Where are the Host Mothers? How Gendered Relations Shape the International Experiential Learning Program Experience for Women in the South.

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**ABSTRACT:** Host communities are becoming a new subject of interest in the research surrounding International Experiential Learning (IEL), but there is a dearth of knowledge surrounding the impact of IEL programs on host families, and on women in host communities in particular. This article contributes to this body of knowledge by examining the impact of IEL programs on host mothers in a rural community in Nicaragua that receives foreign students annually. Hernandez and Rerrie argue that the burden of labour of hosting students falls on women in host communities, who are expected to perform stereotypically feminine roles in order to be seen as ‘good’ mothers and access the benefits that come from the student visits. This care labour is feminized, unpaid or underpaid, and seen as a natural extension of their roles in the community in a patriarchal society. IEL programs rely on the social dynamics in communities that are shaped by patriarchy and global neoliberal systems that have added ‘development’ and ‘community work’ to women’s roles in the community. Rather than empowering women, IEL programs also have a cost because of the highly gendered nature of the work involved for women in host communities.

**Introduction**

Host communities are becoming a new subject of interest in the growing field of research on International Experiential Learning (IEL), with most scholarship focusing on the impacts of IEL programs on “host communities” (see for example Larsen, 2016). These studies focus on the identification and analysis of such impacts, often through a normative
framework that assesses whether these are positive or negative for host communities. While some studies have explored the experiences of host families and called for IEL programs to base their relationship with them on the premise of mutuality (MacDonald & Vorstermans, 2016), others look into the experiences of host organizations, often highlighting the work that the local staff invest into “caring” for the volunteers, which included “keeping them busy at work” (Heron, 2016, p. 87). Most literature refers to “hosts” either as families, communities or organizations. However, the figure of the “host mother” is frequently referred to without further analysis of her role in the social structure that sustains IEL programs. In order to host IEL delegations, communities and organizations need to ensure that students are well taken care of while they participate in these programs. It should not be a surprise that this role of caring for student volunteers is often performed by women, often referred to as “host mothers.”

This chapter aims at contributing to the ongoing critical assessment of IEL programs by considering hosting as a gendered practice embedded in neoliberal and even neocolonial processes. Specifically, we address the following questions: Why are women often the “hosts”? What does it mean to “host” foreign students? And what are the implications of “hosting” them? We use feminist analysis to explore how women in the south engage with IEL programs and how such engagement shapes and is shaped by wider social dynamics. By doing so, we align with Cynthia Enloe’s (2014) plea to “follow diverse women to places that are usually dismissed by conventional foreign affairs experts as merely 'private', 'domestic', 'local' or 'trivial'” (p. 3). The host home in IEL programs is one such place.

In what follows, we explore the specific experience of a group of women in Santa María, a rural community in Nicaragua that has hosted delegations of Canadian high school students for almost a decade. First, we discuss the methodology used to conduct this research and the circumstances that inspire the use of a feminist analysis. Then we provide a brief discussion of “gender” from both a feminist standpoint and in light of a wider international political economy analysis of feminized labour. Second, we present our findings regarding how the act of hosting is feminized and regulated by ideas of what constitutes a “good host,” the rewards that host mothers receive from hosting, and the gender-specific costs of those rewards. Lastly, we argue that the act of hosting is a gendered practice that might reproduce neoliberal and neocolonial dynamics in the larger political economy of gendered labour. Thus, the particular ways in which rural women conceptualize and perform their role as host mothers for international student volunteers limit the possibilities for IEL programs to contribute to the empowerment of women in the Global South, and in some cases, work against women’s empowerment by adding to the unpaid labour performed by host mothers.

**Research Methods**

The data discussed in this chapter was gathered as part of a larger research project undertaken from 2014-2016 by Harry Smaller of York University and Michael O’Sullivan from Brock University, with the authors, Xochilt Hernández and Ashley Rerrie, acting as
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The main objective of this research was to explore the impact of IEL on host communities in Nicaragua. The main research questions were: (a) in what ways, both positive and negative, are host communities in the Global South impacted by IEL initiatives, (b) how are IEL participants from the Global North perceived by the host communities, and (c) what kinds of knowledge, skills and understandings develop amongst host community members through IEL initiatives?

The connection with the Canadian IEL program in question was established based on the previous involvement of the lead researchers. Given the critical scope of the research, it was agreed upon to maintain the anonymity of the program. A meeting was arranged with community leaders in Santa María to present the research proposal, solicit their consent and negotiate the conditions for participatory observation to take place. Hernández was the primary field researcher, responsible for taking field notes and conducting semi-structured interviews with host community members over a period of six months. While the researchers sought a diversified pool of interviewees, host mothers became the main informants given their direct involvement with the student volunteers. Standard ethical protocols were followed. All participants provided oral consent prior to conducting interviews and all names have been changed to keep the confidentiality of interviewees and communities. Interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Field notes from participant observation occurring before, during and after the Canadian student visits were also analyzed.

Gender was identified as a possible theme arising from the interview data. Observations recorded during volunteer visits further showed that disparities between women and men’s participation were integral to the structure of IEL programs. After analyzing the participant observation and interview data, Hernández and Rerrie began to identify a consistent narrative in the accounts of host mothers in relation to their role as host. This narrative featured women’s views on the differential engagement of women and men, and the perceived personal benefits related to their “ability to host,” which also demanded specific costs on their time and energy. Thus, we decided to explore the experiences and accounts of these women from a feminist lens in order to understand how their work, emotions and expectations make them active participants in the learning process of international volunteers, and actors in the global political economy of IEL programs. This paper follows from that line of investigation.

Literature Review

International Service Learning, as a form of IEL (Tiessen & Huish, 2014), is characterized by an explicit and structured educational objective which students achieve through involvement in service activities in an international setting (Crabtree, 2008). The “recipients” of such service are often described as either grassroots organizations or communities, and more often than not, the relationship is said to be built on the principles of “social justice” and/or “solidarity” (Larsen, 2016).
The fact that most IEL programs usually feature volunteers from the Global North travelling to communities in the Global South has raised many concerns. For instance, researchers ask whether these programs constitute a new form of colonial relations between the affluent north and the impoverished south (Perold et al., 2012), or a naturalization of such relations (Crabtree, 2013). Moreover, several researchers have discussed how IEL programs are built on a system of privilege (Macdonald, 2014), or “taken-for-granted global geographies of inequality” (Smith & Laurie, 2011), reproducing, instead of critically assessing, the global structures that perpetuate unequal relations.

Despite this rising interest in the impact of IEL on host communities, they continue to be treated as a homogeneous unit of analysis, which assumes that the “hosting” experience is the same for every community member. Notably, most research that considers the experience and perceptions of volunteer “hosts” feature host mothers among their main informants (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011; Clark, 2015; Smedley, 2016). However, these studies tend to merge host mothers’ accounts into a single and undifferentiated “community” voice. Indeed, a feminist exploration of host mothers’ experiences is overdue, especially given the apparent weight that gender has in determining their experiences.

How does gender define the experience and perspective of women and men in host communities? To answer this question, it is worth revisiting the concept of gender as it will be used in our analysis. Gender is a central concept in analyses of the unequal social structures and power relations that define women’s lives, said to be built on a binary “relation of complementary difference” that is socially produced (Budgeon, 2014, p. 318). Such a notion moves beyond individual sex-based binary roles (men vs. women) to focus more on relations that are structured by a gender ideology differentiating norms, possibilities, perceptions and expectations for men and women (Manfre & Rubin, 2012).

Working from a post-structuralist perspective, feminist scholar Judith Butler (2004) defines gender as a regulatory apparatus that produces and normalizes certain notions of femininity and masculinity for a given society. Its regulatory nature implies that a person will not only be expected to behave according to what has been socially accepted as normal for his or her gender, but will also self-regulate to ensure their behaviour fits into that normalized notion. Therefore, “gender is performative” (Butler, 1990), as it is embodied in the emotions, thoughts and actions of a person. Since gender is socially constructed, gender norms and expectations vary across time and space. Therefore context determines how norms of femininity are embodied in the activities expected to be performed by host mothers in the context of IEL programs.

Despite the growing body of research on host communities, very little research explores the ways in which gender shapes the social relations of hosts and volunteers in IEL programs. Studies that do consider the role of gender in IEL programs have mainly analyzed the experience of student volunteers (Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2004; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Other studies recognize the role of host mothers in the development of IEL programs (Clark, 2015; Hernández, 2016; Smedley, 2016). However, apart from
generating a few mentions as key informants, host mothers’ experiences and perspectives are typically merged with the wider “host community,” and their specific gendered experiences remain unexplored.

This is not an isolated issue. In fact, as Bedford and Rai (2010) remind us, “gendered questions at the heart of International Political Economy (IPE) continue to be neglected” (p. 2), and IEL is not the exception. Discussions on how people in the Global North relate to people in the Global South and participate in global economic and political systems continues to be divorced from inquiries on how gender configures those relations. Indeed, the centrality of gender for analyzing international relations continues to be tangential (Peterson, 2005). Therefore, to address our concern about gender in the context of IEL programs it is worth looking into the contributions of feminist scholars to the study of gender in the international political economy and international development contexts.

Studies on the intersection between gender relations and global capitalism have contributed to understanding how women increase their participation in world labour markets as a result of particular gendered codes (Barker & Feiner, 2010; Bergeron, 2001; Floro & Willoughby, 2016). They do so while still contributing to national and international care economies, defined as “the set of activities and practices necessary for the daily survival of a group of people in the society in which they live in” (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 36). Unpaid care work performed by women continues to be constitutive of the feminine domestic role. Other scholars point to the particular gendered codes that make women more suitable to perform deregulated, flexible and unsecure labour fostered by neoliberal economic policies (Richer, 2012). As a result, the new configuration of the global labour markets has deepened the need for women to perform a certain form of neoliberal femininity in order for them to make a living.

Research in international development has long recognized gender as a fundamental factor defining how women and men participate in and are affected by development processes. For instance, the "Women In Development" (WID) approach, popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, recognized the unequal and exclusionary conditions in which women lived. According to the WID school of thought, women needed to be brought into the economic and political spheres of society in order to contribute to and benefit from economic growth, ultimately leading to their empowerment. In the 1990s, some feminist scholars dissatisfied with the WID approach formulated the Women and Development (WAD) approach, in which the empowerment of women came along with challenging the unequal capitalist economic system that created and perpetuated poverty. Finally, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach was introduced following a critique of "women" as universal category, introducing instead gender as a category referring to "complex power relations shaping peoples’ lives" (Davids et al., 2013, p. 398). As a result, gender mainstreaming was implemented as a policy to promote women’s participation in development processes and gender equality by government departments, NGOs and multilateral agencies alike (Tiessen, 2005, p. 705).
However, as Neumann (2013) points out, gender mainstreaming in the context of neoliberal economic reform meant that the engagement of women in development processes “generated additional burdens for women and reinforce[d] the traditional sexual division of labour” (p. 4). Therefore, despite the increased efforts in development projects to explicitly promote women’s empowerment and emancipation, “gender inequalities in work burdens appear to be intensified” as women’s domestic roles became instrumental for the new globalized neoliberal economy (Kabeer, 2005, p. 20). The women of Santa María are formally organized through a community women’s agricultural cooperative, comprised of twenty women who work together to produce coffee and vegetables, host IEL delegations and coordinate community development projects through various sources of international cooperation. However, despite the unique circumstances and level of organization that the cooperative structure provides, the experiences of the women in Santa María do not escape the gendered structures created in the aforementioned globalized neoliberal economy.

The IEL Program in Santa María

The community of Santa María became involved with IEL programs through their participation in community development projects with a small Canadian solidarity-based development and education organization called Students for Nicaragua (SFN). Their IEL program is linked with institutional and financial support provided for grassroots organizations to conduct community development projects where Canadian high school students volunteer for anywhere from five to 15 days providing non-technical physical labour. Some community development projects have involved Canadian students helping to build schools and community centres, or raise livestock. Women in this community have hosted many delegations of students, and through repeated visits, have become accustomed to welcoming visitors and sharing their experiences. SFN’s IEL delegations are usually comprised of 15 to 20 students ranging from 15 to 18 years old, usually accompanied by three or four teachers. The students fundraise a significant donation that goes to the community development project fund and pays a stipend to host families.

The relationship between Santa María and the IEL organization was originally initiated based on a pre-existing relationship between a SFN coordinator and a female community leader. According to an interview with the community leader, these two individuals first met in an informal setting and talked about the possibility of Santa María hosting Canadian delegations while working in partnership with the organization to finance small projects. After consulting with other community leaders, the first SFN student delegation arrived in 2008. Although the leaders do not recall the details of this consultation process, they all reported this first experience as positive and the almost ten years of partnership indicate their ongoing interest in continuing the collaboration.

The women of Santa María continue to host Canadian delegations of high school students annually. The logistics are negotiated by the IEL program coordinators and the leaders in the women’s cooperative, who are responsible for determining who will be a
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host and who will not. The selection criteria, according to interviews with the cooperative leaders, depends both on the social engagement of the host family in the community work as well as their housing conditions, as their main interest is to ensure the students’ comfort. Host mothers receive $15 USD stipend per night, per student that they host. In general, the act of hosting the Canadian student delegation is seen as a privilege and is only accessible to those who perform their caring duties well. As will be discussed further on, the narrative of what constitute a “good host” is highly gendered.

Findings

Hosting IEL Students is Rewarding for Women

In addition to other community members from Santa María, a total of 11 host mothers from Santa María were interviewed throughout the research process, with some of the women being interviewed multiple times: an introductory interview, a second interview before the IEL delegation arrived and a final interview after IEL students left the community. These interviews were conducted between September 2015 and February 2016. Interviews were coded according to the five general themes (Context, Motivations, Benefits, Negative Impacts, Decision Making) as part of the general analysis in the original research project design, in which gendered experiences of host mothers, specifically those related to emotional and care labour were generated inductively as part of the fourth theme. We will now elaborate on these themes.

All host mothers, without exception, described the experience of hosting students as rewarding and important for their community. When asked about the benefits that came from hosting delegations, most of them made reference to the collective material benefits that the IEL program provides for their communities, like the building of a school, latrines, water wheels and agricultural utensils. In addition, the stipend that host mothers receive to take care of students was also mentioned as an economic benefit. One host mother reported:

“When they come, it is very joyful for me because they bring and pay for their food, so I am able to save my money for that week, because they bring the food and share it for me and the kid, my son.”

As reported by other host mothers, the money saved from the stipend is often used to cover preparatory expenses involved in hosting students, such as buying plastic sheets to improve the conditions of bathrooms and showers, buying blankets and bedding, and purchasing food that normally would not be accessible to families, such as meat, poultry or fish. However, as this account illustrates, the daily stipend also helps cover the costs of these items that otherwise would not be affordable.

Host mothers also mention opportunities for intercultural exchange that arise from hosting international volunteers, which gives them the opportunity to learn about new
cultures. For one host mother, hosting two male students was “a beautiful experience because I learned from them and they learned from us … every night we talked about the situation in Nicaragua, the water crisis.” This host mother also talked about the opportunity to learn English from the visiting students, stating: “I have learned a few words in English, to tell them how they’re going to bathe, to eat… I tell them ‘lunch!’ and they say yes!” The ability to learn basic words in English is seen as a major benefit according to host mothers. Research has likewise shown that one of the major difficulties of hosting international volunteers is the language barrier (Smaller & O’Sullivan, 2016). Therefore, being able to maintain interactions with volunteers despite such language barriers is usually seen as a particular skill or ability that women develop through their experiences with students. Women affirm they have learned to understand volunteers, to anticipate what they need and require. The specialized knowledge that the host mothers gain as part of the hosting experience is seen as a benefit. The women of Santa María claim to know how to properly host their international volunteers, saying that the labour that goes into hosting the IEL delegations is not excessive because they are now well-accustomed to the visits.

On a personal level, some host mothers report having developed more self-confidence as a result of hosting delegations. Such confidence is empowering for women. For instance, one younger host mother explained that the experience and interaction of hosting gave her the opportunity to overcome her shyness:

“When I came to the community, I was a very, very, shy girl. I didn’t like to go out, I was embarrassed […] when people asked me to say something I wouldn’t say a word, I was too embarrassed! But not now. Now I have so many experiences I have had with the delegations that now no one can stop me, I love to talk, and talk and talk.”

Likewise, many other women in Santa María attribute their increased self-confidence to their experience hosting volunteers, as the program provides them the space to interact with new people. Therefore, in their view, hosting provides an opportunity to develop social skills that otherwise would be very difficult or impossible to acquire.

Hosting as a Women’s Practice

As mentioned, the IEL logistics and activities in Santa María are led by the members of the community women’s agricultural cooperative. They are the main contact with the IEL program coordinators and the ones who decide the details of hosting, which range from assigning host families to organizing special activities that involve the entire community. During participant observation for the study, it was evident that these women were the ones in charge of hosting the students. These women usually spent anywhere from two to three days preparing for their arrival, for instance cleaning, buying groceries and cooking. When the delegation arrives, it is the “mothers,” as they call themselves, who have first and last contact with the volunteers. For instance, during one field visit, the host mothers woke up very early in the morning the day the delegation arrived, and they waited
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at the drop-off point for hours in order to greet the students. Only a few brought their children and the absence of men was evident; however, as one community leader pointed out, this is the norm. When the bus got there, all the women waited to greet their assigned students and take them to their home.

One host mother proudly described this role of greeting new students: “When they come, the women are in charge of doing something. We’re the ones who cook, who care [for students], the ones who work, who work in the field [with them]”. In her view, cooking and caring for the students are key components of the IEL program and sources of significant responsibility for the women. Indeed, these types of domestic activities are expected of women and often go unnoticed. One host mother explained this gendered division of hosting labour as probably rooted in the cultural attitudes that prevent men from doing domestic chores or engaging in activities seen as feminine:

“In general it’s women [who are with the students], because the men sometimes are machistas or are busy working, so the women as housewives have to work with students.”

In this account, hosting the students is an activity tied to the domestic roles that women routinely perform in their homes. Men do not engage in such chores, either due to machismo attitudes or not having time for it. The caregiving role that women play is the reason they are at the forefront of the IEL program in terms of hosting responsibilities. However, as one host father pointed out, women’s tendency to look after the needs of international volunteers’ is rooted in their caregiving nature, which is an extension of their role in the community:

“I call this community the ‘Amazonian community’ because it is women who rule here … we [men] do not have their charisma, we’re rather disinterested and passive. Here the ones interested in the community’s well-being and progress have been women.”

For him, the women’s ability to host students is not only tied to their performance of household chores, but is also linked to innate personality features such as charisma and selflessness that the women of Santa María possess, but lacking in the community’s men. This point highlights how the “caring” abilities attributed to women, both in the household and wider community, set women up to play the role of host mother for IEL students. As described by one host mother and cooperative member, “the mothers, we the mothers are the ones in charge of them [students], meaning those among coop members.” She then elaborated on the fact that women in the coop are usually very coordinated and organized. Indeed, the acknowledgement of being in charge also refers to a sense of responsibility towards the program which will be explained further on.
Hosting as Time-Consuming Domestic Labour

As previously described, the accounts of host mothers and one host father identify “hosting” as an activity performed exclusively by women, and usually by the members of the women’s cooperative in the case of Santa María. As one former host mother describes:

“They [the coop leaders] select the people who will host according to the conditions of their houses, but mostly depending if they are caring or not, if they don’t leave their house and the students unattended.”

This account once again illustrates that the ability to “care for” is understood as fundamental in order to host students, and that includes the ability to commit large amounts of time and energy to the activities involved in hosting. Indeed, hosting requires a lot of preparation time, which intensifies a few days before the students arrive. One host mother mentioned some of the activities she performs in order to prepare for the students:

“Well, I prepare their beds, I clean the sheets very carefully. They [the coordinators] give us the money beforehand, some days before […] so we go buy whatever they will drink and eat, so the day they arrive we have the dinner ready to feed them.”

These activities can take most of the day, and they are performed on top of the normal caregiving duties that women complete for their own family. In addition, once the students arrive, host mothers have to adjust their schedule in order to fulfill all their domestic duties and still have time to spend with the students during their volunteer activities. One host mother explained that, normally, they leave the project site about an hour before lunch and run to their respective kitchens to have food prepared for the students:

“Yes, we go with them to the project in the morning, after everyone has had breakfast, and at 11 all of us mothers will come to our houses running [to make lunch] and if there is someone that is not hosting students they stay working [in the field].”

Therefore, hosting is effectively a full-time job to which women are committed. It demands that all meals be ready on schedule, and given that women also go with their guest students to the project site, they must rush to ensure everything is done on time and they can fulfill all the caring duties they are responsible for. While their testimonies indicate that most host mothers are aware of the extra work load that the students create, they often made it very clear that it was not a burden for them and even took pride in how well they performed these duties.
Hosting as a Specialized Practice

Host mother’s responsibilities take the form not just of cooking and cleaning during the visits, but also of ensuring that volunteers stay healthy and safe during their time in the community. The concern for students’ safety is a constant theme in host mother’s testimonies, and the ability to guarantee volunteers’ safety was referred to as the number one criteria for any host. For instance, when asked if only cooperative members could host volunteers, one of the main coop leaders commented: “No, we have two or three families who are not part of the cooperative that we have assigned to host students, but they already know how to take care of a foreigner.” Following up on the question, she elaborated on what special knowledge was necessary to “take care of a foreigner”:

“They have to know that everything needs to be cleaned with purified water, they [the women] know. If they [the students] want to drink coffee, it has to be with that water and the vegetables need to be cleaned with that water. We all want them to be healthy and if someone gets sick, we know we have to cook boiled food for them and they get healthy.”

The water she is referring to is purified, sealed bottled water which is brought to the community by the IEL program.

There are special requirements to host that are related to the notion of “appropriate” care. Only women who know how to “do it right” can host volunteers. This notion of appropriateness suggest that the needs of Nicaraguan and foreign guests are different. Indeed, the fact that the Canadian students are not familiar with the environment of a rural community in Nicaragua means they require extra care and attention to ensure their health and safety. In this regard, one host mother commented on students’ vulnerability in the new environment, referring to potential risky situations that they, as a cooperative, try to avoid, especially in regards to students getting sick:

“Yes, because you cannot assign them anywhere where they will not be taken care of, or where someone will not cook the right way and risk them getting sick, because some of those students are very delicate, especially from their stomachs.”

The notion of “delicate” students was also mentioned by another host mother, who was not a cooperative member, making special reference to what she was told by cooperative members and IEL program coordinators:

“They tell us that some of them are very delicate, so we have to buy sealed oil, sealed rice, everything sealed because we cannot buy the unsealed things that are sold in the streets […] because we have to take care of them so they don’t get sick.”
As these two accounts suggest, the appropriate care needed by international volunteers is mostly related to how food is purchased and prepared. The risk of getting sick has to be avoided as much as possible, and only women who fulfill their roles and take those extra precautions are able to overcome that risk. These responsibilities also involve extra costs for women and households. Although the stipend given to host mothers means that extra money is coming into the household, the women often spent more money on food than they normally would, and many women said that they tried to use all of the extra income on making the students’ stay more comfortable. The stipend seems to not be enough. Most of the times, host mothers cover their own transportation costs to buy supplies. One mother expressed that she budgeted the stipend provided by the program and accommodated the costs to not go over it, but sometimes that was not possible and she had to cover her transportation costs:

“That is the only thing, I tell you, if we start falling short [with money] I accommodate few things to run smoothly and other times I have to cover my transportation costs; but as things are getting more expensive, maybe [they could] increase more [the stipend] because now everything is more expensive.”

Another host mother also mentioned that the constant increase of general food prices, which were more significant in the particular type of foods they purchased for the students.

In addition, the notion of “appropriate care” requires “appropriate supplies” which sometimes require mothers to travel further than they would to buy their own groceries. One host mother bought her groceries from a supermarket rather than her regular market:

“They give us the money beforehand so that we can go buy what the students are going to eat and drink … To take care of them better, so that they don’t get sick, I buy things in the supermarket.”

Therefore, all the precautionary measures and the risks involved make hosting an activity that involves a high degree of responsibility which is exacerbated by the host mothers’ impressions of the accountability involved. For instance, one host mother, who is not a member of the cooperative, mentioned:

“The organization [referring to the women’s coop] has to choose the places where the students will be well taken care of, where they will not get sick so that whoever hosts them is accountable to their embassy or the house they stay with in Managua [referring to the IEL program].”

In her view, given the students’ nationality and the fact that they are volunteering in the community as part of a formal international program, hosting the students also involves responsibilities with distant and powerful institutional third parties. Such a notion elevates the level of complexity in which the practice of hosting takes place, as the hosts are
conscious that the students’ status in the country is mediated by wider international processes. These implications will be discussed further in the next section.

**Discussion**

According to the host mothers interviewed, participation in and engagement with IEL programs provided benefits for the community as a whole, as well as new opportunities for individual women who host students. The student visits provide a sense of recognition that increases women’s self-esteem and legitimizes their local and personal struggles. IEL programs also provide spaces for women to develop leadership and intercultural skills such as public speaking, effective communication (including nonverbal) and wider perspective about other cultures. However, the findings of this research show that these opportunities and benefits also come with a cost for host mothers.

Accounts of host mothers and the observed dynamics that take place during the facilitation of IEL students suggest that the practice of hosting students constitutes a specific performance of a particular gendered role. The additional labour that host mothers perform can be understood as feminized care work, where their emotional and physical labour is largely monetarily uncompensated and not socially valued. As women perform the specific activities required to assist students with their basic needs in a completely new environment, they are able to engage in social relations with the students and access to the rewards such relations allow. However, this performance is bounded in the particular context of ISL as they take on more reproductive duties in their homes and commit to fulfilling the requirements set to be selected as a host. As mentioned above, women first have to demonstrate that they have the skills to cook, clean and keep home to an acceptable level to host students, with women priding themselves on being able to cook in a way that prevents students from getting sick. This feminized labour is an unrecognized or “natural” extension of the women’s roles in a patriarchal society.

The interviews illustrate that these domestic activities involve a certain kind of specialized knowledge to be performed properly and host the students well. This “specialized knowledge” is demanded as the international nature of the guests poses special risks for them and their relationship with the IEL program. Therefore, hosting is gendered not only because it is performed by women, but also as it is shaped by certain regulatory expectations of how that practice should be performed. Namely, only women who demonstrate that they have the skills to be a “good” mother are given foreign students to host, where parameters for “good hosting” and appropriateness of care are determined by the IEL program and patriarchal standards of performing domestic work. The skills that women are able to develop are functional in the IEL context as they prepare the host mothers for other international hosting experiences in the future.

It should be noted that the need to possess such skills responds to a wider trend of labour market shifts that correspond to neoliberal processes (Larner & Craig, 2005), which coincidentally demand social and emotional skills which are often feminized. This way, the
context in which the IEL social relations are embedded produce the gendered self-regulating subject (Katz, 2005) of the host mothers, who, in order to ensure benefits for the community and themselves comply with the specific care that the foreigners require. Furthermore, the fact that host mothers sustain what they see as the appropriate caring standards for the international student volunteers, often using their stipend to cover those costs and even compensating additional expenses, reproduces the precarious conditions in which women perform their domestic roles. As Larner and Craig (2005) note, “the re-embedding economic and social activities after “more market” oriented forms of neoliberalism” (p. 419) set the social conditions for keeping the unpaid and underpaid labour in the feminized and domestic realm.

These implications also echo some of the criticism of the Women in Development approach. The experience in Santa María suggests that host mothers replicate certain subjectivities as a result of the context in which they engage with IEL delegations. As Neumann (2013) writes, “involvement in these programs shapes women’s subjectivities in particular ways, leading them to take pride in their capacity to cope with their own adversities” (p. 2). Thus, while women may feel more confident in their abilities to take care of foreigners or to advocate for the needs of their communities, their way to engage in the program is inevitably influenced by neoliberal politics, as these rely “on the assumption that there is ‘no alternative’” (Craig, 2005, p. 631). This can result in the further detriment of their personal conditions in order to access opportunities that have been denied to them as part of larger systems of inequality.

Such conditions produce a micro caring economy (Rodriguez, 2015), in which host mothers engage in unpaid domestic and care labour in order to maintain their relationship with the program, as a way to guarantee a wider development opportunity for their community. Indeed, the leaders in the Santa María exercise their agency in a very constrained global structure of inequality, when working, with genuine desire and drive, to ensure that their community has options for their development. However, these options have been shaped by the current neoliberal economy in which international volunteer groups fulfill basic community needs that are left unaddressed by the Nicaraguan government.

Therefore, IEL programs are an arena of international politics where international actors engage with one another, and also constitute an arena of international politics where women from the South engage in particular ways. On one hand, the work that these women invest under the argument of "working for their community" subsidizes costs for the Canadian state to ensure international education options for its citizens, while on the other hand subsidizing costs for the Nicaraguan government to cover basic need for education and health infrastructure in the community. What would otherwise cost thousands of dollars is provided for free, saving both nations significant amounts of capital at the expense of women’s unpaid time and energy.
Conclusion

The host mothers of Santa María express their enjoyment for hosting delegations of Canadian students. They take pride in their knowledge of how to take care of foreigners and defend the collective benefits that their community has access to as a result of their participation in IEL programs. However, as our data indicates, the act of hosting and the particular ways in which women perform the role of ‘host mother’ is highly gendered, as the standards and restrictions that women conform to in order to be seen as a ‘good’ host mother are extensions of the unpaid care labour that women already perform to run their homes and communities.

This performance has particular implications for women in the Global South, as it translates into higher demands on their already exhaustive domestic roles. In addition, we have clearly identified how the gendered nature of the act of hosting is shaped by wider social dynamics embedded in the global neoliberal economic system that reproduce the inequalities in which these women live. IEL programs can perpetuate the ‘gendered burden of development’ in Nicaraguan communities much like other NGO-led development programs: “By exploiting women’s unpaid and underpaid labour, these programs entrench established gender roles and responsibilities” (Neumann, 2013, p. 2). The global neoliberal system also defines the particular social relations women can engage with in an IEL context. Such relations are not produced in a vacuum. They constitute a reflection of the wider North-South international relations that continue to foster inequality between the wealthy North, benefitting from their participation in and propagation of neoliberalism and neocolonialism, and the structurally impoverished South, exploited by those same global systems.

Could this mean that hosting foreign students is a form of feminized care labour embedded in the particular relations produced in the IEL context? The particular notions of host mothers in regards to how they perform their role with foreign students suggest so. However, as we lack more accounts of how hosting is performed in other circumstances, we can only conclude that this could be the case for this particular Nicaraguan context.

This is not to say that this IEL program, nor any other program, intentionally creates the dynamics that produce this gendered practice. There is an urgent need for more feminist exploration of how the hosts in the south engage in the particular social relations produced in the IEL setting. More research into this topic is needed, and individuals responsible for developing IEL programs must be aware of the costs to women who perform the unpaid domestic and care labour associated with being a host mother. Only then can we improve programs by compensating women fairly for the labour performed during student visits, breaking down gendered barriers and encouraging men to share the organizational and participatory burden of IEL student visits to their communities.
References


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