

Qualitative Longitudinal Analysis of Labor and Migration Trajectories of Spaniards in Mexico City and London

Análisis longitudinal cualitativo de las trayectorias migratorio-laborales de españoles en Ciudad de México y Londres

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the development of the labor and migratory trajectories of Spanish migrants in Mexico City and London in relation to the contextual changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, qualitative longitudinal research was developed in which biographical interviews were carried out with 43 Spaniards with migratory experience in the destination cities during two separate observation periods. It was found that, faced with the changing contextual conditions derived from the COVID-19 pandemic and the feeling of uncertainty linked to this situation, these matters activated alternative plans and projects (migratory and biographical), exercising a kind of anticipatory agency. This research contributes to understanding strategies and responses of certain types of migrants amid the sanitary crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, based on discussions related to social anticipation and human agency in crisis contexts, from a biographical perspective.

Keywords: 1. longitudinal analysis, 2. international migration, 3. biographies, 4. London, 5. Mexico City.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el desarrollo de las trayectorias laborales y migratorias de migrantes españoles en Ciudad de México y Londres relacionado con los cambios contextuales ocurridos durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Para ello, se desarrolló una investigación longitudinal cualitativa en la que se realizaron entrevistas biográficas en dos momentos de observación distintos a 43 españoles con experiencia migratoria en las ciudades de destino. Se encontró que, ante las cambiantes condiciones contextuales derivadas de la pandemia de COVID-19 y la sensación de incertidumbre vinculada a ello, estos sujetos activaron planes y proyectos (migratorios y biográficos) alternativos, ejerciendo una suerte de agencia anticipativa. Esta investigación contribuye a comprender las estrategias y respuestas de cierto tipo de migrantes ante la crisis sociosanitaria derivada de la pandemia de COVID-19, a partir de discusiones relativas a la anticipación social y la agencia humana en contextos de crisis, desde una perspectiva biográfica.

Palabras clave: 1. análisis longitudinal, 2. migración internacional, 3. biografías, 4. Londres, 5. Ciudad de México.

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INTRODUCTION²

This paper aims to analyze the migration and labor trajectories of Spaniards who left their country during the Great Recession (2008-2015) in relation to the contextual changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in two destination cities: Mexico City (CDMX) and London. Changes in the regulatory frameworks governing migration governance in both cities were considered, as were the characteristics related to the configuration of their labor markets and the experiencing of certain life events.

These changes stem from the international socio-health and economic-labor crisis that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit in London, and the transformations in migration governance in Mexico. These situations modified both the international migration landscape, and the labor market migrants found themselves in, with implications for the future of their lives. Therefore, the aim is to explore how these individuals responded to a context of changing conditions and multiple crises (Gandini et al., 2022).

Based on qualitative longitudinal biographical research (Cavagnoud et al., 2022; Hosnedlová, 2020; Rivera, 2012) consisting of two observation periods separated by a period of five years (2018-2023), this study explores the changes and continuities in the labor and migration trajectories of Spaniards who resided in Mexico City and London before the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also analyzes the evolution of these trajectories in light of the contextual changes, examining whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures adopted by the destination countries influenced their migration and labor decisions.

Also, the contribution of jointly analyzing North-South (Spain-Mexico) and North-North (Spain-United Kingdom) migrations (Masanet & Moncusí-Ferrer, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2019) is emphasized, understanding the mobility of Spaniards to London under dynamics typical of a periphery-center migration, within the Global North (Cortés et al., 2020; Lafleur & Stanek, 2017; Lulle et al., 2018).

Migration projects play a central role in shaping migrants' biographical plans and projects and are affected by the living conditions achieved by them in their destinations. These conditions have been explored through the analysis of socio-labor integration (Grande-Martín & Del Rey-Poveda, 2012; Hosnedlová, 2020). The notion of a migration project refers to the intentions, expectations, and plans linked to the decision to migrate, as well as to the representations about the life plan that will develop at the destination/reception place (Ataide, 2020; Izquierdo, 2000). This notion allows us to link such discussions with those pertaining migrants' agency in the unfolding of their biographies.

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The migration project represents an exercise in anticipation to define the goals associated with the migration experience, visualizing the goals intended to be achieved through mobility (Giannuzzi, 2018). Decisions related to a new migration, return, or even permanent settlement at the destinations are often based not only on experiences during mobility, but also on what was planned, pre-visualized, and targeted in previous stages of the migration process.

The migration project is thus conceived not only from the perspective of the individual, but also in relation to the plans, goals, and needs of other people who are part of the migrant's primary groups, primarily family members (Ataide, 2020; Izquierdo, 2000; Pumares, 2017), similar to what is proposed from the life course approach under the notion of interconnected lives (Mora & De Oliveira, 2022). Such an approach represents a core element in analyzing migrants' decisions from a biographical and longitudinal approach, accounting for the intentions and motivations underlying migration decisions, even more so when seeking to integrate prospective and retrospective perspectives (Hosnedlová, 2020).

In turn, the insertion process refers to how migrants integrate and assimilate into different spheres of social life in their places of arrival (Alarcón et al.; Rivera, 2015). Social-labor insertion is thus understood as an interplay between the individual strategies deployed by migrants and the socio-institutional frameworks that characterize the contexts of reception—the way in which labor markets, migration policy (or policies), or socio-relational dynamics, among others, function (Grande-Martín & Del Rey-Poveda, 2012; Portes & Börocz, 1989).

This paper links discussions about the settlement of migrants in host societies with those related to their agency, recovering notions such as that of “bounded agency,” which proposes a conception of agency bound. The assumption is that, to a certain extent, individuals anticipate the consequences of their actions, and this serves as a reference for choosing between different possible courses of action (Mora & De Oliveira, 2022) in line with proposals regarding the notion of migration project.

The situation of Spaniards who emigrated to Mexico City and London during the Great Recession, the *new wave of Spanish emigration*, is addressed. This took place along a brief change in the migratory cycle in Spain—reversed in the second half of the 2010s—characterized by an increase in outflows and a decrease in immigration flows (Bayona & Domingo, 2022; Esteve et al., 2021; Vásquez et al., 2021). Although a return to pre-crisis migratory dynamics is currently observed, there is also a certain persistence in the number of Spaniards residing abroad, as well as a greater emigration of nationals compared to pre-recession flows (Esteve et al., 2021; Bayona & Domingo, 2022).

This study particularly analyzes the evolution of migration and labor trajectories between the time Spaniards migrated and the COVID-19 pandemic. These are two key moments, contextually speaking—characterized by uncertainty, fear, and multiple crises arising from the pandemic—directly linked to critical moments in the lives of these individuals (Leclerc-Olive, 2009; Martínez-Curiel, 2018; Rivera, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic produced changes in global and regional

migration governance (Castillo, 2021; Gandini et al., 2022; Miranda, 2023; París-Pombo, 2022), with economic-labor and regulatory-institutional consequences. This situation represents one of the axes on which the second observation point (2OP) pivots.

In the framework of discussions on how contextual transformations influence migrants' trajectories and biographies, this article raises the question of whether their decisions respond to contextual pressures or individual motivations, linked to their migration plans or the experiencing of certain events. Along the same lines, it questions whether the COVID-19 pandemic modified the plans reported in the first observation point (1OP) or rather accelerated the occurrence of events and processes that migrants already considered concretizing at some point in their lives; that is, whether it modified their plans or merely facilitated the (in some cases hasty) occurrence of certain events and situations.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative longitudinal methodology based on a biographical-narrative approach was used to reconstruct the labor and migration trajectories of Spaniards with migratory experience in Mexico City and London, two megacities with very different contextual and structural characteristics. The data collected on the same study subjects were analyzed at two observation points, resulting in information that goes beyond a single retrospective reconstruction of their life journeys.

This methodology is especially useful and fruitful for investigating migration decision-making from a dynamic perspective, in line with the nature of the migration process (Hosnedlová, 2020; López-Sala, 2020), as it allows the observation of the intentions and motivations of individuals when facing various life situations during their migration process, without overlooking the relationship of these decisions to their migration and life projects (Giannuzzi, 2018; Hosnedlová, 2020). Thus, the biographies of migrants are analytically understood from the intersection of past, present, and future (Cavagnoud et al., 2022; Leclerc-Olive, 2009).

The importance of collecting both prospective and retrospective information at each observation point is thus highlighted, as information about subjects' projects at a given time is compared with information obtained in subsequent observations, analyzing the relationship between these projects and the current situation. This makes it possible to reconstruct the individuals' courses of action, the intentions and motivations underlying their decisions, and to delve deeper into migrant agency in the development of their biographies. This is a methodological strategy "ideal for exploring the causal processes of the temporality of events [...] how migratory intentions/decisions are constructed, modified, and maintained over time in a context of uncertainty" (López-Sala, 2020, p. 19).

Moreover, this approach also allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional dimension associated with migration processes, a key issue for understanding and identifying the motivations underlying the decision-making of migrants over time (Cardenal, 2016; Giannuzzi, 2018; Leclerc-

Olive, 2009), which is especially useful for analyzing situations related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews conducted under this approach allow for a reflective perspective on the part of the individuals (Alheit, 2012), leading to the development of a biographical narrative from which their trajectories are outlined, linking current events and their interpretations with their previous biographical development and future projections (Mora & De Oliveira, 2022; Rivera, 2012). They also allow us to apprehend how individuals reorganize their biographical narratives, adapting them to the moment in which they are interviewed (Alheit, 2012). Therefore, it is of particular analytical interest to interview again the same informants after a certain period, especially when, in the meantime, major events take place, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit.

We worked with migrants from Spain in these cities because they are representative of the flows linked to the *new wave of Spanish emigration*, paradigmatic cases of the main migration systems associated with mobilities following the international economic crisis that began in 2008: London for intra-European or intra-regional migrations, and Mexico City for extra-regional migrations bound to Latin America (Cortés et al., 2020; Lafleur & Stanek, 2017; Ortiz et al., 2019; Vásquez et al., 2021). These cities were chosen for our comparative research based on criteria of maximum difference, since the socio-structural conditions and characteristics resulted in highly differentiated reception contexts for contemporary Spanish migrants (Ruiz, 2023a, 2023b). Therefore, the results allow us to observe how individuals of similar characteristics encounter different integration processes in each city due to contextual configurations, which in turn result in different consequences for their trajectories and biographical itineraries.

The sample consisted of Spaniards who left their country during the Great Recession; at the 1OP, they had been residing in the destination city for at least two years; they are professionals, of higher or specialized education; they come from urban contexts; they were working in the destination city at the 1OP; they have/had regular immigration status in the destination city, which allows/allowed them to reside and work regularly; they agreed to be re-interviewed, reflecting the changes experienced during the studied period.

As shown in Table 1, the sample is balanced by sex and number of informants in each city. Most interviewees were between 35 and 44 years old at the 2OP, largely due to the fact that the “young” (under 30 at the 1OP) age groups changed between the two observation points. Similarly, a relatively balanced distribution of educational level was observed in both cities. Finally, slightly less than half stayed in the destination city, and among those who remigrated, the majority returned to Spain.

Table 1. Distribution Of Interviewees by Sex, Age Group, and Education

		Current age (years)			Education			Residence at 2OP		
		≤34	35-44	≥45	Higher technical degree	Bachelor's degree	Post-graduate	Stayed	Returned	Remigrated
Mexico City	Women	2	5	3	2	5	3	3	5	2
	Men	4	6	2	3	4	5	7	4	1
London	Women	3	8	1	3	2	6	7	3	2
	Men	3	4	2	3	5	1	4	4	1

Source: Own elaboration.

At the 1OP, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect information regarding the informants' biographical development, particularly emphasizing their work, migration, and family experiences. This occurred in a particular socio-structural context, as they left their country during the Great Recession. This data collection took place between June 2018 and June 2019 in Mexico City and London.

The 2OP is characterized by socio-health uncertainty and instability, which led to changes in the economic and labor scenarios (labor markets) and at the regulatory-institutional level. Data collection in the 2OP took place between June 2022 and March 2023. The majority of those interviewed in the 1OP continued to collaborate with this research; 43 subjects were re-interviewed in both cities, 22 in Mexico City and 21 in London, representing a survival rate close to 80% of the total number of interviewees in the 1OP.

The scenario from which the interviewees visualized their plans and projects in the 1OP changed radically. Having questioned them on their expectations and future plans, we analyze how the projects built at a time marked by given socio-structural and personal conditions actually constitute or not the basis for defining the courses of action followed later.

Following with the information collected previously (1OP), this information was complemented and updated based on four elements: regulatory changes in labor and migration that occurred during this period; major socio-structural and economic-labor changes; major events experienced in the areas of labor, migration, and family; and migration and biographical projects reported in the first interview. The migration policies and labor regulations governing migration-residential and labor conditions for Spaniards in both cities were also reviewed, identifying the main changes so as to delve deeper into their relationship with the development of labor and migration trajectories.

In order to systematize the information collected in the interviews, the main themes and dimensions that emerged in the stories were identified, returning to both the topics defined in the script and the categories that emerged along. This, in turn and in biographic-narrative terms, gives

subjects ample room to develop their own ideas and narratives based on the proposed topics, thus prioritizing meaningful connections and exploring the meanings developed by the interviewees (Cardenal, 2016; Leclerc-Olive, 2009). MAXQDA software was used as a support tool to code the information, generating a coding system that allowed for us to identify the main regularities and key themes for the analyses.

Once systematized and coded, the information was organized around the three temporalities considered, taking into account the different analytical points defined: pre-migration situation, 1OP, and 2OP. It was also organized around the main dimensions observed: migration, employment, regulatory-institutional, and socio-familial. This way, the interrelationships between the different trajectories and their evolution were identified, a fundamental analytical exercise in the development of longitudinal research (Hosnedlová, 2020; Martínez-Curiel, 2018; Mora & De Olivera, 2022; Rivera, 2012).

In addition, to systematize the information related to the “objective” development of the trajectories—that is, to organize the key events that make up the interviewees’ biographical itineraries in terms of migration, work, and family—we resorted to the Ageven matrix and its applications for the qualitative analysis of biographies (Cavagnoud et al., 2022). This enabled the observation of phenomena at different levels of analysis—individual, socio-familial, and contextual—allowing for a perspective that reveals the correspondence between historical and biographical time, thus revealing the main regularities based on the reconstruction of trajectories (Cavagnoud et al., 2022; Mora & De Oliveira, 2022). This information was collected through brief questionnaires in which interviewees were asked to identify key events in the appointed areas, along with information regarding the year and place of occurrence, duration, main reasons, etc., issues that were subsequently explored in depth in the interviews.

FROM MIGRATION PROJECTS TO SOCIO-LABOR INTEGRATION. MIGRANT STRATEGIES FOR OUTLINING THEIR BIOGRAPHIES IN CRISIS CONTEXTS

Through their actions, strategies, and projects, migrants take part in the development of their biographies, exercising their agency, which is limited by the contextual conditions in which they live (Mora & De Oliveira, 2022; Rivera, 2012). In this research, the socio-health crisis and recent regulatory-institutional and economic-labor changes are presented as contextual transformations to which migrants must react, adapting their migration decisions and projects (Hosnedlová, 2020). The aim is not to present an ultra-rationalized view of these individuals, but rather to highlight that they do not passively face changes in the contextual conditions that somehow frame their lives and experiences.

Migrants take active part in the development of their biographical itineraries through three major elements, positioned at different temporalities and analytical levels. First, anticipatorily, through the ideation of migration projects, conceived in dialogue with their biographical projects, which can be updated and modified during mobility (Hosnedlová, 2020; Pumares, 2017). The

objectives, goals, and expectations set in the initial stages of the migration process provide an interesting basis for understanding the strategies, decisions, and actions developed by migrants throughout their migration experience (Giannuzzi, 2018; Izquierdo, 2000)

Secondly, attention must be paid to the processes of socio-labor integration experienced at the destinations. These processes, insofar as they reflect the process of settlement in the host society and its living conditions, represent the main element for understanding the experience of international mobility. Thus, both the migration project and socio-labor integration serve to understand the actions and decisions of migrants, based on individual factors or those related to their first-degree social relationships, such as family relationships (Grande-Martín & Del Rey-Poveda, 2012).

Thirdly, the transformations in the contextual, socio-structural, and regulatory conditions—migration policy (or policies)—that surround migrants' experience must be taken into account, limiting or enabling the development of different strategies for developing their lives. Although migrants possess agency, which they exercise to varying degrees and in different ways throughout their lives, this capacity is limited by the contextual and regulatory conditions that structure migration processes (Rivera, 2015).

In order to analyze the integration of migrants into the labor market, a series of fundamental theoretical categories and proposals must be presented, highlighting two issues: dual and/or segmented labor markets (Fernández-Huerga, 2010; Piore, 1983), and the division of migrant labor (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019; Wills et al., 2009).

Labor market segmentation refers to its division into primary and secondary segments, which hold practically opposite characteristics. The primary segment is characterized by favorable working conditions based on significant capital investment, innovation, and development, while the secondary segment is characterized by worse working conditions (low wages, fewer benefits, worse hours, etc.) and is based on the availability and intensive use of labor (Fernández-Huerga, 2010: 120; Piore, 1983).

In highly segmented markets—such as Mexico City and London—there is also a division of migrant labor, in such a way that migrants generally remain trapped in the secondary segment (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019; Wills et al., 2009). This situation varies depending on the relationship between individual and contextual characteristics; for example, certain types of migrants, such as those from the Global North, tend to face the positive side of segmentation when they migrate to societies of lower economic development (Masanet & Moncusí-Ferrer, 2020). Market configuration and dynamics contribute to their insertion into the primary segment, a situation reinforced by certain socio-relational dynamics linked to logics of inequality, in turn associated with postcolonialism (Demetriou, 2016). Similarly, when the direction of flows changes—from the Global South to the Global North—we observe an almost opposite situation (Delgado-Linero, 2022; Gandini, 2015).

Due to all this, we must address the contextual differences that characterize the migration of Spaniards to Mexico City and London, mobilities marked by contrasting economic-labor, social, and institutional dynamics (Mendoza, 2018; Ruiz, 2023a, 2023b). While the educational credentials and work/professional qualifications of migrants impact their socio-labor integration in destination cities, the way in which they can activate and/or leverage these resources depends on the conditions of the receiving context (Delgado-Linero, 2022; Gandini, 2015; Portes & Börocz, 1989; Staniscia et al., 2021).

This is where the idea of intra/extra-regional migrations becomes relevant, interpreted from perspectives that reflect mobility between the Global North and South and relations between center and periphery (Cortés et al., 2020; Lafleur and Stanek, 2017). In this research, intra-regional (intra-European) migrations are linked to more unfavorable situations in the receiving labor market and society, compared to extra-regional migrations (to Latin America). The characteristics of the market in London, from its position as a global city (King et al., 2016; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2019) and as a receiver of population within an intra-European and intra-regional migration (Cortés et al., 2020; Lafleur & Stanek, 2017; Staniscia et al., 2021), differ notably from the characteristics of Mexico City as a place that receives Spanish population (Mendoza, 2018; Ortiz et al., 2019; Ruiz, 2023b).

Since socio-labor integration largely depends on the reception context faced in the receiving places and societies (Delgado-Linero, 2022; Gandini, 2015; Portes & Börocz, 1989; Staniscia et al., 2021), the dissimilar institutional and contextual conditions in which mobility occurs within intra-regional and extra-regional migration systems, especially when they occur between the Global North and the Global South, are related to the definition of distinct migration projects (Giannuzzi, 2018). This situation ultimately marks the labor and migration trajectories of individuals, resulting in lasting consequences for them. In short, the direction of flows, toward the Global North or South, affects Spanish migrants differently, as the experience and accumulated resources vary depending on where the migration is bound to (Cortés et al., 2020; Masanet & Moncusí-Ferrer, 2020).

Lastly, the two migration systems investigated in this research face distinct regulatory and institutional frameworks, whose regional migration governance is notably different. While the intra-European migration system is characterized—for the United Kingdom, until Brexit—by freedom of movement of citizens and goods, in the last decade, Mexico's role in regional governance has been fundamentally based on containing population flows towards the north, following guidelines largely defined by the United States (Castillo, 2021; Miranda, 2023; París-Pombo, 2022).

MIGRATION POLICY (OR POLICIES) IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED KINGDOM: FROM BREXIT TO THE MIGRATION CORRIDORS OF THE AMERICAS

During the period analyzed, transformations in migration governance in Mexico focused on a type of mobility, populations, and migrants that do not correspond to those analyzed in this research. These changes are primarily evident on the country's northern and southern borders, and focused on controlling the inflow of undocumented migrants and migration in transit through the country through migration containment measures that seek to curb land migration to the United States. However, flows from Europe, due to their volume and characteristics, were not affected by these measures. Furthermore, the interviewees had regularized immigration documentation, which allowed them to settle and work formally, a key factor in understanding their integration into the labor market and the development of their lives in Mexico City. This is evident in the analysis of their stories and migration experiences:

Coming here (Mexico City) was very different from moving around in Europe but arriving with papers and knowing where to work made everything easier. I always had a pretty easy time with immigration, at airports and everything. I understand that it is not the same for everyone, but my experience has been positive (Máximo, personal communication, November 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_DBD).³

For London, Brexit represented a profound transformation in immigration and labor regulations for foreigners. Still, those who had been in the country before its implementation had to comply with the EU Settlement Scheme, the system used by EU citizens to reside in the United Kingdom. This system results in two statuses: *settled status*, or permanent residence, for which one must have resided uninterruptedly in the country for at least five years, and *pre-settled status*, a temporary residence permit.

The United Kingdom, particularly London, became the main receiver of population within Europe—especially for migrants from Southern Europe and the *new wave of Spanish emigration*—a situation explained by its position as a global city and a highly dynamic labor market, but which generated discontent among the British population. This fact quickly echoed in the country's political and media landscape, promoting negative discourses on migration that translated into a hostile climate toward immigrants. All of this materialized in a growing xenophobia that cannot be separated from the existing division of migrant labor in London, a key characteristic for understanding the interviewees' labor market integration and the experience they described in the 2OP:

There were not that many [migrants] when I arrived here, but a lot of them started arriving. And the people, being so British, were not very happy about it. London is different, but in the rest of the country... At first, it seemed like I would not get anywhere, but then things got

³ This code identified the following characteristics of the interviewees: CDMX/LDN (city where they reside/resided); ≤30/31-44/≥45 (age group); CONT/RET/REE (continues to reside where they were interviewed in 1OP, returned, or re-emigrated); HT/DBD/POS (educational level: higher technical, degree/bachelor's degree, postgraduate).

weird! Making a living on the streets, in jobs! I never had problems, but I know people who did, and it put many of us off the desire to be there (Valentín, personal communication, January 2023, LDN_31-44_RET_DBD).

While employability opportunities changed for newly arrived migrants, the working conditions of those interviewed were barely affected. The departure of many foreigners in recent years—due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and even London’s status as a temporary regional destination—has led to changes in the makeup of the London labor market, highlighting the relative labor shortage in various sectors.

Contrary to what might be expected, a series of beneficial findings stand out for Spaniards who stayed in London after Brexit, who experienced labor improvements in two ways: on the one hand, by finding more opportunities to access the primary segment of the market, due to a decrease in the available labor force, or by an increase in their credentials, skills, and socio-labor networks due to a longer residence time and greater “British work experience”; on the other hand, by an improvement in salary conditions for jobs in the secondary segment, especially in the hospitality sector. Since these jobs are primarily held by foreigners, due to the existing division of migrant labor in the city, when their numbers decreased, wages for such activities experienced a slight increase:

Surprisingly, I did better! Since so many people left, companies ultimately wanted us to stay, because training someone and having them leave is a waste. And since there were fewer and fewer of us, they started paying more (Gustavo, personal communication, September 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_DBD).

The implications of regulatory changes in labor matters were found to be felt, above all, among workers employed in the secondary market segment. Thus, Spanish migrants in London report greater implications of these changes on their employment situation compared to those who migrated to Mexico City, who barely participate in that segment.

In turn, the regulatory and institutional frameworks governing the entry and stay of Spaniards in Mexico and the United Kingdom—immigration policy (or policies)—are characterized by two almost opposite logics, which converged between the two observation periods due to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU. In the 1OP, the United Kingdom was still part of the EU and the Schengen Area, so Spanish migrants found a migration context characterized by freedom of movement, facilitating their arrival and integration into society and work. This situation changed in the 2OP, as an increasingly restrictive migration policy was implemented, but not as much for those already residing and working in the country before Brexit. Even so, the climate of growing hostility towards immigration permeated the decisions and strategies deployed by Spanish migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic:

As the pandemic happened along Brexit, many people left, and people were no longer arriving as before, because it was no longer as easy as it had been when we arrived.

Furthermore, with all the commotion, it seemed as if foreigners were to blame for COVID and everything bad. It made you not want to be here (Sarai, personal communication, August 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_POS).

In contrast to supranational agreements typical of the intra-European migration system, regulations for Spaniards in Mexico stem from binational agreements, which grant fewer freedoms to reside and work than in the United Kingdom. This situation meant that migration to Mexico was, in general, more planned than migration to London, as reflected in the stories. In Mexico, Spaniards face highly bureaucratized procedures that, ultimately, have implications for their social and labor integration and the decisions made during their migration process:

Everything is a mess in Mexico! When I was in France and Portugal, everything was easier, but I already knew that. You cannot arrive here just like that; you have to organize everything much more, but if you do, you can find opportunities that would not exist for me in Spain (Isabel, personal communication, September 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_POS).

In any case, Mexico's immigration policy (or policies) and their evolution during both observation points were not found to have direct implications on the interviewees' migration decisions, as changes in migration governance and labor matters focused on other types of individuals and populations.

MIGRATION TRAJECTORIES MARKED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY IN MOBILITY CONTEXTS

In the IOP, several interviewees considered a possible return to their country, a situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of access to and conditions of the existing healthcare and social protection systems at their destinations. This resulted in a degree of mistrust among Spaniards in London and Mexico City, especially when compared to their Spanish counterparts. Issues related to "fear" and "uncertainty" were some of the most recurrent ideas in the interviewees' accounts when considering returning during the COVID-19 pandemic:

We were really scared during the pandemic, like everyone else. At first, we decided to wait, but... we were really scared. We decided to go back because we preferred to be treated in Spain if something happened to us [...] because it gave me much more confidence and peace of mind (José, personal communication, September 2022, CDMX_≤30_RET_POS).

We did not know how to react, but given the situation, I thought that if something happened to me, it would be much better for it to happen in Spain, in hospitals there and close to my family (José Antonio, personal communication, January 2023, LDN_≥45_CONT_DBD).

Moreover, for those living in London, leaving the European Union (EU) brought with it significant changes in the institutional frameworks that regulate the situation of these individuals in British territory, which led the interviewees to question and/or modify their migration plans.

Given this situation, the perception of security in the areas of health and social protection related to the availability of a developed welfare state in Spain appears in the narratives as one of the main reasons justifying some of their decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly their return.

When my husband and I, who were terrified of the pandemic—with the girls here (in Mexico) and our elderly parents over there (in Spain)—realized that it was going to drag on and there was nothing to hold on to, because the way things were being handled did not inspire any confidence, we decided to return to Spain. For the sake of safety and peace of mind (Diana, personal communication, October 2022, CDMX_≥45_RET_DBD).

For those who were in London, the return was more heterogeneous depending on age and biographical moment. Based on their accounts, their decision was related to family closeness and perceived security in terms of health and care.

The role of networks, especially social and familial networks, also stands out in the interviewees' migratory decisions, whether related to settlement, remigration, or return. Among those in CDMX, the return was mainly observed among young people, at earlier stages of their life, most of whom returned to their family homes.

[I] decided to return to Spain and be close to my family because that way we could take better care of ourselves. Also, I thought I would have better conditions to cope with the lifestyle imposed on us, or for anything that might happen (Miriam, personal communication, August 2022, CDMX_31-44_RET_HT).

Broadly speaking, those who migrated to CDMX report longer mobility periods than those who chose London as their destination, which relates to their migration plans and the living conditions achieved through their social and labor integration. In the IOP, the idea of temporary migration appeared more frequently and with greater weight among those interviewed in London than in CDMX, linking the duration of mobility to their migration plan.

The narratives show that the costs and implications (both economic-material and other) of moving to/from Mexico City are greater than those of doing so to London. The following relations thus emerge: "If we left Mexico, it practically meant saying goodbye to the country forever, and we did not want that" (Nicolás, personal communication, November 2022, CDMX_31-44_REE_DBD), while for London: "There was always the possibility of returning to Spain or going to another country for a while, and if I wanted to, I just had to come back" (Leonor, personal communication, December 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_POS). Mexico is conceptualized as a distant country, whose mobility follows different dynamics than those to European countries; it represents a destination where "if you leave, you leave for good," which is why some interviewees decided to stay, due to the appreciation of their professional achievements and the lifestyle they had achieved. The sense of loss linked to new mobility is greater among those interviewed in Mexico City than in London, due to characteristics associated with intra- and extra-regional mobility:

If I left Mexico, I was not going to come back. At least not to make my life here, so I decided to rather stay. And I think I did the right thing. I have Spanish friends who returned, and before the pandemic was over, they told me they would have preferred to have stayed, but that they were not coming back (Carlos, personal communication, August 2022, CDMX_31-44_CONT_POS).

I thought: London is right next door, and I already submitted my residency papers before the pandemic, so I will go back to my parents, and when this is all over, I will see if I will stay in Spain or go back. And look, I came back (Jaime, personal communication, October 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_DBD).

In line with these ideas, more international re-migrations were documented among Spaniards in London, especially to third European countries. Among those who returned, more than half did so to places other than their city of origin, although the youngest returned to their family homes with their parents.

Summarizing, the migration trajectories here analyzed reveal more discontinuities than continuities in their development, and in the strategies deployed between the two observation points. This situation, according to the accounts of our interviewees, is primarily due to contextual pressures derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those related to the fear and uncertainty characteristic of this period. Although these trajectories are somewhat consistent with the projects reported in the IOP, in many cases the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the occurrence of events already accounted for in their migration projects, such as new mobility, especially return.

The changes experienced in family life are also analyzed, due to the impacts of family trajectories on the interviewees' migration trajectories. Most of them joined in couples, got married, or had children during this period, "increasing" their family ties between the two observation points. This shows how, during the period of uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviewees decided to connect their lives with other people. This can be understood as an attempt to grasp at certainties and find a stability and security of sorts in family life, as repeatedly stated in their narratives: "It is not that we decided to have children 'because' of the pandemic, but rather that during the pandemic, things arranged themselves to do so. The fact of being together facing this, always at home... was the push we needed!" (Leonor, personal communication, December 2022, LDN_31-44_CONT_POS).

Finally, ideas of "regression in life" associated with a new mobility are more prevalent in women's narratives than in men's, related to the life and career expectations of both men and women. Although no notable differences were found in their trajectories, there were in how they construct their biographical narratives, especially in the work and family dimensions. The different ways of experiencing certain processes of social life, as well as the way in which they narratively and reflexively reconstruct their experiences, allow us to delve deeper into these differences. When it comes to women's accounts, there is greater pressure to materialize their family projects in

contexts of mobility, linked to two issues: the implications of motherhood on working life and the pressure of age to become a mother, elements barely appearing in men's narratives:

I wish to have children, a family, a house... And there came a time when I started to feel overwhelmed, because years kept passing by, and that's unforgiving. I think men experience that differently, because it is different for them, for women it is something else (Leire, personal communication, September 2022, CDMX_31-44_CONT_POS).

LABOR TRAJECTORIES IN CONTEXTS OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION: BETWEEN ECONOMIC AUTONOMY AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER

Labor trajectories show notable differences between those who migrated to London and Mexico City (Table 2). The experiences of those who migrated to CDMX are mainly characterized by their continuities, compared to the discontinuities observed in the work paths of those who migrated to London. This due to the changes experienced in employment and occupation, which are particularly frequent among those working in the secondary market segment, as is mostly the case in London.

Table 2 shows how, for both cities, migration contributed to an improvement in the interviewees' employment situation, a trend that continued over time, with variance depending on the destination. Most migrants improved their employment situation as a result of international mobility (pre-migration-1OP), especially those who migrated to Mexico City, by finding higher-skilled jobs or finding employment. Slight differences are also observed in the employment situation of men and women in London: in the 1OP, women were employed in medium-/high-skilled jobs to a greater extent than men, reflecting better job placement.

Table 2. Evolution of Interviewees' Labor Trajectories by Job Qualification Level at Three Points in Time: Pre-Migration, 1OP, and 2OP

Observation point		Pre-migration			1OP		2OP		
	Skill level	Low	Mid/High	Unemployment	Low	Mid/High	Low	Mid/High	Unemployment
Mexico City	Women	4	4	2	2	8	1	7	2
	Men	6	4	2	1	11	1	10	1
London	Women	5	4	3	5	7	4	7	1
	Men	3	2	4	7	2	4	5	0

Source: Own elaboration.

Still, the aim is not to offer a quantitative analysis of the information, but rather to reveal the main recurrences of these processes and subsequently delve deeper into these issues in the narrative analysis:

In terms of work, coming to Mexico is the best thing I could have done, because in Spain things were temporary and of little importance, and here I have been able to grow and develop professionally. What I have achieved in Mexico would have been impossible in Spain (Carlos, personal communication, August 2022, CDMX_31-44_CONT_POS).

Differences are also found in the employment situation of migrants in both cities for 1OP (Table 2). In CDMX, almost all were employed in medium- to high-skilled occupations, in the primary segment of the market, with favorable labor conditions and in jobs commensurate with their training, enabling the furthering of their professional careers. This reflects favorable job placements in the Mexico City labor market, through mechanisms related to the positive appreciation of their *European* education, such that having educational and professional credentials from abroad was a beneficial resource for their job placement.

The situation is different in London: more than half of the interviewees, particularly men, in the 1OP worked in low-skilled jobs in the secondary segment of the market, mainly in the service sector and in industries such as hospitality (waiters, service store assistants, kitchen porters, etc.), representing less favorable job placements than in Mexico City. While relatively similar mechanisms to those reported for Spanish migrants in Mexico City were identified, in London they operated in the opposite direction: their education was undervalued in a highly competitive market where language proficiency and regional and sociocultural origin (Southern Europe) are key factors for their job placement, often representing a handicap in the development of their careers. However, language proficiency alone is not sufficient to ensure successful job placement; on the contrary, having a network and British work experience proved necessary to obtain medium- to high-skilled positions:

Finding work in your field with good conditions in London is incredibly difficult for us. For non-English speakers, it is almost impossible to attain certain positions in the job, and in life in general. British society is tremendously classist, even if they deny it. You will easily realize this by talking to other [foreigners] (José Antonio, personal communication, January 2023, LDN_≥45_CONT_DBD).

Overall, for 2OP, these individuals maintain relatively similar employment situations to those reported in 1OP (Table 2); as such, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have as pronounced an impact on their labor trajectories as it did on their migration trajectories. Two issues stand out: 1) several of those who migrated to London, especially men, improved their labor conditions/positions between the two observation points; and 2) several informants became unemployed, which is further discussed later.

All in all, international migration had a positive impact on the labor trajectories analyzed, as there are fewer unemployed people and the remaining population mostly holds higher-skilled jobs than before migrating (Table 2). Similarly, many interviewees reported the development and consolidation of their professional careers as a result of international mobility, especially among those who migrated to Mexico City. Their accounts show how migration represented a dynamic

element in their biographies, overcoming certain “life/existential blocks” experienced before the 1OP: “I have grown a lot both personally and professionally as a result of emigrating, something that seemed unthinkable when I was at my parents’ house, somewhat blocked, not knowing what to do... going to London changed everything” (Claudio, personal communication, December 2022, LDN_31-44_REE_POS).

As for unemployment, the following was identified in 2OP: these are young people, mainly women, who had relatively favorable employment situations and found in the COVID-19 pandemic the conditions to concretize family projects, reflecting voluntary unemployment associated with motherhood:

I have always worked, I have been independent, and I continue to be. But I also want to experience motherhood and raise my child. Besides, it is very expensive to pay someone [...] we decided I would stop working for a while and then resume my working life (Marina, personal communication, November 2022, CDMX_31-44_RET_DBD).

FROM THE DESTINATION PLACE TO THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE. A RELATIONSHIP THAT ENDURES OVER TIME

The migration project represents a fertile analytical category for observing how the migration experience shapes the biographies of migrants (Ataide, 2020; Giannuzzi, 2018), and qualitative longitudinal analysis represents the ideal methodological strategy, enabling both retrospective reconstruction of biographies and prospective approaches (Hosnedlová, 2020). By means of trajectory analysis, it was observed how actions and decisions in the migration and labor spheres have intertwined consequences, as they also have in other spheres, such as the family, resulting in medium- and long-term consequences for the biographical itineraries of migrants (Rivera, 2012). These findings are in line with research based on longitudinal analyses of migration processes and with research that takes up the life course approach, thus strengthening the results of this work (Grande-Martín & Del Rey-Poveda, 2012; Martínez-Curiel, 2018; Mora & De Oliveira, 2022).

In line with yet other research, it was found that the conditions of the receiving contexts of destination cities do indeed influence integration, the migration experience, and, consequently, the resources obtained during international mobility (Delgado-Linero, 2022; Gandini, 2015; Portes & Börocz, 1989). Similarly, the longitudinal approach made it possible to identify the lasting effects of migration on the biographies and trajectories of these individuals, showing how its consequences differ depending on the destination, both in objective terms and in terms of narrative and relative to individual experiences (Ortiz et al., 2019; Rivera, 2015).

There are also commonalities with research focused on analyzing the *new wave of Spanish emigration* (Masanet & Moncusí-Ferrer, 2020; Pumares, 2017; Staniscia et al., 2021; Vásquez et al., 2021), although the greater temporality accounted for in this research allows for different conclusions, derived directly from the methodological strategy employed. Studies focused on the *new wave of Spanish emigration* focused their analyses on disruptive situations and events related

to the economic crisis and its relationship with international mobility, without considering the mid/long-term consequences on the biographies of migrants and prioritizing the analysis of ruptures over continuities in their trajectories (Cortés et al., 2020). That is why this work analyzes how the decisions of individuals at critical moments, both at contextual and subjective levels, permeate the development of their trajectories and biographies over time.

Clear interrelationships were found between changes in labor, migration, and family trajectories, in line with what has been proposed by the life course approach (Cavagnoud et al., 2022; Delgado-Linero, 2022; Mora & De Oliveira, 2022). It is also important to mention that, broadly speaking, migration brought with it an improvement in the interviewees' labor trajectories, fostering the development of biographical paths that, based on their accounts, could not have been outlined without the inclusion of the migration experience in their biographies (Gandini, 2015; Martínez-Curiel, 2018; Rivera, 2012, 2015).

Turning back to discussions on what some authors have termed “progressive migrations/mobilities” (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2019), this idea has been linked to situations of accumulated and relatively permanent disadvantages, to the point of associating “progressive migrations” with “progressive precariousness” (Neuhauser et al., 2023). However, the particular characteristics of contemporary Spanish migrants, despite reporting labor mobility in a context of economic crisis, mean that their narratives and experiences are characterized rather by a kind of “accumulated advantages” (Mora & De Oliveira, 2022). The analytical/explanatory model of “progressive migrations” serves, in this case, to show how Spanish migrants make use of their resources and relative institutional advantages to respond to unfavorable contextual conditions, taking advantage of the alternatives available to them. As such, while their agency should be noted, the opportunities, facilities, and privileges they must deal with such situations are also acknowledged, when compared to other types of migrants (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017).

Similarly, in contrast to the regimes of immobility that characterized migration dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic (Miranda, 2023), this event was a trigger for mobility for those interviewed, especially in return to Spain, observing how the impacts of regulatory and institutional changes on the mobile population vary greatly depending on the type of migrant (Castillo, 2021; Gandini et al., 2022).

These ideas make more sense when we approach such discussions from territorial, geopolitical, and regional/global frameworks, which are useful for understanding both migration in the contemporary world and its consequences for these mobile individuals (King et al., 2016; Lafleur & Stanek, 2017; Staniscia et al., 2021). Comparatively analyzing north-south and north-north mobilities, different situations and consequences were identified depending on the direction of the flows: the experiences of Spanish migrants in Mexico City —north-south mobility— are notably different from the experiences described by those who migrated to London, a north-north mobility characterized as center-periphery within the Global North (Cortés et al., 2020; Pumares, 2017).

CLOSING REMARKS

This research categorizes migration as part of a broader process, that is, the biographical itineraries of migrants, problematizing discussions that conceptualize migration as a biographical rupture. In both analytical and methodological terms, it is notable that when migratory—and biographical—processes are analyzed based on broader temporalities, a series of causes, consequences, and explanatory mechanisms are identified that are distinct from those identified from shorter-term perspectives focused on the immediate consequences of the phenomenon analyzed. From this perspective, migration is embedded in the biographies of individuals, who, based on the life conditions they face, turn to migration as a strategy to shape their biographical itineraries. Linking this idea to the notion of “progressive mobilities,” we found individuals whose biographical projects consider territorial mobility as a strategy for developing such projects.

As for migrants’ agency and its connection to migration projects, it was found that these projects are materialized creatively, by reacting to life and contextual contingencies. Likewise, mobility appears as one of the main actions or strategies deployed to respond to the changing conditions migrants face in their lives, understanding these people as “mobile individuals” (Rivera, 2015), a notion broader than that of migrants, and one that reiterates the existing differences between migration and human mobility.

Based on the cases analyzed, regulatory changes in migration and labor matters did not influence the decisions of contemporary Spanish migrants as much as other types of issues did, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, family relationships, and various biographical events. Furthermore, emotional issues emerge as a key factor in understanding the actions and decisions of these migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as socio-institutional elements related to access to and availability of support, care, and social protection systems.

In closing, the changes in the contextual conditions analyzed, rather than modifying the plans of these individuals, altered the timing of certain events. That is, the COVID-19 pandemic did not radically transform the plans reported in the IOP but rather brought forward the occurrence of situations such as new mobilities or returns, the consolidation of family life, or changes in work life, among others. Finally, it can be stated that migrants do indeed exercise their agency in the unfolding of their biographies, and planning and anticipation exercises represent a key element in understanding the decisions, actions, and strategies deployed to materialize their migratory and biographical projects.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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