

# Morocco's Northern Border Region: Gender, Labour, and Mobility

## Abstract

This paper presents the results of two recent studies on gender, labour, and mobility on the borders between Morocco and Spain. Initially, industrial relocation and the development of a feminised labour market in the border city of Tangier was the focus of our attention. Subsequently, we integrated research on other cross-border labour markets, such as the small-scale commercial activity carried out by women who cross the borders on a daily basis. The objective of these studies is to understand the impacts of globalisation processes, such as industrial relocation and border dynamics, on the daily lives of women. Therefore, we consider theoretical approaches to female participation in emerging economic circuits in developing countries as a macro-vision that enables contextualisation at a micro-social level. At the micro level, our analysis draws from the notion of lived precariousness as a perspective that allows us to examine the testimonies of women and the meaning they give to their experience. The results not only indicate that the complexity of border life and its precariousness represent a challenge for women, who develop different ways of dealing with non-recognition and structural and cultural limits as they strive to achieve more substantial autonomy and empowerment, but also, in many ways, provide a glimpse of a broader trend in female economic participation in these circuits that appears to reproduce gender inequalities and pose new obstacles.

Keywords: Morocco, border, feminisation, gender, labour market, mobility, migration

## Introduction

This paper presents the results of two studies that we have conducted in recent years in the northern border region of Morocco, both of which are part of our research program aimed at understanding the impacts of globalisation processes on women's lives, in particular changes in the opportunities they have to generate income and the consequences for gender relations. A gender-based reading brought to the fore gender role negotiations and feminisation, which has resulted in a prevalence of women in the workforce but also increased precarity and a devaluation of labour, while the area's cross-border nature led us to reflect upon the particularities of a territory marked by the movement of people.

In tune with Sassen's (2003) proposed counter-geography of globalisation, we centre this research on a discussion of the impacts of global flows of capital and people on everyday life, particularly gender negotiations and the extent of female participation in economic activity in a context of labour precarisation in so-called third-world countries, especially within asymmetric border regions, as is the case with Morocco and Spain.

The first case presented in this paper is a continuation of our interest in women's participation in the export industry in the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region. While we believe it of interest to report on other feminised labour markets in cross-border regions, this study focuses on small-scale international commerce conducted chiefly by women. Although the scope was different in each of the two studies, we believe that a comparative analysis of the two will showcase the heterogeneous way in which the

socio-economic dynamics of the region are experienced, together with the opportunities and limitations of female labour participation in a structural context of discrimination and scant recognition of women.

The Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region in northern Morocco has both a sea and a land border with Spain. Export industries have sprouted up around the cities of Tangier and Tetouan to make use of the Tangier and the new Tangier Med ports, while the autonomous Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla share a border with the Moroccan cities of Fnideq (known in Spanish as Castillejos) and Nador, respectively. Our study is limited to small-scale commerce occurring between Ceuta and Fnideq, the importance of which is associated with the bordering process in the region and the way commerce between Morocco and Spain is regulated. This has fuelled mass border crossings by *porteadoras* (“bale carriers”): women who cross the border on a daily basis to transport goods from Spain to Morocco.

This paper is structured into five sections. The first section offers a description of the socio-economic context experienced by our informants in the northern border of Morocco. The second section proposes a theoretical approach from which we analyse changes in roles and gender relations, considering the notion of lived precariousness and Sassen’s (2003) concept of counter-geographies of globalisation. The third section explains the methodologies employed in the studies, while the fourth and fifth are devoted to an analysis of the interviews with workers in export industries and *porteadoras*. Finally, the conclusions offer a summary of the main findings, which suggest that the metaphors of the sticky floor and the glass ceiling may need bringing up to date to understand the scope of women’s incorporation into the economic circuits of globalisation.

### **Socio-economic overview of Morocco’s northern border region**

Tangier is without a doubt a prime example of attempts by the Alaouite Moroccan dynasty to boost the national economy. The port of Tangier Med is the largest ferry port in Africa, with connections to 167 ports in 66 countries, ranking it 16<sup>th</sup> globally in terms of connectivity. In the free economic zone established in the surrounding area, over 750 companies have been set up with over 65,000 employees. Located 20 km from the Tangier Med port, in 2016 the Renault-Nissan consortium alone employed 90,000 workers who manufactured 273,000 cars, 95% of which were exported to 73 countries. By contrast, according to the 2014 Moroccan census (*Recensement général de la population et de l’habitat*), 61% of the female population in the rural region of Tangiers have no formal education, compared to 37% of males; in urban contexts, this gap is reduced by half. The labour force participation rate in rural areas of the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region is 79% for males and 19% for females, while in urban settings the disparity remains significant: 77% for males and 27% for females.

In the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region, women face discrimination at home, in industry, and in the public space (Naïr and El-Khamlichi 2016). This is the case for the women in this study. Most dire of all is the situation of *porteadoras*, whose source of income is considered informal work and therefore illegal by both the Spanish and Moroccan governments. Further compounding this is the fact that *porteadoras* find

themselves living hand to mouth: any money they earn in the day is spent by the evening (Fuentes-Lara 2019).

Women's incorporation into the export industry in northern Morocco has not contributed to their liberation and empowerment due to the low-skilled and low-paid nature of their employment. Nair and El-Khamlichi (2016) note that working conditions constitute more of a survival strategy than a liberation strategy in the face of a patriarchally-structured society. Labour distribution rates in the export industry show that in mid-level and, to a greater extent, senior positions, women are in the minority (Lozano 2021). Moreover, in the sector with the worst working conditions, the textile sector, the proportion of female workers is higher than in the industry as a whole (Trinidad-Requena, Soriano-Miras, and Barros-Rodríguez 2018).

There is no homogeneous profile of working women in the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region. However, it is their sociodemographic characteristics that determine, to a large extent, what type of work they perform. Workers in the export industry are predominantly single women under 30 years of age, with no family responsibilities and for whom the export industry has provided their first job, at least within the formal economy (Soriano-Miras, Trinidad-Requena, Kopinak, and Hennebry 2016). Domestic workers exhibit two profiles: live-in domestic workers are middle-aged but do not have family responsibilities and are unmarried, while those who travel to and from work every day are married and have family responsibilities. On the other hand, *porteadoras* are around 45 years old, have family responsibilities and are either married to an absent husband or divorced (Fuentes-Lara 2019). While it is true that the border dynamism has generated internal population movements in Morocco, it is the export industry that has been the largest driver of displacement in search of job opportunities (Barros 2016).

By contrast, and based on data by Galán (2012), Moroccan women who cross the border to Ceuta each day for work are for the most part *porteadoras*, who number six to eight thousand, with an additional four thousand crossing to perform domestic work. The smuggling of food, beverages, tobacco, textiles, footwear, telephones, and medicine accounts for about 70% of Ceuta's economic activity (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008, Fuentes-Lara 2019). Recent research by Fuentes-Lara and Rosado-Caro (2021) includes a longitudinal analysis of changes in *porteo* ("bale-carrying") work from 2012 to 2021, and reports minimal changes in the goods transported, with only an increase in Asian textiles since 2016. In 2019, the Moroccan government published a Customs Commission report in which it re-emphasised that *porteo* is smuggling and therefore illegal. However, no measures are given to reduce the practice (Fuentes-Lara and Rosado-Caro 2021).

In the wilaya of Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima alone, a total of 46,484 women work in the export industry. The clothing and textile sector accounts for more than half of these, with 28,029 female workers, followed by the automotive and electronics sector, which employs 8,810 women (Trinidad-Requena, Soriano-Mirás, and Barros-Rodríguez 2018).

All of this means that it is no coincidence that several studies suggest emigration is still considered the primary means to achieve improved personal and family well-being in Morocco (Timmerman et al. 2014). At the same time, having a migrant in the household increases female participation in the labour market (David and Lenoël 2017).

In 2019, 8.9% of the Moroccan population had migrated, a figure that has seen a steady increase since 2000. Male migration (52.5%) is somewhat more prevalent than female migration (47.5%). The most popular destination is France (32.5%), followed by Spain (22%) and Italy (14.4%).

On the other hand, it has been documented that industrial relocation acts as a pole of attraction for internal migrants by building up the expectations that come with the promise of employment, while also breeding frustration and acting as a springboard for international migration (Trinidad, Soriano and Barros 2018).

### **A theoretical framework for the study of gender, labour, and mobility**

This section presents recent theoretical discussions that serve as a framework for the case studies presented here, and which deal with female participation in paid work and changes in social roles and gender relations. To this end, the point of departure of our analysis is a macro-social perspective, since the case studies located in Morocco are not isolated; rather, resonances can be found in different contexts and continents. Therefore, we believe that a necessary starting point is the recognition of a link between women's incorporation into productive activities in developing countries and the processes of globalisation. This will allow us to understand the interrelationships between the micro and the macro-social, and update some of the theoretical approaches that have emerged from other empirical studies carried out in recent years.

We consider the approach taken by Sassen (2003) on the formation of counter-geographies of globalisation in developing countries, in which she alludes to the circuits of female participation in the global economy. According to the author:

These circuits are enormously diverse but they share a characteristic: they are profitable and generate profits at the expense of those who are disadvantaged. They include the illegal trafficking of people destined for the sex industry and various types of work in the formal and informal market (Sassen, 2003, p. 49).

Another element that defines the counter-geographies of globalisation is the link between the feminisation of work and the feminisation of poverty, due to the fact that the labour markets with the highest levels of female participation, whether formal or informal, are highly precarious, with low wages, instability, and little or no social protection. Both of our case studies are feminised in both senses, with high female occupation and precarious working conditions, but differ in that the export industry offers women formal employment, while *porteadoras* work informally. This leads us to view Moroccan women's economic participation in the export industry and cross-border commerce as circuits that also shape counter-geographies of globalisation.

On the other hand, following Sassen (2003), research on the role of women in these circuits has gone through three phases. The first phase showed how women subsidise salaried work through domestic labour and agricultural activities, the second phase includes studies on the internationalisation of capital (processes of industrial relocation in the so-called third-world countries) and the proletarianisation of women (which entailed rural-to-urban migratory flows or internal migration), and a third phase encompasses the most recent approaches that address transformations in gender relations.

The research we present here falls under this last phase, as part of an attempt to characterize the conditions in which workers participate in the formal and informal labour markets that have emerged in Morocco within these circuits of the counter-geography of globalisation, as well as the implications for the lives of women, particularly in terms of changes in social roles and gender relations, albeit not without great contradictions and new obstacles to female empowerment.

Within this last phase of studies on gender, labour, and mobility, interest has focused primarily on the impacts that female participation in the global economy has on social roles, questioning the scope of these transformations in the construction of female autonomy and the recognition of women as citizens, especially in contexts of great tension between traditional and modern ways of life (Solís 2016).

This discussion is taken up in Domínguez et al. (2010) in opposition to Kabeer (2004), who, based on her research in Bangladesh, maintains that jobs in global export industries represent a valued alternative for women in the face of the precariousness of informal work, since these jobs offer a certain stability and social protection, resulting in improvements in their well-being and autonomy. In this sense, Domínguez et al. (2010) problematise this view of the benefits of female incursion in these labour markets, based on research carried out in Mexico and Central America, and conclude that any improvement of working conditions for women is dependent on a number of factors, such as the local and regional context, the agency of women, and existing legal instruments.

Meanwhile, different studies have shown that female workers in Morocco are concentrated in less secure, poorly paid or unpaid jobs, including formal and informal sectors of the economy. Indeed, Mejjati Alami (2004) argues that women's jobs in Morocco are characterised by their vulnerability, which is due not only to their professional situation (which in Morocco is severely lagging<sup>1</sup>), but also to the conception and reality of their place in society. Labour markets are also horizontally segregated by sex, as demonstrated by the fact that women work mostly in sectors that are already highly feminised and require young, unskilled labour, such as the textile-clothing and agri-food industries. Meanwhile, despite a recent positive trend, vertical segregation also persists, with limited access to senior job positions for women.

In a more recent study, El Alaoui (2017) notes the scant progress made in the economic participation of women in Morocco, which continues to lag far behind that of men, concluding that:

The legal and socio-economic context of Morocco does not guarantee equality, particularly in the workplace. Stereotypes and prejudices will further contribute to concentrating women in certain less paid and less protected jobs with a predominance of human resource management practices that maintain discrimination against women (El Alaoui, 2017, p. 12)

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<sup>1</sup> As Zirari (2006) points out, two indicators of inequality between men and women persist: the high rates of illiteracy and unemployment among Maghreb women.

On the other hand, Zirari (2006) asks if women's economic participation in Morocco has brought about a change in roles and attributions within the family and in equality between men and women. Based on a broader analysis of the female condition in Morocco, this author points out that growing urbanisation, due to internal male and female migration, tends to generate new configurations in gender relations and changes in social organisation and the cultural domain, which has entailed new roles in the social, political, and community space. However, the changes underway appear to be evolving in a manner that is contradictory and consistent with the enormity of the challenges and problems faced by women, since their social condition has seen significant advances but has also come with delays and setbacks that threaten the sustainability of achievements.

The studies on gender and labour that we have carried out in Mexico from a phenomenological perspective have also revealed a wide diversity of experiences of female incorporation into paid work, leading us to propose the notion of lived precariousness, as distinct from attributed precariousness. At the micro-social level, the experience of precariousness is relative, given a diachronic axis of work experience that allows us to understand the perception and assessment of employment at a point in time. So it is that labour trajectories may become less precarious over time, as in the case of most rural workers who migrate to urban areas, or on the contrary, working conditions may deteriorate, sometimes rapidly.

We have also noted that lived precarity is relational as it depends on the social position occupied. Perceptions are mediated by the meaning of work at a given time and under given structural restrictions, and so we found that women's experience differs from that of men, as does the experience of women in different life cycles or social categories (for example, by race or migrant status) (Solís 2014).

Against this backdrop, we intend to analyse the experience of women working both in formal employment in the export industry in Morocco, and in the informal cross-border transfer of goods with Spain, focusing on changes in gender roles and relations in these contexts and exploring the differences between men and women in the case of export industries, and between women in the case of the *porteadoras*.

### **Methodological approach**

The studies we present were conducted between 2011 and 2018 following the principles of grounded theory and a phenomenological perspective; the fieldwork was therefore defined based on the research subjects and their narratives. The narratives were coded to enable interpretation with different methodological tools, as detailed below.

#### ***Export industry***

The fieldwork consisted in 93 in-depth interviews with export industry workers in various cities in the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region, conducted in four waves. Informants were selected with a view to obtaining greater variability across categories, taking into account sex, age, level of education, region of origin, and occupational level (see Table 1).

#### ***[Table 1 near here]***

After open coding of the interviews, a gender differential was found in the desire to migrate, which could be considered an indicator of the impact of globalisation

processes on women's lives in northern Morocco and also allows us to analyse how social agency provides or denies them an escape route. Statistical network analysis techniques were employed to quantify the presence and matching of codes (Wasserman and Faust 1994). Matching codes were used as a basis to construct graphs in which each code is a node connected to all others with a significant normalised residual. To perform this analysis, we used the services provided by the Netcoin project led by Modesto Escobar from the University of Salamanca (USAL).

This made it possible to develop an analytical framework that would show the complexity of the research, since we consider the intersectional perspective as a tool to compare the categories of men and women, as explained in the next section. This approach provides deeper insight into the social position of our interviewees and allows us to describe different profiles, reflecting the relational dimension of lived precariousness.

### ***Porteadoras***

The fieldwork for this part of the research was centred on two social research techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Six waves of fieldwork were conducted to analyse and interpret changes in the border as reflected in the work performed by the *porteadoras*. As this is a dynamic border shaped by socio-political and economic changes, these factors also have an impact on the *porteadoras*' work and determine which days they can work and which goods they can carry. In total, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with *porteadoras*, and 34 social agents from the border area were interviewed.

***[Table 2 near here]***

### **Gender and territorial mobility in the export industry**

The main basis for an intersectional analysis is that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental axis as different systems of oppression work together to produce injustice (Hill and Bilge 2020). Consequently, we analysed the narratives of industry export workers of both sexes from an intersectional perspective, following Hill Collins' matrix of domination, and identified two discursive profiles as shown in Graph 1.

On the one hand, women are characterised chiefly as single, internal migrants who live with female friends or family members, usually sisters, and work in entry-level positions in the industry. Indeed, it is this last characteristic that is most strongly associated with the 'being female' code (Haberman: 3.30), which is a clear indicator of the structure underpinning the logic of transnational corporations. There is also a smaller community made up of women from the rest of the Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima region. Other characteristics of the female population include the fact that they do not expressly state their intention to migrate and the idea of doing so makes them uneasy unless there is a family connection. In addition, they do not have any experience of international migration. As a result, simply being female does not explain the job positions they hold. Instead, it is necessary to examine the intersection with other dimensions such as place of origin, marital status, who they live with (which all define, to some extent, the type of housing they live in), and expectations of international migration. This is a reflection of the relational nature of lived precariousness, which makes it necessary to consider more complex categories of analysis.

Men, on the other hand, are more likely to hold intermediate-level positions and are mostly natives of the Tangier-Tetouan region. They do exhibit a desire to migrate, but this is conditional upon job security and personal safety abroad. Differences in marital status give rise to two distinct communities: (1) Divorced or widowed men living alone; (2) Married men living with their spouse and children (this being the strongest association in the codes analysed – Haberman: 8.39). The latter are often from Casablanca and the surrounding area and have experience of international migration. This sub-profile emerged in the analysis as a community in itself and was characterised by being male. This reveals the existence of life experiences that are associated with gender and mediated by other dimensions of socialisation.

Thus, the analytical matrix of domination confirmed the existence of four axes of oppression that make it possible to differentiate between subjects beyond a mere gender distinction: (1) structural elements, like laws and institutional policies; (2) disciplinary elements, associated with bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques; (3) hegemonic elements, expressed through ideas and ideologies, like patriarchal practices; (4) interpersonal elements, like widespread discriminatory practices in everyday life.

*[Graph 1 near here]*

### ***Laws and institutional policies***

We have already discussed how the Tangier region is a prime example of how the country has boosted its economy and promoted the establishment of the export industry in northern Morocco by providing economic support, political and legal stability, and social peace conducive to foreign investment. Morocco reformed its Labour Code in 2004, and this remains the legal framework regulating working conditions in the country. Although officially one of its main objectives was to promote access to employment for Moroccan citizens, no attempt was made to hide the fact that, above all, it served to attract foreign investors. With the redrafting of the Labour Code in 2004, Morocco “demonstrated to the world its efforts to transform itself into a modern nation that recognises international labour rights. However, the adoption of the labour code posed a difficult dilemma for the Moroccan public authorities. On the one hand, the effective application of the labour legal framework entailed a loss of economic competitiveness in the face of investment and could raise production costs (...) on the other hand, non-compliance with the regulations worsened working conditions, expelled the surplus population from the system and generated social inequality” (Trinidad-Requena, Soriano-Miras, and Barros-Rodríguez 2018).

On the issue of unionisation, Morocco has not ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, which calls into question the freedom to form and join trade unions in the country. The main trade unions in the country are the Democratic Confederation of Labour (CDT) and the Union Marocaine des Travailleurs (UMT). The narratives point to low or non-existent unionisation, with fear of dismissal as the main justification for not joining.

"If the company found out that I was a union member, they would fire me" (♂, 25, S, 3, El Jadida).

One key to business flexibility lies in the availability of a permanent unemployed or semi-unemployed reserve army of labour in areas of industrial delocalisation, which in recent years has been the case in the border region of Morocco. The ease with which companies are able to adjust the number of workers they employ



based on changes in demand (the just-in-time system) owes itself to the existence of this huge surplus of labour, which, with no great prospect of social improvement, is available for work and, in the case at hand, made up primarily of single women and workers from outside the Tangier region.

... I can tell you they stay here because there's plenty of work, especially for women, unless they're educated. In the factories over 70% are women. (♀, 19, S, 1, *Ksar el-Kebir*)<sup>2</sup>

Some companies prefer to employ non-locals. Once I went with my CV and the only thing the boss asked me was whether I was from Tangier. What does it matter if I'm from Tangier? Because if you're from Tangier, I can't make you work on my terms. (♂, 27, S, 3, *Tangier*)

### ***Bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques: patriarchal practices***

Women with a medium level of education exhibit the lowest labour market participation both in rural and urban areas, except on the border, where the manufacturing industry and the service sector are niches for female employment. However, once women access the job market in factories, they submit to marked hierarchies that are based on the gender order and modelled on the patriarchal family structure. Supervisory and quality control roles, along with other positions not directly associated with production, such as those of specialised machine repair personnel or packaging, storage and distribution roles, are held chiefly by men, in contrast to the entry-level positions occupied by women.

One salient feature of factory work is the high level of work pace pressure endured by production line workers and teleoperators, exerted through the figure of supervisors – who are male – and which harm worker health (Trinidad, Soriano, and Barros 2018). Yet again, the reserve army necessary to fill entry-level positions is shown to be made up of young, single women who lack the support of a male family member in their place of residence. The narratives lay bare the reality of this social structure:

Women do not assert their rights like men do... men assert their rights and are more liable to display their exasperation, whereas women say nothing... and they keep quiet about their rights in these factories. (♂, 25, S, 3, *El Jadida*)

... they don't hire men anymore, because they know if they run a man down, he might answer back... he can assert his right without fear... women can't... poor women... keep their heads down... and that's it... even when they're being insulted... they keep their heads down. (♀, 25, S, 1, *Tangier*)

One further key aspect that explains the low female participation in the workforce is marriage (Verme et al. 2016). The female workforce and reproductive capacity are controlled through the family, while women's work is undervalued with respect to men's (Ye 2014).

Most girls prefer to befriend their supervisors so they don't receive abuse. Again and again he'll be with one girl, when he gets bored, he'll try with another, and that's the way things go; if you don't laugh along with him, if you give him a

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<sup>2</sup> The details given in parentheses indicate the person's sex (♀, ♂), age, marital status (S-single, M-married, O-other), level of education (0-no formal education, 1-primary education, 2-secondary education, 3-higher education), and place of origin.

funny look and don't pay him any notice, he's got that stick and he'll be looking for ways to poke you. (♀, 29, S, 2, Meknes)

### ***Ideas and ideologies: a persistent patriarchy.***

We have attempted not to lose sight of the presence of gender ideology in the narratives. Work may or may not have become an option for women, but is without a doubt part of the essence of being a man, "...men's continual readiness to work is one of the pillars of the social construction of masculinity" (Aguilar 2001: 27, own translation).

Nowadays... if you marry a woman and send her to work in a factory, she's no longer a woman... that's for the poor... those with money would do better not to take up work in the factories... and I'm referring to those who are married... but if you're young and single like me, even if you've got money... you can work there and earn a living... but a married couple working in a factory? No. People are very rude there... there's no respect whatsoever... they're a bunch of foul mouths... when an innocent, unworldly girl joins the factory, she becomes a wicked bitch... you'd hardly believe she's the same person. I'd like there to be a factory where women and men work separately. (♂, 28, S, 1, Beni Ahmed)

Men do jobs women can't do... they use the machines we have... which are high-temperature presses... the guys work in a slightly hotter environment... in other words, their work is a bit risky... and women do jobs like packing, they check the boxes... control, in other words... things like that. (♀, 29, S, 1, Tangier)

Khurshid (2015) problematises the discourse of modernity that presents gender empowerment as an expression of individual choice in the face of oppression by family, religion, and the community, and suggests that the struggles and negotiations often occur not "against" but rather "within" these institutions.

I've gotten used to buying what I want myself... my parents' situation means I have to work. Only if I marry a good man who doesn't make me work will I give it up. (♀, 27, S, 1, Khenifra)  
I'd rather live in my country, cherished and with my dignity... that is to say, with what God gives me... than go and live like a tramp somewhere else. (♀, 23, S, 1, Khenifra)

The culture of migration is much more deeply embedded in men than women; in fact, the code "I do not wish to emigrate" only appears in the group of women interviewed. The culture of migration describes a socialisation process by which members of a community share a set of attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding migration, and since the motivations for migrating are mostly work-related, it seems logical that men are more likely than women to have a positive attitude towards migration.

If there's no work, I can also leave, I'll do anything there, I'll take any job... for my children. (♂, 47, M, 1, Tetouan)  
If I were single, maybe I'd think differently, but when you're married, the responsibility weighs heavy... and if there's work and I have a good salary there... I'll go. (♂, 38, M, 1, Meknes)  
I'd rather stay in my country than go and have a hard time in another country... add to that the fact I'm on my own... I might travel abroad for tourism but not to live there. (♀, 34, S, 3, Errachidia)  
... I have girlfriends that will tell you they live better over there, but the truth is they're suffering more than we are. (♀, 29, S, 2, Meknes)

### ***Widespread discriminatory practices in everyday life***

Having taken a look at the axes of domination identified in the export industry workers' discourse, we are now able to examine how they are reproduced in day-to-day life. Forms of production and organisation determine everyday ways of life; in other words, society plays a part in the way we live our daily lives and influences daily life spaces (Moreno et al. 2018), and in this sense, the existence of a patriarchal society takes on particular relevance due to the polarised vision of the sexes that results.

The interactions that occur between members of a domestic group are not defined solely in economic terms, but also in ideological and symbolic terms in relation to the contributions, benefits, and activities of each member. The following factors are identified by Soriano-Miras et al. (2016) as impacting work trajectories: the importance of power relationships or rather, the power to decide who works and where; family attitudes towards male and female work; and families' commitment to maintaining domestic groups.

I met my wife in the factory and when we got married, I asked her to give up work.  
(♂, 30, M, 1, Tangier)

Now I'm twenty-eight years old and I have to get married and have children, and at home there's still lots of stuff we need – lots, lots. Do you think you're going to achieve a better future on a dressmaker's wages? (♂, 28, S, 1, Chefchaouen)

Brenner (2011) suggests that women do not yet have a loud enough voice in public affairs. It remains difficult for them to make decisions that affect their lives and their bodies. Once again, an intersectional lens is well suited to help us identify axes of oppression, as forms of discrimination are not experienced in segments, but rather reality places us in concrete situations in which the effects of one hierarchy can multiply or prevent the effects of another (Anthias 2008).

The most traditional patriarchal view is associated with men from inland Morocco who have attained only primary education, "*I'm the one who decides what things we buy and it's obvious that it should be me because I'm the one being paid and it's normal that I should decide...*" (♂, 28, M, 1, Meknes), in contrast to men from Tangier who, having accepted that the cost of living on the border is increasing, display a preference for marrying local women who work, "*I would prefer to marry a woman from here, and for her to have a job too, so that we can support each other in our day-to-day lives*" (♂, 29, S, 1, Tangier).

This patriarchal vision becomes less pronounced – but does not disappear altogether – as men's level of education increases, while a border origin also helps to tone down patriarchal discourse: "*If we lived in Spain, she would make many of the financial decisions, because women are more independent there*" (♂, 37, M, 2, Tangier). However, the idea of this patriarchal structure remains strong among men from inland areas, even those with higher education: "*I want my wife to stay at home. I want her to stay and look after the kids and raise them well*" (♂, 23, S, 2, Taounate). Similarly, a fair division of household chores is only reported among those born in the border region, regardless of the level of education attained: "*I get up, clean up the whole house, prepare something for the kids, tidy things up, and turn off the gas and the lights and everything, then I go to work so that she comes back to find everything clean in the apartment*" (♂, 47, M, 1, Tetouan).

But the patriarchal structure is also clearly visible in women. “*There is not a single girl who doesn’t want to get married; on the contrary, marriage means protection*” (♀, 27, S, 1, *Khenifra*). However, this feeling is less marked when women have secondary or tertiary education, highlighting the importance of family pressure in daily life: “*When you get to a certain age here in Morocco, it’s not really acceptable not to get married, so you only have two options: you either work or marry. So if you don’t want to get married, parents say, ‘Let’s at least have her working.’*” (♀, 37, S, 2, *Khenifra*). Lastly, women’s freedom to decide to emigrate appears to be severely diminished by the fact that the family’s honour lies in a woman’s reputation, “*If a woman goes abroad, she loses her reputation... so there are many girls who got divorced when they came back from Spain... or who have opted to divorce in Spain*” (♀, 28, S, 3, *Safi*), although once again, it appears that this idea is more widespread among those from outside the region.

### **The work of *porteadoras* on the Spain-Morocco border**

*Porteadoras* (“bale carriers”) are Moroccan women who live in the northern regions of Morocco and regularly travel to the Spain-Morocco borders to carry bales of goods containing clothing, footwear, personal care products, electronics, etc., in return for a commission paid to them for transporting the goods from one side of the border to the other (Fuentes-Lara 2019).

The *porteadoras* are constrained by their own sociodemographic profile as they enter the workforce. For the most part, they are women aged between 35 and 60, with a low cultural capital, no prior work experience, and family responsibilities. Specifically, family responsibilities are the primary motivation driving the *porteadoras* into work. There are two possible triggers for this change. The first cause may be a change in marital status – married women become widowed, divorced or separated – and the second is the birth of a new child. In both cases, the *porteadora* faces similar circumstances: increased expenses and social responsibility, leading to a decrease in spending power. It is in these circumstances that women take up work – always on a temporary basis, until their financial situation improves – and against this socio-economic and family backdrop that bale carrying, or *porteo*, is best suited to their needs (Fuentes-Lara 2019).

Moroccan women who take up work as *porteadoras* do consider the different employment options open to them, namely domestic work, export industry work, and *porteo*. The determining factors leading them to opt to work as *porteadoras* are the working hours and days, work flexibility, and wages. The value placed on these factors is closely linked to gender roles; these aspects enable women to juggle their roles as mothers, wives, and providers, many being the sole breadwinner in their household.

The working hours are perceived by the *porteadoras* as an advantage. They leave home at around 4:00 a.m. – even when they start work at 7:00 a.m. – but on a good day (when the queue to cross the border is short) they can be back home at about 3:00 p.m., which allows them to balance work and family life. In contrast, export industry workers and domestic workers work much longer hours and more days. While *porteadoras* work from Monday to Thursday – the Quran forbids trading on a Friday – export industry and domestic workers have no vacation and sometimes have just one day of rest a week (Soriano-Miras et al. 2016).

Work flexibility refers to the ability to decide whether to work on any given day. *Porteadoras* are not bound to any employer or superior, such that in the event of any

family situation that may require them to make changes to their working hours, they are able to decide themselves to change their working hours or simply not to work that day. They also have the freedom to work on and off, depending on their economic needs.

In truth, this is cited merely as self-justification for their work, since in practice they have no option but to work continuously, even when they are sick, have broken fingers or arms, or are pregnant. The relative nature of lived precariousness – when considered on a timeline – helps to explain how *porteadoras* become trapped in this activity, given their lack of work experience and the great difficulties they face in supporting themselves and their families.

This perception of work flexibility is key to the positive view that *porteadoras* have of their work. This freedom in how they work is not enjoyed by domestic workers or export industry workers – not because they are subject to an employment agreement but because they work directly for a superior and/or within an organisational structure.

As far as wages are concerned, the difference lies not in the amount received but in how soon workers can collect their wages. Domestic workers earn around 300 euros a month, even with 54-hour workweeks (Galán 2012); export industry workers' wages depend largely on the number of hours of work a week, overtime, and the type of company, but range from 200 euros to 800 euros (Soriano-Miras et al. 2016). Both receive a fixed monthly salary, unlike the *porteadoras*, whose earnings are variable.

Travelling up to the border in the early hours of the morning to work and then returning to their municipality later with 10 or 20 euros to buy groceries or pay bills is one of the main incentives for *porteadoras*. They mention this themselves, in contrast to having to wait for a monthly paycheque in other jobs:

Why would I go and work as a maid? And wait for my monthly pay... you even have to clean up after the dog and they don't pay well, 1,000 dirhams, 2,000 dirhams, and it's the same story whether they're Spaniards or Moroccans. And you're left thinking your best bet is to go to the border and walk away with 100 dirhams, 50 dirhams, and you're done. (♀, 36, M, 0, Casablanca)

This immediate access to wages also works to the detriment of *porteadoras*. While it is an incentive to work carrying bales across the border, it also traps them in a spiral that prevents them from ever quitting the job. Having access to income every day, no matter how minimal, hinders the women's saving capacity. Families' pressing financial needs mean that daily wages are used to pay off debt and purchase basic necessities, and any extra income they may earn – because that day's bale paid a higher commission – is spent on the family and is not enough to save.

In summary, the *porteadoras* prefer their work to a job in the export industry due to a range of factors: working hours, working days, work flexibility, legal status, and wages. The work schedule in the export industry does not allow them to balance their work and family life, they would only rest one day a week, they would be unable to take time off in the event of a family emergency, they would be bound by an employment agreement that would commit them for at least a month, and they would have to wait a month to collect their wages, which is not possible given their financial needs.

## Conclusions

The case studies presented have highlighted how women find themselves in a constant tug of war as they adapt to unstable working conditions with meagre wages, gruelling hours, and exhausting workloads. Naïr and El-Khamlichi (2016) report that *porteadoras* remain fully responsible for household chores, regardless of marital status, while continuing to engage in productive labour.

Meanwhile, in the export industry we found that the most precarious job positions are taken up by women and come with scant personal autonomy. In particular, women are excluded from positions of greater prestige and salary (vertical segmentation) and there is a constant disconnect between marriage and work, both in their own imaginaries and those of others. Likewise, references to submissiveness as an ideal attribute in female workers are a recurring feature of corporate discourse, as has been documented in other countries.

We also note that a comparative approach – firstly between men and women in the export industry and secondly between *porteadoras* – enabled us to identify relevant aspects for a gender-based interpretation. Similarly, an intersectional perspective helps to define the most vulnerable profiles: woman-migrant-single, for example. It also shows the different levels and spheres where forms of domination take shape.

The profiles identified and the lived experiences of the women in our studies indicate that the glass ceiling, a metaphor employed in reference to the lack of opportunity for social mobility, remains firmly intact in these contexts – as does the sticky floor, which refers to the way women are tied down by internalised and socially mandated gender norms. As Zirari (2006) has shown, women's advances in Morocco are contradictory and new obstacles have emerged both in formal and in informal work, as we have described through the cases studied.

While the border represents an opportunity for women to acquire a degree of financial autonomy, it also entails precarity and vulnerability, which is an indication of the lack of social recognition of female labour, not just locally but nationally and globally. For these women, the border brings with it both appropriation and deprivation processes. New territory is appropriated, both by those arriving from elsewhere and those who cross the border, but at the same time these women are deprived of dignified work and the chance to fully realise themselves as citizens. However, in closing, mention should be made of a number of forms of resistance that have sprung up. Collective efforts have brought attention to their social condition; examples include the Attawasol association for export industry workers and informal resistance movements among *porteadoras*.

In short, both of the cases presented confirm women's role as important actors in circuits of the global economy, but also demonstrate the precarious conditions in which they work, reaffirming the trend towards the feminisation of poverty. Meanwhile, the notion of lived precariousness provides insight into how women deal with these working conditions and find meaning for their work in relation to a life context marked both by their personal situation and by their previous experiences of work and mobility.

In closing, there is no harm in recalling the fact that changes in and through work fall far short of achieving recognition of women's rights and ensuring their access

to these rights, as needed to build citizenship from a position of equality and non-discrimination.

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