

Female Latin American migrant workers and violences: towards an intersectional perspective?

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Abstract *The history of Latin American society has been influenced by colonization, which has subjugated non-white women to gender violence, racism and sexism. This article discusses the work of female Latin American migrants through the lens of intersectionality to reflect upon the historical and social realities of Latin women who migrate in search of employment or to escape violence. Drawing upon the contributions of the sociologist Patricia Collins, this article discusses the concept of intersectionality and topics pertaining to intersectional analyses (relationality, power relations, social inequality, social context, complexity and social justice). As a critical social theory that is under construction, intersectionality deepens the analysis of oppressions experienced by female migrant workers, such as xenophobia, racism, slave labor, sexual exploitation and precarious working conditions. Thinking about the violence experienced by female Latin American workers from an intersectional perspective implies listening to these women, understanding their resistance, increasing the visibility of collective actions, and guaranteeing the implementation of public policies considering their experiences and perspectives.*

Key words *Intersectional theory, Labor migration, Xenophobia, Racism, Sexism*

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Introduction

The idea for the debate I propose here arose after reading an article by Patricia Hill Collins titled “Toward a new vision: race, class, and gender as categories of analysis and connection”¹ and the author’s latest book “Intersectionality as a critical social theory”². Feeling moved by these titles and having recently studied and researched the work of Latin American migrants, I was led to consider the following questions for this academic dialogue: how do oppressions of gender, race and social class intersect in the lives of female Latin American migrant workers? How can intersectionality help understand the violence suffered by this group?

Patricia Collins, whose writings I have drawn on to compose this text, is a black American who has been researching black feminism and intersectionality for over four decades. The publication of her books in Portuguese has provided access to her scientific output to an increasing number of people in Brazil. Her recent book² advances the use of intersectionality beyond the categorical junctions of social class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, stating that it is “[...] a critical social theory in the making”² (p. 39).

The use of intersectionality as a tool for carrying out complex analyses of social relations is a challenge as it requires the simultaneous analysis of both group privileges and oppressions. Investigation is therefore grounded in critical social theory to “[...] resist social inequalities caused by racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and similar systems of power”² (p. 46). Consequently, it is capable of providing analytical elements that can inform social justice projects and the democratic construction of knowledge².

Regarding female workers who have left their country in pursuit of better living and working conditions, it is necessary to ensure health care based on public policies regardless of the country they are in. In other words, by uncovering the oppressions of the power relations that influence migrant workers in capitalist societies and weaving social critiques of social justice on a macro level of analysis, we can provide inputs to inform the intense and widespread debate over ensuring adequate working conditions free from violence and the protection of workers’ health.

Addressing the challenge of thinking about intersectionality as a theoretical, methodological and political strategy^{1,2}, this text discusses the work of Latin American migrants, adopting an intersectional approach to thinking about the

historic and social realities of Latin women who migrate in search of work or to escape violence.

I begin by providing a brief outline of intersectionality, followed by a discussion divided into the following sections: social context, oppressions and intersectionality in dialogue with migrant labor; intersectionality and the complexity of violence against female migrant workers; and social justice, dialogue and listening.

What is intersectionality after all?

From the outset, it is important to highlight that the use of intersectionality is complex and, in the words of Collins², it is impossible to cover the concept in a single article. To this end, I provide a succinct summary of intersectionality and some core themes based on Collins and Bilge³ (relationality, power relations, social inequality, social context, complexity and social justice) to demonstrate the different intersectional approaches. These interrelated constructs are synthesized in Chart 1 below.

In light of this somewhat brief outline, it is evident that intersectionality requires the dynamics of historicity, in which oppressions are articulated with context and social inequalities in a critical and complex manner to carry out social justice^{2,3}.

Hence the use of intersectionality in the triad of migration of Latin women, work and violence allows us to understand the complexities of the lives of female workers within a society to this day influenced by the historical process of colonization. The adversities faced during the migration process are more or less intensified depending on social context and intersecting oppressions of gender, race and class, meaning that poor, black and indigenous female workers are pushed into precarious employment^{4,5}, sustaining capitalist exploitation in the Global South⁶, as we will see below.

Social context, oppressions and intersectionality in dialogue with migrant labor

In intersectional inquiry, people are seen as having identities and historical and social experiences are intertwined with power relations. When analyzing different oppressions, the challenge is to not hierarchize them, even though some may stand out, depending on established privileges¹. As such, the key point I take for discussing the work of Latin American migrants is

Chart 1. Synthesis of the core themes for intersectional analysis^{2,3}.

What is intersectionality?	
Intersectionality as an analytical tool	<p>Intersectionality arose from the constructions of social activisms, especially those of women. Although the term was “coined” by Kimberlé Crenshaw at the beginning of the 1990s, it was thought about and used previously by women segregated due to race, sexuality and social class, or in other words by black and indigenous women, Chicanas and Asian Americans who had already produced knowledge about intersectional oppression. Intersectionality fosters an understanding that there are singularities and differences among social groups that should be complexified in critical theoretical analyses. As a foundation for analysis, intersectionality provides a critical understanding of social reality; it is “a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences”³ (p. 245).</p> <p>By examining the intersections of oppressions of race, social class, gender, sexuality, generation, among others, intersectionality weaves critical understanding to deliver and guarantee social justice and democracy.</p> <p>Another key element of intersectionality is that capitalism and the development of neoliberal policies are at the core of intersectional analysis, meaning that historical and macro social approaches are key to obtaining an in-depth understanding of the intersections of oppressions.</p>
Core themes for intersectional analysis	
Social inequality	Social inequality as a historic construct should not be normalized. On the contrary, understanding its genesis provides an understanding of how social life operates in a capitalist society. In the same way, it allows us to understand the resistance of social groups in confronting social inequalities.
Intersecting power relations	<p>Power relations are seen to be dynamic and intersectional, meaning that oppressions of race, social class, gender, disability, nationality, among others, are interrelated and influence the lives of social groups, as in the case of racism, sexism, xenophobia, colonialism, patriarchy, class exploitation etc.</p> <p>Not only forms of oppression, but also resistance are prime intersectionality discussion points. In short, the intersectional approach enables a critical praxis of social reality and complexifies power relations and social inequalities.</p>
Social context	The analysis of social context fosters historical and political reflections that inform intersectionality. Historicity and the specificities of social context allow us to understand the workings of each society or social group.
Relationality	Extending beyond binary thinking, relationality brings together historical, social and individual knowledge in an interconnected manner. Consequently, knowing and doing and theory and practice are interrelated, making them two sides of the same coin. In this sense, it is possible to use relationality as a strategy to understand resistance and knowledge produced by social movements in the face of oppression.
Complexity	Complexity refers to a broader analysis that helps dissect power relations, context, social inequalities and relationality. It provides a framework for more expansive critical analysis, particularly when the experiences and construction of knowledge produced by the Global South are valorized.
Social justice	Social justice supports intersectional analyses aimed at knowledge construction, making it more democratic and ethical, and listening to the voices of disenfranchised people. In this sense, guaranteeing social justice effectuates the ethical construction of knowledge.

Source: Author, based on Collins and Bilge³ and Collins².

that intersectionality, as a critical social theory that is constantly under construction, is intimately linked to the analysis of racism, sexism, patriarchy and colonialism in capitalist societies².

The historicity of capitalism is central in this dialogue as societies influenced by the process of slavery remain racist, classist and patriarchal¹.

Latin American history is characterized by colonial violence, which subjugated African and indigenous peoples to the domination of knowledge, power, being⁷ and gender relations⁸, with female Latin American workers still suffering from the oppressions of racism, sexism, patriarchy and poverty.

The effects of coloniality persist, principally through the living history of racism and gender violence experienced by women. This approach is looked at in-depth by Rita Segato⁹, who analyzes high-intensity colonial patriarchy, through which masculine powers are expressed on feminine and feminized bodies in various forms of lethal or non-lethal violence.

Also central is the racial perspective explored by black Brazilian intellectual Lélia Gonzalez⁶, who highlights sexual and racial division of labor, which places black women in lower-status, low-paying jobs without workers' rights. For the capitalist mode of production, these women are the "workhorses"¹⁰ (p. 49), affirming the over exploitation of black Latin American women by capitalism¹⁰.

A study of Peruvian female migrant workers with indigenous ancestry in Chile delves deeper into the racial division of labor. Hired because of their work availability and loyalty, these women are at the same time stigmatized as "backward", reproducing labor trajectories characterized by labor market segregation, low-paid jobs with poor working conditions and racial violence⁵.

This aspect affirms the racialization of the world of work from a historical perspective^{6,8}, whereby low-status precarious jobs are allocated to black and indigenous women since they have faced various types of informal activities permeated by racial violence⁶. Associated with the above, sociocultural differences and perceptions of racism are themes of intersectional inquiry. Interviews with African refugee women in Brazil show that these themes express the racial violence through which the "successful colonization process"¹¹ makes them feel racism in their daily lives, resulting in psychic suffering¹¹(p. 175).

While migration provides access to the labor market, studies reveal the increasing feminization of migration for employment purposes over recent decades (women now account for 51.6% of migrants in Latin America) without ensuring adequate working conditions for these women¹². Most are in an irregular situation, working in informal jobs in the service sector without social and workers' rights, rarely participating in unions and subject to precarious and insecure working conditions, including irregular and even non-payment of wages¹². It is therefore non-white poor women who tend to seek better life conditions, reinforcing the need to migrate⁴.

Not without reason, the complexity and social context of the lives of female Latin American workers places them in situations of violence,

especially when they are vulnerable due to their irregular immigration status (lack of documents or refugee status) or working in precarious and informal employment: "In refugee reception centers the overwhelming majority [of refugees] are black women from African countries, who, in face of the context of scarce opportunities to access the formal market, end up being employed in subaltern jobs"¹¹ (p. 176).

Leaving the country, for whatever reason, places the women on an often unexpected path, encountering language barriers in the country of destination, non-validation of school and college diplomas and experiencing xenophobia. However, these women recognize their knowledge, intellectuality, rights and resistance¹¹. When casting light on intersectionality, immigration status is an important element in the context and oppressions among workers, as experiences of migration are by no means homogeneous. Nationality and immigration status may contribute to vulnerability, with undocumented migrants being more likely to be employed and remain in precarious jobs, generally in caregiving⁴ or sex work¹³.

The theoretical and methodological advances made by Collins² refer to the interconnections of relations of oppression that extend beyond thinking that suggests categories of gender, race and social class are static and permanent: "Intersectionality postulates that systems of power mutually coproduce one another, reproducing both unequal material outcomes and distinct social experiences that characterize personal experiences according to social hierarchies" (p. 71)².

Thus, given the complex social context of female migrant workers, public policies are needed to tackle violence. Migration for economic reasons, i.e. to find employment to support the family, is common among Latin American women as it is the poorest and most vulnerable who migrate to attain better living conditions. When it comes to caregiving occupations and domestic services, women also face the challenge of leaving their children in the care of other women in their country of origin, which can lead to feelings of fear, guilt, homesickness and concern⁴.

Intersectionality and the complexity of violence against female migrant workers

The use of intersectionality allows us to critically analyze and complexify the violence suffered by female migrants, especially non-white women. As mentioned above, from a historical

perspective of slavery, black women have been disproportionately affected by poverty, intersecting oppressions, labor market segregation and unemployment when compared to white men and women. Depending on their immigration status, migrants who suffer domestic violence are often reluctant to report abuse due to the threat of deportation and cultural and language barriers¹⁴.

Migrants face sexual violence and human trafficking for sexual exploitation¹⁵, xenophobia and racism^{4,11,13,16}, placing their health and life at constant risk. Studies have shown that gender violence is common and often one of the reasons for migration^{16,17}. Furthermore, border regions in Latin America are characterized by conflict, violence and high rates of femicide. Between 2000 and 2015 there were 1,384 deaths of women in Brazil's 122 border towns, including 181 indigenous women¹⁸.

Despite the complex, historical and interconnected nature of patriarchal violence, xenophobia and racism, studies on the influence of these factors on the life and health of women migrants are scarce. Most of these women face discrimination, structural and institutional violence and sexual abuse and harassment across all social spaces, including the workplace. This violence affects their health, being manifested in sadness, anger, fear fatigue etc.^{4,16}

Violence is exacerbated in cases of trafficking of Latin American women for sexual exploitation, which occurs among migrants. This means that, besides femicide, the health of these women is intimately linked with numerous experiences of physical, psychological, moral and sexual violence. It is not uncommon for these women to suffer from mental health problems and be more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases. They also encounter barriers in accessing health care and suffer institutional violence within health services, prompted by the social stigma of being seen as "trafficked"¹⁹.

Bringing intersectionality to this debate helps unveil intersecting inequalities in the dynamic relationship between violence and health. While violence may be heterogenous, its effects on the lives of migrants is undeniable. It is therefore necessary to discuss how historical factors and coloniality shape racism and other types of violence to think about and deliver health care, especially when it comes to developing public policies²⁰.

It is also important to expand the perspective of work and its historicity in Latin America, as the development of capitalism has been and

continues to be intimately linked with racism and the racial division of labor, which subjugates the black population to low-status, low-paid and therefore precarious jobs^{6,7}. According to the literature, Latin American migrants employed in caregiving work exhausting hours. This is associated with lack of documentation, which means they tend to work in informal employment without access to workers' rights and the health system in the country of origin. Poor working conditions have an impact on migrants' lives, often causing anxiety, depression and musculoskeletal disorders, among other problems, meaning there is a need to guarantee access to the health system and job security in migration processes⁴.

Intersectionality therefore provides theoretical and methodological resources to inform an approach to health care that engages historical, social, political and economic perspectives to promote equity based on social class, gender, race/ethnicity, territory, nationality²⁰ etc. In addition, with regard to female migrant workers, intersectionality not only examines the interconnections between oppressions, it also evidences the need to consider the specificities of each one, especially when the effects of immigration status (economic migrant or refugee) and nationality on everyday life experiences and health are articulated. In the words of Collins, intersectionality is a fruitful avenue of investigation because, by looking at our history, we can move forward towards ethics and democracy³.

Social justice, dialogue and listening

As we appropriate intersectionality, the discussion of social justice becomes one of the most complex aspects, because it requires political praxis and criticism³. As one of the possible discussions, here I take the perspective of academic knowledge to think about the violence suffered by Latin American female workers in the direction of social justice.

First, the intersectional perspective provides insights to help understand the singularities and diversity of women, their resistance and the collective actions they develop through the course of their life and work trajectories in response to oppressions. Second, the proposition of public health and labor policies requires policy makers to listen to the voices of female migrants. While academic knowledge sometimes attempts to bring itself closer to the reality of vulnerable social groups, I have to agree with Collins when she says: "Our personal biographies offer us a partial

view”³ (p. 36) of the reality in which we are embedded.

For this reason, establishing an academic dialogue with migrant women is to collaborate in the ethical formation of knowledge, or in other words knowledge that involves listening and is intimately linked to the demands of this heterogeneous social group, with a view to collectively building fundamental agendas to guarantee health and workers’ rights and non-violence. As Collins and Bilge propose, prioritizing collective initiatives with public participation to confront intersecting oppressions and produce ethical knowledge is to

further social justice³. From an academic viewpoint, it is necessary to engage in dialogue with social movements to build knowledge, encouraging new forms of thinking and doing human emancipation and guaranteeing rights.

By complexifying the confrontations of workers in the face of violence before, during and after the migration process, intersectionality provides the opportunity to set public policy agendas to guarantee health, employment and violence prevention. Ensuring that migrants have access to health care in any region should be viewed as a fundamental human right.

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