



Domestic work and international migration in Latin America: Exploring trajectories of regional migrant women in domestic service in Argentina

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SYNOPSIS

Besides emigration towards developed countries, Latin America has a regional migration dynamics of its own — one in which the presence of women, as well as their employment in domestic service, has proved decisive. Combining a macro perspective with a case-based socio-anthropological approach, this paper examines international migration and domestic service at an intra-regional level. Drawing on statistical information, we first present an outline of the regional migration context and the insertion of migrant women as domestic workers in destination countries of the region. The core section of the article centers on the particular case of Argentina, and illuminates the experience of migrant domestic workers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. The paper closes with a series of reflections on the operation of gender as an organizing principle of relations and opportunities involved in international migration.

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Introduction

In recent decades, a significant increase in international migration (CEPAL, 2007) — chiefly to developed countries — has brought migration into the limelight and to the center of discussion in numerous forums. The growing share of women in migration trends — conceptualized, at least qualitatively, as the “feminization” of migration flows — has become a matter of growing academic interest, and has made apparent the need to introduce a gender perspective in migration studies.

As a region,¹ Latin America has a substantial share in the migration processes that presently raise concerns among “First World” States, as most Latin American countries have strengthened their role as labor exporters and emigrants’ destinations have diversified beyond the United States, to European countries — particularly Spain, Japan, Canada, Australia and Israel. There are a considerable number of Latin Americans living outside their countries of birth: it is estimated that at least 4% of the region’s population lives in

extra-regional countries and that this figure accounts for approximately 13% of international migrants worldwide. International migration from the region, which stands out for its increase in women migrants and their widespread entry into the service market of host countries, particularly the domestic service sector² — the emigration of South American women to Spain, the US, and Canada being especially relevant, has also contributed to the quantitative relevance of women in contemporary international migrations.

But besides emigration to developed countries, Latin America also shows a migration dynamics taking place within the region, one in which women play a decisive role, with domestic work as a sector of paramount significance. By combining a macro-perspective with a case-based, socio-anthropological perspective, this paper approaches the relationship between international migration and domestic work at the Latin American level.

Domestic work in Latin America may be traced back to colonial times (Kuznesof, 1989), and there is a long-standing link between female migration and employment in domestic service in the region. Since the 1960s, urban middle-class households in several Latin American countries have relied

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on migrant women (both internal and international) for housework and childcare. This demand has set off and fueled the movement of hundreds of thousands of young girls and women, giving rise to an early, albeit thriving feminization process supported on “family” logic: the migrant woman's family of origin, confident that household work is much more protective than factory or office work; and the employing family at the destination, willing to hire (and house) girls and women through work agreements where labor rights are easily blurred in favor of (fictional) kinship practices. As shown by a general overview of regional statistical information,³ this process has been particularly active in Argentina, Venezuela and Costa Rica in the past decade. The analysis of contemporary Argentine cases, focusing on the experience of Bolivian, Paraguayan and Peruvian migrant women taking on jobs as domestic workers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (BAMA),⁴ allows us to review different stages of the migration process (deciding on migration, organizing the trip, arriving at the destination, finding lodgings and work, saving or sending remittances, family reunification, etc.) in order to highlight the relevance of gender and gender-based practices as organizing principles of many of the relationships and opportunities involved in international migrations (see Grieco and Boyd, 1998; De Jon, 2000; Pessar, 1982; Piper, 2007, among other authors who have explored the relationship between gender and migration).

Context: international migration, female migration and domestic work in Latin America

International migration has been an integral component of Latin American history. Vis-à-vis the drop in overseas migration inflows⁵ (which were remarkably high at the turn of the twentieth century and played an influential demographic and cultural role in some countries), recent decades have seen a rebound in intra-regional migration – a long-standing trend characterized by the ever-changing economic and political conditions of the countries in the region. Argentina, Costa Rica and Venezuela have historically been the main “receptors” of regional migrants. According to Martínez Pizarro (2008):2, in 2000 “the number of regional immigrants stabilized in the leading immigration countries (i.e., Argentina and Venezuela), and increased considerably in Costa Rica and Chile.” Also, during the 1990s and 2000s, intra-regional migration found new impulses, particularly towards border or neighboring countries, bringing the topic of human mobility into the integration agendas, as can be seen throughout the proceedings of the *Conferencia Sudamericana de Migraciones* (since 2000), the *Foro Especializado de Migraciones del Mercosur* (since 2003), and the *Foro Andino de Migraciones* (since 2008).

The growth in the share of women among the migrant population is a tendency observed in several intra-regional flows as well. Although the extent of feminization varies depending on the origin and destination of migration flows, it can generally be asserted that there has been a rise in female migration, from 44.5% of total intra-regional migrants in 1960 to 50.3% in 2005.⁶

Several factors are at stake when it comes to determining the shares of men and women in migration flows, namely the nature of labor markets both in origin and destination

countries, specific labor demands, family reunification decisions and the existence of networks. In the case of female mobility in the region, migration flows have become increasingly labor market-related, and to a large extent cater to demands in the service sector, particularly for domestic workers and carers for elderly or disabled persons.⁷ International female migrants hired as domestic workers in the region amount to 27% of the total female migrant workforce, a striking figure, which is nevertheless lower than the sizeable 40% accounted for by Latin American and Caribbean women working in the same niche in Spain. The transnationalization of domestic and personal services in both the developed world and Latin America – the differences between which would be worth exploring⁸ – is but an expression of workforce flexibilization and cost reduction achieved by labor markets through the articulation of gender, ethnic and class relations. A close look at the stocks of female migrants employed as domestic workers by country of origin and country of residence yields a more detailed picture of the regional situation. Information from the 2000 census revealed that the major destination countries in the region also had higher stocks of migrant women hired as domestic workers: Argentina (81,000 women) stands out side-by-side with Venezuela (50,000 women), followed by significantly lower numbers in Costa Rica (16,000) and Chile (13,000). However, the highest percentages of domestic workers over the total economically active regional female migrants could be observed in Chile (42%) and Costa Rica (35.5%) (Table 1).

Regarding source countries, the 2000 census showed that certain countries stand out as “exporters” of women finding jobs in this niche in the region: Colombia was the source country of 46,000 women employed in the domestic service sector, chiefly in Venezuela; Paraguay had nearly 35,000 women residing in this capacity, mainly in Argentina; and Peru had been the country of origin of 33,000 domestic workers distributed between Argentina and Chile. Yet, when considering the proportion of migrant domestic workers from each country over the total number of economically active migrant women of the same origin, it is evident that Peruvian women exceed the regional average (48%), followed by those from Nicaragua (38%, with Costa Rica as their principal destination), Paraguay (36%), Guatemala (32%, mostly concentrated in Mexico) and Colombia (30%).

Regarding the demographic profile of cross-border female domestic workers in the region, it should be noted that schooling is either high or intermediate in several migration flows – particularly as far as Peruvian migrants are concerned –

Table 1

Latin American-born migrant women employed in domestic service in main regional destination countries (00 and % on total stock of economically active regional migrant women) circa 2000.

Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía (CELADE), ECLAC's Population Division. Data and special tabulations provided by IMILA Project (Investigación de la Migración Internacional en Latinoamérica, www.eclac.cl/celade).

Country of residence	Total (00)	% of total stock of economically active regional migrant women
Argentina	81,194	29.3%
Chile	13,149	42.6%
Costa Rica	15,978	35.5%
Venezuela	49,863	28.2%
Total Latin America	177,004	27.1%

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