

Research Article

Policy making for emotional support: Tackling loneliness in migrant domestic workers

Elaboración de políticas para el apoyo emocional: Abordando la soledad en trabajadoras domésticas migrantes

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Abstract

Introduction: The article delves into the experience of loneliness among migrant women employed as domestic workers in Spain, shedding light on the intersections of gender, race, and migrant status. **Methodology:** Employing a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study conducted 31 in-depth interviews with migrant women working as domestic workers. **Results:** The analysis first demonstrates that the feeling of loneliness is predominantly influenced by the characteristics of the migration process and their subsequent integration into domestic work. Factors exacerbating loneliness include separation from loved ones, the challenging working conditions that limit their leisure time and privacy, and the absence of emotional and social support. Secondly, the results highlight the psychological and physical consequences of loneliness. **Discussion:** The research underscores the importance of implementing social innovation policies to address and alleviate the effects of loneliness on this vulnerable group. It highlights that loneliness is not only an individual emotional experience but also a structural consequence of their living and working conditions.

Conclusion: The study emphasizes the urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate the impact of loneliness on migrant women working as domestic workers in Spain. It acknowledges the intricate interplay of individual and structural factors that influence their overall well-being.

Keywords: loneliness; migrant women; domestic workers; emotions; mental health; labour exploitation; social innovation; grounded theory.

Resumen

Introducción: El artículo profundiza en la experiencia de soledad de las mujeres inmigrantes empleadas como trabajadoras domésticas en España, desde las intersecciones de género, raza y condición migratoria. **Metodología:** Empleando el enfoque de la teoría fundamentada constructivista, se realizaron 31 entrevistas en profundidad con mujeres inmigrantes que trabajan como trabajadoras de hogar. **Resultados:** El análisis demuestra en, primer lugar, que el sentimiento de soledad está influenciado predominantemente por las características del proceso migratorio y su posterior inserción al trabajo doméstico. Los factores que intensifican la soledad se incluyen la separación de sus seres queridos, las difíciles condiciones laborales que limitan su tiempo libre y su privacidad y la ausencia de apoyo emocional y social. En segundo lugar, los resultados resaltan las consecuencias psicológicas y físicas de la soledad. **Discusión:** La investigación subraya la importancia de implementar políticas de innovación social para abordar y aliviar los efectos de la soledad en este grupo vulnerable. Se destaca que la soledad no es sólo una experiencia emocional individual sino también una consecuencia estructural de sus condiciones de vida y de trabajo. **Conclusión:** El estudio enfatiza la necesidad urgente de medidas proactivas para mitigar el impacto de la soledad en las mujeres inmigrantes que trabajan como empleadas domésticas en España. Se reconoce la intrincada interrelación entre factores individuales y estructurales que influyen en su bienestar general.

Palabras clave: soledad; mujeres migrantes; trabajadoras de hogar; emociones; salud mental; explotación laboral; innovación social; teoría fundamentada.

1. Introduction

Labour migration is a global phenomenon that affects millions of people worldwide. According to the latest World Migration Report 2024, an estimated 281 million people were migrants in 2020 (McAuliffe & Ochoa, 2024), of which 169 million were labour migrants in 2019 (International Labour Organization, 2021). Among these workers, 11.5 million were domestic workers in 2015 (Gallotti, 2016), while the global number of domestic workers reached 75.6 million in 2021 (International Labour Organization, 2021). Domestic employment constitutes 2.3% of total global employment, although the significance of this type of work varies by region, being 1% of workers in Europe.

Within this context, migrant women working as domestic workers in developed countries represent a particularly vulnerable group, often facing precarious working conditions, long working hours, and, in virtually all cases, separation from their families and social networks (Parella Rubio, 2003). Loneliness, a profound and complex emotional experience, is a frequent but often invisible consequence of these circumstances (Chan & Qiu, 2011; Ruan & Cheung, 2024; Van Tilburg & Fokkema, 2021).

Above other emotions, loneliness emerges as the most painful and pervasive experience for migrant domestic workers. The transition to live-in domestic work profoundly impacts their lives, as it disrupts their usual social interactions and isolates them from previously active social environments.

This isolation significantly increases their vulnerability to loneliness, which research has consistently linked to a range of psychological issues, including depression and anxiety (Ho et al., 2022). Studies such as those by Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) have highlighted the detrimental effects of loneliness on mental health, emphasizing its role in precipitating depression and other severe psychological conditions. Addressing this issue through innovative public policies focused on social support and community integration is crucial to improving the emotional well-being of these women. Implementing measures that facilitate social interaction and provide psychological support can mitigate the negative impacts of loneliness and enhance their overall quality of life.

The objective of this article is to explore the experience of loneliness among migrant women working as domestic workers in various Spanish cities, highlighting its multifaceted and structural nature. Through the analysis of the underlying causes of this loneliness, the aim is to shed light on this phenomenon and its impact on the lives of migrant women. Additionally, it seeks to stimulate reflection on the need to address migrant loneliness as a matter of social innovation policies, highlighting the challenges and opportunities associated with this perspective.

For this study, grounded theory in its constructivist version was utilized (Charmaz, 2006; 2008), based on intensive interviews conducted with 31 migrant women working as live-in domestic workers in Spain. The analysis revealed that loneliness is largely influenced by the characteristics and conditions the live-in job and the type of relationship they maintain with their relatives, friends and the person they care for, having significant psychological consequences for the migrants. Additionally, an interrelationship was observed between loneliness and other aspects of the migratory experience, such as stress, cultural adaptation, and power dynamics in the workplace.

This article is structured as follows: first, various theoretical approaches defining loneliness both as an individual experience and a social phenomenon are presented; next, the methodology used is described; subsequently, the results of the analysis are presented according to the factors triggering experiences of loneliness and their physical and psychological consequences; and finally, the implications of these results for social innovation policies are discussed and the study's conclusions are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Loneliness: from individual experience to social phenomenon

Loneliness is a complex phenomenon, culturally and socially defined and personally experienced, that has been studied across various disciplines. In this article, the emotions that will be studied are those with a social component, even though they are experienced individually (Ariza, 2016). Therefore, disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology have been chosen to approach the social perspective. The following sections will traverse these disciplinary perspectives on the social aspects of emotions.

From a psychological perspective, loneliness can be described as a profound sense of emptiness and disconnection that permeates one's inner being. It is a sensation of drifting in a sea of people, where despite the physical presence of others, there is a marked emotional isolation that weighs heavily on the soul. Loneliness can manifest as a deep pain in the heart, a yearning for meaningful connection and understanding that seems difficult to achieve, highlighting our innate need for significant relationships and emotional intimacy.

On a personal level, loneliness can evoke feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and a sense of being misunderstood or overlooked by those around us. It can lead to a sense of alienation, a feeling of lack of acceptance, and provoke a profound longing for companionship (Rokach, 2019). The experience of loneliness includes a wide range of emotions, from sadness and despair to longing or hope, and can be configured as a transitory state marked by moments of introspection and self-discovery or as more prolonged periods of intense yearning for connection and belonging (Rokach, 2019).

In social psychology, loneliness is defined as an unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's social network is deficient either quantitatively or qualitatively (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). That is, when there is a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships, resulting in a subjective experience —a person can be alone without feeling lonely or be surrounded by people and feel lonely—, which is painful and unsatisfactory, and is associated with alcoholism, depression, or suicide (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Robert S. Weiss (1973), in his classic work *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, distinguished between emotional loneliness, based on the absence of an attachment figure providing intimate and personal relationships, and social loneliness, based on the lack of social connections or community belonging.

While both types of loneliness are intense emotional experiences, Weiss posited that emotional loneliness is a more painful experience, whereas social loneliness tends to be seen as a mix of rejection or non-acceptance feelings, along with a sense of tedium (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Given the purposes of the present analysis, an additional type, labelled as incidental loneliness (Jylhä, 2004) can be included, which is described as experienced at specific moments after certain events such as changes in social circumstances or personal relationships.

A similar line of thought is resumed by Hawkey and Cacioppo (2010), who define loneliness as a distressing feeling accompanying the perception that one's social needs are not being met through the establishment of social relationships. Loneliness can be understood as a form of perceived social isolation, not objective social isolation. This subjective emotional state occurs when individuals feel disconnected from others, lack meaningful social connections, or perceive a gap between their desired and actual social interactions (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Feelings of loneliness can vary in intensity and duration and can have significant impacts on physical and mental health (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010).

In sociology, loneliness is analysed as a structural phenomenon that reflects and perpetuates social inequalities. Sociological theories highlight how social structures, cultural norms, and public policies can influence individuals' experiences of loneliness. For instance, Durkheim (1987) in his classic study on suicide, addresses anomie and social disconnection as factors contributing to isolation and loneliness. More recent studies have demonstrated that modernity and heightened individualism in contemporary societies increase the risks of experiencing loneliness (Beller & Wagner, 2020; Heu et al., 2019; Swader, 2019).

Anthropology adds another dimension by considering loneliness in the context of cultural practices and the social meanings attributed to loneliness in different communities. Loneliness is not universally perceived in the same way; it varies according to the values, beliefs, and social structures of each culture (de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004). For example, in some cultures, loneliness can be seen as valuable time for introspection and personal growth, while in others it is predominantly perceived as a negative experience.

Cultural influences affect the prevalence and intensity of loneliness, its antecedents, the nature of loneliness itself (Perlman & Peplau, 1981) how it is thought, understood, expressed, and coped with, the protective factors against loneliness, how social relationships and interactions are organized, or the cultural expectations of family support and community networks can affect the experience of loneliness (de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004).

2.1.1. Working and social conditions of migrant domestic workers

Domestic and care work in Spain has been characterized by a broad range of activities within the home. The very conceptualization of domestic work¹, and the fact that it is performed in the quintessential private sphere—the home—has historically hindered the advancement towards equal rights with other workers and the enforcement of regulations progressively established due to the challenging application of control measures (Gorfinkiel et al., 2016). Additionally, the naturalization of care and domestic tasks, the association of domesticity with femininity and reproduction, and the fact that it is an activity often within the informal economy have devalued and depreciated both the work and those who perform it.

In recent decades, Spain has witnessed a significant incorporation of migrant women into the domestic and care work sector. This phenomenon is reflected in the numerical and legislative evolution of the sector, highlighting the prominent role it has acquired in the social organization of care. Since the mid-1990s, with Spain becoming a destination country for female migration, particularly from Latin America, it has been observed that this group has predominantly integrated into domestic service (Díaz Gorfinkiel & Martínez-Buján, 2018).

In this ethnically and gender-segregated labour sector, employment relationships frequently exist without formal work contracts or registration with Social Security. This implies that a high percentage of migrant women face difficulties in regularizing their legal-administrative status. This situation exacerbates the precariousness and vulnerability of those engaged in domestic work, as it relegates them to a limited form of citizenship and prevents them from acquiring certain rights, alongside the constant pressure of the threat of an expulsion order.

In domestic work, both live-in and live-out arrangements, according to Article 9 of Royal Decree 1620/2011 of November 14, which regulates the special labour relationship in domestic service, the maximum working week is 40 hours, with the possibility of agreeing on additional presence times. Live-in workers are entitled to two hours of daily rest for meals, a rest period of 12 hours between working days (which can be reduced to 10 hours), and a weekly rest period of 36 hours.

Despite these regulations, abuses are observed, such as converting presence times into effective working hours, not acknowledging the two daily free hours, not respecting the rest period between working days as many women must attend to the people they care for at night or reducing the weekly rest period. This can lead to a semi-feudal exploitation of domestic workers (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2007).

¹ In this work, we will adopt the definition set out in Royal Decree 1620/2011 of November 14, which regulates the special labour relationship in domestic service. Article 4 defines domestic service as "the services or activities provided for the family household, which may take any of the forms of domestic tasks, as well as the management or care of the household as a whole or parts thereof, the care or attention of family members or those who are part of the domestic or family sphere, and other tasks that are carried out as part of domestic chores, such as childcare, gardening, driving, and other similar activities.

2.2. Intersection of gender, race, and migration in the experience of loneliness

The experience of loneliness among migrant domestic workers cannot be fully understood without considering the intersections of gender, race, and migrant status. These factors intertwine in a complex manner, creating a unique vulnerability for this group of women workers. The intersectional framework, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a useful tool for analysing how these multiple dimensions of identity interact to influence the lives of migrant women.

From a gender perspective, migrant women face specific challenges due to traditional gender roles and expectations. These women are often assigned the primary responsibility of family care, which can lead to profound feelings of guilt and stress when they separate from their loved ones to work abroad. Moreover, the nature of domestic work, which often involves long hours and isolation within employers' homes, exacerbates their loneliness. The lack of time and opportunities to socialize outside the work environment further limits their social support networks (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

Race also plays a crucial role in the experience of loneliness among migrant women. Racial and ethnic discrimination can manifest in various forms, from daily microaggressions to unfair and oppressive labour practices (López Fernández, 2020). Racialized migrant women must contend with negative stereotypes and prejudices that reinforce their social exclusion and subalternity. This structural racism, combined with linguistic and cultural barriers, further hinders their integration into the host society (Collins, 2000; Glenn, 2010).

Moreover, migrant status adds another layer of complexity. Restrictive immigration policies and the limitations they impose on access to full labour rights contribute to the precariousness and vulnerability of migrant domestic workers (Díaz Gorfinkel & Martínez-Buján, 2021). Many of these women work for long periods in the informal economy without access to social protection or basic labour rights. This situation not only negatively impacts their physical and mental well-being but also reinforces their social isolation (Anderson, 2000; Romero, 2002).

The combination of these factors creates an environment in which loneliness becomes an omnipresent and persistent experience for many migrant women. Multiple discrimination based on gender, race, and migrant status not only affects their daily lives but also limits their possibilities of seeking and receiving support through various institutional or informal help networks. Studies have shown that migrant women face higher levels of stress and mental health issues (Ho et al., 2022; van der Ham et al., 2015; Zainal & Barlas, 2022) compared to other groups due to these intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The analysis of migrant domestic workers' discourses will reveal that current policies addressing their welfare largely overlook the critical aspect of the emotional dimension of human beings, failing to acknowledge and address their profound emotional needs. These policies tend to prioritize legal and economic matters, neglecting the significant psychological burden these workers face, particularly the pervasive and painful experience of loneliness. As live-in domestic workers, these women are frequently isolated from social interactions they previously relied on for emotional support.

This isolation is exacerbated by legal regulations, such as migration legislation that restricts migrants from regulating their administrative status despite being employed, and domestic employment legislation that lacks provisions for regulating breaks and the presence times of domestic workers. This gap in policy highlights the pressing need for proactive measures to mitigate the impact of loneliness on migrant women employed as domestic workers in Spain.

It is essential to recognize the intricate interplay of individual and structural factors influencing their overall well-being. Comprehensive policies should be formulated to incorporate emotional support mechanisms, including access to mental health services, community-building initiatives, and social integration programs. Such measures are crucial in fostering a supportive environment that can significantly enhance the quality of life and emotional resilience of these vulnerable workers but essential for the economic and social development of first world countries.

3. Methodology

The research methodology employed for this analysis is that of grounded theory in its constructivist version (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is defined as “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). Constructivist grounded theory is an approach to qualitative research that highlights the collaborative construction of knowledge between researchers and participants, the interpretive comprehension of subjective meanings, and the acknowledgment of diverse social realities. Constructivist grounded theory, as stated by Kathy Charmaz (2000, p. 510),

assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings. This approach involves studying people in their natural settings, focusing on meaning while using grounded theory to further interpretive understanding, and adopting grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory.

According to this definition, the methodological process followed in this research was developed as follows. First, interviews were conducted with 10 migrant women working as domestic workers to inductively study the heuristic potential of emotions within the framework of migration and domestic work.

Once transcribed, they were analysed following the procedure described in constructivist grounded theory, resulting in an initial coding followed by focused coding (Charmaz, 2006, 2008). Once a series of codes and categories, including references to loneliness and its consequences, were identified, theoretical sampling was developed. Theoretical sampling involves producing data to elaborate and refine theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006).

The goal of theoretical sampling is to develop the properties of the categories or the emerging theory, so it does not involve sampling in the classic sense of randomly selecting populations or distributions representative of a specific population. When conducting theoretical sampling, the researcher seeks people, events, or information to illuminate and define the boundaries and relevance of the categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Following these criteria, intensive interviews were conducted with 21 women, which were also transcribed and coded. The interviews were conducted in Granada and Madrid and the participants were contacted in a job centre and a faith-based social centre dedicated to addressing the requirements of immigrants.

The choice of Granada and Madrid as the locations for conducting the interviews was driven by practical considerations as the faith-based social centre involved in this study had branches in both Granada and Madrid, which facilitated access to a diverse group of participants in these locations. The analysis presented below corresponds to several analytical codes related to the situation of loneliness experienced by these women, involving the migration process, their insertion into the labour market as live-in domestic workers, their social and family networks and relationships, and the consequences that the experience of loneliness has for the different interviewees.

3.3. Profile of the participants

The women interviewed for this study were selected considering the criteria of theoretical sampling with the sole requirement that they had at least six months of experience as live-in domestic workers. Regarding the country of origin (see Table 1), we observe that these women come from 12 different countries, mostly Latin American, except for one woman born in Morocco and another in Equatorial Guinea, standing out those from Bolivia with 8 participants and those from Colombia with 4 participants.

Table 1.

Countries of origin of the interviewed women

Country	People
Bolivia	8
Brazil	1
Colombia	4
Ecuador	3
El Salvador	2
Guatemala	2
Equatorial Guinea	1
Honduras	4
Morocco	1
Nicaragua	1
Peru	3
Dominican Republic	1

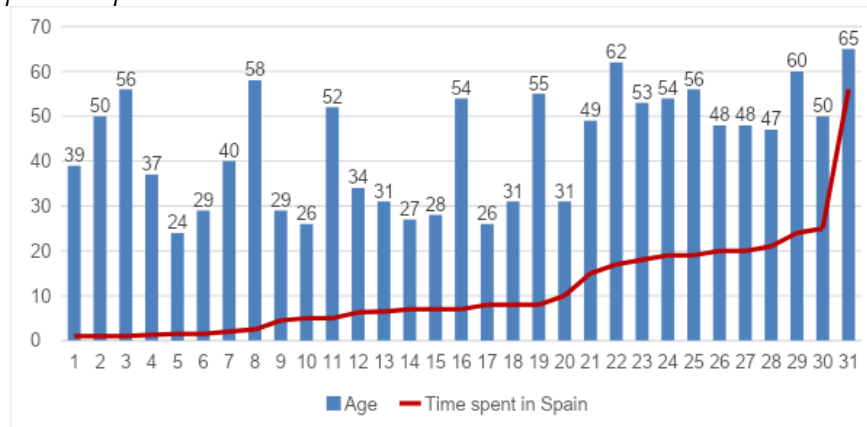
Source: Own elaboration (2024).

In relation to the participants' ages and duration of residence in Spain (refer to Figure 1), the youngest participant is aged 24, while the eldest is 65. The average age of the participants was 43.5 years. The duration of stay in Spain varied among the women, ranging from one year for three participants to 56 years.

It is noteworthy that the case of the participant who has resided for 56 years involves cross-border migration between a Spanish autonomous city and Morocco. This woman has been employed as a domestic worker for various Spanish employers since the age of 9. The average length of residence in Spain was 9.7 years (excluding the 56-year duration of the participant for the calculation of the average).

Figure 1.

Age and time spent in Spain



Source: Own elaboration (2024).

Regarding marital status, 6 women were married, 6 were divorced, 2 were in a cohabiting relationship, 1 was separated, 13 were single, and 3 were widowed. Among the 31 women interviewed, 11 did not have children, 5 had one child, 6 had two children, 6 had three children, and the remaining three women had 4, 5, and 6 children, respectively. In terms of educational attainment, 2 women had qualifications equivalent to vocational training in Spain, 4 had completed primary education, and 2 had incomplete primary education. Additionally, 18 women had completed secondary education, 2 had incomplete secondary education, and 2 women had attained a university degree.

4. Results

4.1. The experience of loneliness: from family to the workplace

The analysis of certain codes derived from the grounded theory process reveals that the loneliness experienced by all migrant women is primarily associated with elements of the migration process, such as family separation and the quality of support networks, as well as to structural factors encompassing working conditions, social relationships (including relatives, friends and the person/people they care for), and characteristics of the host society.

Regarding experiences of family separation due to migration, all the interviewed women² have highlighted the emotional toll of leaving their families: “well, it’s the hardest decision I’ve ever made” (Fabiola, Colombia, 37 years old) and how this separation has evoked feelings of sadness, emptiness, pain, and loneliness. As Claudia narrates, leaving her young children and missing her family in daily life was a heartbreaking experience. Not receiving any salary after working for seven months prevented her from financially helping her family and paying off the debt incurred for the journey:

² The testimonies provided by the participants have been translated from Spanish to English while endeavouring to preserve the intended meaning conveyed by the interviewees, and all names have been replaced with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves to safeguard their anonymity.

Well, I came here, I sold everything I had from the butcher shop because at that time I had no money. My children were young, the youngest was 4 years old, about to turn 5. And well, I came. And when I arrived here, I felt something was missing, I felt empty. I felt very sad for leaving my family. [...] I felt like I left half of my body, that's how I felt, very sad. [...] For my children and because I had problems with my husband at that time. But I'm getting over it. I found a job. It was very difficult in those, in those years; because I found job a week after I arrived with a man who practically exploited me, he didn't pay me 7 months, I worked for him, and he didn't pay me.

Claudia, Bolivia, 53 years old.

The feeling of loneliness, in some specific cases, is not a permanent state or experienced with the same intensity. Like in the previous testimony, Lucía encounters occasions where she longs for her two daughters and reevaluates the objectives of her migration endeavour. On occasion, it is the relatives who persistently encourage the migrant to contemplate a return:

You miss your family a lot, of course, there are days when you say, 'oh, what am I doing here?, for heaven's sake...', but no, in the end, I adapt very easily to things, so, well, it's hard, sometimes you cry at night and you say 'oh...', but mostly because of my dad, right?, because I call him and he still... I call him, 'my daughter, when are you coming back? When are you coming back?'

Lucía, Colombia, 40 years old.

The difference between support provided by acquaintances from the same country or from different countries (compatriots in a broad sense) and support provided by family members is crucial to understanding the loneliness these women experience. Salomé highlights that, despite having acquaintances, the lack of an intimate circle that can provide her with support and comfort exacerbates her feeling of loneliness. For her, compatriots and acquaintances cannot replace family, and no matter how many friends one has, that she misses those "who belong to you" (relatives), those considered part of her intimate circle with whom she has a deep emotional connection:

I've been here for a year, and I've had acquaintances. Do you understand me? And it's not the same, a hug from someone at that moment than from someone who feels like they belong to you. So, that's it.

Salomé, Colombia, 50 years old.

In Ángeles' case, she tearfully pointed out that the migration experience is more complex if there is no family support network to socialize with, to face difficult moments, or to address financial burdens:

There are many people who have family. When you don't have family, it's different. [...] Between siblings and parents, there are always nice things '*compadre* [buddy], let's go,' whatever, right? But if you don't have family, there's no one.

Ángeles, Bolivia, 49 years old.

Considering the above testimonies, it is worth reflecting on the characteristics of social support networks since, at the informal level and based on the evidence found in other interviews, these networks do not usually contribute to meeting and resolving the emotional, social, or material needs of migrant women. In the conducted analysis, those who compose the emotional support networks are typically non-migrant family members (parents, partners, siblings) who, from a distance, try to advise and support migrant women.

Additionally, migrant women often seek assistance from professionals at social centres or job agencies for employment opportunities. The interviews also revealed that faith communities or religious practices, in their diverse forms, serve as fundamental pillars for the emotional well-being of these women. However, accessing these resources is not always possible due to constraints imposed by their work schedules.

Regarding factors related to the characteristics of domestic work itself, due to the conditions set by employers, these women often cannot get off work and socialize. Marta speaks of the overwhelming feeling of confinement and lack of privacy she faces, which reinforces her isolation and loneliness. Even on their days off, she often does not have the opportunity to go out and enjoy her free time meaningfully, further contributing to her feeling of loneliness:

In many places, they don't give you two hours off. You have to be there all day, you go shopping with the person if they can walk; they go and shop, you bring those groceries, and you don't go out again. If the next day they don't have to do anything outside, then you don't go out. You don't go out, you go to your room after lunch, sit there if you want privacy and if not, you stay there with the person or if not, she goes to bed, and that's how it is. But no, no. And the day you go out, you go out. And the day you have off, if it's a Saturday to come back, you go out at 9, come back at 9 at night and that's it, that's it.

Marta, Dominican Republic, 62 years old.

The lack of free time, long working hours, and the constant state of alert to attend to the needs of the family they work for, as described by Sofia, also deepen the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Feeling like a slave, trapped in an environment where her rights are not respected, exacerbates her emotional situation

At first, I saw it that way, as if it was slavery, slavery for the domestic worker, I mean, well, I never complained to her [employer], but according to what I had heard, we did not have the right to be going out if we have a set start and end time. And the live-in girl should not have to, why be outside, if she is a live-in girl she has to be there inside, even if she is not doing anything, one has to be there, watching, waiting for what the children will ask for, what the lady will ask for. I don't know, "go buy me a bottle of wine, bring me a cup of coffee". Whatever. So, it's about being attentive, right? It's about always being attentive to them. It's tough, it's tough because, right? I say, "well, we are slaves, and we are here in this country that is not ours", so my rights, I felt that they were worth nothing here, right? and we feel that way. So yes, it's tough not to go out.

Sofía, El Salvador, 31 years old.

The feeling of loneliness in migrant domestic workers is intensified due to the isolated nature of their work and the lack of a close support network. In some cases, despite living with the family they work for, live-in domestic workers do not feel part of that family, which exacerbates their feeling of isolation. For example, Ruth has never felt like part of the family, even though she has lived with them:

Here, yes, like a bit of loneliness. I've never felt, while I've worked as a live-in, I've never felt, as I say, part of the family, right?

Ruth, Ecuador, 52 years old.

The type of work done with elderly people with notable cultural or generational differences or those with certain cognitive impairments or degenerative diseases intensifies the feeling of loneliness as the workers cannot establish meaningful relationships with the people they care for. Such is the case of Leycan, a 31-year-old Bolivian worker, who cared for a lady with Alzheimer's who didn't communicate. In her job, she wasn't given days off, she only had two hours of rest per day:

The lady was bedridden. She was there. She had to be lifted from the bed to the wheelchair to everywhere with help because she, she didn't speak. [...] And she didn't walk, she had Alzheimer's.

Leycan, Bolivia, 31 years old.

In Fabiola's case, she highlights the hardness of the work as a live-in domestic worker precisely because of the loneliness she experiences when caring for a nonagenarian couple with whom she barely maintains a personal relationship:

But it's hard, hard, hard, the loneliness. This job gives you a lot, a lot of time to think, and you must keep your mind elsewhere, but you're here, I'm sitting there, I think, I plot a lot, I plot a lot, I think a lot.

Fabiola, Colombia, 37 years old.

The experiences of loneliness that migrant domestic workers live stem from both emotional factors linked to family separation and structural factors inherent to their working conditions and the host society. The separation from their loved ones creates a deep emotional void, difficult to fill even with support networks formed.

4.2. Loneliness: invisible consequences of the intimate experience

The intimate experience of loneliness, beyond being a physical condition of being or feeling alone, carries a series of physical and psychological consequences for these women that often go unnoticed but have a profound impact on their mental health and emotional well-being, potentially affecting their quality of life and emotional balance.

Emotional isolation, lack of social support, and lack of emotional connection can generate feelings of sadness and hopelessness, as experienced by Keyla when recalling her loneliness while caring for a woman with senile dementia and physical limitations.

How can I explain? The sacrifice you make is like you, yourself, how do I say this? Psychologically, you get worn out, and that's what I don't want because... [...] And, and I would say, because I didn't feel like eating or anything. It was horrible. And then when I got here [to her current job], I still felt sad, alone, but that's why I'd prefer to be external so I could be more at peace too.

Keyla, Colombia, 24 years old.

The emotional and mental stress resulting from a lack of company and connection with others is evident in Lucía's story. She spent seven months as a live-in caregiver for a woman with dementia, who had suffered a hip fracture and had reduced mobility. She could only occasionally go out on Sundays for two or three hours to visit her brother. She told her employers that she wanted more free time because she began to experience physical symptoms due to psychological stress:

But I told them that it wasn't about the money because, in the end, I was happy with what I was being paid, but it was the time, you know, the time, because I didn't have days off. Sometimes I would go out for a while on Sundays. For a little while, I would go to my brother's place but had to return to where the grandmother was. So that overwhelmed me a lot and with her situation, and when she got like that, at least if I could go out for an hour or two during the day, to distract myself, because you get saturated with so many things. But no, it wasn't easy.

And, and the nights were overwhelming, there was a time when I couldn't sleep, I couldn't sleep, my head hurt so badly, and my hair started to fall out a lot. I had four hairs left, and I used to have a lot of hair. And it fell out in clumps on the pillow, I don't know if it was from sadness or stress or being cooped up, I don't know what it was. I even talked to them. I told them that I was getting sick, I talked to the children, I said that I felt I was getting sick because I wasn't sleeping. I spent the night awake."

Lucía, Colombia, 40 years old.

Lastly, Katherine's testimony, a young Guatemalan woman of 26, reflects the negative impact on physical and mental health of being immersed in a work environment that doesn't allow for a balance between work, self-care, and socializing with others. The lack of time for herself and constant exposure to stress led her to fall seriously ill, prompting her to reflect on the importance of seeking help and finding a balance between her work life and personal well-being.

There was a moment when I got sick, like, seriously, like more than usual. That's when I realized, 'What am I doing?' I reflected, I don't know what hit me, but I reflected then, because of course, I was coming from one job to another job, earning well, not badly, earning well, but then I started to get sick, started getting headaches, couldn't sleep well, had excessive stress, and I said, 'What am I getting from this, a lot of sickness, a lot of things, and the money I'm earning instead of enjoying it, I'm spending it on medicine, for this and that,' because it was one thing after another, I never had a break. So that's when I reflected, 'So what am I doing for myself?' I felt like I was blank because I didn't know where I was going, where I would go.

I think it's hard for us women who work as live-ins to realize that we don't have a life of our own because you're always immersed in your job, and the weekend you go out to a club or wherever because you just want to, 'Oh, I don't want to know anything about anyone, I want to have fun and stuff,' but you never have a moment for yourself, as you said, a space for you, to take care of yourself and all that. Until I got to that point, I was sick for a long time. It wasn't until then that I realized I needed help because I had to turn to someone else to help me.

Katherine, Guatemala, 26 years old.

These examples from the interviews highlight the importance of emotional connection and social support in the mental health and emotional well-being of people experiencing prolonged and unexpected loneliness. The absence of companionship and a lack of an adequate support system to help manage the challenges associated with the migration project and work as a domestic employee can negatively impact mental health, creating a vicious cycle of loneliness and emotional isolation.

Loneliness, understood as an intimate and personal experience that migrant women feel they must keep to themselves to avoid worrying their loved ones, can generate a sense of helplessness when facing difficult situations without any support network to share emotions, thoughts, and concerns. These invisible consequences of loneliness underscore the importance of emotional connection and social support in mental health and emotional well-being. Recognizing and addressing these emotional repercussions of loneliness is essential to promote emotionally healthy personal and work environments.

5. Discussion

The loneliness experiences of migrant women working as domestic workers generate, as Rokach (2019) described, a profound sense of emptiness and disconnection affecting their inner being, manifesting as a form of emotional pain and a yearning for meaningful connection. The causes of this emotional experience are complex and diverse, and this study has revealed at least two groups of factors that generate an *incidental loneliness* (Jylhä, 2004), such as the absence of significant individuals for daily intimacy and the unsatisfactory social relationships that provide a sense of community belonging.

The separation from loved ones following the migration process, coupled with economic and legal challenges in making temporary visits or family reunifications, creates a profound emotional void, difficult to fill even with support networks formed by acquaintances and compatriots (Agudelo-Suárez et al., 2009). This reality prompts reflection on the role of social support networks, both formal and informal, since their size or their composition with other vulnerable subjects limits their effectiveness.

The characteristics of live-in domestic work, often performed without privacy or adequate free time, reinforce their sense of isolation (Anderson, 2000). Moreover, the lack of recognition and respect for labour rights contributes to an increased perception of being trapped in an oppressive and dehumanizing environment (Salazar Parreñas, 2001). Thus, the loneliness of these women is not only an emotional experience but also a structural consequence of their living and working conditions (Sassen, 1998), to which racialized women are particularly subjected.

This loneliness, often invisible, has significant consequences for their mental health, including depression and anxiety (Ho et al., 2022). The challenge of expressing their emotions and worries to loved ones due to geographical distance, coupled with the reluctance to burden their families exacerbates this feeling, generating emotional neglect that informal support networks cannot always effectively mitigate. The loneliness of migrant domestic workers is a profound experience that goes beyond mere physical isolation.

In reflecting on the personal experiences shared by migrant women working as domestic workers in Spain, it becomes apparent that the intersection of race, gender, and migration (Crenshaw, 1989) significantly shapes their experiences of loneliness and social isolation. These women contend with a complex array of challenges arising from entrenched gender norms that saddle them with primary caregiving duties (Collins, 2000), racial and ethnic biases that subject them to harmful stereotypes and prejudices (Glenn, 2010), and restrictive immigration policies that curtail their access to full labour rights and social protections (Díaz Gorfinkiel & Martínez-Buján, 2021).

The structural racism they confront, compounded by cultural barriers and class and gender inequalities, not only exacerbates their social marginalization but also impedes their integration into the host society (Collins, 2000). This convergence of intersecting forms of oppression creates a distinct milieu where loneliness becomes an ever-present and enduring reality for numerous migrant women. It is imperative for social innovation policies to address these intersecting inequalities and offer tailored support that acknowledges and addresses the specific needs of migrant women at the intersection of race, gender, and migration.

In the context we have just presented and based on references to the importance of social workers in employment demand centres and faith communities, innovative community projects could play a fundamental role in mitigating loneliness. Initiatives such as support and listening groups, personalized accompaniment programs, and community activities specific to migrant women could provide a safe and supportive space where women can connect, share their experiences, and develop meaningful relationships (Ryan et al., 2008).

Examples of these initiatives include skill workshops, cultural events, and volunteer programs that not only help reduce loneliness but also foster social integration and empowerment (Baldassar, 2007; McDowell, 2016). In addition, migrant women should have an essential role in the design and implementation of these innovative community projects, enabling them to take ownership of these spaces and ensuring that the initiatives truly address their needs and aspirations.

The consideration of emotions in the realm of policy formulation is a topic that has received little attention in the literature so far (Jasper, 2006; Renshon & Lerner, 2012). However, there are examples that highlight the importance of understanding the role of emotions in political decision-making processes, even in entities considered technocratic and rational, as well as in the construction of institutional identity (Ahmed, 2004; Renshon & Lerner, 2012). There is increasing recognition of the importance of incorporating the emotions of policy recipients as a crucial factor to consider in policy development (Hochschild, 1983).

The implementation of sensitive and just public policies is essential to address the loneliness of migrant women working as domestic workers. This requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of labour, social, and cultural factors (Yeates, 2004). Policies should focus on improving working conditions, ensuring respect for labour rights, and promoting social integration and empowerment, as set out in *The 2030 Agenda* (United Nations, 2015).

Creating community and support spaces can help reduce loneliness and improve the emotional well-being of these women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Therefore, the discussion of these results shows importance of integrating emotional needs into public policies through innovative community initiatives aimed at mitigating loneliness and enhancing the quality of life for migrant women working as domestic workers.

6. Conclusions

The research conducted highlights the complexity of the loneliness experienced by migrant women working as domestic workers, demonstrating that although this issue is individually experienced, it has identifiable structural causes to which these women are offering a biographical solution. The separation from their families is one of the most significant elements contributing to a profound sense of emptiness and sadness, as evidenced by the analysed testimonies.

The working conditions of live-in domestic workers exacerbates their loneliness. The lack of free time, the absence of privacy, and the constant need to be alerted to meet their employers' demands contribute to a sense of isolation and alienation that goes beyond family separation. Furthermore, the nature of their work, especially when caring for people with degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's, limits their opportunities to establish meaningful relationships and find emotional solace in their work environment.

The narratives shared by migrant women working as domestic workers in Spain illuminate the profound impact of intersecting factors of race, gender, and migration on their experiences of loneliness and social isolation. The separation from their families, compounded by the demands of their work and the lack of social support networks, engenders an intense sense of emptiness and disconnection. These women navigate a complex landscape where entrenched gender norms, racial discrimination, and precarious migrant status intersect to shape their lived realities, exerting significant influence on their mental health and overall well-being.

It is imperative that public policies and social initiatives acknowledge and address these intersecting inequalities, dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate loneliness among migrant women. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by these women at the intersections of race, gender, and migration, policymakers can develop more inclusive and effective strategies to mitigate loneliness, promote social integration, and enhance the overall quality of life for migrant women working as domestic workers in Spain.

The existence of support networks composed of compatriots and acquaintances, although valuable, does not substitute for the emotional support provided by a close circle of family members. This lack translates into a deep loneliness that cannot be fully mitigated by interaction with people who do not share a strong emotional bond. The testimonies reflect how, despite the presence of acquaintances, migrant women long for the closeness and comfort that only close family members can provide.

The emotional consequences of loneliness in migrant domestic workers underscore the urgent need for public and community policies that address these issues comprehensively. It is essential to promote initiatives that provide safe and supportive spaces, allowing these women to establish meaningful connections and reduce their isolation. The implementation of sensitive policies that improve their working conditions and promote their social integration will not only enhance their emotional well-being but also contribute to their empowerment and quality of life in host societies.

The discourses of migrant domestic workers highlight a critical oversight in current policies, which fail to address their emotional needs and the profound loneliness they experience, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive reforms that integrate mental health services, community support, and social integration to improve their well-being. The results also highlight the urgent need to address this issue from a public policy and social innovation perspective. Implementing sensitive policies that improve working conditions, ensure respect for the rights of domestic workers, and promote their social integration is crucial. Additionally, it is essential to develop community initiatives that provide safe and supportive spaces for these women, allowing them to establish meaningful connections and reduce their isolation.

In conclusion, the loneliness of migrant domestic workers is a multifaceted phenomenon that requires an integral response addressing both the emotional and structural aspects of their situation. The creation of inclusive public policies and the promotion of innovative community projects are essential steps to improve their well-being and reduce the loneliness they face. This study highlights the importance of considering the emotional experiences of migrant women in developing strategies and policies that seek their integration and well-being in host societies.

7. References

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