

The Impact of Transatlantic Female Migration on Late Colonial Spanish American Society

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Abstract

Throughout the early modern era, female migration from Spain to Spanish America remained numerically marginal, constituting less than a tenth of the flow. Nonetheless, migrating Spanish women, thanks to their Spanish birth, possessed a prominent social role by securing elite families' status in the racialized colonial hierarchy, and by advancing business interests through marriage. At the same time, by the late colonial period, Spanish women of lower status also crossed the Atlantic, going to destinations as Buenos Aires and Caracas – emerging commercial centers, where urban labor was scarce and racial-economic inequality was less entrenched than in an older center as Mexico City.

This paper examines the impact of female transatlantic migration on late colonial society. It addresses two questions: Who were the migrants in terms of their social background and their transatlantic networks? What impact did they have on colonial urban society, especially regarding the preservation of status? I argue that the entry of Spanish-born women into colonial society affected the social significance of markers of status, such as Spanish-birth, purity of blood, or nobility status (*hidalguía*). That social impact depended, among other things, on the social-regional origins of the female migrants, as Basque women possessed an elevated status, compared to Galician and Andalusian women, whose origins did not confer any social prestige.

To address these questions, I examine the regional and social origins of female (and male) migrants in various colonial cities, and variations in the social makeup of

several colonial urban populations in terms of race and class. The evidence largely relies on datasets of female and male migrants collected from church records and censuses located in archives on both sides of the Atlantic. I use Spatial analysis (GIS) to analyze regional origins and migration networks between Spain and the New World.