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# Transnationalism and Financial Crisis: The Hampered Migration Projects of Female Domestic Workers in Spain

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**Abstract:** The importance of transnational migration projects for international development has been increasingly recognized over the past decades. Migrants who move from the Global South or East to work in low-wage sectors such as construction, agriculture or domestic services in wealthier countries may contribute both to growth in the receiving countries and socio-economic development in their countries of origin. Parallel to scholarship on migration and development, research on the transnationalization of domestic work generally assumes that growing care needs and increasing demand for private household services in Western societies imply a continuing demand for migrant labour. However, since the global financial crisis broke out in 2008, unemployment among migrant workers has increased dramatically in many immigrant-receiving countries, Spain being among the most severely affected. Job destruction has so far been lower in the domestic sector than in other sectors occupying large numbers of migrant workers. Yet, we find that migrant domestic workers in Spain are affected by the recession both in terms of unemployment or underemployment and deteriorating job conditions, with transnational consequences such as loss of remittances. Many migrants find themselves in a situation of “standby,” trying to subsist while waiting for the recession to end.

**Keywords:** transnational migration; global financial crisis; domestic work; precariousness; remittances; development

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a growing body of research has engaged with the transnationalization of private domestic/care work, and the role of migrant workers who “fill the care gap” in aging European societies (e.g., [1,2]). These works generally assume that growing care needs imply a continuing demand for migrant labour. However, there are indications that this picture may be changing in the wake of the global financial crisis, which has been particularly strongly felt in the southern European countries. Though earlier qualitative studies have revealed the precarious job conditions of migrant workers in the domestic sector [3–7] a more specific focus on the serious effects of the recession

for (largely female) migrant workers in the domestic private sector<sup>1</sup> is still absent<sup>2</sup> within the emerging literature on the effects of the crisis for migrant workers in general (e.g., [10,11]).

Research on the expansion of the private domestic sector, its link to migrant workers and the job conditions of the latter tend to be separated from scholarship on transnational migration and remittances. The present paper intends to contribute to bridging the gap between these fields of research by focusing on female migrant domestic workers' experiences of how the financial crisis in Spain has affected their job opportunities and job conditions, and how this in turn affects their migration projects, most importantly considering the ability to save money and/or send remittances, and whether to return or not to the country of origin. Stakeholders as immigration officials and NGO actors provide complementary overviews of the present situation of immigrants in Spain, and state that it is indeed alarming. Social exclusion is radically increasing among unemployed migrants, who often lack access to unemployment benefits (or social subsidies in case they are also undocumented, as many of them are). Many of these migrants are dependent on the voluntary work of different social organizations to avoid situations of humanitarian emergency [12–21].

Based on qualitative fieldwork performed within four different international research projects, this paper examines the consequences of the financial crisis in Spain for the present and future prospects of female migrant domestic workers. The data used includes 103 interviews with migrant workers, of which 60 are in-depth interviews with female migrant domestic workers in Madrid and Barcelona, 30 interviews with migrant workers in other sectors in Spain, seven interviews with migrants of Chilean origin who returned to Chile, and six interviews with Moroccan return migrants. In addition, our analysis relies on 21 stakeholder interviews performed in Spain and Chile between 2013 and 2016.

In this paper we enquire into how the financial crisis in Spain affects the situation of migrant workers in the domestic sector and their families, both in the country of origin and the destination country. We assume that the recession has had a negative impact on Spanish households' economy, which leads to a decreasing demand for domestic services that is most strongly felt among the most vulnerable segments of workers: migrants who depend on this income to support both themselves and their families in the place of origin. Moreover, we assume that the remaining lack of opportunities in most sending countries makes the potential option of return to escape increasing precariousness an unsustainable alternative. This points towards a scenario that may have serious implications for both sending and receiving countries when economic development through remittances and investment by returning migrants is hampered in the countries of origin, and a growing segment of the migrant population in the destination country lives in situations of precariousness and marginalization.

Our main objective is to explore how these dimensions play out among migrant domestic workers in the Spanish case, both locally and transnationally. Moreover, we intend to propose a research agenda on the effects of the financial crisis for both immigrant-sending and -receiving countries. The in-depth interviews we conducted allow us to identify the nature of the migration projects of our interviewees and how these have been affected by the financial crisis. However, further empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, needs to be undertaken on the effects of the global financial crisis for transnational migration projects and development.

In the following sections, we will first provide a theoretically grounded account on the effects of the financial crisis for transnational migration projects, with emphasis on the implications for remittances and return migration. A migration project is here understood as *transnational* when it is entirely or partly intended to maintain the links between the origin and the destination country, as for instance through remittances. We will then proceed to focus more specifically on the domestic sector in Spain; what role it has played for (mainly female) migrants over the past decades, and how

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<sup>1</sup> We define "domestic work" as the paid labour performed in private households, including care for children and elderly/dependent persons, and/or general domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, ironing, etc. [8].

<sup>2</sup> Hellgren and Serrano [9] specifically address the consequences of the financial crisis in Spain for the job conditions of migrant domestic workers.

it is affected by the crisis at present, before turning the lens to our empirical study, which addresses the three assumptions formulated above and is largely based on narratives by female migrant domestic workers in Spain.

## 2. Theoretical Context and Background

### 2.1. Transnational Migration and Development in Earlier Research

The importance of transnational migration projects for the socio-economic development of the sending countries, with special emphasis on remittances as the most tangible link between migration and development, has been recognized in much academic work over the past decades (e.g., [22,23]). Starting in the 1950s, the debate on migration and development has swung back and forth between the optimism of neoclassical approaches and developmentalists, on the one hand, and the pessimism of cumulative causation theorists [24] on the other. The latter emphasized the risk that wealthier countries would drain talented populations from the more peripheral areas (“brain drain”) and manpower in general (“brawn drain”). It was also argued that remittances and migrants’ savings were used for private purposes such as consumption and housing, rather than investments that would be beneficial for the country’s economy as a whole. The optimists, on the other hand, emphasized the potential of remittances to improve income distribution and the quality of life both in the sending households and regions, as well as the potential benefits of brain circulation and brain gain [25]. In most sending countries, moreover, emigration is perhaps seen as the most viable strategy to escape unemployment. These migrants are often expected to acquire specific skills in the countries of destination, including entrepreneurial skills, which may be valuable upon their return to their countries of origin, contributing again to a “brain gain” [26].

There is no doubt that migration often provides the opportunity for migrants to increase their income level significantly ([27], p. 15). The positive effects of remittances for family members and communities in the origin countries are also well documented. Families gain access to, for instance, health care and better housing, and may use the money to start their own businesses. The potential impact of these flows at the macro level is significant, particularly when bearing in mind that, for many receiving countries, the remittances are larger in size than any other international flows of capital, such as private investments or official aid to development [27,28].<sup>3</sup>

The most recent research, from the 1990s onwards, has found that the effects of migration and remittances are indeed heterogeneous, but that, under favourable economic and political conditions, they have played a relevant role in the development of regions and countries of origin [29]. Remittance flows have been found to be more stable in comparison with private investments, and more effective in terms of income redistribution and poverty reduction than top-bottom approaches [30,31]. Receiving countries, particularly in Asia and the Pacific regions, also continue to see transnational migration as a major instrument in their national development [29].

Whether applying an economic or a more anthropological approach to the phenomenon of transnational migration, most earlier research still rests on the assumption that transnational migrants improve their own situation through migration, and also are able to contribute to increase wealth in their countries of origin (e.g., [22,28,32,33]). Changing economic circumstances in immigrant-receiving countries, however, alter this status quo. Depending on the degree of dependence on remittances in the destination countries, remittances may become a significant transmission channel of the financial crisis from developed to developing countries ([28], p. 134).

The consequences of worsening conditions in the country of immigration for transnational migration projects are yet a largely unexplored research area. Some theories on return migration

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<sup>3</sup> However, the actual size of remittance flows is hard to fully capture due to informal unregistered channels, which means that the magnitude and impact of these flows is most likely underestimated ([28], p. 134).

tend to view return as an expected choice when migrants have achieved their (economic) objectives in the destination country. Others instead understand return as a last resort when long-term unemployment or insufficient earnings make the migration project unsustainable [34,35]. Moreover, return may not be a viable option even when opportunities are lost in the immigration country, for several reasons, such as continuing political and economic instability in the origin country, lack of capital to start over, or having children who grow up in and identify with the new country [36,37]. We argue that there is a need for more empirical research on the links between transnational migration projects and development within the current context of global economic crisis.

## 2.2. Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on Migrants in Spain

The impact of the global financial crisis in the countries most affected by it, such as Spain [38], has not been evenly distributed between native and migrant populations [39–41]. Migrants have been particularly affected in terms of unemployment and increased levels of poverty and precariousness. Unemployment has hit the migrant populations hard as they tend to concentrate in the low-skilled sectors most severely struck by the crisis, such as construction or service jobs, with high levels of precariousness and low levels of protection. These are also sectors particularly sensitive to economic cycles. Sectors where female migrants tend to concentrate, such as health care and domestic work, are usually more resilient to job destruction, though labour conditions in these sectors are largely precarious also in times of economic growth. Migrants also tend to be less protected by social security systems, and more prone to accept low-paid and precarious jobs as they are overall more dependent on a monthly income than natives [40,42]. This vulnerability is exacerbated when their residence permits are dependent on their labour status.

One concrete, transnational effect of the financial crisis's impact on migrant labour is that of declining remittances. In the past, remittances have been relatively stable and generally unrelated to economic cycles [43]. Yet, as seen in Figure 1, the impact of the Great Recession has been felt: estimates show that remittances fell for the first time in 2009 after a long expansion period, and again in 2014 after an apparent recovery at the global level.

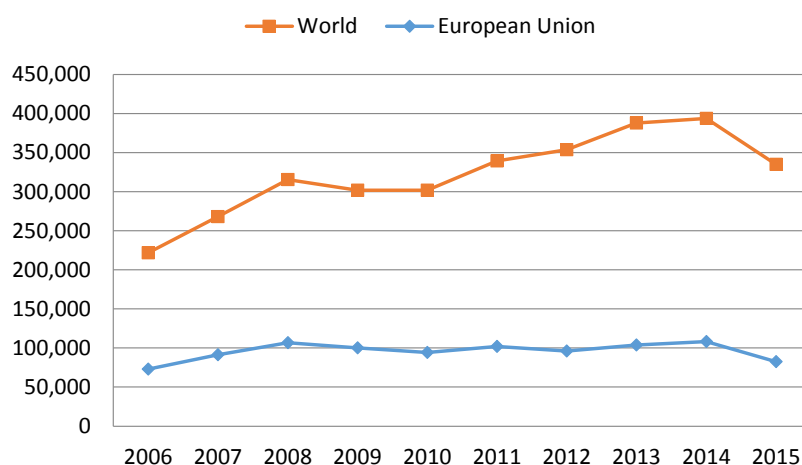


Figure 1. Personal remittances (sent). In current US\$ billions. Source: World Bank [44].

The impact of the financial crisis varies strongly between countries and regions. Europe appears more seriously affected by the crisis than the world as a whole in terms of the effects on remittance flows. Within Europe, Spain is one of the most severely hit countries. It is also one of the EU countries with the largest migrant population, and consequently one of the top remittance-sending countries in the European Union [43]. As seen in Figure 2, the officially recorded remittances in Spain have decreased dramatically since the crisis broke out in 2008. This contraction might partially reflect a tendency to use informal transfer mechanisms in a period of economic downturn ([43], p. 217).

Nevertheless, the striking contrast with the estimates for the European and the global levels suggests that the financial crisis has a negative impact on remittances, which is strongest for those countries most strongly hit by the crisis. The case of Spain thus exemplifies how the crisis can become transmitted from receiving to sending countries where dependency on remittances is great.

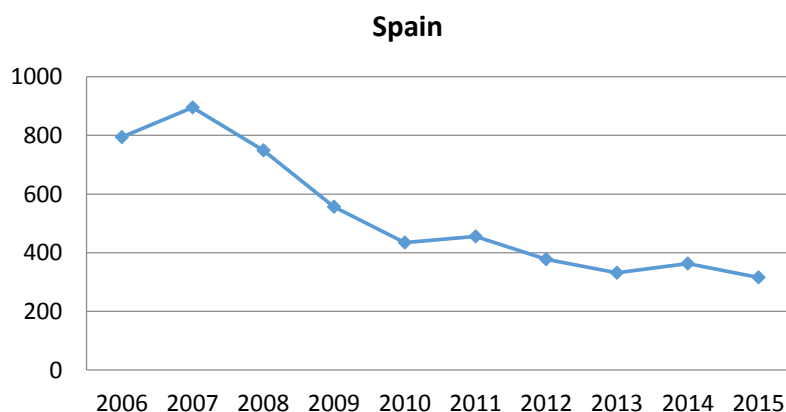


Figure 2. Personal remittances (sent). In current US\$ billions. Source: World Bank [44].

Besides declining remittances, another expected consequence of the crisis has been that migrants who lost their jobs have returned to their countries of origin; consequently, promotion of voluntary return has emerged as a policy objective in Spain (e.g., [11]). However, recent studies show that return migration has not occurred to the extent expected [45–47]. As González-Ferrer [44] shows, yearly return rates have not exceeded 10 out of 100 migrants among any of the large groups defined per geographical origin. In fact, the rate of return for Sub-Saharan African migrants, the group most affected by the rise in unemployment among migrants, has decreased slightly. These accounts coincide with analyses pointing out that return is unlikely, at least from a short-term perspective, given the (personal and economic) costs involved in the migration project [43,45]. Moreover, immigration to Spain has certainly decreased since the crisis, but started to increase again after 2013.<sup>4</sup> Recent data also show that Spain is still among the top migration destination countries in the world [49]. As a result of these trends, the foreign-born population in Spain has only slightly decreased, from a peak of almost 6.3 million to nearly 5.9 million at present. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

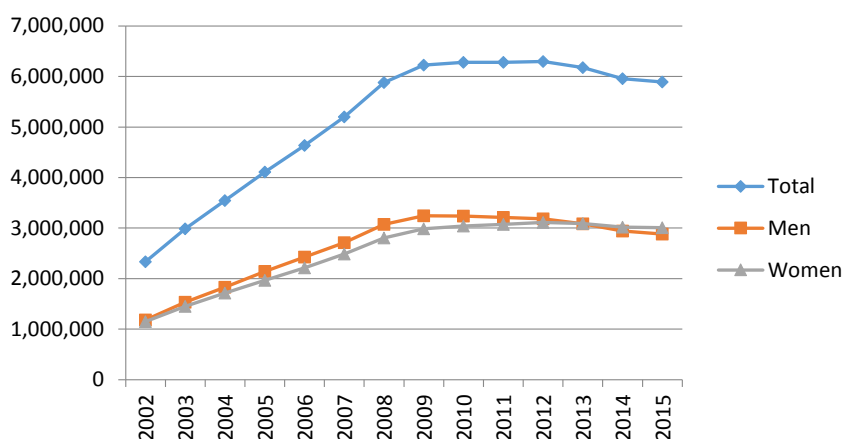


Figure 3. Foreign-born population in Spain. Source: INE (Spanish National Statistical Office) [48].

<sup>4</sup> Spain’s migration index has been negative since 2010, which is explained by decreasing immigration, to some extent return migration, and a steady increase in emigration of native Spaniards [48].

Several of the stakeholders we interviewed claim that return migration is frequently not a viable option, because many migrants would have a much harder time subsisting in their countries of origin than in Spain. Most of these countries are far worse off than Spain economically, and there are some social subsidies in Spain to cover basic necessities. Another impediment for return is in several cases the pressure that female migrants are exposed to by family members in their countries of origin. Women from developing countries who migrate alone to work in the domestic sector are often part of a broader family project, dependent on their income to finance costs such as the education of children and health care of elderly relatives [12,13]. All in all, existing data and research on the situation of migrants in Spain after the crisis indicate that the vast majority stays in the country, in situations of greater precariousness, and bide their time instead of returning to their countries of origin (e.g., [10,46,48,50]). In the results section of this paper, we will provide some explanations of why this may be so, based on our empirical material.

### *2.3. Migrant Workers in the Domestic Sector in Spain*

The domestic sector has played a central role in the labour market participation of female migrants in Spain, and is by far the most significant source of employment for female migrants from a broad array of sending countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. During the years of rapid economic growth in the 1990s and early to mid-2000s, these migrant workers came to perform domestic chores—mostly cleaning services and to a smaller but significant extent care services to elderly, children and other dependent persons—at a comparably low cost (e.g., [1]). In 2010, 20% of non-EU-15 female migrants were working in the household sector [51]. According to the National Survey on Immigrants from 2007, Romanians and Ecuadorians have the largest presence in the sector (following native Spaniards) reflecting their larger presence in the migrant population overall. Migrants from Paraguay, Bolivia, the Ukraine and the Philippines concentrate the most in this sector (between 20 and 30% were working in domestic services). The majority of these migrants have secondary studies (62.5%) in contrast to primary studies (23.8%) or university studies (13.7%), and almost 70% were sending remittances in the year 2007.

As several studies, including our own research projects, have shown, precariousness is the rule rather than the exception for the low-wage sectors in which migrants tend to become employed, including domestic services, agriculture or construction (e.g., [6,7,10,52]). The head of SAIER, the immigrant reception office in Barcelona, states that “immigration in Spain has been completely linked to a precarious labour market” [12], which is overall considered a fact in Spanish academia and policy-making (e.g., [52,53]).

Within this context of generally precarious labour conditions, the private domestic services sector generates particularly vulnerable job situations given its high level of informality and lack of visibility. Domestic workers tend to be isolated in private homes and greatly exposed to the employers' arbitrariness (e.g., [4,5]). They also lack basic rights that other workers are granted. In Spain, several legal reforms have been implemented over the last years to include the domestic workers in the general employment regime. The extension of rights initiated by the Socialist government in 2011 was, however, reduced when the Conservative party (PP) won the elections the same year, and domestic workers in Spain are still not covered by unemployment benefits [7]. The lack of protection implies a particularly serious situation when a labour market is severely hit by a crisis, and precarious work is in many cases replaced by unemployment. This situation is in turn most strongly felt by the migrant workers in the sector, who often lack the support networks that natives more often can resort to, and they may also be affected by ethnic status hierarchies where those considered less attractive have a harder time finding jobs and are offered worse conditions [6,7,12–14,17,20,21,54].

Moreover, when considering the present situation of migrant domestic workers in Spain, one must take into account that irregularity is the normal condition for the recently arrived. Currently, virtually all legal channels for non-EU labour immigration to Spain are, in practice, closed. Economic migration from third countries is therefore largely irregular by default [6,55], though there

is a regularization process for migrants who have stayed three years irregularly in the country and have a job contract. Also migrants who have stayed longer in the country, and previously achieved temporary residence permits, may find themselves in a situation of irregularity if they have no job contract when renewal of the residence permit is due. This is one of the most serious concerns at present according to immigration officials [12,14], and adds to the vulnerable situation of migrant workers with low bargaining power vis-a-vis their employers [8].

To fully understand the situation of domestic workers in Spain, considering the employment form of live-in workers is essential. The 19 live-in workers in our sample generally perform other household chores such as cleaning, cooking, ironing, etc., but are mainly hired to perform care work, often on a 24-h basis. The live-in employment form in the domestic sector in Spain (as in other southern European countries, particularly Italy (e.g., [56,57])) is virtually non-existent among native Spanish workers. The indispensable care work that authors including Ibáñez and León [51] refer to; the necessary work many scholars before (e.g., [56,58]) them have claimed that migrants in the sector perform to “bridge the care gap,” largely consists of the work performed by live-in workers who care for the elderly and children. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that the care work performed by live-in migrant workers—no matter how indispensable they are for these families given the absence of public or other affordable services to meet their care needs—only represents a small share of the domestic sector in Spain. According to data from INE [48], 75% of the Spanish households purchasing domestic services employ by the hour and less than ten hours per week (75%).<sup>5</sup> Only 8.3% of the households who buy these services hire someone to work full-time (40 h or more), including the live-in workers [59].

The vast majority of domestic workers perform cleaning services and may be easily disposed of when households need to save money, and choose to perform these tasks themselves or have someone clean the house less frequently. Cleaning jobs are occupied also by native workers, and there are indications that native Spanish women—who have lost their jobs in other sectors and accept lower salaries than before the crisis—are increasingly present as workers within the private care/domestic sector. Recent data from the Spanish Labour Force Survey show that the proportion of native Spanish workers in the sector has increased since 2010, and this tendency is also reflected by the interviews we have performed in relation to our research projects on migration and domestic work [9].

There are no specific data available on the unemployment rates among migrants in the domestic sector, though according to the organization *Latinas sin Fronteras*, who represents Latin American domestic workers in Barcelona, the unemployment rate in the whole sector was about 27% in 2014, comparable with the Spanish average at that time. It is however important to also consider situations of decreasing work hours and extended underemployment<sup>6</sup> in relation to the financial crisis. The domestic sector is characterized by extensive per-hour, temporary and unpredictable employment that is constantly adapted to the clients' needs; when households need to save, they may choose not to fire the worker but significantly reduce her work hours [7], which makes the worker invisible in unemployment statistics but may lead to her being unable to live on her earnings, and much less able to send money to her country of origin.

In the following section, we will present the data and methods used in our studies, before presenting the main findings addressing the three assumptions on how the crisis affects migrant workers in the domestic sector that we defined in the introduction.

### 3. Data and Methods

This paper is based upon data gathered from four different international research projects, though emphasis lies on the 60 in-depth interviews with female migrant domestic workers performed

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<sup>5</sup> According to the most recent available data, 14.4% of the Spanish population uses any private domestic/care service at all [7].

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the *FamiliesAndSocieties* project and in our publications derived from this project, underemployment is defined as any case of employment below full time when the worker would desire to have more work hours (e.g., [8]).

for the EU-funded project *FamiliesAndSocieties* (WP 9, *Migration and Care*<sup>7</sup>) and the related project *Do welfare regimes matter? Migration and Care/domestic work in two institutional contexts, Sweden and Spain: A Multi-Tier Design*,<sup>8</sup> funded by the Swedish national bank. These interviews are complemented by 43 interviews with immigrants in different sectors that add to our general understanding of how the crisis has affected migrants' job situations and life projects in Spain. These interviews were conducted for the research projects *Immigrants' perceptions on integration in two institutional frameworks, Sweden and Spain*,<sup>9</sup> which focuses on self-perceived inclusion of immigrants of diverse origins and was funded by the research foundation Ahlströmska/Stockholm University, and the Spanish case study within the EU Horizon 2020 project *DiasporaLink: Transnational Diaspora Entrepreneurship as a Development Link between Home and Residence Countries*,<sup>10</sup> where focus lies on return migration and entrepreneurship as a potential strategy to overcome the effects of the financial crisis. In addition, we use 21 stakeholder interviews with Spanish immigrant officials, representatives of immigrant organizations in Spain and institutions offering support to returning migrants (in Chile). All 124 interviews were performed between 2013–2016. They were conducted and transcribed in Spanish, though coded in English, which is the language used throughout the analysis.

The research method we used is thematic analysis, and our approach was largely inductive. We conducted several of the stakeholder interviews and a couple of pilot interviews with migrant domestic workers without an elaborated interview guide, in order to define the main themes for the study. The following themes constituted the basis when we constructed the interview guides for the semi-structured interviews: (i) job conditions before and after the crisis; (ii) workers' capabilities to influence on their work and life situations; (iii) motives behind and plans concerning the migration projects; and (iv) future plans in general. These themes were central in our subsequent coding and analysis in Dedoose (dedoose.com), an online software for qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis.

The purpose of complementing our interviews with migrant domestic workers with results from other research projects is to provide a broader empirical base to support our findings. When comparing the transcribed and coded interviews with migrant workers conducted for different projects, the perceptions on hampered migration projects and lives on "standby" kept being repeated. The stakeholder interviews provide general information and overviews of the effects of the crisis on the domestic sector, complementing the individual narratives by migrant workers. While the migrant interviews are anonymous, full name and affiliation is provided for the stakeholders. We have made this decision, fully consented by the stakeholders, as the purpose of the stakeholder interviews is informative and readers should be able to control the information provided if they should wish to do so. The stakeholder interviews should mainly be considered verbal sources of reference, in contrast to the subjective perceptions and experiences that the anonymous migrant respondents shared with us.

Regarding the sampling, we have used official records on the main countries of origin and migrant representation in different job sectors, and multiple sources (for instance NGOs, public institutions, churches, and the researchers' own contact networks) to find our respondents. Selection criteria varied between the projects: the main sample (for the *FamiliesAndSocieties* and *Do welfare regimes matter?* projects) only included female migrant domestic workers from non-Western countries, in accordance with the projects' aims. For the Spanish case study within the project *Immigrants' perceptions on integration in two institutional frameworks, Sweden and Spain*, 24 interviews with African, Asian and Latin American migrant workers, half men and half women, were performed. Finally, following the guidelines of the *DiasporaLink* project, 19 interviews with returning migrants and migrant entrepreneurs from Chile and Morocco were conducted. The intention was to achieve an equal gender distribution; however, this was not possible in the Moroccan case study as we only were able to find and recruit male respondents.

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<sup>7</sup> Zenia Hellgren was responsible for the Spanish case in this project.

<sup>8</sup> Inma Serrano was responsible for the Spanish case in this project.

<sup>9</sup> Zenia Hellgren was the director and PI for this project.

<sup>10</sup> Zenia Hellgren is currently coordinator of and researcher for this project.



In Figures 4 and 5, we present the countries of origin of our migrant worker respondents. In our analysis, we found that ethnic origin matters both for finding jobs and for how workers are treated. For instance, Bolivian respondents, both in the domestic sector and in other jobs, expressed experiences of discrimination more frequently than others. The significance of ethnic discrimination for the work and life situations of migrants is discussed in several other publications by the authors, though not included in the scope of the present paper. Besides gender and origin, another demographic characteristic we looked at was the respondents' age. Ages overall vary widely between 20 and 65. We found no specific patterns related to age: young and older migrants have similar experiences of job situations. Some respondents claim that youth is an advantage on the job market for domestic services; however, some also state that older workers may be perceived as more reliable. Overall, the migrant workers who are worst off economically are single mothers with small children, especially if these children are living with them in Spain [7].

Regarding the motives behind the migration projects, a vast majority of all respondents migrated mainly for economic reasons. Among the female domestic workers, who generally migrated alone, the need to send remittances to cover costs of children's education, housing or medical treatment of family members was a central driver for more than half of them. The economic motives for the rest of these respondents (who did not leave children or other dependent family members in their countries of origin) concerned improving their own life situation and future prospects.

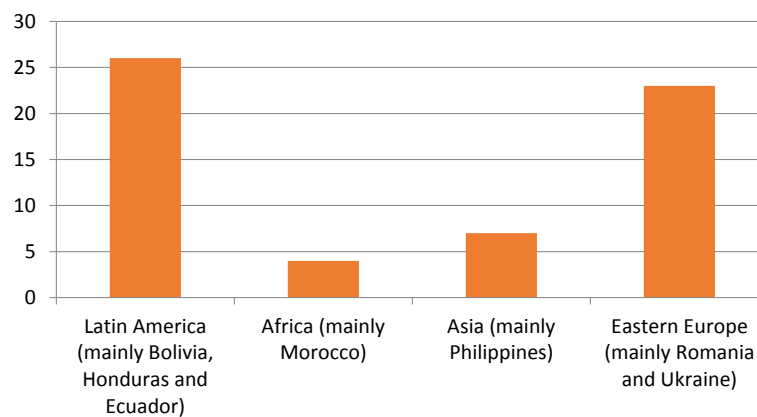


Figure 4. Origins of the migrant domestic workers in Spain (n = 60). Source: Own empirical data.

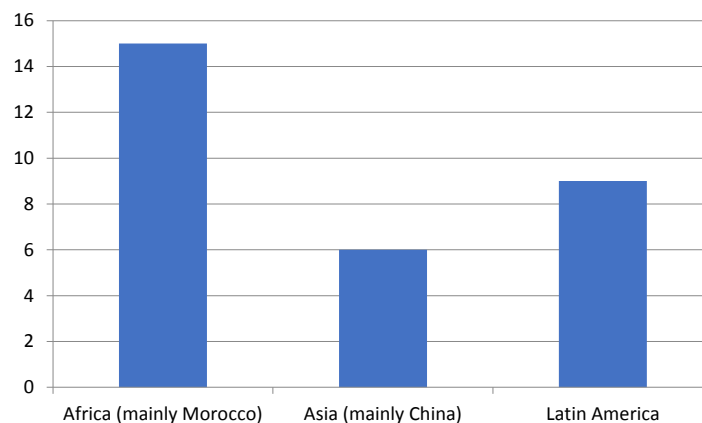


Figure 5. Origins of the migrant workers in other sectors (n = 24). Source: Own empirical data.

#### 4. Results

The empirical section of this paper is structured in order to address each of our three assumptions on how the financial crisis in Spain affects the life situation of migrant domestic workers. First, we will

look at how the migrant domestic workers in our sample experience the effects of the crisis, with emphasis on how their income and ability to save money and/or send remittances to their countries of origin are affected. Second, we focus on the alternatives that migrants identify in order to improve their situation and whether they aim to return to their country of origin or stay in Spain, and third, we examine the potential consequences of this decision.

#### *4.1. Experiences of the Crisis's Impact on Job Conditions, Savings and Remittances*

Throughout our interviews with migrant domestic workers in Spain, experiences of exploitative job conditions and abuse are common, and in several cases viewed as something inherent in this form of work. The most frequent form of abuse experienced by our respondents is that of clients obliging workers to perform unpaid job hours, as they are unable to finish demanding workloads within the agreed schedule. Some of the workers describe how these job conditions, and overall the strongly unequal power relationship between employer and employee, make them feel defenceless and humiliated, though most of the respondents instead represent a rather pragmatic and resigned attitude and accept this as the way things are. Moreover, in many cases, the workers' legal status depends on their job contracts, which may force them to accept virtually any job conditions.

Overall, the workers claim that the conditions have become worse after the crisis, and believe that this is partly due to the fact that many Spanish households have less money to spend on domestic services, but also that some clients tend to take advantage of the crisis as a legitimate excuse to extract more work for less money from their employees.

"There are five people in the house, the oldest is 93 years old and I must do everything, cook, clean, wash, iron, and bathe and change diapers of the elderly person . . . absolutely everything, every day. When I get home at night I am like dead, I cannot talk, nothing. [The clients] insult me, despise me . . . They call me things . . . this did not used to happen, but now with the crisis they complain a lot and think that they pay too much, they threaten me and say that they can find someone to do the same job for half the pay. But what can I do . . . I cry. If I lose this job it would be very hard to find another one." (Ukrainian domestic worker, Barcelona).

"Now people use the crisis as an excuse not to pay you what they should. [ . . . ] They say 'the crisis, the crisis, I have no money,' and you are working and see how they are buying things and go shopping all the time, it doesn't make sense. They say 'look, I can only pay you 300€' and then you see them on the weekend buying clothes that don't cost 20–30€ but 80–100€ . . . So you reach the conclusion that some people, not all, are taking advantage of the situation." (Bolivian (unemployed) domestic worker, Madrid).

What concerned most of the domestic workers in our study more than anything else was the lack of sufficient work hours: 46 out of 60 workers in our sample were actively looking for more work, though they overall complained about how difficult it is to find anything at present. All of the respondents except the 19 migrants who were hired as live-in care workers, and one full-time employed cleaning worker, are defined as underemployed (if not unemployed, which 17 out of 60 workers in our sample were, matching general sector estimates at the time [13]). This means that they work less than 40 h per week but would want to work more hours. Less than half, i.e., 24 out of 60 respondents in our study, can manage on their incomes without help from family or friends, and a vast majority of those who manage are live-in workers, who have their costs of living covered by the employer. Moreover, what it means to "manage" is indeed relative; in most cases this refers to basic subsistence with small, if any, margins to save money [8].

The serious economic effects of the crisis for many of our respondents have direct consequences for their ability to save money and/or send remittances, which for many of them are the primary drivers behind their migration projects. Several of our respondents initially had the idea to save money,

to invest in their country of origin (which some of them also did, buying land for instance), but most are unable to save at present. Out of the 53 respondents who replied to this question, only 12 were able to save anything at all, and most of those who used to save money when they had more work had to spend their savings to cover basic living costs since they became un- or underemployed.

“I used to save money when I had more work, but now I cannot save anything. I am running out of savings, I have been living from them since I lost my job.” (Bolivian (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

“I make about 600 euros per month now and it is barely enough to just survive, to pay my rent and buy food. My apartment is co-funded by a social organization which makes me get by, I only pay 200 euros per month for the rent.” (Nigerian domestic worker, Barcelona).

Out of 60 migrant domestic worker respondents, 33 were not sending any remittances at all at the time of the interview. Of these 33 migrants, 27 declared that they used to send remittances but no longer did; 23 of the 27 were unable to because of insufficient earnings. Of those who still send remittances, many are now obliged to send less money than before because of their decreased incomes.

“I used to send 500 Bolivian dollars, now I cannot even send 200. And they need the money . . . but I cannot return anymore, I have debts, and because of my age nobody would hire me there. I don't have enough to pay for my room, the food . . . but at least I can survive here, that is why I don't return.” (Bolivian domestic worker, Madrid).

“I try to send 100 euros per month to my husband and daughter in Honduras, they need the money to get by, but I make very little and need to earn more money. I can at least pay the apartment and eat, that is what I need to do first, if I don't make more money I have to stop sending because I have to pay for my apartment first, of course.” (Honduran domestic worker, Barcelona).

The economic difficulties that these migrant domestic workers experience may thus generate a situation where they struggle hard to just cover their own basic costs, and are unable to save anything or support their families in the countries of origin.

#### *4.2. Coping Strategies? Why Return Is Often Not an Option*

The interviewed stakeholders claim that many migrant workers in Spain currently find themselves in a state of “standby,” waiting for the recession to end (e.g., [12,14,21]). Despite the severe consequences of the crisis, subsisting is more feasible in Spain than in their countries of origin given that “poverty in Europe is still wealth in many countries in the South” [17]. In this context, the future appears highly uncertain, and plans are hard to make. More than half of our respondents express that they live day by day and have no concrete plans for the future.

Spanish policy-makers and immigration officials confirm that the massive return of migrants that was expected in the wake of the crisis is so far not happening [7]. Of our 60 migrant domestic workers, 13 claim that they plan to return to their countries of origin at some point, 26 state that they will not return, and 20 are not sure or have no plans at all related to return/permanence. To return to their country of origin with their hands empty is viewed by several of the respondents as a very last resort, but most of them do not consider it a realistic option at all. Return appears impossible if there are no savings to start over with in the country of origin, and the lack of either job opportunities or any basic social support provision in the country of origin also prevents them from taking their chances. Furthermore, to participate in publicly funded return programs, migrants are generally legally impeded from returning to Spain within a period of three years, which makes those who already are reluctant to return further unlikely to do so [12,47,60–62].

“When I am here I say ‘I am going back to my country,’ but when I go to my country I see the disaster it is and say I will take the returning flight and I won’t come back. It is a disaster, it’s awful.” (Romanian (unemployed) domestic worker, Madrid).

“If I don’t find a job maybe I will go back. Now I can’t save nor send anything...I don’t know how long to wait, I’m hanging on to see. If I would go to Honduras, I would also have to look for a job there.” (Honduran (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

“I don’t have a future, I don’t know what to do, nor where I’ll go, if there’s no job [...] the problem is my age too. I have two and a half years left for retirement.” (Ecuadorian (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

Some of the respondents also point out how difficult it is to return after spending many years in Spain, and the fact that having worked as a domestic worker (which for many of them is below their educational level and professional aspirations) is likely to decrease their employability upon return.

“I cannot return to Morocco. I could not achieve anything there. In Morocco they ask you for a higher education now than they used to, there are lots of people with a master’s degree. If I would have stayed there 10 years ago I could have had a good job now . . . this [migration] experience has not been good for me. Life here is very difficult but I will try to get by and make it until the crisis is over.” (Moroccan domestic worker, Barcelona).

The present situation calls into question the very meaning of the migration project for many migrant workers: those with plans to acquire some capital and return to their countries of origin to buy a house or start a business (and for whom the current situation prolongs *sine die* the duration of their migration) and, even more so, among those for whom the need to send remittances was the primary reason for migration. No longer making enough money to be able to support children and other family members in the country of origin leads them to question their migration as such.

“If my son can study with the money I send my sacrifice will have been worth something. When I made 700 Euro [per month] I used to send about 300, but now I cannot send anything.” (Bolivian (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

“Of course I wanted to stay with them, with my daughter, but they need money to buy a house, and to offer a future for her. But here I only make 500 euros and if nothing changes I cannot continue like this. It is so difficult now also to get the papers . . . but it has to work out somehow, it just has to.” (Honduran domestic worker, Barcelona).

A complementary perspective on the difficulties involved in returning to the country of origin after several years in Europe (in this case, Spain) is offered by a current research project on return migration and transnational diaspora entrepreneurship.<sup>11</sup> Stakeholders in Spain and Chile assert that return is often the very last option. Returning migrants often experience psychological difficulties involving the sense of failure and being a burden and a disappointment for their family members, and de facto severe economic difficulties. This, together with the scarce opportunities they may find in the country of origin upon return, explains why so few return despite the situations of acute precariousness that they face in Spain [12,19,60–62].

Tatiana Ayala, who represents the reception office in Chile within the EU-funded voluntary return program One Stop Shops, claims that Chilean migrants who return from Spain tend to have serious difficulties finding work. This is partly explained by their age (many are older than 50 and

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<sup>11</sup> Zenia Hellgren coordinates the Spanish partner of the international research project DiasporaLink, and performed research on return/circular migration and entrepreneurship in Spain, Chile and Morocco during 2016.

migrated to Spain about 10–15 years ago to gain professional opportunities, but found their projects hampered by the crisis), and partly by the fact that many of them only worked informally and/or in low-status jobs as, for instance, the domestic sector, which means that their CVs are not useful on the Chilean job market. Based on data from other Latin American project partners, this tends to be the situation elsewhere as well [47,62]. These findings alter the common perception that international (European) experience is valued positively and increases the migrants' status in the country of origin; this surely depends on the character of the experience, and work in the domestic sector, for instance, hardly represents an advantage.

A vast majority of the respondents provide vivid accounts on how they experience the effects of the financial crisis in terms of income loss, worse job conditions, and inability to save money and to continue sending remittances to their families in origin.

“It looks very dark right now with the crisis. Nobody knows what will happen, you cannot make any plans right now. My mistake was that I did not save anything, but I couldn't with the child . . . But I will not return, I have my apartment here and try to get by with the subsidy until I find a job.” (Ecuadorian (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

In sum, it appears clear that the present economic situation seriously affects the migration projects of our respondents. As a majority also find themselves unable or unwilling to return to their home countries, the remaining “coping strategy” translates to a focus on the present; getting by day by day, in some cases with help from the social services, and trying not to think of the future or make any plans.

#### *4.3. Implications of the Crisis for the Destination Country and the Countries of Origin*

On a broader level, the present situation in Spain could imply an increasing adaptation to, and to some extent acceptance of, precariousness, so that worse job conditions and a lower standard of living become normalized. There are indications that this is happening also among important segments of the native population, and affects many other segments of workers than those employed in the domestic sector or other migrant-dense sectors. In the case of migrant workers, who often lack support networks, this situation is likely to become unsustainable sooner than for natives. Several of the stakeholders claimed that what worries them the most is to think of what will happen if, or when, the numerous migrant workers struggling for their daily subsistence are no longer able to even cover their basic costs of living [12,14,18,19,21,63,64].

For the countries of origin, cut or significantly reduced remittances have consequences on multiple levels. Schooling for children and medical costs for family members may no longer be covered, and investment projects in home villages/neighbourhoods may be left unfinished.

“When I worked I used to send 500 or 600 euros every month, my daughter is in school there and needs money. I cannot send anything now. The help is indispensable, in Honduras life is very expensive but people make too little money. The doctor there . . . you must go to a private one or you will not get the medicines you need, and that is very expensive.” (Honduran (unemployed) domestic worker, Barcelona).

Deteriorating job opportunities for migrants in receiving countries in the wake of the financial crisis may thus have serious repercussions also for the sending countries. For the specific case of migrant domestic workers in Spain, we may assume that if the demand decreases, this sector instead of “resisting the crisis” [65] will add to the downturn in migrant labour in Spain with potentially severe effects both for sending countries and the growing “migrant precariat” [66] in receiving countries, which in many cases is neither able to return nor continue contributing to the economic development of the country of origin through remittances. The consequences of the global financial crisis and the precarization of Western labour markets for transnational migration projects have only started to be explored.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In the beginning of this paper, we stated that our main purpose was to explore how the financial crisis in Spain affects migrant domestic workers and their families, both in the countries of origin and the destination country. In order to do so, we complemented our in-depth interviews with female migrant domestic workers by interviews with migrant workers in other sectors as well as stakeholders in order to provide a more general overview of the effects of the crisis on migrants in Spain.

First, we assumed that the financial crisis in Spain has a negative impact on Spanish households' economy, leading to a decreasing demand for domestic services that ought to be most strongly felt among the most vulnerable segments of workers: migrants who depend on this income to support both themselves and their families in origin. When analyzing the interviews, we therefore specifically focused on the respondents' experiences of the crisis's impact on job conditions, savings and remittances. Overall, their narratives reflect worsening job conditions as a consequence of the crisis, which has forced many households to cut their costs, though some clients are also perceived to take advantage of the crisis in order to get more work for less pay. The most serious consequence of the crisis for a majority of workers is the reduction in available jobs and work hours. Most of the interviewed domestic workers cannot manage on their income, and nearly half of them are no longer able to send remittances due to their decreased earnings.

Second, we assumed that return migration is hardly a realistic option for many of the un- or underemployed migrants who are struggling to get by in Spain at present, given the lack of opportunities in most sending countries. Based on the interviews with migrant domestic workers, it appears clear that the economic crisis seriously affects their migration projects. As expected, we found that only a minority of the workers planned to return to their countries of origin. Some prefer life in Spain and have children who are rooted there, but most of the migrants who would like to return consider this impossible since they have no savings; lacking job opportunities and inexistent social security systems in their countries of origin make return economically unsustainable. Also, several of the respondents state that they would feel too ashamed to "return with their hands empty." Most of the respondents express no plans at all for the future, but try to focus on getting by day by day while waiting for the crisis to end.

Third, we assumed that the current economic situation in Spain would have serious implications for both sending and receiving countries. Based on our study, we find indications that this is indeed so: our respondents (both migrant workers and stakeholders) coincide in their descriptions of growing precariousness among migrants in Spain, as well as increasing hardship among family members back home. Several of the respondents were worried that their children would not be able to continue their education, or that relatives with illnesses would not be able to afford medical treatment that they used to pay for when they were able to send remittances.

With this paper, we aimed to start building bridges between different fields of research in order to expand our knowledge about the effects of the global financial crisis on transnational migration projects in both sending and receiving countries. In earlier research on the transnationalization of domestic work, it was generally assumed that the demand for migrant labour in Western societies will continue to increase. We contest this assumption, and argue that more research is needed on the transnational consequences of economic downturns in western immigration countries. Bastia's work on return migration from Argentina and Spain to Bolivia after these immigrant-receiving countries' respective financial crises represents an important contribution to start exploring this field [50]. We consider our work as complementary, and aim at contributing to developing this field of research through the pioneer attempt that this paper represents. We would much like to encourage other researchers to empirically examine these or similar questions in different countries and sectors affected by the financial crisis. To summarize the implications of our findings, we argue that the crisis places migrant workers in a situation of standby, where many are unable to continue sending remittances or even get by, while return to the countries of origin is often not a viable option. The consequences

are tangible both for the sending and receiving countries in terms of hampered development and increasing precariousness.

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