

# The lonely crossing of female immigration in Portugal.

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## ABSTRACT

The number of women in migratory flows has increased considerably in recent years. The transformations resulting from this increase generate the need to understand these phenomena from a gender perspective. Considering this general premise, the focus of this article is female immigration in Portugal. Thus, our main objective is to understand how the process of female immigration in Portugal takes place, from its inception, in the face of a sudden break in national ties, to settling in Portuguese society and the use of support networks that are satisfactory for the safety, integration and social inclusion. This article presents an analysis of the female immigration process in Portugal based on data collected through the Voices of Immigrant Women project. The methodological approach of this study is quantitative, and the data was collected by a questionnaire addressed exclusively to immigrant women living in Portugal, forming a non-probabilistic snowball sample of 62 immigrant women. According to the results obtained, the majority of the women surveyed indicated that they feel there are not enough personal and institutional solidarity networks that promote the integration and social inclusion of immigrant women. We can therefore conclude that we are dealing with a lonely and somewhat neglected migratory journey in women's international displacement, which requires specific policies from a gender perspective.

**Keywords:** immigrant women; support networks; feminization of migrations; gender; intersectionality.

## FEMALE IMMIGRATION, A LONELY JOURNEY

Entering the world of female migration implies realizing that this phenomenon occurs for the most diverse of reasons, closely related to the countries involved (whether the countries of origin or destination), but also linked to personal and professional issues. Among the possibilities underpinning current migratory flows, one of the most important motivations for female international mobility is related to economic issues and, to this extent, the economic context of the destination nation is a factor considered when defining the migratory path, considering the countries of origin of these women, who emigrate in search of a better quality of life. The contemporary world therefore demands greater attention to the phenomenon of migration since these international journeys move the cultural structures of the social body, and between 1960 and 2015, the number of female migrants doubled. "The migration of women has become an important component of modern times, as they no longer travel only as family members but become part of the flow of migrant workers and are often the main breadwinners of the family" [26]. "In the current scenario of the feminization of immigration, women are increasingly immigrating at their own risk, in search of emancipation and personal and economic autonomy" [13]. These changing gender roles brought about by globalization help in the advancement of gender equality. and so that the women who carry out this process must be guaranteed the minimum conditions of security, integration, and inclusion, in full compliance with

human rights [6,19,22,26,27,28].

As mentioned earlier, the focus of this work is female immigration. Many of the works referred to throughout the article refer to migratory movements in general and not specifically to immigration. The decision to incorporate these sources into the theoretical foundation of this work is related to the gender focus that is more prominent in research that focuses on migrant women as a category of analysis. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the women analysed in this study are immigrant women. We take as a reference the concept of immigrant defined in the Glossary on Migration, according to which an immigrant is: “from the perspective of the country of arrival, a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence” [11].

Today’s female immigratory profile features women who move for themselves, with their own dreams and objectives, in a continuous effort to pursue a professional or educational career or simply to improve their general living conditions. In a reality in which they tend to present themselves today as the protagonists of their individual projects and, consequently, of migratory movements, in dissonance with the previous moment, marked exclusively by male labor migration, the previous role of subordinate immigrants is currently giving way to this new profile, autonomous and independent, through female emancipation that makes it possible for these women, who decide to leave their homelands, to immigrate most of the time alone, in search of improvements in their training [8].

The lonely crossing to a new and unknown destination establishes in the lives of migrant women an experience of rupture in their previous experiences, in which habits, customs and relationships are abruptly interrupted, at the cost of expectations about possibilities for growth, especially professional growth, in a new socio-cultural environment recognized for its challenges. The decision of the women who make this journey therefore ends up directly and indirectly affecting various surrounding subjects. By deciding to immigrate, each woman also has an impact on the lives of her family, friends and an entire support network, which for a lifetime has brought her comfort and well-being in mutual support, suddenly upended by decisions that have repercussions on her entire social environment [22].

That said, several relevant issues are now being considered when choosing a migratory destination in an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to make the journey more comfortable. Facilitating international agreements, linguistic and cultural aspects verified in the presence of groups of the same nationality or culturally homogeneous in the destination country, security, and the existence of support and assistance networks in the process of leaving and arriving between countries are all factors that contribute to favoring the migrant population’s trajectory and making it less difficult, especially for women, who due to the social marker of gender tend to encounter even more challenges as migrants, facing discriminatory stereotypes and difficulties in reconciling professional and personal life while living in a foreign country [10,17,19].

In this sense, Portugal has emerged as a destination country for citizens of Portuguese-speaking countries. The consolidation of democracy in the country and its economic development, with the growing creation of job opportunities, combined with an aging population, have made it an attractive destination for migrants, whose data from the Foreigners and Borders Service points to an increase from 157.073 migrants in 1994 to 265.361 migrants in 2004. Among these citizens, we see women from different countries and cultures who immigrate at working age to develop academic, professional or career projects and, in some cases, also projects related to family life, especially in the education and care work sectors, transforming Portugal into a state made up of diverse ethnicities and cultures [19].

As such, the integration and inclusion of immigrant women in Portugal is a challenge to be faced, in order to preserve equity and guarantee the well-being of these women, through public policies capable of combating social exclusion, the result of precarious access to economic goods, insufficient support networks and fragile

personal resources. In this sense, it is necessary to promote the reception of migrant women, ensuring minimum conditions for their integration, making it possible for them to regularize their migratory status, to receive the help they need to settle in the receiving society, to master the Portuguese language (whenever necessary), to receive education and professional training, to improve access to housing and health, and to encourage citizen participation [7,29].

When the various issues associated with immigrant women's lives are not satisfactorily addressed, their journey in search of a better life leads to social isolation, which can jeopardize their integration and inclusion in the destination country. The need to restructure personal, social and economic life in a new culture, together with the attempt to overcome family and social distancing in the country of origin, often ends up demanding an excessive effort from these women, which can even result in intense stress, diagnosed as Ulysses Syndrome or Multiple and Chronic Stress Syndrome Linked to Migration, a specific mental condition that affects people in transit and the symptoms involve depressive, anxious and dissociative conditions. In some cases, they can develop chemical dependency and even physical pain, and it is related to specific factors present in the migratory experience, such as social isolation, a sense of powerlessness, a lack of trust in institutions and a lack of opportunities in the host country [1,20].

International human mobility takes place under the strong influence of gender paradigms, in a migratory flow marked by migrant women's lack of autonomy, due to poor economic conditions and lack of opportunities, and mainly as a result of their being recruited almost exclusively for domestic work. This scenario of social, cultural and economic dependence, characterized by exhausting work, makes support networks inaccessible and unsatisfactory and makes it impossible to create links in the destination country. As they spend less time living with Portuguese nationals, the relationships they establish are less significant, making it considerably more difficult for immigrants to integrate and be included in society, generating the need to maintain relations with their country of origin through constant contact with people who are there, sending financial remittances to family members and establishing links with fellow immigrants [4,24].

In this context, the lonely experiences of migrant women are directly related to the social distancing experienced in the country they have chosen to live in and are inversely proportional to the expected quality of life [23]. It can therefore be seen that loneliness is associated with a decrease in the quality of life of immigrant women, which ultimately has an impact on their mental health, making them particularly vulnerable [9,15].

For all the above reasons, it can be said that the contemporary female migration profile, although emancipatory, is still based on gender inequality. It is therefore necessary to realize that female migration suffers different influences due to the sexist burdens and stereotypes imposed on women, such as being linked only to domestic and care work or the secondary family role, demonstrating that it is necessary to project a new understanding of migration, beyond the mere presence of women, as evidenced by the more than 372,392 immigrant women living in Portugal today [14], but above all, recognizing their protagonism and their demands for health, education, housing, security and many others, from a gender perspective [18,21].

It is in this way that an effective process of integration is necessarily presupposed, given the imperative direct relationship between cultures in the same society [13], in order to ensure the achievement of a set of objectives, through activities that benefit immigrant women and the receiving society, with the active participation of these women in public life and the development of links between them and nationals.

## METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This study is based on data obtained by the research group of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, as the Portuguese partner of the European project "Voices of Immigrant Women" – VIW (Reference: 2020-1-

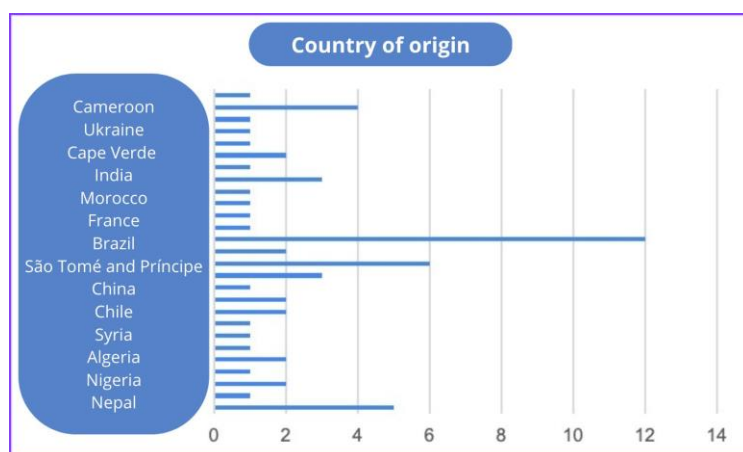
ES01-KA203-082364), which aims to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive higher education system by focusing on the gender perspective in the analysis of migratory flows in the current European context. This project sought to analyze migratory phenomena in a comprehensive and interdisciplinary way, in order to highlight different paths of integration and inclusion, also considering the intersections of the various social markers that accompany female immigration and the challenges imposed on them throughout the migratory process.

Thus, the aim of this study is to understand how the process of female migration in Portugal takes place, from its beginning, in the face of the sudden break-up of national ties to settling in Portuguese lands, and the use of satisfactory support networks for security, integration and social inclusion throughout this process, recognizing its peculiarities, as well as the reasons and expectations that justified the migratory flow. The research question seeks to understand whether women's migratory journeys are solitary and whether they receive support from social and institutional solidarity networks that are sufficient for safety, integration and inclusion throughout this process, in order to observe the women's migratory journey, from leaving their country of origin and their motivations, desires and perspectives, to establishing a new life in Portugal.

In this sense, this study considered the data obtained from the application of a questionnaire addressed to immigrant women living in Portugal. The aim of the questionnaire was to understand women's migratory realities and their integration process, taking a holistic approach to observing their personal characteristics, motivations and qualifications, based on their living conditions and relevant inclusion initiatives that meet a range of predefined criteria within the scope of the project.

In an effort to raise awareness of the migration phenomenon from a gender perspective, the University of Pablo de Olavide, a partner of the VIW project in Spain, developed this data collection instrument with 67 questions, including multiple choice questions and others based on the Leikert scale, which was replicated in all the project's partner countries. In Portugal, the questionnaires were applied in both online and printed versions and the sample was made up of 62 immigrant women living in Portuguese territory, over 18 years old, mostly from Portuguese-speaking countries, but also from European countries, as presented in the figure 1, who came to Portugal with different goals, in some cases to improve their education and life skills and in others to work in a variety of areas, from their field of study, as well as in restaurants, domestic and care services. Given the nature of our survey, based on a non-representative sample of 62 immigrant women, the findings can not be generalized to all immigrant women in Portugal. It is also important to note that some of these women were helped to explain the content of the questions whenever understanding the Portuguese language was an obstacle.

**Figure 1 : Country of origin**



Data collection took place from November 2021 to May 2022, and contact with the 62 respondents was

mediated by various migrant support institutions, in a context in which each woman who agreed to take part in the study was asked to disseminate the questionnaire to her network of acquaintances, resulting in a non-probabilistic, snowball sample for this study.

Next, Jamovi (*open statistical* software) [25] was used to analyze the data collected through the questionnaire, both in its descriptive component and with regard to inferential statistics. To this end, several variables were crossed using the chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ), namely to analyze the distributions of the women's responses considering variables related to their journey being more or less solitary with other variables related to their migratory motivations, the feeling of discrimination, or the search for support in various institutions. Thus, in the context of the VIW Project, we were able to observe that from the variables present in these questionnaires, considerable data emerged about the solitary crossing experienced by women during their migratory processes.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis of the data collected should begin with a socio-demographic characterization of the women who make up our sample. In this regard, it was found that 65% of the women who responded are single and 6% are divorced, resulting in a context in which 71% are not in a conjugal relationship and an equal percentage of these women do not have children, in line with the autonomy and female protagonism affirmed by authors such as Peres and Baeninger [19] and Ramos [21], and highlighting the importance of considering the growth of female migratory flows that move away from family reunification.

Regarding the journey, 56% of the sample surveyed traveled to Portugal completely alone, in an autonomous journey from their countries of origin, which is perpetuated on arrival in Portugal, where 44% of immigrant women do not live with partners or family members at the same address and 64% have no family members in Portuguese lands, in line with the female emancipation present in the studies by Góis and Marques [6].

It was also found that the immigrant women in the sample have a high level of education. 80% of the immigrant women surveyed have higher education, including bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, which is a factor that contributes to women's ability to undertake a migratory project marked by autonomy and independence, as seen in the data presented above, and is fully in line with the perspective shown by Góis and Marques [8], who state that immigrant women in the 21st century have a high level of professional and educational qualifications.

In this way, autonomous, independent and highly qualified women who decide to leave their country of origin and come to Portugal tend to do so with very particular motivations, well grounded in expectations and life projects that assess, above all, the possibilities for improvement in the fields of education and work. Thus, in the questions based on the Leikert scale, 45% of the immigrant women interviewed said they agreed that they decided to emigrate from their country of origin to find a job or a better job, while 68% said they agreed that the decision to emigrate was based on education and professional training.

A comparison of the distributions of the answers given in the assessment of migratory motives indicates a statistically significant difference in the migratory motivation for job-seeking among women depending on whether or not they are in a conjugal relationship ( $p = 0.04$ , which is lower than the analyst's value). It should be noted that the maximum level of agreement indicated is much higher in the group of women who are in a conjugal relationship.

Faced with these expectations created around immigration, the need arises to draw up a well-defined plan for the migratory journey. In this context, in a confirmation of the studies by Papademetriou [17] and Possidónio [19], it is possible to observe the negligence of the support made available to these women



already in the process of preparing for the trip to Portugal, in which 68% of the immigrants surveyed as part of the VIW project did not receive any help from social entities; 74% did not receive assistance from religious entities; and 63% only had the support of informal networks, through friends and local acquaintances, who provided them with some kind of information about the immigration procedure.

The analysis of immigration through a gender lens also highlights the fact that women are subject to various forms of violence in their daily lives and that immigration processes can contribute to intensifying this risk. In this sense, we would like to highlight the results that seek to assess these women's perceptions of the risks they were subjected to on their journey to Portugal.

Thus, when the women were asked about the risks they faced during their journeys, 16% of them felt afraid for their lives; 21% faced discrimination during their journey; 5% experienced a lack of food during their journey; 3% said that bad company appeared during their journey; 8% suffered robberies of some kind; and one of the respondents told us that she had been the victim of a kidnapping during her migratory journey. It can therefore be seen that, in view of the seriousness of the incidents that threaten women's dignity and safety during their migratory journey, the data points to the need to alert the authorities, professionals who interact with immigrant women and political decision-makers to this situation. The data presented portrays the vulnerability of immigrant women, and it is imperative to adopt protective attitudes and policies aimed at guaranteeing the minimum conditions of safety for women who carry out this process, in full compliance with human rights [26].

Furthermore, when the answers relating to feelings of security are analyzed, it can be seen that the distribution of the answers given is different depending on whether or not the women are in a conjugal relationship. The percentage of women who say they feel discriminated against is higher in the group of women who are not in a conjugal relationship. We can add that this difference is statistically significant ( $p=0.018$ ).

Thus, despite the mishaps and challenges that may be encountered along the way, female immigration is based on pre-defined desires and purposes. Among the many different objectives expected through immigration, our sample shows that immigrant women are mainly looking to improve their personal and individual living conditions in Portugal. This is expressed in the results, where 67% agree that they are looking to improve their finances; 55% agree that they are looking to improve their working conditions; and an increasingly higher number, with a variable of 74%, agree that they came to Portugal to improve their education and training.

However, the expectations surrounding female immigration are not always met. According to the data collected, the current situation of these women is far from their expectations in terms of the objectives that led them to immigrate in the first place. Of our sample, 37% of immigrant women are unemployed and 63% have no formal work, which represents a scenario of low economic conditions and lack of opportunities, as Campos [4] and Sousa [23] assert, and which places these women in a situation of economic and social fragility and vulnerability.

Thus, of the women surveyed in this study, 73% said they had no help from social institutions on their arrival in Portugal; 60% had no support from public institutions; 80% had no help from religious institutions; 71% had no advice from associations; and 66% said they had no assistance from a network of immigrants, making it clear that the support provided by institutional support networks on arrival in the destination country was neglected, as Rocha-Trindade et al. [21] state. With regard to this search for support in institutions, there seems to be a significant difference between the distributions of the answers relating to the use of religious institutions, which is more frequent among women who do not travel alone, highlighting the statistical significance of the difference in distributions ( $p=0.04$ ).

Continuing with the immigratory process, which is linked to the integration and inclusion of immigrant women, we can see from the data collected, regarding the use of institutional resources and/or support networks to improve their integration into Portuguese society, that 56% of the women surveyed do not use support from social institutions; 52% do not receive help from public institutions; 71% do not receive assistance from religious institutions; 63% do not use support from associations; and 58% of immigrant women did not have support from immigrant networks.

Still with a view to establishing the integration and social inclusion of immigrant women in the receiving society, in full agreement with García's studies [5], we can see that 36% of immigrant women believe that it is necessary to improve their legal situation in order to improve their social integration; 60% believe that training and education are essential to facilitate their integration; 61% think that a higher income is essential to enable integration; 52% think that housing needs to be improved to improve their social integration; 56% think that work needs to be improved to facilitate their integration; and 63% think that more social relations with nationals are essential to ensure their social integration.

For all these reasons, it is clear from the study carried out that the solitude experienced in women's immigratory journeys to Portugal has been configured, with all the challenging consequences for the effective integration and social inclusion of these women. In this sense, taking into account the considerable increase in female immigration, it is sensible and essential to analyze the international trajectories involving immigrant women. It is essential to address the current situation of female migration, which, in taking on new perspectives and possibilities for personal projects and moving away from the role of mere companion, incorporates stereotypes and challenges specific to the social marker of gender.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of the above, given the presence of women in global human mobility, it is necessary that their demands and needs, as well as the challenges and obstacles they face, receive due institutional attention. The solitary journey of female immigrants in Portugal throughout the migration process, from preparing for and leaving their country of origin to arriving and trying to integrate in the destination country, requires a protective apparatus capable of supporting these women and guaranteeing their fundamental rights. In this sense, safety, well-being, integration and social inclusion are just a few examples of what must be guaranteed for a more inclusive journey, which makes it possible for immigrant women to be welcomed and remain in Portuguese society with a guarantee of equal opportunities and effective social and civic participation.

Therefore, in response to the main research question – which seeks to understand whether women's migratory journeys are solitary and whether these women receive sufficient support from social and institutional solidarity networks to guarantee them security, integration and inclusion throughout this process, from leaving their country of origin, with its motivations, desires and prospects, to establishing their new life in Portugal – and based on the results obtained through the application of questionnaires within the scope of the VIW project, it should be pointed out that women's migratory journey to Portugal and their subsequent settlement there is a solitary one, in a context in which women who decide to leave their countries for Portugal do so most of the time alone, in search of better education and professional training and with the ineffectiveness of support networks for immigrant women, surprising the country's economic and socio-cultural infrastructure in its attempt to integrate and include this new autonomous and independent profile.

Although the bibliographical references already point to the ineffectiveness of the support provided to women in recent migratory flows, in this study it was possible to see the negligence of the assistance provided to immigrant women through social and institutional solidarity networks, even in the face of an

emancipatory and autonomous context of female identity, which is still stereotyped by gender bias.

Thus, in view of the feminization of immigration in Portugal, there is an urgent need for greater attention to be paid to women's international human mobility, since, although there is a clear emancipation of women in these processes, the intersectional vulnerabilities that surround immigrant women require new institutional perspectives that contribute to guaranteeing their fundamental rights and preserving human dignity.

The neglect that can be observed in the female migratory process tends to be the result of a subjective experience that stems from the difference between the expectations created and the challenging reality experienced by these women, and the inadequacy of the networks that welcome and help immigrants. In this sense, the feeling of loneliness can appear in women's migratory journeys through the feeling of not belonging to a place, the isolation generated by social exclusion and the frustration generated by the intangibility of the expectations created [15]. Thus, in their solitary journeys, when they leave their countries of origin for Portugal, they become immigrant women and therefore foreigners, in an intersectional context [5] of identity and gender, in which it is necessary to observe their own peculiarities and demands, as well as their expectations and the obstacles they face.

In this way, female immigration can bring great benefits to everyone involved, as a driving force behind multiculturalism and local and transnational economic development. Portugal, as a destination country, is right to welcome these immigrant women and strive to provide them with opportunities for a better life, but it is wrong to note from the data presented that these women are not fully integrated and included in Portuguese society. With an ageing population and a slowdown in population growth, immigrants are essential for a sustainable economic balance, especially immigrant women, who today work mainly in domestic care work, but who also need to have their identities detached from these stereotyped roles and see their personal goals achieved in other areas of activity too, in order to achieve the mutual goal of staying in Portugal.

In this sense, the countries of origin of these women are also mistaken, as they also neglect to assist them at the beginning of the migration process, but receive the credit for female migration, such as the high-level international training achieved by their nationals and the financial remittances to family members, which boost the national economy. It is clear, therefore, that all those involved benefit from the immigrant woman's decision and, for this reason too, must help her through this journey with the necessary guidance and effective measures to safeguard fundamental rights, minimize the mishaps inherent in the migratory movement and, above all, ease the pain of breaking national ties, transforming the solitary migratory flow into an allied resource for strengthening female autonomy.

Therefore, the effective action of all those involved in international female migration is necessary for the success of these movements. There is therefore an urgent need to implement and strengthen support and solidarity networks that are sufficient and satisfactory to integrate, include and welcome immigrant women throughout the migration process. It is also imperative that this support reaches the reality of these women, moving beyond theory and the distancing of institutions and getting closer to the daily challenges and adversities that make up women's global mobility.

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