

## Migration Chains in the Diaspora of South American Transvestites/Trans Women Residents of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires

### Cadenas migratorias en la diáspora de las travestis/trans sudamericanas residentes del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires

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#### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the migratory chains that constitute South American transvestites and trans women who reside in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area during the period 2017-2019, paying special attention to the role of *godmothers*. The migratory projects of these people are produced because of the hostility and vulnerability they experience in their surroundings and have different instances. One of them is the migratory chains that refer to the social capital necessary to be able to leave the sending society and settle in the receiving society. In this way, South American transvestites/trans women constitute diverse migratory chains that can be characterized as horizontal and vertical, being the godmothers key actors in their diasporas. The focus of the article is qualitative and the method used is grounded theory. According to a theoretical sample consisting of 41 interviews, the information was analyzed using Atlas.Ti.

*Keywords:* 1. migration chains, 2. transvestites/trans, 3. migrations, 4. BAMA, 5. Argentina.

#### RESUMEN

El artículo analiza las cadenas migratorias que constituyen las travestis y mujeres trans sudamericanas que residen en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires durante el período 2017-2019, atendiendo especialmente el rol de las *madrinas*. Los proyectos migratorios de estas personas se producen como consecuencia de la hostilidad y vulnerabilidad que experimentan en sus entornos y poseen diferentes instancias. Una de ellas, son las cadenas migratorias que remiten al capital social necesario para poder abandonar la sociedad emisora y establecerse en la sociedad receptora. De este modo, las travestis/trans sudamericanas constituyen diversas cadenas migratorias que pueden caracterizarse como horizontales y verticales, siendo las madrinan actores claves en sus diásporas. El enfoque del artículo es cualitativo y el método empleado es la teoría fundamentada. De acuerdo con un muestreo teórico constituido mediante 41 entrevistas, la información fue analizada con el software Atlas.Ti.

*Palabras clave:* 1. cadenas migratorias, 2. travestis/trans, 3. migraciones, 4. AMBA, 5. Argentina.

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## INTRODUCTION

International migration processes are complex social phenomena crossing throughout the history of several countries. In the Argentine Republic, migrations have been one of the axes in the construction of the Nation State. European migrations were highly visible towards the end of the 19th century and until the 1930s, and after the second half of the 20th century it was the migrations from South America that had the greatest impact (Benencia, 2003). Thus, it can be certainly stated that international migrations have been an important matter to address at various times, impacting differently on the receiving society.

Broadly speaking, migration studies have focused on the migration processes of cis-heterosexual men and women, downplaying other populations also transiting with considerable regularity. In Latin America, timely ethnographic research has been carried out on Brazilian transvestites/trans women who migrated to Europe (Teixeira, 2008; Vartabedian, 2012). These have shown that migration occurs as a result of discrimination and that aspects such as the glamour and charm of *Brazilianness* are some of the fundamental characteristics that would also allow prostitution/sex work to be made use of as the main survival strategy.

In Mexico, the tactics and strategies employed by migrants to cross borders monitored by security devices have been problematized (among other issues), interpreting masculine gender roles in order to mask their transvestite and trans gender expression (López Fernández, 2018; Zarco Ortiz & Chacón Reynosa, 2020). Finally, studies in Argentina (Fernández, 2004; Berkins, 2007; Boy, 2017) have contributed to the reflection on the disaffiliation of transvestites/transsexuals who from different provinces migrate to urban centers in order to seek the anonymity of the big city and experience greater freedoms.

This article analyzes the migration chains developed by South American transvestites/trans women currently residing in the BAMA (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area) through *godmothers*, which are essential to consolidate migration in the receiving destination. Although migration chains are also established with relatives, friends and with the political organizations that partake of these migration projects, godmothers are the only migration chain of greater relevance and specificity present in the biographies of the interviewees. In view of such, this article finds its place among the emerging studies on migrations, sexual diversity and gender in Latin America, which in the last twenty years have advanced the investigation of different processes.

On the other hand, both *Law No. 25.871* on migration (2004) and *Law No. 26.743* on gender identity (2012) are key elements in understanding why the BAMA is an attractive destination. Both legislations constitute South American transvestites/trans women as holders of rights and, beyond the hostilities, violence and discrimination they experience, they are brought closer to the condition of citizens, having access health, education and justice services. In short, the main reasons for migrating to the BAMA have to do with the possibility of living in better conditions while exercising their essential rights.

The South American transvestites/trans women migrate to the BAMA as a consequence of the hostilities they experience in their original societies, hostilities usually materialized in violence and discrimination that harm them even within the family. The decision to migrate thus results from the overlapping between objective and subjective aspects, and involves a series of stages. One of them rests on the availability of migration chains, that is, the material and symbolic links that rest on the social capital of people that are necessary to carry out mobilization and to settle in a receiving society.

The article is divided into three parts: the methodology is presented first, then the theoretical framework is explained, and finally the main migration chains made use of by the studied universe to concretize migration are accounted for, special attention being given to the role of godmothers.

## METHODOLOGY

This section summarizes some details on the focus of the article, the methods and techniques employed, the sample, the processing of the information, and the procedures of analysis.

With the aim of understanding the meanings that transvestites/trans women give to their migration projects, the focus of this article is qualitative. The fundamental premise that runs through all the perspectives linked to qualitative research lies in understanding the sense and meanings that people give to their actions. The method used was Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002), in order to prompt the discovery of categories and properties that would allow establishing emerging theoretical guidelines. The techniques applied were in-depth interviewing and participant observation. As for analysis procedures, the constant comparison method was employed, which allowed the use of open and selective coding. The participant observations were recorded in a field diary created with the Word 2016 word processor, and a memo was created with the Atlas.Ti 8.3 software. This memo detailed a number of condensed, expanded, methodological, and analysis and interpretation notes (Valles, 2000) that provided the field work with greater rigor. The memos created in Atlas.Ti corresponded to the categories of analysis developed for this study, which are presented in the following section through tables that complement the information provided in the interviews.

The sample was made up of 44 cases, of which three were key informants (two native transvestites/trans women and one cisgender woman). The remaining 41 South American transvestites/trans women (Peruvian, Colombian, Brazilian, Ecuadorian and Paraguayan) had different sociodemographic characteristics which were analyzed in order to reach theoretical saturation based on different cases. In addition, contact was made with around 130 transvestites/trans women between both natives and South American, accounting for both interviewees and those with whom conversations were had within the context of participant observation. The interviews and the participant observations were carried out during the fieldwork that lasted between years 2017 and 2019, this being also the time focus of this article.

Given the difficulties of access, at first the spaces for the interviews were bars and nightclubs in the context of nocturnal sociability. In a later instance, the Association of Women Sex Workers of Argentina (AMMAR, acronym in Spanish for Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina), La Rosa Naranja (The Orange Rose) and the Association of Transvestites, Transsexuals and Transgenders of Argentina (ATTTA, acronym in Spanish for Asociación de Travestis, Transexuales y Transgéneros de Argentina) were contacted. This diversity of interviewees and spaces in which the observations were made it possible to bring together a solid sample that included maximum variations and negative cases.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section defines some of the concepts involved in this research. In the first place, naming this population constitutes a theoretical challenge due to the multiplicity of self-identification processes that do not conform to static taxonomies. Thus, transvestites are understood as a gender and political identity, whereas the prefix trans means “on the other side” and in this case it is used to name those people who, transgressing hetero-cis-normativity, do not consider themselves transvestites, interpreting that term as wrong or even as offensive.

Migration is understood according to the transformation of three dimensions: space, time and culture. In this way, migrating implies leaving one context and reaching another, that is, it implies a significant geographical distance. It also involves staying for a certain time in another territory in order to carry out a life project and, finally, a cultural and social rupture with respect to the original environment is produced (Blanco, 2000; Micolta León, 2005). To achieve migration, people make use of migration chains corresponding to information, ways and people who contribute to carry out mobilization, as expressed by the following authors:

A migration chain can be defined as the movement through which would-be migrants become aware of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and obtain their initial settlement and employment, through primary social relations with previous migrants (Mac Donald & Mac Donald, 1964; Malgesini & Giménez, 2000, cited in Pedone, 2006, p. 107).

The fact that migrants need chains of support and resources to migrate is an element that was described by Argentine sociology from its origins, to explain internal migration dynamics, given that social capital is essential to carry out mobilization. Pedone (2002, 2006) differentiates the concept of migration chains from that of networks, given that the latter is broader; that is, chains are crystallized, developed structures. Succinctly stated, the theory of migration networks argues with economic bias models, which understand the reasons for migration as a result aimed at economic maximization.

Contrary to the assertion that individuals move simply governed by the law of supply and demand, either by their real appreciations or by their expectations, we can say that what often happens is that immigration is a collective social phenomenon: family, friendship chains, previous community ties, these and other networks are at the base of many migration

movements in history and today (Malgesini & Giménez, 2000, cited in Anguiano, 2000, pp. 179-180).

This means that in migration theory some perspectives understand that chains influence the reasons for migrating. A fundamental aspect in the migration projects of our interviewees are assimilation agents, who are the ones who make it possible for migrants to adapt to the receiving society through access to work and, as a general rule, contribute to migration taking place. As addressed in the contributions of Malgesini & Giménez (2000), friends, godmothers, husbands and political organizations are the main actors that favor the insertion of transvestite/trans women migrants in the BAMA.

Issues related to the social context of origin, the provision of internal resources, the trip, the settlement in the destination, and the integration in the receiving society are all involved in the decision to migrate. Migration chains illustrate a transitory instance between the different migration times, instance that surrounds the process of leaving the issuing society and arriving in the receiving one. Clearly said, it is necessary to have social capital if one is to achieve migration.

The analysis of the information and the results obtained are presented below.

### *Ways of Migrating*

To effectively achieve migration, South American transvestite/trans women make use of a set of information, ways, and material and symbolic links. Those who leave their environments and migrate internally, distance themselves from their families of origin to begin to express their gender identities socially and live in better conditions. Given that migration is a symbolic, economic and even educational investment strategy to improve their status in the social space and freely express their gender identity, it is necessary to describe the stage in which the necessary links to move and consummate migration develop.

Faithful to the pillars of Grounded Theory, the category constructed in this analysis is *ways of migrating* and the subcategories are *horizontal migration chains* and *vertical migration chains*. The properties are the agents that constitute these chains, which in the case of horizontal chains are represented by relatives, political organizations and friends; in the case of vertical chains, they are made up of husbands and godmothers. The common dimensions are the minimum survival guarantees (food, clothing and housing), including the costs linked to traveling, respect and protection. In vertical migration chains, abusive behavior, reproductive housework and the subtraction of economic resources during the exercise of prostitution/sex work are included. As for the dimensions, in the case of the godmothers, these refer to a complex diversity, since the protection they provide is linked to the activity of brothels/sex work; differentiated socialization, assimilation; they advise on how to carry out gender performances and how to integrate socially in accordance with the codes of transvestite/trans people. Respect and loyalty towards godmothers are indicators of their leadership and legitimacy, which constitutes a symbolic capital that reproduces social relations of domination. These variations are presented schematically in the following table.

Table 1. *Way of migrating* category according to subcategories, properties and dimensions

Category	Subcategory	Properties	Dimensions	
Way of migrating	Horizontal migration chains	Political organizations	Minimum survival guarantees (food, clothing and housing)	
		Friends	Assuming costs linked to traveling	
		Family	Respect and protection	
		Partners (husbands)	Minimum survival guarantees (food, clothing and housing) Assuming costs linked to traveling Reproductive housework	
	Vertical migration chains	Godmothers		Assimilation and differentiated socialization
				Protection linked to prostitution/sex work
			Assuming costs linked to traveling	
			Tips on how to carry out gender performances Abusive behavior Domination Respect, loyalty and leadership	

Source: Own elaboration.

It should be noted that the theoretical-methodological construction of this category was developed in relation to the information obtained. It is likely for there to be hierarchies and relations of domination in political organizations or in friendships, yet for the processing of the information, what our interviewees provided was taken into account.

The way of migrating refers to the means available to carry out the mobilization, which in this case materializes through the creation of migration chains and which can vary according to the different types of bonds that migrant transvestites/trans women develop with adaptation agents in the receiving society.

In this order of ideas, according to the contributions of Pedone (2002, 2006), horizontal migration chains are characterized by establishing bonds of solidarity, mutual aid and reciprocity. Asymmetries in the links of these chains are not ruled out, however, according to what was reported by the interviewees, the exchanges and reciprocities in these cases are not unequal to an extent relevant for analysis. Although the purpose of this article is not analyzing horizontal

migration chains, it is worth mentioning that these chains are those constituted between friends, with political organizations and with relatives. These chains are part of the social capital of the interviews and allow migrants to insert themselves into the receiving society through material and affective support.

The role of grandmothers is presented next, since this role is key in the migration projects of the studied universe.

### *Godmothers*

During the field work, both in conversations and in interviews, South American transvestites/trans women employed the term godmothers to refer to relevant people in their migration trajectories. These people are older transvestites/trans women (generally over 35 years old) who have spent a considerable time in the country and bond with other transvestites/trans women, younger and newcomers, who usually lack knowledge of the codes typical of this group circumscribed in the exercise of prostitution/sex work in most cases (Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2017). The relevance of describing migration chains of this type, accounting for the role of godmothers, is due to the fact that this modality is specific to the South American transvestite/transsexual population.

One of the fundamental characteristics of godmothers is that their name alludes to the maternal role, linked to protection and affection; this is because the role of actual mothers has generally been one of misunderstanding and abandonment, motivating the displacement of daughters to other environments: “She called herself mother, like a protector, like a protector transsexual who brings in a new defenseless one who does not know how to fend by herself yet, lest another one comes to attack her” (Sandra, personal communication, July 28, 2018).

Some research has described the characteristics of these people through various meanings. Fernández (2004) explains this bond through the notion of pupilage, alluding to a social relationship between godmothers and the recently arrived transvestites/trans women, whom the author terms daughters. The author points out that godmothers socialize newcomers in advance (Goffman, 1989), helping them to incorporate norms, codes and values that allow these newcomers to live socially assuming their gender identity; yet above all, godmothers transmit to younger transvestites/trans women the rules related to the exercise of prostitution/sex work, and advise them on how to take care of themselves in public space.

Academic literature has delved into the subject of godmothers from different perspectives (Kulick, 1998; Fernández, 2004; Benedetti, 2005; Vogel, 2009; Teixeira, 2008; Vartabedian, 2012; Prada Prada, Herrera Galvis, Lozano Ruiz, & Ortiz Gómez, 2012; Vásquez, 2014; López, 2015; Álvarez, 2018). In some cases, this social relationship has been studied from the discourses on prostitution/sex work and from the debates within feminism. However, this article does not focus on the discourses or political positions regarding prostitution/sex work, but on analyzing and understanding the role of these people in migration projects.

The diversity of meanings regarding godmothers must be taken into account because, as Amaral (2012) has pointed out, for transvestites/trans women this term can stand for different aspects. The terms godmothers and daughters are one way of addressing this matter, although it is likely that some interviewees use different terminologies that refer to various situations within that bond.

As a starting point, this bond refers to a social relationship of domination in which conflicts and asymmetries prevail, and whose dimensions include issues related to values, affectivity, personal economy and the necessary means to achieve migration. The migration chains made up of both godmothers and husbands share the asymmetrical aspect that crosses these bonds, yet some of their characteristics and particularities differ from each other.

The role assumed by godmothers cannot be reduced to the exercise of prostitution/sex work. The main characteristics of the bond that is interwoven between godmothers and daughters are summarized below:

1) The difference in ages and time living in the country. Godmothers are usually adults while daughters are teenagers or youngsters. In the study of migration projects, this category becomes more complex given that godmothers have been living in the BAMA for a longer time than their daughters. This makes asymmetries more drastic, since godmothers know the migratory destination better.

2) This bond is asymmetric and hierarchical. This indicator is expressed based on the economic appropriation of the resources obtained through the prostitution/sex work of the daughters. Also, such asymmetries are based on symbolic dimensions that grant godmothers with qualities of leadership, loyalty and prestige, essential to establish their legitimacy.

3) Godmothers tell their daughters how to create an appearance and assume a gender role/performance (clothing, cosmetics, surgeries and hormonal treatments).

4) Godmothers provide the minimum survival guarantees (food, clothing and housing).

5) Godmothers provide affective support and the material means to carry out the migration of other transvestites/trans women, and pay the expenses related to the trip.

6) Godmothers influence the exercise of prostitution/sex work, since they control the space where it is exercised and take care of their daughters from possible aggressions from clients, *fisuras*<sup>2</sup> and law enforcement.

On the other hand, research on the subject of transvestite/transsexual migrations has paid little attention to the place of godmothers in migration processes. In this way, godmothers, as agents of socialization and adaptation, contribute not only to the adoption of norms and values linked to transvestite/transsexual social life in the youngest, but also introduce them to cultural norms and

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<sup>2</sup> Term used by our interviewees to refer to low-income young men who drink alcohol and can potentially be aggressive to them.



values. Specifically, the socialization that transvestites/trans women develop can be approached through the habitus of migrant women, that is to say, through the configurations of the ways of doing, thinking and feeling that imply thriving and lasting dispositions allowing for social living (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2008).

Godmothers “inform” newcomers on the cultural characteristics of the receiving society that are articulated by means of group codes. In other words, these people are agents that contribute to the introjection of cultural norms and values that are specifically linked to the characteristics of the transvestite/transsexual population.<sup>3</sup> In summary, from these bonds a habitus is constituted that establishes the ways of thinking, acting and feeling in which a certain group homogenization is noticeable. Godmothers socialize, transfer and support the adaptation of youngsters as transvestites/trans women and as migrants, contributing to their insertion in the host society as such. They assume a double role: on the one hand, they constitute themselves as the dominant pole and, on the other, as agents or means that favor adaptation in the receiving society. Both roles are linked and contribute to consolidate the dependency of transvestites/trans women in a bond characterized by different asymmetries, which we will address further on.

The relationship between godmothers and daughters is a bond crossed by social domination. According to Weber (2014), dominance implies the probability of responding with obedience to a command in which two or more people are involved. This domination interweaves material and symbolic ties. According to this, Vartabedian (2012) points out that the bond between godmothers and daughters is crossed by factors that legitimize a symbolic power that transcends the borders of economic benefits. In this way, godmothers provide housing for the newcomers and provide them with protection when they engage in prostitution/sex work. Although the role of godmothers cannot be reduced to the guarantees and care they provide in the exercise of this activity, this dimension is key in the migration projects of our interviewees, since these godmothers play a fundamental role in appropriating the income generated by daughters in the context of the exercise of prostitution/sex work.

Recently arrived South American transvestite/trans migrant women learn the codes necessary to bond with other transvestites/trans women, with clients, with law enforcement and with society in general. According to Álvarez Broz (2018), godmothers and newcomer South American transvestites/trans women constitute themselves into *peer families* and, according to the contributions of López Murcia (2015), godmothers teach first-timers the characteristics of prostitution/sex work, the main requirements of clients, the ways they should dress and the ways of expressing themselves physically, as well as the transsexual knowledge regarding the ways of using and applying hormones.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, López Murcia (2015) points out that godmothers teach Colombian transvestites/trans women who migrate to Italy simple language structures so that they can communicate with clients. This example is cultural and linked to the need to integrate into the receiving society.

From the numerous stories told by godmothers, those that allow addressing the dimensions in depth are here exposed and analyzed.

—Most of the people who take you coordinate themselves with the family they have there. Because that way they can back you up and make sure you don't lose your trip. They will not invest just to lose, let's say.

—And why do they invest?

—They invest so they can benefit you, she really is a very good friend, and most girls are taken to be exploited. As if saying, "well I will give this much for the cost of the trip and you will pay me double that cost". That didn't happen in my case. That happens to most girls. I say it because I've constantly seen girls who have left here for Europe and there they pay double and in euros. Not dollars, not pesos, euros (Sandra, personal communication, July 28, 2018).

This story makes it possible to link the role of godmothers to the exercise of prostitution/sex work in order to guarantee the appropriation of economic resources. It is highly noticeable how this activity is the main and almost exclusive one for the survival of this population group and it is in this context that godmothers partake of the process of socialization and assimilation of their daughters in the receiving society. Although it is not pertinent to reduce their function solely to the exercise of prostitution/sex work, the migrant above warns that she is aware of such type of situations, even among transvestites/transsexuals in transit to Europe.

The formula that Sandra recounts is simple: providing the cost of the ticket for a transvestite/trans woman to migrate and then increasing one's income through mechanisms that, according to her understanding, are exploitative. Our interviewee emphasized her political position on the subject, considering that sexual exploitation is one of the functions of godmothers, although, when recounting her experience own, as will be seen later, she nuanced these definitions and was able to contribute other aspects. Vartabedian (2014) argues that transvestites/trans women in other contexts do not perceive the treatment of godmothers as abusive, nor do they consider their actions to be linked to sexual exploitation or human trafficking. Without discrediting this contribution, in this article we deem it necessary to relativize these statements in accordance with the stories provided by our interviewees.

Based on Álvarez Broz (2018), in the godmother-daughter bond family ties are formed that could be characterized as peer families. In other words, they are peers due to their same gender identity and shared experiences, although they are not equal because of the asymmetric social relations interwoven, ruled by power and domination. Definitely so, if the social capital of newly arrived transvestites/trans women was eroded by distancing themselves from their parent families as a result of having assumed and expressed their gender identity, by migrating they manage to create new family ties related to these bonds with people who provide them migrants with new social capital, one necessary to acquire again economic resources and undertake the process of adaptation in the receiving society.

To support these theories, descriptions of the interviewees are presented next, in which the living conditions within the framework of peer families are reported.

It was snowing that day and I started to cry because on top of everything the house didn't have... Where my friend brought me, it had only a roof and air came in from all sides, and I wanted to get back but I didn't have a ticket cause I was just starting to more or less know how to work all those things, and on top of that this girl would charge for absolutely everything; for every single thing, she would charge me for everything, but you don't know, they take advantage of you, you see, and that's it. She was Peruvian too, and would charge me some money to take me to the spot as well. Imagine I tell you: "I'll take you with me and you'll be there." Well they paid you accordingly... it's only logical, isn't it? But in the avenue I'll charge a part, let's say a percentage so that you can have a place. "Alright, it's ok" I said, because you obviously want to work, what else can you say. And I had to be there fucking freezing; whenever possible you work in a private spot and I managed to go and work at a private spot. I worked in a private spot. As I was telling you, my friend would charge way too much for the room and the food and for everything, a lot, I was practically paying for everything. The guy from the private spot was a policeman. He told me that I could sleep there in the private spot if I wanted, because they worked there only till 10 in the night, all day. So I started living there (Ariadna, personal communication, March 3, 2019).

Yes, you need a good mother to help you out; thank God I always had food and a roof to sleep under, to eat under, and worked in a good area (Amaia, personal communication, July 28, 2017).

The poor living conditions in which Ariadna found herself caused her to decide to sever the bond with her godmother and start engaging in prostitution/sex work in a private apartment managed by a Buenos Aires police officer in the Quilmes district. It should be noted that grandmother and daughter lived together in poor housing conditions. The godmother had had a criminal case for drug sales and she was also in a vulnerable situation. In short, Ariadna and her friends, who were also interviewed, recounted similar experiences and described aspects of the bond that went beyond subtraction of economic resources through the exercise of prostitution/sex work, since they were also charged disproportionately for food and housing, causing the depletion of their economic resources. Thus, the dismemberment of peer families as a consequence of attitudes deemed abusive and also due to competition and rivalry between transvestites/trans women can be pointed out as a recurring factor.

Amaia, unlike Ariadna, reports that living conditions depend on the quality of the bond with godmothers. She assured to us that she never lacked for anything and that she was able to practice prostitution/sex work under favorable conditions. In this case, the dimensions linked to survival (food and housing) and the control of the space where said activity is carried out can be observed. With this experience, the native category of *help* begins to emerge, referring to the support provided by godmothers so that daughters can live in better conditions. In other words, the multiple nuances shown by empirical evidence reappear, since in some cases godmothers can be seen as abusive actors, and in others they facilitate the processes of social adaptation.

According to Vogel (2009), the ambiguity between economic and affective exchanges is a characteristic of these bonds. In summary, family ties cannot be isolated from the economic rewards that the exercise of prostitution/sex work entails, yet at the same time, aspects that go beyond such rewards can also be observed, in which affectivity, coexistence, protection and abusive behaviors take place, which can be characterized as positive or negative depending on the experience of each of the interviewees. In this regard, Zelizer (2012) argued that in intimacy, affective relationships are crossed by economic transactions. In this way, the author points out that “none of us lives in spheres divided by unsurmountable barriers between our personal relationships and our economic ties” (Zelizer, 2012, p. 95). For this reason, it is suitable to characterize the social relationship between godmothers and daughters through a perspective that understands that money and monetary exchanges are a constitutive part of family life, also evident in the case of transvestites/trans women, beyond their particularities. The main question is what meaning does money acquire in the exchange between godmothers and daughters, considering that godmothers subtract income from newcomers while also contributing resources such as housing, food and transportation costs as part of those exchanges. That is to say, these are exchanges and reciprocities that exceed utilitarian rationalities and are based on chains of favors and aid. For this reason, Pedone (2002) referred that the interwoven reciprocities between neighbors and friends of potential migrants can sometimes contribute to the reinforcement of power relations. In the case of the godmothers, two faces are observed: the chain of favors, aid and exchanges, and the verticality linked to dominance, including abusive treatment.

On the other hand, age is a key variable in understanding the bond between godmothers and newcomers, and even more so if linked to the characteristics of prostitution/sex work. It is assumed that in the field of this activity, the composition and volume of erotic capital are paramount, that is, the ways of constituting and expressing it. According to Hakim (2012), erotic capital is multidimensional and made up of beauty and sexual attractiveness; physical attributes are largely acquired through various facial and body manipulations associated with fashion. Social skills such as charm, a sense of humor, and the gift of persuasion are also given importance. Likewise, the vitality associated with body expressiveness is valued. The image factor is also taken into account, that is, the social presentation through clothing, the use of perfumes and accessories. Lastly, erotic capital involves the deployment of capacities to be a “good lover”, that is, to sexually satisfy the partner.

In prostitution/sex work, the aforementioned dimensions are roles that are played with the aim of accessing a significant number of clients, thus increasing the remuneration provided by them. According to Hakim (2012), given that in men the notion of a sexual deficit prevails due to not having enough sex, it is likely that this activity represents a profitable survival strategy from the economic point of view, to the extent that prostitution/sex work makes it possible to palliate this deficit. However, migrant women understand that, as they age, the sexual market excludes them to the point where this activity ceases to be an effective strategy for the acquisition of economic resources. It was observed that the indicators of erotic capital that clients appreciate the most are linked to youth, physical beauty and active performance by them during the sexual act.

Given the above, an intersectional perspective is particularly useful for understanding how multiple oppressions interact. We know that age, gender identity and migrant status are aspects that condition the biographical projects of our interviewees, causing them to engage in prostitution/sex work as their only survival strategy, besides the exceptions who work in beauty salons. However, significant differences were noticed. Younger and newcomer transvestites/trans women can easily gain value in the sex markets since clients are willing to pay higher remuneration. This value is at the same time taken advantage of by godmothers through the appropriation of their daughters' resources and through mechanisms that bring together cohesion and coercion. Gender identity and migrant status affects them equally and relegates them to the exercise of this activity, being excluded from formal jobs. Finally, the time living in the receiving destination is a differentiating aspect, since godmothers, having lived there for a longer time than younger transvestites/trans women, can control the *spots*,<sup>4</sup> and by knowing the tricks of the trade and the strategies, avoid situations of violence.

According to the contributions of the migrants interviewed during the development of this research, there are three possible ways to rebuild the economic capital lost after having assumed their gender identities: selling narcotics (cocaine); controlling the space and clients that other transvestites/trans women can have, in order to subtract economic resources from their peers; or by constituting social capital in political organizations in order to undertake other labor strategies. However, this does not mean that these are the only social reproduction strategies available; on the contrary, some cases have been described that show how it is possible to access study and formal job, although these are usually strategies that occur in unusual ways. In summary, the figure of the godmother is the result of the dynamics that prostitution/sex work acquires based on the migration projects of a vulnerable population that has endured discrimination and different hostilities.

Some interviewees provided descriptions that contrast with the previous ones, allowing thus to establish other aspects of godmothers:

She would be like a mother figure or something alike. I am her daughter so they can't touch me, but there are different kinds of mothers and some use this in controversial ways, some don't. For example, I went through a lot of things that I wouldn't like other girls to go through, and I help them, I give them money, for their boobs, their bodies, for this and that, to become independent. A girlfriend brought me and recommended me to another friend who was much older than me, who I used to see all the time in Peru, and she was always beating me up, so when I saw that it was this girl I got really scared, cause I thought it was going to be the same again. But she told me: "no, things have changed." And the truth is that she has been like a mother to me, she showed everything to me, she gave me two weeks to settle in, "and we'll see what to do if you have a hard time." I managed to work well on the fourth, fifth, seventh day, and then she started paying me (Luna, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> This term refers to public spaces where prostitution/sex work is offered.

In this case, a common characteristic of Luna's story is the subtraction by godmothers of the economic resources that come from their daughters' prostitution/sex work. However, from Luna's perspective, there are different types of godmothers. This classification establishes a difference between the appropriation of economic resources, and protection and care. At the end of the interview, Luna clarified by "controversial ways" she means the appropriation of those resources obtained through the exercise of prostitution/sex work of other South American transvestites/trans women. Protection is a characteristic observed at the beginning of the story, when the role of the godmothers is associated with that of a mother figure. If the majority of families expel transvestites/trans women at an early age, as stated in the introduction, and they migrate due to the impossibility of expressing their identities, it is logical that, upon reaching the migratory destination, godmothers sometimes manage to fulfill a maternal role intended for protection, teaching and care, thus favoring the daughters' adaptation in the receiving society.

If the families of origin represent an institution in charge of carrying out primary socialization, godmothers fulfill a similar function. For García (2009), what is observed in these bonds is the need for retribution felt by godmothers themselves, that is, to help others as they have been helped before. In this way, Luna's story is complex because, although she considers that there are different ways to play the role of godmother, she understands that they must help newcomers so that they can go through their lives in better conditions. In a way, the intention of fulfilling the role of godmother going beyond previous experiences by offering help without displaying abusive behavior is kept in mind. Specifically, these bonds express asymmetries, but they also favor the adaptation of newly arrived migrants to the receiving society.

It is a matter of differentiated socialization; first, the families of origin carried out some type of socializing function, given that transvestites/trans women subscribed to certain norms and values while still in the issuing societies. After the biographical turn that implied assuming and expressing their gender identities and migrating (or vice versa), they were able to subscribe to new norms and values in which aspects linked to the group and, more broadly, to the context of the receiving society are partaken of. For this reason, godmothers are key actors in the adaptation processes of the newly-arrived. Thus, by differentiation in socialization processes we mean that the codes related to the exercise of prostitution/sex work in the receiving society are subscribed to by means of the teachings and advice provided by godmothers.

On the other hand, Luna describes the way in which the bond with her godmother began within the context of prostitution/sex work. After a short adaptation process, she exercised this activity at a spot. Our interviewee stated that her godmother appropriated a percentage of her income according to the number of clients she had per day. Luna defined herself as a godmother, although different from the others in that she provided what was necessary for her daughters to satisfy their needs and contributed so that they could live in better conditions. The last expression of our interviewee was "become independent," whose definition is important because it implies that the possibility of breaking a bond of dependency is within her expectations. The characteristics of the godmother-daughter bond entail a dependency agreement involving various

spheres of life, including economics. Luna has a history of militancy in a transvestite/transsexual political organization, which she described as follows.

—I support (...) [referring to the organization] and other organizations; I provide support, only for demonstrations and for them to take care of HIV, and helping girls who have nowhere to live; if I know them, I let them live in my house for a while.

—So they stay here for a while? [referring to her department].

—Yes, but if I don't know the girl then I send her to the ATTTA or Gondolin to set her up (Luna, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

From the interpretation of these excerpts, the concept of *protective godmothers* is consolidated, in which the help received, coexistence and health care come together. The sociability of South American transvestites/trans women is usually limited to bonds linked to prostitution/sex work, and loneliness may be a factor frequently accounted for in these biographical trajectories. Therefore, the arrival of a transvestite/trans woman with whom one had a previous friendship or bond reconstructs the ties of sociability once established in the societies of origin. The protective role assigned to godmothers is faithful to its name and, in the face of the break with the families of origin, in some way symbolizes the social figure that plays the maternal role. Protection and care are the main elements that favor the adaptation of migrants, allowing newcomers to experience better living conditions.

Other relevant stories introduce nuances and delve into the dimension linked to protection during the exercise of prostitution/sex work and to the appropriation of economic resources:

Not so much now, but it used to be quite common that you would work for your mother, and if you didn't work like that things were much more screwed up (Marta, personal communication, November 26, 2018).

—You would pay her per client, per week and per month. It was only one payment and they let me stand at the spot. I'm still in contact with one of them but I would not go back, because besides talking advantage in that sense, they also went the sexual way, if you know what I mean.

—Which way you mean?

—The sexual way.

—In which context?

—Because they drank, would get drunk and looked for trouble; then they would leave and wanted to get you in trouble, I did it once

(Catalina, personal communication, February 18, 2019).

—Then she got going with a chain, the other one with a saber, and they got going [referring to two transvestites/trans women leaders in a space where prostitution is practiced]. And well, she grabbed her and beat up the other one real hard and told her “don't mess with my daughter, you're not coming here and beat my daughters up, you touch my little daughter and you'll have to deal with me.” Those were her words and well there a measure of respect as well.

—Of course. The other one was, like, she also was a leader of sorts.

—That too, a certain leadership. So, leaders got going, well, because she broke the code by mistreating the daughter of a leader

(Sandra, personal communication, July 28, 2018).

The interviewees in the first two accounts frequently describe and associate the role of godmothers with the organization of prostitution/sex work and the protection they provide because, as Marta argues, their presence can protect them from potential attacks. The balance established by the Ecuadorian migrant regarding the bond she had with Peruvian godmothers is negative. Godmothers, whom she also called “friends” at certain points of the interview, told her which streets in the Constitución neighborhood she could “stand on”. She assured that the protection promised was never granted to her. She also made a statement that was better understood only at the end of the interview. In this case, godmothers subtracted from her economic resources obtained from engaging in street or public prostitution/sex work, and pressured her to have sexual intercourse with them. Although Catalina did not delve into this fact, it is clear that the exercise of sexuality, in this case, was an act of domination carried out within an asymmetric bond. According to her account, it was a sexual-economic exchange with which she did not feel comfortable, and valued it negatively. This clearly reinforces the notion that these bonds are social relations of domination, wherein sexuality can be of the vectors favoring them.

From what was reported by Sandra it follows that protection is again presented as a main characteristic, provided in the exercise of prostitution/sex work and having as a correlate the necessary guarantees for daughters to carry out this activity and be able to financially compensate their godmothers.

Lastly, one dimension brought up to a lesser extent is the one related to advice and techniques to transform and present the body. “No, the mother is the one supporting you or allowing you space at the spot. She supports you so you can get a surgery; you borrow money from her and she will charge you little by little” (Luz, personal communication, April 3, 2019).

The stories of some interviewees illustrate and evidence once again the support and concessions linked to the exercise of prostitution/sex work. The subject of body transformations is also introduced. Godmothers teach younger transvestites/trans women how to enhance their physical attributes so as to look feminine. In the case of the South American migrants who reside in the BAMA, it can be observed that godmothers grant loans to their daughters so that they can transform their bodies. Instruction in the first stages of their transformation is also common, both in relation to clothing and to embellishment through styling and cosmetic techniques.



In another order of ideas, and with the aim of synthesizing the meanings encompassed by these peer families, Brazilian literature on the role of godmothers deems *ajuda*<sup>5</sup> (Piscitelli, 2008) a fundamental concept in these bonds. According to the anthropologist Vartabedian (2012):

Generally, these transvestite *afilhadas* do not perceive the “help” they receive to travel as abusive, that is, the debt they acquire in reaching Europe is not understood as exploitative. Power, money and status synthesize the maintenance and reproduction of these matronages (p. 75).

Although these considerations of Brazilian anthropologists are pertinent, some of their definitions should be nuanced. To begin with, the aid provided can in some cases be transformed into *tributes*. It is true that, generally, transvestite/trans migrant women do not consider that they are being sexually exploited under trafficking networks by their godmothers, but it is also necessary to highlight that the processes linked to abusive hierarchies and behaviors are naturalized, and that it is sometimes difficult to point them out. Vartabedian (2012, p. 285) acknowledges that “there is great pressure for transvestites to repay their debt as soon as possible.” For this reason, aid as reciprocity can lead to the need to pay *tribute*, that is, an imposition of economic compensation in which abusive behavior can be noticed. In conclusion, aid is an important concept when it comes to investigating the complexities of the dynamics linked to prostitution/sex work which, from some approaches, can only be understood as human trafficking or sexual exploitation. However, this concept loses ground when it comes to explaining the social relationship between godmothers and daughters, given that reciprocities take place in scenarios crossed by power and inequalities.

On the other hand, and interpreting the role of godmothers as a social reproduction strategy, these people, being past their prime age for the exercise of prostitution/sex work, are sources of economic capital obtained by coercive and cohesive means by having built a symbolic capital. The respect and recognition given by daughters to grandmothers is the product of the history of disputes and conflicts that the latter have had and in which they have been successful. Aging and, therefore, the deterioration of erotic capital make it difficult for prostitution/sex work to be a profitable social reproduction strategy. Godmothers, by forming peer families, acquire social capital and, in certain practices, exercise power in order to constitute a symbolic capital that legitimizes their place and position. This symbolic capital materializes through a series of rituals that the interviewees describe as qualities attributed to godmothers, linked to charisma and the exaltation.

According to Fernández (2013), symbolic capital is one of the most complex concepts addressed in the work of the sociologist Bourdieu. Qualities such as prestige, charisma and legitimacy are components of symbolic capital, in addition to the different other capitals accumulated that would contribute to it by way of recognition. In the words of the French sociologist, “charm and charisma

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<sup>5</sup> Portuguese word for “help.”

designate in fact the power that a social agent possesses to appropriate the power held by other social agents (individuals or collectivities) and to appropriate their own truth” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 188).

If godmothers are to exercise their function, it is necessary for them to be legitimized and that they constitute a power in a symbolic way. In this regard, an interviewee introduced some subtleties that allowed us to further understand how this process unfolds: “When I sometimes meet with her to have a conversation or something, she constantly expresses that I am her daughter, that I am her first daughter that she brought to Argentina. After me she got full of daughters” (Sandra, personal communication, July 28, 2018).

Again, the story of this migrant, articulated with what has been exposed so far, shows that the loyalty between daughters and godmothers is ratified over time and expresses a way of naturalizing that social relationship of domination. Our interviewee also settled the important role that this godmother had in the migration chain, by enabling her adaptation in the BAMA, as well as that of a significant number of other migrants. As can be seen, godmothers create migration chains and hold diverse characteristics.

Given that legitimacy is an essential component in the godmother-daughter bond, the contributions of Bourdieu (1999) on symbolic capital are pertinent to this case, as godmothers are supported by recognition and investiture, in turn sustained by a power with symbolic characteristics consisting of the belief in their legitimacy.

Summarizing, the power of godmothers brings together elements of coercion and consensus, and legitimacy is an essential aspect that sustains such investiture. Their various functions were noted in this article, and abusive and violent aspects were evidenced as well, yet also were the elements of protection, help, support, company and care. This articulation shows, on the one hand, that the work of godmothers favors social assimilation, and on the other, that it is based on the domination necessary for the appropriation of economic resources, as a result of the belief in godmothers as legitimate social actors who in various instances are reinforced and recognized as such in a naturalized way. Respect, loyalty and leadership are all overlapping qualities with which daughters, in an obsequious way, define the godmothers; they consider them leaders and show them respect and loyalty through different tributes. The economic rewards received by godmothers reinforce a symbolic power based on the legitimacy of confrontations with the police and with the *fisuras* for the control of space, in which victories, and therefore recognition, are achieved.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

This article describes a certain moment in the migration projects of South American transvestites/trans women currently residing in the BAMA. These people’s migration is a complex process crossed by different stages with a number of angles, among them the creation of migration chains and the settlement in the receiving society.

There is a set of migration chains (godmothers, husbands, friends, relatives and political organizations) serving the purposes of concretizing migration and developing a migration project. These actors are differentiated according to the type of support they provide for the realization of such projects. The social adaptation of transvestite/trans migrant women in the receiving society is part of a fundamental process in which the inequalities of social capital that the interviewees possess become evident. Migration chains that involve social relations of domination have been differentiated from those emerging in contexts marked by symmetries. Godmothers, unlike husbands and other sex-affective ties, have a double character: they exercise domination by appropriating the income provided by their daughters, and at the same time they favor their daughter's assimilation in the receiving society by providing them with help, company, advice and material support. In relation to migration chains, an exchange of some sort is involved in all cases, crossing the affective sphere with the economic one. One possible limitation of this article is that it focused on the role of godmothers, yet future investigations will make it possible to delve into other chains.

This investigation found a concatenation of social roles in relation to godmothers; for example, godmothers can favor their daughters' process of social adaptation by constituting asymmetric exchange bonds. Affectivity, companionship and monetary exchanges are part of a bonding plot that acquires the specificities described hereby. Power is part of these social relationships, and symbolic capital allows an asymmetric social relationship to be established that both enables and constrains at the same time.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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