

## Activism among female migrant domestic workers: a qualitative study in southern Spain

### El activismo en las migrantes trabajadoras del hogar: estudio cualitativo en el sur de España

Juan C. Aceros<sup>a\*</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2707-5419>  
 Tatiana Duque<sup>b</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9204-1691>  
 Virginia Paloma<sup>b</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0707-1982>

<sup>a</sup> Universidad Industrial de Santander, Escuela de Trabajo Social, Bucaramanga, Colombia, e-mail: [jacerosg@uis.edu.co](mailto:jacerosg@uis.edu.co)

<sup>b</sup> Universidad de Sevilla, Departamento de Psicología Social, Sevilla, Spain, e-mail: [wenducmor@alum.us.es](mailto:wenducmor@alum.us.es), [vpaloma@us.es](mailto:vpaloma@us.es)

#### Abstract

Domestic work is an oppressive occupational niche for migrant women. The strategies domestic workers employ to resist this situation have been scarcely studied. This paper is interested in their activism. Through a qualitative study in southern Spain, the meaning of such socio-political action for migrant women is explored. In the spring of 2020, eleven activists from the Seville Association of Domestic Workers were interviewed. The material was subjected to content analysis. The meanings associated with their activism were grouped into four categories: (1) the horizon of “struggle”, (2) the forms of “struggle”, (3) the levels of involvement, and (4) the challenges of activism. The results are limited to a historically recent case, and to a small sample chosen purposively; however, they contribute to the understanding of migrant women’s agency, and open fields of reflection for domestic workers’ organizations.

Keywords: activism, political behavior, migrants, oppression, domestic workers.

#### Resumen

El trabajo del hogar es un nicho ocupacional opresivo para las mujeres migrantes. Las estrategias que emplean para resistir esta situación han sido poco estudiadas. Este trabajo se interesa por su activismo. Mediante un estudio cualitativo en el sur de España se explora el sentido de dicha acción sociopolítica para las mujeres migrantes. En la primavera de 2020 se entrevistó a once activistas de la Asociación de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores del Hogar de Sevilla. El material se sometió a análisis de contenido. Los significados asociados a su activismo fueron agrupados en cuatro categorías: (1) el horizonte de *lucha*, (2) las formas de *lucha*, (3) los niveles de implicación y (4) los retos. Los resultados se limitan a un caso históricamente reciente, y a una muestra pequeña elegida

Received on August 6, 2022.

Accepted on February 24, 2023.

Published on March 6, 2023.

\*Corresponding author: Juan C. Aceros.  
 E-mail: [jacerosg@uis.edu.co](mailto:jacerosg@uis.edu.co)

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:  
 SPANISH.



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CITATION: Aceros, J. C., Duque, T. & Paloma, V. (2023). El activismo en las migrantes trabajadoras del hogar: estudio cualitativo en el sur de España [Activism among female migrant domestic workers: a qualitative study in southern Spain]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 24, e116. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2305116>

propositivamente; sin embargo, aportan a la comprensión de la agencia de las migrantes, y abre campos de reflexión para las organizaciones de trabajadoras del hogar.

Palabras clave: activismo, conducta política, migrantes, opresión, trabajadoras del hogar.

## Introduction

Spain has received an increasing number of migrants in recent decades. At the beginning of 2022, there were more than five million foreigners registered in the country (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n. d), and approximately 50% were women. Although the majority came from European countries, they were often migrants from Africa and Latin America (Observatorio Argos et al., 2018). Different authors have noted that for these women, the search for a better economic situation has been the main reason for migrating (Benencia, 2014; Molpeceres Álvarez, 2012). However, in the labor market, they are discriminated against because of their gender, origin and administrative situation (Pérez Orozco & López Gil, 2011). Consequently, their access to work is limited. While migrant men can find a position in a variety of occupational niches (informal, low-skilled and precarious), for women, domestic work is one of the few possibilities to integrate into the labor market (Escrivá & Vianello, 2016).

In the domestic work sector, migrant women experience highly unbalanced employment relationships in terms of power (Magliano et al., 2016). Employers represent the majority culture and have better socioeconomic, professional and legal conditions than do employees (Ayalon et al., 2008). Furthermore, their behavior is subject to limited control by authorities (Ahonen et al., 2010). The workers come from developing countries, have little knowledge of the local culture, language and legal system (Ayalon et al., 2008; Rajiman et al., 2003), lack support networks (Loveband, 2004) and are poorly unionized (Madhumathi, 2013). The result is high vulnerability to exploitation, isolation, harsh living and working conditions, discrimination and violence (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, 2018; Ahonen et al., 2010; Alexanian et al., 2015; Martínez-Pizarro, 2011). The literature has reported the pernicious effects this has on the health and well-being of migrant women (Ayalon & Green, 2015; Hall et al., 2019; Lau et al., 2009; Vahabi et al., 2018).

Little is known about the strategies that migrant domestic workers use to cope with the oppression they experience in their work relationships. Some studies document individual coping strategies, such as escaping from the workplace (Loveband, 2004), resting, praying or reading the Bible (Van der Ham et al., 2014), watching their diet or playing sports (Dutta et al., 2018). Álvarez Veinguer (2008) described the “performative resistance” of some workers who refuse to wear a uniform or who carry out their work slowly. Few studies have reported collective actions that can be a source of social change. This fact reinforces the image that migrant women are submissive and traditionalist “third world” women (Contreras Hernandez & Alcaide Lozano, 2021; Garrido Muñoz de Arenillas & Cubero Pajares, 2019).

This study investigates the activism of migrant domestic workers in southern Spain. Activism is a liberating behavior through which political causes are defended (Klar & Kasser, 2009) and changes are sought to eradicate oppression and build a more just society (Watts et al., 2003). People engage in this type of behavior when they become

aware of oppression and develop a sense of agency (Watts et al., 2011). The sense of agency corresponds to “sociopolitical control”, defined as the feeling of having the ability to “successfully intervene upon the world, and includes concepts such as perceived control, self-efficacy, and perceived competence” (Wilke & Speer, 2011, p. 973). In some studies, it has been defined as the belief that social and political change can occur (Watts et al., 2011). The development of a sense of agency occurs in settings in which people can participate effectively and in which their sociopolitical involvement is encouraged (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Social organizations, including associations and unions, can promote the development of a sense of agency and its crystallization through different forms of activism. In different parts of the world, migrant domestic workers have created these groups, showing that they are not passive in the face of oppression and that they can act decisively and collectively to transform their situation (see Goldsmith, 2007). This occurs despite the multiple difficulties they face in participating and organizing politically (International Labour Office, 2013). The effervescence of this phenomenon has led some authors to approach the activism of domestic workers in Asian (Lai, 2010; Ogaya, 2004), Latin American (Goldsmith, 2007; Magliano, 2018; Magliano et al., 2016) and European countries (Fulladosa, 2015; Fulladosa-Leal, 2013).

In the Spanish context, Fulladosa-Leal (2013) and Fulladosa (2015) have studied the unionization of migrant domestic workers. According to the author, women are involved in organizational processes driven by previous experiences of mobilization. Unionization offers them opportunities to exchange information, build memberships, and create projects that meet their needs. Similar results have been found in studies carried out in Madrid (Draper, 2018) and Seville (Aceros et al., 2021). These studies report challenges related, for example, to the reconciliation of union, work and family life (Fulladosa-Leal, 2013), the role of care in activism (Draper, 2018), conflictive relationships between organizations and burnout<sup>1</sup> experienced by some women (Aceros et al., 2021).

Although the activism of migrant domestic workers has begun to attract the attention of researchers, thus far, not enough attention has been given to the way in which women themselves understand their sociopolitical action. Thus, through a qualitative study carried out in southern Spain, we sought to answer the following question: How do migrant domestic workers perceive their activism? Specifically, we sought to understand how they define activism, what type of behaviors it involves, what levels of involvement are required, and what challenges are posed.

These results of this study are derived from the information provided by a small sample of activists linked to a historically recent organization; however, this study contributes to an emerging field interested in migrants as active agents with the capacity to transform oppressive conditions in host societies (Magliano et al., 2016; Martinez-Damia et al., 2023; Marzana et al., 2020; Paloma et al., 2018). In this way, it contributes to the so-called “approximation of the autonomy of migration” (Mezzadra, 2022), which emphasizes the sense of agency and activism of migrants as the engine of new spaces of citizenship that transform structures of domination in host societies. Additionally, this work can offer domestic workers’ organizations stimuli to reflect on their own actions, with a view to strengthening their initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Burnout is understood as a condition of fatigue and debilitating irritability of a chronic nature that threatens the vocational persistence of people (Gorski, 2015).

The structure of this article is as follows. In the “Method” section, the research context and the way in which the field work was developed are described. In addition, the women who participated in the study are presented, and the selection procedures, interview process, and story analysis are described. In the “Results and discussion” section, the main themes identified in the data are presented, described and contrasted with the literature: (1) the *struggle* horizon, (2) the forms of *struggle*, (3) the levels of involvement and (4) the challenges. Each theme is supported by excerpts from the interviews carried out. The “Conclusions” section summarizes the main findings and mentions limitations and contributions of the study.

## Method

### *Research context*

Spain (along with other European countries such as France and Italy) is one of the largest employers of migrant women in the domestic and care sector (International Labour Office, 2013). The demand for foreign labor increased in this country after internal emigration could no longer support the sector in the 1960s (Iglesias et al., 2015; Zarco-Martín et al., 2002). The organizing and activism experiences of domestic workers began two decades later. In 1985, the first Assembly of Homeworkers in Spain was held in Barcelona. A year later, the Association of Domestic Workers of Bizkaia was created to demand a regulation that recognized fair conditions for domestic work (Fulladosa, 2015). Along the same lines, organizations have been created in Madrid, Catalonia, Navarra, Galicia and Andalusia (Draper, 2018). Migrant women are highly active in these organizations, which provide them with spaces for meeting, counseling, training, cultural expression and labor activism.

This study was carried out with the help of the Seville Domestic Workers Association (ATHS, Asociación de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores del Hogar de Sevilla). This is the only existing organization in the capital of Andalusia with the aim of improving the situation of domestic workers. On its social networks, it defines itself as “a group of women domestic workers in Seville who, after fighting against unworthy wages and working conditions, have decided to put aside the silence and raise our voices to fight for our rights”. The association emerged from a process promoted by two social organizations that serve the migrant population in Seville. In 2010, a series of meetings between migrant domestic workers and professionals from the organizations led women to reflect on their situation and make the decision to self-organize.

Initially, migrant workers formed an informal collective, but in 2012, they formed an association. Since then, they have been occupying increasingly relevant positions in a local context where there are no domestic workers’ unions and where workers’ organizations show little interest in defending the rights of this group (Garrido, 2018). Currently, the ATHS is an independent sociopolitical actor integrated into local and national coalitions that seek better

living and working conditions for domestic workers. It is part of the Seville Home Employment Platform, along with other social organizations, and maintains close relationships and collaborates with other groups of migrant women at the regional and state levels with whom it shares common interests, concerns and struggles.

The ATHS has more than 100 associates, all of whom are migrants from Latin American countries. This participation has been constant since the formation of the group, corresponding to a general trend in Spain, where the involvement of Latin American women in household work is very substantial. Indeed, the cultural proximity and social beliefs that describe these women as “ideal workers” have allowed them to easily integrate into this labor sector (Escrivá & Vianello, 2016). The organization is managed completely and voluntarily by its associates, who meet periodically as an assembly to make decisions. A board of directors, democratically elected by the rank and file, determines the strategic direction of the organization and acts as spokespersons before authorities.

To carry out the research, the project was presented to the ATHS board of directors in the winter of 2019. Once approval was obtained, two authors of this work—a man and a woman of Latin American origin—attended various organization activities for three months. In this way, a relationship of mutual trust was established that favored the subsequent development of the research in the midst of the health emergency generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which began shortly after the start of the study.

### *Participants*

In early 2020, potential participants were contacted. Using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2014), a small but heterogeneous group of women was intentionally selected. The participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be migrant domestic workers; (2) live in Andalusia; (3) be or have been members of the ATHS; and, (4) self-identify as activists. To assess compliance with these criteria, the candidates completed a sociodemographic questionnaire and an activist identity measure (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Women who met the criteria were sent a project summary and an informed consent form. An interview was scheduled with those who agreed to participate.

Eleven women aged between 36 and 59 years were interviewed (see Table 1). Five were Peruvian, two were Colombian, and the others were from Ecuador, Paraguay, Nicaragua, and Honduras. All had obtained Spanish nationality, except for one, who had a work permit. The participants had been domestic workers for most of their stay in Spain. None were engaged in this activity in their country of origin; however, two had limited experience during childhood. At the time of the interview, two participants were working outside the sector (but did not rule out returning

to it in the near future), one was unemployed, and the other was on sick leave. The others performed domestic work in different regimes. The women had between 1 and 8 years in the ATHS: three of them were part of the board of directors, six were active collaborators, and two were no longer part of the association but had been activists in the near past. None of the participants had been activists before arriving in Spain. Some mentioned having participated in grassroots groups or indicated that their ancestors were community or union leaders.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants**

Participant*	Nationality	Educational level	Age	Years in Spain	Labor regime**
Carmen	Paraguay	Technical studies	52	17	Live-in
Tatiana	Peru	University degree	45	13	Hourly
Rosenda	Peru	University degree	36	13	Outside the sector
Andrea	Peru	Higher secondary education	40	17	Hourly
Gabriela	Peru	Technical studies	47	10	Hourly
Aguapanela	Colombia	Technical studies	55	29	Unemployed
Penny	Ecuador	Higher secondary education	56	23	Outside the sector
Susana	Peru	University degree	56	22	Live-in
Doris	Nicaragua	University degree	39	3	Live-in
Mencha	Colombia	Primary education	59	13	Live-in
Patricia	Honduras	Technical studies	53	16	On leave

\* The names used in the table and throughout the article are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees.

\*\* Live-in workers reside at the address where they work. Hourly workers work discontinuously in various homes. The interviewees outside the sector work in other occupational niches other than domestic work. The unemployed interviewee had lost her job in the domestic work sector. The interviewee on leave is medically unable to work.

### *Methods and techniques*

Semistructured interviews were carried out with each participant. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. A preestablished but flexible protocol was followed that included questions about work experiences in Spain, the meaning of participation in the ATHS, the perceived characteristics of their activism, and the effects of this activity on their life. For the purposes of this article, the data on the perception that women had of their participation and activism in the ATHS were taken into account.

Data collection coincided with the mobility restrictions decreed in Spain against SARS-CoV-2. Therefore, two interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the others were conducted online, using the preferred platforms of the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two authors, both with qualitative research experience, analyzed the data. To identify patterns, conventional qualitative content analysis procedures were used (Cáceres, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which supposes an inductive approach to the data.

The analysis began with open coding, dividing the transcripts into units that reflected the meanings that the participants associated with activism. With the help of a computerized template, the coded excerpts were grouped, which facilitated their repeated rereading. Next, emerging categories were generated. For this, cross-mentions of the codes were identified in the excerpts, and they were graphed manually with the help of the yEd Graph Editor 3.21 program. The analysts held regular meetings to adjust the coding and categorization processes, resolve differences, and jointly review the data. The interpretations that emerged throughout the process were recorded in memoranda that served as the basis for drafting the results presented here.

## Results and discussion

The meanings associated with the activism of migrant domestic workers have been grouped into four themes (see Table 2): (1) The *struggle* horizon (equalization of rights, social recognition of domestic work, and recognition of the agency of migrant women), (2) the forms of *struggle* (*daily struggle*, care-based struggle and political struggle), (3) the levels of involvement (low, medium, and high) and (4) the challenges of activism (formation of the basis of the organization, family and work conciliation, and exhaustion of the leaders). These topics are presented below, accompanied by excerpts from the interviews.

### *The struggle horizon*

The participating women understand activism as a form of *struggle*. This term is common in other studies on the subject (Draper, 2018; Fulladosa-Leal, 2013; Magliano et al., 2016). Activism is presented as the involvement of migrants in a conflictive field in which they confront other groups while seeking a certain social change. The interviewees suggest that this “struggle” is distinguished by its horizon and by the forms through which it is expressed. In relation to the *struggle horizon*, three subthemes appear in the data: (1) the equalization of rights, (2) the social recognition of domestic work and (3) the recognition of the collective agency of migrant women.

Regarding the first subtopic, the interviewees draw attention to various comparative disadvantages that they experience in the workplace. However, above all, they project a future in which these are alleviated or eradicated thanks to political action. Here, the search for *equal rights* involves a struggle between domestic workers and the authorities. Both the protection of acquired rights and the reform and establishment of a legal system favorable to domestic workers are demanded from these latter

actors. In this sense, the activists demand changes in immigration regulations (for example, seeking “legalization now” for their undocumented partners) and labor laws. These latter claims predominate and are insistently linked to the ratification of Convention 189 of the International Labour Organization (ILO). In this regard, one of the interviewees says:

We must fight for our ratification. The ILO tells us that we have to have this decent, paid job, with all the rights (...) My struggle and all my energy, right now, is focused in fighting with them so that this work is recognized, respected with all legal rights. (Andrea)

**Table 2. Meanings of the activism of migrant domestic workers**

Categories	Subcategories	Definition
<i>Struggle horizon</i>	Equalization of rights	Achievement of rights for domestic workers that are assimilable to decent work
	Social recognition of household work	Publicly highlight the social and economic value of domestic work
	Recognition of the collective agency of migrant women	Position domestic workers as legitimate sociopolitical agents with their own voice on the political scene
<i>Forms of struggle</i>	<i>Daily struggle</i>	Claiming rights in the context of daily negotiations with employers
	Care-based Struggle	Mobilization of personal and organizational resources to help other migrant women and meet their needs
	Political struggle	Collective action to denounce abuses and demand regulatory changes favorable to the interests of domestic workers
<i>Levels of involvement</i>	Low	Level in which efforts to share with others what has been learned about labor rights and attract new participants to the association predominate
	Medium	Level in which the use of part of the free time in voluntary work predominates, including sporadic participation in collective actions
	High	Level at which women direct the activities of the association and actively participate in its execution, in various settings
<i>Challenges</i>	Formation of the basis of the organization	Overcome misinformation and promote empowerment, educating migrant women on their labor and migration rights
	Family and work conciliation	Overcome the lack of time experienced by domestic workers and use that time for activism, without affecting work activity and family life
	Leader exhaustion	Persistent physical and emotional fatigue that negatively affects the well-being of activists

The relationship between the activism of migrant domestic workers and their self-recognition as bearers of rights has already been previously identified by authors such as Magliano (2018) and Duque et al. (2022). As seen in the previous excerpt, such a thing materializes not only in a normative claim but also in a search for the “dignity” of work. The aim is to reverse the consideration of household work as a second-class activity (see Fulladosa-Leal, 2013; Stefoni E., 2009) to restore its nature of “decent work”. In this regard, an interviewee asserts:

(...) There are people [who say]: “this one deserves all the rights; [on the other hand] because [someone] is a domestic worker, she does not have the right to that”. Yes, she does! Of course, she does! Because it is a decent job, very dignified, like anyone else (...), and she deserves all the rights. (Doris)

As part of this dignification effort, the activists mention the second subtopic: *social recognition of their work activity*. The interviewees understand that domestic work is “made invisible”, as mentioned by different authors (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, 2018; Ahonen et al., 2010), and that this situation perpetuates the informality and precariousness of their work (Magliano, 2018). In response to this situation, the activists seek for their work—traditionally located in the private sphere of the home—to become a matter of public interest. In this way, not only they but society in general can perceive what their work contributes to sustaining life and the economy (Draper, 2018; Pérez Orozco & López Gil, 2011). The struggle horizon in this case places domestic workers in dialog with members of the host society and, especially, with employers. However, it also supposes effort within the same group of domestic workers to convince them of the value of their own occupation.

The third subtopic identified is *recognition of the collective agency of migrants*. In this regard, two scenarios for activism can be discerned. The first is the context of political decision-making, in which not only the equalization of rights is sought but also the positioning of the ATHS as an actor with the authority to speak on behalf of domestic workers. The second is the organizational context in which ATHS participates and that, on occasion, is the source of struggle for the recognition of domestic workers as autonomous social agents. Indeed, domestic workers are often not recognized by other groups, especially unions, as valid interlocutors and agents of change. Some participants refer to attempts by other organizations to speak on behalf of domestic workers (ignoring their ability to have their “own voice”), to exploit their support for political purposes or to appropriate their historical achievements. Thus, the ATHS sees itself in constant need to ensuring its position as a collective agent, both before the authorities and before other entities present in the local and national social scenarios.

### *Forms of struggle*

To advance toward their struggle horizon, migrants carry out different individual and collective actions. Here, they are grouped into three modalities: the *daily struggle*, the care-based struggle and the political struggle. The data indicate that women, after training in the organization, have the knowledge to transform the conditions of their work in different contexts. The *daily struggle* places this claim in the interaction with employers. In this regard, an interviewee states:

With all the education that we all deserve, I, for example, confront the employer and tell them that these are not the conditions, that I do not agree with it and that they should know this, right? For example, I am not willing to sacrifice my life and my health for such a job. (Penny)

Labor relations in which domestic workers participate are usually established through verbal agreements established in a private context (Canevaro, 2009; Goldsmith, 2007). For the establishment of such agreements, migrant women are at a disadvantage and depend on the personal resources they have to negotiate with those who request their services (Madhumathi, 2013). Often, the result is a reinforcement of power structures based on race, gender, age and social class (Ceriani et al., 2009; Fish, 2006). However, the data indicate that labor relations can also become a scene of resistance on the part of female workers. Indeed, activism makes it easier for migrant women to oppose unfair agreements in job interviews or during the course of their work. This happens to the surprise of the employers, especially when the latter are unaware of the rights that protect workers or believe that migrants are ignorant of the fact that they should not be working in oppressive conditions.

The *care-based struggle* is related to situations that lead women to seek help from the ATHS. For activists, this implies emotional connections with other women, the vicarious experience of suffering, emotional accompaniment, and the mobilization of resources to satisfy the needs of others. In this regard, the opening of spaces for mutual listening is essential, as one interviewee comments:

I think the most important role we played (...) was listening to the girls because they had a lot to say about how they had spent the week, during that week, the injustices they had done to them, (...) I do not know, listen to them, right? (Aguapanela)

The following excerpt mentions the mobilization of resources that is involved in the care-based struggle:

And from there [after listening to the woman,] I offer her the least I have. A series of resources that is what I can afford through the platform. In addition, then, if I already see that her situation warrants intervention and that it is within my capacity, I can do it. And, other times not: I start crying with her (...). After that, I realize and say, "Well, not everything can be done; not everything can be done". (Tatiana)

Caring for other women experiencing oppression is a part of migrant domestic worker activism. This has been reported by Draper (2018), for whom care is "a form of struggle" (p. 177). The results of the present study suggest that this situation puts into practice the feminist ideal of politicizing the personal or, as stated by Magliano (2018), of defending that the domestic is political. However, they also suggest that activism exposes migrant women to experiencing vicarious trauma (Aceros et al., 2021), as

happens to professionals who assist populations in vulnerable situations. Additionally, the care-based struggle implies that the migrants reproduce in their political activity the role of caregivers that they exercise in their families and jobs. This is consistent with the findings in the study by Osborne et al. (2009), in which the participation of women in groups that help others is seen by participants as a “natural” extension of their gender roles.

Finally, *political struggle* is the form of struggle most prototypically associated with activism: protest and social mobilization. Indeed, the women who participate in the association are regularly involved in collective actions of different kinds, either in the preparation of the materials and food required for protest days, in the collection of signatures during campaigns, or in their presence during rallies and demonstrations. In this regard, an interviewee mentions:

In this type of association, that is what has caught my attention: the constant struggle. If there is any demonstration, I have come forward (...) because we are fully entitled not to be seen as maids but as workers. (Patricia)

The data suggest that political struggle—particularly attending demonstrations—is a source of positive emotions for the participants. Indeed, it is interpreted as an opportunity for emotional “relief”. In addition, for migrant domestic workers—especially those who are in a live-in regime—leaving the employer’s home and participating in organizations such as the ATHS is an important step in their integration and political advocacy in host societies (Ogaya, 2004). In this way, they visibly express their ability to challenge the dominant migration policies, established labor relations and the limitations imposed on them in the exercise of citizenship (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

### *Levels of involvement*

Activism is a demanding behavior that involves significant investments for those who carry it out (Renn & Ozaki, 2010; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). However, this varies depending on the level of involvement that each activist commits to. In this study, it is possible to distinguish low, medium and high levels of participation that correspond to the exercise of specific roles. The *low level* implies that women have already attended training processes and other activities that have familiarized them with the horizon and the forms of struggle of the ATHS. This allows them to act as “informants” and “recruiters” at the service of the cause. In the first sense, migrant women share the knowledge they have learned and advise other migrant women. The following excerpt illustrates this idea:

(...) And I find out and then I communicate this to my acquaintances, [so] they are not fooled. What if [their rights are respected]. Boom! There you go.  
(...) “Who says so?” “Such groups are the ones that support [these claims]”.  
(Gabriela)

Parallel to their work as informants, some women begin to act as “recruiters”, attracting other women to the association and increasing their social base. Because the relational environment of migrants is usually populated by other people of foreign origin (Fernández-Ocón & López-Olvera, 2009), this recruitment effort could explain the exclusive presence of Latin American women in the association as well as the absence of local workers. In addition, although women are attracted to the ATHS mainly through training processes or legal advisory services, they later find space to socialize with other migrants (Aceros et al., 2021).

The action of the recruiters and informants can be seen as an indicator that women are beginning to develop a sense of agency. It supposes an incipient confidence that they can produce changes in the oppressive situations that other people experience, providing them with information and resources to solve their “personal cases” (for example, the unfair dismissal of a friend or family member). This emphasis on “cases” distinguishes the low level of involvement from the other two levels. The sense of agency of the recruits and informants lacks the collective orientation that is appreciated in the “volunteers” and the political sense of the activity carried out by the leaders. In particular, it does not attack the structural conditions that put migrant workers at a disadvantage but rather focuses on alleviating their most visible and immediate consequences.

When the involvement of women transcends this initial level, the execution of roles that go beyond the distribution of information and the recruitment of new partners is appreciated. The *middle level* involves “volunteering”, that is, the unpaid investment of time to support the activities of the association. The following excerpt mentions this form of involvement:

[At first] I gave what I could, right? What I am now trying to get my colleagues to do. In other words, “Look, I’m going to give what I can and when I can and how I want”. Right? In other words, it is a type of volunteering. (Tatiana)

While the informants and recruiters attend the activities of the organization and invite others to do the same, the volunteers make it possible for these activities to take place. They act as caregivers for others, for example, preparing the food that is offered during the training processes. In addition, they contribute to the political struggle, creating posters for the demonstrations, and making decisions in the assemblies. Such contributions vary based on the conditions of each one: women decide how much work they contribute and when and how they do it.

Volunteering is not aimed at solving the individual problems of specific associates but rather at sustaining the association’s agenda. It implies a more collective sense of agency but that unfolds in another familiar and safe context for the migrants: not just their networks of relatives and acquaintances but the ATHS. Their commitment to the organization, however, favors the development of skills that women need to occupy leadership positions and to undertake a more open political struggle. This is in line with what has been mentioned by various studies, i.e., community involvement helps members of oppressed groups acquire new capacities (Paloma et al., 2010; Taurini

et al., 2017) and provides opportunities to climb socially and exercise positions of responsibility (Rajjman et al., 2003; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). For the specific case of migrant domestic workers, Goldsmith (2007) states that their organizations “are political learning spaces where the teachers are the workers themselves by sharing their experiences around organizational models, lobbying strategies and coalitions” (para. 68).

A *high level* of involvement signifies the role of a “leader”. In this case, a sense of agency is fully developed and associated with sociopolitical action (Watts et al., 2003). Thus, women prioritize their activism over other activities and spend an important part of their time not only informing, attracting and collaborating in activities but also assuming responsibilities formally related to the management of the organization, decision-making and representation of the entity on the public stage. Consequently, the time that the leaders invest in the organization is considerably high:

I just do not know what to tell you [about the time I dedicate to the association]. I have put in many hours. More than a job. If I’m working twenty-five hours now, Monday through Friday; well, you can calculate: more or less [I dedicate the same to the association]. (Rosenda)

The leaders carry out the most prototypical political activities of the organization (they are the main protagonists of the *political struggle*): they occupy formal positions on the board of directors; they plan, coordinate and carry out collective actions; and they represent the ATHS before other organizations. Due to the demands that accompany this level of involvement, it is only assumed by a minority of activists: those that one interviewee called the “hard core”.

### *Challenges of activism*

Among ATHS activists, there is differential participation as well as a division of labor between informants and recruiters, volunteers and leaders. The challenges of activism are associated with the level of involvement that each woman in particular assumes. Here, the challenges predominantly emerged in the data: (1) the formation of the basis of the organization, (2) family and work conciliation, and (3) the exhaustion of the leaders.

The *formation of the basis* requires access to relevant information on labor and migration rights. This is the main challenge associated with the initial level of involvement. Indeed, disinformation is one of the factors that hinders the community participation of migrant women (Garrido Muñoz de Arenillas & Cubero Pajares, 2019; Magliano, 2018). Migrant domestic workers are generally unaware of the legal system of the host society (Ayalon et al., 2008; Rajjman et al., 2003), putting them at a disadvantage not only vis-à-vis their employers but also vis-à-vis local domestic workers

(Magliano et al., 2016). Obtaining information about the rights that assist them is a fundamental aspect of the development of their critical consciousness and sense of agency (Aceros et al., 2021). Correspondingly, a fundamental part of ATHS activity consists of organizing workshops on labor and immigration law (in this, it coincides with the efforts of other organizations in other latitudes, see Goldsmith, 2007). The association also offers legal advice that, if it did not exist, would be very difficult for migrant women to access.

*Reconciliation of work and family* appears to be a problem because activism requires a large investment of time, which is often scarce. Importantly, many migrants dedicate themselves to domestic work throughout the day (Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, 2018). Furthermore, while indigenous employees may outsource care tasks in their homes, migrant women tend to undertake them as well (Pérez Orozco & López Gil, 2011). There is then an acute difficulty in reconciling activism, family life, personal life and work, especially for migrant women (Fulladosa-Leal, 2013). The data suggest that for the “volunteers”, this difficulty of reconciliation is a source of frustration. Many of them expose a situation that could be summarized with the following expression: “I want to participate; but I cannot”:

I find it difficult to get more involved. [I have to admit] that I have to get more involved, that I do not get involved enough. (...) It surpasses me, right? I have that desire to fight, to support and that stuff, but it is very sad [not being able to do it]. (Penny)

In an attempt to manage this challenge, the ATHS schedules its main activities on weekends, particularly on Sundays (when women have more free hours). However, this only facilitates reconciliation with work activity while increasing the overlap between the time dedicated to activism and that reserved for family or leisure. In addition, it has effects on the organizational processes of the ATHS. These can only be carried out once a week and sometimes a few times a month, which delays its development and the achievement of its objectives. Finally, it helps the women most committed to the association to accumulate organizational and political responsibilities, assuming those that other people are not in a position or capacity to carry out.

Related to the above is the challenge of *exhaustion of the leaders*. In this regard, sociopolitical activity becomes intrinsically satisfactory for those who are most committed to activism (Pearce & Larson, 2006). In this sense, the interviewees mentioned different positive effects associated with their sociopolitical activity. However, some also reported persistent physical and emotional fatigue. In fact, they expressed feeling “burned out” or close to “exhaustion”. One of the members of the “hard core” said she was so tired that she was thinking of leaving the association, and one of the women who no longer participated in the ATHS claimed to have retired after feeling “burned out”.

In the literature, there is a growing concern about activist *burnout*, and this phenomenon has been identified as a risk, not only for the well-being of activists but also for the sustainability of organizations and social movements (Gorski, 2015, 2019). The data refer to self-care workshops that, in part, address this problem. In fact, for the most committed interviewees, *burnout* is a recurring concern. Some of them stated that it is necessary to prevent burnout by training new leaders who provide greater support to the “hard core”.

## Conclusions

Domestic work is a potentially oppressive occupational niche for women who work in it. The conditions of injustice experienced in this sector can trigger political struggles for domestic workers, especially for those of migrant origin (Magliano, 2018). The latter experience conditions of disadvantage and oppression greater than those experienced by local workers. In addition, they find it difficult to organize politically (Lai, 2010; Madhumathi, 2013). However, they create and manage collectives that give an account of their meaning and agency.

This study has addressed activism as a response of migrant domestic workers to the oppression they experience due to their work and migratory status. Using a qualitative approach, how activist domestic workers perceive their sociopolitical activity and the meanings they express in this regard have been examined. Four themes are highlighted: the activism horizon, its forms, its levels of involvement and its challenges.

The activism of domestic workers is a form of “struggle” for the equalization of rights, the social dignity of work and the recognition of the collective agency of migrant women. All this is part of an agenda that transcends individual coping strategies to oppression and that resists the multiple obstacles that migrants encounter in receiving societies. This finding is closely linked to the concept of “migrant struggles”, which establishes how the migration process involves multiple and heterogeneous struggles against the asymmetric power dynamics established in the host society (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). In this way, migrant women are forced to constantly resist and challenge unfair policies, precarious working conditions, or limitations to exercise full citizenship in the host society. That migrant women dedicate their time and efforts to this sociopolitical action is a sign of their ability to recognize injustice and to act on it, becoming active agents of their own emancipation.

The collective struggle of migrant domestic workers unfolds in diverse contexts that include the workplace, associations, political institutions and society in general. In some cases, this implies increasing the number of places where migrants interact as well as learning new skills. Thus, understanding and monitoring the organizational processes of migrant domestic workers requires an approach that is sensitive to a diversity of contexts of life and *struggle*, to the transition between these contexts and to the different interactions and conflicts that arise in them.

For domestic workers, the expansion of their life contexts and transformative action represents the opportunity to expand their contact with the receiving society, which is especially important in the case of newcomers and live-in workers, who often chronically experience social isolation (Ayalon et al., 2008; Ayalon & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010). For migrant women, becoming activists is not an easy matter. Magliano (2018) documented a process that, over many years, allows migrant women to move from oppression to politicization. It implies, successively, sharing the injustices experienced with other domestic workers, becoming a member of a trade union and actively participating in it. In this work, a similar process was found, associated with a series of roles that migrant women assume as their sense of agency increases.

Becoming *informants* or *recruiters* seems to be facilitated by the educational activities that the association strives to provide. Such activities make it possible to overcome the misinformation that usually characterizes migrant women in their first stage of settlement in Spain. In addition, it encourages their sense of individual agency,

providing tools to undertake a *daily struggle* with their employers. However, promoting commitment to *volunteering* and, above all, *leadership* is more complex. Indeed, the most committed forms of involvement involve challenges such as reconciliation with work and family as well as the prevention and management of burnout. Facing these challenges effectively involves both an acknowledgment of their occurrence and the design and implementation of strategies that, while encouraging a sense of collective agency, protect the interpersonal relationships of migrant women as well as their psychological well-being.

The study presented herein has several limitations. First, it was carried out with a relatively young association compared to more historical organizations in Spain. Other studies could involve organizations with a longer history to explore the experience of activists with longer sociopolitical commitment. Second, the study participants were selected intentionally; therefore, the sample does not provide information on the perceptions of people with other circumstances, for example, migrant women in an irregular situation. Future research should address this gap. Third, although the results suggest the existence of different levels of involvement, it is not possible to determine that they function as a sequential process that all women follow. Longitudinal studies are required to help explore this issue.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study help to understand the agency of migrants and open up fields of reflection for their organizations. In particular, it draws attention to the ability of women workers to combat injustice, using the scarce resources that are often available to them. In relation to this issue, the results suggest the need to design strategies that help them overcome the obstacles they face and that limit their activism. Specifically, three areas of work are derived from the study: (1) the design of training programs that facilitate the appropriation of the knowledge that women need to strengthen themselves (programs that, given the condition of internment experienced by many migrants, could be virtualized, at least partially); (2) the search for strategies to face the conciliation problems experienced by activists (which could go through negotiations with employers and the involvement of families in workers' organizations); and (3) the implementation of strategies to detect, prevent and address possible cases of *burnout* in activists (see, for example, Gorski, 2015).

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#### Juan C. Aceros

Colombian. PhD in social psychology from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. He is currently an associate professor at the School of Social Work of the Universidad Industrial de Santander, Colombia. Research lines: public perception of human trafficking and activism of migrant groups. Recent publication: Duque, T., Aceros, J. C. & Paloma, V. (2022). Sociopolitical development of female migrant domestic workers in Southern Spain: a qualitative study of a pathway against injustice. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.2613>

#### Tatiana Duque

Colombian. Master's degree in international migration from the University of Seville. Master studies in community psychology at the Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia. She is part of the Center for Research and Community Action, University of Seville. Research lines: socio-political development of migrant women, human trafficking. Recent publication: Duque, T., Aceros, J. C. & Paloma, V. (2022). Sociopolitical development of female migrant domestic workers in Southern Spain: a qualitative study of a pathway against injustice. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.2613>

#### Virginia Paloma

Spanish. PhD in Psychology from the University of Seville. She is currently a full professor in the Department of Social Psychology at the University of Seville and directs the Center for Community Research and Action (CESPYD) of the same institution. Research lines: life satisfaction and well-being in migrants and refugees. Recent publication: Garrido, R., Paloma, V., Benítez, I., Skovdal, M., Verelst, A. & Derluyn, I. (2022). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological well-being of migrants and refugees settled in Spain. *Ethnicity & Health*, 28(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2022.2035692>