

BOOK REVIEW

Ultra-Intensity Patriarchy: Care and Gender Violence on the Paraná Tri-Border Area

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This book offers a collection of robust academic contributions to the study of an area that has barely been explored. The tri-border area (“*triple frontera*” in Spanish; “*tríplice fronteira*” in Portuguese) presents a complex object of study because it covers the dynamic intersection of three separate countries: Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, each with its particular social, economic, and political structures, logics, and organizations. The authors propose a feminist approach to analyze the trajectories of Paraguayan women who perform cross-border activities, with particular attention to their overloaded experiences as caregivers. In this review I will first provide an overview of the contents of the book before discussing the key contributions it makes.

The book is structured in three parts, with four chapters each. Part I establishes the multidisciplinary frameworks and resources used to understand the research context. The authors introduce key theories and concepts, including care, gender violence (which includes gender studies), the sexual division of labor, the androcentric worldview, masculine domination/female subordination, discrimination based on sex, border areas with racial and ethnic identities, productive and reproductive overload, and intersectional discrimination. It is through these intersecting rubrics that we approach the territory that the authors study.

Chapter 2 skillfully sets the visual tone for the book with dozens of photographs that provide a visual ethnographic record, highlighting the key differences between the three countries. The illegal activities therein—from small-scale smuggling to the trafficking of drugs and goods—are based mainly on the Paraguayan side.

The term *tri-border area* denotes the geographical location set between three cities: Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Foz de Iguazú (Brazil), and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina). Of the three, Paraguay faces the most challenges, including the highest levels of social and economic inequalities, and the lowest Research and Development investment rate of the region at -0.13% of GDP, compared to a regional average of 0.70%—(Macrofinanzas 2019), which means that Paraguay is generally not included in comparative studies.

After establishing the geographical context, chapter 3 incorporates historiographical analysis to reveal the generalized invisibility of women as actors in Paraguay’s history. This emphasizes the significant role played by subordination and patriarchal oppression since the colonial era, through the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay (1864–70),

and the contemporary reproduction of these roles for Paraguayan women in culture, society, economy, and politics.

The central thesis is that the historical changes in the tri-border area caused it to undergo three key shifts beginning with: a) an increase in levels of patriarchy, which were low prior to colonization where Indigenous peoples' family structures often saw a sharing of power between fathers and mothers; b) to a high level of patriarchy during the colonial and independent period, in which the male/female dichotomy was imposed, situating women within a role of subordination; and c) finally reaching a level of ultra-intensity patriarchy that is present to this day, in which women are placed in a position of complete inferiority within the political, economic, and social structure of Paraguay.

After setting the historical-geographical-theoretical framework, the authors delve into the experiences of women who live, inhabit, and cross the tri-border area. Part II focuses on female border trajectories, drawing on factual and evidence-based research that helps us understand women's roles in this area. The word *trajectories* shapes our understanding of what the authors want to reveal: the overload of care that Paraguayan women have faced and continue to face. Although in the past this was observed through care roles they provided for their families, in the present this is intertwined with their work activities in a cross-border context.

The life stories of thirty Paraguayan women form the basis for two separate ethnographic methodology proposals: the Extended Case Method, focused on observations on conflicting experiences; and the Multi-situated Ethnography, based on interviews for piecing together women's biographies. These powerful testimonies help to illustrate that many families live in conditions characterized by social exclusion and geographical isolation, generally in rural areas. In many cases, there is little access to rights and services, gender violence is widespread, and advances in the agro-industry continually shape the broader context within which inequalities are reproduced. On this last point, Paraguayan governments have been characterized by constantly rejecting taxes on soybean exports (Alborada 2021). The economic effects of these policies led many of the families of the women interviewed to choose, or be forced, to migrate from the small rural districts to Ciudad del Este, the second most populous urban district in Paraguay (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2021).

Chapter 6 specifically analyzes educational exclusion as a risk factor that impacts people's trajectories, particularly in the context of how this affects job opportunities. In Paraguay, access to an education is hindered by the long distances required to travel to and from schools, the insufficiency of teachers in terms of preparation and resources, and a lack of public transport infrastructure. In addition, women are often made responsible for care activities from an early age. These care and productive activities make it impossible for many women and girls to continue studying. In some cases, they are even victimized by sacrificing themselves for their brothers' education (Matos et al. 2015). The disruption of schooling keeps people at a level where they can access only low-wage and often informal jobs, thus putting women at further risk of commercial activities that expose them to different types of violence.

Chapter 7 discusses labor exclusion. Generally, the women interviewed considered commerce to be the most suitable economic subsistence strategy, since it enables them to continue taking responsibility for household chores alongside their work responsibilities (Matos, Conde, and Peixoto 2013). However, this was found to contribute to work overload. In the case of the women interviewed, three spatialized job niches were observed in the tri-border area, characterized by being within illegal circuits:

women who work in a fixed space in Ciudad del Este (as street vendors, and in clothes stores, restaurants, and industry); those who pass through Brazil daily looking for products that can be smuggled into Ciudad del Este; and women who work in a fixed space in Brazil.

Finally, part III demonstrates how the opportunity to work in Brazil, to make daily journeys across the bridge, can have diverse and contradictory effects on women who make the decision to cross. The most important element in this scenario is that they are women. In Paraguay, women suffer several types of violence, and social protection is weak or even nonexistent. In general, they earn less money than men (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2020) and are constantly overwhelmed due to the additional burden of maintaining the household and caring for their relatives and family members.

Thus, the benefit that women obtain crossing over to Brazil is relative, because on the one hand they can earn more than working in Paraguay (even when considering the offloading of home care responsibilities), but on the other hand, they face new types of violence by customers on the streets, mistreatment by employers, and ill treatment crossing the bridge by police officers or military agents. Chapters 9 and 11 draw attention to these situations with the concept of dialectics of care and dialectics of opportunity, to understand the way in which a situation can be both positive and negative at the same time. For example, although access to work can be understood as a “positive” for women if analyzed in the context of family poverty, it can also be understood to be “negative” if they are hurt, mistreated, abused for racial reasons, arrested, or imprisoned at police checkpoints. This nuanced understanding of what changes and opportunities can be considered desirable offers us a rich tool for interrogating the optimism of development discourses in general: perhaps positive outcomes are more elusive than we might believe.

This section will engage in a discussion of other important contributions about Paraguayan women in the Paraná Tri-Border Area. The first is the concept of *ultra-intensity patriarchy* that organizes the social, economic, and political life of Paraguay, and in which contemporary Paraguayan women disproportionately assume the role of caregivers, thus exposing themselves to bio-psychosocial risks. Analyzed from the relationship of male domination and female subordination, different types of violence against women become particularly relevant.

Another contribution is the distinction of the concept of *transborder social protection* from *transnational social protection*. Literature shows that there are push-pull causes to emigrate (Arango 1985), and people are motivated to migrate to obtain resources to provide their families with better living conditions, including access to health care, education, housing, and nutrition, among others. In the case of Paraguayan emigration, the most common destinations tend to be Argentina, the US, Brazil, and Spain, the latter only in the twenty-first century (Galeano Monti 2014). This means that those who can decide to emigrate need sufficient economic resources to do so, placing them within the middle-class stratum at least. In contrast, in the case of Paraguayans working in Brazil, those who move tend to be persons in lower social strata, often characterized by poverty. Here, they can emigrate without as many economic resources because they live on the neighboring border.

Third, the analysis of women’s life trajectories is also a pedagogical accomplishment as this enables readers to understand and empathize with those most marginalized in terms of access to resources and various forms of power. In this context, social protection is self-managed. Paraguayan women, not the Paraguayan state, defend their lives and dignity and create opportunities for their children and for generations to come.

Therefore, although the book focuses on the lived experiences of Paraguayan women, its implications can prove useful guides to public policy decision-making, especially in the design and development of applied policies for gender equality, the elimination of violence, and public policy for the general population.

In terms of education, this book clearly traces the mechanisms through which it is particularly women who come to abandon their studies earlier than men. Most do not finish primary-level education because of their particular family structures, because they start working, and because of the low value they give to education (Saraví 2006; Czarny 2007; Elías and Molinas 2009). In terms of health, it is noteworthy that women find better health care in Brazil than in Paraguay. It is also highlighted that they do not have access to sexual and reproductive education, and are often unaware of how people get pregnant, resulting in unplanned pregnancies, early maternity, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Fundación FOESSA 2016). Therefore, policies aimed at redressing these specific inequalities are provided with the empirical evidence often required to advance significant changes.

Finally, this book invites us to engage in future research on different aspects covered here. Future projects might seek to incorporate Paraguayan researchers. As a Paraguayan reader, I noted several instances in which it becomes apparent that the book studies Paraguay without the involvement of Paraguayan authors or Paraguayan institutions. The agencies and support that helped develop this book come from Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. One explanation could be the institutional lag within the social sciences in Paraguay, especially evident when compared to other countries of the region and the world in general (Ortíz and Galeano 2015). This recommendation is far from a nationalist approach, but rather shares a pragmatic view that familiarity facilitates certain cultural and idiosyncratic understandings that could be practical when it comes to interpretation. Fortunately, in recent decades, excellent gender studies have been developed by Paraguayan institutions and researchers.

Ultra-Intensity Patriarchy: Care and Gender Violence on the Paraná Tri-Border Area leaves us with the clear sense that women in Paraguay experience several layers of discrimination that are intertwined with and characterized by multiple forms of violence. Thus, we are offered up-to-date and innovative information on the historical and geographical emergence of these gendered experiences of transborder mobility, a contribution whose applications are potentially far-reaching, from pedagogy to policy. From the perspective of social exclusion and intersectionality, the book illustrates the multiple vulnerabilities imposed on Paraguayan women: racism and discrimination in neighboring countries; gender inequality and sexism; overload in care work involving children, feeding the family, and maintaining the home; and different types of violence, including state violence. Crucially, the rich analysis of the life trajectories of Paraguayan women enables us to grasp how much suffering women in this region of Paraguay experience, and this is arguably a first step toward making the changes that can significantly alleviate this suffering.

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