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International migration, public policies and domestic work Latin American migrant women in the Spanish domestic work sector

Sandra Gil Araujo^{a,*}, Tania González-Fernández^b^a CONICET (National Council of Scientific and Technical Research), Gino Germani Research Institute, Faculty of Social Science, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina^b Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, Marie Curie ITN CoHaB (Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging), Sweden

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SYNOPSIS

Based on the Spanish case, in this article we explore the connection between migration policies, family policies, gender regimes and the insertion of Latin American migrant women into the domestic work sector. Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, Latin America became the main region of origin of migrants who had settled in Spain, being women the first link in these migration chains. The main factors that have affected the configuration of this feminization are linked to migration policies and patterns of migration, the features of the welfare state, the characteristics of the labor market and the way in which gender organizes and stratifies migration and domestic work. The achievement of national middle class women's rights to conciliate their professional and family life through outsourcing domestic work to "non-national" women also brings with it a deep inequality in terms of citizenship.

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Introduction

Over the first decade of the 21st century, Spain became the primary destination for Latin American immigration, particularly from Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and the Dominican Republic. This growing migration can be mainly explained through the financial crisis, impoverishment and degradation of working conditions in their countries of origin,¹ but also (and we should emphasize this) through the far-reaching social transformation of Spanish society since the mid-1990s. The analysis of Latin American migration to Spain, thus, needs to be attentive to the conditions in which this phenomenon is embedded: accelerated economic growth, the specificities of the regional labor market, state policies, gender relations, the welfare regime, the historical bonds between Spain and Latin American countries, the consolidation of migration networks and increasing importance of family migration (Gil Araujo, 2008).

Unlike traditional Latin American migration to the USA, headed foremost by men, there is a substantial female presence in Latin American migration to Spain, especially in the earliest stages of the project and by the role of women as the first link within the migration chains (Pedone, 2006). As we will show in the following sections, the factors affecting the configuration of this feminization are linked to the history, policies and patterns of migration, the features of the welfare state, the social and sexual division of reproductive labor, the characteristics of the labor market and the way in which gender permeates, organizes and stratifies migration and work. As many scholars have shown, migration policies, family policies, labor markets, racial and gender relations shape the transfer of productive and reproductive labor from the South to the North in the context of international migration (Anderson, 2000; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001).

In this article we focus on the connection between Spanish migration policies, family policies, gender relations, the "de-nationalization" or "foreignization" of domestic work, and the feminization process of Latin American migration towards Spain, as well as the implications in terms of inequalities based on gender, class, legal status and nationality.

* Corresponding author at: Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Pte. Uriburu 959, 6° (1144), Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In addition to the limitations on family life that the grueling pace of domestic work implies (especially in the case of live-in workers), migration legislation imposes requirements for housing, earnings and employment, which make official family reunification very difficult. These limitations on the right to family life have deepened family transnationalism, encouraging various forms of long-distance motherhood, rarely freely chosen by the women themselves. The transfer of inequality between women involved in domestic work being outsourced from 'national' to 'non-national' women also brings with it a deep exclusion in terms of the right to family life, care and affection.

We will draw on the data collected within different research projects we have participated in over the last six years.² Between 2006 and 2007, as part of the Spanish research team for the project *Civic Stratification, Gender and Family Migration Policies in Europe*, we took a gender perspective for analyzing the diverse formal and informal regulations that affect the "non-national" population established in Spain in relation to access to the labor market, social rights and family life. We also carried out sixteen interviews in Barcelona and Madrid, conducted with a lawyer, a social mediator, two representatives of migrant associations along with nine female and three male migrants with different nationalities and migration status. All the women interviewed worked or had worked in the Spanish domestic labor sector. Between 2009 and 2011, as part of the project *Fundamental rights situation of irregular immigrants in the EU* carried out in different European countries, we elaborated a Spanish case study about irregular migrants employed in domestic work. Interviews were conducted in Madrid with both migrants in irregular situation employed in domestic work and other stakeholders such as members of NGOs, migrant associations, women's organizations, trade unions and experts in the field. Between 2010 and 2012, we were part of the research team for the project *Migration Policies, Family Transnationalism and Civic Stratification: Latin American Migration to Spain*. From a transnational and gender-based perspective, the aim of this project was to explore the connections between Spanish migratory policies, the stratification of migrants' rights and the transnationalization of family life among Latin American migrants who had settled in Spain. Within this framework we looked at migration, social, labor and family legislation and (formal and informal) regulations that particularly affect the Latin American migrant population. Transnational fieldwork was carried out between Spain (Barcelona and Madrid), Colombia and Ecuador, including thirty in-depth interviews with members of migrant families in both the country of origin and destination. All the migrant women interviewed had worked in Spain as domestic employees.

We have organized the text into four sections. Firstly, we will present a brief review of the research on female migration in Spain, with the aim of highlighting that from the very beginning, the feminization process of migration was related to the insertion of migrant women into the domestic work sector. Secondly, we will summarize the particular features of the Spanish migratory regime and present data on the profiles of Latin American migrants who have settled in Spain, including information about the impact of the current economic crisis on their unemployment rates and settlement patterns. Thirdly, we will explore some of the features that

have historically characterized the Spanish welfare regime (such as the family as the main provider in times of need, the decentralization of social policies or the notion that care was closely linked to and relied on families, households and women), which add to the implementation of recent family policies that urge private households to have their care needs met by the market, thus generating a sustained and increasing demand for domestic workers. The data we present in this section shows that to a large extent, Latin American migrant women were the ones to meet this demand and that the increase in migration was accompanied by growing numbers of migrant women in domestic work. As described in the testimonies of our informants, the demand of women for domestic work is crucial in explaining the feminization of the migration flows from some Latin American countries (the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, and Paraguay, among others) and the role of many of these women as the first link in these migratory chains. In order to understand this process, we give an account of the immigration regulations (visa exemptions and regularization processes) that facilitated both the entry into Spain and the later regularization of Latin American migrant women through their insertion into the domestic work sector. Lastly, in section four, we will focus on the effects of public policies (migration, labor) and the domestic work regime on the family life of Latin American domestic workers. This paper sheds light on how the difficulties in fulfilling the requirements for family reunification deepen and broaden the exercising of transnational motherhood, which the women rarely freely choose. Within this framework, national middle class women's rights to conciliate their professional and family life have been achieved through denying "non-national" female domestic workers a family life of their own.

Female migration and domestic work in Spain: a brief state of the art

In the Spanish context the first debates on the feminization of migration were related to studies on domestic work from the early 1990s. For instance, [María E. Sánchez Martín's \(1992\)](#) study *Nuestras hermanas del Sur: La inmigración marroquí y el servicio doméstico en Madrid* that dealt with the situation of Moroccan women in Spain, and [Gina Gallardo Rivas's \(1995\)](#) exploration on Dominican women's migration to Spain and their settlement patterns published in her book *Buscando la vida: dominicanas en el servicio doméstico en Madrid*.³ Both publications are crucial in studying the feminization of migration in Spain, because at that time there was already a noticeable presence of women among the nationals from both countries. These works addressed the situation of migrant women in Spain and drew attention to the fact that domestic work was one of the main entry points into the labor market, a situation that has hardly changed since.

In the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century, several dissertations that focused on female migration and domestic work were published,⁴ in addition to [Colectivo IOE's \(1991\)](#) groundbreaking study for the International Work Organization. Although the data is outmoded, it remains a crucial frame of reference. Later works, such as the [Colectivo IOE \(2001\)](#) on the situation of migrant women and their entry into the labor market, and [Parella Rubio \(2000, 2003\)](#) analyses of the

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