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Highly Educated Women: Exploring Barriers and Strategies for Labour Integration in an Emotional Migratory Process

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Abstract: This article explores the barriers and the strategies of a group of highly educated foreign women to obtain a job-education matching situation in the Basque Country (Spain) where they all permanently settled following a binational heterosexual marriage. Drawing on 21 biographical interviews with women from Latin America and Europe, we examine new perspectives on the complexity and fluidity between their professional pathways and family projects. For that, we apply an intersectional lens to analyse their life experience. Our results show that respondents involved in a feminised labour market (education and health) have fewer difficulties to find a job-education match. In other cases, becoming self-employed is a way to gain independence and flexibility by running an open market-oriented business. Interviewees identified language, lack of personal networks, family reconciliation, traditional gender roles and the transferring of cultural capital as the main barriers for their incorporation into the labour market. The study finds that marriage support is not enough to overcome the barriers. We argue that for a more comprehensive understanding of labour integration of highly educated migrant women, motivation and agency, linked to family support, should be considered factors to cope with structural inequalities.



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Keywords: highly educated migrant women; inequality; gender; binational marriages; job-education match; agency; intersectionality

1. Introduction

Scholars have highlighted the complexity behind the decision to emigrate and other mobility phenomena. In particular, family and emotional reasons have been identified as important factors that overlap with traditional studies of economic motivations (Suárez Orozco 2020). This article contributes to and expands on previous work on the complexity and inequality of women's migration processes in relation to emotional reasons and the construction of a family project (e.g., D'Aoust 2015; Di Martino et al. 2020; Enguix and Roca 2016; Erlinghagen 2021; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Riaño 2015; Roca 2016; Roca and Folguera 2021; Zinatsa and Saurombe 2022). In this article, we use the term 'emotional journey' to refer to a specific group of women for whom marriage to a man from the Basque Country (Spain) was the key factor in their migration or settlement process. We cannot forget that emotional ties are among the main reasons that drive women with advanced degrees to pursue a migratory trajectory or to change their lives within a specific migration project (Scott 2006).

These women face the challenge of settling in another country, where they must obtain recognition of their professional qualifications and find employment commensurate with their educational level. Research evidences the interplay of multiple and important barriers among university-educated migrant women and insecure conditions to validate professional degrees in the countries of destination (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir 2022;

Kofman 2012; Liversage 2009; Rodríguez and Scurry 2014). In addition, the gendered division of labour in the family sphere has a significant impact on their employment opportunities (Föbker 2019; De Miguel et al. 2015; Mulholland and Ryan 2014; Seminario and Le Feuvre 2021; Riaño 2021). As this body of research confirms, the interaction of contexts and barriers influences women's agency and their insertion into the labour market. In light of this evidence, there is a growing recognition of the need for more research from a gender perspective to better understand this issue (Rodríguez and Scurry 2014).

This paper explores the gender dynamics associated with the achievement of a job-education match of highly educated migrant women and their strategies to overcome structural and familial constraints. The gender perspective research recognises the fluid nature of gender dynamics that intersect with other social categories of difference (Timmerman et al. 2015; Ortega-de-Mora and Terrón-Caro 2023). To understand the complexity of the situation faced by women with advanced degrees at the intersection of the family and the migratory process, we focus on the categories of gender, origin, marriage to a native-born man and migration. Thus, we adopt the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical framework. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of inequality or oppression of subordinated groups (Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2015). Regarding migrant women, intersectional research suggests that even women, who are considered privileged because of their high levels of education, may suffer a process of deskilling (Fuentes-Mayorga 2023; Kofman 2012; Riaño 2021). Inspired by the intersectional approach, which makes "the invisible visible" (López et al. 2017, p. 1), we explore the experiences of 21 migrant women in the Basque Country. We attempt to capture the fluid dynamics between these overlapping and simultaneously operating categories (Menjívar 2006). Our research questions are the following: How do highly educated immigrant women cope with the obstacles to insertion into the local labour market? Which trajectories do they follow? How do marriage and origin affect their entry into the labour market?

We aim to contribute to the literature by identifying the barriers faced by one of the least studied groups: highly educated migrant women married to a native man. In doing so, we draw on life histories traced through in-depth biographical interviews (21 women from Latin American and European countries, who represent the largest flow of migrant women to the Basque Country). We are aware that the literature on skilled migration or university-educated migrants has generated an unsolved dilemma, as the standards of qualification are based on different ways of assessment and criteria adopted in every country (Boucher 2019). Therefore, following Sandoz (2021), we want to point out that in this paper, the term "highly educated" refers to migrant women with tertiary education (university degrees). The interviewees share two characteristics: (1) they have all built family and professional lives in the Basque Country, where their heterosexual husbands and children were born; (2) the interviewees have achieved a job-education match. The article analyses how the intersection of gender, origin and marriage articulates the trajectories towards insertion into the labour market. A central theme that emerges from our data is the diversity of migratory routes taken by the participants. In addition, the adoption of self-employment is a way to gain independence and flexibility by running an open market-oriented business.

1.1. Literature Review

International studies of highly educated migrant women from a gender perspective show that their career paths are neither homogeneous nor linear (Bermúdez 2014; Liversage 2009). Moreover, it should be noted that women are influenced by discriminatory categories such as race, ethnicity, class, status and educational level (Yuval-Davis 2015). These categories make them more vulnerable and complicate both the reconstruction of their lives and their professional and personal balance in the destination countries, often leading to a waste of human capital (Bailey and Mulder 2017; Kofman 2012, 2014).

Scholars have mainly explored obstacles and responses to potential processes of over-qualification (Liversage 2009; Rajendran et al. 2020). Language barriers, the need for

recognition of their educational qualifications for regulated professions and the devaluation of their qualifications, as well as the lack of social networks and specialised job search support services, are the main barriers and challenges for women with tertiary studies in the EU labour market (Gomes de Araujo 2023). Upgrading and re-qualification are the main strategies identified to overcome these barriers (Bermúdez 2014; Kofman 2014; Liversage 2009; Riaño and Baghadi 2007; Seminario and Le Feuvre 2021).

As Scott (2006) notes, professional reasons are not the only factors to account for the migration of professional women. Indeed, emotional factors are one of the main considerations for pursuing a migratory trajectory. Since the second half of the 1980s, many studies have emerged that describe and analyse love relations between men and women from different countries (Mai and King 2009; Roca et al. 2021). Women with foreign partners describe their migration project from perspectives of sentiment and love (Roca et al. 2012; Roca 2016). This implies “an ‘emotional turn’ in migration and mobility studies which explicitly places emotions, especially love and affection, at the heart of migration decision making and behaviour” (Mai and King 2009, p. 298).

As Romens (2021) suggests, family dynamics are a key factor in understanding the entry of highly educated women into the labour market of the host country. Indeed, marriage and family ties influence their professional trajectories and contribute to either hindering access to occupational integration (Seminario and Le Feuvre 2021; Roca et al. 2021), driving a process of occupational downgrading (Zinatza and Saurombe 2022) or driving a project of immobility (D’Aoust 2015). In that sense, Seminario and Le Feuvre (2021, p. 207) estimate that “the gender configuration of the family environment influences the employment opportunities of highly skilled migrants more than origin or educational qualifications per se”.

When migration occurs as a couple, this process should be understood as a product of bilateral negotiations between the partners and not as a decision of one actor without social boundaries. From a gender perspective, when making decisions about family migration projects, women who prioritise the careers of their husbands are often the weaker side of this negotiation (Seminario and Le Feuvre 2021). After a bargaining process, the wife would follow, even though it may limit her individual labour market position (Cangià 2020; Cangià et al. 2018). This decision can lead to the well-known phenomenon of the ‘trailing wife’ (Cooke 2001). Consequently, the outcome of these negotiations is influenced by a complex interplay of economic considerations about maximising the wealth of the household and its members, gender-related role expectations, as well as the (unequal) distribution of power between the couple (Erlinghagen 2021).

Becoming a spouse in a binational marriage in another country involves a journey of navigating cultural and gender norms, expectations and emotions (Herrero-Arias et al. 2021). Although women who migrate for emotional reasons have some advantage in assimilating into the destination society, marriage to a local man can have conflicting effects depending on the country and the nationalities. In Switzerland, previous studies have documented disadvantages for migrant women in dual-career mixed couples (Riaño 2021). Research in Spain also suggests that an advantage for foreign women married to native men does not usually include entry to the labour market (Roca et al. 2012). However, for some women in Basque Country, such as those from Latin America, marriage can provide certain legal advantages in terms of residency and work permits (Di Martino et al. 2020).

At the same time, these women have to reconcile their professional aspirations with the configuration of a new family project and, in general, there is an increase in domestic and/or childcare responsibilities, especially when there are young children (De Miguel et al. 2015; Roca et al. 2012). Indeed, pregnancy, motherhood and childcare are significant moments in their lives. Previous studies have shown that the role of carer is a crucial element in women’s family projects (Roca et al. 2021; Kwon 2023). Consequently, fulfilling their professional aspirations may be a long process.

In spite of the limitations encountered, recent studies have shown that migrant women with tertiary education also maintain agency and find ways to subvert the barriers that

exclude them from the labour market (Clark and Huang 2006; Gomes de Araujo 2023; Lassalle and Shaw 2021; Riaño 2021; Zinatsa and Saurombe 2022).

1.2. Context of Research

Regarding highly skilled migration, both the structure of the Spanish labour market and its segmentation have led to overqualification whereby a large percentage of people with higher education occupy medium or low-skilled positions. By sex, professional devaluation is much higher in women (Fernández and Parra 2013). In that sense, although a higher educational level has become a global tendency, personal, economic and social investment in training and improving human capital is wasted, in many cases, due to a job-education mismatch.

As the Immigrant Population Survey (EPIE 2014) shows, in the Basque Country, overqualification is also high among migrant women. Nevertheless, an important variability is detected by origin: Latin American and Eastern European women are the groups that ‘experience higher overqualification’ (Figure 1). As can be seen, the groups with the highest levels of overqualification in most Latin American countries (Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay) exceed 27%, except those from Bolivia (12%). In the case of European population, women from Eastern Europe perceive a higher overqualification (32%) compared to those from Western Europe (8%).

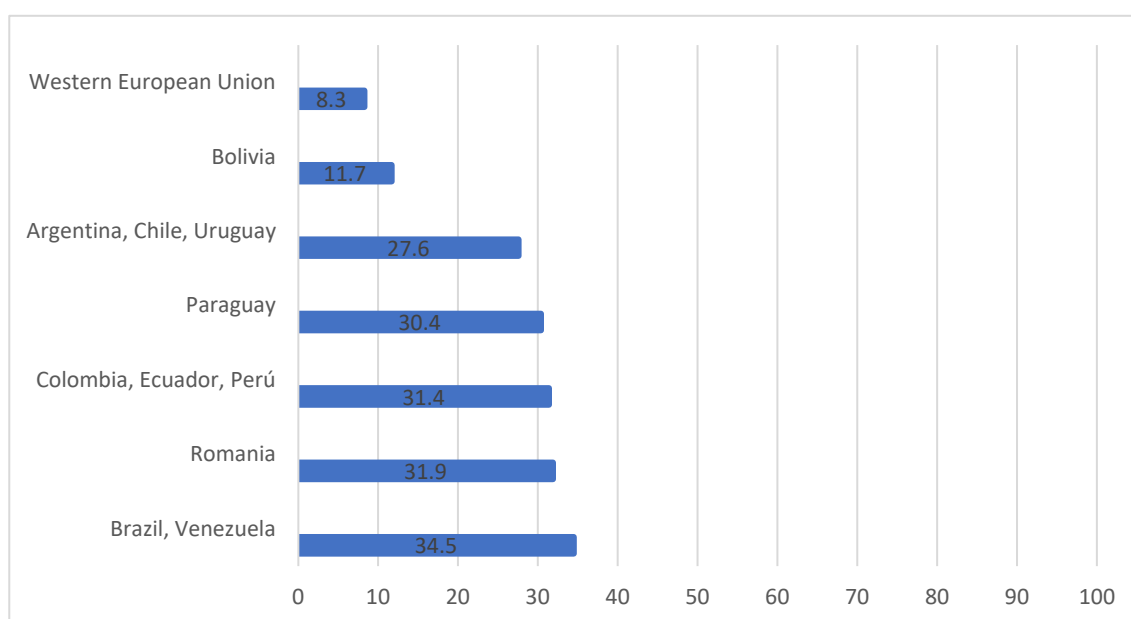


Figure 1. Percentage of women of foreign origin in the Basque Country (BC) who state that ‘their occupation is lower than their level of training’. Authors’ elaboration, based on data from the BC Survey on Immigrant Population (EPIE 2014), following the EPIE country typology.

By analysing the situation of these foreign women with tertiary education, it can be said that they also claim overqualification. Moreover, the differences between countries become more acute (Figure 2). It is more evident within the Latin American group, particularly those from Paraguay, Bolivia or Brazil and Venezuela, where more than 65% of these women experience overqualification.

By contrast, highly educated European women seem to enjoy a better situation than those from Latin America. However, Figure 2 illustrates that the situation of tertiary-educated women in Europe is also dependent on origin. In this sense, while 29% of Romanian women claim they experience overqualification, Western European women do not appear to experience this, indicating that they find it easier to access the appropriate level.

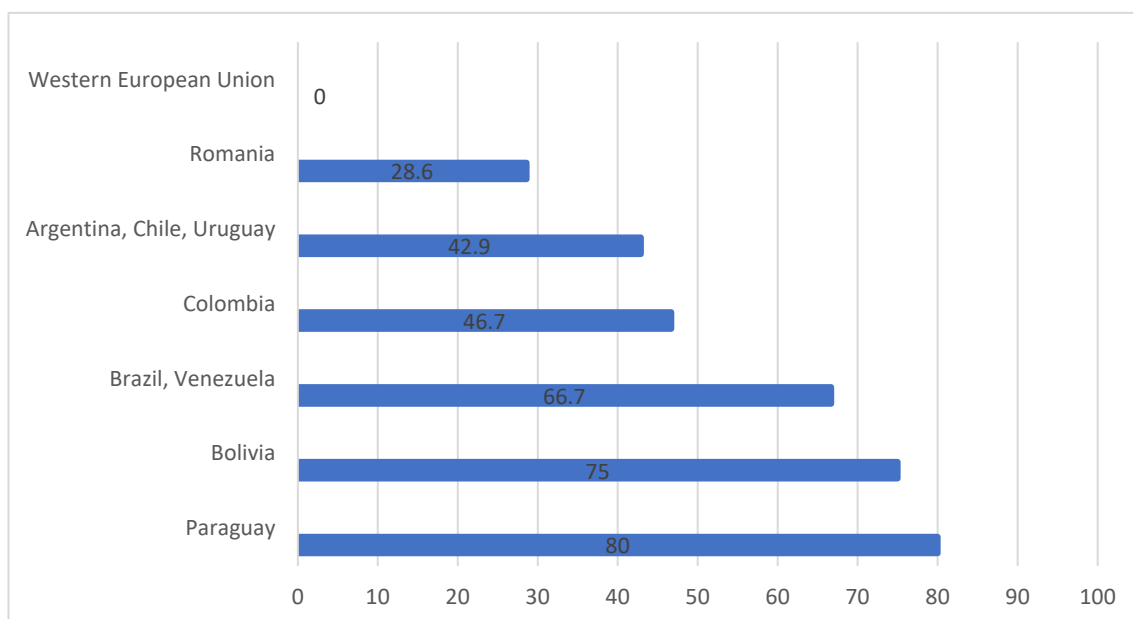


Figure 2. Percentage of women of foreign origin, with tertiary studies, in the Basque Country (BC) who state, ‘their occupation is lower than their level of training’. Authors’ elaboration, based on data from the BC Survey on Immigrant Population (EPIE 2014), following the EPIE country typology.

This situation reflects the structure of the Basque Country labour market, with labour demand and pressure factors (i.e., administrative status, non-accredited qualifications, language barriers, etc.) (Shershneva and Fernández 2018). The Basque society’s view of immigrant women could act as an additional obstacle, as stereotypes and prejudices about immigration lead to mistrust of their qualifications and work experience (Aristegui et al. 2018; REALISE 2013). In sum, the combination of all these constraints risks wasting human capital, with few women achieving a situation of job-education matching. In addition, it should be stressed that the migratory careers of highly educated women and their socio-occupational integration process in the labour market of the host country have been analysed mostly from the macro-economic dimension, but they have scarcely been explored from the perspective of sentiment and family. We argue that this is an important dimension that can better explain the migration process of these women.

1.3. Migration and Binational Marriages

The so-called emotional migration, through binational marriages, constitutes one of the strongest reasons that determines the transformation of women’s migration project from temporary to permanent (Roca et al. 2021). Statistical data on binational heterosexual marriages in Spain from 1996 to 2020 show that 58% of these correspond to unions between a Spanish man and a foreign woman. These statistics also show that Spanish men marry more Latin American or Slavic women (Roca and Folguera 2021). In the Basque Country, a similar trend can be observed (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 shows that the number of heterosexual marriages in the Basque Country, in which at least one of the partners is a foreign national, has doubled in the last few years, from 14% to 27%. Among mixed relationships, those in which women have foreign nationality are higher (around 40% or 50%) in comparison with couples in which men, or both, are foreign nationals (Figure 4). According to EUSTAT (2020), the Basque Country Statistical Survey, the countries of origin of foreign women are mostly Latin American countries (Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil and Nicaragua), followed by European, originating from Romania and Ukraine, and from France in 2020.

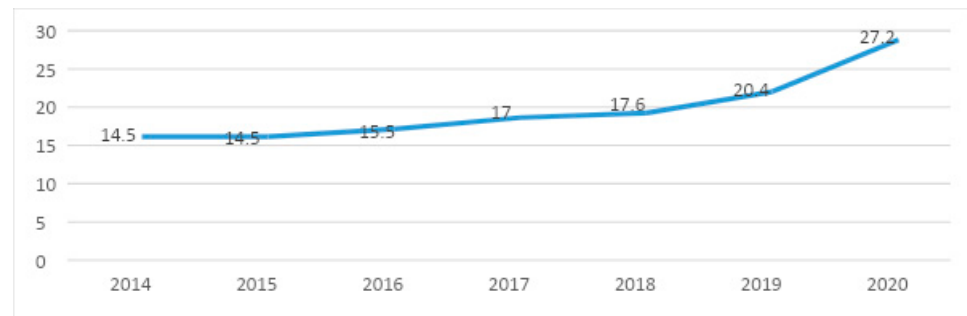


Figure 3. Percentage of marriages between different sexes in which at least one member of the couple is a foreign national. Basque Country (%). Statistical data on marriages in BC between 2014 and 2020 (EUSTAT 2020).

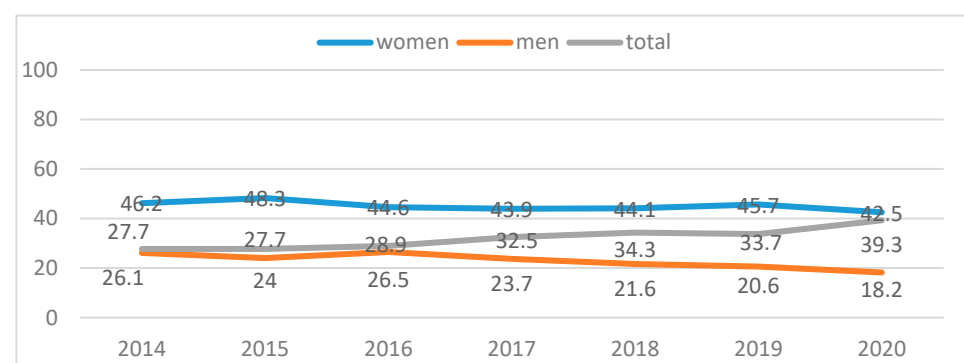


Figure 4. Composition of mixed couple's marriages in which at least one member is a foreign national. Basque Country (%). Statistical data on marriages in BC between 2014 and 2020 (EUSTAT 2020).

2. Materials and Methods

This paper's empirical data are based on fieldwork carried out from 2015 to 2019 in the Basque Country. It is part of a wider study ("Between privileges and vulnerabilities: Migratory careers of highly qualified foreign women in the Basque Country", [Di Martino 2019](#)). On this occasion, we explore the trajectories of a group of 21 migrant women in binational marriages with Basque men. As a method, we used biographical interviews to encourage informants to recreate their life trajectories. Previous studies have shown that migration flows do not have linear trajectories, but people on the move are embedded in a complex process based on different spheres (personal, professional and relational) ([Bermúdez 2014](#); [Di Martino et al. 2020](#); [Liversage 2009](#); [Petroff 2017](#); [Riaño et al. 2015](#)). The use of biographical interviews offers us the possibility to focus on their life trajectories from a retrospective angle. By using them as a conceptual framework in the field of human mobility, it is possible to reconstruct the intersections between the biography of the agents, in the form of life histories, and the socio-structural factors of the places of migration (countries of origin and destination). Moreover, the analysis of this process requires identifying sequential events over time, highlighting certain turning points related to the social and emotional ties that people weave throughout their life ([Leclerc-Olive 2009](#)). Due to their progressive evolution, those processes are considered as a succession of situations to which people give specific meanings ([Bertaux 2005](#)).

The selection of participants followed the below criteria: (a) hold a high level of education (with a university degree: BA, MA, PhD); (b) work in a job-education matching situation; (c) have a native Basque husband; (d) have established resettlement in the Basque Country, based on love and family reasons; and (e) have at least two different channels of mobility, such as inter-European or Latin American mobility (as these are the largest groups in the Basque Country). Table 1 gives an overview of the occupation sectors of this group of women, identified through the non-randomised snowball method following

the principle of maximum variation sampling in dimensions as origin and professions. Their qualifications ranged widely from medical science and education to consulting and services. This study considered the ethical consideration of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and academic integrity, under the supervision of the Ethical Committee of the University of Deusto (Spain) (code: ETK-26/23-24).

Table 1. Respondents' sectors of occupation in the labour market.

| Occupational Sectors of Competencies and Skills | European Union | Latin America | Total |
|---|----------------|---------------|-------|
| Teaching and Research | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Health (medicine/nursing/psychology) | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Editing and Communication (editing/translation/journalism) | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Services, Consulting | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 11 | 10 | 21 |

Authors' elaboration.

We adopted an interpretative approach for a deeper understanding of the interplay between relational elements (emotional and family projects), professional trajectories (work–education matching goals) and chosen strategies in order to understand their way of balancing initial expectations, overcoming the barriers encountered. We also combined the thematic perspective with the temporal structures of the narrative, seeking both a synchronic and a diachronic construction of the stories. Synchronic analysis provides a more complete view of the situation and processes. A diachronic analysis of the biographical events allows us to identify key moments in the women's trajectories. In addition, marriage to a Basque man interweaves other intersections or key elements in their biographies that are full of change (Leclerc-Olive 2009) (e.g., migration, motherhood, end of studies, etc.). Therefore, the analytical approach sequences the narrative and facilitates an ordering of the biographical data. In short, temporality and spatiality were useful for both analysing the migratory trajectories and the strategies developed to achieve a situation of labour–educational adaptation in the host country.

Following Table 2, we have identified two different patterns of migration among the interviewees. The first consists of those who met their partners in the BC and, after initiating this relationship, decided to stay (Alina, Filomena, Sofia, Luisa, Mary, Anca, Jenica, Paula, Fernanda, Cristina, Ana María, Cecilia, Elena); we call this 'direct pattern' because the women started the process in the BC. The second pattern, called 'indirect pattern', includes the presence of a 'transit country', where women met their Basque partners, usually through master's or doctoral studies (Claudia, Astrid, Annie, Emma, Teresa, Mariana, Mercedes, Ángeles). The profile of these women reflects their interest in professional improvement combined with a desire for adventure. Once their binational relationship was established, in double-career couples, the couple decided to get married and move to the Basque Country since the men had better job opportunities and salaries. In this way, these women embark on a similar path to the well-known 'trailing wife' (Cooke 2001). The number of participants from Europe and Latin America is quite similar for both patterns of migration.

Table 2. Respondents' profiles.

| N | Country of Origin | Children | Time in Spain | Place They Meet Their Partners | Education | Type(s) of Employment (s) |
|-------------|-------------------|----------|---------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Claudia | Italy | 2 | 20 years | Norway | BA Mathematics | University Lecturer |
| 2. Astrid | Germany | 3 | 13 years | Canary Island | BA Administration | Self-Employed Translator |
| 3. Alina | Poland | 1 | 8 years | Basque Country | BA Sociology | International Relations |
| 4. Filomena | Italy | 0 | 5 years | Basque Country | BA Sociology | Self-Employed Fashion Stylist |

Table 2. Cont.

| N | Country of Origin | Children | Time in Spain | Place They Meet Their Partners | Education | Type(s) of Employment (s) |
|---------------|-------------------|----------|---------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 5. Sofia | Italy | 2 | 9 years | Basque Country | MBA Admin | Administration and Marketing |
| 6. Annie | France | 0 | 30 years | London | MA Environment | Self-Employed Environmental Processes |
| 7. Luisa | Italy | 2 | 10 years | Basque Country | MA Development | Self-Employed Local Development |
| 8. Emma | France | 2 | 24 years | Salamanca | BA Philology | Language Teacher |
| 9. Mary | UK | 0 | 8 years | Basque Country | BA Philology | Language Teacher |
| 10. Anca | Romania | 1 | 17 years | Basque Country | BA Philology | Language Teacher |
| 11. Jenica | Romania | 2 | 16 years | Basque Country | Nurse | Nurse |
| 12. Teresa | Mexico | 0 | 10 years | London | BA Labour Relations | International Cooperation |
| 13. Paula | Mexico | 1 | 20 years | Basque Country | MA Development | International Relations |
| 14. Fernanda | Colombia | 1 | 10 years | Basque Country | MA Development | Self-Employed Development |
| 15. Cristina | Brazil | 0 | 5 years | Basque Country | Ph.D. Psychology | Psychologist |
| 16. Ana María | Venezuela | 0 | 8 years | Basque Country | Nurse | Nurse |
| 17. Mariana | Costa Rica | 2 | 15 years | Barcelona | Medicine | Doctor |
| 18. Mercedes | Cuba | 3 | 5 years | Internet | Medicine | Doctor |
| 19. Cecilia | Argentina | 2 | 10 years | Basque Country | MA Cultural Management | Self-Employed Social Communication |
| 20. Elena | Honduras | 1 | 5 years | Basque Country | Fashion Stylist | Self-Employed Fashion Stylist |
| 21. Ángeles | Venezuela | 0 | 5 years | Madrid | MA Cooperation | Self-Employed Coaching |

3. Results

This section is structured according to the research questions. Firstly, we show how the intersecting dimensions of the migratory process lead to specific issues related to the settlement process. Secondly, we refer to barriers related to integration in the labour market, organised in five subsections and, thirdly, we analyse the women’s main trajectories of obtaining a job-matching situation. Figure 5 presents a summary of the main categories of analysis related to the migratory process of participants. Those categories will be analysed in the following sections.

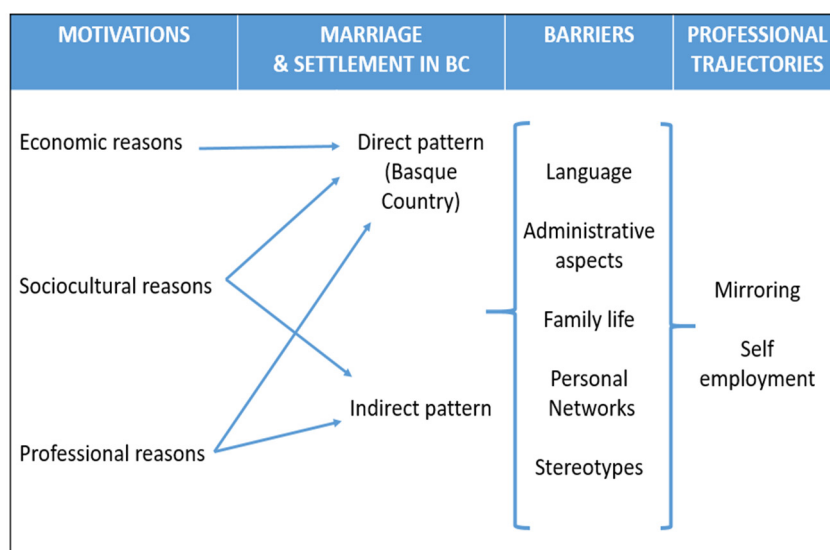


Figure 5. Categories of analysis related to the migratory process.

3.1. The Process of Migration and Settlement in Relation to Marriage

This section explores how the motivations for emigration and settlement are not fixed and change over time. For our interviewees, love is a turning point, a key milestone in their biographies, which emerges as a central factor in the project and the decision to settle. As we have commented, the first group of interviewees, the ‘direct pattern’, met their husbands in the Basque Country. Analysis of the interviews shows that their path was different depending on the respondent’s economic circumstances. All those in the sample who say they moved for economic reasons started a deskilling process in the Basque Country, which forced them to take temporary jobs while they were settling down. This is the case of two women from Romania (Anca, Janica) and one from Latin America (Ana María). This group found support in their husbands, which gave them some legal and economic stability.

Other participants left Latin America (Paula, Fernanda, Cristina, Cecilia, Elena) in the search for new horizons, escaping from the social pressure and family restrictions. This group of women also came to escape the economic crisis or gender discrimination in the labour market in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, they brought with them a life project that would open up new opportunities to improve their skills before they met their husbands. They also argued that meeting their partners was a key element in their decision to settle down in the Basque Country and start a family:

When my grant finished, I had to decide whether to stay or to go back to Argentina. My husband and I thought about different options (. . .). Finally, the marriage was the easiest one for me to obtain Spanish nationality and a work permit. (Elena)

(. . .) then I had to face the big decision: either I opted for love, a person who was worthwhile, or I opted for work. I decided (. . .), we talked to see if we would stay in Colombia or come to Bilbao and we decided Bilbao, because the security situation in Colombia was not the best. I decided to gamble, if it works well, if not I will go back. In February 2009 I arrived here on a 3-month tourist visa, without a job. (Fernanda)

This was a similar case for some of the European participants (Alina, Filomena, Sofia, Luisa, Mary) who met their husbands while working or studying in the Basque Country. The reasons for leaving their countries were not exclusively economic, but sociocultural factors play a role in understanding women’s migratory process (Riaño 2015). Our data suggest that this may be associated with a particular lifestyle (young, single people), for which marriage and family responsibilities influenced the decision to settle in the BC.

The second group, which we have termed the ‘indirect pattern’, includes the presence of a ‘transit country’, where the women met their Basque partners (Claudia, Astrid, Annie, Teresa, Mariana, Mercedes, Ángeles). Most of the women in this group had chosen to continue their studies abroad. Their profile reflects an interest in professional development combined with a sense of adventure. Once their binational relationship was established, in a dual career couple, they decided to get married and move to the Basque Country because the men had better job opportunities, higher salaries and better security:

We met in London, got married and came to live in the Basque Country, because here my husband had all his career prospects [meaning that she is the one who gave up her career, because her husband had the best career prospects]. (Teresa)

I am a pioneer in my family [. . .] The first woman to travel so far, first to Norway [where she met her husband] and then to the United States [. . .]. (Claudia)

As already commented, these women follow a path similar to the well-known ‘trailing wife’ (Cooke 2001). This pattern is related to traditional gender roles, with men taking the lead in deciding where to settle and women assuming the role similar to trailing wives (Erlinghagen 2021). Following one’s husband to his home country comes at the cost of neglecting one’s own aspirations, and the discourses of the interviewees reflected the idea that local men have more opportunities in their home countries. They indicate that there

was little or no room to question this decision as they prioritised raising a family and decided to follow their husbands rather than pursue their own career ambitions. As we will see below, the interviews show that there was no lack of professional ambition, but that it was relegated to a more favourable environment.

3.2. Barriers in the Process of Job Matching

This section presents the main findings related to the barriers identified by the interviewees. We organised them into five subsections according to the participants' perceptions. Although we have separated them, throughout the discourse, we analyse how they interrelate with each other. We also identify the strategies employed by the interviewees to overcome these barriers.

3.2.1. Language: Not Only Spanish

In the Basque Country, two official languages are spoken, Spanish and Basque. In the interviews, mastery of Spanish was not considered a barrier to incorporation into the labour market. It is worth noting that knowledge of foreign languages was a key factor in labour insertion of languages teachers, as well as in the private sector with an international focus (Claudia, Sofia, Alina). In other cases, Basque was a limitation to achieving job stability; in particular, it was a barrier to gaining employment in public health and education sectors. Some of the interviewees commented on the difficulties in entering the Basque employment system as civil servants:

Right now, I am studying Basque. I got into a job exchange of Osakidetza Basque health service, I did the public service examinations but because of the Basque language they always excluded me from the lists. [In Osakidetza] sometimes I have even been hired for 1 h, extremely precarious (. . .) Sometimes we accept things that we should not even accept (Ana María).

The Basque language issue is a bit bad because I can't get the EGA degree (Official Certificate of Proficiency in Basque language) and I can't get a permanent position in public education (Annie).

As in other countries, feminised sectors, such as health and education, are more in demand (Kofman 2012). Basque is a difficult language to learn fluently, and lack of knowledge of it is one of the biggest obstacles to equal opportunities for foreign people (and national people who do not speak it) in the public sector or it presents further barriers and limited opportunities for career development. For that reason, to overcome the precariousness of this situation, the women alternate public work with the private sector or they permanently join the private sector, such as the education sector to work as language teachers or the health care sector (Mercedes, Annie, Anca, Emma, Mary). Only two of our interviewees stated that they were in the process of learning Basque, such as a Venezuelan nurse (Ana María) or the international cooperation technician (Paula). Learning the language becomes a personal challenge and an investment for the future, as they do not see themselves living elsewhere since their partner and children are settled here (Paula).

3.2.2. Administrative Aspects and Validation of Degrees

All the women interviewed were affected by common structural obstacles, which influence the shorter (for European women) or longer (for Latin American women) time period to access the labour market. Participants mentioned the high levels of bureaucracy at immigration offices in respect of the necessary documentation. In particular, women who started the migration process alone considered that the most prominent issue was the regularisation of their status and titles (Anca, Jenica, Ana María).

The difficulty of transferring the institutionalised cultural capital from the country of origin seemed to be one of the most significant barriers to labour market integration (Zinatza and Saurombe 2022) In Spain, accreditation of diplomas is mandatory in certain areas such as health. Respondents told us about their previous attempts to achieve accreditation and thus speed up the process of insertion into the labour market:

I started to process the validation of my degree in 2009, the paperwork, before coming to live in Spain, so that when I could come to Spain I would already have an employment contract, it took me a year. (Mercedes)

Before leaving for the Basque Country, I got apostilles for all my degrees. With the apostille of The Hague (...) In one year in the UPV [Basque Country Public University] I did the validation of the degree with 3 modules that I lacked, in which they considered that I had a deficit: geriatrics, medical-surgery, ethics and legislation. (Ana María)

Despite the advantages of this strategy, the process is complex. It implies taking exams or only receiving partial accreditation that would prevent the women from practicing. This process sometimes does not prevent a certain amount of deskilling, due to the inability to gain validation of certain specialties as pointed out by a doctor who has to practise general medicine instead of the speciality of psychiatry that she practiced in her home country.

I agreed to be medical doctor, because I can put into practice some expertise as a psychiatrist as I am in a retirement home and I can employ my skills with my patients and their families. (Mercedes)

The lack of optimal conditions has an impact on agency, limiting the women's rights. This type of deskilling is a subjective perception held by foreign women and is linked more to the socio-cultural (rather than professional) dimension. Namely, the phenomenon of subjective deskilling occurs precisely in the constant comparison made by foreign women with native men, although in a latent or rather invisible or unconscious way from the perspective of the women interviewed.

(...) sure, when I got here I spent the first two weeks like, wow everything, how cool! And then all of a sudden, then I find myself alone, and I say, 'What have I done with my life?' I've left my job, I've left my family, I've left my country, my culture, everything and the achievements I had made as a professional (...). And to arrive here and feel like, as they say, to be a lion's head in some parts, and in others, a mouse's tail. I thought, I have come here to be a mouse's tail [laughs]. (Fernanda)

I thought I was going to be somewhere else, but then it happens that you lower your expectations completely, and, to tell the truth, I didn't risk much. But because I also wanted to build a family (...) I don't think there was a right strategy. My father-in-law always says that loyalty used to be the best virtue in the world of work, but today it's not like that anymore. Today it is very difficult to get something permanent, to have a fixed plan or strategy; sometimes there are many disappointments, depending on the expectations one has. So you have to adapt to the circumstances, know how to flow with the opportunities that come your way and know how to take them (Alina).

3.2.3. Family Life

Previous research has shown that having children is a critical event in women's lives, often associated with a negative impact on their careers (Kwon 2023; Riaño 2021). Our data highlight how raising children is a key element in the participants' lives'. Having a family further complicates their career progression and also any thoughts of returning to their country of origin. Emotions such as nostalgia for family, loneliness, rootlessness and homesickness emerged from narratives. Moreover, building relations and networks seemed to be difficult, often relying on their husbands' networks.

The experiences of the trailing wife limit growth expectations (Lassalle and Shaw 2021), and raising a family is often a factor that drives women's immobility in the home. Jordi Roca (2016) speaks of the re-domestication of women in Spain. This present study does not offer a definitive answer. On the one hand, our findings show that the women prioritised the home at the expense of their careers when they arrived to the Basque Country. In some

cases, it almost feels similar to a return to the dynamics of traditional roles in the early post-migration phases:

I continue to reproduce traditional family roles, the woman being responsible for the home. I have to admit it. The mistake was mine. Outside the home? When I came here, I felt like a fish out of water. I went with “bodyguards” everywhere, and I still go with my husband everywhere. I always move around with him, but with time, I am becoming more autonomous. (Sofia)

Our results suggest that the issue of work–life balance is related to the type of employment, for both women and men, and not to nationality or the migratory status. Thus, for women who work shifts with complex schedules, work–life balance is only achieved through coordination with their husbands who have flexible working hours (Jenica, Mariana and Mercedes).

My husband takes care of the three children, so I can work night shifts, holidays. (Mariana)

I am happy with my husband. He buys; he makes the menu every Sunday. We know what we are going to eat for the whole week, we have everything organised, this is fundamental, because my timetable is horrendous (. . .). (Mercedes)

This is not always the case, especially where husbands have long working hours or are self-employed; the women interviewed have devoted some time to bringing up their children (Claudia, Sofia, Luisa, Cecilia, Paula). At times, they have sought self-employment as a way to have more flexibility and to reconcile bringing up children (Astrid, Luisa, Cecilia). Our data also show the complexity of the women’s situation who live in a context of some economic security but who also have to negotiate daily life in an environment where the main support comes from their family in-laws. In addition, participants acknowledged that balancing career opportunities with family priorities places them in a situation of both vulnerability and stability, as their family life is rooted in the Basque Country. As noted by [Mulholland and Ryan \(2014\)](#), highly educated women do not live in a vacuum, but they have to adapt to local norms and the expectations of their family in-laws. These are unexpected barriers, which our respondents face.

In terms of parenting I have to admit that at all times I felt very lonely [. . .] Then you are with the parents of your children’s friends in the park, but you will never get to establish a deep friendship [. . .] besides, it’s because they don’t let you, here people are apparently very cosmopolitan, but in reality they are very closed. (Annie)

I had the feeling that the in-laws here are different than in Italy, we are more invasive perhaps, protective in Southern Italy (. . .). Here I suddenly found myself with two children and a great loneliness [. . .] I thought it was a cultural issue. (Claudia)

3.2.4. Personal Networks

The loss of social capital of women who have met their husbands in another locality or abroad is a barrier that affects both the feeling of loneliness and dependence on the family group. Women with children need space for true friendships, aside from the playground friendships that occupy the children’s leisure time. These superficial friendships do not fulfil their intimate needs for connection and understanding abroad, as can be read in their words.

To make relationships outside the park you have to go beyond the park, the “park friendship” (. . .) I see that these conditions do not bring them together. (Emma)

Sometimes I go back and miss my country. However, every time I go I realise that for me the best thing is to stay here. I also do it for my son and for his safety, for the quality of life, to be at ease in the street, for example (. . .). (Elena)

Participants mention that their husbands' social and family networks became their main relationship structure. In the Basque Country, social life is mainly structured around 'cuadrillas', closed groups of people who are united by a friendly relationship and who carry out regular leisure activities together. Those groups are mainly based on childhood friendships, and they form a stable structure.

Many times, when my partner and I go out with his "cuadrilla", they push me aside, they ignore me, they don't welcome me very well (...) they don't talk to me either, they never make an effort to make conversation with me. (Mary)

The interaction between affectivity and relationships has led to an 'emotional turn' in migration and mobility studies (Mai and King 2009). Our results show that these factors also influence job expectations. Building a family, and especially having children in another country, creates deep bonds that generate immobility. This situation brings with it a mixture of feelings of rootedness and discomfort, knowing that their choice limits both their ability to return to their own country and to take advantage of other opportunities abroad.

I thought I'd be somewhere else, but then you lower your expectations completely, and the truth is I didn't take much of a risk because I also wanted to have children. (Alina)

Finally, it is worth noting that in their responses, the women interviewed do not identify with the organisations or social entities where people of their own nationality come together. As seen in previous research, the imagined sense of group or community is very different for skilled migrants and does not correspond to that of diasporic organisations, usually formed by low or semi-skilled qualified groups (Bailey and Mulder 2017).

3.2.5. Relationship with the Local Population's Stereotypes

Previous scholars have highlighted that both stereotypes and essentialism influence migrants' access to employment (Romens 2021). Although we did not identify any major cases of discrimination, in almost all interviews, some isolated incidents were mentioned that reminded them of their status as foreigners, despite the fact that they have been settled for a long time.

For women coming from Latin America, the language barrier has a subtler dimension. Although they share a language with the local population, there are differences in lexis and accent. This makes them stand out, and they are identified as part of the migrant group, whose main employment opportunities are care and domestic work. This stereotype led to several incidents where they felt offended:

I will tell you an anecdote: I remember when I took the business creation course there was a very simple Andalusian lady. She said to me: Have you ever thought of going to work in a house? No! I told her, my parents have paid for my studies, and it is not for me to work in a house (...) it was very outrageous, I have never felt this bad in my life. This is simply because I am a foreigner. (Elena)

Preconceived ideas and superficial relationships that native people have about immigrants are reflected in the image of migrant workers in undervalued sectors. It is the idea that native people have about the class of an immigrant based on the colour of their skin and physical features, their accent and way of speaking. These comments question their professional skills and position them as workers in certain sectors of the labour market, thereby challenging other family and professional roles. These stereotypes also reflect the experiences of Eastern European women, as the women from Romania reported to us:

I have perhaps encountered some problems with the issue of being Romanian, with the label that we are Roma people and so on. At the Romanian consulate itself, eh? More than at the police... Because maybe they are used to always dealing with people with paperwork problems etc., especially highly qualified people. You go and they put you in the same bag, they treat you badly, wait a minute, I'm not a criminal. (Jenica)

Participants from Latin America said the following:

I noticed the discrimination when I came to Spain. As a Colombian women, I was seen as an object, as a prostitute or drug seller or a caregiver or cleaner of domestic worker. I was not characterised based on my high level of education. (Fernanda)

I tell you something that I never usually repeat. I tell you what happened to me with a football mum. She was a bit distant. I always went into the kids' locker room, to keep an eye on them and to educate them a little, so that they wouldn't lose things in the locker room, educating them not to be picking on each other, not to forget things. I don't remember what she said to me. . . what was I doing cleaning up? (Mercedes)

We have noted that bureaucracy leads to spending time in migration offices and other local services, and in these spaces the women encountered the unfriendly, unwelcoming attitude of the civil servants. This difficulty invokes the outsider status despite their participation in labour and social lives:

I don't feel like an immigrant [subjectively]. I think it depends a lot on the environment whether or not I feel like an immigrant, whether or not the environment is supportive (. . .) I feel like an immigrant when I go alone to get papers and they make me feel like an immigrant (. . .) If I go with my husband, everyone shuts up. Once, I went alone to get my papers approved and the woman at the window treated me terribly and I couldn't get my problem solved. The next time I went with my husband and he told her off for her lack of respect. (Ana María)

The previous comments take place in a public space. In these situations, we can see that family capital is used not only to understand the environment but also, symbolically, as an element of respect. Dependence on their husbands' networks can be a factor that helps them find employment or develop certain initiatives but, at the same time, also a limitation to their own feelings of independence. Other European women, only the Romanian migrants (Anca, Jenica), did not discuss these issues. The European women's comments focus on the notion of being a foreigner despite the time they have been settled (Alina, Emma, Mary). These comments come from the private sphere, in social gatherings, as seen below.

To me what really catches my attention is when they introduce me: 'This is T., my French friend' (. . .). It seems so strange to me when they introduce me to others as 'la française', but I am T., I am just like you. (Emma)

3.3. Professional Trajectories

On migrants' journeys to professional reconciliation and integration, we have been inspired by previous studies such as [Liversage \(2009\)](#), [Carling \(2012\)](#), [Bermúdez \(2014\)](#) and [Webster and Haandrikman \(2020\)](#). The women interviewed had undergone an upskilling or reskilling process prior to their marriage; only on two occasions had they undergone reskilling once they were married (Elena, Astrid).

Based on the data analysed, we have identified two main trajectories: (1) the 'mirroring' trajectory, related to finding employment in an occupation or training sector similar to the original sector of employment; (2) the 'recapitalisation and self-employment' trajectory, which refers to the trajectory of women who have used their personal and professional tools and subsequent training to reorient their professional profiles. It is important to stress that these trajectories are not fixed, and respondents may have followed one or combined the two in their career paths, depending on personal, family and contextual characteristics.

Regarding the "mirroring" trajectory, in most cases, once their studies are validated, a job-education match is achieved (Emma, Mary, Anca, Jenica, Teresa, Paula, Fernanda, Cristina). In our findings, these are women working in health and educational sectors (related to languages), both feminised sectors with a high demand for professionals. The women interviewed who have joined the education sector have also been able to pursue

their careers in the sector of activity in which they were trained, and, in this respect, their knowledge of foreign languages has been especially valued. Some women that followed this trajectory found work in services and consulting sectors (Claudia, Alina, Sofia, Teresa, Paula).

I left the UK because I would take the new opportunities to work as English teacher in Spain, where I like it. (Mary)

I have always alternated Osakidetza [the Basque public health system] with private clinics all my life. (Mariana)

Networks are important to find work:

Once they saw me in different public talks and they decided to hire me. I thought about it, but I accepted. They treat me well and they push me forward, make me take positive actions and I didn't feel discriminated. (Fernanda)

With respect to the 'recapitalisation and self-employment' trajectory, the findings reveal that this is a broad strategy used to gain independence, recognition and flexibility. In this article, entrepreneurial activity is understood in the broad sense of self-employment. Therefore, among the immigrant women studied, we found a variety of different situations: freelance or self-employed workers with no employees, members of cooperative companies, shops or business owners with employees. For this group of women (Astrid, Filomena, Annie, Luisa, Fernanda, Cecilia, Elena, Ángeles), being an entrepreneur means to place their expertise into highly skilled post-industrial businesses, such as translation companies, social media communication or the fashion sector, among others. However, our findings show that self-employment can be a lengthy process that requires skills, time and agency. Whilst there is heterogeneity in the entrepreneurs, some of the women (Astrid, Luisa, Fernanda, Ángeles) who identified as such could be considered so-called 'digital nomads', as they needed digital literacy as well as economic, social and cultural resources (Sandoz 2021, p. 4).

According to our respondents, self-employment is also considered relevant in the search for self-determination and independence. Having the support of social networks seems to be an essential element for these entrepreneurs. From the interviews, we identified two types of support: the family support of their partners who encouraged and supported them in domestic tasks and the professional peer support. This is the case of a French environmental entrepreneur who, thanks to her digital and international skills, created her own consultancy on environmental issues:

How, in the end, after trying so hard to find something of my own [international development cooperation, difficult without speaking Basque] (. . .) I ended up like my parents, setting up my own company, in the end I studied business. (Luisa)

Environmental entrepreneur. (. . .) I was tired of doing what others told me to do, what others thought was a priority (. . .) I decided to start my own company, to start a project with other partners after many years of thinking about it. (Annie)

I thought that it was the best way to manage all the area of my life and combine my personal aspirations and passion for languages with the parenting. (Astrid)

Social and family networks have also been used as a resource to develop their own projects. One woman from Honduras who worked in the world of architecture and decoration explained that after arriving to the Basque Country, she took advantage of her family skills and networking to develop her project:

Since my family is a family of entrepreneurs, when I came here, I thought that I could unite my passion for decoration and fashion and the fabrics of my country, so with my sister from there we started to export fabrics, handmade clothes, handcrafted, from Honduras. (Ángeles)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to explore how 21 highly educated migrant women in the Basque Country have overcome the barriers to obtain a job-education match. Coming from European and Latin American countries, these women share a common experience: marriage to a native Basque man. Our paper contributes to the scientific knowledge in two ways. Firstly, we focused on the experiences of a group of highly educated women married to a native partner, who have been able to achieve a job-education matching situation. Secondly, we analysed the intersection of the incorporation into the workplace and the family project. In doing that, we showed that affectivity drives the decision process to establish their family projects with a native Basque partner and transforms their migratory trajectory into an 'emotional journey'. We have identified unexpected barriers that intersect the everyday experiences of women, who are considered privileged by their professional and personal status.

We can conclude that origin is not the main explanatory category. However, it is true that women who migrated for improved economic conditions or safety encountered more difficulties during the early stages of the migration process. This information is consistent with the findings reported by [EPIE \(2014\)](#) and reflects the experiences of women from Latin America and Eastern Europe, who faced greater over-qualification and insecurity. We can also point out that it is Latin American women who feel most challenged by the stereotypes of the local population. We have not analysed the category of ethnicity in this paper, but it may be present. We are therefore of the opinion that this could be another relevant line of investigation for future research.

The decision to settle in the Basque Country led the women to devalue their cultural and social capital, whereas their husbands were able to maintain theirs. A main conclusion can be drawn from the above. The gender perspective in the couple is relevant when it comes to making decisions about where to live together. As other authors have previously pointed out, the negotiation between both members of the couple is based on the perceived opportunities for the family group (security, professional stability for the husband, future work for the wife, education of future children) ([Cangià et al. 2018](#)). Prioritising easier access to the labour market for men implies a situation of asymmetric power ([Erlinghagen 2021](#); [Riaño et al. 2015](#)). Our respondents affirm that settling in the Basque Country seemed to be the easiest option for their husbands, and therefore this factor was decisive. However, we cannot forget that, in the case of women from Romania and, in particular, Latin America, other structural factors (such as gender-based violence, intra-familial violence or economic and political instability) made it very difficult for them to decide to settle there. For these interviewees, the security factor was a priority, combined with the couple's job prospects. In fact, the experience of peace and security was one of the most valued factors in assessing their situation and that of their families.

It is common for migrant women married to native men to face specific barriers and experience disadvantages in the labour market ([Roca et al. 2021](#); [Riaño 2021](#)). Our findings evidence the intersection of multiple barriers. Language, lack of personal networks, family reconciliation and the transferring of cultural capital are identified by women of all nationalities. Interviewees share an experience of transformation, in line with previous research ([Cimpoeru et al. 2023](#)). All of them have had to adapt their curricula and training to fit in with local employment opportunities. Consequently, they have developed different strategies, such as the validation of qualifications, the search for private companies where they can exercise their skills or sometimes the creation of their own businesses. We would like to point out that Latin American and Romanian women, who make up the largest group in the Basque Country, must overcome the stereotypes that identify them with more precarious occupational sectors, such as care and domestic work. Such stereotypes, which do not apply to women from Western Europe, reflect the structure of the Basque labour market, where women from these backgrounds are overqualified ([EPIE 2014](#)). This situation illustrates the experience of subtle biases that serve to remind women from the Global

South that they are not considered to be part of the highly skilled market (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir 2022).

Intersectionality can be used to understand the development of agency to reverse disadvantages (Riaño 2011). Intertwined throughout their lives (Romens 2021), we found two types of resilience strategies the women adopted to cope with the above-mentioned barriers. The first strategy is family support and the second is individual agency. With regard to family support, the analysis shows that emotional reasons and the construction of a family project with their Basque partners have a strong influence on the place of settlement. Norma Fuentes-Mayorga's (2023) comparative research in New York reveals that Dominican and Mexican women who are highly educated but lack middle-class networks tend to concentrate in the informal and domestic sectors upon arrival in the city. Our findings show that many of the interviewees whose project was initiated by the search for better employment or gender emancipation underwent a deskilling process or became involved in domestic tasks in the hope that their family and their social networks would open up new opportunities. Highly educated women lead higher expectations. Indeed, especially for Latin American women, marriage is also a way or a strategy to accelerate the process of naturalisation and, consequently, the process of socio-occupational integration. Respondents from different backgrounds reported that the greatest support came from husbands and related family.

Family provides opportunities with regard to access to valuable professional contacts and information to find employment. In addition, marital status provides a certain stability in the work–life balance. However, family ties could be an obstacle. Our findings are consistent with those of Kwon (2023), who notes that managing family life remains a challenge for highly educated female migrants. In this regard, participants shared the feelings of dependency towards their husbands, particularly in the first period of post-migration. In line with other studies (D'Aoust 2015), participants affirmed that their households and family ties root them to the Basque Country, developing a professional and personal immobility. We would also like to highlight that this work–life imbalance is extended in the Basque Country where there still exists a sexual division of labour. According to EUSTAT (2020), women (67%) doubled the share of domestic work performed by men (32%).

In relation to the second strategy, individual agency, it is noteworthy that motivation (Carling 2012), together with agency, is a key element in achieving a job-education match (Di Martino et al. 2020). Our findings uncover a capacity for reflection and proactivity in the pursuit of goals that are adapted to the migration process. When women have encountered more difficulties to achieve a job-education match, they have relied on their ability to demonstrate certain technological skills that allow them to begin the process of incorporation into the labour market. International environment and multinational companies are important for job placement (Petroff 2017). The cultural capital related to foreign languages skills has also proven to be an employability element, as has been observed in other national contexts (Föbker and Imani 2017).

As a result of these two main strategies to overcome the above-mentioned barriers, the women interviewed have achieved a job-education match. The analysis shows two types of professional pathways. The first one refers to finding employment by 'mirroring' or transferring their skills to a similar level. It should be emphasised that it is easier to gain accreditation of studies in health and education, which facilitates incorporation into the local labour market following this typology of 'mirroring'.

The results highlight that the second strategy to achieve work–life balance is directly related to self-employment, whereby the respondents can organise their work time and raise their children. Migration is an interesting approach to entrepreneurship as 'outsider-ship' (Lassalle and Shaw 2021, p. 1510). Following the distinction made by De Luca and Ambrosini (2019) and by Vitores et al. (2020) about entrepreneurial strategies of immigrant women (family; independency and mixed networks), our findings show that they did not operate in ethnic niches to realise their dreams and achieve self-realisation. The support of

their husbands and their families (grandparents helping to raise the children) are important enablers that allow other types of strategies, such as skills development, professional retraining, etc.

We are aware that the non-random sample of women, who were chosen because they have achieved this job placement, prevents the generalisation of the results. This convenience sample has provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of women who have achieved employment in line with their level of education, but it does not allow us to contrast their trajectories and the barriers they have encountered with those of women in similar circumstances who have not achieved this, or those with lower levels of education. Another limitation of this paper is that we cannot speak about a unified social category of ‘highly educated migrant women’. This concept, broadly used by social scientists, is based on the heterogeneity of interconnected and intersectional factors. In our case, we highlight the relational nature of the emotional reasons for resettlement and binational marriage to native Basque husbands. Drawing on intersectionality approached from an inequalities perspective, we give visibility to expected and unexpected barriers experienced by highly educated migrant women. This group move between privileges (job-education match, family and husband’s support) and vulnerabilities (dependency, stereotypes and gender roles), and an intersectional approach offers the possibility to analyse how those categories interplay in their daily experiences. In the framework of highly educated female human mobility, they are the starting point for a deeper and multidimensional understanding of the phenomena. Future longitudinal and comparative studies could reinforce these findings.

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