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Transnational guest workers in the 21st century: Gender and the agro-industry in southern Europe

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Abstract

This article analyses the contested interconnections between global structures and the living and working conditions of female temporary migrant workers by exploring the transnational condition as a means of understanding intensive and insecure post-Fordist work in late global capitalism, particularly in southern Europe. Building on existing research of migrant work experiences in the agro-business industry, the main part of the article considers three ethnographic questions: What is the impact of the transnational economy on these guest workers' lives? How does this concept relate to the working lives of women? And how can we understand the impact of intermediaries and global elites in such transnational practices? We employ the concept of transnational space applied to southern Europe alongside notions of "mobility strategies" to advance sociological inquiry into the intersections between different fieldworks – in Andalusia and the Meknes province in Morocco – and the conceptual debate concerning women's lives and experiences in transnational migration. In this guest worker model, workers who live in one country and work seasonally in another typically come from rural areas and reside abroad in barracks-style accommodations with fellow citizens. What are the challenges for women involved in such a model in terms of recruitment, transportation, work, leisure and return to origin? What space is left for social justice?

Keywords: Agro-business industry; Moroccan women; transnational practices; global mobilities; Huelva; Meknes; strawberry pickers; southern Europe; social justice; environmental health

Resumen. *Trabajadores transnacionales invitados en el siglo XXI: género y agroindustria en el sur de Europa*

Este artículo analiza las controvertidas interconexiones entre las estructuras globales y las condiciones de las trabajadoras migrantes temporales. Para ello se explora la condición transnacional como herramienta para comprender el trabajo posfordista intensivo e inseguro del capitalismo global tardío, particularmente en el sur de Europa. Basándose en investigaciones previas sobre la vida laboral en el sector agrícola, la parte principal del artículo considera las siguientes tres cuestiones etnográficas. Primera, ¿cuál es el impacto de la economía transnacional en estos acuerdos de trabajadores invitados? Segunda, ¿cómo se relaciona este concepto de «invitado» con la vida laboral de las mujeres? Y tercera, ¿cómo podemos entender el impacto de los intermediarios y las élites globales en tales prácticas transnacionales? Empleamos el concepto de espacio transnacional aplicado al sur de Europa junto con nociones de «estrategias de movilidad» para profundizar en la investigación sociológica sobre las intersecciones entre diferentes trabajos de campo —en Huelva (Andalucía) y en la provincia de Mequinez (Marruecos). Analizamos los debates conceptuales sobre las vidas y experiencias del vivir transnacional de las mujeres. En este modelo de trabajador huésped, los trabajadores que viven en un país y trabajan estacionalmente en otro normalmente provienen de zonas rurales y residen en el extranjero en alojamientos precarios junto a sus conciudadanos. ¿Cuáles son los desafíos para las mujeres involucradas en este rígido modelo, en materia de reclutamiento, transporte, trabajo, salud, ocio y retorno al origen? ¿Qué espacio queda para la justicia social?

Palabras clave: agroindustria; mujeres marroquíes; prácticas transnacionales; movilidades globales; Huelva; Mequinez; recolectoras de fresa; sur de Europa; justicia social; salud ambiental

Abstract

1. Introduction

Analysis of the southern European migration model in terms of gender has been addressed in this journal previously. The model emerged in the late 1980s, and signified a pivotal shift in European migration patterns towards the Mediterranean Basin (King and Zontini, 2000). An integral aspect of this model was the incomplete transition towards gender equality in southern Europe. In the northern region of the basin, southern Europe underwent a metamorphosis from being a labour-exporting territory to becoming an importer, particularly in tertiary activities and a vibrant informal sector characterised by gender and ethnic-specific features typical of familist welfare states. Initially, the demand for female labour was concentrated in domestic

services, care services and the catering industry, gradually expanding across transnational boundaries over time (Oso & Ribas-Mateos, 2013).

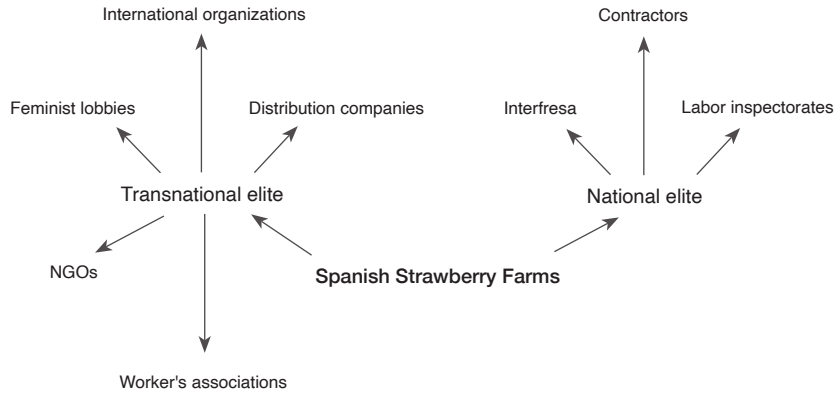
In recent decades, the process of economic modernisation in southern European countries has driven an escalating demand for young, low-skilled labour in labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture. This transformation has been shaped by Europeanisation – notably the Common Agricultural Policy – and economic modernisation focusing on agricultural productivism, and by the demands of globalisation. This model, influenced by free trade agreements and the reconfiguration of the European agricultural landscape, relies heavily on the movement of workers in precarious conditions (Reigada, 2016, 2017). As a result, workers within this system encounter a highly gendered and ethnically segregated labour market, and are often engaged in intermittent and temporary arrangements. Thus the political dynamics of globalisation in the "new agriculture" of the agri-food system in southern Europe significantly impact the overuse of natural resources and the rigid segmentation of the labour market. This is the fundamental premise of this article, which takes Huelva as a paradigm of this transformative process in southern European global dynamics.

This paper analyses the contested interconnections between global structures and the conditions of female temporary migrant workers by examining the transnational condition as a lens to understand intensive and insecure post-Fordist employment in global late-capitalism. Drawing on existing research on migrant work experiences in the agro-business industry, the main section of the article addresses three questions: What impact does the transnational economy have on such guest workers' arrangements? How does this concept intersect with the working lives of women? And how can we understand the impact of intermediaries and global elites in such transnational practices? We use the concept of transnational space alongside notions of "mobility strategies" to advance sociological inquiry into the intersections between various power terrains of social action and the conceptual debate surrounding women's lives and experiences in transnational migration. In this fundamental model of a guest worker system applied in southern Europe, guest workers who live in one country and work seasonally in another typically come from rural areas, and when abroad live in barracks-style accommodations alongside other women from their country of origin. What challenges do women face in recruitment, transportation, work, leisure and return, and what are the best practices to mitigate such a nexus of discriminations?

Throughout history, the international division of labour has encompassed various trans-local circuits for labour mobility, shaped partly by the specific constitution of labour and capital (Sassen, 2000). These circuits, deeply intertwined with other dynamics of globalisation, contribute to general economic insecurity and new forms of employment-centred poverty among workers. Thus, the strategic sites where the international division of labour can be examined from a feminist perspective vary across different components of the economy.

At the other end of the political-economic spectrum, significant changes in the organisation of economic activity since the 1980s have led to a proliferation

Figure 1. Mapping of elite actors in the Spanish strawberry industry



Source: Own elaboration

of low-wage jobs in today's most developed and strategic economic centres in the global north and south, where transnational fields are emerging. These transnational social fields constitute networks of networks, linking people in local and global networks and complicating the understanding of territorially situated social relationships (welfare, labour, education) in local communities, villages, cities, etc. These fields can connect different structures of socio-economic and cultural power, embedded in many transnational practices that legally and politically legitimise differences (gender, race, class).

The transnational focus of this article is twofold: First, it observes a shift in dominant power relations from nationally to transnationally oriented elites (Figure 1) in the context of the rise of a globally integrated production and financial system, an emergent transnational capitalist class and incipient transnational state apparatuses (Robinson, 2011: 349). Second, it examines the introduction of transnationalism as opposed to the Fordist migration model (Oso & Ribas-Mateos, 2013) in the context of migrants' agency. Mobility for migrants becomes an alternative to immigration, with migrants striving to remain mobile to improve their standard of living in their country of origin, rendering mobility a fundamental resource for migrants' social capital. This mobility is understood within the context of gender in the global migration process, impacting both global production and reproduction chains (idem: 25).

1.1. The structure of this paper

The structure of this paper is directly derived from ethnographic observations. We present a multi-sited ethnography focusing on a group of 20 temporary female workers from Morocco employed in the strawberry fields of Huelva, Spain. Our study aims to address two main objectives relating to transna-

tional economic strategies and mobility as a resource for both businessmen and female workers. These objectives, informed by ethnography, can be outlined as follows:

a) Regarding the transnational economy: Our aim is to understand how women organise their economic activities, particularly through sending remittances home as a form of transnational connection to their families, and the circulation of spending in the villages where they shop. However, we aim to go beyond the scope of remittances sent from Huelva to villages in Morocco, exploring other economic costs such as private health expenses, consumer goods, banking and money-sending services, and housing (based on fieldwork in the province of Meknes).
b) Regarding mobility strategies: We seek to examine how mobility serves as a resource for the various actors involved. Specifically, we aim to explore how borders and mobilities operated during the pandemic, considering the restrictions of 2020 when women could not return to Morocco due to border closures, and the flexibility strategies implemented by businessmen in 2021 to reduce costs and uncertainty, potentially at the expense of workers' social protection and security (based on fieldwork in the province of Huelva).

In this context, Moroccan female workers are subjects of control and domination by both employers and "privileged individuals" who possess greater mobility resources. Labour recruiters use neighbouring countries as a resource for economic advantage, offering a type of labour based on available unskilled women, often mothers, in a disposable system which aims for quick economic agro-benefits.

Global capital and elites play a significant role in the deterritorialisation circuits of the agro-business, alongside local employers, within the broader framework of labour regulation involving states, unions and workers. Workers are organised into crews by contractors and intermediaries in a decentralised system, often resulting in simultaneous labour shortages and surpluses. Farms operate with pyramid-style labour markets, offering few opportunities for upward mobility. Labour is intensive and demand-driven, with employers expecting a flexible labour force aligned with their economic needs and timings.

This article is structured into five major sections: methodology, the context of a particular model, brief overviews of the situation in Morocco and Huelva, and a comparison with the Americas. The context of the model provides an overview of agriculture and the women employed on commercial farms in Huelva, emphasising the increasing reliance of countries in the global north on hired workers. The brief overviews of Morocco and Huelva examine migration patterns and the operation of the seasonal farm labour market in Morocco and Huelva. The final section connects the agri-food strawberry industry in Spain to that in North America.

2. Methodology

There is nothing new under the sun. The topic of gender and migration in the province of Huelva has been over-researched and over-mediatised. The originality of this work is its multi-site focus, looking at locations in both Andalusia and Morocco. Ethnographic insights are made using field research that informs (and often contradicts) interview content, in addition to our participation in various multi-stakeholder forums on gender and migrant labour issues (Mujeres 24H).

The study explores the social dynamics experienced by migrant female farm workers across multiple locations in Morocco and the province of Huelva in Andalusia, Spain. It engages with various forums, including interactions with activists focused on gender, social justice and environmental issues in Huelva. Collaboration with female farm workers entails navigating a multi-sited context involving strategic partnerships with a selected group of women from a specific region in Morocco, as well as collaborations with activists addressing gender, social justice and environmental concerns in Huelva. Within this framework, advocacy serves as a fundamental approach in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by women farm workers. Specifically, this contracted labor entails the selection of temporary peasant labour by employers, based on the workers' gender and maternal status, directly confronting rural poverty in the neighbouring global south. In essence, these individuals are chosen due to their status as women from impoverished rural areas.

The methodology required needs to go beyond the social binaries used in traditional studies, such as origin-destination, home-abroad, regular migrant-non-migrant, circular-non circular, temporary-non temporary. This article consequently highlights the prevalence of transnational ways of living and calls for theoretical adjustments in line with migrants' multi-sited social lives; for more inclusive policy approaches that recognise multiple experiences; and for social rights and conditions of human dignity related to such experiences. The ethnographic research into the situation of women farm workers reveals a wide context of commonalities, differences and contradictions between the experiences of women farm workers and the structural economic system. In mobility contexts like the one presented here, multi-sited fieldwork offers practical advantages for gaining access to social networks and forms of circular migration. The movement of migrants is an inescapable aspect of the contemporary agro-industry. For us, following migrants throughout their journeys in an ethnographically and even historically sensitive way is probably one of the best ways to untangle the dynamics of the model of guest workers and its genesis, development and probable eventual failure.

For this study, multi-sited ethnography takes the form of a spiral, as changes result from the multiple movements of participants. Ethnography is used in the broadest sense to include methods of intensive interviewing and participant observation. The first strategy draws on Marcus (1995) to identify how four different types of multi-sited ethnography reveal the full scope of the migration

experience and its impacts. In doing so, we gained access to a closer relationship with female farm workers operating in multi-sited networks in different places. The methodological mandate "to follow the people" (Marcus, 1995) as they travel between localities takes seriously the movement that constitutes the migratory process. Thus, multi-sited fieldwork also offers practical advantages for gaining access to social networks with nodes at different sites. Such a scope allows us to better understand what we cannot see clearly by observing higher structures of globalisation. In doing so, we contribute to some extent to rebuilding theory from empirical research and then revising it; we begin with a theory and reconstruct it in the light of the anomalies we encounter in the field.

With this methodology we can also integrate different categories into our theoretical framework in order to understand the full transnational process. Through reflexive ethnography we can better theorise our results, making our case more extended. Such transnational processes cover both the present and the past, as well as visions of future strategies. We do this in a way constructed by different oral histories which help us to avoid the trap of the so-called "ethnographic present" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992). In this respect, the context of the ethnographic research shows the interaction of many different transnational actors in various countries. More than on the concept of circularity, which in the sociology of migrations has been related to an idea of agency of movement (in contrast with official EU terminology), we focus here on the idea of temporality, using the classic conception of the temporary worker.

Ethnographic research for this study took place in different observation periods and places, first in the province of Huelva during the entire period of the pandemic lockdown 2020 and a further research period in May-June 2021; then two visits to Morocco to the area of origin of the group being studied, in November 2020 and again at the end of June-early July 2021. We call the combination of these selected ethnographic places and periods a multi-sited ethnography or transnational ethnography. We would like to thank here the people who helped us during the ethnography, particularly a Moroccan interpreter in Arabic and Spanish in Huelva and the women in the selected group of temporary workers (19 women), who were the core of the follow-up to the ethnography (especially Fatima and all her family in the province of Meknes). We have taken the necessary measures to ensure the anonymity and/or protection of participants and their communities (according to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007).

This ethnography emphasises the importance of using ethnographic methods to study the empirical aspects of globalisation. It aligns with traditional ethnographic approaches to researching globalisation. (See Burawoy, 2000, for a discussion on ethnography for studying globalisation, in our case the agro-business). Our fieldwork, conducted in certain areas of Huelva and Meknes, follows established practices, although we don't necessarily reside in these communities permanently. Instead, the ethnographer's movement in and out of these spaces is methodical. Thus, the transnational practices of travel and the

temporal practices of writing are essential for defining and representing our subject matter – the translation of ongoing experiences and complex relationships into something tangible and understandable (Marcus, 1986). Therefore, our fieldwork approach is shaped by transnational travel and temporary residence, as well as face-to-face interactions through participant-observation. This methodology is located within broader discussions surrounding women's mobilities in the context of various research areas such as 'diasporic', 'border', 'minority', 'activist' and 'community-based' studies. Even if it might look like a short-term investment, immersing oneself in a different environment also involves language acquisition and navigating unfamiliar situations to gain insights.

3. The context of a particular model

Employers directly contracting with the migrant's country of origin harks back to traditional guest worker programmes such as the Bracero Program in California during the 1960s and the guest worker regime in Germany during the 1970s. However this also underscores the growing significance of the transnational context, in which migrants are temporary residents "fully intending to return to their home country" (in theory) after earning sufficient savings for a human security strategy. At the same time, transnational practices complicate these plans, influenced by factors such as migrants' robust social networks, the persistent demand for unskilled labour in the agro-business industry, diverse strategies for circular migration inside Spain and other evolving dynamics, leading to a more transnational population.

This model focuses on a particular type of migrant. Migrant workers vary widely in education and skills, from students who pick fruit crops during summer vacations to subsistence farmers who work seasonally or year-round abroad. Agriculture provides jobs and wages for workers who cannot find better jobs, both local and foreign. In turn, migrant workers sustain labour-intensive crop production in high-income countries and in some cases enable its expansion. Such labour-intensive crop agriculture provides income-earning opportunities for migrants. Hired farm workers are near the bottom of the wage scale in most industrial countries, despite being employed in an industry that often requires potentially dangerous, hard, outdoor work. Nonetheless, many workers from countries with lower wage-earning potential are eager to enter industrial countries to earn in an hour what they could earn in a day at home, and many legal guest workers return to the same farm employer year after year.

Firstly, the model also focuses on a particular gender. Often three-quarters or more of the international migrants employed in agriculture in high-income countries are male (Martin, 2016). This dominance of men in the agricultural industry is due in part to a requirement for employers to provide housing, as hiring only one sex reduces total housing costs. However, our study focuses on women, making it a very specific situation of guest worker recruitment which contrasts with other cases in the world.

Second, the model is highly contentious. Over the years, human rights, feminist, trade union and anti-racist organisations have been very critical of this anti-feminist model. The challenges highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as border restrictions and workplace limitations, have underscored the systemic obstacles faced by migrant workers. The criticisms are directed against a model perpetuated by a global system which exploits the recruitment conditions of specific women, thereby legitimising an unequal north-south distribution of labour in border areas of the global north. The temporary workers selected for this study are poor women in rural areas of Morocco who deal with the hard realities of patriarchal domination and exploitation to support their households and alleviate family burdens (extracted from ethnography notes). Considering this model has endured for almost 20 years, it is important to understand the changes or lack of changes that have occurred during this time.

Third, the model is based on a state agreement. The Spanish and Moroccan states view these migrant women from a utilitarian perspective inherited from the classic European *gastarbeiter* regime of the 1970s. Once their work is completed, they are often disregarded, with little consideration for the women's desires regarding mobility or survival strategies – whether they wish to return home or stay.

Fourth, the model uses time for the purposes of discrimination. Following a relative pause in the use of labour contracted at origin, which was primarily due to an increase in nationals working in their native agricultural sectors during the economic recession of 2008, the mass recruitment of female Moroccan temporary workers resumed in 2017 and 2018. Moreover, international press coverage in Spring 2018 brought national and international attention to the poor living and working conditions of these women workers.

Therefore, Huelva is presented as the paradigmatic example of the model. The labourer population contracted for the peak of the red berry season totals around 100,000 people in the relatively small province of Huelva, which typically has half a million permanent inhabitants. The adoption of this migration model in 2000 by Huelva's business leaders and politicians aimed to prevent racist incidents like those that had occurred in El Ejido (in the province of Almeria) in February 2000, where conflicts were attributed to the mass influx of Moroccan males. As a result of these assumptions, male day labourers were replaced by women with lower literacy levels, creating a new worker profile that mitigated scrutiny of the migration model and discouraged labourers from demanding rights. This model is supported by the European Union and the International Labour Organization (ILO), which consider it a leading example of circular migration, to be emulated by other European countries (Wickramasekara, 2015; Hooper, 2019).

3.1. The profile of the contracted Moroccan worker

In the global south, this model can be seen operating in Morocco. Employer agencies and large companies in Spain contract companies that manage the

recruitment of Moroccan women, such as ANAPEC (L'*Agence nationale de promotion de l'emploi et des compétences),* which has offices all over Morocco.

The hiring criteria prioritise women aged 18-45 years old with families and young dependent children. The rationale behind this profile is that family responsibility in the country of origin will ensure their return to Morocco at the end of the season. As observed in the interviews in Morocco, lone mothers – called single mothers by the Spanish authorities – will not have their applications accepted, and the official profile for marital status refers to married women with family responsibilities. Curiously enough, in ethnographic observation, it was found that most of the women are in situations where there is no man with them (separated, divorced, widowers) or where the man of the family is ill. These observations correlate with the significant social changes Moroccan families undergo in today's rural context.

The profile of this temporary flow is clear. This group of women do not master or even understand the Spanish language (extracted from the ethnographic notes; Castro, 2021). They do not know their rights; they are misinformed and are isolated on the agricultural farms where they work and are hosted (Davies, 2020). Having this profile exposes the women to a whole series of dangers. For example, they can be approached by men who may be interested in receiving sexual favours from them, using certain forms of sexual blackmail. This is a profile that presents vulnerabilities, and ethnographic notes show how these vulnerabilities manifest in different ways. For example, the lack of basic communication skills prevents them from maintaining a direct relationship with the Moroccan consulate or any authority in their country, and the information they receive comes through consultants from PRELSI (Interfresa's Ethical, Labour and Social Affairs Responsibility Plan, their recruiters), or from NGOs in the field.

In such a situation, the issue of family responsibilities is the basic factor for recruitment. Women are pressured into obtaining immediate remittances, sending money home and returning home to see their children again, among other things. The agricultural company chooses this type of profile because they assume that return to the country of origin is easier, and that a person with this profile would not want to stay in Spain and apply for a residency permit. According to Hannan – a seasonal worker who is divorced with three children whom she leaves in the care of their grandmother in Morocco because their father left years ago – the women recognise that the work is harder in Spain, but the three months working there support them for the rest of the year in Morocco, where the cost of living is much cheaper.

3.2. Living and working conditions

In Huelva, migrant women face multiple challenges, based on their working, living and health problems (Escrivà et al., 2025), as well as on the role of actors operating in the environment in which they work. Working conditions are broadly understood to cover contractual and wage conditions as well as living

conditions relating to specific housing and the villages where they are consumers and where they socialise – mainly Moroccan shops, Romanian shops and Andalusian bars.

Once in Huelva, the workers normally live on farms in prefabricated housing modules, which they call caravans. The modules are typically divided into units, each with bunk beds for six people and one kitchenette. The farms are distributed in various zones in the province. Accompanying these farms are also informal settlements. In the summer of 2020, there were about 49 such settlements, distributed between Lepe, Moguer, Lucena del Puerto and Palos. Arrangements differ depending on the farm. Some have battered prefabricated sheet metal roofs, which lead to high temperatures in summer and are usually not well protected against rain.

The women from our interview group described the farm's hierarchy as including a manager and a handler, and explained that their employers hired mediators. We understood such a description in a general context of the farming calendar and the organisation of work seasons.

The employment agreement *for* female workers for the 2020 application process provided in Morocco by ANAPEC (L'*Agence nationale de promotion de l'emploi et des compétences)* states that there is a trial period of 15 days. Once in Huelva, the workers are made to sign a contract written in Spanish indicating the trial period is 30 days. This probationary period allows workers a way out of the contract if they are dissatisfied; however, it is often used by employers to get rid of surplus labour and difficult workers. There are cases in which temporary workers from abroad have been fired after working only seven or eight days. This misleading clause continues to be a pretext for terminating contracts, benefiting employers over workers. In 2018, seasonal workers made allegations of violations of their rights to dignity, personal integrity, privacy and compensation, and their personal and sexual freedom and freedom of movement. Despite complaints from women who worked during the 2018 agricultural season, these practices continue, and the court dismissed charges after six months without hearing workers' testimony (extracted from ethnographic notes).

Additionally, the contract does not mention measures relating to the length of the working day, physical posture or maximum temperatures to safeguard the health of the workers. The current guidance regarding good practices to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse require women to report to the very companies that are enabling the abusive behaviour. Although the model focuses on a feminised employment sector, there is no gender focus in the employment agreements. Women are noticeably absent from employment negotiations that occur between unions, business organisations and governments.

3.3. The local economy

In Huelva, women are faced with high costs during the working season, and the COVID-19 pandemic created additional unexpected expenses for workers.

Female migrant workers in Huelva are marketed goods differently to locals. According to Nisrin, a woman who took part in the interview, food is bought on credit. A Moroccan man will go to the village often and will travel to different farms as a peddler, selling food to women at their doorsteps at "double the price of the supermarket."

COVID-19 created additional costs for the workers. The women interviewed had expected their employers to reimburse them for the cost of buying water during the lockdowns in 2020, but this did not happen. Many of the women who had begun working before the COVID-19 lockdown had sent a large amount of the money they had earned to their families, leaving them no funds for essential living and healthcare expenses. Rania, a woman interviewed for this study, added that the women wondered why, as they were already there, they could not work on anything else. The women claimed their right to some kind of help, that the work they had contributed should be returned to them. Some had been there since December; they had gone from picking strawberries to raspberries and then to blueberries.

3.4. Closing of borders during the first COVID-19 lockdown: A blockade of the workforce

By 2020, the pandemic highlighted strong gender discriminations that had previously been hidden when freedom of movement was widespread. In 2020, Spain granted 16,000 seasonal work permits for Moroccan women for the province of Huelva; however, only about 7,000 women arrived before the Moroccan government closed its borders on 12 March 2020. From March to July when Morocco opened its international borders, no Moroccan national outside the country was able to return to Morocco. Some of the women stuck in Spain were in extremely vulnerable positions during this period. In our interviews, we encountered women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer, women who were pregnant, and others who had recently given birth. When international borders opened, Moroccans in Italy and France were able to travel home, but travel from Spain to Morocco was restricted, preventing the migrant workers from returning home, and thus extending their stay and leading to escalating costs.

Farm workers were "trapped" during the last season of 2020 because the Moroccan government delayed the opening of the border with Spain specifically. Typically, workers stay for three months, but the travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic extended their stay. Many had been there for six months with their wages stopped. Those interviewed described receiving some support from charities due to their poor and unsanitary living conditions. We were able to document several instances of such conditions, and were able to publicise them. During this time and for unknown reasons, the Moroccan government created obstacles preventing the women from returning home. The women trapped in Spain asked for help drafting a formal request to the King of Morocco to allow them to return home. We supported them in doing

this: "This action was performed in a collective and inter-sectional way, trying to go beyond the limits of white, urban, middle-class, western-based feminism and instead we tried to enact it through new strategies of sisterhood rooted in eco-feminism" (interview with Mujeres 24H, June 2021).

4. A brief view from Morocco

An ANAPEC dossier, including their job application, costs 500-700 dirhams (approx. 50-70 euros). The selection interview lasts about five minutes, during which the recruiters examine the condition of the women's hands and ask them simple questions, such as what is the colour of a raspberry. Those who have previously been contracted by employers in Spain still need to reapply.

During our fieldwork in Morocco, we observed in detail the degree of socio-economic changes in rural Morocco, especially regarding gender roles and survival strategies for women. Only by understanding this can we interpret the cultural norm of men agreeing to women leaving their home and country to support the family financially for four months. The women are often viewed through the stereotype of victimisation. In the ethnography, we realised that people had many labels for the women who would accept contracted farm labour in Spain. The migrant workers are referred to as "the women who go to Spain" and face certain stereotypes in terms of their autonomy, independence, and even are also accused of being involved in prostitution.

The main topics covered in the November 2020 interviews and discussions for this paper focused on employment, COVID-19 and mobility. One area where the women expressed concern was employment and the benefits of working internationally. They said that their contracts were for six months but that they started by working for three months initially, understanding they needed to be flexible since the work always depended on the availability of employment. Fatima described her goal: she had bought land and wanted to build a house of her own, outside of the extended family, for herself and her seven-year-old daughter. Once she had the home, she would look for a husband. Similarly Zahra, a widow with three children who lives in a slum neighbourhood in the city, wants to rebuild her house. When she goes to work in Spain, the children go to stay with neighbours, and she allocates half of her salary for herself and the other for them. Sabah has three children and is married. When she goes to work in Huelva, her husband's mother comes to live with Sabah's family. When she returns to Morocco, Sabah wants to buy more land and a bigger house. Her earnings go in part to buy medicine for her husband's sick mother, including medical costs such as a blood test. She indicates that a private medical consultation costs 300 dirhams (approximately 30 euros).

The women discussed the importance of saving for health expenses for their families. Fatima explained that she is always paying the hospital, either for operations or for medication. Her father has been mentally ill for 11 years, and the medicines he takes cost her 250 dirhams (approximately 25 euros) per

week, and consultations 200 dirhams (approximately 20 Euros). Spending on the children includes clothing, schooling and health.

COVID-19 was also discussed. The women arrived in Spain by boat on 13 March 2020, just one day after the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus pandemic. They had one day off and then worked until the end of April. They talked about the peculiarities of the work, that in Huelva they use gloves but in Morocco they do not, that it is forbidden there because strawberries are very delicate. They showed us photos of themselves in the Huelva countryside, showing how they wear gloves and boots.

We discussed the pre-departure health check process, which included the authorities meticulously examining individuals' naked bodies. At the internal screening stage, respiratory health is evaluated, and individuals with asthma are deemed unfit for work as they would be required to operate in environments under plastic covering. Cardiac health is assessed through X-rays, though detailed analytics are not requested during this examination, with pregnancy screening notably absent. However, there is growing talk among employers about implementing pregnancy checks in Tangiers to prevent last-minute issues for expectant mothers. Women in our group mentioned the supposed requirement to pass an international health check, often referring to Mohammed V Hospital in Meknes as a benchmark. However, within our group, only superficial check-ups had been conducted.

The women also expressed specific needs regarding their mobility, even though many of them were already accustomed to being mobile due to their family responsibilities. For instance, some, like Karima, have relocated within Meknes province for employment opportunities, moving within Morocco's employment landscape. The changes experienced by women here are mirrored by changes within rural Moroccan families, which must be acknowledged. They discussed the dynamics of mobility between farms and villages, highlighting that transportation costs around five euros for a group of four people by car, from the village to Meknes.

5. A brief view from Huelva

The origins of the current recruitment system in the province of Huelva can be found in the "Cartaya Model". This model emerged in 2000, following the racist conflicts in El Ejido and the efforts of Moroccan workers there to organise (Escrivà, 2022). Today, during the peak work season, the day labourer population in the province of Huelva reaches around 100,000 individuals, a significant number considering the province's total permanent population of half a million (Escrivà, 2022).

In Huelva, understanding the situation of these women's lives within the institutionalised mechanisms of "circular migration" – or temporary migration as it was always called – and with the challenges of language barriers and their predominantly low educational background poses considerable ethnographic difficulty.

This profile underscores their vulnerabilities, driving grassroots activism for labour and health rights. In Huelva, demands for social justice have become more vocal in recent years. The resurgence of high levels of recruitment of female Moroccan temporary workers during the 2017 and 2018 strawberry seasons drew attention to their living and working conditions, which were reported on in the media from 2018. The onset of the pandemic in 2020 further highlighted the discrimination faced by these women. Trade unions, NGOs and feminist groups have united in advocating for social justice for foreign workers. The improvement in the working conditions for seasonal workers, known as "*las temporeras*", is seen as the main issue in the fight for social justice and inseparable from the struggle for equality between genders and against discrimination by national origin or ethnicity. They fight for decent and dignified work and for the right to appropriate health conditions, as well as for the protection of the earth's ecosystems. The feminist struggle here follows an eco-feminist perspective (Puleo, 2019), activating the alliances between environmentalist movements and feminist movements.

Analysis of the context of the women's arrival in the province of Huelva is based on the observance of work conditions in the broad sense of labour conditions, contracts, salary, living and health conditions, and in the context of the actors involved in the medium in which the women work. Besides, isolation is also relevant. The multiple forms of isolation that the women suffer in the strawberry fields, discipline encapsulates them away from the villages, a situation that also favours sexual harassment in the form of blackmail or direct violence (or fear of it) as a way of obtaining the women's compliance. Given such power relationships, it is clear how the women can find themselves in a vulnerable condition, which is increased by the difficulties in reporting sexual abuse and the risk of losing what one has – a day's wages or the job itself – if they do not agree to provide sexual favours to their bosses. Consequently, the impact of unwanted sexual encounters can lead to health issues, both at the physical and psychological levels. This subject has also been a key issue in social justice campaigns.

Accordingly, feminist activism has formulated a response to these vulnerabilities (see the NGO Mujeres 24H and their activities, Escrivà, 2022). The response is found in collective, intersectional action which goes beyond white, urban, middle-class feminism to embrace a geographically diverse, transnational approach. By overcoming linguistic, cultural and class-based barriers, this activism seeks innovative mechanisms to address the multifaceted challenges faced by migrant women workers.

6. A brief view from the Americas

Why look to the Americas? For us it was a way to visualise global chains. The structure and transformations of the agri-food sectors and the position of power of the retail chains as new global players impact transnationalism and extend beyond the Mediterranean, dominating seasonal agriculture in the Americas.

Strawberry supply chains are regionally focused, with the dominance of Mexico and the US for North American sales, and Spain and Morocco for European sales (Fischer-Daly, 2021). Driscoll's is the largest transnational berry company, valued at $3 billion (Fischer-Daly, 2021). It is supplied by over 700 independent farms in more than 24 countries, shipping its strawberries, blackberries, blueberries and raspberries to over 60 countries (Babbitt, 2019).

Driscoll's strawberry farming in the Americas is mainly located in California, Baja California, and Central Mexico. The Bracero Program, established in 1942 and running until 1962, organised a circulatory migration scheme for Mexican men to work on US farms (Martin, 2020). The programme brought many Mexican families closer to the Mexico-US border, established migration networks and kept agricultural wages in the US low (Martin, 2020). In 1986, the H-2A programme, an employer-sponsored temporary work programme with a specific agriculture section, was established to fill the need for farm workers in the US. The programme, much like Spain's, is designed to both reduce undocumented immigration and fill jobs with lower pay. However, H-2A only supplies about 10% of farm labour in the US, due to high employer costs and the complexity of rules. Approximately half of US agricultural workers are undocumented migrants (Bier, 2020). Unlike the bilateral agreement between Spain and Morocco, the H-2A programme allows for family migration, although the spouse and dependent children are not legally allowed to work under it (Bier, 2020).

The 1980s saw the start of an increasing feminisation in the agricultural sector, with more women being hired more often (Velasco, 2022). Farms hire women from their mid-teens to middle age, leaving older women to take care of the family (Chollett, 2011; Velasco, 2022), and they are hired for jobs viewed as feminine by farm owners. These jobs include classifying products by colour and picking fruit by hand (Velasco, 2022). As with Moroccan strawberry workers, the monotonous work uses very little technology, and women are assigned this work based on the widely-held assumption that they are more dexterous (Velasco, 2022). In order to ensure a source of income throughout the year, workers have to travel according to production seasons. During the high season, women, who are often paid by the piece, have the opportunity to make more money than male agricultural workers, who work for hourly or daily wages (Velasco, 2022). However, this also increases the risk of harm to women's bodies due to overwork and exposure to pesticides (Chollett, 2011; Velasco, 2022).

In Mexico, farm workers face wages four to eight times lower than their US counterparts, due to protectionist contracts between union federations and Mexico's government (Fischer-Daly, 2021). Berry companies such as Driscoll's, California Giant Berry Farms and Andrew & Williamson all have an active presence in Mexico (Fischer-Daly, 2021). In 2015, San Quintín Valley workers participated in a strike, which led to some Mexican berry farms adopting private certifications such as Fair-Trade USA and the Equitable Food Initiative (Fischer-Daly, 2021). Driscoll's has requirements for its supplying

farms, such as the Promise for Workforce Welfare, although it does not involve itself in negotiations between farmers and workers (Fischer-Daly, 2021).

6.1. Connecting the global chain back to Huelva

Following a visit to strawberry farms in Huelva in February 2020, during which he saw first-hand the living conditions of migrant workers including Moroccan women, UN Special Rapporteur on Poverty and Human rights Professor Philip Alston wrote, "I met with workers living in a migrant settlement in conditions that rival the worst I have seen anywhere in the world" (Alston, 2020). In the statement, he challenged Driscoll's and its associated companies, asking what the company was doing to monitor employment conditions (Alston, 2020). A further letter was sent directly to CEO of Driscoll's Miles Reiter in April 2020 highlighting the discrepancy between Driscoll's declared employment standards – which the company has claimed applies to all their workers in the supply chain including seasonal migrant workers – and the unsafe conditions of the workers in Huelva (Alston et al., 2020). In response to the letter, senior vice president and general counsel of Driscoll's Tom O'Brien said that Driscoll's share of the Spanish strawberry market was less than 1%, and of the raspberry market 3% (O'Brien, 2020). Even so, Driscoll's state that they perform frequent visits to farms and use third-party audits for evaluations every two years, in addition to an initial evaluation when farms join Driscoll's (O'Brien, 2020). He said that Driscoll's also worked to provide Moroccan workers on their farms with materials in the their own language informing them of their rights; that the company had designed protocols for preventing sexual harassment; and it supported the PRELSI plan, the Huelva berry industry-based protocol to ensure adequate working conditions (O'Brien, 2020).

Another example of the examination of this global change is Denmark, which has reported on alleged workplace abuse in the strawberry fields in Huelva, Europe's biggest red fruit producing region. Danish media outlet Danwatch made these claims in an extensive report (see the euronews website). See also all the material related to the launch of the play "Berries of Wrath" (Fix Foxy Company, Teater Republique in Copenhagen, May 2024) showing on one hand, the faceless underclass, living in a parallel, makeshift society without electricity and with failing running water. They dream of a better life and work for a daily wage of €20. On the other hand, they make sure our supermarkets are full of beautiful, freshly picked berries that taste of summer and sunshine. Fix+foxy puts a face to the berry pickers and invites the audience to take a journey from the Spanish fields to the tables in northern Europe.

7. Conclusions and future research questions

The seasonal farm labour market operates with inefficiencies and lacks sufficient worker protections, which poses challenges in safeguarding workers

engaged in seasonal agriculture. Workers spread across farms often lack awareness of their rights, and encounter significant informational barriers. Additionally, migrant workers may be reluctant to voice complaints due to fears of being blacklisted and unable to return for subsequent seasons. The agricultural employment structure is steep and narrow, with limited opportunities for seasonal workers to advance to year-round employment or farm ownership due to legal and financial constraints (Martin, 2016). Most farms are privately owned, relying on a few year-round workers while outsourcing seasonal jobs to contractors, which reduces farmers' interactions with seasonal workers and limits opportunities for promotion.

One of the official justifications for promoting female migration for seasonal agricultural work is its potential to empower women by providing them with higher earnings than they might typically earn in Morocco. However, further research is needed to fully understand the impact of seasonal migration on individual health, as well as its effects on community resilience and coping strategies in difficult circumstances.

Such research faces significant challenges, including the semi-legal nature of many workers, cultural attitudes such as women's reluctance to speak openly, and their isolation in remote rural areas. For women researchers, navigating potentially hostile responses from male farm owners who seek to conceal their workers and properties to protect their economic interests remains an ongoing challenge. This highlights the need for further work on accountability, and the role of public administrations, police protection and judicial willingness to address ongoing cases.

This study employs various fieldwork approaches to create a space where diverse contextual knowledge can engage in critical and respectful dialogue within a transnational framework involving multiple actors. These actors include migrant women and local women activists, who communicate within a challenging and unequal environment. As Velasco (2022) notes in relation to mobility circuits in the agro-food industry between the US and Mexico, interdisciplinary and multidimensional studies are necessary to identify social disruptions caused by mobility and labour migration in the lives of marginalised women and their families involved in global agro-export circuits. Integrating the symbolic dimension of labour relations is essential to challenge the normalisation of exploitative conditions which are often imposed on culturally constructed categories of worker who are deemed to be inferior.

Transnational ethnography involves travel and daily engagement with local communities, in order to establish long-term relationships with workers, intermediaries and activists. This approach explores the transnational context of labour recruitment, particularly focusing on rural Moroccan women and addressing discrimination based on motherhood, while emphasising the need for policies promoting gender equality and protecting children's rights. (For more on the context of changes in social movements in Morocco, see Feliu et al., 2018). Thus, the research uncovers various aspects of transnational living, migration agreements, motherhood and emerging solidarity networks,

establishing Huelva as a paradigm of the broader context of Mediterranean circular migration.

This ethnography looks more closely at a specific case of labour recruitment targeting rural Moroccan women under 45 who have children under 14. From the employer's perspective, the worker's profile is defined by their reproductive age, potentially discriminating against them due to the "motherhood penalty" this implies (see above for the model based on the mother with small children) This approach contradicts contemporary models of gender equality supported by policies and programmes that seek to reduce disparities and improve quality of life. From the children's perspective, they are left vulnerable and unprotected by international children's rights standards.

Our research emphasises the multifaceted nature of transnational living, in this article, unveiled through: the discriminatory transnational migration agreements based on forms of motherhood and on the other hand, being contested by emerging strategies of transnational activism facilitated by solidarity networks. This transnationalism operates on multiple levels, not only impacting the everyday lives of workers and their families but also encompassing health conditions such as European pesticide protocols, Moroccan health standards, the petrochemical industry, and its effects on the soil.

To sum up, all these different factors demonstrate that Huelva is a leading example in southern Europe for researching changes on the interpretation of gender and migration in the region, backed up by the forces of global circuits of the agro-industry.

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