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# Ways of Staying Put in Ecuador: Social and Embodied Experiences of Mobility–Immobility Interactions

Diana Mata-Codesal 

*Immobility is to be complicated as a topic of study in research on human migration. This paper analyses different ways of staying put, investigating the motivations, degree of (in)voluntariness and associated narratives, to show how immobility is as complex a research category as mobility. It does so in the context of irregular male migration from a rural location in Andean Ecuador to the USA. This paper also focuses on the interactions between mobility and immobility. Families with migrant and non-migrant members are imbued with and affected by changing mobility–immobility dynamics. This paper explores such dynamics to facilitate the understanding of local sociocultural logic, where mobility and immobility are infused with specific meaning, while placing such dynamics within global regimes of (im)mobility.*

*Keywords: Immobility; Mobility Regimes; Transnational Family; Gender; Ecuador*

Zoila is an energetic woman in her late 50s. She has taken care of her granddaughter Gladys since she was six, when her parents migrated to the USA. Zoila's youngest daughter, Magda, is one of the few villagers to earn a university degree. Remittances sent from New York by Magda's father allowed Magda to pursue her education. Now, she works as a teacher in a nearby village primary school. She is certain that going to the USA, as her father and her oldest siblings did, is not part of her life plans, as she feels that she can live a good life without leaving Ecuador. Magda's case is unusual in the village, where almost everyone under 30 is looking forward to going to the USA. Magda's cousin Gato is one of them. He has been unsuccessful in his attempt to reach the USA and currently works locally at any job he can find. Zoila's husband Julio decided to return after a decade in the USA. He was finding it harder and harder to find construction jobs in the USA, as he was approaching his 60s. That same year,

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Zoila's only son Luis was deported by the US authorities. After their return, both men have experienced difficulties dealing with their new situation.

Zoila's family is by no means an exception, neither in their Ecuadorian village nor in many other rural locations in Latin America, where international migration to the USA is perceived as the most certain path forward. Compared with local sources of income—disregarded as just enough to cover survival costs—international migration provides room for improvement strategies (Carpio Benalcázar 1992, 46; Mata-Codesal 2012, 63). Pervasive international migration to the USA—mostly irregular and male-led—is a defining feature in many villages in highland Southern Ecuador (Jokisch and Pribilsky 2002; Kyle 2000). A culture of migration has developed in many of these rural locations, making the migration of men to the USA and the receipt of remittances a self-feeding process that is embedded in the local sociocultural structures. Consequently, the number of families with migrant and non-migrant members is significant. These families are imbued with and affected by changing mobility–immobility dynamics. Opening up such dynamics facilitates the understanding of local sociocultural logic, where mobility and immobility are imbued with specific meaning, while placing such dynamics within global regimes of (im) mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

This article has two aims. First, the article argues that staying put is not a passive-by-default situation. There are specific ways of staying put, so it is necessary to examine the particular lived experiences of immobility (Mallimaci 2012). The label immobility is imposed on heterogeneous situations, obscuring the many different ways of staying put and the wide variety of reasons, degrees of (in)voluntariness and lived experiences of immobility. The narratives of Zoila, Gato, Magda, Julio and Luis illustrate this heterogeneity. Second, the full significance of immobility can be understood only when it is considered together with mobility. Different ways of migrating entail different ways of staying put. Zoila's family combines several of these mobility–immobility arrangements.

### 1. Immobility as a Research Topic

In the era of migration, only 3% of the world population lives in a country other than their birth country (United Nations 2013). This meagre percentage has received much research attention, as international migration is a hot research topic, policy and media issue. The remaining 97% of humanity has not received such interest. The sedentary logic underlying much of Western Social Sciences (Malkki 1992, 31) explains why staying put within the borders of one's own birth country has been construed to be the 'natural' situation that needs no explanation. Non-migrants are not a topic of study because under the modern nation-state rationale, it is mobility that is construed as a dangerous threat to the national order (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 184).

Some authors have recently urged us to recognise 'the on-going dynamic between situations of settlement and those of mobility' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 188).

Mobility and immobility are not related in a purely symmetrical way but are derived from and are part of a framework of hierarchical and hierarchy-forming relationships in the broader context of today's capitalist globalisation, in what Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) have called regimes of (im)mobility. Currently, global capitalism and human mobility are closely linked, but in complex ways. At the same time that the capitalist mode of production encourages the free movement of capital and goods, it has established filtering mechanisms to select, control and discipline worker mobility (Aquino and Varela 2013, 7). Restrictive immigration policies are not used to block but to filter who is legally entitled to cross national borders and who is not. In the present context of international migration, the most obvious mobility barriers—destination countries' restrictive immigration policies—are not monolithic but are applied selectively to specific groups. The range of authorised and unauthorised movements applies differently to different people, beyond their nationality. The global mobility regime stratifies according to several variables; nationality and socio-economic status are probably two of the most relevant. In a recent work, Van Hear (2014) revised the role that class plays in shaping migration. His work is a well-founded appeal to bring back class as an explanative variable in migration studies.

People endowed with limited (im)mobility entitlements face forces that, in some cases, immobilise them against their will, while in others, mobilise them in undesired ways. The current mobility regime generates a growing pool of people who are immobilised because they lack the means to migrate internationally. The age of migration is simultaneously the age of involuntary immobility (Carling 2002). Conversely, legal irregularity does not completely stop migration but increases the vulnerability of migrants forced to migrate in this way. Hence, restrictive immigration policies serve to discipline an under-class of irregular migrant workers whose basic rights and physical presence are denied. As stated in the foundational work of the transnational paradigm, the subordinated positioning of migrants in their country of residence is one incentive—although by no means the only one—to develop transnational connections (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 234). Migration regulation—including migrant legal status and labour market incorporation—compels some migrants to develop transnational family lives. Research on global care chains—chains that bind migrants and their non-migrant relatives, particularly females—has shown how someone's mobility often depends on somebody else's immobility (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2012). This is one, among many different, mobility–immobility articulations.

The (im)mobility regime is met by—and often confronted by—bottom-up dynamics, which imbue situations of mobility and immobility with meaning. Localised cultural normative constructions are socially translated, shaping the desires and expectations to migrate or stay put, as well as the narratives of immobility. There is not a unique sociocultural construction that defines immobility. Gender and age are most likely the personal features that influence most the expectations and narratives of immobility.

The unequal distribution of (im)mobility rights means that mobility and immobility are—depending on the context—valuable assets that are asymmetrically distributed. Michaela Pelican’s analysis of mobility and immobility discourses in English-speaking and French-speaking parts of Cameroon is enlightening, as she explores both situations within the same country (Pelican 2013). Her study shows how the desirability of physical (im)mobility is closely related to social mobility (2013, 237). In many small locations, following the development of a culture of migration, geographical mobility is intrinsically linked to upward socio-economic mobility (Cohen 2004). By the term ‘culture of migration’, I follow Cohen’s identified features in rural Mexico: international migration needs to be pervasive and often restricted to only one or a small range of destinations; the decision to migrate is perceived as an everyday decision while being socially sanctioned; and international migration is regarded as the only true way forward (Cohen 2004, 5). Under these circumstances, regardless of legal mobility entitlements, the incentives to migrate are so strong that migration takes place whatever the cost. It often results in migrants enduring very vulnerable forms of mobility, including risking their own physical security.

This paper analyses the localised sociocultural logic that imbues (im)mobility with specific meaning and the consequences of subordinated insertions into a global regime of (im)mobility. Even in the case of unskilled, unprivileged migration from marginalised areas subjected to tight structural constraints, such as the one presented in this paper, the agency of migrants and their families is not completely undermined. As this paper will show, migrants have coping strategies to achieve good lives, which include enacting different arrangements between mobility and immobility over their life cycle.

## 2. A Family in the Village

The data for this paper come from a 2000 inhabitant village in highland Southern Ecuador. The local situation of acute land scarcity means that agricultural production has long been insufficient to cover peasant household needs. The village families have traditionally tried to make up for this deficiency through a strategy of income diversification, which supports insufficient agricultural production and minimises risk in the context of irregular crop output. Non-farming activities have historically been very important, especially craft production and spatial mobility. Andean peasants, due to geography, have always been characterised by high mobility between different ecological niches (Buren 1996; Murra 2002; Stadel 1990). In the case of Zoila’s village, villagers migrated internally first to the Amazonian area in the 1950s, and seasonally to the sugar cane plantations in the Ecuadorian lowlands. By the mid-1970s, these migrations came to an end, and international migration to the USA quickly entered the mobility map of the village in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As with previous booms, international migration started first in the

provincial capital, expanded to the more remote areas of the province and eventually arrived at villages. Many villagers began leaving by the early 1990s.

Migrants from this village are concentrated in the USA in the adjacent states of New York and New Jersey and densely concentrated in the neighbourhood of Queens in New York City. Except from remittances originating in the USA—which are the main source of income for most households—all other income sources are disregarded as time-consuming and of low reward by the villagers. Young male villagers are expected to migrate to save enough to start a life of their own in their village upon their return. International migration as a rite of passage has been acknowledged in many locations worldwide (Ali 2007; Cohen 2004; Massey et al. 1993) and is in itself a corollary of a culture of migration. This highly gendered feature has a definitive impact in shaping family arrangements between mobility and immobility.

The type of interactions between mobility and immobility that this paper addresses are broadly located within the specific context of international irregular migration. Zoila's village is itself a case of limited mobility rights in a context of high mobility desirability. Migrating to the USA is perceived as desirable, but given the villagers' subordinated position in the global mobility regime, regular international mobility entitlements are scarce. Situations such as those described and analysed in this paper are present in many rural locations throughout Latin America. They are particularly true for places where there is a long tradition of irregular male-led migration to the USA and where a culture of migration is in place.

Fieldwork was carried out in 2009 and 2010 and comprised four months of participant observation in Zoila's village as well as a two-month follow-up in New York City with villagers living there.<sup>1</sup> The need to develop a framework that considers both the situations of mobility and immobility emerged from an initial research project on remittances. Remittances, as any other transnational practice, require active players at both sides of the transnational field: transfers need to be created and sent—by migrants in most cases—but also need to be received and managed (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). This paper was developed after a secondary analysis of the collected ethnographic data, particularly from fieldwork notes. The aim of this exploratory paper is to put forward the need for immobility to be considered as a complex research category so that studies of human mobility can be enhanced by the joint consideration of situations of mobility and immobility using a spatial and temporal lens.

I use Zoila's family to expand on the different ways of staying put and to illustrate mobility–immobility interactions in a specific context while placing them within the broader logic of a global mobility regime. Most families in the village who have relatives abroad show remarkably similar mobility–immobility arrangements. Such arrangements are heavily shaped by gender and generation. I have selected Zoila's family because it comprises all the most common patterns of (im)mobility in the village, involving three generations of both males and females. The relationships forged with each family member—except for Julio (the father)—were autonomous

from each other, so each family member told me about her/his personal life independently. All of the names have been changed, and I have deliberately avoided providing the name of the village. Methodologically, this is—as many other authors have published before (King, Iosifides, and Myrivili 1998; Lawson 2000)—a plea for openly acknowledging the power of migrant/family stories for Migration Studies.

### 3. Ways of Staying Put

Staying put is not a passive-by-default situation. In her exploratory study of Swedish elders, Hjälm (2014) showed how staying put could, in fact, be a conscious decision. The label ‘immobility’ is imposed on heterogeneous situations, obscuring the many ways of staying put as well as the wide variety of reasons, motivations and lived experiences of immobility. The global regime of (im)mobility heavily filters who can move and who cannot. However, it is not only about being mobile or immobile. It is also about the circumstances under which one decides to migrate or to stay put. Situations of immobility can be experienced very differently, particularly based on their degree of (in)voluntariness. Immobility can be experienced as a burden or as an achievement. Gato’s involuntary immobility or Magda’s desired immobility also allow us to investigate how immobility is perceived by the group and how it is experienced by the person who stays put. They are just two extreme cases in point, with ample room for in-between situations combining desirability and ability. These two cases also illustrate how the social construction of immobility translates into the embodied experience of immobility. Furthermore, immobility is not only experienced by those who stay put, but migrants and returnees also face situations of immobility, as the experiences of Luis and Julio will show.

#### 3.1. Involuntary Immobility

Gato does not like talking about his failed attempt to reach the USA. Trying to reunite her older children, his mother sent him the required money from New York to pay a smuggler. He crossed the Mexico-USA border and, after a five-day walk, managed to cross the desert. Unfortunately, he was stopped by *la migra* in Houston while waiting at a bus stop. His recounting of the subsequent events is distressing, including his stay at what he recalls as three different prisons. He can still vividly recall a strong feeling of injustice. The experience was so hard that Gato decided not to try again—even though the smuggler’s fee included two crossing attempts. When I met Gato he was 27, still single and—confronted with no route for local social recognition or economic improvement—spending most of his weekends drunk. Gato belongs to the undetermined share of the 97% of the world’s population who stays in their birth country against their will. He is what Carling called an involuntary immobile, a person who has the desire to move internationally but lacks the ability to accomplish it (Carling 2002).

Carling (2001) showed how in the ‘Era of Migration’, an increasing number of people from the Global South are immobilised in their countries of origin. His desire/



ability model is particularly powerful, as it allows for breaking down two different sets of processes behind Gato's current immobility. First, it questions the reasons behind Gato's desire to migrate to the USA. This desire is derived from a complex set of cultural norms—particularly regarding gender—which stratifies (im)mobility expectations. Second, Carling's model addresses the barriers that prevent Gato from enacting his desire. This second part of the model points to broader political issues around entitlements to specific types of (im)mobility.

Today, it is widely agreed that mobility is more than motion; it is movement with meaning (Cresswell 2010). Consequently, not all forms of mobility are equally significant. In Zoila's village, socially significant mobility means migrating to the USA. Any other type of mobility is regarded as irrelevant. The USA, specifically New York, is so prominent in the village geographical imagination that often places such as Spain or the UK are thought about in relation to New York. Imaginaries are essential for the creation of desires to move, as they create the sense of possibility (Salazar 2011, 2). These imaginaries are historically laden (Salazar 2011, 1). The joint history of the USA in relation to many rural locations throughout Latin America, and the role of the mass media and the entertainment industry, has contributed to disseminating the imaginary of the American dream. Together with a local lack of improvement expectations, these images and imaginaries fuel strong desires to migrate to the USA.

(Im)mobility expectations are stratified by local ideologies. Different villagers, according to their gender and age, are expected to enact different (im)mobility trajectories. As many anthropologists have shown, in a culture of migration, migrating becomes a rite of passage to adulthood and full social membership (Ali 2007; Cohen 2004; Wilson 2010). Rites of passage associated with migration are highly gendered (García 2008). Women are not expected to migrate but to stay put and wait for their migrant relatives, as the cases of Zoila and Magda illustrate. By contrast, young male villagers are expected to migrate to the USA to earn enough money to settle down in the village. No one takes Gato seriously, as he has been unable to reach social adulthood in the village. The local culture of migration involves more than just physical arrival to the USA. It also encompasses working hard abroad, saving money and returning to settle down in the village. Luis' deportation means that Zoila's son has also been unable to fulfil all of the stages of this rite of passage. Part of his uneasiness upon deportation derives from his ambiguous position in the local hierarchy. His rite of passage was abruptly truncated in its last stage, as he did not decide to return, but was deported. Sørensen (2011) showed how efforts to capitalise migrants' remittances by their countries of origin have led to the creation of the image of the migrant superhero, who—in the eyes of the remittance-dependent state—is unmercifully stripped of this status when deported (90). Returning entails changes that returnees need to deal with. In addition, deported migrants are forced to deal with an abrupt change of status—from heroes to trash—and endure suspiciousness regarding the reasons for their deportation (Sørensen 2011).

The interplay between local sociocultural and economic frameworks, personal features and global power regimes places specific mobilities in a continuum from voluntary to forced. The local sociocultural and economic frameworks make a type of immobility desirable or undesirable. The power regime, which is more global, makes mobility possible or not possible. This means that there are processes of immobilisation at play that prevent Gato from migrating. The lack of entitlement to migrate legally is most likely the most important immobilising force currently at play in many situations of involuntary immobility. Gato lacks the know-how and resources to bypass the legal hurdles and enact his desire to migrate. As Franquesa aptly points out, currently, ‘power is not so much an attribute of the “mobiles”, but an attribute of those who can decide who is mobile and who is immobile’ (Franquesa 2011, 1024). The global regime of (im)mobility produces an unresolved tension between structural (im)mobilising forces and individual coping strategies. Although Gato remains immobilised in his village, many others around him have figured out how to bypass those immobilising forces.

It is not only those who stay put against their will who experience situations of involuntary immobility. Migrants also face situations of immobility, whether in transit, in the USA or upon return or deportation. Immobility in transit has been acknowledged in many of the most travelled long-distance corridors, such as for sub-Saharan migrants in Istanbul (Suter 2013), African female migrants in Morocco (Stock 2012) or Central-American migrants through Mexico (Diaz and Kuhner 2007). Even if migrants manage to arrive at their intended destination, they can still feel trapped. Haugen was most likely the first author to specifically analyse the situation in the case of Nigerians in China who ‘have succeeded in the difficult project of emigration, but find themselves spatially entrapped in new ways in their destination country’ (Haugen 2012, 65). She calls this a second state of immobility. This type of secondary (involuntary) immobility is often due to legal status (Nuñez and Heyman 2007). Irregular legal status is a powerful immobilising mechanism through the disciplining force that generates the constant threat of deportability in migrants’ lives (De Genova 2005). The situation of being confined in a detention centre, which Gato endured, is the migrants’ ultimate form of physical immobility.

### 3.2. *Desired Immobility*

On the opposite side of the voluntary-forced immobility spectrum from Gato, his cousin Magda stays put as the consequence of a conscious decision. She has a job that she likes and future plans that do not involve working abroad. Unlike Gato, Magda does not experience her situation as a burden, and she definitively does not feel trapped. Because she has a permanent job and a steady income, she qualified for a visa to go on holiday to Mexico. This is something that is not possible for her fellow villagers, who, to migrate to the USA, have to endure long and dangerous trips throughout Central America because they cannot fly directly into Mexico without a visa. The money sent by Magda’s father during his time working in the USA was crucial for Magda to pursue her education beyond primary school. There are many

accounts from many locations worldwide showing how financial remittances are used for educational purposes.<sup>2</sup> The few villagers with further education, such as Magda, are in a more complex situation regarding migration, given that their education investment does not yield rewards in the USA as irregular migrants (Kandel and Kao 2001, 1210; McKenzie and Rapoport 2006, 26). Only non-specialist jobs are available for migrants without a work permit in the USA. Going irregularly to the USA—the only way these villagers are allowed to migrate to the USA—has never been a desirable option for Magda.

The imaginaries of life elsewhere are essential for the creation of the desire to move or to stay put. As Salazar states, ‘the motivations to cross borders are usually multiple but greatly linked to the ability of travellers and their social networks to imagine other places and lives’ (Salazar 2011, 2). However, as the case of Magda shows, ‘imaginaries are not simply imposed on them in a one-way direction, but appropriated and acted on in terms of co—and counter-imaginaries’ (Salazar 2011, 3). For those villagers who have never migrated to the USA, the primary images are the pictures and videos taken at social gatherings that their fellow villagers organise in the USA. These festive images are confronted in the intimate domain of the close family, where the hardships of life and work in the USA as irregular migrants are not so easy to conceal. Magda has first-hand knowledge of what living and working in the USA as an irregular migrant is like, thanks to her returned father, her deported brother and her migrant sister. The rosy image fades away.

Immobility, similarly to migration, is highly gendered. Magda, as a woman, was allowed more room for manoeuvring under the local logic of the culture of migration. Because female villagers are not expected to migrate and they have financial resources in the form of remittances, they are able to continue their education. Young female villagers are getting ahead with regards to education compared with their male peers (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). All the cases of successful educational investment in the village are women who, supported financially by their parents in the USA, have finished a university education and have careers of their own. However, under the prevailing logic of the village, Magda is perceived as not fulfilling her social role, given that she is not married or engaged to a local migrant villager. This situation suggests that some women are willing to exchange their financial independence and stability for upward social mobility by partnering with a migrant or returned villager and placing their careers second. Bastia found a similar case with returned Bolivian women who ‘prefer to barter the gender gains accrued abroad for upward social mobility along the urban class structure upon their return to Bolivia, thereby consolidating their belonging to the city and their own place in the urban hierarchy’ (Bastia 2011, 1526).

Desired immobility is more likely to be present in contexts where staying put is associated with processes of upward social mobility. Immobility is a valuable asset when there are insider advantages that are location-specific that would be lost in the case of emigration (Fischer, Martin, and Straubhaar 1997, 75). This can develop into a culture of permanence, as opposed to the better-studied concept of a culture of

migration. In the presence of a culture of permanence, staying put is considered the right thing to do. As Pelican (2013) showed, this means that depending on the context and personal variables, the valuable resource can be the ability to stay put and not the ability to migrate.

#### **4. Mobility–Immobility Interactions. Enabling Immobility**

The full significance of immobility can be understood only when examined simultaneously with mobility. Different ways of migrating entail different ways of staying put. Zoila's immobility needs to be thought of together with her relatives' mobility. By staying put, she enabled her husband first, and her siblings later, to pursue their migratory projects. These arrangements are closely linked with the life cycle. There is, then, a clear time dimension in mobility–immobility interactions, and this requires investigation.

Zoila has never been to the USA. Surprisingly, she can describe, with mesmerising detail, the US town where her husband Julio lived for a decade and where Gladys's parents are still living: the inexpensive clothes at the mall at the town's main crossroad; the Mexican supermarkets, where one can purchase Latino foodstuffs; and the train station parking lot, where her husband used to queue, waiting to be hired. Zoila knows every detail of the place where her relatives live—as many other villagers do—because she inhabits a transnational space that spans national borders and links two geographically separate localities. A transnational social field has been defined as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships that are not necessarily contiguous with national boundaries (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1009). The daily routines of Zoila in the village and her relatives abroad are interwoven into the same transnational social field. As Carling (2002) reminds us, 'migration also affects those who remain in the country of origin, but participate in transnational social fields' (7). Zoila inhabits a different corner of the same transnational field in which her husband dwelled.

By taking care of the productive and reproductive tasks in the village, Zoila's immobility allows other relatives' mobility. Zoila's immobility enabled her husband and her daughter's international migration. By taking care of her daughter Magda first and her granddaughter Gladys later, Zoila's immobility made the mobility of her husband and Gladys' parents possible. It is well documented that grandmothers are taking care of their migrant children's offspring (Bastia 2009; Pantea 2012). The literature on transnational care chains have documented similar cases to Zoila's, as female maternal relatives are often preferred to take care of those children who stay put. It complies with local gender ideologies, according to which men are providers and women take care of the children. In Andean Ecuador and in many other patriarchal societies, women's international migration is portrayed as a family problem, while male migration has never been an issue of public concern (Pedone 2008). We can see then how some immobilities are constructed as more 'natural' than

others. As Jónsson points out, immobility is portrayed as highly gendered, with a male bias that portrays men as more mobile than women (Jónsson 2011, 11).

Along with essential reproductive tasks, Zoila also managed the family properties and the remittances sent from abroad. The properties were limited to a few cows and pasturelands and required long daily walks to milk the animals. The small income from selling milk and cheese was crucial immediately after her husband migrated, when all of his wages in the USA were used to repay the exorbitant debt incurred by his migration. Journey prices have experienced an increase following US securitisation strategies after 9/11. Wage migration is increasingly becoming debt migration as a consequence of the current border closures (Stoll 2010). The months immediately after migrants' departure are hard for migrants and their relatives in Ecuador as a consequence of debt-generated stress simultaneous with the adjustments that occur as a result of migration. Relatives in Ecuador are constantly worried about migrants not meeting their obligations, which would lead to the loss of the property that is held as security in exchange for the money to pay the smuggler.

Once the first years are over—when migrants and villagers complain that the 'journey debt eats all our money'—migrant remittances start arriving more regularly. The wages earned by Julio in the USA and that are sent to the village, together with Zoila's management, allowed the household to cover their basic needs and, most remarkably, Magda's university education. Zoila was also in charge of the remittances sent by her daughter and son-in-law to build a house in the village, the construction of which and later maintenance she supervised. The role of remittance receivers is crucial for the migratory venture's success or failure (King, Mata-Codesal, and Vullnetari 2013). Those remittance senders and receivers who have managed to build on relationships of trust and mutual support are more likely to perform better socially and economically as well as emotionally.

Zoila's immobility has also allowed her relatives to remain acknowledged in the village's local hierarchies. Her physical presence stands in for her migrant relatives' social participation. By staying put, taking care of the house and managing the money her husband sent while in the USA, she enabled her husband's transnational membership, as well as easing his reincorporation upon his return from the USA. The Zoila–Julio (im)mobility interaction, which is very typical for the region, calls into question the nature of what is actually moving. The assumption is that only bodies count; however, it is also our minds that move or do not move, often not aligning with where the physical brain is located. In many ways, Zoila also migrated, and in other ways, her husband Julio never fully left their community.

This type of enabling immobility is again highly gendered. The image of Penelope—from the Homeric myth—who waits for her traveller Ulysses is sometimes attached to women like Zoila, the mother and wife of migrants (Barbancho 2012; Gaspar 2006; Mediavilla 2013). It is a beautiful image that helps to overcome the social invisibility of these women. Not only does Ulysses travel, but also Penelope waits for him. However, this image also conveys ideas of subordination and passivity. Those 'left behind' are commonly portrayed as lacking agency in their relatives'

mobility decisions. The term itself reinforces that image (Jónsson 2011). As seen, the invisible roles fulfilled by the ‘left behind’ play a central function in the capitalist mobility regime, which itself creates high rates of irregular migration (Aquino and Varela 2013, 9). These ‘left behind’ take over the migrants’ reproduction tasks. They take care of their offspring while the migrants are abroad and, quite often, also take care of their migrant relatives when they are forced to return due to old age or accident. Incapacitating accidents at construction sites are common in this research, given the villagers’ incorporation into the US labour market, which is strongly shaped by their legal irregularity and lack of recognised qualifications. This type of irregular unqualified migrant is constructed and maintained by the global mobility regime as young, able, working bodies to consume, wear out and return (Berger and Mohr 1974). Irregular migrants are a cheap labour force for their countries of residence, as no reproduction costs are paid. As is clear from the transnational literature on global care chains, these reproduction costs are instead shouldered by invisible Penelopes, such as Zoila.

Other authors have also voiced their discomfort with expressions that attach ideas of passivity and meaningless waiting to people who stay put. Instead of ‘left behind’, Gaibazzi suggests the term ‘active stayers’ for the household members who are left in charge of the family, who manage the remittances and who are responsible for the fields, the house and other properties (Gaibazzi 2010). Both expressions—active stayer or enabling immobility—recognise the necessary role played by non-migrants in somebody else’s migratory project. In order for some to move, others have to stay put.

Mobility–immobility situations are not fixed, but change over time. Zoila’s husband Julio had to return to Ecuador once his body was not considered fit enough to carry out the hard tasks involved in construction work. As he was an irregular migrant in the USA he is not entitled to any retirement benefits and must rely on his savings to live in his old age. The situation of Zoila’s son Luis upon return is even more precarious, as his migration project was abruptly interrupted by his deportation. Both men are finding it difficult to re-incorporate themselves into the local dynamics of the village after a decade in the USA. These post-return feelings of entrapment are commonly experienced by returnees (Berger and Mohr 1974). The reconfiguration of the mobility–immobility arrangements over time in this family creates tension that its members need to deal with.

## 5. Experiences of Immobility

As seen in this paper, immobility is, in fact, a research category that is as complex as the category of mobility. It is not a by-default situation, but entails very different reasons, motivations and meanings. The different experiences presented in this paper allow us to investigate how immobility is perceived by the group in each case and how it is experienced by the person who stays put.

Immobility, similar to migration, is an embodied experience, culturally constructed and socially enacted. The same type of immobility can be locally perceived as desirable or undesirable based on specific underlying cultural, social and economic norms. There is not a unique sociocultural construction of what staying put means, as different variables are associated with different meanings. Gender is one of the most salient variables. Immobility, as migration, is always gendered. In the case of Ecuador, and in many other patriarchal societies—see for instance Schewel for Senegal (2015, 26)—males are more often associated with mobility than females.

The social expressions of cultural constructions about immobility, which are more localised, need to be simultaneously considered in the context of broader political forces. The local sociocultural logic, where mobility and immobility are imbued with specific meaning, is placed in the context of the global regime of (im)mobility. The desire of the subject—whether to move or to stay put, and under which circumstances—might be or might not be enacted, depending on his/her position in the global (im)mobility regime. The global regimen of (im)mobility—of which nation-states and are still preponderant actors—grants (im)mobility rights to specific groups (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). This allocation of entitlements does not go uncontested.

Finally, mobility and immobility are intertwined in complex ways. Zoila's immobility enabled her husband and children's migration to the USA. Julio's mobility facilitated his youngest daughter Magda's desired immobility, thanks to the remittances he sent. This is also currently the case for Gladys and the money that her parents send her every month. The interaction between the local culture of migration and the global North-South regime of (im)mobility immobilises Gato and complicates Luis' social status after his deportation. The mobility-immobility coupling is malleable and changes over time. Migrating is not a perfectly linear state, and neither is staying put.

Migration scholars are in a position to cement, complicate or contest official categories of mobility. This paper has attempted to show that there is room for improving studies on human mobility, by thinking about the mobility-immobility pair not as binary opposites but as a mutually constituted unit.

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## Notes

- [1] The original research on remittances was based on a questionnaire and 34 in-depth interviews with returnees and non-migrant villagers in Ecuador.
- [2] This use has been repeatedly found in the case of Ecuador. See for instance, Bendixen (2003), Calero, Bedi, and Sparrow (2009), FLACSO and UNFPA (2008), Mata-Codesal (2013) or Ponce and Olivie (2008).

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