

**Bolivian Domestic Workers in Barcelona: Negotiations of citizenship rights  
in the context of precarious labour markets, migration policies,  
and non-governmental associations**

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**Introduction**

In my paper I will address the issue of everyday cosmopolitanism and citizenship exemplified by female Bolivian migrants, who work undocumented in the Domestic Service in Barcelona: That is caring for children, for elderly people or as housemaids. My paper is based on an ethnographic research in Barcelona that I did last year for my M.A. thesis<sup>1</sup>.

The term Cosmopolitanism is usually rather associated with global players, intellectuals or artists than with “illegal migrants”. Also Ulf Hannerz, who provided the certainly most popular anthropological approach to cosmopolitanism, defended a quite bourgeois view (see Hannerz 1990). Later on however, a number of authors, among them Antoine Pécoud, Pnina Werbner and Regina Römhild<sup>2</sup>, criticized him for his elitism and claimed that also labour migrants and refugees perform cosmopolitan practices.

Following these authors I will highlight the cosmopolitan practices of “illegal” female labour migrants and show that they develop diverse strategies to be incorporated into the host society while still maintaining strong ties to their countries of origin. I will analyse their struggle for incorporation using the example of their strategies of passing borders, of finding employment and accommodation, and of getting access to basic rights. First I will now talk about motives and organization of the migration project. Then I study the living and working situation of

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<sup>1</sup> See my unpublished M.A. thesis: „Bolivianische Migrantinnen im privaten Dienstleistungssektor in Barcelona – Alltagspraxis und Strategien im Kontext von Gender- und Migrationsregimen“. (Goldberg 2007)

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Pécoud 2000; Werbner 1999; Römhild 2007

undocumented domestic workers in Barcelona and highlight the ambivalent role of aid organisations there.

### **The migration project of Bolivian women**

In the last years Bolivian immigration to Spain notably increased, especially the so called “illegal migration”. In the year 2007 about 132.400 Bolivian immigrants lived in Spain, and among them 81.660 were undocumented<sup>3</sup>. The Bolivian migration however is not only characterized by a high rate of irregularity, but also by a high rate of female migrants.

The women’s motives to migrate are mostly quite similar. Like many other of my Bolivian interviewees, Victoria<sup>4</sup>, one of them, tells me:

*“As Bolivia is such a poor country, you can’t make enough money there. I therefore think that while you are young, you have to dare to come here and try to earn some money in order to offer your children to have a better life than you had.”*

In Bolivia the neoliberal restructurings<sup>5</sup> of the last years came along with a dramatic worsening of living conditions. The closing of industries lead to a massive male unemployment and therefore to a so called “Female Proletarianization” (see Ribas-Mateos 2000, 177). Women are now more and more responsible for the maintenance of the family, a fact that Saskia Sassen refers to as the “Feminization of Survival” (Sassen 2003).

As it however gets always harder to secure the wellbeing of the family in Bolivia, the women consider migration as a possible survival strategy: Working abroad and sending back remittances<sup>6</sup>.

The often cited “feminization of migration”<sup>7</sup> (Ribas-Mateos 2000, 177) is not only due to the female responsibility back home, but also linked to the great demand for domestic workers in Spain. As the housework is still considered as female sphere of action, women are supposed to have it easier finding a job there and thus being rather able to maintain the whole family from abroad.

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<sup>3</sup> These data is taken from: El País, 08.09.2006

<sup>4</sup> The names of the Bolivian migrants are all anonymized. I conducted all interviews in Spanish and did the English translations for the here cited quotations by myself.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the neoliberal restructurings in Bolivia see also: Salazar Paredes (2006); Kruse (2003)

<sup>6</sup> As a number of authors have already emphasized, migration has to be analysed as “Family Strategy” (see for example Ribas-Mateos 2000; Gregorio 1998), as family members create thereby a “Transnational Household” (Pries 2005, 397)

<sup>7</sup> Migration is a highly gendered phenomenon. As many authors claimed, our studies should thus include a “Gendering Migration” (Anthias/Lazaridis 2000; Morokvasic et al. 2003)

## The European Border Regime

The women's migration project is also influenced by transnational networks. Relatives and friends who have already migrated to Spain provide information about the labour market, for instance about the better job opportunities for women and give advice on strategies to overcome the European borders.

The common strategy of entry today is to come as tourist and then just stay. In fact, with the Schengen Convention<sup>8</sup>, the so called "third state nationals" simply don't have any other possibility to set foot on Europe.

On the one hand, Schengen stands for the abolition of internal borders and the freedom of movement for European Union citizens. On the other hand however it implies the tightening of the controls on the external borders and higher restrictions for Non-Europeans.

Third state citizens are only allowed to enter "Schengen-land" for the purpose of tourism, for at most three months, and even then only in compliance with certain requirements: They have to be in possession of a valid passport, able to demonstrate their purpose of travel and sufficient means of subsistence.

These requirements constitute a great obstacle for migrants, as I know from my interviewees. Many of the women, for example, never had a passport before and had now to apply for one, which costs about 100 \$. Then, in order to prove that their travel purpose is "tourism" they needed to book and prepay an accommodation in Barcelona for at least three days. The proof of sufficient means of subsistence however poses the main problem. Concretely, it is namely about 1000 \$ that Bolivian tourists are supposed to show in cash at the European border control. So, if we add together the plane ticket, the hotel and the "money-to-show", we realize that an amount of about 3000 \$ is needed for the migration project. My interviewees all had to borrow money, either from banks or from private persons.

As my interviewee Victoria tells, also travel agencies play an important role. Like many other migrants, she was advised to book a flight with lots of stopovers, so that the actual origin cannot be easily identified. Her itinerary thus was: *Cochabamba – Santa Cruz – Buenos Aires – Madrid – Barcelona*. Another interviewee, Ines, was in addition told to enter Europe through France, where "illegal" migration from Bolivia is not yet seen as a problem. She did a stop in Paris before flying to Barcelona. This put her in a better situation, because she then arrived in the inner European terminal where there are less controls.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Schengen Convention see also the URL of the European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/youreurope/nav/en/citizens/travelling/schengen-area/index.html>

Esmeralda, another interviewee, chose another strategy. She decided to fly on the New Year's Eve hoping that also border officers might have a day off or be at least less rigorous. And actually she was right.

Nevertheless, if it comes to those controls, even when migrants meet all criteria to prove that they are "tourists" they still have no entry guarantee. Some of my interviewees were interrogated by border officers for hours, or even held overnight in the control station. Psychological pressure is put on them to make them confess that they are actually coming to work and not to travel in Spain. Many migrants are then deported to their countries of origin directly from the airport.

Considering these examples, I want to argue that we shouldn't regard the European Border in terms of a "Fortress Europe". This widespread image not only underestimates the migrants as actors, but also mistakes the actual effectiveness and power of the border. The obstacle namely consists no longer in the physical borders alone, but in the number of different mobility categories, along which migrants are ordered and controlled (see Lenz 2007, 141).

Thus, we should regard border and migration policies as highly ambivalent *regimes* (see Karakayali/ Tsianos 2007, 14), following the *gouvernementality*-approach, as developed by Foucault and adapted by the social sciences (see Foucault 1987; Bröckling et al. 2000). Thus we are able to show that the European border regime doesn't aim for a total walling-off, but rather for the control, the hierarchisation and the selective economic utilization of labour mobility (see Düvell 2002, 49).

Furthermore we have to consider, that the power of the border reaches deep into the everyday life of societies, namely in form of street controls, hierarchies of citizenship rights and precarious labour markets (see Hess/Tsianos 2003, 6f).

### **Spain as new country of immigration**

In the last 30 years a lot of Southern European states, traditionally known as "senders" of migrant labourers have now become countries of immigration, a phenomenon that is referred to as "Migration Turnaround" (see King 2000, 6).

Today Spain has about 4, 1 million migrants and is, within the European Union, the country with the highest immigration rates per year (see Vicente 2005, 1). One main characteristic of the migration flows to Spain is the high rate of so called "illegal immigrants".

While, on the one hand, politics always seem to be fighting against "illegal migration", there is, on the other hand, an increasing demand for undocumented, cheap and flexible labour

force. Especially in the agriculture, construction and Domestic Sector (see Arango 2000, 263), which are more and more refused by local labour force (see Escrivà 2000, 208).

The great demand for domestic workers has also demographic and gender specific reasons: First, there is an increasing female incorporation into the labour market, which is not accompanied by more male participation in the housework (see Oso, 2003, 213); then we have the aging society, the dissolution of traditional family structures and a weak welfare state (see Ribas-Mateos 2000, 174).

Meanwhile also politics have recognized the “Domestic Work”- problem and concluded quota systems to introduce annual contingents of foreign labour force. Besides, several regularization processes<sup>9</sup> were initiated in the last years, where undocumented migrants already working in Spain could acquire residence and work permits.

Another particular feature of Spain’s immigration policy is that, since the year 2000, all immigrants, independently of their legal status, can gain access to public health care, education and other social benefits.

### **Living and Working in Barcelona**

When the Bolivian female migrants arrive in Barcelona, relatives or friends who already live in Barcelona are mostly the first address. Usually, long-established female migrants offer accommodation for the new ones until those find a room. As undocumented migrants can’t get an official lease contract, they mostly sublease rooms. Such rooms are normally shared by 2 or 3 migrants, so that a four-room-flat is often shared by 10 people. The lease prices are quite high, ranging from 200 to 350 Euros per person. Many women have problems with their landlords, are discriminated and humiliated, but still put up with it for fear of becoming homeless.

Another problem with informal tenancies is that they complicate the official registration, the *Empadronamiento*<sup>10</sup>, which is necessary for obtaining access to basic rights like public health care and education. Everybody who resides in Spain – independently of nationality and legal status – is allowed to register at the local registration office and gets access to the rights in question. The challenge for undocumented migrants however is showing a lease contract. The

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<sup>9</sup> Regularization processes took place in the years 1991, 1996, 2000/2001 and 2005. For more information on this issue see for example: Kostova 2006

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the issue of the *Empadronamiento* see also the URL of Barcelona’s municipality: <http://www.bcn.es/diversa/padro/cast/index.htm>

landlords, who could realise this registration, mostly refuse to confirm the subleasing agreements. Thus, in order to obtain access to basic rights anyhow, it has become a common strategy that relatives and friends make that registration. That means, they confirm at the registration office that the migrant is living in their house, although he is actually living somewhere else.

Informal migrant networks play a very important role, also for the job-seeking. It is mostly the friends, who provide the first jobs and give further information on how and where to seek for employment, namely at the job agencies, aid organisations and churches. These locations are first addresses, where new migrants in turn meet other migrants and inform each other on job issues. As Esmeralda puts it:

*“We always ask the others: Where do you go now? Can I go with you? And so we go together. It’s like a chain”.*

Although undocumented migrants officially have neither a residence nor a work permit, they develop different strategies to get accommodation and jobs. And as we see, informal social networks play here a decisive role. But also aid organisations are involved in the struggle for acquiring substantive citizenship rights.

Job agencies, NGOs and churches are at first view very different entities, but concerning the placement service for migrants they act in a similar way as they all carry on some kind of employment agencies. Whereas job agencies are commercial enterprises, churches and NGOs are however non-profit-organisations and regard their placement services in terms of humanitarian aid. For them, the employment agency is just *one* aspect of a much broader offer for migrants. This offer ranges from diverse information sessions, to psychological and legal advice, to job application trainings and advanced trainings for improving job opportunities.

Those “aid services” are often subsidized by the *Generalitat*, the Catalan government. The financing of the NGOs is a main element of the Catalan Integration Policy. Instead of implementing own political measures, the Generalitat is increasingly delegating public funds to citizen-centred, grass roots entities, so that they can realise integration projects themselves<sup>11</sup>. In the year 2006, for example, about 1 ½ million Euros went to non-profit organisations in Catalonia, among them to Caritas and the foundation PRAHU, which I will both now present as examples<sup>12</sup>.

The name PRAHU stands for “proyectos y ayudas humanitarias”, which means “Humanitarian projects and support”. In 2007 about 7000 migrants registered with that

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on the relationship between Immigrants and the Politics of Governance in Barcelona see also: Però 2005

<sup>12</sup> This data is taken from: Generalitat de Catalunya, Secretaria per a la Immigració: BEF 347/2006

organisation. The registration is for free, but people have to take a number and only 35 numbers are given per day. After registration a curriculum is compiled. For this purpose PRAHU assistants conduct interviews to get to know better the migrants and extract from their biographies all “útile” skills and experiences, which are then presented as suitable for labour market. Thus, simple everyday practices, like caring for the own children or parents, suddenly turn to professional skills listed in the CV as “occupation as child carer” or “geriatric nurse”. The aim, as a PRAHU assistant tells me, is to make useful the migrants’ capacities and experiences in reference to the real existing demand on the labour market. It is already during the introduction session that the migrants are informed about the determined sectors, where they will be able to find a job: Gastronomy, Construction, Agriculture and especially the Domestic Service.

### **Domestic Service: The household as workplace**

Despite the increased female incorporation into the labour market in Spain, the reproduction activities are still mainly attached to the women. It is the women, who have to solve the problem of compatibility of job and family, and more and more working women nowadays opt for employing domestic workers<sup>13</sup>. It is also the mistress, the “Señora” – as called in Spain – who employs labour force and gives the instructions.

There are three different types of employment for Domestic Workers. First, the “Fijas”, who are Live-In Domestic Workers, then the “Interinas”, who work all day in the same house but don’t live there, and then, women working “por horas”, that is per hours.

Most of my interviewees were employed in different households on an hourly basis working as housemaids, caring for children or for elderly people. As undocumented migrants almost never have a working contract, the working conditions depend mainly on the goodwill of the *Señoras*. And these ones are not always fair-minded and understanding. Many of my interviewees complained about fussy employers, who wanted everything to be polished and used to run after them controlling their work. Many *Señoras* also take advantage of the migrants’ shortage of money and their illegal status to reduce wages and establish precarious working conditions. Some migrants work several days as probationary employees for free and are then rejected without a reason. In other cases, the day off is refused for weeks. Victoria, one of my interviewees, says about this situation:

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<sup>13</sup> A very good and detailed study on both the issue of Domestic Work and of paid Domestic Workers is provided by: Anderson 2000. For the case of Domestic Workers in Spain see for example: Oso 1998

*“As we don’t have any documents, where should we go and complain? Because if we went somewhere and complained about it, we would rather harm ourselves instead of doing something good. They would immediately deport us or give us an expulsion order!”*

While the private household is on the one hand a place of exploitation, it represents on the other hand also a place of empowerment for female migrants. Considered as private sphere, this workplace is not very much affected by state control and therefore offers a job niche for migrants without work permits. Besides, this workplace also implies the possibility of gaining documents and thus more citizenship rights.

The current law allows private employers to recruit foreign labour force for the Domestic Service directly by means of a job offer. The recruited migrant is then provided a temporary residence and work permit. Actually, it is assumed that at the time of the job offering the foreign worker finds himself in his country of origin. In practice however this legislation is used by undocumented migrants already working in Spanish households (see Arango 2000, 270). If employers are cooperative, they can make a job offer to their already employed domestic workers and these can pretend that they have just migrated *after* being directly recruited. Also some of my interviewees had done it or were thinking about doing it. That way they are able to acquire documents and thus more citizenship rights.

### **Aid organisations: Between empowerment and integration pressures**

Aid organisations like PRAHU also advise migrants on those legal niches and the informal ways of acquiring residence and work permits. In PRAHU's information sessions on citizenship rights, it is furthermore emphasized that even if someone is undocumented, he still has access to public health care and education and that he should by no means put up with police and state arbitrariness. In PRAHU an emancipative discourse is evolved and “illegalisation” is deconstructed. One assistant, for example, says: “Don’t let anybody tell you that you don’t have any documents! Because *we all* have documents: birth certificate, passport, driver’s licence. The only thing you don’t have is a residence and work permit!”

The aim is to empower migrants to feel as equals towards the Spanish population and to incorporate into the working and social life of the host society.

At the same time however this empowerment also comes along with certain requirements.

In order to maximize their possibilities, the migrants are supposed to accept and adapt to the given socio-economic reality. They have to attune to determined labour market sectors and working conditions and are advised to adopt an effective way of job-seeking.



They are asked to be highly flexible and accept, for instance, weekend and night shifts or jobs outside of Barcelona. Concerning the wages, the motto is: First you have to show what you are “worth”, and then you can ask for something. So, it is proposed to them to work for a few days on a trial basis for free, in order to prove themselves and convince the employer to employ them despite their lack of documents. Besides, migrants are also advised to acquire additive qualifications. PRAHU offers trainings in geriatrics, gastronomy, construction and informatics. The certificates are supposed to improve their situation on the labour market.

In Caritas as well courses are offered, but here it is about basic trainings of one week duration, in which migrants are prepared for working life in Barcelona in general, and especially for the Domestic Service. The trainings consist of six modules, among them cooking, geriatrics, child care and housekeeping.

Social workers often recommend female migrants to do such courses, not only to improve their job opportunities, but also as a sort of empowerment against exploitation. The practical experience is namely supposed to strengthen their self-confidence and so prevent them from being underpaid and accepting precarious working conditions.

As I observed, those trainings however are not only empowering but also constraining. Female migrants are not only taught the domestic *activities*, but also the determined *role* of the Domestic Worker. So, they are told to always demonstrate willingness to work and learn, to fulfil all tasks quickly and thoroughly and are also instructed in how to deal and speak with the Señora. The trainings imply a disciplinary engineering that covers even the body. The participants, for example, are told how to dress for the job interview and even advised of how important it is to “smell of water and soap”.

While the NGOs offer their services primarily as “help for migrants”, also employers and the government benefit from it<sup>14</sup>. The Señoras get cheap and qualified labour force and the Generalitat delegates the Integration Policy.

As I was told by a PRAHU-assistant, a commissioner of the Catalan Immigration agency visited their foundation and told them: “Officially we can not congratulate and honour you for your activities, but we definitely have to thank you, as you relieve us of lots of problems: Because migrants that work mean obviously much less trouble than unemployed ones.”

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<sup>14</sup> Arango thus also refers to the NGOs as the „government’s flexible arm” (Arango 2000, 272)

## Conclusion

As I tried to show in my paper, the undocumented Bolivian migrants develop diverse strategies for being incorporated into the host society economically, socially and politically. While they seek for incorporation in Spain they however still maintain strong ties to their home countries and actively participate in the family-life of Bolivia, as they for instance provide for their living by sending remittances. And it is exactly because of these multiple relationships and simultaneous participations that their practices can be regarded as everyday cosmopolitanism.

In contrast to Hannerz, who defined Cosmopolitanism as a competence proceeding from a certain state of mind, I want to argue that Cosmopolitanism is a practice, which emerges within certain social contexts. “Illegal” migrants thus develop cosmopolitan practices, not *despite*, but rather *just because* of their socio-economic necessities to get involved with another culture.

The cosmopolitan strategies, as I showed, involve individual practices, social networks and aid organisations. The latter play here an ambivalent role: On the one hand they empower migrants to be incorporated into the local labour market despite the lack of documents, and thus to subvert existing legislations. On the other hand their informal job agencies contribute to the reproduction of ethnically segmented and precarious labour markets and thus to the conservation of prevailing neoliberal power relations.

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