

# Mapping the communicative ecology of Latin American migrant women in New Zealand

**Abstract:** This article is based on a study that focused on the narratives of Latin American migrant women (LAMW) in New Zealand and the role *formal* and *informal communication networks* play in their migration experiences. These networks were both *online* and *offline* and supported by the ethnic media. Informed by a feminist theoretical framework, this qualitative investigation employed the oral history and communicative ecology approaches. This study demonstrated the existing complexity and interrelationship between the communication networks, the feminisation of migration and migrant women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** communication networks, gender, Latinas, migration, New Zealand

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**T**ODAY women comprise almost half of the world migrant population. However, they are the majority of migrants in Europe, the Americas and Oceania (International Migration Report, 2013). Although migration can be an empowering tool for women, visible and invisible challenges persist including migrant women facing employment opportunities segregated by gender, working below their qualifications and earning lower wages than locals and men.

Communication networks serve as social capital in migration processes, which means wider access to resources and benefits in the micro and macro structures of the sending and host society. Migration networks include 'family and friendship, community practices such as festivals, membership in associations and as "intermediaries" such as labour recruiters, immigration consultants, travel agents, smugglers and other forms' (Boyd, 1989, p. 639).

The goal of this study was to explore what role communication networks play in the migration experience of Latin American migrant women in New Zealand. To answer this, we analysed the narratives of ten migrant women. Communication networks in this case included formal channels like culture and language maintenance groups and informal and personal connections. These networks were both online and offline and supported by the ethnic media.

The study was a qualitative investigation, conducted under the oral history (Sypher, Hummert, & Williams, 2013) and communicative ecology (Hearn & Foth, 2007) approaches and informed by a feminist theoretical framework (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 2010). This meant respectively the collection of their narratives with shared authority and the use of migrant women's voices to understand their self-development in a gendered and multiethnic society. Communicative ecology mapping involved identifying the use of various communication channels and environments and flows of information these migrant women engaged with in New Zealand. In order to map their communicative ecology, methods of focus group discussions, oral history interviews and participatory photography were used.

The data was collected over a period of two months in 2015 in Auckland and the Waikato region and involved ten participants recruited first through organisations for Latin American Migrant Women in New Zealand: Grupo Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa and Mujeres in Aotearoa. The intention was to recruit participants with different nationalities, social and cultural backgrounds.

## **Gender and migration**

The feminisation of migration has become a significant global phenomenon (ILO, 2014). According to Kofman (2003, p. 2) 'female migrants have participated in a range of globalised movements: labour flows, family reunification, marriage migration, asylum and refugees, and students'. Gender increases the challenge women face as migrants (Kawar, 2003). It also influences their status. The status of women is related to the level of gender equality within sending societies and their families, which includes social beliefs about gender behaviours, access to information and resources (Boyd & Grieco, 2003).

Migrant women's experiences and outcomes in the host country depend on the 'particularities of specific origin and destination countries or regions, their labour market structure, labour force composition and particular migrant groups' (Mearns, Bell, & Peace, 2010, p. 70). The majority of the studies have placed Latin American migrant women at the margins of both sending and host societies, sometimes portraying them as 'submissive, subordinate and passive' (Rivera, Nash, & Trlin, 2000, p. 50). Although some Latinas are achieving positions of power and leadership, they can face isolation, emotional pain, self-doubt and non-acceptance among their colleagues (Vasquez & Gomas-Diaz, 2007).

Motherhood and migration can mean more gaps in terms of gender inequality,

as women leave behind their paid jobs and increase their dependency on their husbands or the welfare state (Wu, 2009). Research, however, about gender and ethnic migrant entrepreneurship (Verheijen, Nguyen, & Chin, 2014; Verdaguer, 2009) has shown that more migrant women are becoming business owners and overcoming discrimination and structural challenges in industrialised labour markets. In developed countries, migrant women entrepreneurship can represent autonomy, agency, professionalism and a form to break away from stereotypes of passivity and dependency.

Femininity was also found to be a tool for empowerment among migrant women as shown in Cvajner's study (2011) about hyper-feminine performances of women from the former USSR that worked as caregivers in Italy. The study also identified the importance of the solidarity among women that share the same goals in the recognition of their womanhood. Hyper-feminine attitudes can be linked to third wave feminists' notion that women are diverse and their identities are expressed through 'many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and cultural backgrounds' (Tong, 2009, p. 285).

In the 2013 New Zealand census, the Latin American residents comprised almost 15,000 people (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).<sup>(1)</sup> New Zealand has a long history of gendered migration that affects the overall gender balance in the population (Badkar, Callister, Krishnan, Didham, & Bedford, 2007). By 2013, the percentage of female migrants (51.3 percent) made up a little more than male migrants (48.7 percent) (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). However, male migrants continue to have higher rates of employment, work in a skilled job or skill shortage area and earn more from wages and salaries.

New Zealand has a high level of gender equality (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Thus, as migration influences women's notions of identity, relationships and gender perspectives, migrating to New Zealand can contribute to women having a better understanding of gender equality and work-life balance (Verheijen et al., 2014). This is mainly due to more freedom of lifestyle and welfare security for women (Wei, 2007).

### **Communication networks and migrant women**

Communication networks as social capital are influenced by gender, ethnicity, educational qualifications and personal and professional aspirations (Côté, Jensen, Roth, & Way, 2015). Migrant women's networks serve as tools for learning and developing employment opportunities as well as for individual and collective agency. Embedded in feminist principles of collaboration, nurturance, empowerment, agency and autonomy (Lott, 2007), they also represent social change as women can reformulate and create new paths for gender behaviours in the receiving society. This includes female ethnic role models that inspire other migrant women's self-evaluation and motivation (Kwong, Thompson, Jones-Evans, & Brooksbank, 2009).

The ethnic media a more formal network—contribute to migrants’ achievements in the host society and play an important role, whether maintaining cultural identities or hybridising them, as well as helping in socio-cultural separation or integration in the host country (Noronha and Papoutsaki, 2014). The participation of migrant women in the ethnic media has been growing, taking them to high levels of responsibility and allowing them to change gender representation and portray migrant women as active and subjects of their own stories (Rigoni, 2012).

New technology also enables the maintenance of virtual transnational networks as well as ties within the host country (Nedelcu, 2012). Distant networks of family and friends as well as with co-ethnics in the receiving country can create a sense of solidarity and influence assimilation and integration processes. The internet under feminist lenses (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002) has shown that women can connect themselves in a more democratic, gender egalitarian and new form of public space, where they promote agency and renegotiate their identities.

### **Findings and discussion**

Five of the participants were Hispanic-Latinas and five Brazilian-Latinas (2)<sup>2</sup> from six different countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru). They lived in Auckland and Waikato region and were between 21 and 60 years old. Nine of them spoke fluent English and one, intermediate English. Their levels of education varied between level 3 (one), level 7 (seven) and level 8 (two) (NZQA). In terms of occupation, five participants had paid work; four had unpaid or domestic work; and three were students. A brief description of each participant and their respective pseudonym is presented in Figure 1.

### **The communication networks of the LAMW**

The communication networks used by the LAMW who participated in this study were categorised as follows: Formal Networks; Informal Networks; Online and Social Media; Ethnic/Migrant Media. The formal networks represented an organisational or associative structure or served as professional and emotional support. They were divided to Women’s Associations; Organisations or Professionals for Migrant Support; Culture and Language Maintenance; Child Caring and Education; and Business Associations. The informal networks were related to the participants’ connections with their families, friends and community.

The role of the communication networks was found to be related with the capacity of the participants to renegotiate gender values, roles and status as well as to deal with acculturation and maintain their culture and language within their gender perspectives. The role of their communication networks frequently overlapped among each other.

Online (websites) and social media were used by the participants to promote their interests and business, communicate with their family and friends overseas

**Figure 1: Participant profiles of Latina women, 2015**

<p><b>Ana</b></p> <p>Ana is a psychologist from Brazil and has been living in New Zealand since 2009. She is a business owner and married to a South African man. They have one daughter.</p>	<p><b>Coral</b></p> <p>Coral is a translator with an MBA from Brazil and has been living in New Zealand since 2002. She is divorced and has three young adults. At the time of this study, Coral worked as Senior Contracts Administrator.</p>
<p><b>Diana</b></p> <p>Diana is from Columbia and has been living in New Zealand since 2010. At the time of this study, she was single and worked as student registrar.</p>	<p><b>Gloria</b></p> <p>Gloria is a physiotherapist from Chile and moved to New Zealand in 2012. She is married to a New Zealander. They have one daughter.</p>
<p><b>Julia</b></p> <p>Julia is from Brazil and has been living in New Zealand for more than 10 years. She is married to a New Zealander, has three children and is involved in parenting and child development.</p>	<p><b>Lorena</b></p> <p>Lorena is from Mexico and has been living in New Zealand since 1998. She is divorced and has four children. Lorena works in the community sector.</p>
<p><b>Mercedes</b></p> <p>Mercedes is from Columbia and moved to New Zealand as a refugee in 2012. At the time of this study, she had a Chilean partner and one son.</p>	<p><b>Rosa</b></p> <p>Rosa is an accountant from Argentina and has been living in New Zealand since 2006. Her husband, a New Zealander, works as a sharemilker on a dairy farm. They have two daughters.</p>
<p><b>Roxana</b></p> <p>Roxana is from Peru and moved to New Zealand in 2010. At the time of this study, she was single and worked in the shipping industry. She has a postgraduate diploma.</p>	<p><b>Vitoria</b></p> <p>Vitoria is from Brazil and has been living in New Zealand since 2005. She is married to a New Zealander and has two sons. She is the founder of an online Brazilian magazine and organises playgroups in Portuguese.</p>

Source: Luciana Nunes Hoffman and Evangelia Papoutsaki

and connect with the Latin American community or people from other nationalities in New Zealand. The use of ethnic media was relevant mainly for the Brazilian community through its online magazine (*Mundo Brasileiro Aotearoa*). An online newsletter (*Informativo*) was mentioned to be produced by the Spanish cultural group (*Grupo Cultural Hispano-Latino Waikato*).

### **Renegotiating gender values, roles and status**

In this study, a complex interaction was observed between communication networks and the phenomenon of the feminisation of migration, as well as how these networks empowered the participants, leading them to break away from established gender roles. This can be related to their active or passive engagement within their networks; the solidarity of womanhood; their leadership positions

within their ethnic communities and the importance of family and the role of children in their lives as migrant women in New Zealand.

The women in this study commented on their challenges in their pre- and post-migration stages. Some of them mentioned they left behind a life or an unsafe society they were not happy with. Economic migration was not the main cause for the majority of the participants to migrate. Their reasons were mainly related to an increase in the quality of life for themselves and their families.

We decided that we wanted to give our three kids the opportunity to understand that their life could be different. That the values in life and in a society can be different to those they were familiar with in Brazil (Coral).

The feminisation of migration was observed among the participants whose migration was a personal initiative in search of better lives, qualifications and job opportunities. According to Kofman's (2003) definition of globalised movements, some of the participants—Ana, Diana and Vitoria—integrated the labour and study flows of migration. Others were part of the marriage flow (Gloria, Julia, Lorena and Rosa). Roxana integrated the family reunification flow as she migrated to New Zealand to join her mother and sister. Mercedes migrated as a refugee; Coral chose New Zealand for considering this country safer than Brazil. In Ana's case, she was a psychologist that got divorced, quit her job and went to New Zealand to study and find a better job.

On one hand, the findings indicated that the phenomenon of the feminisation of migration was strengthened by ties the participants developed in their migration processes. This meant that friends, women's group or migrant organisations helped them to overcome psychological distress and get a job. On the other hand, the need to establish communication networks in the host society is also a characteristic of gendered patterns in international migration (Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). Migrant women are more likely to settle permanently because they have more comprehensive networks that provide information and contacts to overcome economic and social barriers (Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003).

This study showed that, even though they are highly skilled, most of the participants faced hardships in entering the New Zealand job market as a result of the lack of English proficiency and local work experience, apart from the limitations imposed by family and parenting tasks. They spoke of how they felt discriminated against and devalued for being migrant and female, and indicated a sense of low self-esteem which led them to positions of underemployment or unemployment at the beginning of their migration process.

The informal networks established by the participants in order to migrate and achieve success in New Zealand were usually linked to people from the same cultural background and those who had similar migration experiences. However, formal networks such as job mentors and programmes offered by migrants'

organisations such as the Waikato Migrant Resource Centre, and the defunct OMEGA (Opportunities for Migrant Employment in Greater Auckland) played the role of validating their professional careers, and that implied a change in their life situations (Ryan, 2007). These formal networks helped them with their curricula vitae and job interviews and created a bridge between those migrants and possible employers or people in a more privileged and established position within the New Zealand society. ‘Having someone in New Zealand who could vouch for me was what changed my situation because it’s always hard when you get your first job here’ (Ana).

It is noteworthy that participants’ professional development was also possible due to New Zealand’s favourable conditions and programmes and initiatives related to immigration, which enabled migrant women to personally and economically thrive in this country.

These findings correlated with the gender and ethnic migrant entrepreneurship research (Verheijen et al., 2014; Verdaguer, 2009) which showed the increasing number of migrant women who became business owners as a way to overcome the discrimination and structural challenges in industrialised labour markets. While formal networks bridged the participants with the host society, their personal ties also helped them to achieve their entrepreneurship goals. Ana, who has a business that brings Latin American students to New Zealand, emphasised the importance of having a business partner from the same gender and ethnic background. She pointed out that their body of employees is basically composed of women from Brazil that were or are students they brought to New Zealand.

The participants found in New Zealand more grounded feminist values and gender equality (Rivera et al., 2000) than the male dominant countries they come from (Wei, 2007).

Because I have a girl, if she was born in Brazil I’d prefer she was a boy. Because when you’re a man in Brazil, you have a lot more options. You’re freer to decide where you go and what you want to do. (...) In New Zealand (...) [women] see themselves as strong as men (Ana).

Because New Zealand has higher levels of gender equality than their countries of origin (United Nations Development Programme, 2015) more mechanisms were available to the participants to defeat socially constructed female oppression and subordination.

Ana’s most significant contribution to migrant women’s empowerment and a break away from established gender roles was the creation of the Brazilian Business women’s meeting (*NZ Brasileiríssimas*) that promotes the businesses of those women and shares their successful histories with other Brazilian women. The experiences of well-settled migrant women have shown to some

participants that overcoming migration challenges can represent social mobility and subsequent renegotiation of their status within the host society (Curran & Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). They served as inspiration as well as enhancing their self-evaluation and motivations. Female ethnic role models (Kwong et al, 2009) had a great impact in this process as those women could resonate more with other women from the same cultural background.

Because they come from more collectivist societies than New Zealand (Hofstede, 2003), the migrant women in this study organised themselves to help, support and inspire each other to direct their professional careers and develop individual and collective agency in the host society. Although traditional male and female roles still persist within their private lives, the majority of the participants engaged, whether more actively or passively, in organisations or group of friends focused on women's issues and interests. New Zealand women are included in these groups, but the connection with women from the same or similar cultural background had the greater impact on their lives as stated above.

The participants expressed the opinion that the bond with their children is the most important one, and directs their networks. Thus, they looked for organisations in New Zealand (e.g. Plunket and Playcentre) that assisted them with their personal and parenting skills, helping them to achieve positive outcomes in their relationships with their children.

It was an eye-opening and I felt better as a mom. My family didn't praise me a lot. It's something they expect from you. I learnt 'awesome, you did it!', how to praise (...) and encourage them (Lorena).

In turn, they also made friendships which increased their sense of self-esteem and integration into the society. It was shown that the ability to make and sustain friendships outside their domestic environments was fundamental if the participants were to rely less on their partners and become more integrated within their communities (Ryan, 2007).

For some participants, ties with women from the same ethnic background meant filling the gap created by not having extended family in New Zealand. 'My friends are my adopted family in NZ. [They] have seen my kids grow so they play a big role in my kids' life' (Lorena). Also, these women share similar values and same language and want to raise their children as bilingual. Two main groups served for this purpose: the Brazilian mother's group (*Grupo Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa*) and the Hispanic-Latin playgroup (*Manitas*).

Even if motherhood somehow de-skilled the participants in the sense that they left behind their professional careers, some of them found themselves developing other skills instead. Being a stay-at-home mother gave Vitoria the opportunity to become a leader within her ethnic community and to create a network (*Grupo*

*Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa*) that supports and empowers mothers from the same ethnic background:

This whole womanhood (...) grew really strong in me after I had my kids. (...) My duty as woman is to understand you as woman and I know that we do have problems and we need to understand each other (Vitoria).

Her practice was shown to be effective in promoting social change by organising Brazilian mothers through the feminist principles of collaboration, nurturance, empowerment, agency and autonomy (Lott, 2007).

### **Gender and acculturation**

In this study, it was found that communication networks influenced acculturation and gender perspectives. If in Latin America women are historically seen as submissive, subordinate and passive (Rivera et al., 2000), in New Zealand the participants encountered a society where they could resist and subvert those deep-rooted gendered power relations. Migrant and/or non-migrant social support networks represented an effective resource to help them with their psychological and socio-cultural adjustment (Berry, 1997).

Some of the women in this study seemed to cope more easily with acculturation and gender role conflicts as they engaged in organisations that gave them migration support and helped them with child care and developing friendships with locals or other migrants. The connection with organisations focused on their children's development represented one of their strategies for assimilation and integration into the host society. It also enabled them to renegotiate gender roles in their private lives by liberating themselves from busy domestic chores and making outside connections. These organisations also helped them to develop leadership skills and, in contrast with their culture of origin, discover more positive approaches for raising their children.

[You learn] how to respond to challenges underneath their learning processes. (...) When they are fighting instead of saying 'give it to him!' you say 'We only have one of this. What are we going to do? We take turns' (Rosa).

The women in this study have shown more agency and participation in both mainstream society and the Latina American community in New Zealand. Even with parenting tasks, some of them manage to study, work from home or organise women's meetings such as *NZ Brasileiríssimas* and *Grupo Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa*.

On one hand, the informal ties some participants developed with non-Latin American female friends were considered 'an interesting cultural exchange' (Coral) and positive in terms of assimilating and integrating into the New Zealand

society. By comparing their groups of New Zealand and Latina female friends, Vitoria found a stronger sense of sisterhood in New Zealand than in Brazil.

On the other hand, other participants found in ethnic networks the support to overcome migration challenges and acculturative distress and transcend isolation and alienation (Aizpurúa, 2008). Some women said they feel more comfortable joining Latin American-oriented playgroups (*Manitas* and *Mums* and *Bubs*). The sense of feeling at home in New Zealand facilitated their integration and increased their self-esteem in the host society because of the contact with their native language, traditions and shared understanding about where they come from. However, by only reinforcing ties to their places of origin, these networks seemed to limit opportunities for them to develop ties with the larger society (Curran & Saguy, 2001). 'I feel 100 percent Latin American and I don't feel very close to people from here. (...) Sometimes, I have that no really easy relationship with them' (Diana).

### **Gender and the relevance of culture and language maintenance**

Culture and language maintenance was widely emphasised by the participants as they expressed how much they missed contact with Latin Americans. Sharing their traditions with their co-nationals represented a way to reinforce their sense of identity as well as a buffer to deal with external pressure and increase their self-esteem (Aizpurúa, 2008). One example is the Festival de la Primavera (Spring Festival) organised by the *Grupo Cultural Hispano-Latino* Waikato (GCHLW) of which Lorena is president.

The associations and groups that organise cultural meetings were the most significant in allowing the participants to deal with an identity that is always changing and becoming (Hall, 1994). 'It's not easy to live with a dual identity. You have to be very much in peace with your own identity and the reasons you left your homeland to come here and to adapt, to settle in and to be happy here' (Coral). Understanding and dealing with their 'dual identity' seemed to be a way to participate in the New Zealand society. They found their participation in churches, meet-ups and the community useful to deal with psychological adjustment. However, frequent contact with their family back in their home countries also helped them with any acculturative distress and identity issues they might have faced.

Motherhood and migration may generate greater gaps in gender equality, due to women's decreased participation in paid work and increased dependency on their husbands or the welfare state. However in this study, the participants actively and strategically used their non-dominant cultural resources to succeed in the host society and provide their children with access to various forms of cultural and social capital (Wu, 2009). Culture and language maintenance among the participants' children was found to be a way of empowering themselves as they joined organisations such as Playcentre and Plunket or created playgroups

to raise bilingual children. One example is the Spanish speaking *Manitas* play-group, which was started by Lorena and receives funding from the Ministry of Education.

You're pretty much on your own. Then, you start to connect with people from your own culture as well. That motivates you. You speak more Spanish to your children (Lorena).

It was mainly with their co-ethnic female friends that they developed a more protective and integrative relationship, sharing experiences and overcoming discrimination (Aizpurúa, 2008). Roxana seemed to feel more comfortable and secure going out with her group of Peruvian girlfriends as they all have passed through similar harassment episodes.

It was also proven that re-connection with Latinas after avoiding their ethnic group for a long period also helped them to reconnect with their femininity: 'I had too much of conservative Kiwi already on me. I started putting my big earrings back on, (...) some nice tights. (...). It gave me some confidence as a woman' (Julia). This agrees with the third wave of feminism that acknowledges that women claiming for and recognising their beauty can be a practice of self-expression and empowerment (Wissinger, 2011). This sense of femininity expressed by them seemed to have acquired a different meaning and been enhanced after migration and their communication networks such as women's associations and group of girlfriends. For example, some meetings and community networks would include dance, yoga classes or make up lessons.

As seen above, culture and language maintenance was strengthened through face-to-face or online relationships with friends, family, organisations, women's associations and ethnic community. By contrast, ethnic media seemed not to have a great importance for all of them in this regard. Some participants had heard about the existence of Latin American radio programmes, but did not listen to any. It was observed that ethnic media was more important for the Brazilian community. Using and creating content for the ethnic media was also a way to renegotiate gender roles through leadership within their ethnic community. It represented social activism and an attempt to achieve gender equality by portraying strong and positive images about ethnic women and communities (Rigoni, 2012).

As an extension of the *Grupo Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa*, Vitoria created the online magazine *Mundo Brasileiro Aotearoa* that was first established to celebrate Brazilian mothers in New Zealand.

We all went through some really hard paths in our lives to be here today and (...) have something to tell. The first magazine we chose a Brazilian midwife. Everybody wanted to read because she's popular (Vitoria).

As the impact of the *Mundo Brasileiro Aotearoa* grew, Vitoria incorporated stories of successful Brazilians in New Zealand and engaged the wider Brazilian community. The magazine plays the role of a support network by preserving the Brazilian cultural identity and promoting Brazilian business in the country through articles and ads. Thus, it represents ethnic and social cohesion and connection. In other ways, the magazine also addresses how Brazilians are positively hybridising themselves and socio-culturally integrating within the mainstream society.

### **Latin American migrant women and the online and social media**

In this study, online media was found to be a significant way for the participants to find or promote information about their interest. Websites served as tools to promote women's meeting, ethnic media and business (*Grupo Mamãe Brasileira Aotearoa*, *Mundo Brasileiro Aotearoa*, *NZBrasileirissimas*, *yepnz.com*). However, social media represented the most important tool for them to build and maintain their transnational networks as well as ties within the host country (Ryan, 2007; Nedelcu, 2012). For some participants, maintaining their emotional ties with their families and home countries proved to be essential in dealing with the physical separation from their familiar networks and to overcome a sense of not belonging to the host society.

Social networking such as Facebook, Twitter and Skype provided a new sense of transnationality among families in terms of emotional support and proximity (Dekker & Engebensen, 2010), as illustrated by Ana, 'It's not of course like being there. At least you're not so left out of their lives.' She even expressed the view that without social media to communicate with her family and friends, migration would be harder and she would feel a sensation of loneliness and isolation.

Transnational networks through social media facilitated and gave new meanings to the participants' migration experience and assimilation and integration processes (Dekker & Engebensen, 2010). They were found to be a way of maintaining their culture and language as well as their ethnic identities and emotional ties also through Latin American social media groups in New Zealand. One example is the Colombian Association NZ, mentioned by Diana that brings Colombians together through Facebook by posting news and organising events such as Sunday lunches in a Colombian Restaurant with traditional live music. Other groups (*Grupo Cultural Hispano Latino Waikato*, *Latinos in New Zealand*, *Peruanos en New Zealand*, *Brasileiros em Nova Zelândia*) also served to exchange practical information such as finding a place to live or buy and sell things.

In accordance with feminist studies about the internet (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002), the use of online and social media enabled the participants to connect themselves in a more democratic, gender egalitarian and new form of public space. It also developed a sense of solidarity by promoting agency and renegotiating their

identities. By participating in Latin American online women's group (*Mulheres na Nova Zelândia, NZ Brasileirissmas*), these migrant women found a tool for support and empowerment and a way to undermine gendered power relations (Falicov, 2007).

In women's Facebook groups, for example, the participants felt they can talk about any women's issue and have a voice that is not going to be censured or ridiculed. Some of the participants created groups for discussion and support and are helping other migrant women to settle in New Zealand. 'The Facebook group started because they wanted to know "where is a good place to do waxing?" or "where can I get my medicine?"' (Ana). Some groups are specifically developed for co-ethnic mothers as the *Colo de Mãe*, which is a platform to help and introduce Brazilian mothers and promote traditional events for their children.

Despite this, these women felt they can participate in the New Zealand society by engaging online with mainstreamers through organisations of migrant support or businesses, for example. Some of them still consume media and news from their home countries to keep up to date and feel a connection with their homelands (Nedelcu, 2012) as well as use social media to promote positive images of their ethnic groups. 'I share with my friends because when something is good about Brazil, you need to share' (Ana). Others prefer to be more aware of what is going on in New Zealand, indicating more assimilation and integration within the host society.

Because of their business, they also maintain online connections with their countries of origin, as in Ana's weekly YouTube hangouts with Brazilians about New Zealand and its education opportunities. These women have been creating a bridge between their homelands and the new land. "I believe that this is how things are now, we are in New Zealand but we are able to connect with people in Brazil. It means future, technology, connection" (Ana). Therefore, their agency and autonomy through online and social media are impacting their gender situations as migrant women in New Zealand.

## **Conclusion**

Communication networks are key for migrant women to thrive in the host society. The most important insight from this study was how migrant women renegotiated their gender and migrant identities in New Zealand. By deciding to leave behind what no longer served them – a more patriarchal culture—and keep what is important for them—their femininity and family and collectivist values—the participants were able to organise their networks within a more gender egalitarian and multicultural society. This facilitated their own empowerment as well as the empowerment of other Latin American migrant women in New Zealand.

The feminisation of migration was evidenced as the women of this study

migrated for labour, study, matrimonial, family reunification and safety reasons and created gender based migrant networks to fulfil their needs as migrant women in the host country. This was a proactive and empowering process and led to their formal and informal networks as well as online and social media use. Those networks were meaningful for the participants and their roles frequently overlap. Thus, their communication networks served as emotional, professional and health support, job mentoring, the development of their leadership skills, to set up their own business and to make strong friendships. Also, they played the role of helping them with their parenting challenges as well as maintaining their culture and language within the host society and through contact with their homelands. Some women said that they left behind a sentiment of loneliness, isolation and homesickness for a situation where they are more settled and happier with a home-like feeling.

## Notes

1. In the 2013 Census, Statistics New Zealand did not break down the number of Latin American migrants by gender or employment rates. This information was provided through email by the Statistics New Zealand advisor Kathy Kemp.
2. For the purpose of this study, the term Hispanic-Latinas refers to the Latin American women originally from Spanish speaking countries whereas Brazilian-Latinas refers to Latin American women originally from Brazil where they speak Brazilian Portuguese.

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