

# How London's Latin American Women Make Families, Communities and Rights Visible

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Latin American migrants constitute an important part of London. Yet they remain institutionally unrecognized. Despite the campaigns for visibility carried out by advocacy groups, such as the Coalition of Latin Americans in the United Kingdom (CLAUK), the British government has still not included the Latin American category in the British Ethnic Recognition Scheme used by institutions, such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to collect census data (CLAUK 2020). The absence of a demographic category means that the contributions of Latin Americans to British society and the everyday challenges they confront go unnoticed. Institutional invisibility has obscured the stories of how Latin American women nurture their families and communities. These stories have also remained untold by the limited scholarship on this community. Despite documenting the inequalities Latin Americans face in London, scholars have paid little attention to how these inequalities affect the families and communities of Latin American migrants and the role women play in coping with these inequalities.

This chapter attempts to bring to light the experiences of London's Latin American migrant women by presenting the practices through which they maintain and make their families, communities and rights visible. Specifically, this study focuses on the strategies London's Latin American migrant women deploy to carry out social reproductive work, the 'array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally' (Nakano Glenn 1992, 1). As such, social reproductive work refers to activities like domestic work, childcare and the intergenerational transmission of culture, but also the maintenance of community ties. This study is based on 203 hours of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2018 and July 2019, which took place mostly within a London-based non-governmental organization (NGO) supporting Latin American migrants. During the fieldwork, the narratives of 17 Latin American women and 14 Latin American men were collected through semi-structured interviews. In this study, the category Latin American refers to people originally from South America, Central America and the Caribbean whose inhabitants speak Spanish, Portuguese or French (Kittleson et al. 2017). However, most of the people I met and interviewed during the fieldwork were middle-aged Colombians, Ecuadorians and Peruvians working in low-income jobs.

After problematizing the lack of attention on the social reproductive work of London's Latin American migrant women, I present the literature conceptualizing social reproduction from a feminist perspective and the methodology used to conduct this study. I then describe the social reproduction work through which Latin American women ensure the survival of their families and communities. I will demonstrate how Latin American women's social reproductive work acquires a political dimension, as it becomes key to the survival not only of their families but also of NGOs advocating for the rights and visibility of Latin American migrants in the UK. I conclude by calling for the recognition of the political nature of migrant women's everyday social reproduction practices.

### Latin American Migrants in London

The lived experiences of social reproduction among London's Latin American migrant women have largely remained

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unaddressed. In what seems an effort to begin understanding the experiences of a relatively new and unrecognized migrant group in the UK, scholars have focused mostly on the reasons behind Latin Americans' migration to the UK, their experiences in the labor market, in dealing with 'illegality' and in accessing support.

Research shows that Latin American migration to the UK began increasing in the 1970s as an outcome of the socioeconomic instability in Latin America (McIlwaine et al. 2011). Latin American migration to the UK increased further with the tightening of immigration policies in the United States during the 1990s and after 9/11, which forced Latin Americans to look for alternative destinations to find job, safety and study opportunities (Pellegrino 2004). Following the 2008 global economic crisis, Latin Americans began migrating to the UK also from Southern Europe using the European passports acquired while living there (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016). Having been negatively affected by the crisis, Latin Americans living in Southern Europe decided to look for better opportunities in London (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016). In 2019, the ONS estimated that there were 255,000 people born in Central and South America in London.

Much of the literature on the adaption experiences of London's Latin Americans has focused on their experiences in the labor market. Research shows that a considerable size of London's Latin American community earns salaries below the London Living Wage, the threshold for lifting people out of poverty in London (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016). Latin American migrants are overwhelmingly concentrated in low-paid jobs in the cleaning, care and construction sectors for which they are overqualified (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016; McIlwaine and Bunge 2018). Scholars attribute such downward mobility to limited English language skills and employers' reluctance in recognizing their educational titles (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016).

Other studies have addressed the experiences of London's Latin Americans in dealing with 'illegality'. McIlwaine et al. (2011) demonstrate the difficulties Latin Americans have had to enter and remain in the UK, since many were denied asylum and work permits. Dias's (2017) study on the way Brazilians deal with being undocumented reveals how 'illegality' meant constantly moving between houses and odd jobs to avoid being identified. Gutierrez Garza (2018) introduced the expression 'temporality of illegality' to indicate how some Latin Americans in London would move in and out of 'illegality' due to changes in migration laws and expiring visas.

Scholars have also highlighted the challenges facing London's Latin American migrants to access social protection. In 2011, only one-fifth of London's Latin American community received some kind of state assistance (McIlwaine and Bulge 2016). These numbers have been explained in terms of insufficient English language skills and lack of information available in Spanish and Portuguese (Turcatti and Assaraf 2020; Mas Giralt and Granada 2015). In this respect, scholars have shown the vital role played by the NGOs established and run by Latin Americans in supporting Latin American migrants to access health care and welfare benefits (Mas Giralt and Granada 2015; Turcatti and Assaraf 2019; Turcatti and Assaraf 2020).

This scholarship has raised awareness about the inequalities facing Latin American migrants in London. However, researchers have paid relatively little attention to the practices through which London's Latin American women maintain their families and communities. The literature we do have is sparse. Some studies have shown how social reproductive labor, such as domestic work, childcare and the transmission of heritage culture, is often carried out by women (Souza 2015; McIlwaine 2008; McIlwaine 2010). Other scholars have explored how Latin American migrant women care for their left-behind families from distance through remittances and by providing emotional support through visits and everyday communication (Passarelli Tonhati 2017).

While demonstrating the key role Latin American women play in their families, these studies tend to confine women to the familial sphere, preventing us from fully appreciating how they contribute to their communities. In order to build on and expand this literature, this study presents the strategies Latin American migrant women living in London deploy to carry out social reproductive work not only to nurture families, but also to maintain their communities. The next section defines in more detail what social reproduction and social reproductive work is from a feminist perspective.

## Social Reproduction from a Feminist Perspective

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From a feminist perspective, social reproduction is a term that refers to 'maintaining and sustaining human beings throughout their life cycle' (Truong 1996, 32). As such, social reproductive work includes the activities needed to maintain and sustain human beings, which range from domestic work and the care of children, the elderly and the ill to the intergenerational transmission of culture (Kofman 2014). The maintenance of kin and communities has also been considered a form of social reproductive labor (Nakano Glenn 1992; Gedalof 2009).

Since the seventies, feminists have highlighted the gendered nature of social reproductive work. Scholars such as Benston (1969) attributed the fact that it is often women who are held responsible for social reproductive work to gender ideologies constructing women as the 'natural' carers and men as the 'natural' breadwinners. Since the 1970s, feminists have placed reproductive labor at the center of women's oppression due to its undervalued character and because reproductive responsibilities make climbing the social ladder harder for women (Benston 1969; Nakano Glenn 1992).

While exposing the gendered nature of social reproductive labor, feminist scholars explain that the family is not the only site of social reproduction (Razavi 2013). Families can outsource reproductive tasks to other families (e.g., ask relatives or friends to care for their children) or use markets to arrange the provision of food (e.g., restaurants) or childcare (e.g., paid care workers) (Kofman 2014). The welfare state and NGOs also assume social reproductive functions. The welfare state provides households with benefits and health care, which may be vital for the social reproduction of low-income families, while NGOs can act as bridges to help families access welfare support (Razavi 2007). Put another way, the market, NGOs and the welfare state become resources that can be used to secure one's family's social reproduction.

Yet access to such resources is uneven. Colen (1995, 78) coined the term 'stratified social reproduction' to indicate that social reproductive labor is 'differentially experienced, valued and rewarded according to inequalities of access to material and social resources in particular historical and cultural contexts'. Colen (1995) developed this concept from her investigation of the parenting practices of West Indian childcarers and of their employers in New York. Colen found that the migration of West Indian middle-class mothers allowed their employers in New York to secure two salaries *and* their children's care. This meant, however, that West Indian carers could not provide the same level of security to their children, as they would struggle with both bringing their children to the US and providing them with adequate childcare, due to fragmented local networks, low wages, low-quality housing and insecure legal status.

Framed by this literature, this study investigates the kind of social reproductive work London's Latin American women do to sustain their families and communities and the meaning such work acquires in a context of institutional invisibility. The next section describes the methodology used to understand the lived experiences of social reproduction of London's Latin American women.

## Understanding Social Reproduction through Ethnography

The everyday social reproduction practices of Latin American women were documented through 203 hours of ethnographic fieldwork mostly conducted between October 2018 and May 2019 in a London-based NGO. Run by Latin Americans, this NGO helps Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking migrants access welfare support, health care and their employment rights through one-on-one advice sessions. The NGO also provides English classes, social events and workshops on topics that interest the NGO's clients.

The fieldwork started by collecting data through participant observation at the NGO. I participated in 68 advisor-client one-on-one sessions and in various social activities and workshops. Conducting participant observation at the NGO allowed me to become more familiar with the kind of everyday challenges Latin American migrants and their families face and for which they seek support, while also observing the role women play in the NGO.

Apart from participant observation, I collected the narratives of 17 Latin American women and 14 Latin American men through semi-structured interviews aimed at understanding the ways in which Latin American migrants make sense of their lived experiences of social reproduction. I interviewed both men and women in order to better understand the role that women play in their families and communities by comparing what men and women said

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about their social reproductive labor. Most of the interviewees were accessed through the NGO and were Colombians, Ecuadorians and Peruvians, middle-aged, documented and working in low-paid jobs, mostly in the cleaning sector. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were recorded and were conducted in Spanish.

While transcribing field notes and interviews, I assigned pseudonyms to participants and removed potential identifiers in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Field notes and interview transcripts were then analyzed through thematic analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) as 'a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. This analytical method was chosen as this study aimed to identify 'themes', such as the types of family and community responsibilities participants may have.

The findings are presented in the next two sections. First, I present the social reproductive practices through which Latin American women ensure the survival of their families. I then discuss Latin American women's social reproductive labor in their communities and how these are fundamental to making their families, communities and rights visible.

## From Ensuring the Survival of their Families...

Through a variety of everyday practices, Latin American women nurture and ensure the survival of their families in economic, social and cultural terms. First, the Latin American women I met while conducting participant observation at the NGO and whom I interviewed played important breadwinning roles in their families. They would often work along their partners to provide for their children, while single mothers were often the only breadwinners in their families. Women's salaries, regardless of whether they had children or partners, were often meant to enhance the lives of family members living in other countries. If in some cases remittances were meant to raise their families' living standards, they often secured everyday necessities.

In order to provide for their families, women would often work long hours in more than one company. Working in the cleaning and domestic sector meant that their salary was often below the London Living Wage, the wage required to lift people out of poverty in London. While both women and men worked long hours, it was mostly women who would queue at the NGO waiting to be attended by one of the advisors to inquire about the welfare benefits to which their families were entitled and to seek help filling out the application forms for welfare benefits and social housing.

Apart from playing a key role in securing their families' everyday necessities, women were often responsible for domestic work, childcare and the care of the elderly living in the UK. Unable to afford nurseries or residential homes and in absence of family members living in London who could help them with childcare and the care of the elderly, parents reported sharing some of these tasks. Single mothers, on the other hand, had to be both 'fathers and mothers'. As Annamaria, a Colombian single mother with three children put it:

Sometimes I rest to find the strength to cook... clean... do laundry... talk with my daughter... feed my children... meet their teacher, check how they do at school... ask them how they are doing these days... make sure I have the money to buy them shoes to go to school.

Yet it is important to highlight that having a partner does not necessarily mean help with domestic work and childcare, as Rosana, a Peruvian mother with a two-year-old son, repeatedly emphasized during the interview. Rosana explained how her ex-partner would not help her at nights when their baby was just born. Instead, he expected her to do his laundry, cook and keep their baby quiet so that he could rest.

Many women would also care for family members living elsewhere. For instance, some of the Latin American women I met while conducting participant observation at the NGO and who I interviewed were or had been at some point in their life transnational mothers. For seven years, Hadi could not bring her two children, who remained in Venezuela with their grandmother, to the UK. Being a transnational mother meant sending remittances back home to ensure her children had access to food, a roof and education. Furthermore, through 'chats all the time, video calls day and night', Hadi would do her best to provide her children with the guidance and emotional support they need to deal with issues ranging from how to deal with discussions with friends to making sense of why she has been away so long.

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For some Latin American women I interviewed, securing the survival of their families meant helping them cross borders and settle in London. Daniela, a Colombian woman who came to London during the 1980s, explained how she helped her siblings escape the violence they experienced in Colombia:

They [her siblings] didn't suffer here. They stayed with me [at her house], they found jobs [she found work for them], they got their documents [she instructed them on how to get them]. Step by step, they organized themselves.

According to Daniela, had she not shared her resources with her siblings, her family members would either be in danger or scattered around the world by now.

Latin American women's social reproductive work included organizing family gatherings in order to maintain the strength of familial bonds. It was women who would often organize visits to their left-behind families, when they could afford them and when their legal status allowed them to travel. Gathering the family also means getting together with loved ones who live in London. Romina, a Bolivian mother, provides an example:

When my husband comes home from work... we have a family moment. We sit on the bed and play with our baby... But to have that moment, the baby needs to be cleaned and the food ready.

The importance of creating the conditions that allow families to enjoy 'family moments', as Romina calls them, can be best appreciated when considering the fact that, for many of the people I interviewed and met at the NGO, free time is a luxury. Working long hours often limits the time available to families to be together.

For many of the women I interviewed and met at the NGO, nurturing their families also meant maintaining their heritage languages. For instance, women wanted their children to be able to communicate with them and their family members. Women, more often than men, reported spending time teaching their children Spanish and planning activities that would foster the learning of Spanish. This was made evident during the interview with Xiomara, a Colombian woman I interviewed whose children are now in their twenties. Xiomara explained that, apart from talking to them in Spanish, she would take them to the free Spanish classes offered by an NGO in London and test their Spanish after class. She used to tell her children: 'when you learn it well [Spanish], you will be able to speak the language you want [Spanish or English]'.

Furthermore, for the women I interviewed, nurturing their families also meant teaching their children about their heritage cultures. Mothers and parents would often mention during the interviews how they feared their children becoming 'too British' and not appreciating their heritage culture, which would lead to familial misunderstandings. This is why mothers would cook heritage food and take them to so-called Latin shops and Latin organizations to meet other Latin Americans and participate in their cultural activities.

The women I interviewed tended to be proud of the efforts they make every day to nurture their families. Yet the fact that some of the women would burst out into tears during the interview is a testament to how ensuring the social reproduction of their families is not always easy when lacking support and socioeconomic resources. As Sofia, an Ecuadorian woman, put it: 'you have to find the strength even if you don't have it'. What motivates women to find such strength can be appreciated through the words a young Colombian woman used to console Annamaria, a single mother who was crying in the hall of the NGO where I conducted fieldwork:

In a few years, your children will recognize your fights and they will keep you as a queen. They will have a diploma and will become someone.

It is clear that what keeps many women going is the hope that their efforts will bring a better future to their families.

## ...to Making their Families, Communities and Rights Visible

Latin American women are key not only to the social reproduction of their families, but also of their communities. Some volunteer for their communities where Latin American migrants receive help and support. Other women

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contribute to the maintenance of a shared 'Latin American' identity on the basis of which Latin American migrants created and keep developing NGOs advocating for the rights and institutional recognition of London's Latin American migrants. There are also women who become leaders in their own communities in order to enhance the quality of life of London's Latin American migrants and claim for their recognition and visibility.

At the NGO where I conducted participant observation, the majority of volunteers were Latin American women who would help at the organization by answering calls at the reception, helping to clean the office or cooking lunch for the advisors. Some women would also help advisors address the NGO clients' questions when they had the skills and the time to do so. For example, having studied law in Spain and being more fluent in English, Fernanda, a Colombian woman who came to the UK from Spain, decided to volunteer at the NGO and help advisors with minor tasks, such as helping clients figure out whether their driving license is valid in the UK and what to do if it is not. These women's volunteer work should not be underestimated. As one of the community workers explained, there are not funds specifically allocated for the Latin American community, precisely because Latin Americans are still not institutionally recognized. This means that the NGO is severely understaffed and overworked. To attend the clients that queue at the NGO every day, advisors had little time to have lunch and take breaks. This is why the volunteer work of Latin American women in the NGO is crucial.

Latin American women are also key to the maintenance of a shared 'Latin American' identity on the basis of which Latin American migrants create and keep developing NGOs advocating for the rights and institutional recognition of London's Latin American migrants. At the NGO where I conducted fieldwork, women were often responsible for organizing activities and social events such as monthly gatherings and parties. In these events, women would often cook heritage food. For major events, such as the Christmas party and the anniversary party of the NGO, they would invite professional dancers to perform choreographies based on salsa, cumbia and bachata music. By doing so, Latin American women create spaces where their heritage cultures can be celebrated and enacted. As one of the advisors of the NGO emphasized, these social and cultural activities play an important function in making Latin Americans feel they belong to the same community despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, histories and migratory trajectories. The sense of belonging to a Latin American community instils an obligation to help each other, which is the rationale and the motor of many of the NGOs in London funded by Latin Americans, including the one where I conducted fieldwork, whose objective is to enhance the quality of life and claim the recognition of Latin American migrants in the UK.

Here it is important to emphasize that the Latin American women I interviewed contribute to the social reproduction of their communities even when not directly volunteering in their communities. In the previous section, I highlighted the social reproductive work women do to maintain and reproduce their heritage cultures and languages inter-generationally. These practices contribute to their children's development and the maintenance of a Latin American identity. Feeling Latin American, the second generations may decide to contribute to enhance the quality of life of other Latin Americans living in London once they grow up. At the NGO where I conducted fieldwork, one of the advisors was a young woman in her twenties who was the daughter of a Colombian woman who came to the UK as an asylum seeker. Claudia studied at university and decided first to volunteer and then work for the NGO where I conducted fieldwork as she wanted to use the knowledge and skills that she acquired in school to support London's Latin American migrants. The case of Claudia is only one example of how Latin American women play a crucial role in the social reproduction of their communities even when not directly involved in volunteer or community work merely by virtue of transmitting their heritage culture to their children.

Finally, I met and interviewed women who had become leaders in their own communities and contribute more proactively to enhance the quality of life of London's Latin American migrants. The case of Valeria, a Colombian mother, illustrates this. Valeria approached the NGO where I conducted fieldwork a few years ago when she was diagnosed with a chronic illness that prevented her from working and supporting her two children. At the NGO, the advisors helped her access health care and the welfare benefits she needed until she could return to work. Since then, Valeria started participating in various activities of the NGO and volunteering, as it was a space for her to not feel alone. When her health got better, Valeria decided to start a course to become an advisor specialized in social housing and began volunteering for the NGO by assisting advisors helping migrants access social housing. While she was still training at the time of my research, she started to handle some social housing cases at the NGO on her

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own. She also became the president of the board of trustee of the NGO, where key decisions about the kind of services that the NGO provides to the Latin American community are made.

There are many reasons why women participated in their communities more or less actively. Some of the women I met volunteered at the NGO where I conducted fieldwork because they wanted to 'give back'. Having been helped by the NGO to access health care and the welfare benefits to which they are entitled; volunteering was a way of expressing their gratitude to the advisors of the organization. At the same time, volunteering was a way of socializing and making friends with people who understood them by virtue of coming from the same culture, speaking the same language or having shared similar challenges. There were also women who more explicitly stated that their community involvement stemmed from being aware of the lack of support available to Latin American migrants in London. 'We are invisible', Valeria said, 'and I want to support my community, the same way they supported me'. Yet, regardless of the reasons why and the extent to which women become involved in their communities, Latin American women play a crucial role for the social reproduction and therefore survival of these communities.

## Conclusion

In order to bring to light the experiences of London's Latin American migrant women, this chapter presented the practices through which London's Latin American women maintain and make their families, communities and rights visible. Specifically, this study focused on the strategies London's Latin American migrant women deploy to carry out social reproductive work for their families and their communities and the function that such work acquires in a context of invisibility.

This chapter showed that Latin American women play a crucial role in the social reproduction of their families. While at times men and women shared domestic and childcare tasks, women were often responsible for these. Women were also breadwinners in addition to being responsible for keeping families together by organizing family gatherings, helping their family members migrate to London and transmitting their heritage cultures to the next generation.

Apart from securing the survival of their families in economic, social and cultural terms, there were women who would volunteer for NGOs and communities supporting Latin American migrants in London. Fieldwork allowed me to appreciate the journey some women undertake to become leaders in their own communities, where the objective is to enhance the quality of life of London's Latin American migrants and claim for their recognition and visibility.

In a context of institutional invisibility, the social reproductive work Latin American women do to nurture their families and communities acquires a political dimension. By volunteering and becoming leaders in their communities, women ensure that the NGOs enhancing the quality of life and visibility of Latin American migrants in London continue to operate. By passing along their cultures to the next generations, women are keeping up the hope that these Latin American communities and organizations will be supported by the next generations and continue to claim for the rights and visibility of London's Latin American migrants.

Not only does this chapter make visible the experiences of London's Latin American migrant women, it also clearly demonstrates how confining migrant women's social reproductive work to the *private* realm of domesticity prevents us from appreciating its political and *public* dimensions. Only when considering the social reproductive work migrant women do both within their families and for their communities can we appreciate and recognize the political nature of migrant women's everyday social reproduction practices within and beyond the boundaries of domesticity.

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## About the author:

**Domiziana Turcatti** is a Clarendon Scholar and DPhil Candidate in Migration Studies at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford (UK). Domiziana's doctoral research focuses on the experiences of the families of onward Colombian migrants who moved from Spain to London. This research emerged from her previous study on the experiences of social reproduction of Latin American migrants in London, conducted during her MPhil in Sociology at the University of Cambridge (UK) as a Gates Cambridge Scholar. Prior to moving to the UK, Domiziana was awarded an Honors BA in Liberal Arts and Science at Amsterdam University College (Netherlands), where for three years she looked into the educational experiences and the peer culture of Moroccan-Dutch youth in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Her research interests lie at the intersection of Migration, Family and Childhood Studies, and the role of migrant-led organizations in advancing migrants' rights and visibility.