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Coping practices among Colombian migrants in London

December 2005

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The photographs on the front cover were taken by Cathy McIlwaine.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research provides information on a so-called 'new migrant' group to the UK (which has migrated since 1990 and which is not from the European Union or the Commonwealth), and about which very little is known. Based on qualitative research carried out between July and November 2004 with 30 Colombian migrants living in London, together with 5 workers and representatives from organisations working with the Latin American community in London, the aim of the research was to explore the nature of coping practices or strategies created by Colombian migrants in the city.

The study highlights a series of key findings:

- Colombian migration to the UK reflects the intersection of political and economic factors linked with the long-standing civil war in Colombia together with the economic crisis, itself exacerbated by the conflict. Even if people migrated to find work, their source of income in Colombia had usually been compromised in some way by the armed conflict.
- The UK asylum system is chaotic and inconsistent. Not only did people have to wait up to 8 years to have their claim processed, but those who had fled life-threatening circumstances often had asylum claims turned down, while others with much more distant experiences of civil conflict were granted asylum. This meant that political migrants had started to migrate to the UK illegally. This shows how the division between undocumented migrants and those claiming asylum and refuge is becoming blurred over time, an issue only recently recognised.
- The majority of migrants worked in the low-wage cleaning sector, many illegally, where working conditions were precarious and exploitative.
- De-skilling was widespread; cleaning work represented a dramatic drop in status for many migrants, with only 2 having previously worked in this sector in Colombia. The research found teachers, university lecturers, secretaries and accountants working as cleaners, mainly because of language difficulties, but also because of discrimination on the part of employers.

- Remittances were important, often being a major rationale for remaining in the UK, especially among undocumented migrants. However, because many of the migrants were refugees and had fled with their families, they were less important than among other migrant groups. Also significant was that in some cases, it was found that migrants became impoverished as a result of sending remittances to Colombia, an issue often overlooked in favour of focusing on the poverty-reducing effects of remittances in the source country.
- Support networks were limited, often to helping newly arrived migrants and developing a small social circle of friends who could be trusted, as well as some migrant support organisations.
- There was little unity among the Colombian population linked with a severe lack of trust and widespread fear. This was related to a perceived culture of individualism and materialism, together with anxiety about deportation among those without status, and with the Colombian political situation and the misplaced stereotyping of Colombians with drugs.
- Discrimination was a major problem linked with lack of English language, inability to secure decent work and stereotyping by wider society linked with the drug culture.
- Depression, anxiety and stress were widespread among all migrants, but especially those with no regular status.
- Gender issues also emerged as important, first, in terms of signaling a change in gender roles, relations and ideologies from the home country, and second, because women were generally perceived to cope better than men with settling in London. This was mainly because they were thought to be more likely to be successful in asylum claims, and/or to be more able to access the labour market than men.

The report concludes that Colombian migrants are a critically important group not least because of their integral contribution to the functioning of the London labour market in the cleaning sector. Yet, they experienced widespread abuses through low wages, with few earning much more than the minimum wage, and experiencing a host of exploitative

work practices. In turn, many migrants, both documented and undocumented lived in fear of their jobs, of deportation and in some cases their lives. As a result, the social fabric of this community was particularly fragmented, especially when coupled with the stigma that associates Colombians with drugs.

There are important grounds therefore to recognise both the problems experienced by this migrant population, and to think of ways in which their existence in London, as a valuable migrant community, could be enhanced. This could be done, at least as an initial first step, by addressing two major issues: first, thinking of ways to regularise economic migrants who make an integral contribution to the functioning of the London labour market; and second, to address discrimination in relation to the stereotyping of Colombians with drugs. In both cases, this would go some way towards dealing with the insidious fear that permeates the lives of this migrant group in London.

The report is divided into a series of sections dealing with different aspects of migrant coping. After a background section on the current socio-economic and political situation in Colombia and Colombians in London together with an outline of the research framework and profile of migrants, the report explores first, migration as a coping mechanism in Colombia, together with the nature of arrival and asylum, second, work as a coping mechanism in London, third, support networks, and finally, how migrants negotiate everyday life in London in relation to discrimination and racism.

INTRODUCTION

'It's a country that's given me opportunities. Here there's a lot of respect for human rights, that's what I like best about it, the respect for human rights that gives people opportunities to improve themselves'. Marina, 37 year-old living in Streatham.¹

'It's a tortuous society, it's a society that kills, it's a society that oppresses. I'm here out of necessity, nothing else, because I need to be here'. Ronaldo, 42 year-old living in Upton Park.

These views represent two opposing perspectives by Colombian migrants living in London. Marina, a widow whose husband was killed in the armed conflict in Colombia, is eternally grateful to the United Kingdom for taking her in and giving her asylum, as well as a host of other opportunities for herself and her children, one of whom is disabled. Ronaldo, on the other hand, who is single, had his asylum application rejected despite receiving numerous death threats from the FARC guerrilla. He continues to live and work illegally as a cleaner in a factory in London.

London represents a city of hope, disillusion and ultimately, a source of huge contradictions for its growing Colombian community. Representing approximately half of all Latin Americans living in the UK of which around 75% live in London (Bermúdez Torres, 2003), the Colombian population while relatively small, is growing in significance. Acknowledging the difficulties in estimating the size of the population in light of the unregistered and illegal nature of much Colombian migration, the community is thought to number between 50,000 and 200,000 people and probably around 150,000.² Yet, despite the growth and increasing interest as one of the city's 'new migrant groups',³ little is still known about how the community lives and functions.

This report is based on research carried out between July and November 2004 with 30 Colombian migrants living in London, together with 5 workers and representatives from organisations working with the Latin American community in London. Qualitative in

¹ All the names used in this report are pseudonyms.

² This estimate is based on Bermúdez Torres (2003:5), Open Channels (2000), as well as interviews with several organisations providing services for the Latin American community in London.

³ Usually denoting those who have migrated since 1990 when migration to the UK diversified

nature, and thus interpretative rather than representative, the aim of the research was to explore the nature of livelihood options available to Colombian migrants in the city. This includes not only income-generating activities, but also a host of other mechanisms created to be able to cope with living in London such as support networks, and accessing state benefits. In examining the nature of these coping mechanisms, a broader picture of the nature of the community also emerged.

A. BACKGROUND

The Colombian context: political and socio-economic situation

Colombia is one of South America's oldest and most enduring democracies, as well as being a middle-income economy with rich natural and human resources. However, it is also one of the world's most violent nations in terms of homicide rates; they are three times that in Brazil and Mexico, and 50 times a typical European country (Gaviria, 2000). These rates grew steadily between the 1970s and 1990s to an alarming 89.5 per 100,000 in 1993 (compared with 19.7 in Brazil) (Ayres, 1998). Since then, there has been a decline although conflict has intensified in other ways (Rubio, 2001).

Violence has a long history in Colombia with roots extending back over a century and involving confrontations between the Liberal and Conservative parties, the two principle parties that constituted the central power of Colombia's aristocratic state. Contemporary political violence is closely linked with '*El Bogotazo*' that erupted in 1948 as a response to the assassination of the Liberal politician Jorge Ulcer Gaitán. His popularity related to his identification as the first political figure to protest against the privileges of an unjust social and political system oriented towards the powerful. This insurrection led to widespread violence, resulting in an undeclared civil war known as '*La Violencia*' that cost the lives of some 200,000 Colombians between 1948 and 1958. *La Violencia* led to the displacement of over two million rural peasants and farmers who fled to slums and shantytowns in the major cities or to marginal lands along the country's borders.

Between the 1960s and 1970s, a range of different left-wing guerrilla groups emerged in an attempt to break the power base of the oligarchy. The main ones included the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) and the National Liberation Army, or ELN (*Ejército de*

beyond the Commonwealth and the European Union (Kyambi, 2005).

Liberación Nacional), together with the smaller Popular Liberation Army, or *EPL (Ejército de Liberación Nacional)* and the M-19 (19 April Movement – *Movimiento 19 de Abril*), the latter two no longer functioning (see Loughna, 2003).⁴ Together, in 1997, the FARC and ELN comprised 132 guerrilla groups. There were also around 100 paramilitary organisations fighting against the guerrilla groups, with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC) the best known among them. The paramilitaries, representing the interests of the business community and cattle ranchers, have traditionally been linked with the Colombian armed forces both directly and indirectly. In addition, there are a host of organised crime groups such as the drug cartels, arms traffickers and money-laundering organisations (Ceballos Melguizo, 2001). These armed violence groups have multiplied over time in various ways leading to a burgeoning of different types of daily violence, which on the ground are often interrelated. Also, and significantly, politically motivated conflict has increasingly merged with other types of crime and violence. Increasingly, it is difficult to distinguish between political and economic motivations for various types of crimes and violence (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004).

The current civil conflict has been exacerbated by economic factors. Although Colombia's economy was largely immune to the recession affecting the rest of Latin America during the 1980s, by the end of the 1990s, neo-liberal reforms had brought about widespread economic stagnation, worsening unemployment, and a deteriorating social situation. For instance, Colombia's annual growth in GDP declined from 3.6 per cent between 1980-1990) to 3.3 per cent between 1990-1999, with the worst affected sectors including manufacturing, construction and retailing, all concentrated in urban areas. This stagnation was reflected in unemployment with levels of over 20 per cent in the first quarter of 1999. Together with the privatisation of the oil industry which is opposed by both the ELN and the FARC, these have tended to fuel violence even further (*ibid.*).

Despite various attempts to work towards peace since 1991, arguably, this situation has been exacerbated even further by United States intervention through Plan Colombia,

⁴ The FARC, the oldest of the guerrilla groups which began as a pro-Soviet group, was formed in the 1950s, while the ELN, which is pro-Cuban, was established in the 1960s (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004).

drawn up between Colombia and the US and implemented in September 1999. Making Colombia one of the US's main recipients of aid, the plan is aimed primarily at curbing the supply of drugs to the US. However, most of Plan Colombia comprises military aid, with minor components allocated for alternative cultivation schemes for coca farmers and human rights and judicial programmes. As a result it has been widely criticised, especially by human rights organisations (see Loughna, 2003). The 2002 election of Alvaro Uribe, known as a 'hardliner' and elected mainly because of his promises to strengthen the military and combat the guerrilla organisations, has caused controversy as his 'democratic security policy' is thought to further undermine constitutional and human rights.

All types of violence now affect the lives of Colombians from all strata of society. This has prompted frequent public demonstrations against violence and the widespread impunity prevalent throughout the judicial system. Perhaps even more importantly, it has led to widespread migration within Colombia as people have been forcibly displaced by violence, usually from rural to urban areas. Indeed, Colombia has one of the world's largest populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), constituting around 2.5 million people at the end of 2002 (IOM, 2005: 94). The violence situation has also led to increasing numbers of people emigrating abroad; several surveys have reported that over 50% of those interviewed wanted to settle abroad (Rubio, 2001: 55).

Emigration from Colombia

Although emigration from Colombia has been noted since the 1930s (to Venezuela) and later to the United States since the 1950s, it became significant in the 1960s and 1970s. While those fleeing violence have tended to stay within Latin America, mainly in neighbouring Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama as well as Mexico and Costa Rica, some have gone to the US or Europe (Loughna, 2003).⁵ In 2000, the US Census estimated that there were 509,800 Colombians living there, although this has reportedly increased dramatically since.⁶ In 2003, the Colombian Ministry for External Relations estimated that over 4 million (4,243,208) Colombians lived abroad, of which 11% were living in

⁵ The IOM reports that between 2003 and 2004 there has been a significant increase in Colombians seeking asylum in Ecuador in particular who in turn, are finding it difficult to deal with the increase without international assistance (IOM, 2005: 94).

⁶ The IOM reports that in 2002, 18,845 Colombians migrated to the US which was an increase of 16,730 from 2001 (IOM, 2005: 94).

Europe.⁷ In turn, they estimate that more than half go to Spain (52%), followed by nearly 20% to the UK and 14% to Italy. The IOM further estimates that since 1997, 1.2 million people have emigrated abroad including 400,000 refugees or those living like refugees (IOM, 2005: 94). Most emigrants, however, do not claim asylum even if they have fled violence and persecution.

Emigration of Colombians to the UK

Beyond some very broad and often inaccurate estimates, very little is known about the Colombian population in the UK. As noted above, estimates of their presence in the UK range from 50,000 to 200,000 and they are often referred to as the largest Latin American in the country (Bermúdez Torres, 2003: 13). The roots of Colombian migration date back to the 1970s when Colombians first arrived under the work permit system to take-up jobs in domestic service and catering. After 1980 more began to arrive to join relatives and friends despite the end of the work permit system. After 1986 there was an increase in Colombians seeking asylum as the conflict in their home country worsened. Once visa requirements were introduced in 1997, asylum applications decreased despite another rise in 1999 (*ibid.*)

More specifically in terms of asylum, Home Office figures show that between 2002 and 2004 asylum applications have declined by 45% from 420 applications in 2002 to 120 in 2004. In the first two quarters of 2005, only 50 applications were made. Perhaps more important, the success rate of applications in 2004 was very low; of 160 decisions made for those excluding dependants, only 5 were recognised as a refugee and granted asylum. In the first two quarters of 2005, 55 decisions were made and only between 1 and 4 were granted asylum.⁸ In light of this high rate of refusal, it is perhaps not surprising that so many Colombians are increasingly choosing to migrate illegally and not to apply for refuge. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that many also migrate for economic reasons with no intention of applying for asylum (see below).

While the Colombian population is heavily concentrated within London, it is fairly widely spread throughout the capital. Having said this, there are concentrations in Islington,

⁷ <http://portal.minrelext.gov.co/portal/webdriver.exe?Mival=colombianosune.html> (accessed 23/8/05).

⁸ Home Office Asylum Statistics, available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds> (accessed 24/8/05).

Lambeth, Southwark, and Camden (Bermúdez Torres, 2003; Open Channels, 2000). More recently, and as found in the current research, there are also concentrations in Tottenham, Hackney and Newham.

Generally speaking, the Colombian population is thought to be from an urban working class background despite a small middle-class population of professionals who have little contact with the community at large. The majority do not have very high education levels. Most are aged between 20 and 50 years and especially between 30 and 40 years (*ibid.*).

Much of the existing information on the Colombian community is superficial and often inaccurate, however. Thus, the current research aimed to provide a much more complete assessment, albeit qualitative, of how this population lives and survives in London.

B. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Methodology

This research was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 30 Colombian migrants and 5 employees from 4 organisations working with the Latin American population in London (3 of who were Colombian themselves). The research was conducted between July and November 2004. Interviews were carried out mainly with migrants who were involved with or using the services of the 4 organisations, although some were carried out as a result of snowballing and other personal contacts. While obviously, this sample is unrepresentative, it is a well-established method of working with migrant and refugee groups where issues of illegality and trust are central (see Bloch, 1999).

The aim was to interview migrants 'from below' (Smith and Guarnizo [eds], 1998) rather than those from the Colombian elites (such as those linked with the consulate, wealthy business people and university students). Having said this, several professional migrants who had dramatically de-skilled were included in the sample by virtue of their living conditions in the UK.

The interviews explored a range of issues linked with migration, labour, support networks and the main problems faced by migrants in London (see Appendix 1). All but 4 of the interviews were taped and transcribed.⁹ Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured in all cases and pseudonyms are used throughout this report. This was essential as so many of the migrants were undocumented.

Profile of migrants

While the report will discuss the specific findings in more detail in each section, a broad outline of the migrants' main characteristics are presented here. Most of the migrants had arrived in the previous 10 years (between 1994 and 2004), with only 3 arriving before this, and around half migrating since 2000.

In terms of **gender**, there was a broadly even split between men and women with 16 men and 14 women being interviewed. As for the area of previous migrant residence in

⁹ In these 4 cases, the interviewees were uncomfortable with the recording process and so detailed notes were taken instead.

Colombia (which did not always coincide with their area of birth), the majority had come from urban areas in Colombia (23 out of 30). More specifically, they came from the departments of Risaralda (7 from Pereira), Valle de Cauca (6 from Cali and 1 from Palmira), Antioquia (5 from Medellín), with 2 from Bogotá, 1 from Armenia, Quindio, and 1 from Manizales, Caldas. The 7 rural migrants came from Risaralda (2), Valle de Cauca (2), Caldas (1), Quindio (1) and Antioquia (1). As such, nearly half of the migrants had come from the Zona Cafetera (Coffee Zone comprising the departments of Caldas, Quindio and Risaralda) (13), with 5 from Cali just to the South and 6 from Medellín and rural Antioquia just to the North. Therefore, the majority of migrants were fairly closely drawn from the same part of Colombia.¹⁰

Migrants had an average **age** of 39, with more than half in their 30s, 40s or 50s (there were 6 in their 20s, 10 in their 30s, 3 in their 40s and 8 in their 50s).¹¹ In terms of **education**, the migrants were well educated with just over half having either primary or secondary education (only 3 had primary only), while 13 had been to college (3) or university (10). With just under half having some form of tertiary education, this makes them very over-qualified for the predominantly low wage cleaning jobs that most migrants work in. Indeed, of the 17 people who were employed, all worked in the cleaning sector in some capacity.¹² Among those who weren't working, they had either been employed in the cleaning sector previously or their partners were cleaners. This was especially marked for those who had worked as teachers (3), lawyers (1), or accountants (1). Migrants had come from a range of **occupational backgrounds** in Colombia ranging from small business owners, factory workers to domestic servants, yet with most having a higher occupational status before migration.

In terms of their **status in the UK**, 20 out of the 30 migrants were documented and had some form of legal status. For instance, 4 people had residency and British passports, 6

¹⁰ See also Lagnado (2004) for similar findings.

¹¹ This correlates broadly with the picture presented by Kyambi (2005) as part of a study conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research on new immigration drawing on official data sources such as the 2001 Census and Labour Force Surveys. She notes that around half of immigrants from Colombia are aged between 25 and 44 (p.123).

¹² Again, Kyambi (2005: 126) notes that around 50% of Colombian migrants are working in some form of employment. In terms of occupation, Spence (2005) using the same data sources, shows that 60% of Colombians are working, and that they are concentrated in the lower echelons of the labour market, with 33% employed in 'elementary' occupations including cleaning work (which was second only to Ecuador with 38.9% working in these occupations) (p.65).

had Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) which gave them refugee status and access to benefits, 4 had Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) which also gave them refugee status and access to benefits for a fixed time period, 4 were waiting the outcome of an asylum application or an appeal of an asylum claim, and 2 were on student visas. However, 10 were undocumented resulting in them either entering the country illegally, or overstaying their visas once they had expired.¹³

Finally, in terms of **where they lived in London**, there was a wide geographical spread in terms of residence. In the North of London, 6 lived in Tottenham or Seven Sisters, 2 in Holloway Road, 2 in East Finchley, and 1 in Old Street. In the South, 1 was from Kennington, 1 from Stockwell, 1 from Southwark, 2 from Lambeth, 1 from Streatham, and 1 from Clapham. In the East, 1 lived in Mile End, 1 in Canning Town, 1 in the Isle of Dogs, 3 in Forest Gate, 1 in Bromley-by-Bow, 2 were from Upton Park. Of the rest, 1 lived in Putney and 2 were from Barking in Essex. Just over half (17) lived in private accommodation, usually renting a room in a house, or in a flat which they rented on their own. A further 12 lived in council flats, all of whom were refugees or were awaiting decisions on their asylum claims (see Appendix 2).

¹³ In this report, migrants without official status will generally be referred to as 'undocumented'. This is to highlight the fact that the illegality of migrants reflects the actions of states rather than individuals (see Black, 2003 for further discussion). It should be pointed out, however, that migrants often referred to themselves as 'illegal'.

C. MAIN FINDINGS

i) COPING WITH CRISIS IN COLOMBIA: MIGRATION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

In light of the political and socio-economic situation in Colombia, migration to the UK is invariably an enforced decision rather than one of choice, or, as Castree *et al.* (2004) refer to as 'reactive necessity' rather than 'proactive choice'. Although it was rarely a carefully thought out strategy of survival, it was certainly a reactive mechanism by which people ensured either their livelihood or literally their life.

Reasons for leaving Colombia

Often, people had little option but to leave the country in order to survive for economic or political reasons, and in most cases, because of a combination of both. Ostensibly, 22 out of the 30 migrants (73%) reported that they had moved to the UK for issues related to the armed conflict. In turn, only 3 people identified purely economic factors related to finding work and securing higher wages as the reason for moving, with a further 2 coming to study English, and 3 migrating with their parents (in these latter 3 cases, their parents had moved for primarily political reasons). However, the picture is much more complicated than this initially suggests with political and economic factors closely intermeshing (see also Bermudez Torres, 2003b; IOM, 2003).

Overall, the armed conflict had almost completely permeated the lives of the Colombian migrants in London. Indeed, only 2 out of the 30 migrants interviewed did not mention the civil war and insecurity as motivating their movement in some way. At one end of the spectrum were those who had suffered severely as a result of the civil war, making up around half of those interviewed. Most of these people had no other option but to flee the country because of death threats and/or the assassination of people close to them. Indeed, sixteen of the 30 migrants had received death or kidnapping threats from either guerrilla or paramilitary groups, or from the army or police. In general, most migrants who had migrated for political reasons had been associated with the Left in Colombia, through trade union activism, human rights work or community political activities.

In one extreme case, Jairo, a 38 year-old illegal migrant from Apia, Risaralda, had fled from the FARC as a former conscript in 2000. As a farm labourer, he and his brother had been forcibly conscripted into the FARC. They both tried to escape, but his brother

was shot in the process in front of Jairo. Jairo managed to flee and get to Bogotá where he almost immediately boarded a plane for Europe (he went to Madrid first). He still fears for his life in London, saying that the FARC are still hunting him down.

Several migrants with varying degrees of association with the political Left had been persecuted by the paramilitaries or the army as a result. Two of the migrants interviewed had been involved with the Unión Patriótica (UP) or Patriotic Union and both had received death threats as a result.¹⁴ Luz Maria, a 46 year-old from Pereira, was the former secretary of the local UP. Just after the party won some local elections in 1999, she and her brother, who was the president, were targeted. Luz Maria was shot in the leg in a gun fight with the paramilitaries, resulting in the need for 6 operations. She fled from Colombia as soon as she recovered, still fearing for her life.

Often, people's children were targeted as punishment for suspected political involvement. For example, Rosario, a 37 year-old refugee from Pereira, fled to the UK in 1995 after her daughter, Angela, had been kidnapped by the FARC when she was only 8 years old. She had been targeted because her father had worked in the local mayor's office that took a hard line stance against the FARC. Fortunately, she was released after several weeks in captivity. With her daughter suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, the family decided to flee the country as soon as possible.

This highlights how people with ostensibly only fairly tenuous links with certain organisations remained at risk. For instance, Nuria, the community worker from Palmira worked in the isolated mountainous zone surrounding the city. She worked with young people through a child nutrition project, as well as with peasant families highlighting their human rights. Because this was a zone where the guerrilla (the FARC) operated, the police and army offered her money and a mobile phone to inform them about any

¹⁴ The UP was established in 1985 as part of a series of peace processes and negotiations with the President of the time, Belisario Betancur (elected in 1982). While the UP was made-up of some former guerrilla members, it also comprised a host of left-leaning members whose aim was to reform the Colombian state, reduce poverty, social injustice and address unequal land distribution. However, despite winning of widespread popular support including 14 seats in Congress in 1986, the UP was allowed little freedom to operate and thousands of its members were threatened and killed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Those who have been associated with the UP in the past as well as its current members remain targets for paramilitary groups and the security forces such as the military and the police (Dudley, 2004).

'strange movements' (i.e. guerrilla activity) that she saw through her work. Nuria had no links with the guerrilla besides meeting them in her travels in the mountains, and as such, told the army and police that she had never seen anything strange and that she didn't want the money or the phone. After that, she was targeted, being sent first, threatening letters, after which her brother-in-law was killed, and then the director of the college where the child nutrition programme was based (he was shot in front of the children in the school). Although she and her family fled to Cali, the threats continued, and in the end, they realised that they had to leave the country.

Perhaps most common among the migrants in the current study, were those whose reasons were a combination of political and economic factors. Often the political factors linked with the armed conflict had severely undermined people's income-generating potential in Colombia, making emigration a 'reactive necessity'. For instance, Jaime, was a small businessman selling agricultural supplies to local farmers in Caldas. He left because he stopped paying 'vacunas' (bribes – literally vaccinations – which are widespread throughout Colombia for any type of business person – see Moser and McIlwaine, 2004) to the guerrilla because he ran out of money. When the guerrilla began to threaten him he started to make plans to leave the country. Similarly, Fernando, a former cattle rancher from the Valle de Cauca, had to abandon his land when the guerrilla stole his cattle. As he noted:

'I came because of the problems in my country. I had some small land holdings there, but they took all the cattle and left me with nothing, the guerrilla took everything. Therefore, I came here to start again, to struggle, to try and look after the children that I've left behind in Colombia ... if I hadn't left, we would have had lots of financial problems, therefore, I had to abandon my land'.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Hernan from Cali was an active trade unionist in the chemical plant where he worked as a mechanic. He said that he was on a government black list as a result of his union membership, and he was targeted by paramilitary groups who consistently drove up and down outside his house on their motorbikes shooting their guns. Eventually, after a leafleting campaign where trade unionists were described as 'military objects' he and his family fled to Atlantic coast. They had to leave everything behind including their house, and Hernan found it very

difficult to get work there. As a result, he decided to come to the UK to earn money to send to his family to support them.

The close interrelation between political and economic reasons for migration has intensified over time as the conflict in Colombia has become more embroiled and complicated. As the different types of violence perpetrated in Colombia have become closely interrelated, with for example, drug-related violence becoming linked with politically-motivated activities, and related further with delinquency (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004), so the reasons for migrating have become more complex (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003a). Furthermore, there appeared to be an increase in people migrating because of distant or tenuous links with political activity, or because they were willing to speak out against the authorities or the armed groups (*ibid.*). César, a refugee from Pereira, who had lived for 14 years in London, pointed out that fighting for justice on the political Left was enough to make someone a target for the authorities. In his view, this had become worse over time due to the proliferation of the political armed groups together with organised crime organisations that were growing in Colombia. Eduin, from Bogotá, was a former journalist and university lecturer. Although he had come to London to learn English, he had also fled persecution after, among other things, he had become involved in a project of rehabilitation of sex workers in Bogotá. He was threatened by the organised crime group that ran the prostitution ring in the area, as well as being denounced by some colleagues for speaking out against government policies. He noted:

'I was a teacher at the university and because of saying unfavourable things against the state or not saying good things about those who rule the country, in a certain way, I was threatened by a group of colleagues. I received a letter that invited me to leave the project [the rehabilitation of sex workers], and said that if I didn't leave they would take violent measures against me'.

As noted above, in a minority of cases, some people migrated in order to expand their horizons and/or learn English that would ultimately improve their employability in Colombia. This was primarily among those from middle class and educated backgrounds, most of whom were professionals in Colombia. Carolina, for instance, a former special needs teacher from Cali, came to London as part of a tour with her father

and his wife. She decided to stay on in order to learn 'English English' and to try and improve her professional qualifications. Similarly, Rosa, a former accountant from Bogotá, felt that she could not secure a promotion or a better job in Colombia without learning English.

Thus, it is virtually impossible to say that migrants came for only one reason, but rather, for a range of interrelated reasons centring mainly on the need to improve their income-generating potential, as well as escape threatening political circumstances, and to improve their lives culturally. Overall, most people stressed so-called 'pull' factors or structural reasons referring to conditions in Colombia rather than the 'pull' of the UK in general and London in particular. Yet, there were reasons relating specifically to the UK that influenced the choice of destination (if not the reason for moving in the first place).

Reasons for migrating to London

London represented the most attractive European city for many of the migrants, where in the words of a representative of an organisation working with Latin American women, 'they think the streets are paved with gold'. Although many noted how they ideally would have liked to have migrated to the United States, visa restrictions meant that it was too difficult for most. Also, many had also either spent some time in Spain, using it as a transit country, or had considered migrating to Spain before ending in up in London (see below). Most preferred to come to London for three main reasons. First, was the availability of relatively well-paid jobs in the cleaning sector which paid more than the equivalent jobs in Spain, linked with the fact that the pound was seen as a strong currency. As Graciela, a Colombian who ran an organisation for Latin Americans in London, noted, *'I think it's because the money is so strong, or rather that the pound exchange rate for pesos is much higher than elsewhere'*. Yet she was also aware of the relative nature of this reason: *'people don't take into account that if you earn pounds, you spend pounds'*.

A second major factor, especially for those who had claimed asylum or were in the process, was that the UK was perceived to be an upholder of human rights and a place where asylum was possible to secure. Enrique reported that: *'I had read a lot and this is the country where human rights are respected, where people are more tolerant, where you can come as a refugee, where it's possible for those of us who have problems'*.

Indeed, the perceived tolerance of the British was frequently cited, usually in contrast to the reported racism of Spain. Madrid in particular was singled out as being a racist place to live for a Colombian.

Partly related to this, people reported how London was a secure place to live. Indeed, security was mentioned repeatedly by people when they discussed their lives in London with several people saying how they felt safe because of all the CCTV on the streets. Nuria from Palmira and living in Canning Town, said that the thing she liked best about London was that she could now sleep through the night; in Colombia, she and her husband took it in turns to sleep, being constantly woken by the paramilitaries on their motorbikes or on hearing their marching boots.

This safety was relative primarily to Colombia, but also to Spain. Not only was Spain perceived to be a dangerous place to live in terms of general crime and violence, but also because Colombian guerrilla and paramilitary networks continued to operate there. Indeed, several migrants reported that one couldn't really flee the guerrilla or paramilitaries in Spain as Enrique pointed out:

'The groups from our country have a lot of contacts there, you understand me, in Spain, there's a lot of violence, there's lots or rather there are groups of guerrilla members, groups of paramilitaries that are concentrated there, that are not that notorious, but they're there none the less'.

He went on to say that the same happened in the United States as well, continuing:

'they [Spain and the US] are not secure countries like this one, there's a lot of security here, you can see cameras in every street, therefore lots of people are prevented from doing things because of the security of this country, it's a secure country ... lots of people flee to the US and there they are killed, they send their people there from Colombia, and they die there'.

Fernando corroborated this in relation to Spain, saying that he had been recognised in the street in Madrid by associates of people who had been persecuting and threatening him, and who knew all about the situation with the stolen cattle and unpaid 'vacunas'.

As a result, a friend in London suggested he came to live there instead where he had more anonymity.

A final, more general factor as to why people migrated to London was the classic chain migration or social network process whereby once a group of family or friends established themselves in a place, in turn, they helped others to migrate there. This was an important, although often secondary, consideration for many Colombian migrants who otherwise would not have come to London (see also below). Ana, from Cali, who at 62 years of age, was the oldest interviewee, came to London when she was 56 because her sister was here, as well as to find work:

'I came here because my sister was here, she helped me because I didn't have any money and the little that I had worked for, I had saved. Therefore, I came here at her feet, to see what I could do because in Colombia it's difficult to secure work at my age'.

Entering the UK: documented or undocumented?

The reasons for migrating to the UK often affect the manner in which migration is undertaken, especially in terms of whether it is documented or undocumented. However, it is also significant that among the migrants in the current study, that while in general, those who applied for asylum were political migrants, and those who had entered the UK illegally were economic migrants, this was certainly not always the case. Furthermore, there was a marked sentiment among those who had migrated more recently, that it wasn't worth applying for asylum even if their lives were in danger in Colombia, given the inconsistencies and difficulties inherent in the asylum process (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b).

Seeking asylum

As noted above, 20 out of the 30 interviewees were resident in the country legally, with 14 of these having secured some form of asylum. Generally speaking, the granting of asylum was much more likely among those migrants who have lived in London the longest, especially those who had migrated before 1997 when visa restrictions were introduced (around half of those with legal status). Among those who had migrated after this date, only 4 had some form of asylum, with a further 4 waiting for a decision about an asylum claim, and 2 on student visas (one of whom was working illegally in terms of

exceeding the number of hours per week allowed by her visa – 20).

Not only was it becoming much more difficult to secure asylum over time, as reflected in official statistics (see earlier), but assisted migration by human rights organisation was likely to facilitate the asylum process. For instance, 4 out of the 14 migrants with asylum had been helped by either Amnesty International or the Colombian Solidarity Campaign. In all 4 cases, asylum was granted within several weeks or months of application.

The most common pattern, however, was extremely long delays in dealing with asylum claims. This was a continual source of complaint among the migrants, generating, not surprisingly, deep-seated feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b). Many refugees had to wait between 6-8 years to have their claim settled. During this period, people said that their lives were literally on hold. Margarita, from Armenia, who had Indefinite Leave to Remain, had to wait for 8 years during which time she lived in a state of constant worry, as did her 2 daughters who would regularly ask her if they were staying in London:

'it was really hard for us. It was such a long time, such a long time, every day we were thinking, worrying ourselves sick that were going to be deported from here, and thinking about what was going to happen to us'.

Indeed, Enrique who arrived in 1998 was still living through this worry as his case had not been resolved despite having 50 letters from the Home Office about his case: *'I'm going on 6 years with my arms in the air because they have decided nothing about me ... the government here doesn't listen'.*

However, as well as extremely long delays in dealing with asylum claims (during which time migrants cannot legally work and must depend on state benefits from the National Asylum Support Service), the validity of the process also emerged as being very chaotic and uneven in terms of the types of cases granted asylum and those turned down. Several asylum-seekers and/or refugees, and especially those who arrived before 1997, were transparent about the fact that they had migrated primarily for economic or related reasons, although they were often distantly involved in the armed conflict. For instance, Ana from Cali discussed above, was also in the process of applying for asylum despite

being very open about the fact that she had migrated to the UK for economic reasons and because of her sister. While Margarita had much more experience of insecurity than Ana, her life was not directly threatened by the conflict; she recounted how she was a community leader in Armenia, and had witnessed the incursion of the FARC into her community, frightening her. After this, she felt unsafe and decided to leave for the UK. She also admitted that she knew that they would have a much better life economically in the UK than Colombia.

On the other hand, several migrants who were either illegal and/or had had their cases turned down, recounted shocking stories about how their lives had been in danger in Colombia. Jairo, the ex-member of the FARC, for example, had already been deported once by the Home Office after he had his claim turned down, but he had returned to the UK a second time illegally because his life was in so much danger in Colombia. Luz Maria, the former UP secretary from Pereira, also had her asylum claim turned down despite being disabled because of the gun-fight with the paramilitaries who were trying to kill her. She reported that she was completely humiliated by the judge in her case hearing because he openly said that he didn't believe her story. Indeed, 3 migrants recounted distressing experiences with judges at their asylum hearings, all of whom complained that they were belittled and/or not believed.

In general, around half of those who had experienced severe persecution in Colombia such that they couldn't return, and had applied for asylum, had been granted it. However, there was also a sizeable number of illegal migrants whose lives were in danger in Colombia who were too afraid to apply because of the risks of being deported. This was especially the case when they had migrated for a combination of political and economic reasons. Fernando, the former cattle rancher from the Valle de Cauca noted: *'The fear of asking for refuge and then being returned to my country is too much. My family wouldn't have anything to eat'*.

Undocumented entry

Undocumented entry into the UK appeared to be increasingly common according to those interviewed. This was mainly because asylum was seen to be much more difficult to secure, while the political and socio-economic situation in Colombia has continued to worsen. In turn, as the Colombian community has grown, so has the system of networks

and support for newly arrived migrants (and those thinking about migrating).

Seven out of the 10 undocumented migrants entered the UK illegally, all of them with Spanish passports. Most of them bought them in Madrid on their way to London, although 2 people had bought them in Bogotá. These cost anything between US\$800 and US\$1600 and were usually passports of naturalised Colombians living in Spain.¹⁵ These passports are used several times, with migrants having to send them straight back to Spain and/or Colombia once they enter the UK. People used this system as one of last resort, with 2 using Spanish passports to re-enter the country following deportation after their asylum application had been turned down. Another, Jairo, initially entered on a Spanish passport in 2000, and after he was deported, entered again on a Venezuelan one.

Generally, people felt very uncomfortable about having to use this system to enter the country, with it being used as a route of last resort. Julián from Cali, who was primarily an economic migrant, travelled from Cali to Madrid on his Colombian passport on the advice of a Colombian friend living in London. He then spent 3 days in Madrid sorting out his Spanish passport to enter the UK. Julián said how shocked he was that he was going to have to use a false passport, as he hadn't realised this when he left Colombia; his friend was going to sort everything out for him. He noted: *'in Colombia, I had always worked honestly, correctly, you know. But I didn't know anything, what a refugee was, what asylum was, not an idea ... if my friend had asked me to jump in a hole I would have done it.'* He said he was shaking when he arrived at the airport and went through customs.

Although Julián's trip was organised by his friend who paid for everything for him, several migrants paid people traffickers to arrange flights and/or entry with or without passports. While Graciela who works with the Latin American community estimated that people pay around £6,000 to these traffickers, other estimates suggest that most pay between £3,000 and £5,000. For instance, Jairo paid £5,000 on his first trip with a Spanish passport using a trafficker who smuggled him in the back of a lorry transporting broccoli from Madrid to London via Harwich. He organised his second trip himself via

¹⁵ The Spanish passports belonging to real people are stolen or sold to the dealers by their owners in order to raise money; in some cases, they are completely falsified.

Venezuela where he bought a 'tour' of Europe for £3,000 arriving on a tourist visa with a Venezuelan passport and abandoning the tour as soon as it arrived in the UK.¹⁶ Another illegal migrant, Carolina, arrived via a European tour with her father and his wife, and simply overstayed her tourist visa (on a Colombian passport) (see above). Generally, this was a system more common among those with higher socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

Also worth noting is that 2 of the 10 undocumented migrants had stayed on following the failure of their asylum claim. Both recognised this as a high-risk strategy, engendering high levels of anxiety that they would be deported at any moment.

Irregularity, anxiety and exclusion

Perhaps not surprisingly, the irregular status of migrants was a major source of anxiety for all the undocumented migrants regardless of how they entered the UK. Those with no status (*falta de estatus*) or papers (*falta de papeles*) suffered greatest levels of stress. Jaime, the small businessman from Caldas who arrived on a Spanish passport (for which he paid US\$1500 in Madrid) noted: *'I have always lived concealed, I've had to cover-up my life. I know that justice isn't going to protect me there [in Colombia]. They won't protect me there ... I had to say to myself, should I stay or go? I would be under the ground now if I'd stayed'*. The stress of this situation was taking its toll on many migrants. Alejandro, who had entered the UK twice and spent 14 months in a detention centre (Haslar Immigration Removal Centre, near Gosport, Hampshire) before being deported and entering again on a Spanish passport felt this stress acutely. He linked such anxiety to the exclusion experienced as a result: *'because we don't have papers, because we're irregular, we are totally marginalised. We live in fear and then the stress appears, stress about not having papers'*.

Again, not surprisingly, their status had far-reaching ramifications for all aspects of migrant's lives in London, and especially their work, housing and welfare, and as such, was as major source of concern. Indeed, most irregular migrants discussed the possibility of an amnesty by the Home Office; they seemed to be living in hope that this

¹⁶ Although Jairo was originally a farm labourer, he said he was extremely well paid by the FARC, such that he could afford to pay up to £5,000 for one of his trips.

was the only way they could acquire status.¹⁷

Entering the UK: alone or accompanied?

While many people already had friends, family or acquaintances in London before they arrived, more than half arrived alone (17 out of the 30), with a further 12 coming with family members, and 1 migrating with a friend. Having said this, it was quite common for one family member to come ahead and then to send for other members once they arrived. Margarita from Armenia initially arrived alone and 3 months later her husband and daughter came. This was primarily because they didn't have enough money for all their fares at one time. Similarly, César from Pereira arrived first, sending for his wife and 2 sons to come 3 years later once he had saved the money for the flights.

Related to this, most people had some form of basic contact when they first arrived in London and with whom they stayed initially. This was mainly friends (13 cases) or family (4 cases), although 4 had no contacts and stayed in hotels or hostels, the latter all in cases of people claiming asylum. The rest stayed with friends of friends or with very distant acquaintances. Indeed, several people discussed how they had ended up staying with people whom they had met on the plane from Colombia, or how they had first found their feet in London through very distant acquaintances whom they hadn't met before. Hernan, for example, told how he had been met at the airport by someone he didn't know who had held up a sign with his name on it. For those with few initial contacts, arriving in the UK was deeply unsettling, with several migrants recounting their feelings of fear and concern when they first arrived.

Gender and migration

Most migrants felt that broadly equal numbers of women and men migrated to London (9 out of 19), with some suggesting that slightly more women migrated than men (5 out of 19).¹⁸ Although several were very keen to point out that men were disproportionately involved in the armed conflict and so were more likely to flee for political reasons, others suggested that women were the ones who had to cope with the ramifications of losing

¹⁷ In November 2003, there was an Amnesty for dependants of those who were in the country in October 2000 and made an asylum application and had at least 1 dependent child – they were granted residency status.

¹⁸ Official figures suggest that there are more female Colombian migrants in the UK than men (58.7%) (Spence, 2005: 107).

partners or husbands due to the conflict.¹⁹ They therefore had to flee to other countries for economic or political reasons or for both (see also Meertens, 2001). Several women in the sample who had claimed asylum had to flee Colombia because of threats made to their families because of the political work of their husbands, fathers, brothers and so on (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003). For example, Marina's husband and her brother were killed in the conflict in Medellín, and she fled soon after, partly because she was subsequently targeted by those who killed her family, and partly because she had a severely autistic child whom she needed to care for economically. Similarly, Rosario fled to the UK after her daughter was kidnapped by the FARC (see above), while Adriana, a refugee from Quindío claimed asylum with her husband and children after her father, a former policeman, was killed by the FARC, and her family was subsequently threatened.²⁰

However, several women also fled Colombia because of their independent political work (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b). Susana, a former human rights lawyer from Medellín, had been involved with defending peasants who had been displaced by an oil pipeline and as a consequence, had been persecuted by paramilitaries, receiving death threats against herself and her daughter. As noted above, Luz Maria, was the secretary for the local UP, and suffered severely as a result. Also, several women who were not directly involved in political work had received threats because of suspicion that their activities were clandestinely political, such as the case of Nuria discussed earlier whose community social work had attracted the attention of the authorities ultimately leading to death threats. Interestingly, none of the women in the sample had applied for asylum as dependants of their husbands. Instead, they all did so in their own right, or as part of a family application.

Among the undocumented, women were generally much less likely to arrive and live illegally than men. Not only did several people voice this view, but it was borne out among the sample, in that of the 10 illegal migrants, only 3 were women, one whose asylum application was unsuccessful, and 1 who entered on a tourist visa. Armando, a

¹⁹ It is generally accepted that men are the main victims of the conflict in Colombia (Meertens, 2001).

²⁰ It's important to point out that officially more men claim asylum than women in terms of actual applications to the Home Office (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b).

Colombian who worked for an organisation working with the Latin American community pointed out that it was much more difficult for women to arrive and cope illegally than men:

'For women, it's much more difficult, women in our culture aren't prepared for such hardships of being illegal. A man can go and sleep anywhere, while for a woman it's very difficult to devalue herself in this way'.

Instead, he noted that for women it was much easier for them to arrive and claim asylum, especially, in his view, if they were single mothers who had a greater chance of securing asylum and be able to claim benefits as a result (see also CARILA, 1996).

Linked with this, it was the general opinion that it was easier for women to migrate and establish themselves in London than for men (10 out of 19, with only 2 suggesting it was easier for men) (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b). This was mainly because it was thought that women could get jobs more easily than men. Adriana, a refugee from Quindío who claimed asylum with her husband and children after her father, a former policeman, was killed by the FARC, and her family was subsequently threatened felt that: *'a woman can get work more easily in a house, cleaning or she can get work cleaning offices, she can do it more easily than men who don't give priority to cleaning at home, they don't have the same skills'.*

Women were also more likely to migrate with their children than men (especially if they were single parents). Although some women had initially left their children in Colombia (usually with grandparents or fathers), all of them had been reunited at a later date. Among the men, however, many had migrated alone leaving their wives and children there and sending money to support them (this was most common among those who had migrated illegally). Hernan, for example, had left his wife and daughter ('the light of my life') in Colombia and his only reason for staying in London was to send money back to them.

Generally, as noted by Armando above, it was felt that women had more rights and were treated more fairly by the UK government and society than in Colombia. All the female migrants who discussed gender issues attested to the fact that women had much greater

access to power and rights in the UK. Carmen from Pereira pointed out:

'Here they protect people, there's a lot of legal protection. The laws protect women. They don't respect laws in Colombia. There, they're not respected and there's lots of violence against women as a result'.

This more flexible organisation of gender roles and relations which granted women more power in society extended to all aspects of life, as Susana from Medellín noted:

'The role of women in Colombia is very different to here. Women's roles are more recognised here and they are more respected although I also think that every society has its good customs as well. But women here go out more, have more freedom, they go out for drinks with their friends, and men respect this. In Colombia, men wouldn't allow their women to drink beer with their friends'.

Also, one man, Julián, said that he now cooked and prepared all the food for his new partner (whom he had got together with in London and had a baby with) while he did not do this for his former partner in Colombia (although recognising that he was a trained chef).

Indeed, all the women who discussed gender issues felt that their lives had improved as a result of migrating to the UK in terms of being able to make more independent decisions, go out to work and to have more control over their lives (see also Bermúdez Torres, 2003b).²¹

Linkages with Colombia: the importance of remittances

All the migrants maintained some form of linkages with Colombia. Regardless of their legal status or the length of time they had lived here, all migrants kept in touch with family and friends through phone calls (everyone) and by email (the latter to a lesser extent – in 6 cases). 19 people also sent money or remittances to Colombia, sending an average of £106 per month, with no gender differences in terms of the remitters. This

²¹ Changes in gender roles, relations and ideologies among migrant groups has been widely noted elsewhere (see for example, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1992 on Mexicans in the US; Mahler, 1999 on Salvadorans in the US).

reflects the wider importance of remittances which are becoming an increasingly crucial source of foreign exchange for Colombia. Indeed, while accurate figures are difficult to find, it has been estimated that remittances from Europe to Colombia totalled 3,067 US\$ million in 2003 (Pellegrino, 2004: 47). This source also suggests that Colombians sent an average of 322 euros (approximately £214) per month which is more than that sent by migrants in the US (p.46-7).²²

Perhaps not surprisingly, those most likely to send money to Colombia were those living in London without their immediate families such as Fernando, the former cattle rancher, who sent around £250 per month to his wife in Buga. Also, undocumented migrants were more likely to send remittances than those who had attained status (all but one - Carolina who came from a fairly wealthy family who didn't need any extra resources), suggesting that their main motive for migrating was economic. While undocumented migrants were more likely to send large amounts to Colombia, it was most common to send around £25-£40 per month.

Being sent either to immediate families in terms of spouses, children or parents, money sent by migrants was primarily used for everyday expenses together with the education of children and other relatives and medical expenses (especially in the case of ill parents). Only in one case was the money being used for investment purposes; Hernan who was remitting £290 per month to his wife and daughter had sent enough in 3 and a half years for her to build a new house and an extra storey that was being rented out in order to provide extra income for his wife. In many cases, remittances are also used to fund the migration of family members to the UK. Marcelo, from Pereira, who was a member of the UP and owned a restaurant before he came to London on his own, not only paid for his wife's education in Colombia (at university where she trained to be a teacher), but also for her and their son's fare to join him (see also above).

Interestingly, however, 5 people sent money to wider communities for various types of developmental assistance. Three of these people sent money on an informal basis; Nuria sent money to set-up and run a school restaurant for malnourished children in the

²² Furthermore, the IDB estimate that Colombia received remittances from nationals in the US worth over 3 billion dollars in 2003 (IDB, 2004).

community where she used to work; Adriana sent money to community leaders in her home village to distribute to the very poor; and Susana continued to help the displaced peasants she had worked with previously by organising fund-raising events among her friends. The other 2 had set up small-scale organisations (often called Home Town Associations or HTAs – Goldring, 2004). Alejandro, for example, had established a community organisation that did a lot of small-scale fund-raising to develop projects in his home area. One of these was a cancer rehabilitation centre where those who had had chemotherapy could go to recover. Similarly, Jaime, who had been a community leader in Colombia had continued to work for his community in London with the support of his church (San Ignacio in Seven Sisters), again through fund-raising to develop projects for the elderly and poor.

Sending remittances can take their toll on migrants living in London especially those who are maintaining their primary families in Colombia. Graciela noted that some migrants send up to £500 per month, leaving themselves only £100 to live on. As a result, they eat very little and poor quality food and live in very over-crowded conditions (sharing rooms with other people, up to 4 or 5), with the result that their health is affected. Hernan was making such sacrifices for his family in Colombia, living in dire circumstances in London in order to be able to send money to his wife and daughter. As noted above, he sent £290 per month to Colombia, leaving only £25-£30 for himself. He used this mainly for transport costs (only travelling by bus as this was cheaper). He fed himself through an occasional can of sardines, or through out-of-date sandwiches that a friend of his saved for him from her job in a café. He clandestinely lived in a workshop in Waterloo arriving late at night after the owner had left and leaving early in morning before he arrived back (he had obtained the key from a former employee).

Sending remittances aren't always one-way, however. Several migrants who said they couldn't afford to send anything, received help from their families in Colombia. In one case, Luz Maria whose asylum case had been turned down, was sent clothes by her mother in Colombia, while Carolina, the former teacher, was sent medicine by her parents.

To sum up, migration to London is not only a political and economic survival strategy for many Colombian migrants, but often for their families who have remained in Colombia.

While the roots of migration are often in people's economic circumstances, these are intricately interlinked with political factors associated with the armed conflict. In turn, the claiming of asylum is not always a true reflection of migrant's circumstances. It was found that some people whose circumstances genuinely meant that they could not return to Colombia either had their asylum claims rejected or didn't apply in the first place, while others whose claims were successful were first and foremost economic rather than political migrants. Also, understanding of the Colombian situation on the part of the Home Office appeared to be very weak. In addition, regardless of the reasons for migrating, the whole process of migration was incredibly stressful, especially when people had no formal status and were undocumented. This was especially marked in relation to work and securing employment.

ii) COPING IN LONDON: INCOME GENERATION TO SURVIVE

The nature and conditions of employment for migrants

While some migrants moved to London because of the perceived employment potential in such a global city, others were involved in the labour market as a way of making ends meet once they found themselves in the city. Regardless of their motives, however, the majority of migrants end up working in the cleaning sector at some point in their employment trajectories. Indeed, as noted above, there were extremely limited income-generating options available to most Colombian migrants. Of the 17 of the 30 migrants working, 16 were cleaners (as their primary job), and 1 was an odd-job man. Of these 16 cleaners, 2 were domestic cleaners in private houses (both women), while the rest worked as contract cleaners for larger companies, mainly in offices and factories, with two working specifically in maintenance as well as cleaning (see Lagnado, 2004 on the concentration of Colombians in the contract cleaning sector in London).²³ Only a small minority of either recent refugees or students did not have some sort of link with the cleaning sector; even if the migrants interviewed did not work in the sector, they had done so in the past, or their partners did so. As Rosa, a student pointed out: *'It's rare to find someone who arrives here who doesn't end up cleaning'*.

The reasons for such concentrations rested mainly on the fact that most migrants

²³ Lagnado (2004) also suggests that this concentration in one sector differs from other places where Colombians have migrated such as Spain and South Florida where they work in a greater variety of jobs such as retail and construction.

couldn't speak very much English, and certainly not enough to secure a job in which English was used as the main form of communication. In addition, there were also marked ethnic concentrations within particular companies where, once a Colombian was in a supervisory position, he/she was most likely to recruit other Colombians, or at least other Latin Americans. Feeding into this was the fact that people always secured jobs through 'word-of-mouth' and not through formal advertising channels (*ibid*). The concentration of Colombians was most common in the smaller companies, while the larger ones tended to have a greater diversity of nationalities working in their ranks. In particular, many spoke of the recent competition from Eastern Europeans in the cleaning sector, who following the expansion of the EU in 2004, could work legally. Several felt that this was pushing out the Colombians in some of the larger companies. Having said this, it was still fairly easy for people to secure jobs whether legally or illegally; most reported having got jobs within weeks of arriving in London. Also common was that those who had a fairly good command of English would work as supervisors, whereas those without could never aspire beyond the 'office floor'.

Many of the migrants were working illegally (10 of the 17 workers in the sample were undocumented, and all of the undocumented migrants were working), mainly facilitated through the securing of jobs through personal contacts and the use of false papers. There was a range of strategies that allowed people to work illegally. Most common was the use of false Spanish passports or false documentation of some sort. In particular, it was possible to buy or borrow National Insurance numbers which until recently was sufficient to secure a job. However, since the accession of the Eastern European countries in May 2004, it has become more difficult to use false documentation as employers have begun to request original papers. The majority of the workers complained that this made it much more difficult for them to find work, and further intensified competition. In turn, many workers reported that the government was clamping down on companies that employed illegal workers. Enrique, for example, who was a supervisor in a cleaning company reported how the immigration authorities had sent leaflets to his firm explaining that if undocumented workers were found, they would remove their licence. When the workers found out about this, 50% of the workforce left as they were afraid that the immigration police would come and deport them.

In relation to the conditions of work, most were employed on an irregular basis; the

majority of contract cleaners worked for more than one company in more than one job on a part-time basis. The most common practice was to work for 3-4 hours in the early morning and again for 3-4 hours in the evening, usually in different places for different companies. However, some worked less, especially if they were also claiming benefits (see below) or studying as well, while others worked more. Jaime, for instance, worked for two different companies cleaning offices, one from 6-12 am and the another from 7-12 pm, totalling 11 hours.

In terms of wage levels, most were earning the minimum wage (£4-50 at the time of study) or just above it. Only two people reported earning less - Carmen, who worked for a cleaning firm for only £3-10 per hour and Jaime, who worked as an odd-job man in Stamford Hill where he earned £4-00 per hour. The highest reported wage was £7-00 earned by Julián who worked as a janitor and cleaner for a company in Canary Wharf, together with Carolina who cleaned private houses.²⁴ While these rates are undoubtedly low, and less than the 'Living Wage' of £6-70 (see Evans *et al.*, 2005), people repeatedly stated that they earned substantially more than they could in Colombia.

Undocumented workers were generally paid less than those with papers. Marcelo, for instance, noted how those with National Insurance numbers were paid more: *'I would be paid more if I had "the national", but because I don't I'm paid less and I can't complain as I have no papers'*.

Such exploitation of undocumented workers was reported as being widespread. Another method of paying lower wages to illegal workers was to pay them in cash but still deduct tax which was then retained by the company. Again, illegal workers had no comeback as Fernando stated: *'They pay in cash but take out tax. But what can we do? Stay quiet or lose your job ... you're earning only a little, but you're still earning'*. Also commonplace was to withhold wages from new workers; when they were due to be paid after one month, the supervisors or managers would claim that their work was unsatisfactory or simply that they were undocumented and so they wouldn't pay them. Again, if workers were undocumented, then such abuses were difficult to challenge. Hernan reports:

²⁴ These findings are similar to another recent study of low-paid workers in London where few earned less than the legal minimum, but few much more than this. Only a very small minority were earning more than the 'Living Wage' of £6-70 which has been calculated to estimate how much it costs to actually live in London (Evans, *et al.* 2005).

'Here, they pay by the month, and at the end of the month, they say "listen brother, because you're undocumented we're not going to pay you because we can't give you a receipt" You have to stay quiet ... it's a terrible problem that rarely comes to light in public.'

The workplace abuses of undocumented migrants was a major source of stress. Many felt a sense of resentment and exclusion that they had been treated in such a way, but also felt helpless to do anything because they had no official rights. Enrique, who was a supervisor recounted how he felt after the British manager of his building spoke down to him because he couldn't understand his English: *'It's very humiliating, the way he spoke, to receive a rebuff like that from the people here. It hurts me, do you understand, it's something that represses you, that stops you getting on, something that holds you back'*. However, even worse, and indeed more frequently mentioned was that Colombian supervisors exploited their own people, generating a deep resentment and mistrust (see below).

Repeatedly, undocumented migrants said that all they wanted was to be able to work freely and with dignity. They wanted to pay taxes and give something back to British society. As Hernan pointed out: *'I want to work and pay taxes; I don't want to live sucking the blood from anyone'*.

It is also worth mentioning that although many migrants were working illegally, it didn't necessarily mean that they weren't contributing to the tax base of the country. Although some were paid in cash, others were paid officially using false names and passports meaning that they paid income tax and National Insurance. Even if they didn't pay tax, as some noted (see above), it was rare for them not to pay National Insurance. Thus, undocumented migrants were contributing to the financial health of the country without being able to gain anything in return (see also Evans *et al.* 2005 for similar findings).

A process of de-skilling and de-professionalisation was also widespread. As noted above, migrants were generally well educated with nearly half having some form of tertiary education, and only 3 having primary level only.²⁵ Migrants had worked in a

²⁵ Again, this was reiterated in the Evans *et al.* (2005) study where de-skilling was very common with migrants having high education levels before migration.

range of jobs in Colombia, from farm labourers to factory workers, to domestic servants. However, it is significant that there were 3 teachers, one of whom was also a journalist, 1 lawyer, 1 social worker and 1 accountant, together with a range of other white-collar positions such as administrators and secretaries, as well as a nurse. Indeed, only 2 migrants had worked in domestic service occupations before they migrated. While the lawyer, one of the teachers and the social worker were all refugees and not working, most of the other professionals were working in cleaning jobs. Eduin, a former university lecturer and journalist who was on a student visa worked as a cleaner for 3 hours a day (although he had worked in a local shop prior to his cleaning job), while Rosa, a former accountant, also on a student visa, worked in 2 cleaning jobs and as a kitchen assistant in a cafe. All these professionals felt this process of de-skilling acutely. Carolina, a former special needs teacher from Cali who entered on a tourist visa and was undocumented, was working as a cleaner in private houses as well as doing some occasional childcare. She complained about the difficulties: *'It's the quality of work that's limiting us. It's very hard because I've seen lots of professionals doing cleaning jobs. What else can they do? I think this society is very tough on immigrants, especially Colombians'*. Several people were very specific about the difficulties they had in cleaning toilets in particular, finding it very demeaning after all their training and education.

The main reasons for this de-skilling was that either migrants couldn't speak sufficient English, and/or that their qualifications were not recognised in the UK, with the result that they would have to re-train substantially. In turn, many spoke of discrimination against Latin Americans in the labour market as well. Pablo, a former nurse in Colombia, and currently working as a cleaner, noted:

'Here, they close doors on those who want to work at their profession ... they don't give you the opportunity to demonstrate what you can do. The problem here is that they don't value people's profession and experience. If you have a high level of English, then yes you can work sometimes, otherwise no. Here, to start work you have to begin at zero, you have to start to take exams again through levels, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. When I reach the last level I'll be an old man, no, no. Look, there's horrible discrimination, you see, although they say that they need people to work in certain areas, it's total lies'.

Similarly, Carolina had been trying to get a job as a classroom assistant, but found it impossible, not because of a lack of English (which she could speak well), but due to her lack of legal status. She had found one job but they couldn't employ her because they needed to do a police check which was impossible as she was undocumented. Instead, Carolina, made do with running a 'Saturday school' (*Escuela Sabatina*) for Latin American children in Spanish on a voluntary basis.

Indeed, over one third of the migrants (11) did some form of voluntary work, usually with the church or with organisations working with the Latin American community. Indeed, many of these organisations are dependent on volunteer labour to keep functioning. Some people work regularly for organisations, such as Rosa who worked several hours per week for the Latin American Women's Rights Service doing basic administrative tasks, while Pablo was involved occasionally with a health-related organisation for specific workshops.

Additional sources of income: state benefits

Around two-thirds of migrants (11 out of 18) who were eligible to claim state benefits did so. While those with secured status were able to claim a host of different benefits such as income support, housing benefit, family tax credits and so on, those who were waiting to hear about their asylum claim received benefits from NASS (National Asylum Support Service). Those in receipt of NASS benefits and thus unable to work were very frustrated. This was especially pertinent in light of the fact that claims were taking up to 7 and 8 years to process. Lucia, a former teacher, had been waiting for a decision from the Home Office for 6 years. While she did some voluntary work, she didn't want to jeopardise her case by getting a more formal job. She managed to survive through help from her two daughters (she said she didn't receive any help from NASS as she was in appeal) (see Bermúdez Torres, 2003b for similar findings).

The popular media image of asylum seekers and refugees as 'benefit scroungers' was thus not borne out by the migrants included here. Not only were around a third of those eligible not claiming benefits, but the vast majority were desperate to work in dignified jobs and make a contribution to UK society. Several also said that they planned to get jobs as soon as their status was secure. Margarita, who had just been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain, said that she and her husband were determined to get jobs, even if

only cleaning in the short-term, so that they could re-pay all the help they had received from the British government. Similarly, Marcelo noted: *'Just like many of my Colombian friends, we aspire to have permission to work, not to live off benefits, that's what we want, not to live off this help, without any self-esteem, but by our own hands, a job that we can do with dignity such as driving a bus'*. Indeed, in most cases, the only reason why migrants didn't work was that the only jobs they could find were in cleaning, mainly because of problems with English despite the majority making some effort to learn.

Additional sources of income: extra jobs

While cleaning was the primary employment for migrants, many also had additional income-generating activities that helped them to raise extra funds (10 of the 17 workers). Several migrants had permanent and regular additional jobs, such as Rosa, who as well as studying English and cleaning for 2 companies also worked as a kitchen assistant in a cafe 5 days a week, and Milena who as well as cleaning for 3 hours a day also worked every Saturday as a hairdresser (for the Latin American community in East Ham where she lived). Similarly, Julián, who was a janitor at a building in Canary Wharf, worked on Saturday mornings doing window cleaning in order to be able to send money back to Colombia for his daughter and mother: *'I do 4 hours for £20 which I have to do because if not then I wouldn't be able to pay for things and above all to send money to Colombia which is my priority'*.

Other types of additional income-generating activities were more occasional, yet still very important. Some worked extra hours when people were ill in their cleaning companies or sometimes at weekends for specific jobs such as cleaning new buildings on a one-off basis. Others provided services within their own community. Alejandro, for example, sometimes did painting and decorating work at weekends as well as his regular cleaning job during the week. In addition, he and his wife, regularly made and decorated cakes that they sold to local Colombian restaurants, as well as *arepas*, *empanadas* or *tamales* (Colombian pasties) that they sold to friends. These extra activities were essential for their survival, and especially to pay their tube fares: *'We can get by doing these things, we have to pay for the train, it's the only way we can survive, we can do it during the day'*. Similarly, Adriana and her husband, who didn't have a cleaning job made Colombian food that they sold from a small stall every Sunday on Clapham Common where Latin Americans play football every week (mainly

Colombians). Some people were especially entrepreneurial, such as Antonio, who was trying to set-up a business importing designer jeans from Colombia in the smaller sizes that Colombians needed. However, he wasn't making much money as he needed more capital.

Overall, while most of the migrants interviewed were both very resourceful and eager to work, they were limited by the lack of opportunities available, compounded by their lack of English and the inability to transfer their qualifications and experience from Colombia. As a result, partly linked with de-skilling, many were frustrated with the limited employment opportunities confined to the cleaning sector. Many acknowledged that they could make more in cleaning than in their previous, often professional jobs in Colombia, yet hardly surprisingly, they did not find their work satisfying. While several people noted that Colombians were starting to establish their own businesses in much greater numbers than in the past, both for their own community, such as the shops and restaurants in Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre or Seven Sisters Market, or for the population in general, such as cleaning firms and window-cleaning businesses, this was still on a fairly small scale. It is expected however, that as the community grows, then Colombian businesses will expand.

Additional sources of income: borrowing money

In addition to work and benefits, migrants also turned to friends and relatives during times of need to borrow money. Around a half of those who borrowed money (of a total of 23), depended on friends (10), or to a lesser extent on family (3). This involved small amounts of money such as £10 or £20 to tide people over, and was usually reciprocal in that people reported borrowing one week and lending another. Also interesting is that 3 people had small bank loans (one of whom was undocumented), which in one case was to buy some furniture. Two people also borrowed from migrant support organisations, in this case for emergency help when they didn't have jobs.

The predominance of informal borrowing and lending small amounts of money within the Colombian community relates more broadly to the nature of support networks among migrants.

iii) COPING IN LONDON: SUPPORT NETWORKS

The nature of support networks

As with all migrant communities, those away from their homeland establish networks of support to make life easier in foreign countries (Castles and Miller, 2003). Not only did the migration process itself facilitate such networks that helped people to move and establish themselves, but it involved other forms of help, that could be tangible in terms of borrowing and lending money (see above), and intangible (such as information and advice).

Around three-quarters of the migrants interviewed reported helping out other Colombians (19 out of 25), with similar proportions receiving help themselves. Migrants noted that they provided or were provided with financial support in terms of fares to get to the UK, information, especially about jobs, advice, food, and immediate shelter for newly arrived migrants in the city.

However, while everyone noted that they received some form of support from other Colombians when they first arrived, and indeed, that they themselves had helped recently arrived Colombians, the broad consensus was that support networks were very limited, and restricted, first, to those who had newly arrived, and second, to a very small group of friends. In fact, all of those who assisted other migrants said they had given shelter to someone when they first arrived in London, with job information being the second most common form of help. As Marina noted: *'For example, my heart is very big, I can tell you honestly that I've helped and tried to help people who've just arrived, to try and help them get established, to tell them how to get a lawyer, to call friends who could get them jobs as cleaners'*.

However, people's social networks were very small. Repeatedly, people noted that they had 2-3 good friends whom they could trust, but no-one else beyond this. Despite Marina giving help to new arrivals, she simultaneously noted: *'I have few friends here, but those I do have I'm really close to'*. Along similar lines, Carmen stated, *'I have my small group of friends but we're isolated'*, echoing Ana, who reported to have only 3 friends whose houses she and her husband would visit. One woman, Adriana, said that she had only social friends; *'I have people with whom I can chat, spend some time with, pass a Sunday afternoon with, but people in whom I trust to tell my problems and private*

things, no'. Men as well as women noted a similar pattern; César said that he had friends to go for a drink with but not to confide in, while Jaime reported : *'I always go about alone. I don't like to go about with anyone,'* although he had some friends from the church and because of the shared experiences he had with other Colombians.²⁶

Lack of unity and trust

The limited nature of these networks was linked with a widespread perceived lack of unity among the Colombian population. When asked if they considered the Colombian community in London to be close-knit, the vast majority (20 out of 30) thought that it was not, with only 8 feeling that it was (2 didn't know). Reflecting this, Eduin noted: *'We go along like separate wheels; it's like there are lots of different wheels in a cog but none of them are connected ... we have a tendency to isolate ourselves ... we're selfish among ourselves'*.

In turn, people also felt that there was a severe lack of trust among the population, with 22 saying that people didn't trust each other, and only 5 saying that they did, indicating that there was even less trust than unity. Susana pointed out: *'There's no trust because we as a people have a deep-seated complex, therefore many are with one group, some with another and there's no unity, only division'*.

The reasons for this lack of unity and trust are manifold and interrelated. The first was individualism linked with materialism. People discussed how people arrived in London and became obsessed with earning money, such that they forgot about everything else. Susana again noted: *'Many people arrive here to work, work, work and they're not interested in others or the destiny of people in Colombia'*. Echoing this, Pablo repeated: *'There's no union ... I don't know but when people arrive they totally change when they begin to earn money, I think it's because the exchange rate of money is so high, and so people get envious of how much people earn'*. Underlying this was the phenomenon of 'envy' (*envidia*) that was discussed by the vast majority of migrants in some form; there was reported to be extremely high levels of envy among the population, about jobs, money and legal status in terms of whether they had legal rights to stay in the UK. David said: *'People don't help each other out in jobs, there's lots of divisions, everyone*

²⁶ See also Guarnizo and Díaz (1999) for similar findings among Colombian migrants to New York.

wants to help themselves personally and there's lots of envy'.

The differentiation in terms of legal status emerged as important here. Those with status were often thought to distance themselves from those who were undocumented, thus creating further mistrust and envy. Julián reported that: *'Those who receive benefits can't help others. If they help someone who is illegal, and immigration come round, then they are deported, I think that's what's at the root of the mistrust'*. Thus, those with benefits were afraid to help those who are undocumented in case they themselves lost their rights and status. This was reinforced by Rosario who had Indefinite Leave to Remain: *'One of the main problems here is that even though I have status I'm still frightened that it will be taken away, then what will I do?'*

This type of fear linked with deportation was the second major set of factors underlying the lack of unity and trust. As noted earlier, people were terrified of being deported, not least because some who had entered the country illegally couldn't return without risking their lives, as well as the economic implications. Ronaldo, who was undocumented and worked in a factory as a cleaner, stated: *'The one fear that I have that affects me psychologically making me very anxious is that the immigration authorities arrive at the factory to get me'*. Indeed, several people noted how they had to keep moving house when either other people in the places where they lived had been deported, or they had heard stories about various types of Home Office clampdowns.

Another frequent complaint that led to widespread anxiety was that other Colombians would inform on those without status to the Home Office. This could be the result of feud started in Colombia or London, with some noting that it even involved family members as well as acquaintances or associates. Indeed, Alejandro ended-up in a detention centre after he was reported to the Home Office as a result of a family feud that had boiled over from Colombia.²⁷ Thus, with so much to lose, this type of fear was insidious and severely undermined the social fabric of the community.

Regardless of migrant status, fear was also fuelled by the political situation in Colombia, some aspects of which had entered into life in London. As noted earlier, several people

²⁷ This type of informing among migrant groups has also been reported by Jordan and Duvell (2002) in their research on migrants in London.

reported that the arms of the various armed groups were known to have reached the UK, and that people had to be aware of informants with a political agenda as well. While none of the migrants interviewed had direct experience of this in London, Fernando, who had lived in Spain for a year before coming to London moved because someone in Spain recognised him (see earlier).

Also fuelling fear and contributing to the lack of unity were rumours about a so-called 'Colombian mafia' (gangsters that some people suggested were involved in drug trafficking). People were afraid to be potentially associated with these types of people and as a result, were very wary to trust other Colombians just in case they were involved. Pedro, a university student who had left Colombia while he was in primary school, noted, '*I don't hang around with my own people, you have to be careful as you don't know what they're doing in case they're involved in drugs*'.²⁸

Sources of unity, trust and support

From a more positive perspective, among those who identified unity and trust, this was either among very close friends (see above), especially in terms of sharing the migrant experience, or among church congregations (both the Catholic Church and Protestant Evangelical). As Jaime stated: '*We support each other because we're here for the same reason. We understand each other*'. Milena, who is part of an Evangelical church notes: '*I trust in some people from my church, but not those who aren't Christians*'. In other cases, people reportedly became united about specific issues. In one case, Alejandro noted that a young Colombian woman had been killed in a car crash and the community joined together to donate money to bring her parents over from Colombia and to pay for the funeral and so on: '*For these types of things, the community here is very united, especially the Colombian*'. In another, Roxana, noted that people were happy to organise around festivals and carnivals.^{29, 30}

²⁸Guarnizo and Díaz (1999) identified similar issues among Colombian migrants to New York where the drug culture tainted solidarity and people were afraid to be associated with a '*mafioso*' (see also Guarnizo *et al.*, 1999 on Colombians in New York and Los Angeles).

²⁹Every summer since the late 1990s, there has been a carnival for the Latin American community in Burgess Park, Camberwell, South London called El Carnaval del Pueblo (the Carnival of the People). While involving the participation of all Latin Americans, it is generally accepted that the Colombians dominate the carnival - see www.carnavaldelpueblo.co.uk – accessed 16/11/05).

Partly because of the general mistrust of other Colombians beyond their small social circle, people identified migrant support organisations as one of the few places they could turn and know that they would receive help and not run the risk of being reported to the authorities. Acknowledging the inherent bias of the sample where many people were interviewed via migrant organisations, 19 out of 24 people said that they trusted such organisations whereas they didn't trust other Colombians in general. As well as feeling that they would not be denounced by these organisations, it was also felt that they were impersonal, held no grudges and had no links with the 'Colombian mafia'. Indeed, 19 out of 24 reported using organisations, with all these discussing them favourably saying that they had received a lot of help there. Luz Maria noted: '*Institutions like this one, we receive a lot of help from them. If it wasn't for these organisations, what would become of us? Colombian families here want to help but they're too frightened to help, to have you into their home, especially when they get help from the government*'. Similarly, Enrique, '*We don't trust each other, but we do receive help from institutions like this one, they help us, they tell us where to go*',

Thus, while sources of support and levels of trust have been severely compromised in London, they are not absent altogether. Yet, solidarity is very closely bounded to trusted friends and family, and migrant support organisations. Commonalities inherent in shared migrant experiences have generally been undermined by individualism, envy, and fear linked with the armed conflict, deportation and the misplaced stereotypes about drugs.

IV) COPING IN LONDON: NEGOTIATING BRITISH SOCIETY

This final section of the report focuses on how Colombian migrants manage to negotiate British society and culture on a daily basis. In particular, it focuses on issues of discrimination and racism, which in turn is related to what migrants perceive to be the main problems facing them in London, highlighting the problems of drug stereotyping, language difficulties and lack of status.

The overwhelming majority of migrants felt that they were discriminated against in some way in London (18 out of 20). However, not all of them felt that this discrimination emanated from what they referred to as 'the English', but rather from other Latin Americans in some cases, and more commonly, from other immigrants groups. In

³⁰ Again, this was noted by Guarnizo *et al.* (1999) in relation to Colombians in New York.

particular, people complained about Black African and Afro-Caribbeans and especially those who worked in local government offices and job centres. They felt they were ignored and not given appropriate information about benefits and so on, as Rosario noted: *'It's not the English, but the Africans who work in government institutions. When you're isolated, and don't have defined status they try and make you feel really bad. They're not interested in what country you come from, they protect their own'*.

Besides this inter-migrant group racism, migrants also felt that they were singled out for discrimination because of the stereotyped association of Colombia and its people with drugs (see above – also Guarnizo *et al.*, 1999; Guarnizo and Díaz, 1999 on the US). All those interviewed mentioned this as an issue affecting their daily conduct in London. Alejandro stated: *'Listen, when you're taken in, when you're questioned, when you walk down the street, when you talk about Colombia, Colombia is always linked with drugs'*. Julián echoed this: *'When I first arrived at the building where I work, all they would say was "Colombia mafia, Colombia nice drugs". This is really difficult. Very few would every mention Colombia football, nice football, it was always mafia and drugs'*. As a result of this continual stereotyping, people reported that they stopped saying they were from Colombia, and instead, usually said they were from another Latin American country or more usually from Spain.

Having said all this, it is important to emphasise that in general people also spoke very favourably about the 'English' and said that they felt welcome in London most of the time. Jaime, for example said: *'I haven't felt discriminated against. I've worked with English, and it's great, also with Spanish and that's fine too'*. Indeed, many acknowledged that the discrimination they experienced was often indirect and related to the situation they found themselves as migrants.

Another major issue for migrants was language. They recognised that the fact that they couldn't speak English or only very basic English was a major problem in terms of interacting on a daily basis and contributed to them feeling discriminated against. Only 3 of the 30 migrants spoke fluent English, mainly because they had migrated with their parents as children and had attended local state schools. Only one other person, Carolina, reported speaking good English (although two others had migrated specifically to learn English – Rosa and Eduin). This was a continual source of anxiety for people,

much to the frustration of their children in many cases. Danilo, who spoke English fluently, said: *'It amazes me that my Dad still can't speak English. What the hell has he been doing for the last 13 years?'* He said that people were exploited in the workplace as a result: *'If someone can't speak fluent English at work they take the mick innit'*. For those without English, their children were a crucial lifeline as translators especially in terms of going to the doctor, dealing with government departments and so on.

Despite these language problems, the majority had tried at some point or were still involved in some form of adult education. However, courses were reported either to be too expensive or not available to those who were undocumented, or the standards of teaching were reported to be very low. Interestingly, a couple of people who had secured asylum also stated that they hadn't started to learn English until their claim had been settled favourably and they knew they could stay; it was worth the investment then in terms of effort and money.

These language problems compounded other problems. One of the most pervasive was the stress engendered because of lack of status or 'lack of papers'. As mentioned at various junctures in this report, people were desperate either to have their asylum claims dealt with, or if they were undocumented, they yearned for some sort of amnesty in order to regularise their situation. Indeed, even those who had secured refugee status were afraid it would be taken away as noted by Rosario above. People appeared to live in constant fear which hardly surprisingly, was not conducive to the construction of solidarity among Colombian migrants, especially when intersecting with other issues such as individualism and drugs. The desperation for a dignified and regularised condition is summarised by Jaime:

'I've never asked for refuge because I don't want the state to give me anything. All I ask is somewhere to sleep and that I'm allowed to work, and at the very least that they give me a work permit because I'm illegal. I just want that doors aren't closed on me, I don't want to do any harm to anyone, I only want to live a tranquil life, and if I have any pesos left over from what I earn here, then I can give a helping hand to my family in my country because the situation there is critical'.

The issue of stress and depression linked with lack of status was repeated frequently as

it affected every aspect of the migrant experience (see also earlier). Again, the words of Fernando summarise these sentiments succinctly:

'I just want to get out of this situation of being illegal because it's making me so stressed. It's becoming tedious, it's making me melancholy, do you understand? It's making me nostalgic. Why doesn't anything in this life change and why can't people who want to live in peace, live with dignity. I think the most beautiful thing in this life is peace, where there's life there's peace'.

To summarise, migrants were asked which problems most affected Colombians in general in London. While discrimination emerged as the most significant problem (identified by 28 out of 30 people), this interrelated with a host of other concerns. Second to this were employment-related problems (20 out of 30), linked with lack of decent opportunities beyond the cleaning sector, together with difficulties in developing professionally, and workplace abuses, not least by other Colombians. The drug stereotyping discussed above was also a major problem (17 out of 30), as well as language difficulties (16 out of 30). Lack of adequate housing and overcrowding was also mentioned by 8 people, and inadequate access to healthcare by a further 7. The other issues mentioned by the majority was the climate in London, sometimes in a joke and in others in relation to ill health as César said: *'The climate here kills us'*. Indeed, Susana, who was a refugee and so could not return to Colombia, was thinking of going to Venezuela to escape among other things, the climate.

On a more positive note, people were also asked what they liked about living in London. The most important issue was security and freedom from violence, which regardless of whether they were a refugee, was mentioned by most migrants as significantly improving their quality of life. Migrants were also keen to mention that the UK was an upholder of human rights and less racist than other European countries such as Spain. Finally, many felt that despite the poor working conditions and the exploitative nature of many working practices, they were able to earn relatively high wages when compared with Colombia (with all also acknowledging that costs of living in London were extremely high as well).

Conclusions

This report has tried to provide some insights, albeit on the basis of a small sample, into the lives and living conditions of Colombian migrants in London, one of the capital's 'new migrant groups', one of its most rapidly growing, yet also one of its most neglected in terms of how they live. The research reported here has highlighted how and why Colombians have ended-up migrating to London, which has been for a mixture of both political and economic reasons, which in turn, do not determine the legal status that migrants have (i.e. that some political migrants were undocumented and vice versa).

Colombian migrants, while certainly facing massive exigencies on arrival and settling into life in London, have not been passive victims. Instead, they have been active and creative agents who have developed innovative and enterprising strategies that have allowed them to make a living, albeit almost exclusively from a single sector – cleaning. Indeed, for many offices and companies in the city of London, it is Colombians who are maintaining their buildings as an invisible workforce. Yet, they also experience abuses at hands of their own supervisors (who are often Colombians themselves) and by the cleaning companies more generally (who are usually subcontracted by the buildings and organisations) who pay them little over the minimum wage, and certainly nowhere near the 'Living Wage' of £6-70 per hour that is currently being demanded for low-paid workers across the capital. Furthermore, even if undocumented, they often contribute to the tax base of the country through National Insurance payments, yet cannot make any reciprocal claims on the state.

As many are working as undocumented migrants, they have no recourse to challenge these decisions. Indeed, many fear both for their jobs and for their lives in case they are deported back to Colombia. Lack of papers or status is a major source of concern for this group, contributing to very high levels of stress and anxiety as a result. This is further exacerbated by damaging stereotypes that consistently associates Colombians with drugs. This, together with a host of other issues such as individualism and materialism has prevented the growth and construction of a unified social fabric among Colombian migrants. Instead, their social networks are small and limited to close friends, together with the assistance of migrant support groups.

There are important grounds therefore to recognise both the problems experienced by

this migrant population, and to think of ways in which their existence in London, as a valuable migrant community, could be enhanced. This could be done, at least as an initial first step, by addressing two major issues: first, thinking of ways to regularise economic migrants who make an integral contribution to the functioning of the London labour market³¹; and second, to address discrimination in relation to the stereotyping of Colombians with drugs. In both cases, this would go some way towards dealing with the insidious fear that permeates the lives of this migrant group in London. In turn, it would begin a move towards recognising Colombians rights and promoting social cohesion through integration, both principles encompassed within the recent Global Commission on International Migration (2005) report.

This is a highly productive, hard-working and responsible group who are contributing very constructively to the reproduction of the global city of London as a whole. It is true to say that both quantitatively and qualitatively, that London would be much worse off without the Colombian population in its midst.

³¹ See for example, the No Border campaign (<http://www.noborder.org>) that lobbies for the freedom of movement throughout Europe and the right to stay for migrants.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedule

Livelihood strategies among Colombian migrants in London

Interview schedule: individuals

Name of person interviewed (please note that all names will be changed):

Age of person interviewed:

Gender of person interviewed:

Date of interview:

Migration

- 1) What year did you arrive in London?

- 2) Did you arrive alone or with others? If with others, with whom?

- 3) Where did you stay when you first arrived?

- 4) Where did you live in Colombia?

- 5) What were the primary reasons for migrating here?

- 6) What is your current status here in the UK? Please note that this information will not be used for any official purposes or passed on to anyone else?

Educational background

- 1) What sort of educational level did you attain in Colombia?

- 2) Have you participated in any education while in the UK?

- 3) Have you taken any language classes?

- 4) How would you describe your English?

Housing/accommodation

- 1) What sort of accommodation do you live in (rented, owner, B&B etc)?
- 2) How long have you lived there?
- 3) If different from the above, where did you live when you first arrived?

Household structure

- 1) How many people are living in your household?
- 2) Who are they?
- 3) Do you share all the expenses?
- 4) Has anyone come to live with you recently?

Occupation/making a living

- 1) What sort of occupation did you have in Colombia?
- 2) Do you have any sort of work/a job here in London?
- 4) Is this temporary or permanent work?
- 5) Do you earn more than the minimum wage (£4-50 per hour)?
- 6) Ideally, what sort of work would you like to do?
- 7) Are you able to save any of your income?
- 8) If so, what do you use it for?

Other forms of income

1) Do you have any other sources of income? For example from renting rooms, part-time or extra work?

2) Where do you turn if you don't have any money? For example, friends, relatives, money lenders, organisations for Latin Americans etc.

Support networks

3) Would you consider the Colombian community in London as close knit?

4) Do people trust each other?

5) Do you help any other Colombians in monetary and non-monetary ways? For example, money lending, childcare, accommodation etc.

6) Do any other Colombians help you in monetary and non-monetary ways?

7) Do you use the facilities of any organisations for Latin Americans here in London?

Links with Colombia

1) Do you maintain any links with Colombia?

2) If remittances, what proportion of your earnings do you send and how often do you send money?

3) Are you registered to vote in Colombia?

5) Do you plan to return to Colombia?

Discrimination

1) Do you think that Colombians are discriminated against in London?

- 2) If so, what are the main forms of discrimination?
- 3) Is discrimination worse for other Latin Americans or the same?
- 4) To what extent do Colombians have to deal with stereotyping? And to what extent are these linked with drugs?

Gender

- 1) Do you think more women or men migrate to London?
- 2) Do you think it's easier or harder for women or men to settle in the UK? And why?
- 3) Is life in London very different for women compared with in Colombia? Is there a difference for men as well?

Problems faced

Overall, what do you think are the main/most important problems facing Colombians living in London?

Appendix 2: List of interviewees

Name of person	Age	Status	Employment in London
1. Pedro	20	British passport	University student
2. Antonio	24	Refugee/ILR*	Unemployed and voluntary worker
3. Roxana	16	Refugee/ILR	Student
4. Susana	39	Refugee/ILR	Unemployed and voluntary work
5. Pablo	52	ELR*	Cleaner
6. Carmen	37	ELR	Cleaner
7. Rosario	37	Refugee/ILR	Unemployed
8. César	54	British Passport	Unemployed, voluntary worker
9. Marina	37	ELR	Unemployed
10. Rosa	38	Student visa	Student, kitchen assistant, cleaner and voluntary worker
11. Danilo	18	British passport	Student
12. Adriana	27	ILR	Unemployed
13. Margarita	34	ILR	Cleaner
14. Nuria	34	ELR	Unemployed
15. Ana	62	Asylum decision pending	Housewife
16. Enrique	28	Asylum decision pending	Cleaning manager
17. Jairo	38	Undocumented	Odd job man
18. Jaime	50	Undocumented	Cleaner
19. Julián	29	Undocumented	Janitor, window cleaner
20. Lucia	51	Asylum appeal pending	Unemployed, voluntary worker
21. Luz Maria	46	Undocumented	Cleaner (houses)
22. Marcelo	38	Asylum decision pending	Cleaner
23. Ronaldo	42	Undocumented	Cleaner
24. David	57	British passport	Disabled and voluntary worker
25. Hernan	56	Undocumented	Cleaner
26. Carolina	37	Undocumented	Cleaner (houses)
27. Alejandro	50	Undocumented	Cleaner and voluntary work
28. Fernando	51	Undocumented	Cleaner
29. Eduin	44	Student visa	Cleaner
30. Milena	28	Undocumented	Cleaner and hairdresser

ILR: Indefinite Leave to Remain

ELR: Exceptional Leave to Remain



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