Argentina and Brazil: the clothing sector and the Bolivian migration
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This paper aims to point out significant signs of change in migration patterns in the context of globalization, which can be seen especially in the case of Bolivian immigration into Brazil (São Paulo) and Argentina (Buenos Aires). Both in Brazil and in Argentina, the specific significance of Bolivian immigration lies in its difference in relation to “classic” immigration processes in as much as the country has had an important history of assimilation of immigration waves from Europe and Japan since the 19th Century.

With the influence of the “Chinese cost/prices” in the clothing sector as from the 1990’s, the existing pattern seems to have been replaced by a new one in line with the periods of formation of industrial labour. In their more recent formation, migratory courses seem to have altered. Migration often occurs with the mediation of family networks in the country of arrival with migrants working in bad conditions in the clothing sector where they also live forming a set of elements that lead us to see this kind of work as informal and often illegal.

However, in spite of the similarities in the production reorganization processes, especially in the clothing sector in both countries – Brazil and Argentina, recent migrants from Bolivia (as well as from Asian countries, such as Korea) encounter on arrival different realities and difficulty in entering the job market: these “ethnic” group’s activities in Brazil are highly focused on the clothing sector in their domiciles, often carried out within family immigration networks, or work in sweat shops belonging to previous immigration groups, such as the Koreans; in Argentina, job inclusion is more diversified with part of workers finding themselves in a situation similar to that of the clothing sector in Brazil while others opt for domestic or farming work. Another fundamental difference relates to human rights and reporting of the immigrants’ situation, which politicize and publicize in different manners the presence of illegal immigrants in São Paulo and Buenos Aires as a result of the existence or permanence of popular movements and organizations, as well as social movements on a larger scale in the case of Buenos Aires. These immigrants, in the case of Brazil, remain invisible and contrast particularly with the level of organization and claims of their peers in Argentina where immigration goes back a long way and where the similarity with the indigenous
populations – besides the language – give them a greater chance of “inclusion” despite the relative similarity in working conditions. However, we must point out that the new Law of July 2009 on legalization of illegal immigrants in Brazil, regardless of their origin, paves the way for new possibilities for these immigrants.

This paper intends to present a research issue relating to the emergence of a “new pattern” of immigration of Latin American immigrants and their connections with informal work. The paper observes that the migration processes, where Brazil was a point of arrival, went from integration and absorption, rising and consolidation of immigrants to the confinement of some immigrant categories in productive “restricted sectors” in difficult living conditions with very few possibilities of a way out and little public action or visibility. Extending the scope of the research outside Brazil – combining different types of prospects and views, it may be possible to see some of the Brazilian specificities resulting from the Bolivian presence in Latin American countries.

1. Bolivian Immigration in Brazil and in Argentina

Bolivian immigration is part of a dynamic system whose first movement seems to have been from rural to urban areas in Bolivia and then continuing towards southern Latin America, United States and Europe. To understand the meaning of Bolivian immigration to Brazil and Argentina we have to review the history behind the issue. From an internal migrating movement in Bolivia mainly from rural areas to the cities (La Paz and Cochabamba), historic immigration of Bolivians to Argentina since the beginning of the last century and to Brazil since the 1950’s had the purpose of higher education and access to the labour market by some professionals such as medical doctors or for political motives.

As from the 1980’s, the focus of Bolivian immigration changed, as a result of internal reasons such as the crisis of the mining sector and land reform. Immigration then became widespread, growing about 24% from 1980 to 1990 and affecting the less qualified and lower income classes. This increasing number of Bolivians in Brazil and in Argentina grew from more than 118.000 in 1980 to about 143.000 in 1991. According to the Brazilian census of 2000, in spite of Bolivian immigrant groups being small in comparison to other groups, the rate of growth was significant in the period
from 1991 to 2000. Another striking change is the concentration of Bolivian immigration in São Paulo and Buenos Aires; in Argentina, the largest concentration of Bolivians is in Buenos Aires; in Brazil, in São Paulo\(^1\) (in 2000, 44% of Bolivian immigrants are living in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo). They are a low qualified population of young adults. The success of their migration depends on professional inclusion. In São Paulo, this population consists of men (56%), due to and in spite of the predominance of their inclusion in the clothing sector – which is traditionally female. Another interesting fact, which points to the existence of different migratory waves, is the coexistence of populations: 30.5% have been in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo\(^2\) for more than 20 years and 27.6% have up to five years residence in the area. This also reflects their dispersion in the centre and in outlying districts: they have settled in the historic districts of Centro, Bom Retiro, Pari, Belém and Brás; and, in smaller numbers in the northern, eastern and southern regions of the city even if their presence is more significant in the districts of Lajeado and Cidade Tiradentes, where they seem to form new borders in international immigration areas.

2. The clothing sector: globalized production and homogeneous informality

The clothing sector is one of the economic areas that can be seen as an example of the global neoliberal policies of the 1990’s, which the so-called “labour market crisis”\(^3\). A new informality seems to change the main element of enterprises/companies’ competitive strategies. This informality is different “old” informality, conceived in Latin America as a place of archaic non capitalistic work relations. In spite of national differences, the analysis of recent changes of production and work relations in the clothing sector – such as for example the emergence of the “Chinese cost/price” – would lead to a mix between poor working conditions and

\(^1\) There are bolivians immigrants in Corumbá (MS), Guajará-Mirim (RO) and Rio de Janeiro (RJ) According to Pastoral do Imigrante, there are 60.000 illegal immigrants from Bolivia. Newspapers mention 250.000 (Freire da Silva, 2008).

\(^2\) cf. 2000 census .

\(^3\) Harvey, 1993 ; Offe, 1985; Sennet, 1999
informal work relations as well as flexible diversified production processes on a larger scale.

This new pattern has become widespread with the introduction of outsourcing both for the contracting and risk processes in the production chain: entrepreneurs who control the outsourcing production to cheaper labour, in many cases employing immigrants such as Bolivians in Brazil and in Argentina, often illegal immigrants. In this case, the illegal workers’ situation is essential to define their work and living condition. Edna Bonachich, based on the clothing manufacturing industry in Los Angeles in the early 1990’s, analysed this process that she called “ethnic economy” which was formed by workers in their majority Latin, hired by Asian owners, who became their immediate “exploiters”. Her analysis observed the systemic nature of illegalities and corruption. The situation of these immigrant workers – who often work and live in the same place – being exploited sometimes by family and/or fellow countrymen, may be comparable to living and working conditions of the industrial revolution in 18th century.

The generalization of this kind of work and living conditions is justified by contemporary production processes based on the increase of competition for cost reduction. Thus, the dramatic reduction in labour costs – that is, the reduction in wages – became the reduction of formal employment at large companies, increased informal work and the creation of a production chain whose final links employ a higher number of workers in bad conditions. Part of this chain is characterized by a low level of technology and, consequently, by the persistence of standards, which imply manual work with long working hours and low wages, increasing domestic work or in small sweat shops. In this perspective, mobilization of certain types of labour such as female labour, immigrants and migrants increases informal employment relations as a natural form of work and enabled these production patterns to be generalized.

There is therefore a significant relationship between an increase in informal employment and clandestine immigration in metropolitan regions, especially in the United States and Europe that can also be seen in the countries of the south. This increase in informal employment relations seems to constitute one of the systemic conditions that leads to greater circulation of immigrant labour. According to some

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4 See Abreu, 1986; Abreu e Sorj, 1993; Araújo e Amorim, 2001/2002; Freire e Georges, 2007
authors, (Souchaud, 2009) this new production model has led to a significant growth of these migratory flows, which differs from previous waves motivated largely by internal crises in the country of origin. This phenomenon can be called “low globalisation”, expanding the expectations and horizons of partial and problematic inclusion (migratory, social and economic) of low income populations worldwide (Tarrius, 2002).

To a certain point, these production practices go hand in hand with the ever present possibility of dislocation of production in a sector requiring tacit and/or informal knowledge, which is little or not at all recognized as qualified work. The existence of new “sweat-shops” around the world, both in Los Angeles and in São Paulo\(^5\) or Buenos Aires follows a global dynamic, with the same results for the working conditions, in spite of different migration histories. However, the issue of compatibility of certain economic sectors and migrant workers is clear. This compatibility can explain the new national migratory patterns, connected with the productive reorganization in and out of each one of these countries who provide and accept workers.

In the case of the clothing industry in São Paulo, the productive restructuring process seems to have contributed to boosting this migratory flow to the city. It is one of the most traditional branches of São Paulo’s industry which, in spite of the decreasing number of formal jobs from 180,000 in 1981 to 80,000 in 2000, is still one of the sectors which creates more jobs in São Paulo. Clothing manufacturing in the districts of Brás and Bom Retiro, where production of clothing in the city was concentrated, reduced the size of factories and diversified production to small scale seeking to accompany the movement in fashion market trends. This production at competitive prices would represent the possibility of recovering the clothing sector, during the 90’s, after the unfavourable results in the late 1980’s. Thus clothing factories are one of the major creators of added value in the city forming one of the largest conglomerates of clothing production in the world.

In this restructuring process, production was fragmented. Formal and large companies concentrate on creation, styling, fabric cutting and marketing of end products. Sewing, the most labour intensive stage, was outsourced using a number of subcontracted sweatshops, with mainly informal work. Outsourcing was a labour management strategy to address this diversified production in small scale series. Sweat shops sprawled in districts where former factory workers lived. Having experience in

production due to a long period of formal work in this industry, they make the sewing orders circulate. This gave rise to an urban dynamics linked to the clothing industry and spatial re-ordination of production relations: sewing orders come from formal companies in the districts of Brás and Bom Retiro and are produced in the distant districts, mainly in the eastern and northern outskirts of the city.

Massive use Bolivian migrants occurs at this stage of the process: informal and bad working conditions in the sweat shops. One such evidence lies precisely in the coincidence of the places where they concentrate in the city and in the networks where orders are placed, that is, in the central districts of Brás, Bom Retiro, Belenzinho, Cambuci, Pari, Canindé, Penha, downtown and in distant districts of Itaquera, Guaianazes, Lajeado, Cidade Tiradentes in the eastern zone and the districts of Casa Verde, Vila Maria and Vila Guilherme in the northern zone of the city.

The clothing manufacturing sector has traditionally welcomed many immigrants. The Koreans stand out as main players particularly in the 1990’s in restructuring the sector which had already been going through changes due to the 1980’s economic slowdown. The group’s success in the sector was very expressive because it counted on its own financing system – called Kye system – and on privileged relations with South Korean’s businessmen in the textile sector, later acting also as importers of synthetic fabrics. Furthermore, they used irregular labour employing other Korean people who arrived in the city. Argentina was also a place of arrival for Korean immigrants and many have become established in the country likewise in clothing production. The Brazilian government imposed restrictions on Korean migration in the 1970’s. Many of them entered the country clandestinely crossing the Bolivian border. They spent some time in that country, and some of them settled down there in the clothing sector before they travelled clandestinely to Brazil. According to Choe, there were even some Korean agents who guaranteed travel conditions and above all the passage through the border Bolivia-Brazil. Brazil, in turn, also served as a stop for many Koreans who had the USA as a final destination.

The Korean and Bolivian immigration circuits in the city of São Paulo are coincident with the development of the clothing industry. At first, this Korean migration circuit was used for migration of the Bolivians themselves despite each group taking up

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6 It’s the case of the Ibanese in the 30’s and jews in the 40’s. The Korean immigrants arrived later, in the 60’s.
7 Kontic, 2001; Garcia e Moreira 2004).
a distinct place in the production chain. It is then possible to see immigrants who crossed borders settling in the city and creating dynamics articulated around the production sector.

Further, there is in the case of Bolivians a specific dimension: that is, a close relationship between irregular immigration, informal work and housing. In São Paulo, illegal immigration criminalization as set out in the foreigners’ law (2005) and the reality of some districts in the city of São Paulo – former industrial districts - concentrate these immigrants and contributed to this “migratory pattern” and migratory network. In Argentina, Bolivian immigration started much earlier and resulted in a larger group, which is less visible because it is confused with other indigenous and Andean ethnicities. This non-differentiation in relation to other populations from country side combines with more institutionalized types of organization and defence.

In Argentina – as in Brazil – it is difficult to know exactly the number of informal workers in clothing or agriculture sectors. When we cross this data with the analysis of migratory flows and its orientation to certain sectors of activity, the question becomes more complex. However, we try to provide some approximate data. In Argentina, in 2007, employment in the textile industry accounted for 10.4% of the national industry. The informality rate in the labour market was 53% (3.9 million people); in the clothing sector, the rate of informality was 40.1% (515,000 people), accounting for 13.8 % informal work; also note the sharp differences in salaries for the formal and informal sectors (about 63%). There are about 10,000 tailor shops (“talleres”) where the sweat shop owners have about 12 workers each. Nearly half of these talleres are in Buenos Aires (in the districts of Flores, Bajo Flores, Parque Avellaneda, La Paternal, Liniers, among others). Another effect of informality is the low rate of union membership of about 17%.

According to an interview held in the Argentine capital with another member of the union of “talleristas” (Unión de Trabajadores Costureros) and president of a NGO/cooperative, the working conditions of Bolivians in the clothing sector changed

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8 The bolivian immigrants working in the clothing sector in Argentina are near 100,000 (Adúriz, 2009).
10 O Sindicato Obrero de la Industria del Vestido y Afines (SOIVA) is the union of formal workers of clothing sector with 16,032 members, from 2000 little factories (talleres) in Argentina.
between the years 1990 and 2000 because there has been an increasing immigration, with bad working conditions and generalized corruption at all levels (human trafficking, relations of the latter with the traffic of drugs and body organs, connections between clandestine sweat shops and cocaine production)\textsuperscript{11}. In the 1990’s, immigration of Bolivians to Argentina and mainly to Buenos Aires was often associated with family relations with the arrival of about 100 people a month, coming from urban areas (La Paz, Cochabamba), to work in the clothing sector through family connections in clandestine sweat shops of other Bolivians, in a system of “exchange of favours” as occurred in Brazil in the years 2000. In the last 10 years we have seen the development of the so-called “rubbish work” “trabajo-basura”, resulting from economic growth and the increasing Bolivian immigration due to the worse Bolivian conditions (lack of potable water, lack of minimum basic infrastructure) and rationalization of migration processes, involving the Bolivian media offering jobs in Argentina in different local languages (in Spanish, but also in Aimara and Quéchua) and in remote regions of El Alto, such as Oruro and Sucre. There were also arrangements with bus companies. This also gave rise to other forms of illegal traffic (drugs, organs). These migratory flows of people would have contributed to these forms of bad working conditions becoming normal (in agriculture and in the clothing sector). According to the same source, the the clothing sector is high profit margin (between 33 and 53%), varying due to direct or intermediary sales. In this sector, about 90% of the work is informal, which represents about 3,000 clandestine sweat shops in the city of Buenos Aires, where 40,000 people would be working in conditions close to “slavery”\textsuperscript{12}, to which we would add about 15,000 in the outer areas of the city, and almost 250,000 in the interior of the country (textile industry, clothing, footwear, agriculture, civil construction). In all, “illegal and/or informal” labour in Argentina accounts for about 500,000 immigrants in all sectors\textsuperscript{13}. In spite of being reported, the workers themselves do not see their situation as slavery.

We must also point out that calling this kind of work as slavery, and Bolivian immigrants as slaves in Argentina is also used for mobilization for workers’ protection,

\textsuperscript{11} This member of workers union suffered a violent attack in July 2009, when he presented 17 testimonies about the working conditions in the argentine clothing sector for large clothing international shops.

\textsuperscript{12} We have problems to call these cases of ethnic economy as slavery. But we understand the political use of the term in the mobilisation for human and labour rights.

whether immigrants or not, strongly associated with social movements, which developed in the country in the last decade. The fight against “slave” labour, understood as clandestine, overexploited illegal work without clearly established rights, is one of the elements of conflict which seems to pervade associations, cooperatives and popular “assambleas” which persisted after the shrinking of popular organization forms in Argentina. In La Ciudad Vista, Beatriz Sarlo describes two small examples of Bolivian presence in Buenos Aires to the magnificent descriptions of the social situations of Parque Avellaneda. The first is called Police Facts and tells of the release of 37 Bolivians working in a sweat shop. Among them, three children between the ages of three and eleven. Brought from Bolivia and having as employers three other Bolivians, these workers were only rescued because one of them managed to escape. What is the slavery situation in this case? Perhaps a mixture of coercion because of debts and deception in the country of origin where they were promised both proper work and Argentine citizenship. However, no matter how elementary these work situations, perhaps the second headline will clarify important differences between work by these immigrants in illegal situations who are overexploited and in conditions of “slavery”. This headline refers to claims of Bolivian workers during a massive demonstration that gathered 1,500 people in Avenida Avellaneda. They demanded better working conditions and positioned themselves against the Government of Buenos Aires closing sweat shops and were against irregular clothing production: “in response to the official action (inspection and closing of irregular sweat shops) workers demonstrated raising banners with the slogan ‘there are no slaves here, only workers’ and demanded their jobs should continue”.14

In our field research, carried out in 2008/2009, from what remained of the popular district meetings, social movements, popular organizations, we could see the organizational and contentious side of some of the Bolivians migrants. We point out the “Yanapacuna” Bolivians’ Association for the protection of human rights. (“Yanapacuna” in Aymara means self-help). We also saw “La Alameda” Cooperative, which employs Bolivians in an attempt to form self-managed cooperatives. Other initiatives of the Bolivian population have an important role such as a collective action organized by a local radio station directed and by Bolivians with the intent to press one of the employers to correctly pay his employees.

Some differences in the situations and experiences of Bolivian workers in Buenos Aires were established showing that it is possible to raise similar migration and employment trajectories, equally unsatisfactory inclusion methods on arrival which differ according to distinct social political and mobilization conditions.

3. Among individual horizons and publicization processes: workers trajectories

In the interviews conducted in Brazil and in Argentina, we saw that Bolivian workers seem to follow a pattern where migrations in Bolivia, from Bolivia abroad and in this case between Argentina and Brazil (sometimes passing through Paraguay) as well as temporary returns to the their country, according to the employment opportunities in Bolivia, Argentina or Brazil. We highlight some trajectories taken from interviews which can give an idea of the possibilities of life and work.

The first one is the story of a young Bolivian girl interviewed while waiting in a queue at one of the offices for foreigners’ regularization in São Paulo in August 2009. Even after returning to Cochabamba, where she left on her own and still a minor, she quickly returned to São Paulo, where job opportunities seemed to be better. Her story is typical: first joining the clothing sector as an illegal and informal worker with her family (this was the destination of migration) to pay for her fares; then working in a Brazilian company, with better conditions and rights. As she was single, this type of more regular occupational inclusion, allowed her to dream about the access to education, which seemed more attractive than hypothetical inclusion in Argentina, where part of her family is living.

Overall, generation gaps creates differences in patterns of inclusion, in addition to national differences and job opportunities. From this perspective, it is interesting to compare the stories of two Bolivians (a woman and a man) who have approximately the same age but who arrived in São Paulo with very different life situations.

The first one (Angélica), an experienced seamstress, arrived in São Paulo through an aunt who brought her from La Paz to work in her clandestine sweat shop. Angélica was running away from domestic violence. She arrived here in early 2000 and was over 30. At that time and in more restricted situations, the only alternative to clothing jobs was at a first rubbish collection and recycling, before starting sewing at home and selling her products – handbags – in one of the night street markets. Today she has her own sewing machine, and her 16-year-old daughter also works as a
seamstress in a clandestine sweat shop in the eastern zone of São Paulo. Angélica belongs to an NGO/cooperative that employs women who are victims of domestic violence.

The second story (Alonso) is part of the older generation who was successful in business especially because he arrived here when he was young and able to develop a different type of activity, which makes his story different from the others. Although he is almost the same age as the former immigrant (about 40), he arrived in São Paulo when he was young with his wife and when he was able to save some money working in different areas (he as mechanic and she as a maid), which was possible because of their quick legalization in the country because their children were born in Brazil. Alonso was once the owner of a car repair service. In the early 1990’s, he moved to Argentina where the economic situation was better and used to send money to his wife in Brazil. The Brazilian sweat shop that he owned with his wife failed in the late 1990’s because of a problem of adjustment between huge demand and his lack of ability to mobilize workers to meet this demand. He incurred debts with suppliers and defaulted, which, by the way, was emblematic of outsourced (and sub-contracted) companies supporting the risk of the so-called production flexibilization.

Alonso, 44, Bolivian, has lived with his family in the district of Brás since 1984 and had a sweat shop. When he came to the city with his own resources he did not get a job in the sweat shops but as a mechanic. His wife was already in Brazil before him and worked as a maid. He did not encounter problems to legalize his situation in the country because his children were born here. Through recommendations from other Bolivians who were already in the country he started to work sewing together with his wife in a sweat shop belonging to a Korean. As he had no debts relating to his journey here and did not live at the sweat shop where he worked, in early 1990’s he already had his own sweat shop. He bought some machines, rented others and worked at home with his wife. He said that many Koreans and Bolivians left the country at that time. In 1992, his orders diminished drastically due to the Brazilian economic crisis. Without orders in a sufficient number he had to sell some of his machines. He lost a great part of his assets. He left his wife and children in the city and decided to go to Buenos Aires in Argentina to work at a sweat shop of a Korean. He already knew some Bolivians who worked there and the clothing sector in Buenos Aires was more prosperous at the time. He stayed there for a year and would send two to three hundred dollars every month to his wife; the foreign exchange difference increased even more his earnings. He invested the money he saved in his own sweat shop when he came back to São Paulo.

A decisive episode in Alonso’s trajectory may help to explain these differences between the sweat shops, how they deal with the pressure of orders. After he came back from Argentina and resumed his activities at his sweat shop with his family his business was
doing well. Even when sometimes some companies would default on him by not paying for the service, which would leave him in a difficult situation with his seamstresses. Defaults are very common in this industry and create a knock-on effect also affecting seamstresses. However, this time, Alonso faced another problem. In 1998, he received an offer of a huge order:

“(...) the Korean came and said ‘Alonso, do you have people?’... it was the order of my life ... I have to deliver 5,000 shorts ... they will pay you for the shorts, ... because they are going to be exported to Europe and I need them in a week’. I said: ‘I can do 4,000, ..., I have 10 seamstresses’. ‘O.K., then you do 4,000 and 1,000 I’ll order from somewhere else’. ‘Listen, ... I’ll pay you 2 for the same shorts”, (the Korean friend said). ... So I’ll make the 4,000 shorts, I’ll have my seamstresses working harder”. He gave me a good payment in advance”.

The seamstresses would also be paid double to earn R$ 0.80 per item, however they would have to work more than to be able to cope with the order. There was even a moment of euphoria when Alonso took all of them to celebrate the order. However, after two days, the seamstresses said they would no longer work at the sweat shop, they were not accustomed to the work and that they were only waiting to find a place to go to leave. After discussing with the seamstresses, Alonso paid them what they owed them and threw them out. He did not manage to complete the order and ended up in debt. He had to sell his machines and decided to quit the sewing business. Now he works at his own restaurant specialized in Bolivian food which he set up with his wife; he also does delivery services between sweat shops and has a food stand in the Kantuta square market where the Bolivian community gets together every Sunday.

It is interesting to compare the story of this Bolivian, former owner of a sweat shop in Brazil, with the story of another Bolivian worker in Argentina, also the owner of a sweat shop who was able to carry on with this business when he returned to Argentina in early 2000 for the second time, where he settled after legalizing his situation. Perhaps it is possible to associate these trajectories with the mobilization ability of Bolivians in Argentina and with the experience of passing from informal and illegal work to becoming the owner of a sweat shop employing legal workers who find channels and space for demand.

Felix is an employee we met at the practice of a lawyer who works for the Bolivian community in Buenos Aires. His inclusion trajectory is already “consolidated” and he knows the lawyer very well. He told us his story while he was looking after his baby (his wife was at the dentist on the same floor of the building where the lawyer practice is in the district of Liniers, in the western zone of the city from where many direct line buses leave for Bolivia). His parents had a small plot of land near La Paz, too small to maintain his children (he has three sisters and two brothers). He went to La Paz to do
secondary education and survived by selling products grown by his parents such as coca. He left there to go to Cochabamba at the time of an economic and political crisis, where he worked and lived at the same time in a hotel to try and continue his university studies in Engineering. However, he could not attend the lessons at the times required. Around 1992/1993 – at 22 – he went illegally to Buenos Aires (Argentina) for the first time, and had to pay a bribe at the frontier so he could go free (he also had to prove he had an income); he worked at a clandestine sweat shop for three months where workers were not allowed to go out in the open. They worked from 7h00 a.m. to 2h00 a.m. The sweat shop owner, located near Parque do Centenário, belonged to a family of three brothers (each brother had his own clandestine sweat shop) and a woman brought workers from Cochabamba through the local radio connections. He ended by returning to Bolivia, where he stayed for two years before going back to Argentina; he only received his wages after returning to Bolivia. Only when he went back to Argentina was he able to find formal registered work. In 2008, when we interviewed him, he had been in Buenos Aires for eight years, where he owned a small sweat shop offering better working conditions to his four workers. His wife was an outsourced worker and earned between six and seven pesos per pair of trousers sewn while other outsourcing companies pay a third of this value. Married with a daughter, he felt disappointed he could not help his sister who is in Spain to continue her studies.

The experiences of other Bolivians interviewed at this association are somewhat different; it is interesting to observe how they move from one branch of activity to the next. It is also possible to note their family situation - especially that they are single mothers or separated – which influences their better or worse choices for working conditions – both in Brazil and in Argentina.

One of the interviewees, 22, who looked very intimidated, went to Argentina when she was 17 to look after the children of her 31-year-old sister. She arrived from Cochabamba in 2001. She is a seamstress (informal work), overlockist and earns about 600 pesos per month. She lives in the sweat shop where there is one room for women and one for men. She tells of ill treatment from the Koreans (physical violence, non-payment, inadequate and repetitive meals, mainly beef mince). Her sister sells vegetables at a small illegal grocer’s (informal work) earning only the leftovers of what she sells at the weekends.

Maria-Ester went from La Paz to Buenos Aires in 1985 with her parents, she arrived when she was 17. She lives in Vila Lugana in a slum, at a place bought by her parents; she has worked for the same sewing company with three other employees for 13 years where she does sewing re-stitching. Her work is informal because she asked her boss to be paid by piece, which enables her to have flexible working hours to be at home with her children. She worked in 4 places in all: in two as a helper, and in two others as a more skilled worker. She has not completed secondary education. In her trajectory she had her first job as a cleaner and she lived at the home of the family employing her for three years and later moved on to work with sewing. She is separated, the father of her children helps but what he gives her is not sufficient. She told of how she was hired once being seized by the arm by her future employer at the corner of Calles Florida and San Martin.
We also contacted a family – father, mother and a five-year-old daughter. He had a formal job in the textile sector and his wife, who was younger, worked as a baby-sitter. He is does sewing at an Argentine family company that makes uniforms for YPF, the Argentine oil company. He spoke of the importance of formal work which entitles you to family benefits. The need for benefits and the search for formal work strongly relate to the family.

Of the many trajectories seen in major metropolitan economic centres in Brazil and in Argentina some questions stand out. The first refers to an important difference between forms of urban and in labour market inclusion in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. In Buenos Aires, there are many doors to enter the city and the labour market – domestic jobs, work in the green belt, in the production of fruit and vegetables, and in the clothing “industry”; in the case of Brazil, it seems to be limited to one single sector of activity, although we can also find some of these immigrants working as street vendors and in other activities. We can also say that in Argentina public presence, local associations working on employment issues, illegality and unsatisfactory inclusion of Bolivians in the capital city seem to be more significant than the associations for protection and/or mobilization seen in São Paulo.

Conclusion

We found based on our research confirmation of similar elements in working conditions in the clothing sector labour market segment in the two metropolitan regions – São Paulo and Buenos Aires. On the other hand, production globalization together with the metropolisation of Bolivian immigration in the two countries seem to orientate these migratory flows of low income populations. Also, it seems very significant from the point of view of experience of the agents, working and living conditions are mixed as well as the conditions of lack of citizenship and rights. In the two national contexts and their migratory standards, the importance of the gender differences to the access to better working conditions is confirmed, as well as the lack of choice, especially in the case of not only informal but illegal workers who have no documentation.

We also outline some differences: in Brazil, the differences between the immigrants’ life and work conditions, their individual horizons result mainly from characteristics such as gender, family, their time of life as well as the country’s economic situation. In Brazil, to obtain better working conditions, you must work with
Brazilians outside the restricted clothing jobs that accommodate illegal workers; or move from the clothing sector to individually fight for survival through an activity such as collecting and recycling, taking into account the restricted sectors where low income Bolivians can include themselves. In Argentina, beside these elements, it is their ability to go further the limits of “subordination” imposed by illegal situations, mobilizing to obtain rights through access to employment – which is possible in the context of an older immigration story mixed with the social movement’s organisations that survived particularly in Buenos Aires. Greater institutionalization of the fight – through associations and district meetings, cooperatives and other cultural and identity organizations, which, by the way, seem to witness a different level of “participative democracy” and expression of workers in general – is the fabric that enables a greater visibility of a group which is confused partially with other indigenous ethnicities from some Argentine regions. As well as focusing and give voice to these claims, Bolivians’ identity discourse built in Argentina is legitimate and has as base the claim of its acknowledgement as workers and possible citizens.

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