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Cross-border mobility of migrant households under COVID-19 in Argentina

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Argentina is historically the main destination of Bolivian migration, present since the first national census in 1869; then follow in descending order the United States, Brazil, Chile and Spain. From the 1980s to the present, the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA, Argentina), is consolidated as the center of the migratory subsystem of the Southern Cone since it concentrates the largest proportion of bordering immigrants. From the 1950s they began to settle (along with internal migrants from the impoverished provinces of the north of the country) in the slums of the AMBA. Thus, while academic concern about mobility or migratory circulation is recent, the phenomenon itself is not. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the paradigm of integration and assimilation present in the First School of Chicago predominated, and within the framework of the theory of modernization of the second half of the twentieth century, migrations in Latin America were associated with the definitive change of residence from a rural to an urban environment that provided the conditions for integration and social mobility. In this framework, the main objective is to analyze the links of Bolivian migrant households, living in Villa 20 in the southern zone of the City of Buenos Aires (Argentina), with their country of origin from the recent turn of mobility that allows us to think about flows, circulations, networks and relationships.

It should be noted that Villa 20 is the fourth most populated village in the city of Buenos Aires and is immersed in a Commune (number 8) that occupies the second place with the highest percentage of foreign population, after Comuna 1, where the population of Bolivian origin stands out. For this reason, in this study, it is defined as an ethnic enclave due to the weight of the Bolivian community among the main breadwinners of the household and its imprint on the configuration of the habitat. In this way, the Villa 20 becomes a witness case of the situation experienced by the Bolivian community in the villas of the southern part of the city given its predominance also in this scale and type of popular urbanization.

It seeks specifically to investigate the characteristics and conditions of possibility of plurilocal practices (at a pre-pandemic time), as a type of cross-border residential mobility between countries of the Global South (Argentina and Bolivia), which are part of migratory projects that seek the reproduction of the family unit. In this way, we try to detail who, the migratory routes and the economic resources used for this purpose, which accounts for a rhythm of life that overflows the neighborhood. Likewise, the impact of the border



closure, which prohibited the entry of any non-resident foreigner, is investigated, as a measure adopted by the National State to alleviate the effects of the global pandemic of COVID-19.

This measure was part of the extension for one year (2020) of the health emergency that, in parallel, ordered the Preventive and obligatory Social Isolation (ASPO). In this sense, multilocality as a practice of movement across the border (material and symbolic) of migrant households constitutes a type of circular cross-border residential mobility that defines a type of migratory trajectory.

In this direction, the intersection between urban and migratory studies proposed is considered a contribution that contributes to the dynamic approach explained from the lens of spatial mobilities. In addition, the perspective of analysis proposed contrasts with the classic view of definitive migration, and at the same time differentiates multilocality from seasonal/temporary migration that conceives the country of origin as the only place of permanent residence. In summary, this work takes up "old themes" but from the recent paradigm of "mobility" in a context of global pandemic.

To carry out this work, which is part of a larger research project, a multi-method methodological strategy was used that combines qualitative and quantitative procedures, and incorporates data from primary and secondary sources. The primary quantitative data are derived from a survey processed through the SPSS, carried out in the pre-pandemic period 2018-2019 with a strategic (non-probabilistic) or theoretical sampling of 60 migrant households of Bolivian origin living in Villa 20. Thus, although a strategic sampling (not probabilistic) was used where the sample selection procedure concludes when theoretical saturation is reached, each household in which the survey was applied represents a type of mobility characteristic of this migrant group living in the slums of the southern zone.

Additionally, the primary qualitative data resulting from a set of semi-structured biographical interviews in depth carried out with the migrant households of Villa 20 in the 2020-2022 pandemic period allowed to deepen working hypotheses appearing from previous publications; in addition to contextualizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these multi-locality practices. It should be noted that part of the interviews were conducted remotely due to the epidemiological situation in the country. In this context of the pandemic, a newspaper analysis of national newspapers was also carried out, especially in the first months of 2020 and 2021, which enabled reflection on the socio-political consequences of border closures in Argentina.

Among the main results, the practice of multilocality stands out as part of family reproduction strategies on a scale that goes beyond the limits of the neighborhood. For this reason, these displacements are not analyzed as a type of seasonal migration but rather as part of this "double residence", where that "rural there with family anchorage" marks the rhythm of life on both sides of the border, at the same time that they transform and produce territories in their different scales. It should be clarified that multilocality on a cross-border scale can imply a double or more residence where urban and rural areas converge.

However, it is a practice of a fraction of migrant households. Thus, the most impoverished families, including single-parent households where women predominate as "head of household", have less (economic) possibilities of returning to Bolivia. In this way, these new data allow to deepen and complicate the hypotheses of the research worked and introduces new variables of analysis that account for the intersectionality of socioterritorial inequalities.

On the contrary, the government's border closure measure in the face of the pandemic generated a decrease in multilocal practices, which resumed once the borders were enabled towards the end of 2021. Paradoxically, the strengthening of the securitization process and land border controls were accompanied by an increase in irregular border entries due to the diversity of land crossings created for this purpose. In particular, women who traveled for a family emergency related to health problems stand out. Thus, these types of cross-border visitation movements that fall on migrant women responsible for care tasks on both sides of the borders were strengthened.

Likewise, differential repatriation policies were revealed according to migratory status and type of belonging, which accentuated the devaluation in the use of time imposed on migrants residing in the country in general, and on women in particular, in contexts of inequality. In this direction, this study gives an account of the intersectionality of inequalities even within the migrant collective that complicates the analysis of Argentine social stratification since it relates the ethnonational origin, the economic condition of the



household and the gender of belonging of the adults of the household. Finally, this article is considered one of the first links for the development of a later comparative approach with other territories and Andean migrant groups, such as the Peruvian.