

Femintegra – Labor Trajectories and Occupational Segmentation among Romanian Women in Spain: An Intersectional Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the labor market integration of Romanian women in Spain through an analysis of their labor trajectories in four provinces with distinct economic and migratory contexts: Barcelona, Lleida, Valencia, and Castellón. Adopting an intersectional and gender-sensitive perspective, the study explores how structural labor market conditions, institutional frameworks, and individual strategies interact over time to shape employment opportunities, stability, and mobility.

The research follows a mixed-methods design combining quantitative data from the Spanish Social Security system and the National Statistics Institute with qualitative material drawn from 29 in-depth interviews, life stories, participant observation, and elements of digital ethnography. Qualitative data were analyzed through an interpretive thematic approach that reconstructs labor trajectories as temporally structured processes shaped by migration timing, family responsibilities, and regional labor demand.

The findings reveal persistent occupational segmentation and deskilling, with Romanian women strongly concentrated in domestic work, care services, hospitality, and seasonal agriculture—sectors characterized by low wages and limited opportunities for upward mobility. At the same time, trajectories vary significantly according to educational capital, migration cohort, and family obligations. The analysis identifies a typology of migratory projects that illustrates the heterogeneity of women's strategies, ranging from survival-oriented trajectories to entrepreneurial and professional reorientation pathways. Despite structural constraints, Romanian women display significant agency through the mobilization of community networks, digital platforms, and self-employment initiatives.

By integrating administrative labor data with qualitative trajectory analysis, the article contributes to research on gendered labor migration in Southern Europe and highlights the paradox between formal European mobility rights and persistent labor market marginalization. The findings offer insights for policy debates on qualification recognition, labor rights enforcement, and inclusive labor market integration for EU migrant workers.

KEYWORDS

Romanian migrant women; Labor trajectories; Labor market segmentation; Gendered labor markets

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1. Introduction

Romanian women constitute one of the largest groups of migrant workers in Spain and play a crucial role in sectors central to social reproduction, including domestic work, care services, hospitality, and agriculture. A significant proportion of their employment is concentrated in activities linked to the care economy, which sustains households and compensates for structural gaps in public welfare provision in Southern European countries.

Despite their structural contribution to the Spanish economy, Romanian migrant women's labor market incorporation remains characterized by occupational segmentation and limited opportunities for upward mobility. In addition, many experience processes of deskilling, whereby educational qualifications and professional experience acquired in the country of origin are either not formally recognized or systematically undervalued in the host labor market.

While a growing body of research has examined migrant labor in Southern Europe, relatively little attention has been paid to the longitudinal reconstruction of labor trajectories among intra-European migrant women within territorially differentiated labor markets.

By combining administrative labor data with qualitative life histories and digital ethnography, this article addresses this gap by reconstructing the labor trajectories of Romanian women across four Spanish provinces—Barcelona, Lleida, Valencia, and Castellón—territories that differ in their productive structures, migration histories, and patterns of sectoral specialization.

The selection of these provinces responds to both empirical and analytical criteria. Barcelona represents a large metropolitan labor market with a diversified economy, strong service and hospitality sectors, and a long-standing history of international migration. Lleida, by contrast, is characterized by an agro-industrial economy, where seasonal agricultural labor has played a decisive role in attracting migrant workers, including Romanian women. Valencia combines tourism, services, and small-scale industry, offering a mixed labor market structure that reflects both urban and coastal dynamics. Castellón stands out for its historically high concentration of Romanian residents—at times described as a “Little Romania”—and for its ceramic industry and agricultural activities, which have shaped specific forms of labor incorporation. Together, these four provinces allow for a comparative perspective across metropolitan, agro-industrial, coastal-touristic, and highly concentrated migrant contexts, making it possible to analyze how local opportunity structures and regional labor markets influence women's trajectories over time.

Spain's transformation from a country of emigration into a major destination for international migration in the late twentieth century provides the broader context for this analysis. Within this shift, Romanian migration emerged as one of the most significant intra-European flows. Following the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989 and Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, Romanians became one of the largest foreign populations in Spain, reaching nearly 900,000 residents by 2012. Although the economic crisis led to a partial decline in numbers, Romanians continue to represent a substantial share of the foreign population. A distinctive yet still insufficiently examined feature of this migration is its feminization: Romanian women have become indispensable to key segments of the labor market while remaining disproportionately exposed to structural disadvantage.

The article adopts an intersectional and gender-sensitive perspective, conceptualizing labor trajectories as dynamic, temporally structured sequences of employment positions

shaped by the interaction between institutional frameworks, gendered labor demand, migration timing, and individual biographical resources. Rather than treating employment outcomes as static positions, the analysis reconstructs trajectories over time, attending to turning points such as migration timing, legal status changes (notably EU accession), family formation, regional labor demand, and broader labor market restructuring. Within this framework, occupational inertia refers to the long-term confinement of highly qualified women within feminized and low-mobility segments of the secondary labor market, despite accumulated experience, linguistic adaptation, and legal stabilization.

The intersectional perspective is operationalized empirically by examining how gender, educational capital, migration cohort, and family responsibilities intersect to produce differentiated access to employment, stability, and mobility across territorial contexts. This approach allows for a multi-level understanding of how macro-structural conditions and micro-level strategies interact in shaping labor incorporation.

This article pursues three main objectives:

- (1) to analyze the labor trajectories of Romanian women in Spain from an intersectional perspective;
- (2) to examine how structural labor market segmentation and institutional frameworks shape their employment opportunities and mobility;
- (3) to explore the adaptive strategies and forms of agency developed by women in response to precarious labor conditions.

Methodologically, the study follows a mixed-methods design with a qualitative-dominant orientation. Quantitative data from the General Treasury of Social Security and the National Statistics Institute provide a structural overview of sectoral distribution, contractual arrangements, and employment patterns across the selected provinces. These data are complemented by qualitative material drawn from 29 in-depth interviews with Romanian women aged between 23 and 60, representing both pre-2007 and post-2007 migration cohorts. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, supported by recruitment via associations, community networks, and digital platforms, including Facebook groups, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. This strategy enabled access to diverse profiles in terms of education, family situation, length of residence, and sector of employment, while ensuring representation across the four provincial contexts.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach based on open and axial coding. The analysis prioritizes analytical depth and theoretical saturation over statistical representativeness, identifying recurring patterns, ruptures, and adaptive strategies across labor trajectories and territorial settings. Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Empirically, the findings show that Romanian women's labor integration is marked by persistent occupational segmentation, deskilling, and gendered precarity across all four provinces, albeit with context-specific variations. Concentration in domestic work, hospitality, and agriculture remains widespread and is frequently associated with informal employment, irregular schedules, and limited contractual stability. At the same time, women display significant agency through strategies such as self-employment, requalification, occupational diversification, and reliance on family, community, and digital networks. Clear generational differences emerge between early migrants—whose trajectories were shaped by urgent economic needs and restrictive institutional frameworks—and more recent arrivals, who often

possess higher educational capital and clearer professional aspirations but continue to encounter structural barriers.

By centering women's lived experiences within differentiated regional labor markets, this study positions Romanian women not merely as passive participants in the labor market, but as active agents who navigate, negotiate, and, at times, reshape the conditions of their economic integration. Moving beyond a descriptive account of occupational segmentation, the article contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it develops an empirically grounded typology of migratory labor trajectories among Romanian women in Southern Europe. Second, it combines administrative labor data with qualitative life histories to reconstruct these trajectories over time, capturing both structural constraints and individual strategies. Third, it examines the role of digital infrastructures and migrant community networks as key mediating mechanisms that connect macro-level labor market conditions with everyday practices of mobility, adaptation, and support. unity networks as mediating mechanisms between structural constraints and individual agency.

2. Contextual Background

2.1. Spain as an immigration country

Spain's transformation into a major immigration destination since the mid-1980s marked a shift from emigration to labor-driven inflows (Sanz Abad, 2014; King et al., 2000). The democratic transition and the Immigration Act of 1985 established the initial regulatory framework (Arango, 1985), while accession to the European Economic Community in 1986 consolidated Spain's position within European migration dynamics (Cachón, 2002).

Historical Context of Immigration in Spain		
1. Until 1985	2. 1986–1999	3. From 2000 Onward
Spain as an Emigration Country and Secondary Immigration Destination Emigration country: millions of Spaniards migrated to Germany, France, Switzerland, and Latin America. Limited immigration: - Northern Europeans (UK, Germany, France) → retirees and residents attracted by climate and low cost of living. - Political refugees: Latin Americans (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay) and Eastern Europeans. Political and economic context: - Franco dictatorship until 1975 → little attractiveness for migrants. - Democratic transition and modernization → first openings. No migration law until the Immigration Act of 1985.	Transformations After Joining the EEC Structural change: Spain shifts from emigration to immigration country. Immigration Act of 1985: first legal framework, but restrictive and limited. Economic profile of flows: - Morocco → labor in agriculture, construction, domestic work. - Latin America (Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic) → cultural and linguistic ties. - Eastern Europe (Romania, Poland) → late 1990s, agricultural and construction jobs. Migrant networks: facilitate arrivals, settlement, and job placement. Spain consolidates as a key migration destination in Europe.	Migration Boom and Labor Market Transformation Exponential growth: from 923,879 immigrants in 2000 to over 5 million in 2008. Key drivers: - Economic boom → demand for labor in agriculture, construction, domestic service. - Regularization processes (e.g. 2005 → ~700,000 legalized). - Migrant networks and "pull effect." Main origins: Romania, Morocco, Ecuador, Colombia. - Romanians surged after EU accession (2007). Labor market impact: - Temporary contracts introduced in 1984. - Spaniards less willing to take temporary/seasonal jobs → filled by immigrants. - Gap between migration policies and labor market needs. Demographic and social transformation: - Immigrant population rose from 1.8% (1998) to 9.76% (2008). - Romanians and Moroccans became the largest groups.

Figure 1: Historical Context of Immigration in Spain

Source: Author's own elaboration

From the 1990s onwards, immigration became closely tied to labor demand in sectors such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and domestic service. Migrant incorporation occurred within a segmented labor market characterized by temporary contracts, limited mobility, and sectoral differentiation (Dolado, García-Serrano & Jimeno, 2001). The rapid expansion between 2000 and 2008—when the foreign population grew from under one million to over five million—reinforced this model, as regularization processes enabled legal incorporation while maintaining concentration in low-skilled sectors (Arango, 2007; González-Enríquez, 2010; Brădăţan & Sandu, 2012).

This structural context is central to understanding Romanian women's labor trajectories. Their concentration in domestic and care services, hospitality, and seasonal agriculture reflects structural labor demand rather than individual choice. Spain's migration regime thus shapes migrant women's constraints, opportunities, and strategies of adaptation.

2.2. Romanian Migration to Spain: phases, gendered effects, and labor trajectories

Romanian migration developed within the broader context of post-socialist transformation and European integration. After 1989, economic restructuring and declining social protections in Romania stimulated migration toward Western and Southern Europe (Horváth & Anghel, 2009). During the 1990s, migration patterns combined temporary, circular, and family-based strategies (Sandu, 2000; Diminescu, 2001).

Spain emerged as a key destination due to sustained labor demand and the expansion of migrant networks facilitating employment and settlement (Viruela, 2004; Potot, 2002). Mobility intensified after visa liberalization in 2002 and especially following Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, which enabled free circulation while maintaining segmented labor incorporation (Sandu, 2006; Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009). By 2012, Romanians constituted the largest foreign population in Spain.

Within this framework, Romanian women were predominantly incorporated into feminized sectors such as domestic and care work, hospitality, and agriculture—areas characterized by instability and limited mobility. The 2008 economic crisis reinforced these patterns: while male-dominated sectors contracted, women's employment in care and services remained relatively stable, consolidating their role in Spain's care economy (Stănculescu & Stoiciu, 2012).

Since 2014, migration flows have stabilized and diversified, including settlement, return migration, and onward mobility. These dynamics reflect broader structural changes, including economic recovery in Romania and intra-European mobility. Overall, Romanian migration continues to sustain key sectors of the Spanish labor market while revealing persistent structural segmentation.

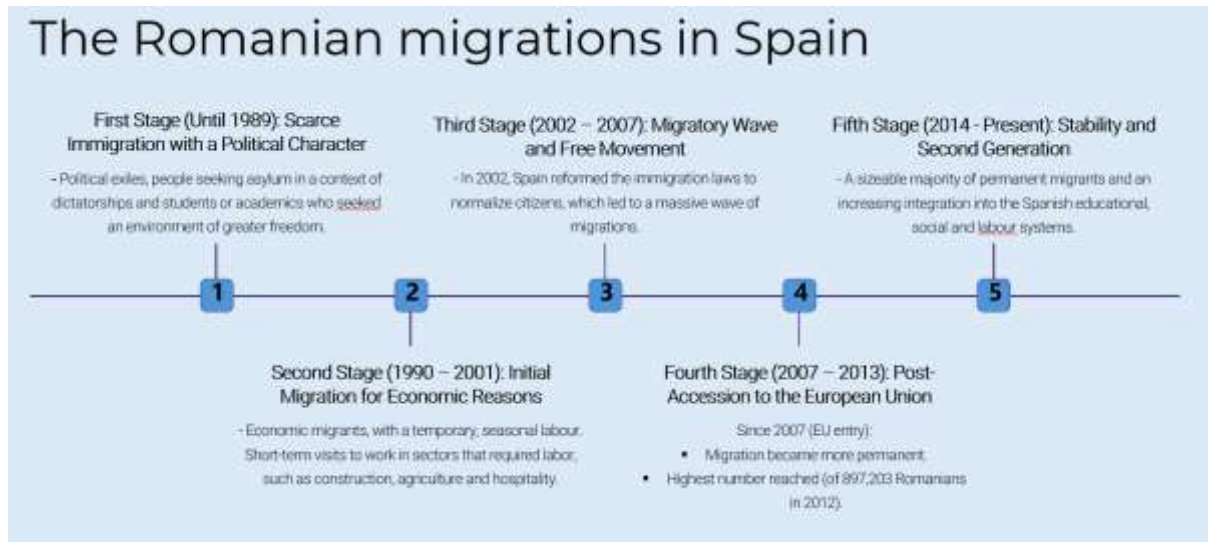


Figure 2: Stages of Romanian Migration in Spain

Source: Author's own elaboration

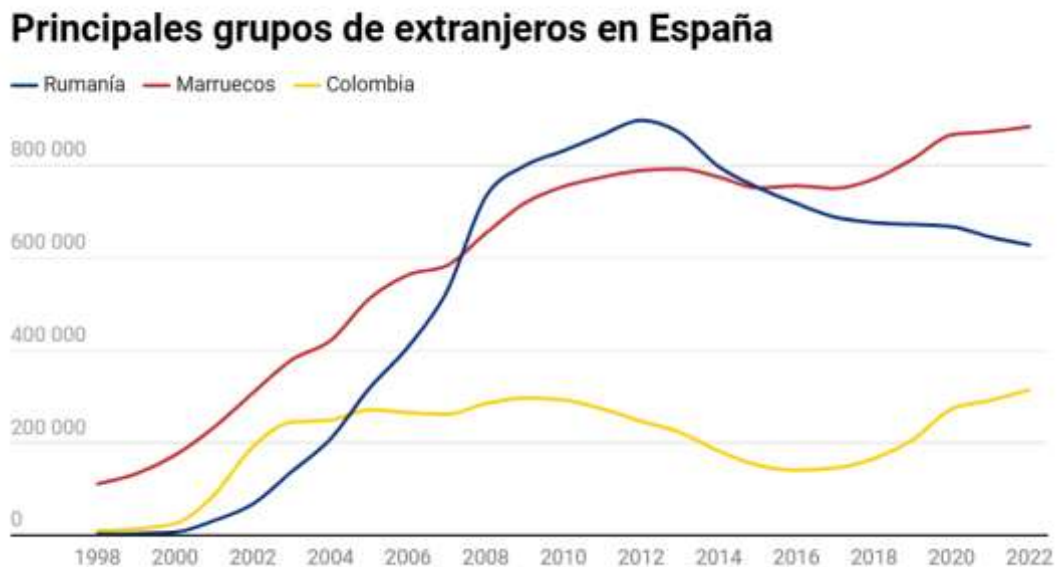


Figure 3: Main groups of foreigners in Spain

Source: INE, El Debate, Created with Datawrapper. . Blue represents Romania, red – Morocco, yellow - Colombia. The chart tracks the number of residents from each country in Spain from 1998 to 2022, with the Y-axis ranging from 0 to 800,000.

3. Migration drivers, structural constraints, and mediating networks in the incorporation of Romanian women

Romanian women's migration to Spain is driven by the interaction of labor demand, cultural proximity, and migrant networks, which facilitate both mobility and rapid labor market entry. Linguistic and cultural affinities, rooted in shared Romance language origins, ease adaptation and employment access (Sandu, 2005; Potot, 2002; Viruela, 2004; Marcu, 2009; 2013). At the same time, demand in domestic work, hospitality, agriculture, and cleaning enables quick insertion, but these sectors are marked by low wages, informality, and limited mobility, concentrating women in precarious, feminized niches (Calavita, 2005; Oso & Parella, 2012; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Lutz, 2011).

Established Romanian communities, particularly in Catalonia and the Valencian Community, further reinforce migration by providing access to jobs, housing, and administrative support, while also channeling women into specific labor segments (Elrick & Ciobanu, 2009). Although Spain is often perceived as offering a better quality of life, these benefits coexist with structural constraints shaping long-term trajectories.

Despite relatively accessible entry conditions, Romanian women face persistent barriers that reinforce labor segmentation. Cultural adaptation involves identity negotiation between origin and host societies, often described as "double presence" or "identity grief" (Berry, 1997; Lazaridis & Koumandraki, 2007; Achotegui, 2002; Sandu, 2005). More critically, labor market incorporation is shaped by gendered and ethnicized segmentation, leading to occupational downgrading and concentration in low-protection sectors regardless of qualifications (Arango & Mahía, 2017; Calavita, 2005). Limited credential recognition and the undervaluation of care work deepen precarity (Oso & Parella, 2012; Lutz, 2011), while administrative and linguistic barriers increase dependency on informal mediation (García Castaño et al., 2014; Parella, 2019; Oliver Alonso, 2012).

Integration is mediated by community institutions and digital networks. The Romanian Orthodox Church, migrant associations, and online platforms provide support in employment and daily life, while reinforcing cultural continuity (Viruela & Marcu, 2015; Diminescu, 2002). However, these networks operate ambivalently: they facilitate access and reduce exclusion, yet also reproduce occupational clustering in low-protection sectors, reflecting the relational and socially embedded nature of migration.

4. Labor market positioning of Romanian Women: Quantitative patterns and structural constraints

Official data from the General Treasury of the Social Security and the State Public Employment Service confirm that Romanian women constitute one of the largest groups of EU migrant workers in Spain, with strong representation in Catalonia and the Valencian Community. Their labor market insertion is concentrated in hospitality, cleaning, domestic and care work, retail, and seasonal agriculture—sectors characterized by low wages, limited protection, and restricted mobility. Most are affiliated under the General Regime, alongside a significant presence in the Special System for Domestic Employees, reflecting the feminization and segmentation of their employment.

From a demographic perspective, Romanian women affiliated with Social Security are predominantly between 35 and 54 years of age, indicating a relatively stabilized workforce. However, this stability coexists with persistent vulnerability. Despite the labor reform introduced by Royal Decree-Law 32/2021, which increased permanent contracts, instability remains evident. Romanian women continue to experience high contract rotation, overrepresentation in part-time employment, and concentration in low-paid positions, highlighting the limited transformative impact of recent reforms.

Sectoral and regional patterns reinforce these dynamics. In Catalonia, particularly in Barcelona, Romanian women are strongly represented in the General Regime and domestic work, with a smaller presence in self-employment. In the Valencian Community, employment is concentrated in cleaning, hospitality, retail, care services, and seasonal agriculture, alongside emerging entrepreneurial activities in areas such as beauty services, translation, food-related businesses, and small commerce. While these initiatives indicate diversification, they remain constrained by limited access to credit, weak institutional support, and regulatory barriers.

Domestic and care work remains a central site of vulnerability. This highly feminized sector continues to exhibit high levels of informality, with many workers lacking contracts or Social Security coverage. Although Spain's ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 and recent legal advances have strengthened formal protections, enforcement remains uneven due to the persistence of informal employment and limited oversight in private households. Consequently, many Romanian women remain excluded from full labor rights and social protection.

Overall, the quantitative evidence reveals a pattern of labor integration marked by occupational segmentation, partial formalization, and enduring precarity. While the 2022 labor reform increased indefinite contracts, this has not substantially altered the structural conditions shaping Romanian women's employment. Contractual stabilization has occurred within already feminized and low-mobility sectors, leaving patterns of concentration largely intact.

Sectoral segregation remains particularly pronounced in Catalonia and the Valencian Community, where Romanian women continue to be concentrated in domestic work and hospitality. Although formal employment conditions have improved, this has not translated into significant occupational mobility. The labor market thus remains structurally segmented along gendered and nationality-based lines.

The concentration of Romanian women in domestic and care work reflects broader dynamics of the Southern European care economy, where migrant labor sustains household-based care systems in contexts of ageing populations and limited public services.

At the same time, quantitative data suggests a "glass ceiling of nationality." A decline in domestic work contracts among Romanian women coincides with their partial replacement by newly arrived Latin American migrants. Rather than upward mobility, this often involves lateral shifts into adjacent sectors, such as cleaning companies, where precarity persists.

These macro-level patterns provide the framework for the qualitative analysis that follows, examining how women navigate and respond to these structural constraints over time.

To synthesize the main quantitative findings, Table 1 summarizes the key dimensions of Romanian women's labor market positioning in Catalonia and the Valencian Community.

Table 1. Labor Market Positioning of Romanian Immigrant Women in Catalonia and Valencian Community

Dimension	Main Patterns	Analytical Implications for Labor Trajectories
Demographic profile	Predominantly women aged 35–54; long-term residence; high labor force participation	Indicates relative settlement and continuity, but not necessarily upward mobility
Affiliation regime	Majority under the General Regime; significant presence in the Special System for Domestic Employees; minor share in self-employment	Confirms concentration in feminized and low-protection sectors, with limited access to stable career paths
Contractual dynamics	Increase in permanent contracts after 2022 labor reform; persistent high contract rotation and part-time employment	Suggests partial formalization without substantive reduction of precarity
Main sectors of employment	Hospitality, cleaning, domestic and care work, retail trade, seasonal agriculture	Reflects structural labor market segmentation and gendered division of labor
Regional concentration	Strong presence in Barcelona and Lleida (Catalonia); Valencia and Castellón (Valencian Community)	Links labor trajectories to urban service economies and territorial demand
Domestic and care work	High levels of informality; limited enforcement of labor rights despite recent legal reforms	Core site of vulnerability and exclusion from full social protection
Entrepreneurship and diversification	Small but growing number of women entrepreneurs (beauty, food services, retail, translation)	Signals agency and resilience, constrained by institutional and financial barriers
Overall trajectory pattern	Stable labor participation combined with persistent occupational downgrading	Reveals long-term incorporation into precarious labor niches rather than upward mobility

Source: Author's elaboration based on TGSS and SEPE data (2023–2025).

5. Qualitative analysis of labor trajectories

5.1. Analytical framework and coding strategy

The qualitative analysis is based on 29 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between January 2025 and February 2026 with Romanian women aged between 23 and 60 residing in the provinces of Barcelona, Lleida, Valencia, and Castellón. The sample includes participants with diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from upper-secondary education to doctoral training, allowing for the reconstruction of heterogeneous and differentiated labor

trajectories across provincial contexts. The interviews were distributed across the four provinces in order to capture variation in metropolitan, agro-industrial, coastal-touristic, and highly concentrated migrant settings.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach grounded in open and axial coding (Glaser y Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss y Corbin, 1990; Strauss, 1998).

In the first stage (open coding), narratives were fragmented into meaningful units, generating initial codes such as deskilling, starting from zero, remittance obligation, care burden, institutional mistrust, occupational stagnation, nostalgia market, entrepreneurial autonomy, and legal turning points.

In the second stage (axial coding), these codes were relationally organized around broader analytical categories:

- Intergenerational differentiation,
- Migratory project typologies,
- Occupational inertia and precarity,
- Agency and adaptive strategies,
- Community mediation and digital infrastructures.

The differentiation between types is based on three analytical criteria identified during axial coding:

- (1) degree of decision-making autonomy,
- (2) centrality of remittance or caregiving obligations,
- (3) long-term settlement orientation.

These criteria allow differentiation between projects framed as autonomous but structurally shaped by family obligations and those explicitly embedded in collective mobility strategies.

Rather than treating interviews as isolated testimonies, the analysis reconstructs labor trajectories as temporally structured processes shaped by turning points (migration timing, EU accession in 2007, the 2008 crisis, childbirth, family reunification, regularization). Patterns presented below emerge across the full interview corpus, even when illustrated through emblematic cases.

5.2. *Structural constraints in lived experience*

Thematic comparison across interviews reveals clear intergenerational differentiation in labor incorporation, reflecting shifts in both structural opportunity conditions and migratory expectations.

Pioneer migrants: survival-oriented trajectories

Pioneer migrants—arriving mainly between 2000 and 2007—describe migration as an urgent economic necessity. Open coding frequently captured expressions such as “we accepted anything,” “there was no time to think,” or “I had to send money home.” Their entry into domestic work, live-in caregiving, cleaning, and seasonal agriculture was typically mediated by informal networks rather than institutional channels.

As one participant who arrived in 2003 stated: “When I came, I just needed to send money home to my daughters. I accepted anything.” (Interview 15, Castellón)

This account exemplifies a survival-driven trajectory characterized by constrained agency, where immediate remittance obligations override considerations of occupational matching or long-term mobility. Within the analytical framework, such narratives reflect economically compelled entry into feminized sectors, reinforcing early positioning within segmented labor markets and limiting the scope for strategic career planning.

Many interviewees reported substantial discrepancies between their educational backgrounds and the occupations they currently perform, illustrating persistent patterns of deskilling. A pioneer migrant interviewed in Valencia similarly highlighted the primacy of economic survival upon arrival, as well as the structural constraints and discriminatory dynamics that shaped her early labor market experiences: “I was a professor in Romania, but here I started working in a restaurant. I dreamed of opening a language school, yet everyone told me to be realistic — that for a Romanian woman, something like that was simply not possible.” (Interview 24, Valencia)

This testimony reflects a process of institutionalized deskilling combined with symbolic devaluation, where not only qualifications but also professional aspirations are actively constrained by perceived ethnic and gender boundaries. The reference to being told to be “realistic” reveals the internalization of structural expectations that delimit aspirational horizons, illustrating how labor market segmentation operates not only materially but also discursively.

Axial coding shows that for this cohort, early insertion into feminized and weakly regulated sectors created a path-dependent dynamic of occupational inertia. Longitudinal reconstruction of their trajectories demonstrates cumulative disadvantage, whereby initial conditions—informality, deskilling, and fragmented employment histories—translate into long-term exclusion from stable career pathways, social protection, and pension accumulation.

Post-EU accession migrants: aspirations and constraints

In contrast, post-2007 migrants and second-generation women display higher educational capital and more clearly articulated professional aspirations. However, interpretive coding reveals a persistent tension between formal qualifications and actual labor market incorporation. Codes such as degree not recognized, bureaucratic labyrinth, and glass ceiling recur systematically across provinces, pointing to structural rather than individual obstacles.

As one participant in Barcelona explained: “My diploma exists, but here it’s like it doesn’t exist. They tell you to wait, to translate, to certify... and years pass.” (Interview 21, Barcelona)

This narrative illustrates a condition of suspended professional recognition, in which institutional procedures delay or effectively neutralize the value of educational capital. Within a trajectory perspective, this produces a form of temporal stagnation, where years of potential professional development are lost, reinforcing downward or lateral mobility despite high qualifications.

This experience is not limited to regulated professions. Even among women who successfully access skilled sectors, expectations of economic upgrading are frequently frustrated. Another participant in Valencia, employed in a high-level IT position, expressed dissatisfaction with Spanish salary structures: “I would earn more if I worked for a foreign company. Even my salary in Romania was higher than what I would earn here in Spain” (Interview 22, Valencia).

Her testimony reveals a form of partial or segmented incorporation, where formal access to qualified employment does not translate into proportional economic rewards. This

challenges linear assumptions of upward mobility and highlights the existence of hierarchized labor markets within the EU, in which intra-European migrants may experience relative disadvantage even in skilled positions.

These findings corroborate previous research on the feminization of migrant labor markets in Southern Europe (Lutz, 2011; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015), while also extending it by showing how intra-EU mobility produces differentiated but converging forms of constraint. Despite formal freedom of movement, Romanian women encounter structural barriers that limit their ability to convert educational capital into sustained upward mobility.

Comparative synthesis

The analysis shows that longer residence in Spain does not necessarily lead to improved occupational outcomes. Instead, labor precarity is reproduced through cohort-specific mechanisms that nevertheless converge in limiting mobility.

For pioneer migrants, early entry into feminized and weakly regulated sectors produces long-term sectoral confinement, reinforcing occupational inertia through cumulative disadvantage. For younger and more highly educated women, mobility is constrained by different mechanisms, including delayed credential recognition, subtle processes of ethnicization within professional hierarchies, persistent wage disparities, and unequal access to high-return professional networks.

Intergenerational change thus reflects evolving expectations and strategies but also reveals the structural persistence of segmented incorporation. Across cohorts, labor trajectories are shaped less by individual capacities than by the institutional and market conditions that regulate access to opportunities, recognition, and mobility.

5.3. Typologies of migration trajectories

Based on inductive analysis, four types of migratory projects were identified: clearly individual, apparently individual, apparently family-based, and clearly family-based projects. This typology emerged through axial coding, as narratives were compared along three key dimensions: decision-making autonomy, remittance and caregiving obligations, and long-term settlement orientation.

Importantly, these categories are analytical constructs rather than fixed classifications. Women frequently move between them as family dynamics, legal status, and labor market opportunities evolve. The typology therefore captures dynamic configurations of agency, highlighting how migration decisions are continuously renegotiated within structurally constrained and transnational contexts.

Clearly Individual Projects (Professional Ambition)

Clearly individual projects are characterized by high decision-making autonomy and a migration narrative centered on personal or professional self-realization. Migration is often framed as an ethical, professional, or existential rupture rather than a purely economic necessity.

One participant trained as a lawyer explained: “In Romania, I had to pay bribes to be able to practice law. I initially came to Spain to earn the money I needed, but in the end, I decided to start from zero here. Now I work as a lawyer in Spain and run my own law firm, but I had to work incredibly hard to get to this point.” (Interview 29, Castellón)

This trajectory illustrates a form of value-driven migration, where mobility is motivated by the rejection of institutional corruption and the pursuit of professional integrity. However, despite this initial autonomy, her pathway also reflects a process of non-linear mobility, marked by initial deskilling followed by gradual requalification. This underscores how even highly autonomous projects remain embedded in segmented opportunity structures that delay or complicate professional reintegration.

Similarly, a younger participant with postgraduate education stated: “I didn’t leave because of poverty. I left because I felt stuck. I wanted merit to matter.” (Interview 5, Valencia)

This narrative reflects an aspiration-driven trajectory, grounded in expectations of meritocratic recognition. However, within the Spanish labor market, such expectations often encounter structural constraints, including credential recognition barriers and limited access to high-return professional networks. As a result, these trajectories frequently involve recalibrated aspirations, where initial goals are adapted to structurally available opportunities.

In both cases, migration is narrated as a self-directed project, yet outcomes are mediated by institutional and market constraints, revealing the limits of individual agency in shaping labor trajectories.

Apparently Individual Projects (Family Survival)

Apparently individual projects involve women who migrate alone and frame their decision as autonomous, but whose narratives reveal strong transnational obligations toward family members in Romania.

One interviewee emphasized: “I came alone, yes. But everything I did was for my children. If I stopped working, they stopped studying.” (Interview 15, Castellón)

This account illustrates a form of relationally constrained agency, in which formal autonomy coexists with strong economic and emotional obligations. Labor decisions are shaped by the imperative of remittance continuity, producing a survival-oriented trajectory characterized by high tolerance for precarious or exploitative working conditions.

Another participant reflected: “You say it’s your decision, but when your family depends on you, is it really only yours?” (Interview 28, Lleida)

This statement explicitly problematizes the notion of individual choice, highlighting the relational nature of migration decision-making. Within this framework, autonomy is not absent but reconfigured, as choices are embedded within transnational family structures.

Axial coding shows that these dynamics often reinforce occupational inertia, as the need for stable income prioritizes continuity over mobility, limiting opportunities for professional advancement or requalification.

Apparently Family-Based Projects (Secondary Labor Incorporation)

In apparently family-based projects, migration is initially framed as a collective decision linked to family reunification, typically following a spouse already inserted into the labor market. However, women’s labor incorporation rapidly becomes central to household economic sustainability.

As one participant explained: “My husband came first. I followed. At the beginning I thought I would stay at home, but after a few months we realized one salary was not enough.” (Interview 1, Castellón)

This narrative reflects a transition from dependent to economically active status, where women's labor shifts from supplementary to essential. Entry into care and cleaning sectors is often pragmatic and immediate, reinforcing insertion into feminized labor niches.

Another interviewee noted: "I came for family unity, but in reality I became the stable salary." (Interview 27, Castellón)

This statement reveals a process of role inversion and feminization of economic responsibility, where women become the primary stabilizing force within the household economy. Such trajectories illustrate how formally collective projects can evolve into gendered patterns of labor specialization, reinforcing women's concentration in sectors characterized by stability but limited mobility.

Clearly Family-Based Projects (Collective Mobility Strategy)

Clearly family-based projects are explicitly constructed as collective strategies of household mobility, with migration decisions jointly negotiated and embedded in long-term settlement plans.

One participant described: "We decided together. It was an investment for all of us. Spain was the plan." (Interview 11, Castellón)

This reflects a strategic household-level trajectory, in which migration is framed as a long-term investment in collective well-being, including housing acquisition, children's education, and intergenerational mobility.

However, even within these explicitly collective frameworks, gendered asymmetries persist. As one interviewee stated: "It was our project, but I'm the one who adjusted my career to make everything work." (Interview 26, Lleida)

This account highlights the gendered redistribution of professional sacrifice, where women disproportionately absorb the costs of family adaptation. While decision-making may be shared, labor market outcomes remain structured by gendered expectations and constraints, often leading to the prioritization of family stability over individual career progression.

Analytical Synthesis

Across all four types, the analysis demonstrates that migration projects are best understood as relational and dynamic configurations of agency, rather than fixed or purely individual decisions. The typology reveals how varying degrees of autonomy, obligation, and strategic orientation intersect with structurally segmented labor markets to shape differentiated trajectories.

Importantly, women frequently transition between project types over time, as caregiving responsibilities evolve, legal status stabilizes, or new economic opportunities emerge. This fluidity highlights the temporal dimension of migration trajectories, where agency is continuously renegotiated in response to changing structural and personal conditions.

By grounding the typology in empirical material across multiple regions, the analysis shows that migratory projects are neither purely individual nor purely collective but are embedded within transnational family systems and gendered labor market structures.

Ultimately, the typology underscores a central finding of this study: while Romanian migrant women exercise agency in shaping their migration pathways, this agency operates within—and is often constrained by—institutional barriers, labor market segmentation, and

persistent gender inequalities, which together limit the extent of upward mobility across trajectories.

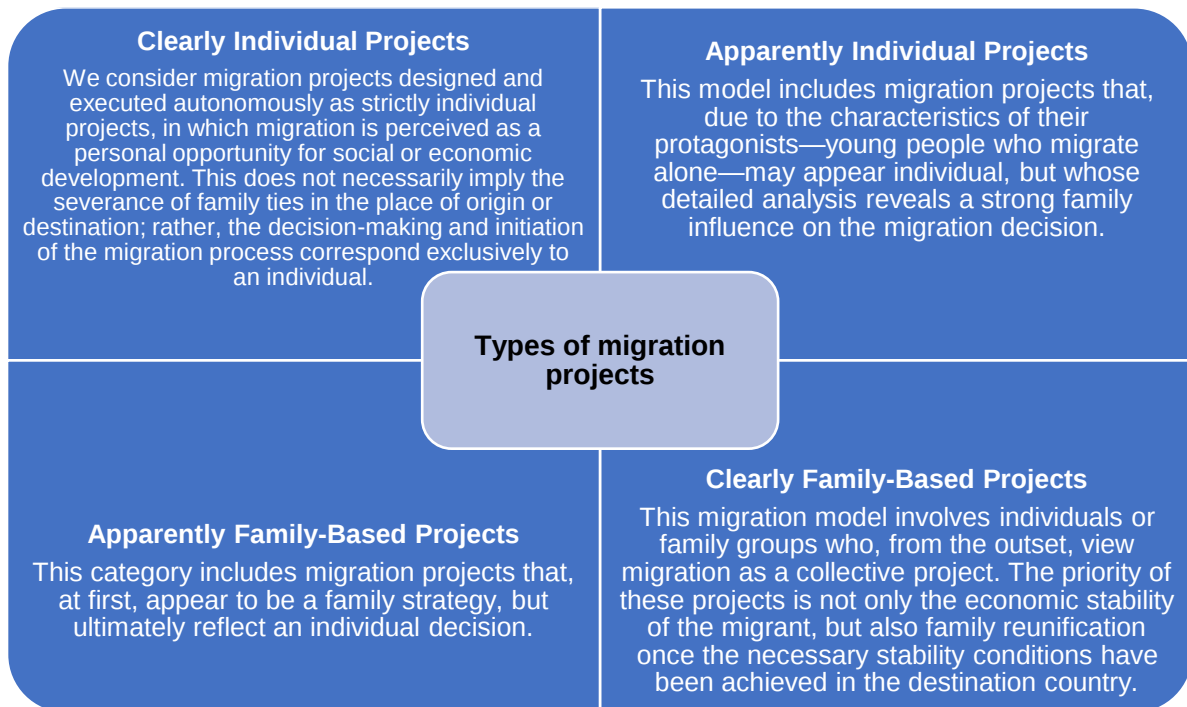


Figure 4: Type of migration projects

Source: Author's own elaboration

5.4. Agency, adaptive strategies, and network mediation

Despite structural precarity, the interviews consistently reveal significant forms of agency among Romanian immigrant women. Through thematic clustering, four major adaptive strategies emerge: (1) sectoral mobility within feminized niches, such as transitions from live-in care to hourly cleaning or from hospitality to beauty services; (2) self-employment and micro-entrepreneurship, including small businesses in cleaning services, aesthetics, translation, ethnic retail, or hospitality; (3) credential reinvestment through language acquisition, homologation attempts, and vocational retraining; and (4) network-based access to employment, relying on both community ties and digital infrastructures.

At the same time, this agency operates within clear structural constraints. The very networks that facilitate access to employment also contribute to the reproduction of occupational segmentation, concentrating women in low-skilled, feminized labor circuits. Similarly, entrepreneurship often represents a form of lateral rather than vertical mobility, offering increased autonomy but maintaining income instability.

In this context, Romanian associations, informal community leaders, and religious institutions function as key mediators, providing not only employment opportunities but also housing, legal guidance, and emotional support. Digital ethnography—particularly through Facebook and WhatsApp groups—further confirms their central role in job matching, reputation-building, and problem-solving, as reflected in statements such as: “I found it on

Facebook,” “someone from the group recommended me,” or “we share warnings about employers.”

However, these same networks also tend to reinforce occupational segmentation by circulating opportunities predominantly within domestic work, care, and cleaning sectors. Thus, while they mitigate processes of exclusion and facilitate labor market entry, they simultaneously contribute to the stabilization and persistence of feminized labor niches.

5.5. *Analytical synthesis of trajectories*

The interpretive thematic approach demonstrates that Romanian women’s labor trajectories cannot be reduced to linear mobility or static disadvantage. Instead, they reflect:

- Path-dependent incorporation into segmented labor markets,
- Intergenerational transformation in expectations and educational capital,
- Persistent institutional barriers (credential recognition, bureaucratic complexity),
- Strategically deployed but structurally bounded forms of agency.

By reconstructing trajectories through open and axial coding across all interviews, the analysis foregrounds lived experience as analytically central. Romanian women emerge not merely as participants in secondary labor markets, but as actors negotiating constraint, redefining projects over time, and reshaping—albeit within limits—their positions in Spain’s socio-economic structure.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

This article has examined the labor trajectories of Romanian migrant women in Spain through an intersectional and trajectory-based approach, combining administrative data with qualitative life histories. The findings reveal a persistent pattern of labor market segmentation, in which women remain concentrated in feminized and low-mobility sectors such as domestic work, care services, hospitality, and agriculture.

By reconstructing trajectories over time, the analysis demonstrates that labor incorporation is not a static outcome but a path-dependent process, shaped by migration timing, family obligations, institutional constraints, and regional labor demand. Early entry into precarious sectors—particularly among pioneer migrants—generates long-term occupational inertia, while more recent and highly educated migrants face different but equally constraining barriers, including credential recognition and segmented professional opportunities.

The typology of migratory projects developed in this study highlights the relational nature of agency, showing how women’s decisions are embedded in transnational family obligations and evolving life-course dynamics. Migration trajectories are thus neither purely individual nor purely collective, but continuously negotiated within structurally constrained contexts.

Importantly, the qualitative analysis reveals that agency does not necessarily translate into upward mobility. Strategies such as self-employment, sectoral mobility, or reliance on community networks often result in lateral adaptation rather than structural advancement, reproducing segmentation in new forms.

The article contributes to research on gendered migration in Southern Europe in three key ways. First, it introduces a trajectory-based analytical framework that captures the temporal and relational dimensions of labor incorporation. Second, it provides an empirically

grounded typology of migratory projects that bridges individual strategies and structural constraints. Third, it highlights the ambivalent role of digital and community networks as mechanisms that both enable integration and reproduce occupational clustering.

Overall, the findings point to a central paradox: despite formal EU mobility rights, Romanian migrant women continue to experience structural labor market marginalization. Addressing this gap requires not only improved recognition of qualifications and enforcement of labor rights, but also a reconfiguration of the gendered organization of care and work in Southern European labor markets.

6.1. *Tailored policy implications*

To strengthen the link between evidence and intervention, policy recommendations must reflect the specific structural position of Romanian migrants as EU citizens, long-term residents, and a numerically significant community.

First, improving the recognition of qualifications within an EU framework is essential. Although Romanian women are legally entitled to professional mobility, interviews reveal persistent bureaucratic delays and limited institutional guidance in credential homologation, contributing to deskilling among highly educated post-2007 migrants. Addressing this requires fast-track recognition procedures in sectors with labor shortages (education, health, technology, administration), stronger bilateral coordination between Spanish and Romanian professional bodies, and province-level advisory services specifically targeted at EU migrants navigating validation processes.

Second, occupational inertia in feminized sectors must be addressed. Qualitative findings show a strong concentration of Romanian women in domestic and care work, often accessed through informal networks, with early insertion leading to long-term confinement. Policy responses should include strengthening labor inspections in private household employment, facilitating transition pathways into formalized care professions through subsidized vocational certification, and recognizing prior informal care experience as part of accredited qualifications. These measures directly target the documented sectoral clustering of Romanian women.

Third, policies should leverage existing community and digital infrastructures. Romanian associations, the Orthodox Church, and online platforms play a central role in labor mediation, already functioning as informal integration mechanisms. Rather than replacing these structures, interventions should build on them by partnering with community organizations and digital administrators to disseminate verified labor rights information, supporting bilingual employment mediation initiatives in provinces with high Romanian concentration (Barcelona, Castellón, Valencia, Lleida), and promoting digital literacy programs to reduce vulnerability to informal or exploitative job offers circulated online.

Finally, retention and intergenerational mobility require targeted attention. Romanian nationals represented 12.6% of Spain's foreign population in 2022, yet their gradual decline raises concerns for sectors structurally dependent on their labor. At the same time, second-generation participants express aspirations beyond traditional migrant niches, alongside experiences of blocked mobility. Policy measures should therefore promote mentorship and internship programs linking second-generation Romanians to diversified professional sectors, facilitate access to public sector employment through targeted information campaigns for EU nationals, and recognize Romanian-origin youth as a strategic human capital resource rather than a temporary migrant population. Given Romania's economic growth and increasing intra-

EU mobility, failure to improve professional integration may accelerate onward migration, exacerbating labor shortages in sectors such as care and agriculture.

6.2. Discussion

The findings confirm that Romanian women's labor trajectories are shaped by the intersection of EU mobility rights, segmented labor markets, gendered care regimes, and transnational family obligations. However, situating these results within the broader landscape of immigrant women's incorporation in Spain helps illuminate the specificity of this group. Unlike non-EU migrants—such as Moroccan or Latin American women—Romanian women do not face the same legal-administrative barriers related to residence permits or work authorizations. As EU citizens, they enjoy formal freedom of movement and immediate access to the labor market. Yet this legal advantage does not translate into structural mobility. Instead, they remain concentrated in feminized, low-wage sectors characterized by instability, deskilling, and limited upward mobility.

Compared to Latin American women, who often benefit from linguistic proximity and, in some cases, facilitated access to nationality, Romanian women frequently encounter subtle forms of ethnicization that shape employer perceptions and hiring practices. At the same time, unlike many Moroccan women—whose trajectories are often structured by family reunification policies and stronger constraints related to legal status—Romanian women's incorporation is less restricted administratively but similarly segmented economically. Their qualitative experiences reveal patterns of occupational confinement, wage disparities, and blocked credential recognition comparable to those documented among non-EU migrant women, despite their distinct legal position.

This contrast reveals a central paradox: formal European citizenship coexists with labor market marginalization. The study therefore demonstrates that legal status alone does not dismantle structural labor market hierarchies. Rather, it interacts with gendered sectoral demand, employer expectations, and transnational care responsibilities to reproduce inequality in differentiated forms. Romanian women occupy an intermediate position in Spain's migration regime—legally mobile yet structurally constrained—highlighting how segmented labor markets can neutralize the integrative potential of supranational mobility rights.

By integrating quantitative sectoral patterns with the interpretive reconstruction of individual trajectories, the research shows that labor integration must be understood as a longitudinal and relational process rather than a static outcome. Mobility rights shape entry conditions, but it is the interaction between institutional frameworks, gendered labor demand, and biographical resources that ultimately structures long-term incorporation and stratification.

6.3. Limitations and Reflexivity

The study relies on a qualitative sample designed to prioritize analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness. Provincial labor market differences and post-pandemic restructuring may therefore influence the trajectory patterns identified. The researcher's linguistic and cultural proximity to participants facilitated trust and narrative depth, while also requiring sustained reflexive attention to issues of positionality, interpretive authority, and potential identification biases. Within these analytical and methodological limits, the findings nonetheless highlight how the intersection of gender, migrant origin, and the structural characteristics of the Spanish labor market contributes to the consolidation of occupational

segmentation, shaping the labor trajectories of Romanian women and constraining their opportunities for upward social mobility.

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