

Brazilian and Colombian Women in Iberian Sexual/Marriage Markets: An Intersectional Analysis

Brasileñas y colombianas en los mercados sexuales/matrimoniales ibéricos: un análisis interseccional

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the participation of Colombian and Brazilian migrant women in Iberian sexual/marriage markets. It combines a statistical analysis and an ethnography based on 40 women of Spain, Portugal, and Brazil between 2017 and 2022, to follow the strategies generating superpositions between migration policy and ethnosexualization. The results expose a participation typology in mixed marriages according to the social characteristics of migrant women: marriage as a means of regularization assumed by women in a precarious legal-labor situation; the social downgrading experienced by privileged women; and young childless women's rejection of mixed marriages. The originality of this work lies in the reconstruction, based on the cross-referencing of different variables from origin to destination—maternity experiences, legal status, race, employment, educational level, nationality of the spouses—of the intersectional logic that governs the Iberian sexual/marriage markets.

Keywords: 1. intersectionality, 2. mixed marriages, 3. sexual markets, 4. Colombian women, 5. Brazilian women.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación tiene por objetivo analizar la participación de las migrantes colombianas y brasileñas en los mercados sexuales/matrimoniales ibéricos. Así, se combinó un análisis de estadísticas y la etnografía conducida en España, Portugal y Brasil entre 2017 y 2022 con 40 mujeres, para seguir las estrategias que articulan enredos entre la política migratoria y la etnosexualización. Los resultados exponen una tipología de participación en los matrimonios mixtos según las características sociales de las migrantes: el matrimonio como vía de regularización asumido por las mujeres en situación jurídico-laboral más precaria; el desclasamiento experimentado por las privilegiadas; y el rechazo de las jóvenes sin hijos a los matrimonios mixtos. La originalidad del trabajo reside en reconstruir, a partir del cruce de distintas variables desde origen a destino —experiencias de maternidad, estatus jurídico, raza, trabajo, nivel educativo, nacionalidad de los compañeros—, la lógica interseccional que rige los mercados sexuales/matrimoniales ibéricos.

Palabras clave: 1. interseccionalidad, 2. matrimonios mixtos, 3. mercados sexuales, 4. colombianas, 5. brasileñas.

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INTRODUCTION³

Mixed marriages are in the center of international migrations. In recent decades, intensification and diversification of the human mobility and especially of the women (Ribas-Mateos & Sassen, 2022), have made of trans-nationalization of intimacy a growing concern in the academic and political fields and in public debate (Constable, 2009).

Intimacy is referred to relationships with physical and emotional proximity which involve care and affection provision and often, sexual services (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). The trans-nationalization of intimacy is directly related to the commodification of reproductive work and to the bodies that have historically performed it, and it is also at the basis of the increasing precariousness of feminized migration.

The space of contemporary transnational circulation is demarcated by two closely interrelated scales of intimacy: the global sexual industry where mainly, migrant women serve as sexual workers, strippers, waitresses, and so on, and the households they join as domestic workers, caregivers, and eventually, as wives (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014). In this context, trans-nationalization of intimacy permeates what Laura Agustín (2007) has defined as the activities assembled in the affective-sexual *continuum*, and which constitute the main way of socio-occupational integration for migrant women in their countries of destination.

The specialized literature has highlighted the correlation between the supply of sex and care markets in rich countries with female labor from the ex-colonized peripheries; and the increasing of the called trans-border, trans-national or mixed marriages; between migrant women and local men (Piper & Lee, 2016). Constable's (2009) groundbreaking work analyzes the experience of migrant wives by approaching mixed marriages as another link in the large-scale trafficking of women, alongside sexual exploitation networks and global care chains.

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The relevance of intersectionality for the study of changing and complex realities that expand through different space-times and in which multiple power structures converge (Hill Collins, 2017), has made this perspective a recurring tool in recent research about mixed marriages. This literature has been devoted to examining the different areas where precariousness and gender violence are expressed, often experienced by migrants who are involved in these marriages (Piper & Lee, 2016; Chiu, 2017)

In addition, the authors of intersectionality have been concerned to preserve the agency that women exhibit even in the most adverse situations, complexifying the figure of “migrant women” by situating them in specific and changing power relations and questioning victimizing narratives (Flemmen, 2008). Their work addresses binational marriages and divorces as part of the strategies for survival and social mobility that women deploy in the transnational space (Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017).

The scientific production has explored the role that representations play in the transnational love game, influencing the transformations that migration triggers in the image projected onto people and also in the criteria for choosing a partner (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). The invigorating work of Joane Nagel (2003) on ethno-sexual boundaries explores, from a post-colonial perspective, the overlapping between racial, ethnic and national boundaries, that determine the framework in what is acceptable/unacceptable in the sex and marriage business when the individual and communities involved are codified as racially and nationally different.

Nagel (2003) emphasizes the extreme surveillance of ethno-sexual boundaries. In this way, there has been a proliferation of research in the European context that addresses the centrality of cross-border marriages in migration policy. More than any other type of hybrid relationship, these marriages undergo extensive state scrutiny and social control (Bonjour & De Hart, 2013). The meticulous legal procedures designed for the management of the bi-national couples reflect this and constitute a good example of contemporary “ethno-sexual borderisation” policy (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2024).

The premise of romantic love, understood as interest-free, underpins immigration legislation to determine the veracity or falsity of transnational relationships; and subsequently, the approval or denial of visas, residence and work permits, and the access to citizenship (Eggebø, 2013). In this regard, on the international scene, feminist researchers have strongly opposed a migration policy that promotes an idealized culture of intimacy, making invisible the inequalities that underlie gender relations in the private sphere.

In contrast to the prolific international production, mixed marriages have not yet been sufficiently studied in Iberian countries. In Spain, some studies have examined marriages between Latina women—particularly Brazilian women—and Spanish men. However, with few exceptions (Parella & Cavalcanti, 2010; Sánchez-Domínguez, 2011), the approach adopted has been mainly demographic.

In Portugal, Adriana Piscitelli’s (2008) pioneering work on the participation of Brazilian women in the Portuguese marriage market reports on the relevance of ethnosexual representations

in the formation of mixed couples. She points to the changing meanings that gender assumes as a function of nationality in certain contexts. According to her, the hyper-sexuality and docility images associated to “Brazilianness” are at the origin of the Portuguese citizens’ interest in these women.

Also in Portugal, recent research has addressed different aspects of mixed marriages and divorces from an intersectional and comparative approach by crossing categories of gender, sexual orientation, nationality and class (Gaspar et al., 2021; Ramos & Ferreira, 2022). The quantitative study by Silvia et al. (2022) stands out, relating numerous variables —class, occupation, marital status, temporality of migration, etc.— with the main forms of violence —physical, verbal, sexual, economic— faced by Brazilian women in intimate relationships with Portuguese.

Despite these valuable contributions, there is a lack of qualitative studies that delve deeper into the dynamics of sexual-affective and marital intimacy between locals and migrants, as well as their resonances in the trajectories of social, labor and political integration of women in the Iberian context. It is also necessary to develop an intersectional perspective that is transnational, capable of situating class, race and gender relations in the plurality of spaces and times that integrate the migratory reality, and in turn, signifying these relationships on the daily, institutional and symbolic scales.

To help fill the above-mentioned gaps, based on a multi-sited and longitudinal ethnography, this article analyzes the participation of Brazilian and Colombian migrants in what is defined as “Iberian sexual/marriage markets” from an intersectionality perspective. The main objective is to explore the affective and marital strategies that these migrants deploy in Spain and Portugal, within a framework constrained by migration policies, according to their intersections of gender, race, class and generation. “Strategies” are understood in a Bourdian sense, not as an anticipated calculation, but as the result of a habitus, an unconscious of history, a social way of reacting in certain situations (Bourdieu, 2013).

The selection of cases is based on the analysis of statistical series from the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF) (Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service) and the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) (Spanish National Statistics Institute). The data show an increasing participation of Colombian and Brazilian women in mixed marriages with nationals from Spain and Portugal, since both countries became the main recipients of migration flows from Latin America in the 1990s.

An intersectional analysis is proposed that considers the changing, but historically anchored in post-coloniality, meanings, that categories take in each specific context (Hill Collins, 2017). Transnational intimacy constitutes a privileged place to analyze how ethnosexual boundarying processes influence the configuration of relationships between migrants and locals. Thus, “Brazilian/Colombian” nationality is incorporated as a device of ethnosexualization of migrants and their spatial mobility is highlighted as a relevant variable in this process.

The class position of migrant women from origin to destination is considered, tracing their patterns of social mobility in the transnational space. Occupation is interpreted from a feminist perspective, relating the type of work performed, and the different forms assumed by their participation in the Iberian sexual/marriage markets. Likewise, the experience of motherhood in origin and destination and legal status are treated as constitutive variables of women's race and class. Finally, the nationality, legal status and social class of the partners are considered as intersecting variables in the organization of these markets.

The research methodology is explained in detail below. In the results, the three marital strategies identified in the field, deployed by the interviewees, are presented. The conclusions are the reflection on the intersectional logic that governs the functioning of the Iberian sexual/marriage markets.

METHODOLOGY: OPERATIONALIZING INTERSECTIONALITY

What follows in this methodological section is an approach to operationalize intersectionality from the biographical and marital trajectories of 40 Brazilian and Colombian migrant women. These trajectories have been reconstructed in the multi-sited and longitudinal ethnography conducted in Spain, Portugal, and Brazil between 2017 and 2022, and they are the empirical foundation of the research.

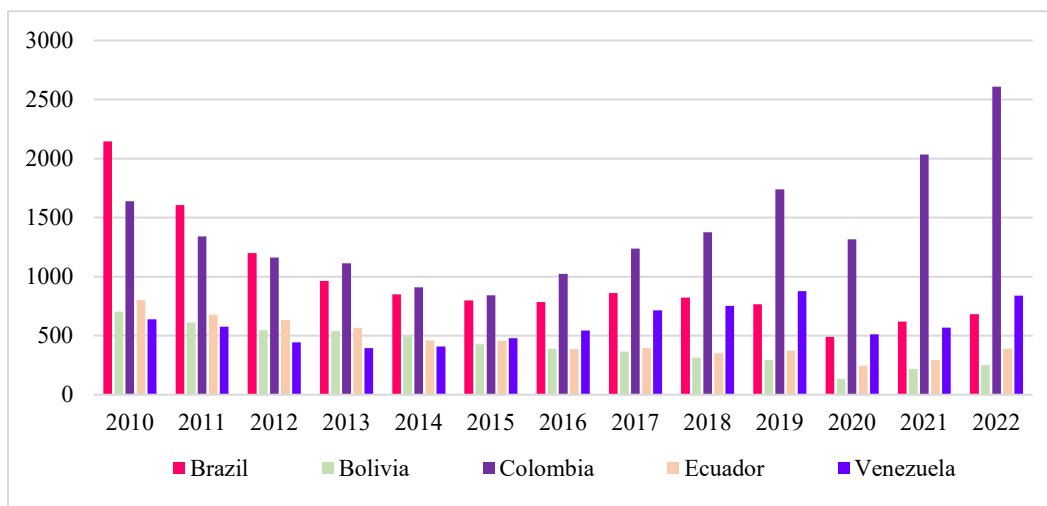
In this research, the comings and goings between statistics and fieldwork are constantly discussed and form the basis for the interpretation of results.

Public statistics are the usual practice of States to describe what is perceived as a social problem. Marriages, migrations, etc., are measured because they are points of support to justify political actions, the definition of the relevant categories itself expresses a political debate (Desrosières, 2000). The emergence of mixed marriages as a statistical phenomenon indicates that they have become a concern for the State, something to be described, measured and controlled.

The main public statistics consulted are: Acquisition of Portuguese Nationality through Marriage of the Annual Statistical Reports on Immigration, Borders and Asylum (2012-2021) (Relatórios Estatísticos Anuais de Imigração, Fronteiras e Asilo (2012-2021)) (SEF, n.d.a), and the statistics of Marriages of Different Sex with at least one Foreigner Spouse by Country of Nationality of the Wife, 2010-2022 (INE, n.d.a). The data on marriages have been relativized by estimating the number of Colombian and Brazilian women living in both countries, based on the Continuous Register Statistic (Estadística del Padrón Continuo) (INE, n.d.b) and the Residential Variation Statistics in Spain (Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales en España) (INE, n.d.c), and the data from Stock and Flow of Foreign Resident Population in Portugal (Fluxo de População Estrangeira Residente in Portugal) (SEF, n.d.b).

As shown in Graph 1, the predominance of Colombian women in mixed marriages with Spanish men begins in the period studied, in 2013, when they outnumber Brazilian women, and increases significantly since the retirement, in 2015, of the tourist visa required for Colombian citizens to enter Spain since 2003. It should be noted the superiority of Brazilian women in mixed marriages in the country until then, compared to other more numerous Latin American migrants such as Bolivians and Ecuadorians, and also the strong irruption of Venezuelans since 2019.

Graph 1. Mixed Marriages by Nationality of the Wife

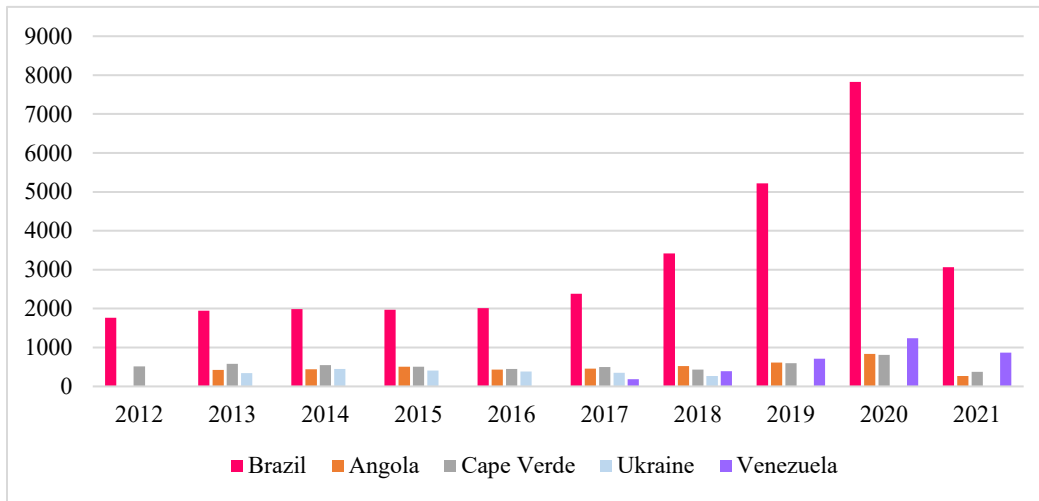


Source: Own elaboration based on Marriage Statistics (INE, n.d.a).

As far as Portugal is concerned, Brazilian women have the hegemony in access to nationality through marriage, as can be seen in Graph 2.⁴ Although they are currently the largest female contingent, in marriages with Portuguese men, Brazilians are far superior to other nationalities that, like the Angolans and Cape Verdeans, have had a sustained presence in the country for longer.

⁴ Although there are no sex-disaggregated data available for this graph, it is known from previous studies (see references) that in the binational unions between Portugal and Brazil the Brazilian woman-Portuguese man combination is the most frequent.

Graph 2. Acquisition of Portuguese Nationality by Marriage



Source: Own elaboration based on *Relatórios Estatísticos Anuais de Imigração, Fronteiras e Asilo (2012-2021)* (SEF,n.d.a).

The hegemony of Colombian and Brazilian women in mixed marriages in Spain and Portugal, respectively reflected in the statistics, suggests the representations described by Piscitelli (2008) as the driving force of mixed marriages and also a racial-national hierarchy of migrants, in which Colombian and Brazilian women occupy a better position than other Latinas.

The fieldwork material is shown below. The multi-sited ethnography was conducted in Porto and its metropolitan area (Portugal), Madrid and Galicia (Spain), and Grande São Paulo (Brazil), between 2017 and 2022. It is a longitudinal study that incorporates the life-cycle perspective for the analysis of trajectories (Souto-García, 2022). Over the course of six years, the women participating in the research have been recontacted at different times with the aim of apprehending life cycle events —births, marriage, separations, deaths, mobilities— and the impact of these on their trajectories.

Indeed, 23 Brazilian migrant women were interviewed, of which 13 were contacted in Porto, four in Galicia and six in São Paulo; and 17 Colombians, of whom 4 were contacted in Galicia and 13 in Madrid. Between the ages of 24 and 59, women have different affiliations of race and class and belong to different generations of migrants. The high participation of Brazilians in marriages with Spaniards and their high presence in Galicia also led to some interviews with Brazilian women in this territory.

From the information produced by interviews and observations, it was decided to categorize some of the data and obtain an overview of the sample. In order to deduce the women's class of origin, the occupation of their parents at origin and their occupation at destination, their educational level, their experiences of motherhood and their migration patterns were taken (see Table 1).

Table 1. Occupations of the Colombian and Brazilian Migrant Women in Spain and Portugal

Occupations on assignment	Types of employment by category	Total of women
Senior professionals and university students	Lawyer (1), publicist (1), teachers (2), university students (3)	7
Female workers in trade and beauty fields	Hairdressers and beauticians (4), saleswomen (2), receptionists (1)	7
Hostelry and night leisure	Waitresses (7), dancers and singers (2), sex workers (4), cooks (1)	14
Domestic and care work	domestic workers (3) and care workers (4), both (5)	12
Total of women		40

Source: Own elaboration based on ethnographic material.

At destination, 26 of the 40 interviewees were found in those activities assembled in the affective-sexual *continuum*. In other words, most of them are integrated into the precarious and often unregulated niches of the hostelry and the night-life industry, domestic service, and care. Another seven women are employed in beauty and aesthetic businesses. These 33 women are all mestizo and black, come from the urban working classes of Brazil and Colombia and, except for three of them who are daughters regrouped by their migrant mothers, they were the protagonists of feminized migration, facing legal irregularity after their arrival.

The older women of the sample came to Spain and Portugal before 2010⁵, have no higher education and were often single/abandoned mothers before emigrating, experiencing long periods of separation from their children, who were left in the care of other women in the family of origin. Younger women migrated after the economic crisis and, unlike veteran women, have more educational capital and none had children before they emigrated.

The seven women who are qualified professionals or students in the Iberian countries (see Table 1) come from the middle and upper professional classes at origin and are white. They have never experienced irregularity. This group includes women who migrated with their partners and returning migrants interviewed in São Paulo. Their experiences of motherhood occur within the framework of the nuclear family model and, if they had children before emigrating there were no cases of parental abandonment.

Women's racial identification is self-assigned. Although the racial assignment was not recorded in the tables, the concordance found in the fieldwork between "mestizo/black" race with "popular class" and "white" race with "upper class" corresponds to the postcolonial social structure of Latin American countries (Telles, 2014).

⁵ In Spain and Portugal, the effects of the 2008 economic crisis had a greater impact from 2010 onwards.

The strategy of contact with those interviewed in the four fieldwork enclaves (Madrid, Galicia, Porto and São Paulo) started from the personal networks of the researchers and from the urban ethnography carried out in the territories of migrant socialization —mainly in ethnic trade enclaves, leisure facilities and non-governmental organizations—, and expanded by “snowball.” The younger migrants, all in an irregular situation during the first phase of the fieldwork, were contacted through expatriate groups on the social network Facebook.

The interviews took place in the women’s everyday environment, in their homes, in their workplaces —bars, beauty salons, offices— and again in their leisure spaces —pubs, parks—. Continuous participant observation naturally led to encounters with people from the women’s social universe. Informal conversations with their husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, children, mothers, and colleagues were recorded and greatly enriched the research.

In classifying the biographical data, a first result called attention: a correlation between experiences of irregularity and childbearing at origin contexts with women’s participation in mixed marriages with Portuguese and Spanish men (see Tables 2 and 3). On the other hand, women in the same precarious legal-occupational situation but without children at home are less involved in mixed marriages and are more likely to remain single.

Table 2. Distribution of Motherhood in the Transnational Space and Type of Participation in the Iberian Sexual/Marriage Markets

	Women with children at origin (before migration)	Women without children at origin	Total of women
Spouse with Portuguese or Spanish nationality	9	4	13
Non-national spouse (citizen or migrant from a third country)	4	3	7
Without Spouse	4	16	20
Total of women	17	23	40

Source: Own elaboration based on ethnographic material.

Table 3. Experiences Of Irregularity and Type of Participation in Sexual/Marriage Markets

	With experience of irregularity	Without experience of irregularity	Total of women
National Spouse	11	2	13
Non-national spouse (citizen or migrant from a third country)	2	5	7
Single	17	3	20
Total of women	30	10	40

Source: Own elaboration based on ethnographic material.

On the other hand, women without experience of irregularity usually arrive in Spain and Portugal already married to citizens of their own country. Meanwhile, women with irregular experiences often arrive alone and in destination if they engage in affective-sexual relationships, they do so with male nationals.

The dynamics of social mobility through mixed marriages are of interest to the research and, in order to analyze them, it has been considered on one side, the class of origin of women by distinguishing between those with greater and lesser cultural capital⁶ and those with or without children; on the other hand, consideration has been given to the social class of the husband and his nationality for the socio-political benefits this confers at destination contexts (see Table 4).

⁶ Possession of a university degree was considered an indicator of greater cultural capital.

Table 4. Social Mobility Through Marriage. Type Of Participation in Sexual/Marriage Markets by Class, Maternity and Educational Level

	Working-class women with children and low cultural capital	Working-class women without children and high cultural capital	Upper-middle class women with children	Upper-middle class women without children	Total of women
National spouse of lower class	9	2	1	1	13
Non-national spouse of lower class	2	1	0	0	3
Non-national spouse upper middle class	0	0	4	0	4
Without spouse	7	12	0	1	20
Total of women	18	15	5	2	40

Source: Own elaboration based on ethnographic material.

General trends in participation in sexual/marriage markets have been identified. First, marriages of Brazilian and Colombian women with male nationals of the middle and upper classes are not considered because they do not occur in the sample. As expected, there has been a strong social reproduction through marriage: usually women marry men of their same social class whether they are nationals or migrants.

There is also a marked tendency towards exogamy among working-class women with children and low cultural capital, who most often marry Portuguese and Spanish citizens. In addition, Table 4 shows that women from the upper middle classes who practice exogamy experience a “de-classing.” In other words, women with a high socioeconomic status at origin who married off men from Spain and Portugal experienced downward social mobility because their husbands come from the working classes. Finally, the low participation in mixed marriages of women from popular classes without children and with higher cultural capital stands out.

In the following section, the three most common strategies of participation of Colombian and Brazilian women in the Iberian sexual/marriage markets are illustrated with the ethnographic material and the correlations located in the fieldwork.

THE INTERSECTIONAL LOGIC OF SEXUAL/MARRIAGE MARKETS

The Impact of Ethno-sexual Representations on the Formation of Mixed Marriages

Ethno-sexual boundaries define the ways in which men and women are represented in the transnational/post-colonial space (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2024; Nagel, 2003). On the one hand, the hypersexuality and docility that is imputed to Colombian and Brazilian women in the Iberian countries makes them attractive in the eyes of local men. And, conversely, Portuguese and Spanish men racialized as white Europeans in the eyes of Brazilians and Colombians, see their value increased in order to establish sex-affective relationships. In addition, the irregular form often taken by these women's migrations, their patterns of socio-occupational integration, incorporated predominantly in precarious and often highly sexualised niches such as hostelry, especially night-time entertainment, and, in the most extreme cases, sex work (Malheiros & Padilla, 2015; Souto & Perosa, 2022), increase the probability of Colombian and Brazilian women matching with national citizens.

Marisa is a 50 years old mestizo woman who migrated from the hills of Rio de Janeiro in 2004 to work as a prostitute in the Lisbon region. A single mother of five, she sent practically everything she earned to her mother, who stayed in Brazil to look after the children. Shortly after her arrival, her *caçula*⁷ daughter died suddenly. Marisa was unable to attend the funeral because, without proper papers, she could not risk leaving Portugal and not coming back. She met her future husband at the club where she worked. Through marriage, she obtained Portuguese residency and had another daughter. Today she has reunited her children and works in a small grocery store.

I knew stories about Brazilian women who suffered a lot here. I knew many cases of Brazilians married to Portuguese men who were very drugged and beat them. My mother was very afraid that I would get involved with someone who would kill me [...]. No, I did not have the same fate, but I also knew where I came to. I have a lot of friends who came because of that, a lot of them married men who took them out of the clubs. They made a life for themselves here. Look, the girls are very affectionate, they appreciate it a lot, but because they had nothing. I have many friends who have stayed here, married to Portuguese, Spaniards, Italians, even Germans. And I think the Brazilian man is more macho than the Portuguese, although the Portuguese still have this thing with the Brazilians. (Marisa, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

This testimony reveals the validity of colonial raciality when she evaluates her friends' husbands on the basis of their nationality. That "even Germans" makes clear who is at the top of the national/racial hierarchy. Although she is aware of the violence perpetrated against many compatriots, Marisa describes local men as less macho than Brazilians. These representations of Iberian men are part of a racist dialectic and circulate among migrants who see them as an

⁷ Refers to the youngest daughter.

opportunity to establish more egalitarian relations. However, their expectations are often not fulfilled. The irregularity experienced by Colombian and Brazilian women during their first years in Spain and Portugal, or their fragile regularity status depending on temporary residence and work permits, confines women to a state of sub-citizenship that disregards them in the face of gender-based violence.

In addition, there are other, more visceral motivations for mixed marriages. If a woman has been treated as worthless, if she has been pregnant and abandoned several times, if she has had to endure the stigmatization of the community of origin, as many of the women interviewed have, marriage to a European becomes a kind of symbolic restitution.

Marisa's case is illustrative in this regard. Abandoned by the fathers of her five children, for her, returning to Brazil on the arm of her white, European, Portuguese husband, wearing an expensive wedding ring on her right hand, represented revenge against the men who scorned her. But, above all, it was a settling of scores with all those people who mockingly witnessed the humiliation of the teenage mother, criminalizing her for her supposed promiscuity, without ever questioning the men who impregnated her and then ignored her and her children.

“Migration contributes to transforming the ways in which men and women think about each other as potential partners” (Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 830). And upon their return, Brazilian and Colombian emigrants experience a revaluation in their countries of origin. The following case illustrates the intersectionality that articulates sex-affective relations in trajectories of mobility in the transnational/postcolonial space.

Valeria is a Black woman, 34 years old, and comes from a large working-class family in the interior of the State of São Paulo. In 2013, her father, exhausted from his work in the “roça”⁸ fell ill, and Valeria, 25, single and childless, decided to migrate to Lisbon to ease the financial situation at home. A hairdresser and beautician already in Brazil, she worked illegally in a beauty salon since her arrival in Portugal. There, she began a relationship with a Moroccan migrant man, also in an irregular situation. They were deeply in love and planned to get married as soon as they obtained their papers, but in 2017, her mother, a “faxineira,”⁹ by profession, also fell ill and Valeria returned to take care of her.

Although her return was initially temporary, she met a young white man from a wealthy local family and became pregnant. Valeria decided to live in Brazil, but their relationship broke down shortly after her daughter was born, so she returned to her parents' home. They all care for the little girl while Valeria works. The girl's father also contributes financially.

Valeria would like to return to Portugal, but she does not want to leave her daughter, and she does not dare expose her to migration.

⁸Sugarcane fields.

⁹Domestic worker.

In Portugal, I had a boyfriend, but he was not Portuguese, he was from Morocco. I fell very much in love with him. He wanted me to go to Morocco, but it was not possible, there was no way. I got pregnant with the girl, and I had to stay. It is very difficult for me to go because I am not going to leave her, and how am I going to take her? How am I going to start? I do not think it is possible [...] He [her daughter's father] is very rich. When I arrived from Portugal, I met him, but here in Rio Branco, no one interests me. There are quite a few boys who are interested. Specially, when I came back, I was a success; everyone asked about the fact that I had been to Europe. (Valeria, personal communication, October 26, 2019)

Valeria's trajectory reflects the functioning of the temporary gain and loss of value for migrants in transnational sexual and marriage markets. If before migrating, she was not a good match as a poor Black woman, migration revalued her in the sexual and marriage market of her hometown, where she has returned to live. Her time in Europe seems to have symbolically whitened her. Migration becomes a process of social distinction. It made Valeria attractive for a formal relationship, even for those well-to-do men who, under other circumstances, might only be interested in her for casual sex.

In Valeria's case, once the initial fascination passed, the material and cultural differences marked by race/class took their toll on the couple. However, although her socioeconomic status has not improved significantly, as she continues to work in precarious jobs, her path to social mobility is not one of stagnation. She has a daughter whose father provides financial support, a privilege not enjoyed by many of her friends, and Valeria can eventually turn to him if she needs money.

In the transnational/postcolonial space, the lives of lower-class and dark women take on a liminal character, taking place in a multi-faceted informality: labor, legal, and affective/sexual. Lacking the economic, political, racial, and cultural capital valued in their marriage markets of origin, emigration can increase their chances of finding a partner with a higher social status upon their return.

Marriage as a Regularizing Tool for the Most Vulnerable Women

The race/class of Brazilian and Colombian migrants, intersected by other variables, determines their incorporation into the Iberian sexual/marriage markets. Marrying Portuguese and Spanish men is more common for women from working-class backgrounds with low educational levels and experience of undocumented migration. Above all, motherhood will be a key factor in the formation of mixed marriages.

Motherhood is an indicator of women's social class (Stack, 2012). Like Marisa, many of the interviewees from the working classes were single or abandoned mothers before emigrating, and it was precisely the desire to provide future opportunities for their children that drove them to migrate. In Spain and Portugal, the working conditions they face as irregular workers in the

domestic and care sectors, in the hospitality industry, and also in sex work, inhibit children's migration (Oso & Martínez-Buján, 2022). Loneliness and precariousness, the desire to bring their children to live with them, and, in the case of mothers of adolescents, the urgency to remove them from the violent Latin American suburbs, drive women toward mixed unions.

Establishing a sexual-emotional relationship with a Portuguese or Spanish man opens the doors for migrant women to local social networks and, often, to better job opportunities, which not only improves their socioeconomic status but also their legal and political status. Some of the interviewees obtained their residence and work permits because a relative or friend of their partner offered them a job contract. But, above all, marriage to a local man will mean a direct path to legal status for these women and will expedite the reunification process.

Fernanda is 59 years old and of mixed race. She arrived in Spain in 1998 from a city in the Coffee Region. Before emigrating, she lived with her daughter Martina (whom her father never took care of) in the family home, along with her parents, sisters, and two nieces, daughters of her sisters, who were also single/abandoned mothers. There were nine of them in the house. With no prospects, she decided to emigrate to ease the fragile household budget, leaving four-year-old Martina in her mother's care. She remained in Spain for five years, working as a domestic worker in different cities, illegally. She met Miguel on a train trip; they fell in love, married, and reunited with Martina. Miguel formally adopted her shortly after arriving; together they have had another son, and now also a granddaughter.

Martina's father never took care of her. I came because I did not see a future, because I had a daughter, and I was living at my parents' house. I left Martina when she was four. When I brought her, she was nine. I was already with Miguel, and he said, "Okay, let us bring your daughter." And of course, because I was already married to him, and that is when I got my papers. Look, I ended up working in houses, and I... really... felt bad... People are... it is very hard. I came to breathe and have a life when I met Miguel. For me, it was salvation. For me, life changed here with Miguel. (Fernanda, personal communication, June 15, 2022)

Layla is 25 years old, of mixed race, and comes from a working-class neighborhood in Buenaventura. She arrived in Spain in 2018 to join her mother and stepsister. Layla was two years old and her stepsister was three when their mother, María, left them in Colombia with her grandmother to come to Spain, as the girls' parents never acknowledged paternity. After several years working as a sex worker, María met a Spaniard, Álvaro; they married, and she obtained Spanish nationality. Over time, she also applied for Spanish nationality for her two daughters. Although she is divorced, María maintains an excellent relationship with her ex-husband; together they run a hospitality business. Both Layla and her stepsister treat Álvaro like a father.

Oh yeah... We met Álvaro when we came here when we were ten years old. I love that man a lot because he helped us a lot. I can say that he did things that our parents did not do, so I love him a lot, I respect him a lot... Look, even today, without having anything to do with my mom, he is always attentive to us, he talks to my mom every day, he is there for us when

we need him. He is been a very good person to us. (Layla, personal communication, April 18, 2021)

Spanish and Portuguese men are a valuable resource for poorer women. Squeezing the sex-racial capital associated with Brazilian or Colombian nationality is a form of resistance forced upon those with no other capital to put into play. Testimonies have confirmed that establishing a relationship with an Iberian citizen can have a very positive impact on women's careers. Those men who have proved to be good partners have been a crucial support for women, providing emotional and material shelter and helping them achieve their migration goals. Furthermore, many have collaborated by sending remittances to relatives back home and have adopted, if not legally, then de facto, their partners' children.

However, managing intimate relationships with locals is not easy. Mixed marriages are complicated businesses for Colombians and Brazilians since they emerge in a racist context and are marked by the asymmetry between the parties. Immigration law requires women to remain married for a minimum of two years in Spain and three years in Portugal¹⁰ before being able to begin the process of naturalization. During this time, residence and work permits obtained through marriage can be suspended in the event of separation. This weakens the position of women.

Gabriela is 40 years old and Black. She arrived in Pontevedra, Spain, at age 21 from Curitiba, Brazil. Young and beautiful, she worked illegally as a waitress in pubs and nightclubs for the first few years. At one of the venues where she worked, she met Carlos, her boss. They hit it off and began a relationship. Although Carlos signed her into a formal contract shortly after they began dating, Gabriela's third renewal of her residence and work permits was denied. With no alternative options, she had no choice but to get married in order to remain in Spain.

They expose you publicly for a month, then call you whenever they feel like it for an interview. It was like that for Carlos and me because I did not see that with other foreigners, right? Forty-five minutes with me, another forty-five with Carlos. What is that pressure? Because it was in Court, it is something important... they can put you in jail if they see anything suspicious. They can say, 'Nacional¹¹, take her.' Do you know what it is like when they ask you the name and surname of your boyfriend, of his mother? Does any of his uncles have a mental problem? What is his license plate? If my family knew him, if he had been to Brazil, which side of the bed he slept on, what color he liked, food, music, what year he bought the car, if he has a company, that I show his company number on my phone. And it was another humiliating thing because I was legally paying Social Security, they denied my documents that I already had, I had to get married at 25, because obviously a girl that age does not want to get married. But to continue living well in this country, I got married, and even then, they made it difficult for me. They made you lose the desire to stay. All my paperwork was difficult; they did not give me anything, they did not help me at all, the

¹⁰ Time is reduced to one year if you have children.

¹¹ National Police.

government, the people, everything I got was through hard work. Every time I go to Immigration Office, I come out nervous and cry, outside of course, but I cry! I cry! I feel like banging my head against the wall, because it is helpless! I had my ID, they did not renew it because of other people's bullshit, I got married, and a 45-minute interview! (Gabriela, personal communication, December 3, 2022)

Although their relationship was good, Gabriela remembers her wedding as a bitter moment. She was subjected to an inquisition process in court to prove the authenticity of her relationship. Gabriela is convinced that the judge's suspicious attitude was due to the fact that she is Brazilian. Before this interview, Gabriela had already agreed to visits from the social worker to their shared home, who meticulously inspected the bedroom closets and the personal hygiene products in the bathroom, violating the right to privacy with impunity. In Spain, transnational intimacy is a public matter, a matter of state.

Most of the interviewees married to Spaniards and Portuguese nationals report experiencing racism from officials during marriage ceremonies or during administrative procedures. There is a *continuum* between institutional racism and the everyday racism that migrants face (Fresnoza-Flot & Shinozaki, 2017). In the following excerpt, Gabriela recounts the harassment she suffered from Carlos's family when the couple separated amicably after more than 10 years of marriage:

The family was prejudiced, they did not like Brazilian women, it is what it is. His family made my life miserable. I divorced the man, the family blamed me for his shitty life, I took advantage of him, my business is thanks to him, he supported my sister... Because my sister came to live with me when she was 12 years old and she came because I said she could, and if we are together it is our house... You know what I say? "He took care of your sister, the house you have in Brazil was on Carlos's shoulders," you know? The family started freaking out, Carlos telling them "But what are you saying?" defending me and the family "No, you do not know what you are saying because you are crazy, she took advantage of you and you are crazy." (Gabriela, personal communication, December 3, 2022)

In the case of Colombian and Brazilian women, racism intersects with a pronounced sexism that, in Spain and Portugal, caricatures them as opportunistic women who seduce and manipulate local men with the aim of improving their legal status and socioeconomic position.

*The Declassing of Privileged Migrants
and the Rejection of Marriage by Younger Migrants*

Migrants from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in mixed marriages. In the sample, they exhibit family migration patterns, frequently arriving accompanied by their husbands, and at their destination, they become skilled workers or students at Iberian universities. These women, who are predominantly white, possess greater economic and cultural capital, and sometimes also political capital (some have European nationality inherited from parents and grandparents who once immigrated), maintain high standards of living at destination.

However, essentialized as “Brazilian/Colombian women” in ways not unlike dark-popular class migrants, these privileged women will suffer a marked symbolic declassing at their destination.

In reality, this is a “deracialization” that will negatively affect their social capital, diminishing their value as potential wives in the Iberian sexual/marriage markets and their chances of finding a well-off husband. The Portuguese and Spanish men who are interested in them possess the racial capital—they are white and European—but lack all other capitals—economic, cultural, symbolic, and so on. Conversely, men with a social status equivalent to that they used to have in their countries of origin dismiss them because of their “Brazilian/Colombian” race/nationality. Thus, most privileged women who migrate alone reject local men to establish serious relationships.

Ligia is white, 38 years old, and comes from a wealthy family in São Paulo. She inherited Spanish citizenship from her paternal grandfather, holds a degree in International Relations from the private Cásper Líbero University, and a postgraduate degree from the University of Barcelona. She emigrated to Porto in 2013 as an expatriate employee for a prestigious multinational company. Although she earned very good money and valued the quality of life there, she never felt fully integrated. She met João, a native of São Paulo like her, in Prague. The two were on vacation, met at a party, got talking, and discovered they had mutual friends. After four years away, Ligia returned to São Paulo to marry João, and they now have a son.

At first, I did not realize it, but then the jokes from my colleagues. I was the Brazilian girl in the office, you know... and I am very dedicated, very professional, and those comments hurt me [...]. I did have a relationship with a [Portuguese] colleague, but it was not serious; we had different interests. I do not know, I am a person with interests. I like traveling, art, and the world of culture in general. I am ambitious in my work, and he, well... he was a good guy, but how can I tell you, very simple, conformist. We were from different worlds [...] Yes, he had a job category much lower than mine. (Ligia, personal communication, October 5, 2019)

There are exceptions, however. Some among the privileged have married Iberian citizens, although their marriages have been “downward.” Laura comes from a wealthy family in Bogotá, is white, and is 36 years old. She completed high school in the United States and holds a degree from the prestigious Universidad de Los Andes. She arrived in Spain in 2014 to pursue her doctorate. She met Ángel at a party; he comes from a working-class family and has no university education. Despite the social distance between them, they married to comply with Laura’s conservative family and also because the student visa that allowed her to legally reside in the country was about to expire. After completing her doctorate, Laura returned to Colombia to join a research team at Los Andes. Ángel accompanied her, but he struggled to adapt. When she became pregnant, they decided to return to Spain. They both believe it is a safer country to raise their child.

For Laura, migration meant a marked downward mobility in her personal and professional career. Since their return a few years ago, Ángel has been working as a telemarketer, and her lack of the necessary social capital has prevented her from settling into the narrowly-knit Spanish

university, despite her excellent cv. Currently, after a long period of unemployment, she works for a company that provides project development consulting. She is not passionate about it, but it is a steady salary at the end of the month.

Yes, let us say that, at work, in terms of salary, I was fine there, it was a good job, with a high, stable income [...]. For me, migrating was very challenging, also in terms of my economic capacity because I went from having everything to being a little more limited, thinking three times before [buying]. Because let us say my husband does not earn that much either, he earns the same as I earned in Colombia, but in Colombia life is much cheaper, so Madrid is very expensive [...]. We live far away, but it was cheaper than living here in the center [...]. I always felt very welcome, both by his family and friends. I mean, I do think that helped me, having a PhD and, well, here they know that my family there is well off, and I think that is part of it, that I break the stereotype a bit, but also that they are welcoming people. It was actually the other way around, more so my parents who were more shocked at first [...], because he [Ángel] did not go to college, that kind of thing, you know? (Laura, personal communication, August 21, 2022)

Laura may have demoted materially and symbolically by marrying Ángel. However, with her “bad” marriage, she has achieved a more egalitarian relationship. Ethno-sexual boundaries are blurred by Laura’s family heritage, her exquisite academic training, and cultural capital. In Ángel’s eminently popular circle, her former class position invests her with social value.

This is a structural adjustment maneuver, an intersectional arithmetic that balances the power relationship between the two. The upper class of the women, Brazilian and Colombian migrants, counteracts the “high” race/nationality of the men, Portuguese and Spanish citizens, and, moreover, white. For privileged women like Laura, settling for partners from lower classes is a way to cushion racial subordination and to some extent compensate for gender inequality.

In a relationship of class equivalence, the intersection of race/nationality and gender categories, coupled with their status as migrants, relegates upper-middle-class migrant women to a position of inferiority they are unwilling to accept. Those who do not shoulder the responsibility of others’ survival can declass themselves and balance the asymmetry of mixed marriages.

Younger migrants arriving since 2015 from the working classes at origin, also in an irregular situation and employed in precarious jobs at their destination, but with greater cultural capital and, above all, without dependent children, will be the most reluctant to participate in mixed marriages.

Patricia is 32 years old, of mixed race, and arrived in Spain in 2017 from the outskirts of Bogotá. Coming from a very humble, single-mother family, she worked during the day in a factory while studying design at night at university. After graduating, faced with a lack of job opportunities, she decided to emigrate. In Madrid, for five years she worked irregularly as a domestic worker from Monday to Saturday, sewing on commission on Sundays. Although she has no children, she sent much of her earnings to her mother to help with the rent, her grandmother’s medical expenses, and her younger brother’s school fees.

I know another woman, also Colombian. She met a man here who is much older than her. I think they met online, and the man treats her horribly. I do not know, she already has her documents and everything, but she is still there. And he says to me, “Oh, why do not you get a Spaniard and get married?” I said, “No, that is mortgaging my freedom for some papers.” And that is what he said to me: “I will introduce you to someone,” and I would never even think about it. My friend and I talk about this a lot, that until we have the papers, we are not going to find anyone who is at least similar in tastes. And you come with your studies, and you have different knowledge, other things, and well, you are in the same position as everyone else. So, we are equal, but they [the Spaniards] are always going to feel superior. So, I told her, we are not on the same level, we are not equal, and so if there is no equality, it is very difficult because the other person will always think he is superior. (Patricia, personal communication, December 13, 2019)

Patricia’s testimony reflects the difficulty of establishing fair relationships with local men on the basis of intersecting inequalities (Chiu, 2017). Young migrant women are aware of the social and political deficit they carry for being dark women, for being “irregular,” and also for being ethno-sexualized as Brazilians/Colombians. They refuse to experience firsthand the violence that others have endured in mixed marriages.

Being the daughters of manual workers in large Latin American metropolises, they hold university degrees that they financed with great effort. In line with the cultural changes promoted by feminist movements on the continent in recent decades, these women have postponed motherhood to prioritize their careers, understanding education as the only reliable path to social mobility and emancipation. Although they cannot claim their degrees at their destination, they are more empowered; their greater educational capital and feminist background make them more demanding in their relationships with men. Thus, these migrants, who support their families financially by sending remittances, but free from the enormous responsibility of motherhood, newly arrived in Europe, still young, and able to support themselves from their own labor, choose to remain single.

The young migrant women’s refusal to participate in Iberian sexual/marriage markets can be interpreted as a form of resistance against prejudice. Rejecting the “poor” candidates symbolizes their rejection of the poor social destiny that looms over them in Europe. It is a reaffirmation that everything will get better when they get their papers, that “cleaning toilets” is not forever, that they will meet men worth their salt, that the dream of social advancement that brought them here from the poor neighborhoods where they grew up will come true.

In 2022, Patricia finally got her papers.

CONCLUSIONS

An intersectional logic governs the experiences of Colombian and Brazilian migrant women in Iberian sexual and marriage markets. The high number of these women' mixed marriages with Spanish and Portuguese citizens reveals the porosity of ethno-sexual boundaries and, in turn, reflects the strength of racist and sexist stereotypes associated with "Brazilian/Colombian" nationality in the postcolonial context.

The malleability of identities in the transnational/postcolonial space is reflected in the migration trajectories of women. The social revaluation experienced by some of the darkest and poorest among them in the sexual/marriage markets at the origin contexts upon their return from Europe is an example of the unexpected transformations that migration brings.

In Spain and Portugal, women do not participate equally in the sexual/marriage markets; migration policy regulates the transnational intimate relationships they establish. Depending on the intersection of multiple variables, migrant women articulate different emotional and marital strategies in which feelings and interests converge, as in any human social relationship. These highly conditioned strategies, always affected by chance and favored by ethnosexual representations, tend to define the nature of the romantic relationship, its degree of formality, and also the profile of the partner.

The methodological contribution is intersectional because it begins with the classic social markers of inequality—gender, race, and class—but the analysis becomes more complex due to the specific nature of the ethnographic material. Thus, in the migrations of Colombian and Brazilian women to Iberian countries, the category of race is strongly related to women's class of origin and type of occupation, since, mediated by nationality, it introduces them to the sexualized labor niches at their destination. The category of gender is directly associated with marital status and, above all, with motherhood.

Age is a relevant variable because it is intertwined with women's migratory generation and, to a certain extent, determines their educational opportunities. Furthermore, considering other factors such as the temporality and type of migration, the partner's nationality, the number of children, and whether they were born at the country of origin or destination helped us understand the emotional and marital trajectories beyond the determinants of gender, race, and class.

Systematically categorizing and comparing the recurring aspects in the transnational trajectories of 40 socially diverse women allowed us to identify at least three patterns of behavior among Colombians and Brazilians in the Iberian sexual/marriage markets.

Marriage to a national citizen offers women in more precarious situations the opportunity to consolidate their migration process. Among those interviewed, single/abandoned mothers who had left their children in their homeland most frequently married Portuguese and Spanish men. The urgency of reuniting children makes transnational motherhood the primary factor leading to mixed marriages.

The “de-racialization” experienced by privileged migrant women in Spain and Portugal limits their participation in mixed marriages. On the one hand, these women migrate more frequently accompanied by their husbands and children. But also, their migrant condition, associated with Brazilian/Colombian ethnosexuality, also separates them from men with equivalent cultural and economic capital. The few privileged women who married Portuguese and Spanish men did so “downward.” However, this study reveals that “downward” marriages are less asymmetrical. Choosing partners with a lower social status can be an effective strategy to compensate for the racial and gender “deficits” they carry as migrant women.

Political inequality characterizes the early years of marriage between migrants and citizens; the subsidiary nature of the residence and work permits women acquire through marriage fosters dangerous intimacies. Aware of the experiences of abuse suffered by some veteran women in their marital relationships, younger migrants—who are in an irregular situation—but with greater cultural capital and, above all, without dependent children, choose to remain single at their destination.

In this sense, the absence of children acts as a protective factor for women from working-class groups against potentially abusive marriages. Their presence, on the other hand, exposes them to a greater predisposition to mixed marriages and, eventually, to upward mobility in their destination, as the regularization associated with marriage and the entry into local social networks give them access to better employment opportunities.

Translation: Edward Samuel Rojas Rueda.

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