The Gendering of Political and Civic Engagement among Colombian Migrants in London

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Aim and structure

• **Aim:** How Colombian migrants engage politically and civically in London from a gender perspective

• **Structure:**
  - Conceptualising migrants’ political engagement from a gender perspective
  - Colombian community in London: background and methods
  - Gender regimes among Colombians
  - Gendered nature of formal political participation
  - Gendered nature of civic engagement
  - Conclusions
Conceptualising transnational and local political engagement from gender perspective

• Growth in research in migrant transnational political activities from gender perspective – but focus on US

• Multi-scalar aspects of political activities - engagement in ‘homelands politics’ and ‘immigrant politics’

• Need to focus more explicitly on how changing gender ideologies affect migrants political activities. Link with diversity and intersectionality

• Move beyond dichotomous division between men migrants active in formal homelands politics and women in informal immigrant politics or civic engagement
Methods: research projects

Project 1: 2005-2008
47 semi-structured interviews with Colombian migrants most involved in politics

Project 2: 2005
30 semi-structured interviews with Colombian migrants + 5 community leaders

Project 3: 2006-2008
28 Colombians + 10 community leaders + 3 focus groups

Project 4: 2009-2010
Quantitative survey (249 – 100 with extended info)
The Colombian community in London: background

- Colombians 2nd largest Latin American group in London (official estimates 2008 - 24,040 living in UK; informal estimates - 50,000 to 150,000 )
- Most established – first arrivals Work Permits 1970s
- 1980s: + Colombians. After 1986 asylum seekers
- Mainly urban, working- or middle-class from Bogotá and other large and medium-size cities (esp. Eje Cafetero)
- Well-educated but > half employed in elementary or sales activities in London (52%)
- 36% British passports; only 7% no valid documents
Gender regimes among Colombians back home and in London

- Gender regimes in Colombia = hegemonic masculinities rooted in machismo - but not monolithic

- More flexible gender ideologies especially among middle class, educated professionals

  - ‘I always saw my father supporting my mother who was a really hard worker; he always let her work. Within my family, the husbands help the wives in the same way as they do here’ (Sara, 29 Bucaramanga)

  - ‘I think that we are still a machista country ... in Colombia, all the important positions in work and government are held by men’ (William, 33 Armenia)
• But ... migration challenged hegemonic masculinities = equal gendered authority patterns especially in domestic realm
  – ‘I would burn water ... first my mother did everything for me and then my wife and I just went along with it’ ... ‘Now I cook, I make some really good dishes, I look after the children, sometimes I wash the dirty clothes, I mow the lawn ...’ (Sebastian, 40 from Palmira)

• Strong association with work; men and women both working in similar jobs (cleaning, catering); but backlash among some men

• British state recognised women’s rights, especially domestic violence + access to welfare benefits = women independence from men
  – ‘Here, there’s a lot of help for the children, and there’s lots of help for women. There’s Child Benefit and Child Support that makes fathers give money to their children. In Colombia, you have to have to wait and wait to get any help at all. Here, I’m very independent’ (Isabel, 32 from Cali)
Gendered nature of formal political participation among Colombians in London

• Colombian women more likely than men to hold British nationality; 42% of women and 30% of men

• Suggested link with changing gender ideologies

‘Some of the women are incredibly active. I mean they change from being totally dependent on men, they become incredibly active and have total control. I’ve had women who are learning much quicker than men. I can see that more women, I’m talking about maybe, in the last three weeks, I’ve had four women who have passed their language and UK tests [citizenship test]. I’ve known of 3 or 4 men that have taken it and failed’ (Chilean case worker at a LA organisation)

• But...creates resentment among men
Men more involved in homeland politics and women in immigrant politics

Participation in Colombian elections from abroad low: 18%
• Slightly more men than women (20% compared with 16%)

Participation in British elections higher: 20%
• Slightly more women than men (24% compared with 20%)
But ... class and gender differences

Middle classes more engaged than working classes ... But ... working class women are more formally engaged than working class men

Participation in Colombian elections:
• Middle class men much more likely than working class (29% compared with 5%)
• Middle class women more likely than working class (17% compared with 11%)

Participation in British elections
• Middle class men much more likely than working class (33% compared to 5%)
• Middle class women more likely than working class (27% compared with 18%)
Colombian women’s activity in British elections partly linked with independence and men’s difficulties in settling:

‘Latin American men in this country learn the language later than us, they relate with others less, integrate less in the community. They allow women to do everything because they don’t know how to speak ... we always do it ... here we are in charge’ (Ruth, mid-40s, active in formal British politics and immigrant politics)
Gendered nature of informal civic engagement among Colombians in London

- One-fifth (20%) of Colombians were members or leaders in migrant organisation + 7% members in past

- 37% of women involved with organisations compared with only 22% of men; women more likely to be leaders (4 women and 2 men)

- But... Class differences again

- 38% of middle class women had been involved in migrant organisation; 26% of middle class men

- 50% of working class women had been involved in migrant organisation, 16% of working class men
Sporadic informal civic engagement

- Over half celebrate home town fiestas (52%); 64% of men, 44% of women

- Over half celebrate Independence Day (58%); 68% of men, 48% of women
Almost three-quarters attend the summer festival(s) (74%); 78% of men, 70% of women

Why?

- Participation linked with the number of dependent people have; more than half of everyone attending all types of events have no dependents (average = 1)
- Men more likely to have no dependents
- Those living in single person households more likely to attend events
- Working class women least likely to attend fiestas (39%)
Conclusions

• Different axes of gendered participation
  – More men in formal politics than women + in homeland politics than immigrant politics
  – More women in migrant organisations + more men in sporadic civic engagement

• Bearing in mind intersectionality – especially class position
  – More middle classes in formal politics
  – More working class women in formal politics than working class men
  – More working class women in migrant organisations than working class men
  – Fewest working class women in sporadic civic events

• Working class women have gained most from changing gender regimes and are most strategic in formal and informal participation in politics and collective action

• Highlights need to recognise more complex picture underpinned by changing gender regimes and cross-cut across scales, borders, class position and stage in life course