

Dreams and aspirations in later life: grassroots organising and activism by migrants' elderly parents in Bolivia

Tanja Bastia

Tanja.Bastia@Manchester.ac.uk

Global Development Institute
University of Manchester



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What do you think about life?

*Life, all there is left is to die, we are old [laughs]
yes.*

*La vida pues para morir nomás ya pues, ya
estamos viejitos, viejitas... (Risas) si pues.*

(62 year old woman from a rural area near Cochabamba)

Projects

- MICRA Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing 2013
- British Academy and Leverhulme 2014-15
- Methodology
 - 22 in depth interviews in Cochabamba city and surrounding areas carried out in 2013
 - 20 interviews in Tarija in 2014
 - 20 interviews in Santa Cruz 2015
 - Men and women 60 years and over
 - Urban, peri-urban and rural



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Ageing in lower income countries

- 62% of the 868 million people over age of 60 live in developing countries
- Expected to rise to 80% by 2050
- 80% of older people in developing countries have no regular income
- Only 25% of older people in lower and middle income countries receive a pension (HelpAge 2015)

Context

- Bolivian migration
 - Historically regional, to Argentina, Chile, and Brazil
 - US also an important destination
 - Post 2001: Spain, Italy
- 6.8% population lives abroad (IOM 2011)
- 11% of the households have somebody living abroad
- Life expectancy 67 years (70 for women and 65 for men)
- Cash transfers for over 60s (Renta Dignidad)

'Left behind'

- Migration and development
 - Social consequences of migration
 - Migration has negative consequences for older people left behind (Shetty 2012; Vullnetari and King 2008)
- Transnational care (Baldassar et al. 2007)
- Older people are not just 'receivers' of care
 - Most older people in low income countries continue to be economically active in later life (Farah et al./ HelpAge Intl 2012; Barrientos et al. 2003)
 - Many also have caring responsibilities, especially in contexts of high out-migration (Bastia 2009)

- High diversity in the experiences of older people that are left behind
 - Age (Vullnetari and King 2008)
 - Social position (Kreager 2006; Kreager and Schroder-Butterfill 2007)
 - Residence (urban/ peri-urban/ rural)
 - Migration streams
- Migration and inequality

Experiences of separation

- “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 (62 year old woman rural CBB4)
- “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” (72 year old man rural CBB5)
- “That she went to look for her future, it hurts me as a mother, because she is far away, I miss her a lot because she is my only daughter” [...] “Sad, sad, ... it’s like something came apart in me, very sad, because I had never been apart from my children (60 year old woman rural CBB7, her only daughter migrated)

Transnational care: Becoming mothers again

“I feel better, I built the houses for my children, I am well and built the houses, I bought plots for my children. What I want is that they be better because on my own I wouldn't have been able [to do all this]. My daughter then after building her house, she left me my grandchildren and she left [...] I feel better now because she left me with my grandchildren” (CBB13 woman peri-urban 60 years old).

- Age of interviewee
- Age of grandchildren

Livelihoods

- Migration is a livelihood strategy
 - Land fragmentation (Cochabamba and Tarija)
 - Access to water (Tarija)
 - Sometimes migration is seen as the only option (Tarija)
- Elderly left-behind continue to work to support themselves
 - Rural areas: emigration of younger people makes land cultivation difficult
 - Increased insecurity for the left-behind
- Migration of adult children leads to better financial security in urban areas
 - Investments looked after by the migrants' parents

Dreams

- Actual dreams: gardens, drug enforcement agents, the dead
- Truncated dreams:
“If I had studied, I could have been something, but I didn’t have a father, I didn’t have a mother and for that reasons I didn’t go to school” (82 year old woman).
- Achievements
“I only dreamt to have enough to live” (67 year old man)

Vulnerability

- “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 until I have the strength to do that. Life has been that: work and work. Thanks to God we have the Renta Dignidad, which we didn’t have before. That helps us a lot” (67 year old man from a rural area)

Dreams for living in harmony with nature

“Well, we all dreamt when we were young, that the world would be different, to walk freely in the countryside, have contact with nature, butterflies, swallows, ... I used to wake up at 5 in the morning, I had a political mother, birds were singing a special song and when it started raining, there was a glow worm song, a frog song, ... Our authorities don't really see the environment, they don't protect it. If we leave a desert, who is going to go there. Nobody.” (83 year old man from Arbieto)

Socialist revolution

“The revolution, this process of change, I am happy, at least I am able to see at least one part of it, I wouldn’t have thought ... this revolution, those were my highest aspiration, the poor are now in government, with their mistakes and all, but it’s better. The women, before the revolution, women couldn’t vote, the illiterate couldn’t vote, moreover, we had to have an income. We were nothing. Our leaders used to tell us that politics was a crime, women weren’t allowed into politics because their fathers used to say that they would be ruined. But now we have a woman senator, and a woman MP. Here we had two women mayors.” (82 year old man from Arbieto)

The future

- Wanting to be close to family members (women) or sharing it with friends and neighbours (men)
- Some interviewees wanted to be left alone
- Ambition of contributing to a better future and helping others
- Wanting to learn new skills, learn to speak Spanish

Emerging collective identity as 'elderly'

- 'Adulto mayor'
- Visible political participation and activism
- Many interviewees active in grassroots community and regional associations of 'older adults'
 - Important for the wellbeing of the older generation
 - Increase the universal payment for elderly people (renta dignidad)
 - Improve hospital facilities
 - More doctors who specialise in geriatric medicine

Conclusions

- Vulnerability of older people
- Contributions they make to society, through working, caring and associational life
- Very active in the community
- But also cases of extreme isolation
- Need to increase awareness of their needs

Policy recommendations

- Urgent need to improve health in general but geriatric care in particular
- Support older people's economic activities, including in rural areas (access to subsidised seeds, irrigation)
- Regional and local governments are already setting up homes for older citizens, including day centres (to combat solitude, provide health advice, food)
- Continue supporting campaigns to increase awareness of the rights and needs of older citizens