

BUENOS AIRES, Jun 24, 2011 - Although Argentina's immigration law is regarded as one of the most progressive in Latin America, xenophobia and discrimination persist, showing that progress is still more theoretical than practical.

Discrimination against foreigners, which cannot be eradicated by words on paper, is experienced by thousands of immigrants in government offices, streets, workplaces, schools and hospitals in Argentina, in spite of the law that recognises everyone's right of free access to all public services.

"I often go by the hospital, and it's full of Peruvians and Paraguayans taking the place of Argentines," a woman who says she can recognise "the accents" of patients attending the state hospital in San Isidro, in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, just by walking past the door, comments to IPS.

Sociologist Corina Rodríguez, of the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Public Policy (CIEPP), reports another such phrase from a taxi driver, that she recorded for her study: "Bloody blacks, why don't they go back to their own country?" The racist slur refers to the darker skin of indigenous or mixed ancestry Bolivians, Paraguayans and Peruvians, compared to that of many Argentines.

Rodríguez is the author of an as yet unpublished study on immigration of Paraguayan women to Argentina to work as domestics and caretakers of children and the elderly, a dynamic that she places in the context of "global care chains."

Her research is part of a U.N. Women project that is also analysing the "global care chains" among Ecuadorian and Bolivian women immigrants in Spain, Peruvians in Chile and Nicaraguans in Costa Rica.

In Latin America, women migrants rose from 44.7 percent of the total in 1960 to 50.5 percent in 2000. The feminisation of migration has increased sharply since the 1990s due to economic crises in migrants' countries of origin.

Rodríguez says the globalisation of care work is inherently unfair, because the rights of those who migrate are violated, as well as those of the people who take on the family caring roles left behind by the departing migrants.

The mainly unskilled women who go abroad in search of better employment opportunities tend to leave children behind in the care of grandparents or other relatives, to take jobs in middle and upper class homes where they often end up raising other people's children.

Immigrant women mainly find jobs in domestic work. In Argentina, 58 percent of Paraguayan women are employed as domestics, and in spite of having responsibility for a family (their employer's), an institution that is highly valued in this country, they often suffer discrimination.

In her article, Rodríguez says the new migration legislation "is progressive" and has "expanded human rights," but warns that "cultural hurdles" still block access to health and education, due to bureaucratic "inertia."

"Xenophobia and discrimination are still a tangible reality in Argentina," the sociologist says. "Equal rights for immigrants are not always welcomed by Argentines."

For her study, Rodríguez carried out a large number of interviews with immigrant women employed in housework and the care of children and the elderly. She also interviewed their employers, civil servants and representatives of immigrants' associations and human rights organisations.

Some of the employers used discriminatory language, in spite of the fact they might be assumed to be less prejudiced because they chose to employ foreign women to work in their homes.

"Some Paraguayan women are slovenly," said one. "I have had bad experiences with Paraguayan women because they tend to tell lies," said another.

"These stereotypes of characteristics linked to nationalities also crop up in the media, and in the remarks of civil servants and the public in general," Rodríguez told IPS. "They are attitudes that still persist in Argentine society."

These discriminatory practices coexist with Argentina's pioneering reforms in migration law, including a 2004 law revoking previous legislation passed during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, and a programme enabling undocumented foreigners to regularise their residence status.

In an interview with IPS, Luciana Litterio of the National Migration Directorate (DNM) said Argentina was the first Latin American country to pass a law recognising migration as a human right.

"Later Uruguay passed a similar law, taking the Argentine law as a model, and now Ecuador, after its constitutional reform, is working on a law focused on the rights of the individual," she said.

The Argentine legislation guarantees access by immigrants to public health and education services, and eliminates the previous duty of civil servants to report undocumented foreigners.

Meanwhile, the Patria Grande (Great Homeland) Programme - a reference to Venezuelan independence hero Simón Bolívar's term for a united South America - launched in 2006, has allowed over 400,000 immigrants in Argentina to gain temporary residence status by simply producing their national identity document and certifying they have no criminal record. No work contract is required.

However, Pablo Asad, representing the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), a human

rights organisation that provides legal aid for immigrants, says there are still many flaws in the practical application of the law.

According to Asad, some immigrant families have not been able to enrol their children in public schools, while others are rejected at hospitals because they do not have Argentine identity documents, and there is no office where they can report these problems.

He also pointed out that Argentina's migration policy is providing preferential access for immigrants from South American countries by streamlining their immigration procedures, while applying greater restrictions to nationals of other countries like the Dominican Republic or Senegal. (END)

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