Editorial: The social dynamics of remittances and the pandemic

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Migration is typically portrayed as an effective response to socio-economic hardship. Pushed by a lack of work at home and pulled by the promise of higher wages abroad, people relocate. When those moves succeed, migrants transfer money home (Yang, 2015). A logical, predictable system that is confirmed by evidence as well as World Bank figures noting migrants returned a record $689 billion globally in 2018; and while researchers expected the pandemic to push down wages, the decline to this point has been modest. Remittances continued apace and serve to cushion the impacts of the pandemic (Ratha et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the assumption that the decision to migrate is straight-forward misses how socially complex the processes can be, particularly during the pandemic (Pintor Sandoval and Bojorquez Luque, 2021, Marwah and Ramanayake 2021, Gupta et al., 2021).

Remittance decisions based in household-based decision-making, the strengths of weaknesses of movers and non-movers; their contacts at points of origin and destination as well as their experiences and resources are only made more complex in moments of crisis and as movers and non-movers rethink life, social engagement and confront new roles and responsibilities (Paerregaard, 2021). This is of particularly import for when remittance use fails to fall into expected and socially sanctioned categories (Cohen and Zotova, 2021), disrupts socially sanctioned behaviors and/or creates stress and undermines mental well-being. This includes the stress that surround migrants who must juggle their own safety while confronting the loses sending households face in response to crises (see Siders and Gerber-Chavez, 2021).

Shifting patterns in remittance use and social relationships are founded in the household management and the dynamic give and take between movers and non-movers. Their experiences are not simply a response to the pulls and pushes of labor markets and opportunity (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2013). They reflect the moment (and the crisis) as well as shifting patterns of real time needs. In other words, remittance behaviors reflect a moral economy and understanding that moral economy highlights the negotiations that

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define remittances and their role in social reproduction, mental well-being and family health as well as community.

To send remittances is a choice—and while the choice may be mediated by a lot of different factors—it remains a choice. There are no guarantees, and the decision reflects an ongoing costs/benefits analysis that can pit movers against non-movers, create difficult social spaces for those who are involved and undermine well-being and mental health as the challenges to “success” grow (as they have during the pandemic). We should celebrate remittances and the important role they play as sending communities (particularly impoverished sending communities) struggle to maintain themselves (see for example Ryan and El Ayadi, 2020, Singer, 2020, Azeez E P et al., 2021, Cohen and Mata-Sánchez, 2021).

References


