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VIOLENCE IN IMMIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

The Spiral of Violence Experienced by Immigrant Domestic Workers: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Many immigrant women engaged in domestic work encounter precarious employment conditions characterized by uncertain contracts, often experiencing marginalization based on their racial identities. Through qualitative methods, including 23 in-depth interviews and interpretive analysis, this study aims to explore the structural and circumstantial violence embedded within the narratives of migrant women involved in caregiving and domestic work. These women report a spiral of structural violence influenced by classism, racism, and sexism perpetuated through the use of fear, abuse, and economic coercion. Such violence leads to systemic neglect, verbal and physical abuse, and continual humiliation, resulting in isolation. Immediate action is necessary to reform labor regulations and reshape care services, in order to address deeply ingrained inequalities and safeguard vulnerable women through administrative and labor reforms.

Keywords

Migrant workers, caregivers, violence against woman, sexism, racism.

Introduction

The violence against woman is defined as: any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. This form of violence is a violation of human rights and encompasses intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and other forms of violence that can occur in various settings and contexts (WHO, 2021). Gender discrimination exists in both origin and destination countries and gender inequalities, including violence against women and girls, can be both a fundamental reason for migration and a violation of their rights throughout the migration process (Christou & Kofman, 2022)

The work of caregiving and domestic work, especially focused on caring for dependent people, presents an unseen reality which accompanied by situations of exploitation, precariousness, violation of rights, and a multiplication of violence (Paniagua, 2022). The main axes of inequality that underlie the social relationships within caregiving and domestic work are gender, origin or ethnicity, and social class (Parella, 2006). It is a sector predominantly occupied by migrant women, racialized and with or without legal documentation.

Caregiving encompasses a broad network of actions, ranging from attending to dependent individuals (due to illness, age, or physical and psychological conditions) to maintenance and cleaning tasks in both private and public spaces (Tronto, 2013)

Care work consists of two overlapping activities: direct, personal and relational care activities carried out towards a person; and indirect care activities, such as cooking and cleaning. Care work, in turn, can be either paid or unpaid, with the latter also being regarded as a fundamental dimension of the world of work (International Labour Organization, 2018).

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The stigmatization associated with caregiving and domestic work, particularly impacting immigrant women, originates from a historical context of undervaluation and exploitation of these occupational roles. This stigma is further intensified by the intersectionality of gender, race, and socioeconomic status, resulting in considerable psychosocial adversities for individuals engaged in this form of labour. Traditionally, domestic work has been perceived as an inherently "natural" responsibility for women, which has ultimately led to its devaluation as a form of legitimate labour (Degani, 2022). The gendered dimensions of caregiving perpetuate stereotypes that conflate women, and particularly immigrants, with subservience and inferior status roles (Gabriel, 2023). Many migrant women are compelled to enter the caregiving sector due to a scarcity of viable opportunities, frequently encountering precarious working environments that intensify their vulnerability (Abanto et al., 2024)

Spain operates within a framework of hegemonic rights that relegates migrants to the margins, where their claims to citizenship remain unacknowledged (Constitución Española, 1978). These rights are limited by the fact of being immigrants and are regulated by law (Ley Orgánica 4/2000, 2000), commonly known as the “Ley de Extranjería” (immigration law). Migrants are forced to accept labour responsibilities in situations of exploitation and precariousness to survive, along with limitations affecting their lifestyle and dignity.

In the context of the feminization of migration, Ochoa and Elizondo (2022) identify various forms of violence experienced by migrant women, including partner violence, public violence, institutional violence, and violence linked to armed conflicts in their countries of origin. These experiences highlight the pervasive risk of gender-based violence, which is a manifestation of male sexism and a violation of human rights. This violence, driven by discrimination and inequality, can be physical, economic, or psychological, involving threats,

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intimidation, and coercion, and occurs in both public and private spheres (LLEI 17/2020). Furthermore, factors such as insecurity during migration, harsh immigration policies, exploitative labour conditions, poverty, and social marginalization exacerbate their vulnerability (Moriana, 2018). Considering violence as a form of interaction between individuals and collectives with an asymmetrical position of power (Giddens & Sutton, 2015), these women face structural violence arising from the unequal distribution of power and resources, embedding violence within societal structures (Woehrle, 2022).

Community feminists Julieta Paredes and Adriana Guzmán (Paredes & Guzmán, 2014) explain how caregiving work is configured in such a way that it produces violence towards the bodies of the carers. They point out that humanity learns to exploit when it sees women doing unpaid housework, placing them in a secondary position where capitalism is reproduced in women's bodies through unpaid labour, generating profit and savings. Lorena Cabnal (2010) has developed the concept of 'body-territory' to explain how the domination and control of feminized bodies occur in a similar way to the exploitation, dispossession, and subordination that occurs in colonized territories. Women from colonized territories carry the load of the conception of "third-world women," being understood as monolithic, singular, and ignorant subjects.

To understand the situations of violence experienced by these women, the objective of this study is to analyse the structural and circumstantial violence embedded in the narratives of migrant women who are engaged in caregiving and domestic work. Particular focus is given to the intersecting dimensions of racism, classism, and sexism that shape their lived experiences.

Methodology

Design

This is a descriptive, qualitative study under the phenomenological paradigm, a suitable method for understanding and describing complex experiences and sentiments that are not quantifiable. This methodology has immense value for investigating intricate subjective reactions and how they are affected by historical, cultural, and social elements. Phenomenology aims to uncover the essential characteristics of the phenomena under study and underlines the importance of using the participants' own words to describe their experiences (Dodgson, 2023; Dragan & Sondaité, 2023). With this approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted. IPA researchers strive to understand how an experience (object or event) appears from the participant's point of view (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Additionally, data collection and narrative analysis will be conducted with a feminist approach, aiming to highlight the experiences of violence and resistance practices of caregiving women workers. By experiences, we refer to the meanings and knowledge acquired from the world, as well as the skills to act and signify experiences and their changes. Alongside these experiences of oppression, resistance practices emerge, consisting of active opposition by individuals to the subordination and domestication of the dominant system (Butler, 2009; Pimentel et al., 2021). In the analysis of the narratives, we will also recover the agency of these women and consider the axes of inequality within this group, using intersectional theories (Platero, 2014).

The COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research) guidelines have been followed to ensure methodological rigour in the research.

Scope and Participants

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The study population consisted of migrant women engaged in caregiving and domestic work in the city of Girona (Catalonia, Spain). The decision to interview migrant women aimed to centre the migration experience, recognizing that while their primary labour involved caregiving or domestic work, migration introduces additional and distinct axes of inequality.

It was an intentional sample. Recruitment was carried out through snowball sampling starting from contacts through municipal social centres in the town that assist immigrant women. Intentional or snowball sampling is a strategic method employed in qualitative studies, particularly when researchers aim to access hard-to-reach populations. This approach allows for the identification and recruitment of participants through existing social networks, facilitating deeper insights into specific communities or phenomena (Gierczyk et al., 2024; Naderifar et al., 2017). Engaging these women is difficult for several reasons. Firstly, due to their possible irregular status as immigrants, and secondly, because they have limited free time, few available meeting spaces, and religion plays a central role in their lives. Having a room available in a municipal social centre or meeting at the church provides spaces for gathering and meeting with peers. The progressive consolidation of these groups and their relationship with the municipal staff to promote actions of mutual interests has made it easier to reach out to them and encourage their participation in this study. All these women primarily provide care for elderly dependent people as well as perform domestic work. A total of 28 women were recruited. Inclusion criteria were understanding the language and agreeing to participate in the study by signing an informed consent form.

Data Collection

Data collection involved individual, semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. Two researchers conducted the interviews, both of whom

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had established rapport with the participants through regular interactions during meetings organized by municipal staff or in reception courses attended by the women.

The interview script focused on the following dimensions: sociodemographic data, migration process, work experience, primary social and service networks, concept of care, experiences of violence. Interviews were conducted in person at social centres in the municipality between May and December 2022.

Data Analysis

An analysis of the literal transcripts of the audio recordings of the interviews was performed. This analysis followed the steps described for IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), including reading the transcription and taking multiple notes, transforming the notes into emerging themes, seeking relationships and groupings of themes. Through this process, thematic areas, categories, and subcategories were established. When constructing the categories, various factors were taken into account, such as uniqueness criteria, mutual exclusion, homogeneity, relevance, clarity, objectivity, replicability, and productivity (Ruíz, 2012). The data were meticulously reviewed several times through literal readings and inductive reduction of content. To ensure data reliability, three researchers classified the data independently before comparing their results. Data saturation was reached with the 28 interviews. In Figure 1, the units arising from the analysis are presented.

Figure 1 About here

Ethical Considerations

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The ethical principles outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 2022) were followed. Anonymity and confidentiality of data were ensured in accordance with Spanish Law 3/2018 on Personal Data Protection and Digital Rights Guarantee (Ley Orgánica 3/2018, 2018). The participating women never provided their real first names during the interview, nor any information that could identify them. In the transcription, we refer to them by fictitious names. They were informed of the objective of the study and gave their signed consent to participate and to record the interviews in audio format, which were destroyed once transcribed. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. At all times, the data collected were stored in a secure location accessible only to the study researchers and protected by an access password.

Results

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A total of 28 women participated in the study, the majority (64.3%) of whom are from Honduras and are aged between 31 and 41 years. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 About here

The analysis stems from the premise that many women arrive in a new territory with a backpack and a journey that must be taken into account to understand and contextualize their experiences. Some of them have suffered situations of violence in their countries of origin, abusive and violent situations that, upon arriving in a new place, can be relived and repeated, constituting a process that we define as a spiral of violence. We must be very aware of this context to adopt a global and comprehensive perspective that integrates all the vital experiences of women.

Below, the categories analysed of this spiral of violence, which recount the experiences of the participants, are developed.

Dimensions of violence

Violence based on Classism

The situations of labour exploitation to which the workers are subjected are recurrent in their experiences. Many women in the sector do not have a work contract and therefore find themselves in a situation of greater vulnerability. In this sense, we encounter both employing families that do not have the information and resources necessary to establish a work contract and face the resulting expenses, and employers who, despite enjoying a comfortable economic situation, do not process a work contract for the workers, nor do they financially compensate

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them adequately and with a dignified wage, commensurate with the value of the working efforts dedicated by these women.

Occasionally, some women work for 24 hours a day in a home without a contract and are dismissed without prior notice. Without rented rooms, they end up on the street. Also, in cases of sick leave, these workers do not receive payment for the days off unless there is willingness from the employing families who are prepared to pay them. The testimony of Alina is important regarding this issue. She tells us that when she fell ill, she asked the employing family for the week of vacation that was owed to her, and they ended up firing her from her job.

There are also several occasions where the employer or employing family has directly refused to pay them their salary. Thus, the exploitation of women dedicated to this sector is perpetuated: "For a live-in caregiver job, they offered me €800, and I had to take care of 7 children, aged between 6 months and 9 years." Situations like the one described by María are predominant in the experiences of the women interviewed. Undignified salaries, not commensurate with the tasks and hours of dedication demanded of the workers, as well as 24-hour workdays with brutal overload, and without breaks or holidays in many cases. Alicia's testimony also stands out here:

"I take care of a couple with Alzheimer's, the husband and the wife with limited mobility. A relative comes from time to time, and the grandson is here from Thursday to Sunday, and I have to take care of all three of them. It's not just the couple anymore; it's the three of them, with different meals, different needs, medication... it's exhausting. I'm here every day from 9 am to 10 pm, with only one day off". (Alicia)

We have identified situations where workers are forbidden to leave the house unaccompanied, as well as to use spaces in the house where they work as live-in workers. Being

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prohibited from accessing the kitchen or the bathroom entails a regime of control and total possession over these women's lives, preventing them from carrying out their daily tasks normally. We have also identified cases where workers are forbidden from eating certain types or quantities of food. These prohibitions and control dynamics also extend to other aspects and spaces of workers' daily lives, such as hours of rest, physical appearance, clothing, and friendships. They describe it themselves:

"There are people who control everything. I used to say I was going to my room at eleven, and there were moments when she subtly came and opened my door... According to her, I was talking to a man. And that was the moment to talk to my daughter." (Rocio)

"She didn't like fat girls, they had to be slender girls. My hair was very long before, and she told me that having long hair caused her a lot of distress, so every month she sent me to the hairdresser because they had to cut my hair short. Short hair and not eating too many sweets, sometimes I was still hungry..." (Julia)

We observe that this control does not cease even during their hours of rest. This is the case of Rocío. The woman she worked for as a live-in worker prohibited her from studying during her rest hours, and she had to do it in secret. The woman told her: "Who do you think you are, why did you come here? You should have stayed in your country."

It has also been noted that highly stereotypical images of domestic and care workers are present, constructed from a clear classist perspective. Julia's story stands out here, as they wanted to force her to wear a blue chequered maid's uniform, typical of the films, during her working hours. The employing family urged her to wear it when people came to the house because, they said *"there had to be a distinction between the domestic worker and the family."*

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Thus, we observe the reproduction of a classist, denigrating, and completely humiliating treatment. The need for a distinction, regarding clothing, that distinguishes the worker from the employer or employers, is a key indicator of the dehumanization to which these women are exposed:

"Yes, this dress thing really lowered my morale... I felt such... I can't even explain it."

(Julia)

This treatment, which sometimes maintains a certain correlation with slavery, is seen again in other experiences that women have shared. Situations that show the use of classist and slave-like language and treatment, are examples of the domination and control that is sometimes exerted towards these women. Here, the case of Rocío stands out. She worked for a lady who urged her to publicly address her as *"her mistress."*

This dehumanization was also experienced in Susana's workplace, where they left her food on the floor, outside her room. On another occasion, she details that they did not allow her to enter certain rooms of the house where she worked when a specific family member was present, nor to look directly at this person.

Another example of the role of power and the denigrating treatment sometimes used against women in this sector is that of making them work with cleaning products that are toxic to their health, as well as in dangerous places and under risky conditions. A situation that, despite having a serious impact on women's health, is repeated in the experiences they have shared with us.

To conclude, it must be reiterated how, from a completely classist perspective, the work of care and domestic work is undervalued and inferiorised in relation to other professions, as well as other women in the sector. Sometimes employers are surprised that workers have studies and

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certain abilities and skills since they consider them only fit to perform tasks of this nature. They only consider them valid for performing tasks they identify as "maid" type tasks, characterized by great subalternity, that is, without a voice, without feelings, even without agency.

In this regard, it has been detected that some individuals with a well-off socio-economic situation demonstrate an enormous lack of awareness about the concept of need, thus creating an invisible line, a status distinction, that separates them from those working-class individuals who are in a precarious situation. This lack of awareness dangerously impacts on the perception of care and domestic work, as well as towards the women in this sector. It is also necessary to remember that the historical non-recognition of reproductive and care work as value-producing labour has resulted in the fact that in the current capitalist system, this value is also not recognized in the salaries of care and domestic workers.

Violence based on Racism

The racist logics and dynamics entrenched in our societies and institutions have been a key element in analysing the violence experienced by migrant women in this sector.

The hindrance and rejection of open expression of their culture, language, and religion are aspects that have emerged in some of the workers' narratives. In the experiences shared by the women, there have been repeated instances of rejection of elements that are not accepted or respected from a Western perspective, stemming from a racist ideology. Several women express experiencing a different, and sometimes derogatory, treatment from the Spanish national population when their customs and places of origin are known, or simply by hearing them speak.

The undervaluation of these women by their employers, based on their nationality and place of origin, is also a factor to consider when analysing these forms of violence. In this sense, there have been several occasions when these workers have been considered passive subjects,

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lacking certain capabilities and skills simply because they are migrant women, directly associating them with ignorance and misinformation. This type of demeaning treatment is sustained by the use and reproduction of racist stereotypes and prejudices that permeate our society. Thus, a hierarchy of the population continues to be legitimized, from a clear power role that is evident in experiences such as the one shared with us by Patricia, experienced within the work context:

The son of the man I was caring for said to me: "You, irresponsible, why are you coming at this time? You must be from abroad... You have all come from abroad for us and you are going to do what we say, you are going to do what I tell you, and if I want to shout at you, I will shout at you." (Patricia)

Sometimes, for the employers, the bond created with a migrant woman working as a domestic worker and/or caregiver does not prevent them from continuing to reproduce racist attitudes towards others based on their skin colour, nationality, and place of origin, amongst others. In this sense, it is not uncommon for employers to use racist and dehumanizing language and expressions in the presence of the worker, not directed towards her, but towards people who may be of the same nationality as her, and yet they are unaware that the worker may feel targeted by these words. In this regard, the account of a woman who explains how the employer she works for speaks disparagingly of "the others," as if they were not like her. Although it is the same racist treatment, she would direct towards her if she didn't know her as a worker is revealing.

A significant distinction in the assignment of tasks based on the nationality, place of origin, and skin colour of migrant workers in the sector has also been identified. In this sense, there is

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minimal representation of black women in live-in positions or those that involve entry into employers' homes. This situation is a result of entirely racist logic, based on mistrust and rejection towards black individuals, as well as on the classist and racist stereotype that places women of Latin American origin as suitable for domestic care and cleaning work within households.

Institutional Racism Violence

Migrant women working in this sector also experience various forms of violence from institutions and administrations. Sandra's words stand out here:

"We, as migrants... begin to see all the structural racism within all the tools of the system. Why some and why not others, and why according to some procedures it is legal for us to be identified as physical persons, but for rights we do not exist in the system, but rather it penalizes us and practically criminalizes us." (Sandra)

Complaints have been received from some women, both regarding the requirement for qualifications and regarding the level of Catalan required of newly arrived individuals, without taking into account the possibilities and temporal availabilities that women have in contexts of precariousness. To obtain residency in the host country, women must remain registered in a municipality for three years and complete courses on local knowledge and the Catalan language (in Catalonia). Only under these conditions can they be employed and formalize their status as citizens in Catalonia. Andrea explains it this way:

"When they were finally offered a contract, many found that they lacked the required Catalan language skills. Without it, they were unable to regularize their situation. Some women have even been dismissed from their job"

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On the other hand, there is a demand for the minimal representation of migrants in municipal, political, and decision-making spaces. Sole, one of the interviewed women who is currently in a legal situation, highlights this reality:

"There are many women who are undocumented and work in the underground economy. They have many fears, they experience unreported violence, you don't know what will happen at the police station without documents. Then they have a job without guarantees, neither for their safety nor for the state. And a lack of visibility, hidden from sight... if you go to public spaces in the afternoon, you see them, but in municipal, political spaces... you don't see them. They don't have any point of reference, neither in the Generalitat (Catalan regional government) nor in the City Council." (Sole)

Another racist barrier that migrants face is access to decent housing. What was classified as a right and basic need ends up becoming a privilege. Sole explains it as follows:

"Racism generates illnesses, look at the emotions you have when you experience racism: they don't rent an apartment to me because I am black. Do you know the emotions...? I call a friend and they rent it to her, 'but to you, black, no!'" (Sole)

Male Sexist Violence

Domestic and care work, based on the sexual division of labour, is a highly feminized field. In this sense, we have identified different forms of male sexist violence exercised against women in the sector, which can be classified, from a more generic approach into the following: objectification and sexualization behaviours; situations of sexual abuse, aggression and sexual harassment; verbal, psychological, physical, and economic violence, as well as other behaviours based on discriminatory treatment due to gender.

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Women have shared various experiences regarding situations where they have been prohibited from dressing in a certain way to avoid "provoking," in the words of the interviewed women, members of the family of the household where they work. One of them asserts: *"It seems like they don't want to hire you for what you know how to do but for the body you have."*

On other occasions, based on male sexist and sexist beliefs, employers interpret women's way of dressing as a symbol of accessibility to potential sexual relationships. A woman in the sector explains it this way:

"I was taking care of a man and he wanted me to dress differently because supposedly when you dress like we do, it's because you're looking for something, and of course, he wasn't going to stop, like I was provoking him" (Vera).

Another situation experienced by various domestic and care workers during job searches is the demand for prostitution services from men. One of the interviewed women explains that after posting an ad looking for work as a caregiver or cleaner, she received calls from several men asking for prostitution services:

"Another girl goes to be interviewed and she arrives and the man is naked and closes the door. In the end, she was able to open the door and ran away terrified. You imagine those who don't speak out of fear." (Janis)

The precarious situation of many of these women is a key element in the coercion towards them regarding the demand for sexual services. It is thus evident how social class is determinant regarding the position of greater vulnerability and helplessness in which it places the workers.

The participants narrate experiences of harassment, abuse and sexual assault:

"One day she was bathing, wearing a towel, there was a struggle and the man touched her down there. She told the son what was happening with the grandfather, crying,

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saying she was going to leave. The children decided to kick her out and told her that if she reported it, they would report her for theft. She didn't have a contract." (Janis)

"There was a man who had had an accident and had parts of his body that didn't work, so I had to massage him. For me, it's normal, like being a doctor, to have to massage a man. And he started introducing me to other men, and I didn't like that. And at night, he called me to give him a massage. But I'm a very clever girl, and I found out that he had done this to other girls. And when I was massaging him, I saw that the man was getting aroused. And I told him that if he didn't behave well, I would leave. And I wanted to leave there already. And he didn't pay me". (Vera)

These common forms of violence are completely invisible and normalized, as Sale explains: "Living in a house with an older man, and the daughter tells you: dad is old, it's okay if he touches you. Well, no, that's abuse."

The invisibility of situations of male sexist violence, along with a lack of intersectional gender perspective from institutions, causes situations of helplessness in women, which are evident when some of them affirm: "They won't believe us when we explain these situations of abuse we've experienced."

Strategies and practices that sustain the reproduction of abuse and violence

The different forms of violence that women endure continue to perpetuate and reproduce according to a series of strategies used by those who perpetrate them.

The politics of fear

In this sense, the politics of fear is a key strategy through which situations of abuse, exploitation, and violence are produced and reproduced. The imposition of fear, blackmail, and sometimes also emotional blackmail, as well as intimidation, are very powerful tools used

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against women to continue subjecting them to all kinds of abuse, situations of labour exploitation, and violence, with total impunity. Two of the women interviewed explain this very clearly:

“Fear, the politics of fear, as we call it, there are policies of fear that are actually used and, apart from that, our migratory burdens are used when we are in jobs with very low salaries. When you leave, they tell you: “But outside it's cold, there's no food, you have no friends, you'll be alone, you won't find anything, it's going to be dangerous.” You know? They use fear, that fear that... well, one with her burden, with a heavy burden... well, that restricts and affects a lot, right? So, it's difficult.” (Sandra)

“You arrive at homes and because we are not legal, they frighten us: we have to stick to the hours they set for us. “If you work two more hours, I won't pay you for them, it's a favour you're doing me,” they say. A woman, a migrant, with no opening to report it or support. There are three conditions against us when being a caregiver is a job, but there is no support.” (Rocío)

Abuse and threat in the economic sphere

Abuse and threat in the economic sphere are also commonly used strategies by some employers, who see the precarious situation of women working in domestic and care work as an opportunity to continue reproducing different abuses and violence. Threatening to fire them, not paying them for the days worked... based on these individuals' knowledge of the context of lack of security in which many women in the sector find themselves, are common situations for the workers. Alina, regarding this aspect, explains the following:

“The economic abuse when you're a migrant, when you have no help, no employment contract. Some workmates have been working for 10 years and they don't want to give

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them a contract. There's also harassment of women: "If you don't do what I want, I'll report you and throw you out." There are two colleagues to whom this happened and they don't want to report it because they are in the legalisation process, and they don't want to have a record that complicates the process." (Alina)

On the other hand, workers are completely dependent on the will of employers when it comes to having an employment contract, a situation that does not occur in a large majority of cases. Sandra, one of the interviewed women, explains it like this:

"For many women, the only way they have to register and legalise is to live-in for three years in a family's home, with the commitment that they will be given a contract and their papers will be legalised, which in many cases does not happen, but when the three years are up, they don't do it and they look for another. (...) it's a circle of absolute lack of security." (Sandra)

Total neglect

Total neglect, as well as ignoring the workers, are mechanisms, also based on male sexism, racism, and classism, that perpetuate situations of abuse and violence. The complete disregard for the physical, emotional, and mental health of the workers by the employers, converted into restrictions and prohibitions, has been repeated in several accounts from the women. María expresses it this way:

"They don't give us time for the doctor. At 7 months, my mother died, I felt like I was exploding, I was feeling very bad, they recommended I go to the doctor, I felt a knot so that I couldn't even breathe. And the daughters asked me why. The doctor told me she couldn't give me medication, and that I had to go to the psychologist, but I could never go, they

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didn't give permission. These people think we are robots, that we don't feel, that only they can get sick, but we can't." (Maria)

Restrictions and prohibitions

Restrictions and prohibitions at different levels are a recurring fact in the daily lives of workers in the sector. Some of them include prohibiting the woman from accessing food, being able to leave the house, or showering... Basic needs and activities of daily life for people, which in the case of these workers are often only carried out under surveillance and control, according to brutal processes of dehumanization. One of the women interviewed was informed by the employers that, working as a live-in, she could only shower once, on the day they decided. She informed them that she showers daily and that she will take advantage of her two free hours to go to the room she rents to shower. According to Eva, one of the employers denies her the possibility of leaving the house at any time. Another woman in the family tells the worker the following words: *"Here the custom is to shower once a week, you have different ones, not to say weird."* In this woman's case, the job offered was with a verbal contract of €600 to work 24 hours a day doing *"everything"*.

Humiliation and submission

Verbal violence, insulting remarks, the implementation of aggressive communication, and physical aggression are commonly recognized instances of violence that individuals encounter in the sector, as demonstrated by their lived experiences, and are unmistakably substantial forms of humiliation and subjugation as reported by the participants. For example, Janis worked for a woman who prevented her from eating and insulted her if she did, while enduring the shouts of this woman's daughter.

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Humiliation and submission are techniques also used by employers as strategies that completely invade the privacy and life of the workers, violating them at different levels. In this regard, women have shared cases where they have been forced to dress, eat, relate with others, and act according to the will of their employers. The lack of security and needy situation plays a key role, directly influencing the fact that many women cannot take an active role in the face of these systematic abuses. Susana explains it:

"Sometimes she would get angry and told me I was like a cow and to put on a robe that covered me to my feet, that she had a grudge against me." (Susana)

Distrust and Isolation

Distrust is another technique that violates women, as they are treated based on classist and racist stereotypes, through clear processes of dehumanization. Julia's case is a clear example of this practice, converted into control and domination dynamics, starting from distrust, and generating a significant psychological impact on the workers. The people Julia worked for would sometimes test her, hiding up to €3,000 under the pillows to see if she would steal it or not. Julia, fearing that someone would come in to steal the money during her rest hours and terrified of being accused, would end up locking herself in the room and waiting for hours until the owners arrived. Upon arrival, they would go straight to the room to check if the money was still there.

Finally, we must mention the isolation that many of these workers are subject to. The separation and disconnection from any contact, from any bond with the external environment to the workplace and the employers, are elements that diminish the capacities of women to be able to escape from situations of abuse and violence, as they do not have external support and resources. In this regard, the case shared by a worker is illustrative:

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"She came, she was hired in a village, years and years passed and when the grandmother she cared for died, she didn't know anyone, because since she got there she never went out again. She was never registered, never had any papers... and she had been there for like 10 years. And a person with fear does not go out, and stays there enslaved for so many years..." (Rebeca)

Discussion

The majority of the study participants were women from Honduras. Due to economic crises and increasing violence, there has been growth in migration from Central America to the United States and Mexico. However, stricter migration policies in the United States, slow economic readjustment, and the risk of crossing Mexico have led some Central Americans to seek alternative routes, such as Spain and Italy, which, despite the greater distance, offer safer options and a possibility of regulated migration in the long-term. In the Spanish context, Honduran women often find themselves undertaking domestic and caregiving work in irregular economic and working situations (Rivera Farfán, 2016).

The analysis of the women's narratives describes the spiral of violence they have experienced and continue to experience. The various situations of classist, racist, and sexist violence are structural, the product of a capitalist, legal, and heteropatriarchal social order, and affect all women, specifically women working in caregiving and domestic work, even if they have not experienced them directly, first-hand (Garcia et al., 2021). This is also highlighted by Encarnación Fernández (2006:154): "The structural nature of violence implies that it is always present, even if only as a possibility. This has an important consequence. Members of the groups against whom structural violence is exercised are or feel permanently exposed to the threat of violence, even if they have never suffered a direct act of violence".

The results are then discussed by thematic areas.

Dimensions of violence

Starting with the voices and narratives of the women, the concepts of classism, racism, and sexism are further explored. Their stories show that alongside sexist violence, they also face

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violence due to their socio-economic conditions, class, and racist practices based on their nationality or place of origin (Jiménez & Arisó, 2012; Poch & Torresano, 2019).

The disparities in understanding regarding socio-economic necessities between affluent individuals and those in precarious situations can be attributed to a variety of interrelated factors. Individuals possessing substantial wealth frequently reveal a restricted sociological imagination, hindering their understanding of systemic inequalities and the realities faced by economically marginalized populations. This deficiency in awareness cultivates a distinction of status that sustains social inequalities (Edmiston, 2018; Melita et al., 2024).

Domestic and care workers are also exposed, on occasions, to dynamics of control, restrictions, and strict prohibitions by employers. This is a completely degrading and humiliating treatment (Canevaro, 2009; Paniagua, 2022).

These are situations that are constantly repeated in the life stories of migrant women working in domestic and care jobs. This is discrimination that must be viewed from a class perspective. Various studies corroborate that the immigrant population in Spain experiences racism, particularly women, who also perceive other forms of discrimination more strongly than men (Ahonen et al., 2010; Gil-González et al., 2014).

The participants narrate that they face institutional violence, including qualification and language requirements that don't consider their precarious situations. They also struggle with underrepresentation in decision-making spaces and face barriers to accessing decent housing. The women who agreed to participate are mostly Spanish speakers, so discriminatory processes resulting from linguistic barriers would not apply to them. However, what they experience are clear examples of an established dynamic of cultural superiority, thus perpetuating ethnic and racial hierarchies (Fibbi et al., 2021).

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The main factors that make these women vulnerable to male sexist violence are poverty and social exclusion (Moriana, 2018).

Domestic and caregiving labour, characterized by its significant feminization, subjects women to a multitude of manifestations of male sexist violence, which encompasses objectification, sexualization, abuse, harassment, and economic exploitation. Focusing on the objectification and sexualization exerted towards their bodies as instruments for the transmission of power relations (Goldstein, 2009), women have shared various experiences regarding situations where they have been prohibited from dressing in a certain way to avoid "provoking". Some employers erroneously perceive women's attire as a solicitation for sexual propositions, leading to instances where job applicants may encounter requests for prostitution-related services. The unstable economic circumstances facing these women further intensify their susceptibility to exploitation for sexual services. Situations of harassment, abuse, and sexual assault suffered by women in the sector in work environments are not isolated cases (Goldstein, 2009; Tizziani, 2011). These forms of violence are often invisible and normalized. The lack of an intersectional gender perspective in institutions significantly exacerbates women's helplessness, particularly for those from historically marginalized groups. Women from historically marginalized groups face unique challenges in accessing caregiving resources due to institutional neglect of their specific needs (Carmichael-Tanaka & Kang, 2023). Discrimination based on race and ethnicity compounds gender oppression, limiting opportunities for equitable access to support (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2005). Gender budgeting processes lack effective integration of intersectional analysis, leading to misallocation of resources and continued marginalization (Brenton, 2023).

Strategies and practices that sustain the reproduction of abuse and violence

The multiple forms of violence that women face continually remain and are replicated through numerous methods employed by those who perpetrate such violence. It is necessary to be able to cite these practices specifically, to understand them well and be able to identify them. Discrimination, humiliation, and isolation are common practices applied to women employed in private households (Leão et al., 2017; Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2023).

The narratives of women highlight the power dynamics between employers and employees, where employers do not recognize the rights of female employees to have a life outside the domestic space, to be respected (Cuentas & Cruz, 2020), and to live with dignity and fulfil such a basic need as personal hygiene.

Distrust and excessive supervision, humiliation, and abuse of power that are evident when imposing the repetition of tasks and even, in certain cases, verbal contempt are findings corroborated by other researchers (Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2023).

Participants highlight experiences of objectification and exotification, shaped not only by gender but also by origin and race (Tijoux, 2016). They link these experiences of objectification and exotification to instances of abuse and sexual harassment encountered in the workplace. Furthermore, the women critically engage with the category of "white woman," emphasizing the differentiation between the experiences, needs, and demands of native individuals and those of migrant and racialized women. This distinction complicates the notion of a universal gender experience (Mohanty, 2008). Recognizing this differentiation is crucial for shaping labour rights advocacy and support initiatives.

On one hand, it underscores the need for assistance services to address the basic needs of migrant women during the reception period. On the other, it highlights the importance of training

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programs aimed at broadening their employment opportunities. Above all, creating spaces for self-organization is essential to empower women in their pursuit of full citizenship rights.

The results of this research corroborate that care work is gendered (Mora & Pujal, 2018), and its practices in everyday contexts are marked by the embodiment of gender, race, and class, which jointly act to subordinate these women and place them within a framework of structural violence regarding their citizenship status. In their experiences as “migrant women,” they bear the stereotype of “third world women” (Mohanty, 2008), being stigmatized and having their possibilities and opportunities limited. Consequently, the bodies of caregivers are a physical, social, and symbolic materiality that reflects this subordination, indicating physical and mental impact due to their objectification as caregiving bodies.

It is essential for future research to focus on the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in care work, exploring how these overlapping identities contribute to the subordination and structural violence faced by women caregivers. Furthermore, continued investigation into the physical, social, and symbolic impacts of caregiving on migrant women is necessary to provide deeper insights into their lived experiences and the challenges they encounter.

Strengths and Limitations

Snowball sampling may not have recruited women with notable experiences of violence; many of these women, due to their irregular status, are invisible as it is difficult for them to access municipal resources.

The situations of violence experienced by these women have repercussions on their health, an aspect that should be thoroughly considered and explored in future research, as well as the coping mechanisms they resort to in the face of these experiences.

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This study contributes to highlighting the precarious employment conditions of these women, considered one of the main niches of female employment, leading to dehumanization, exploitation, subjugation, and a spiral of violence tolerated by society.

Despite our position as non-racialized, university-educated women from the country, which has placed us in a position of privilege, we have made a continuous effort to engage in self-reflection within our research group. This has included maintaining contact beyond interviews with these women, such as providing support during periods of grief, offering informational assistance, and providing emotional support. Additionally, we have shared some of the data obtained by convening these women and also employers at a civic centre in the city to explain the study's results.

Conclusions

The experiences of domestic workers and caregivers who dedicate their lives to caring for others highlight the intersectionality of power relations based on gender, structural violence, and the need for comprehensive support and protection for these women. The phenomenon of gender-based violence is currently under debate in Western countries; however, violence perpetrated against immigrant women continues to be invisible. Urgent changes are needed in domestic employment legislation, as well as social and political debate regarding the organization of care for dependent individuals, ensuring both quality care and respect for human rights, and a commitment to reversing strong structural inequality. This entails administrative and labour changes for these women in a state of permanent vulnerability.

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Figure 1: Thematic area, categories, and subcategories emerged from the analysis

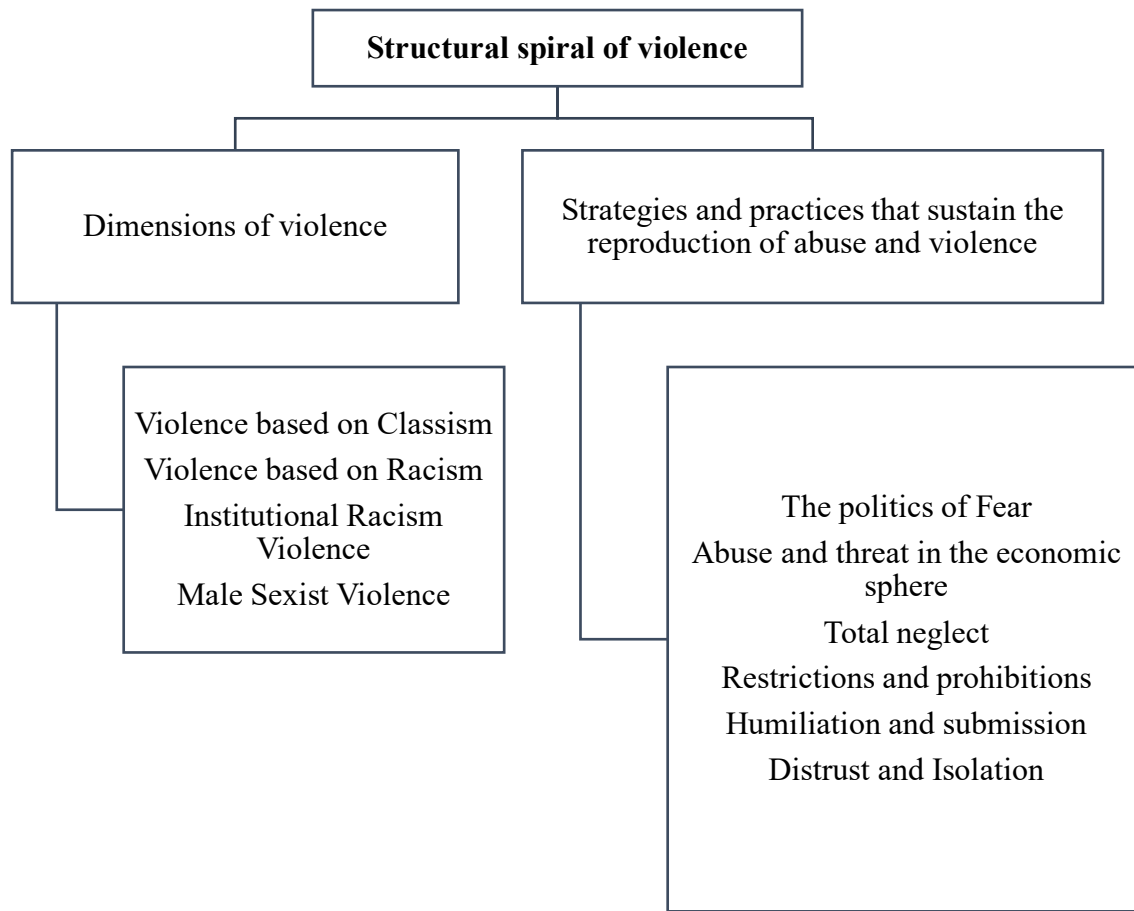


Table 1: sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Origin	n(%)
Honduras	18(64.3)
Argentina	1(3.6)
Uruguay	1(3.6)
Brazil	1(3.6)
Colombia	2(7.1)
Mexico	1(3.6)
Morocco	2(7.1)
Gambia	1(3.6)
Senegal	1(3.6)
Education	n(%)
Basic education	13(46.5)
Medium-level education	9(32)
University education	6(21.4)
Age	n(%)
Not report	2(7.1)
28-30	2(7.1)
31-40	12(42.8)
41-50	8(28.6)
51-60	3(10.8)
61-70	1(3.6)
Stay in Spain since	n(%)
1-3 years	10(36)
3.5-5 years	2(7.1)
6-10 years	11(38.9)
>10 years	5(18)
Legal situation	n(%)
Yes	13(46.4)
In the process of legalisation or are not legal	15(53.6)
Lives with a family member	n(%)
Not report	1(3.6)
Yes	15(53.6)
No	12(42.8)
Time commitment	n(%)
By hours	12 (43)
24 hours (live in with one or more elderly people under their care)	11(39)
Other unspecified situations	5(18)

Biographies

Concepció Fuentes-Pumarola is a PhD, lecturer in the Nursing Department at the University of Girona (Spain). She is a Principal Investigator of Health, Gender and Aging Research Group at the University of Girona. One of her research lines is Health and Gender, which includes violence against women. She has participated as a researcher in several competitive projects within this line.

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Estefania Acién-González is Social Anthropology Professor at the University of Almería and Main Researcher of the Laboratory of Social and Cultural Anthropology research group at the same university. Her lines of research are migration, ethnography, gender, sex work, human trafficking and prevention of sexist violence. He has published more than 30 articles, book chapters and books on these topics and participated in 25 competitive research projects

Mar Sibila-Pérez has a degree in Social Work, is a collaborating researcher in the Department of Psychology about women and domestic work. She has a Master's degree in gender studies and experience in intervention with LGTBIQ+ people.

