship.

What is particularly important is that these illustrations indicate not just that partnered women felt the need to compromise, but that they participated in a compromise in which both parties were active in the labor force rather than where only the male had labor force interests (a nuanced variation of the tied mover). A married woman in her thirties said it this way.

I had a job but my husband didn’t. So I figured he had a right to work too. We picked Alberta because we both thought we would be able to find good jobs. Ironically, my husband got a job right away, but I had trouble.

Unsponsored women migrants then are much more likely to expect benefits to their own labor force interests in the decision to relocate.

When asked who initiated the idea of moving, most women could identify which partner initially broached the idea, but succeeding discussions involved shifting positions. A 34-year-old woman perhaps provides the best illustration of this type of interactive dialogue:
He initiated the idea of moving, but wasn’t going unless I agreed. We talked for a year or so about it, but we put it off until the conditions were right, until everything fell into place. Then several things happened and I ended up being the one who felt most strongly about leaving.

One woman admitted that she was the one who wanted to move and after discussing it over a long period, ‘he eventually went along with it.’

In many cases, it was not so much who proposed the idea of relocation, but what transpired over the gestation period. A woman noted that it was mainly her husband’s idea to relocate. However, during the 2 years that they considered the option, she lost her job. This convinced her that moving was necessary even though it would be very hard for her.

We worked like a team. He went ahead and bought the new house and I stayed behind and sold the old house and packed up. I think though that I had to deal with more of the emotional things about leaving because he had already moved on.

Women whose husbands relocated first and then the wife followed often expressed such feelings (Magdol, 2002). In general, though, who initiated the idea of relocating was not important because after months of consideration, the other partner almost always worked through how their own employment interests would be addressed.

Migration: The issue of control and empowerment

Information gleaned in Phase I of the study suggested that the question of who initiated the idea of migration was more significant than had been anticipated. Consequently, a more specific question was asked in Phase II, and the results were surprising. Of the 40 women interviewed, 28 were classified as either married or in a serious relationship. Fully 46% (13) of those partnered women felt that they had been the primary influence in the move, 25% (7) felt the decision was entirely joint, and only 29% (8) felt that the male had been the dominant force in the move. Among these respondents, overall, women felt quite powerful: ‘He initiated the idea of moving but in the end, I felt most strongly about it,’ ‘I initiated the move. He didn’t come happily,’ or ‘He never would have elected to come here by himself, but when I said I was moving, he agreed to come along easily.’ For those who made a joint decision this excerpt was typical: ‘We both really wanted to do it and worked out the details together.’ Instead of being the drag in migration, women were often the initiator. When women played that role, their ability to be assertive within their dyadic bond was clear. To be sure, some women who wanted to move had been less assertive, such as a 45-year-old woman who exclaimed, ‘I would have left 20 years earlier but my husband didn’t want to leave. He finally felt forced out because of the economy.’ At the other end of the assertiveness continuum, one woman noted, ‘In our relationship, I am the one who instigates things.’ Boyfriends sometimes followed girlfriends. One young woman recounted her own experience by noting that ‘my boyfriend was more sentimental about not going and preferred to stay. But I said, “come on, are you going or am I going by myself?”’ A 29-year-old woman pointed out that because she was so committed to relocating, her 7-year relationship with a man ended. A number of other single women indicated that moving either ended a relationship or followed the breakup of a relationship. As one woman in her twenties noted about her boyfriend:

Basically it was my idea to move as I knew that I could do better financially. But I am also more outgoing and adventurous. It was either he came with me or it was over. I would have gone no matter what.
Participants’ assessment of migration

For most women, the assessment of the migration decision was intimately related to the extent to which they had at least some control over it. All single women felt that they had control, whereas those who were partnered had to deal with the dynamics of their relationship to a male. The data demonstrated unequivocally that the overall assessment of the move for women who were partnered was much more likely to be positive if they were actively part of the decision-making process. In contrast, one woman who did not have that control expressed her remorse by stating, ‘I have been here for 6 months and I may be here for 20 years but I don’t want to be. I try to keep as positive as I can and experience as much as I can.’ Resignation and unhappiness was expressed in the strongest way when women felt that they did not have any choice in the migration.

My husband came out to work and I thought I was just coming for a visit and when it wasn’t happening that way, I cried a lot. I will never call this home because we built our dream home back there and it is waiting for us. Whenever I buy anything here, I always imagine how it will look in our house back home.

The adjustment struggles were real and one of the key symbols of the tension was the home, which married women, in particular, may have reluctantly left behind. Such attachments to a home at the place of origin almost always suggested a negative assessment of the migration. By contrast, when partnered women viewed their migration more positively, it was because they felt that they had made a decision to establish a new home at the destination (‘I feel this is home now because we are building a new house and a baby is on the way.’).

In contrast to corporate sponsored migration where many forms of assistance are available to partnered women, the initiative that unsponsored relocation required to ensure its success also contributed to the sense of control these women experienced. References to enhanced personal/couple skills that resulted from the migration were typical of a more positive assessment of migration. For example, ‘This had to be a team effort because everything depended on the two of us’ (married 39-year-old); ‘I seek out new opportunities more as the result of moving here’ (married 28-year-old); or ‘I’m a stronger person because I am more independent’ (married 29-year-old). A successful migration was considered a challenge requiring constructive energy.

There is no question that the small proportion (18%) of women who only moved because their husband wanted to move were the least satisfied. Negative feelings were often repressed in interaction to support the husband or to rationalize the move in terms of what was in the best interests of the family. Women who had strong attachments to parents or grandparents, or to children or grandchildren back home acknowledged that ‘my heart is not here’ or ‘back there is where my heart is and that is where I want to be.’ When husbands/boyfriends were working long hours and overemphasized the acquisition of money, the gulf between the sentimental and emotional aspects of life and the monetary benefits of the move that created tensions in relationships were accentuated. The social costs of separation from family and friends in an economic climate where ‘getting ahead’ was paramount led to expressions of emotional ambivalence about the move among all women from time to time regardless of marital status.
Conclusion

Our qualitative analysis of interview data allows us to understand the dynamics of migration decision-making from the perspective of partnered women and moves the debate about the gendered consequences of migration beyond income and labor-market outcomes (Marsden & Tepperman, 1985; Morrison & Lichter, 1988). Before summarizing the contributions of this study, a few limitations should be noted. The study’s strength is the voice given to women. However, only one side of the relationship is stressed in this analysis in that it does not give voice to men. Another point of note is that since the data were collected after the relocation, the sample may over-represent those who positively evaluated their migration, and their responses may exhibit elements of post-facto reframing. Women who had more negative outcomes or who felt trapped by the move and did not adjust may have either returned or simply not participated. Adding families with older children in the sample would add an additional level of complexity in evaluating both decision-making and outcomes. The experiences of ethnically diverse groups and all social classes were also not part of the study design.

The study, however, does advance our understanding of the role that partnered women play in domestic migration. Focusing on independent movers allowed us to find more women who initiate and benefit from migration. This finding challenges the assumption that women were always losers or subordinate in internal migration (Jacobsen & Levin, 2000). Such a distinction is also a corrective to a previous study of migrants to Alberta that suggested that three quarters of women migrants followed their spouses and played a subsidiary role in the husband's decision to migrate (Shihadeh, 1991). These results are also consistent with findings that single women (Jacobsen & Levin, 1997) can be major gainers from migration but broadens this conclusion to include partnered women who themselves can benefit from migration as individuals in relationships. The fact that 88% of the women interviewed in the second phase of the study considered the move to be positive from a personal employment perspective supports this point. So in contrast to the corporate mover that focuses on employment continuity for one partner (usually the husband, Shaklee, 1989), independent movers are more likely to look for opportunities for both partners. This choice likely enhances the likelihood that the migration outcomes for women are duly considered. In that sense, one spouse has no particular advantage in the move as both are experiencing discontinuities in labor-force participation, which creates a greater sense of equality in the evaluation of the move.

Because the independent mover carries all the responsibility and risks for relocating, couple dynamics are more likely to come into play and women are more likely to have a voice. In comparing women’s experience with migration by marital status, women without partners would be expected to much more likely feel a sense of control in migration than partnered women (Boyle et al., 2001), but the data point out that even partnered women who are independent movers exercise power and influence
in the decision to move and are therefore more likely to be satisfied with the outcome. Such moves particularly appeal to women who have labor market interests and who are ready to take control (Markham, Macken, Bonjean, & Corder, 1983). The sense of departure control (i.e., when to move or where to move) helps to create what McCollum (1990) calls ‘authentic choices’ which then extends to feeling a sense of personal control and responsibility at the destination.

Our results indicate that relational considerations must supplement economic factors in the migration process. Moreover, instead of focusing only on outcomes at the destination, the analysis must begin at the place of origin. Partnered women clearly understand migration as altering their role in a variety of relationships. Although the idea of joint decision-making in migration might mask male dominance (e.g., Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege, & Hall, 1996), partnered independent movers require a more collaborative process in order to maximize the success of the move in which the notion of ‘self-imposed powerlessness’ (Whitaker, 2005) among women is less likely to occur. In addition, we have also confirmed that active participation in the decision to migrate not only increases women’s satisfaction with the move but allows them to see the growth potential of the move (Jones, 1973) so that they are less likely to consider themselves the trailing spouse. These results suggest that migration can potentially be empowering for women as ‘a catapult for growth and change’ (McCollum, 1990, p. 34) in contrast to the victim/subordination theme.

The give-and-take required by compromise in decision-making (Hardill, Green, Dudleston, & Owen, 1997) may be creating more symmetry in migration decisions (Smits, Mulder, & Hooimeijer, 2003). What is needed now is a more thorough analysis of the interactional dynamics between both partners. Although the results of this study do not suggest that the ‘tied mover’ has been eliminated, women in partnered relationships who are unsponsored migrants have been shown to have much more initiative, power, and control in migration than women attached to men involved in sponsored (employer-induced) migration.

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