

Migration and older people in Bolivia

Between opportunities and new vulnerabilities

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Introduction

Interest in migration is currently booming, given the large numbers of people who move across international borders as a result of conflict and persecution. Journalists and researchers alike are paying close attention to the movement of people – in terms of migration or refugee movements (and the distinction between the two), how states are reacting to these movements, and the consequences these movements might have both for those who move and for the places that migrants and refugees aim to settle in. Yet in both newspaper reports and academic writing on migration (including forced migration), there continue to be two specific biases: an assumption that those who move are young, and a disproportionate interest in countries of destination. Through a project supported by a British Academy-Leverhulme Small Research Grant and pilot funding from the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing (MICRA), I aim to challenge these biases by focusing on countries of origin and on older people – specifically the consequences that migration has on the older 'left behind'.

Most images we see about migration – the movement of people within and across international borders – are associated with the young, the economically active, people who, despite facing obstacles and challenges in their places of origin and on their journeys, are in their prime. Migration as a subject of study is likewise almost obsessed with the young, generally assuming that those who migrate do so because of war or work, but do so in their most active years. However, migration is a complex phenomenon that does not always discriminate



Figure 1
The author (second from left) visiting an Hombres Nuevos drop-in centre in the Plan 3000 neighbourhood of Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

in favour of the young. People of all ages engage in migration. Many are also affected by the migration of others. Children have received some attention in migration studies so far, mostly in respect of the effects that migration has on those children who have been left behind by their parents, and to a lesser extent on child migrants in their own right. However, older people have generally been marginalised, in terms of those who migrate at later stages in their lives, but also in terms of the consequences that migration has for older people – the migrants' parents, for example.

What we see in the news and read about in both newspapers and academic articles is mostly concerned with migrants themselves and what happens to them once they arrive at their destination. There is an inherent bias to studying and analysing the effects of migration in so-called 'host countries': issues of integration, language, labour market, housing, etc. Migration, however, does not only affect the countries that migrants arrive in, but also those where they departed from, as well as the many places through which they pass on their journeys towards their destination. Putting the emphasis on countries

of origin is essential, for these countries are generally poorer than the countries of destination, and have fewer resources to invest in social programmes. These are the countries that are currently expected to have almost 80 per cent of the world's population over the age of 60 by 2050.¹ These are the countries where most of the population works in the informal sector. They therefore have no provision for pensions when they come to what in higher-income countries we assume is a 'pensionable age'. People therefore need to continue working well into their old age. These are the same countries where old age is associated with greater poverty.

Ageing and migration in Bolivia

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in the Latin American region, with an average income of 5,000 US dollars per year. It has experienced high rates of economic growth in the last few years, some of which has been invested in social programmes. Since 1997 the government has had a universal cash transfer, the *Renta Dignidad* (Dignity Income, a name that was often ridiculed by our interviewees given the meagre payment), that pays about 30 US dollars per month to everyone aged 60 and over. For many of our interviewees, this payment is a life-saver, particularly for those living in rural areas.

Bolivians have been migrating to Argentina since the 18th century – traditionally cross-border migration from the south of Bolivia to the northern Argentinean regions. But Bolivians have diversified their migrations dramatically over the last few decades. Today migration encompasses every single region in Bolivia, and its destinations include the US, Brazil, Israel, Russia, Italy and Spain. Official figures estimate that about 7 per cent of the Bolivian population live abroad and that over 10 per cent of the population has somebody living abroad. Its population is relatively young compared to its neighbours, with only 6 per cent of the population aged 65 years and over, which is not surprising given the low life expectancy of 67 years on average.²

It is within this context of diversified migration streams and a relatively small ageing population that this project has been aiming to address the consequences that migration has for older people, those over the age of 60. Since 2013, and with the collaboration of Bolivian researchers at the University of San Simon in Cochabamba and the research group *Jaina* in Tarija (Figure 2), we have collected over 60 testimonies from men and women living in cities, its peripheries known as peri-urban areas, and rural areas. This is an explorative project that aims to uncover some of the ways in which the migrants' parents have been coping with the migration of their (adult) children. The qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews was used to collect information on



Figure 2
A *Jaina* workshop in Tarija, southern Bolivia. Photo: the author.

the interviewees' livelihoods, their main problems, their relationship with neighbours and different institutions as well as their experience of their children's migration.

Migration leads to increased vulnerabilities

For many interviewees, though by no means all, the migration of their children was associated with sadness. Being far from their children was, for some, not something that they had envisaged. Particularly in rural areas, there was an expectation that children would settle independently but somewhere close to their ageing parents. Maria, a 62-year-old woman from Cochabamba, for example, said: 'I cried, because I had never thought that I would separate from my children, never. I thought that I was going to be with my children my whole life until the day I die. But I cried, I still cry now when I remember.'

Sadness seemed to be a more common experience among women; or women, at least, were more likely to talk openly about the sadness they felt when their children left. When men talked about being sad, they related it more to the opportunities that in their view their children had missed as a result of migration. This was most common among men in rural areas, from where their children migrated to the less lucrative regional destinations, such as Chile or Argentina, to work in menial jobs. Francisco, a 72-year-old man from a rural area in the department of Cochabamba, for example said: 'I never wanted him to go, I was demoralised [...] yes, I was totally demoralised because I said "Why are you going to go? Stay here." But he decided to go.'

Many fathers had hoped that their children would continue their education, go to university and then find a professional job, as doctors for example. The migration, particularly of their eldest sons, might signify financial independence for their children and possibly some remittances for their parents, but it is also associated with a failed social mobility project that had been promised by the widening of primary and secondary education.

This sadness was sometimes also associated with loneliness and vulnerability. In rural areas in Tarija, interviewees had to keep working the land well into their 70s and 80s, because this was their only source of livelihoods. With their children absent, they had to hire farm help to keep farming their plots, and this was only possible if they had produce to sell in order to receive some cash with which to pay the hired help: a vicious circle meaning that they could not stop working their

1. UNFPA and HelpAge International, *Ageing in the twenty-first century: a celebration and a challenge* (New York and London, 2012).

2. Figures from: WorldBank, 'Life expectancy' (2015) <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN/countries/XJ?display=graph>; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, *Bolivia: Características de población y vivienda, censo nacional de población y vivienda 2012* (La Paz, 2012); International Organization for Migration, *Perfil migratorio de Bolivia* (Buenos Aires, 2011).



Figure 3
Selling produce on a vegetable stall in Tarija, southern Bolivia. Photo: the author.

plots. Severe lack of water resource means that farming in this area is arduous. Moreover, the absence of younger people was also associated with increased thefts and land incursions. Some interviewees were unable to secure their land and livestock from trespassers and thieves, hinting at loosening social control that used to be exercised by the wider community.

The community is not just essential for practical help but also for a sense of belonging. But being able to continue working is essential to maintain one's standing within the community, as in the words of Juan, a 67-year-old man from a rural area in Cochabamba:

I only hope to be able to continue working, so that I will always have something to eat, or otherwise, where can we get money from? Even people ignore us when we don't have an income, if I was to go to any family, they would think that I was there to beg, to borrow something ... they would receive me with those thoughts. That's why I have to continue working as long as I have the strength to do that. Life has been that: work and work. I give thanks to God for the Renta Dignidad, which we didn't have before. That helps us a lot.

In these cases, the migration of younger people is leading to an exacerbation of already existing vulnerabilities. This is particularly the case in rural areas, where our interviewees had to continue working the land in order to survive.

Migration as an opportunity

For many middle-class families, despite the sadness that they might feel as a result of living far away from their children, migration also represents an opportunity. Some interviewees were proud and happy that their children had achieved better education and professional qualifications as a result of migration. Some were also able to pursue their professional careers abroad, opportunities which might not have been available in Bolivia. Marta's daughter had gone to Brazil to specialise in dentistry and opened her own surgery, and while her daughter was away, Marta managed the flat that her daughter had bought in Cochabamba. She collects rent and makes sure that the flat is kept in good order. For these families, the migration of their own children implies upward social mobility for the whole family, through improved opportunities for professional education and jobs for the children, as well as additional income opportunities and a more secure financial future for the parents who remain in the country of origin.

In the city's peripheries, the peri-urban areas that have been populated since the 1980s by internal migrants arriving from rural areas and mining towns, migration also represents an opportunity for upward social mobility. Here grandmothers are often in charge of their grandchildren when their own children migrate. Even in cases where migrants give birth abroad, they often send their grandchildren back home to be cared for by their

parents. The migrants' jobs might not allow them also to care for others. For example, they might work long hours, double shifts, or be live-in carers; or they might not earn enough also to support their children or pay for childcare. The migrants' parents, usually the mother, 'become mothers again' and take their grandchildren into their own care. For some, this represents a difficulty, for example, if the grandchildren are very small or if they are teenagers. But for others, having their grandchildren with them helps them deal with the loneliness they feel as a result of their own children being far away. Grandchildren provide companionship and a renewed sense of responsibility and purpose. This is clearly not the case for everyone, but it definitely is in contexts where grandmothers had been widowed at an early age and they are in receipt of remittances that cover the costs of caring for their grandchildren.

Besides looking after their grandchildren, these grandmothers in the urban peripheries also become very active in investing their children's remittances, by buying plots of land, overseeing the construction of houses and generally taking care of their children's investments. They play an essential role, particularly in families where migrants might be undocumented, lacking proper working or residency papers. When this is the case, travelling back to their country of origin represents a very high cost and is therefore generally avoided. When this happens it is therefore essential to have somebody trustworthy to oversee their investments. In these cases, like those of middle-class families, migration also becomes an avenue for social mobility. With the help of the parents who have 'stayed behind', migrants are able to build a more secure future for themselves, their parents and their children.

Conclusion

The qualitative and explorative nature of this project does not provide the basis for a more thorough generalisation of its initial findings. But so far it has generated a very interesting set of interviews that highlight the importance of taking into account the views and experiences of older people, particularly in countries of origin. These original perspectives will complement and counterbalance the overwhelming focus on younger people and countries of destination in what we know about migration.

The interviews also show that migration has different consequences for different groups of people. This heterogeneity needs to be taken into account in any analysis and policy formulation about migration. Gender, class, place of residence, race and ethnicity mean that one particular story or policy will not fit everyone's needs.

Throughout the duration of the project, I have also had the opportunity to disseminate its findings both in Manchester, through an international workshop funded by MICRA, and through workshops in Bolivia, funded by the British Academy-Leverhulme Small Research Grant and the University of Manchester Pilot Rapid Response Impact Fund. These dissemination events have provided a critical platform for the discussion of emerging ideas related to ageing and migration. In Bolivia, workshops were attended by local and regional authorities, HelpAge International Bolivia, some interviewees, as well as grassroots organisations representing older people. The discussion provided useful feedback on initial findings but also the opportunity to highlight the opportunities as well as the challenges raised by international migration. Critically, they also provided the space to raise awareness about the needs and specific situation that older people face in Bolivia. Countering stereotypical portrayals of older people as being passive and a drain on national resources, the testimonies gathered through this project highlight the important contribution they make in all aspects of society, from the caring of grandchildren, to looking after the economic investments of their absent children and contributing to an active civil society. With the continued collaboration of HelpAge International, it is my hope that we will be able to continue securing funding to develop this work further.

Dr Tanja Bastia was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, 2007-2010. Her research deals with migration and social inequalities, particularly gender but also ethnicity. She has been conducting long-term and multi-sited ethnographic research with Bolivian migrants in Buenos Aires and various cities in Spain. She is currently engaged in two new research projects: the one described in this article, and a second one dealing with urban citizenship and grassroots organising in Buenos Aires' informal settlements, funded by cities@manchester. For more information about her research see <http://tanjabastia.wordpress.com>
