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**Social Protection on the Move: a transnational
exploration of Nicaraguan migrant women's
engagement with social protection in Spain and
Nicaragua**

*Chandreyi Guadalupe Guharay Gómez**

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Abstract

This research paper examines Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with transnational social protection (TSP) in Spain and Nicaragua. Although in recent years TSP has emerged as a relevant research agenda in migration studies, not much is known about the ways in which migrants, particularly women, navigate welfare systems and mobilize resources to access and provide social protection across borders. By approaching this study from a gender lens, and by privileging the voices of migrants, this work represents an innovative and original contribution to the growing scholarship on TSP.

To grasp the transnational nature of 'social protection on the move', I have used a multi-sited methodology to conduct qualitative research in Spain and Nicaragua, sequentially. Such a multi-sited approach provides an opportunity to understand the complex transborder processes in which migrants are embedded, and allows for a more holistic understanding of these transnational dynamics.

Findings suggest that Nicaraguan migrant women create assemblages of formal and informal social protection that intermingle state and non-state actors. Nonetheless, due to the exclusion or limited access to formal social protection schemes, participants mostly rely on informal sources of social protection, particularly personal networks and grassroots organizations. Furthermore, Nicaraguan migrant women's experiences evidence that engagement with TSP is a gendered process, as strategies and practices embedded in social protection are shaped by gender notions in sending and host countries.

As this paper evidences, migrants' transnational lives require new ways of thinking and organizing social protection. Consequently, TSP will remain a relevant matter of contention in the fields of migration, social policy, and development in the foreseeable future. Based on these reflections, I finish by proposing policy recommendations for enhancing Nicaraguan migrant women's social protection in Spain and Nicaragua, and for providing just, inclusive, and transformative social protection for people on the move.

Keywords

Transnational migration, social protection, migrant women, migratory trajectories, gender, Nicaragua, Spain.

Acronyms

ACC	Asociación Atarraya-Centroamérica
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labor Organization
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
INSS	Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security
PNDH	Nicaraguan National Plan for Human Development
SRHE	Social Security Regime of Household Employees
TSP	Transnational Social Protection

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Social Protection on the Move¹

A transnational exploration of Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with social protection in Spain and Nicaragua

1 Introduction: setting the case for Social Protection on the Move

Karla is a Nicaraguan migrant woman.² She has lived outside the borders of her country for seventeen years. In 2001, she embarked on her first migration, headed to El Salvador. She lived there for four years as an undocumented migrant, juggling between informal jobs. During her time in El Salvador, Karla had no access to formal social protection (provided by states and organizations) due to her irregular status. Every month, she diligently sent remittances back to Nicaragua. In this process, Karla became the primary breadwinner in her transnational household, and a provider of informal social provision (provided by personal networks) for her mom Lucía, and her two children who were now under the care of their grandmother. At the same time, the childcare provided by Lucía was a form of informal social protection, both for Karla and her young son and daughter in Nicaragua.

In 2005, Karla returned to Nicaragua as a consequence of El Salvador's violent and unsafe context. However, she spent only two weeks in Nicaragua before emigrating again, this time to Zaragoza, Spain, to work as a live-in domestic worker,³ or *interna*.⁴ Contrary to her experience in El Salvador, this time, even as an undocumented migrant, Karla had access to formal social protection in the area of healthcare. This is because specific Spanish autonomous communities (comunidades autónomas),⁵ including Castilla and León, where Zaragoza is located, provide access to the public healthcare system to all residents of that community, irrespective of their immigration status. While living in Zaragoza, Karla continued to send remittances to her family regularly. After two years in Spain, Karla received her temporary residence permit.⁶

¹ 'La historia del mundo es la historia de las y los inmigrantes, por lo tanto, esta historia también podría ser la tuya' (César Meléndez)

² In this paper, I have used pseudonyms to refer to research participants to ensure and protect respondents' anonymity and confidentiality.

³ In Spanish law and policy, there is no distinction between domestic and care work. Hence, in my research, I use domestic work to indicate paid work that takes place in and for a private household with no distinction between care work and other domestic tasks. Often, domestic and care work overlap, as migrant women engage in domestic chores while also taking care of older people and children.

⁴ *Interna* [fem] is the word used in Spain to denote a live-in domestic worker.

⁵ Spain is divided into seventeen autonomous communities. Each is endowed with individual legislative autonomy and administrative powers.

⁶ In Spain a distinction does not exist between residence and work permit. A residence permit also allows a migrant to work.

Since then, she has been able to renew her permit without issue. However, even with regular status, her access to formal social protection is not fully guaranteed. As a migrant domestic worker, Karla faces challenges in accessing social protection, particularly in the form of social security. In addition to engaging with formal social protection in terms of public healthcare and social security in Zaragoza, Karla has also been able to access informal social protection mainly through faith-based organizations and her involvement with Asociación Atarraya-Centroamérica, a local Nicaraguan migrant organization. Moreover, she is also planning for her protection in the future and has enrolled as a contributor to the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) through a voluntary insurance scheme. This will allow her to access a pension in Nicaragua when she retires.

This small glimpse of Karla's migratory trajectory illustrates how, in a context of widespread migration, the arrangement and provision of social protection often takes place not within but across the borders of nation-states. *Social protection on the move*, or transnational social protection (TSP henceforth), can then be considered a product of the interaction between different systems: the social protection policies in the host country, the social protection policies in the country of origin, and migrants' own practices and support systems (Boccagni 2011). Karla's vignette also evidences that social protection is "an assemblage of informal and formal elements" (Bilecen and Barglowski 2015:204), as it comprises of provisions implemented by states and organizations, as well as migrants' bottom-up strategies and practices. Moreover, these social protection assemblages involve a variety of transnational actors, including migrants and their non-migrant family members, as demonstrated by the transnational interactions between Karla and her mother.

At the same time, Karla's vignette reveals the complex dynamics of migrants' engagement with TSP. Her experience highlights the fact that the search for social protection takes migrants to different places and as such, that organization of social protection is achieved through mobilizing resources and strategies across borders, and not only within the borders of a single country. Furthermore, these arrangements underline how a person's mobility, gender, nationality, employment, and immigration status affect and shape her engagement in social protection across borders. In particular, my research builds on theoretical perspectives on TSP, the migration-development nexus and gender. Moreover, I privilege the lens of 'social protection from below', the process through which migrants mobilize resources to create a system of social protection for themselves and their families (Faist 2013; Grabska 2017; Paul 2017). The empirical data in this work draws on research with Nicaraguan migrant women to examine how they develop and engage in 'assemblages' of social protection (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015) through their everyday practices in order to provide welfare for themselves and their transnational families in Spain and Nicaragua.

The case of Nicaraguan female migration to Spain is relevant for two reasons. Nicaraguan migration to Europe, and especially to Spain, has not been a focus of migration research. Second, this case elucidates the implications of

migrant women's engagement with transnational social protection from a gender perspective, an aspect which has neither been prioritized nor explored in academic debates. Given that this is a transnational problem and by its nature in motion, I propose a multi-sited research strategy which "privileges transborder processes" (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004:1012). To build a more comprehensive understanding of how migrants' engagement with transnational social protection takes place in a context of cross-border migration, I include research participants in both research sites: Nicaraguan migrant women living in Zaragoza, Spain; as well as their non-migrant family members in Nicaragua.

Moreover, my research tries to go beyond the narrow perspectives of migration, which look at migrant women mainly as 'victims' and 'marginalized subjects'. Instead, I adopt a feminist approach to emphasize the agency of women, viewing them as "strategic agents" (Vives 2012:74) of their migratory projects. I believe that privileging migrant women's experiences, knowledge, and agency can contribute to building a more holistic understanding of transnational social protection from a gender perspective.

1.1 Structure of the research

This paper is divided into eight chapters. This chapter serves as the introduction. In Chapter 2, I provide the contextual background for the case of Nicaraguan women's migration to Spain. Chapter 3 reflects on theoretical discussions and relevant concepts for the study of transnational social protection. To inform my research strategy and analysis of findings, I propose a framework with three compatible lenses: a transnational angle, the migration-social protection nexus, and gender. Approached together, they can provide a more comprehensive understanding of Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with transnational forms of social protection in Spain and Nicaragua. In Chapter 4, I give a description and justification for employing a multi-sited research methodology in the study and the value such methodology brings to researching issues related to transnational migration. Chapter 5, 6, and 7 present the empirical findings. In Chapter 5 I provide an analysis of the migratory trajectories of women and review how women's transnational and 'multi-scalar' (Mahler et al. 2015) interactions and positions in Spain and Nicaragua shape their engagement with social protection. Chapter 6 addresses the second and third sub-questions which deal with how Nicaraguan migrant women access and provide social protection in Spain and Nicaragua. Chapter 7 discusses the effects of these women's engagement in social protection, in terms of viability and reconfiguration of gender relations. Lastly, Chapter 8 looks back at the proposed theoretical framework and includes my contributions to the broader debate of transnational social protection in the context of migration and policy recommendations for the case of Nicaraguan migrant women in Spain.

1.2 Research questions and sub-questions

In order to better address the given research problem, I have formulated the following question:

How do Nicaraguan migrant women engage with transnational forms of social protection in Spain and Nicaragua?

I intend to operationalize my main research question through the following sub-questions:

1. How do Nicaraguan migrant women access social protection in Spain and Nicaragua?
2. How do Nicaraguan migrant women provide social protection for their families and households in Spain and Nicaragua?
3. What are the effects of engagement with transnational social protection for Nicaragua migrant women, in terms of viability and gender relations (re)configuration?

2 The transnational field that expands across and within Spain and Nicaragua: Contextualizing the research problem

In this chapter, I provide the contextual background for the case of women's migration from Nicaragua to Spain and situate my research within this transnational field. This 'South to North' cross-border movement conforms a transnational social field in which Nicaraguan migrants in Spain, settle and create new relationships in the host country, yet simultaneously maintain relationships and close links with Nicaragua. The chapter also presents an overview of state social protection provisioning for Nicaraguan migrants in these two countries.

2.1 In search of new horizons: Nicaraguan female migration to Spain

Since the early 2000s, Spain has become the third most prominent migrant destination for Nicaraguans, after Costa Rica and the United States (UNICEF 2013). As of January 2018, there were 31, 220 Nicaraguans registered at different municipalities located nationwide (INE 2018).⁷ Nicaraguan migration to Spain has a distinctly female face. With 77.11 percent (24, 074) of Nicaraguan migrants being women, they conform to what Oso and Catarino (2013:627) refer to as a "feminized migrant community", given that women represent 60 percent or more of its population.

The feminization of migration, however, has implications beyond the debate of whether women are now migrating in higher numbers. More than that, it means understanding that migrant women are generally "the first link of the migratory chains, the main people responsible for providing economic resources to transnational families, and the leaders of family reunifications" (Pedone et al. 2012:543). Therefore, attention should be paid not only to whether women are the majority in these flows but also to the changes that migration led by women generate in gender and social relations both in their countries of origin and destination.

There are diverse factors which have influenced the feminization of Nicaraguan migration to Spain. These do not emerge or exist in isolation, but often in junction with each other. Economic constraints, such as high levels of

⁷ Calculated on May 2018 via the website of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), section Demografía y Población:

<http://www.ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/listaoperaciones.htm>

It is important to note that it is hard to estimate the exact number of Nicaraguan immigrants living in Spain given that many of them have an irregular status and thus are not projected in official statistics. As Winters (2018:4) suggests, "these numbers should be used with caution given the difficulty of measuring irregular forms of migration". Estimates suggest that a more realistic number of Nicaraguans residing in Spain would amount to 80, 000 (Rodríguez 2013).

unemployment, lack of state support, and poverty drive Nicaraguan women to migrate to Spain in search of a 'better future' (González 2011; Moré 2017)

Spain has become an attractive destination because it offers Nicaraguans with the possibility of earning higher incomes than those in other popular migration destinations such as Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Panama. This is also associated with migrants' perception of Spain's better quality of life as a country located in the 'Global North' (González 2011). Demand for female labor in the Spanish labor market in service sectors, particularly domestic work, has become another significant factor for this migration (IOM 2013). For migrant women in Spain, domestic work represents the primary source of employment (Hierro 2016; Oso & Catarino 2013). In the case of Nicaraguan migrant women, it is estimated that 90 percent are employed as domestic workers.⁸

Another significant element influencing Nicaraguan emigration to Spain is the 'perceived' shared cultural background, including colonial ties between these two countries (González 2011). Such links facilitate migrants' integration in Spanish society due in large part to the shared language. Also, social and migratory networks established by pioneering Nicaraguan migrants since the early 2000s have been vital in establishing a '*cultura de migración*', a 'culture of migration' from Nicaragua to Spain. Finally, are the permissive visa procedures for entering Spain, and the 'privileged' legal status granted to Latin Americans, which facilitates their path to Spanish citizenship (Ibid).

I want to emphasize, nonetheless, that in the context of my research, I understand that these migratory dynamics originate beyond 'push and pull factors'. Instead, I recognize that Nicaraguan migrant women's identities also represent an essential element in shaping their mobility (Boyle 2002). By this, I mean that while many of their "motives for migration are economic, [they] cannot be understood separately from the social and cultural expectations of women" (Basa et al. 2011:14). Hence, the decision to migrate is not only based on 'cost-benefit calculations' but are also grounded in other aspirations that women have. I will explore this further in Chapter 5.

Zaragoza: 'the Nicaraguan capital of Spain'

Among Nicaraguan migrants, Zaragoza has come to be known as 'the Nicaraguan capital of Spain' (Figols 2011). In the past fifteen years, Zaragoza has become home to 5, 470 Nicaraguans (INE 2018), making it the city with the largest Nicaraguan population in the country. After Romanians and Moroccans, Nicaraguans are the third-largest migrant community in Zaragoza, comprising 6.7 percent of the total migrant population (Ibid.).

Women constitute 74 percent of the Nicaraguan population in the city and almost all work in the domestic work sector. Nicaraguan men usually work at local markets, in construction, and in domestic work too, but to a significantly lesser extent compared to women. Besides, most Nicaraguan migrants found in this city come from Chinandega, a city located in the northwest region of

⁸ Personal interview with Javier Arce, July 2018, Zaragoza.

Nicaragua. Thus, Nicaraguan emigration to Zaragoza happens at a particular junction between female labor demand in domestic work, transnational networks and an established migration culture between Nicaraguan and Spain, and specifically between Chinandega and Zaragoza.

2.2 The Spanish migration regime: ‘a hybrid model’

Since the mid-1980s, Spain has evolved rapidly from being a classic labor exporter country to a labor importer country (Hierro 2016). Spain is now the second state in the EU with the highest migrant population, after Germany (Fuentes & Callejo 2011). In fact, as Moreno Fuentes and Bruquetas Callejo note (2011:46), “Despite the current economic crisis with its high attendant unemployment among foreign workers, immigrant labor has become a structural component of the Spanish labor market”. Winters (2018:4) indicates that “a number of dynamics converged to create a Spanish labor market attractive for migrants, particularly women”. For instance, compared to other EU countries, in the last decades, Spain has had ‘flexible’ legislation towards migrants. Evidence of this is found in the multiple regularization campaigns which were pushed forward between 1986-2005 to grant amnesty to undocumented migrants (Fuentes 2007).

Today, migration to Spain is mainly irregular (Hierro, 2016). There are various factors for this. The high levels of informality in the Spanish economy fuels demand low-skilled, irregular, migrant labor, creating highly stratified labor markets and niches along ethnic and gender lines. Other significant elements are the somewhat lenient Spanish entry visa requirements, which do not require entry visas for certain countries, including Nicaragua. Hence, this has become “an easy channel of legal entry for some immigrants” (Ibid.) who enter the country on a regular status and then overstay their visas, working and living in the country without the required documentation (Winters 2018). However, it is important to underline that migrants would prefer to apply for work permits if these were made accessible through guest worker programs or immigration policy that would provide them with a regular administrative status during their migration to Spain. The absence of such initiatives further the flow of irregular migration.

In Spanish immigration legislation, there are certain exceptional circumstances under which undocumented migrants can regularize their status. Such residence authorizations can be granted to foreigners who are in an irregular situation and comply with any of the following specifications established in immigration regulations: *arraigo* (rootedness), international protection, humanitarian reasons, and collaboration with public authorities or on matters of national security/public interest (Izquierdo 2006). Most undocumented migrants regularize their status through *arraigos* or ‘rootedness’ procedures. There are three different types of *arraigos* based on employment, social ties with Spain, or family ties with Spanish citizens (Hierro 2016). These links are used as proof of the applicant’s interest in residing in Spain and

determine the prevalence of such particular interest for the granting of the requested temporary residence permit.⁹

Yet, although these procedures might seem a viable option to regularize undocumented migrants' status, "a paradox arises from the additional observation that the acquisition of legal status is only partially resolved through the above-mentioned regularization processes" (Hierro 2016:69). In reality, many migrants find it difficult to renew their residence permits and fall back into an irregular situation. Given these contradictory dynamics, the Spanish migration regime can be considered a 'hybrid model' characterized by both permissive and restrictive policies (Hierro 2016; Laubenthal 2007).

2.3 Social protection for Nicaraguan migrants in Nicaraguan and Spanish policy

In Nicaragua

"No government in Nicaragua has ever been sensitized with the realities of migrants. The government's focus has always been on their remittances" (Javier Arce, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Nicaragua is characterized by presenting a residual provisioning system. This means that formal social protection from the state is fragile, and most people rely on their personal networks to ensure social protection. Migrants significantly contribute to filling the formal welfare provision gap as they "frequently become social protection providers for families and sending communities" (Paul 2017:39). They usually do so by engaging in informal social protection arrangements, mainly through remittances, to ensure that the needs and welfare of their families back in Nicaragua are covered.

On average, half of Nicaraguan migrants' remittances is directed to cover families' welfare expenses such as medical, educational and housing costs (Franzoni & Voorend 2011). Consequently, Nicaraguan migrants' economic and social contributions represent a relevant feature in the country's social provisioning system. What this creates however, is a private protection system where the burden of social protection relies not on the state, but on families and community networks, and therefore generates "a dangerous substitute for a public welfare system" (Krozer & Lo Vuolo 2013:118).

Nicaraguan policy and macroeconomic development discourses envision Nicaraguan migrants as 'development actors'. Policy documents, such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and National Plans for Human Development (PNDH) underline increasing remittances as a strategy to achieve higher levels of development and reduce poverty and inequality (IMF 2005; PNDH 2008; PNDH 2012). To achieve this, the Nicaraguan government has tried to "guarantee remittances as a key element for 'reactivating' the economy and reducing poverty" (PNDH 2008:32) by facilitating the infrastructure needed for receiving remittances, such as allowing

⁹ Personal interview with Erika López, July 2018, Zaragoza

local banks to manage the money transfers. Winters (2018:4) underlines the relevance of remittances for the Nicaraguan economy:

“[O]n a macroeconomic level, these remittances have represented around 12–13% of Nicaragua’s GDP in the last decade and, despite the most recent economic crisis, have remained relatively stable compared to other income sources”.

Thus, the economic contributions of Nicaraguan migrants are highly significant for the Nicaraguan state; however, their social protection is not. Although fifteen percent of the country’s population are migrants (OIM 2013), there is no evident political motivation from the state to provide Nicaraguan migrants with adequate social protection.

In Spain

“When it comes to social rights what obligations do states have towards non-citizens present in their territory?” (Paul 2017:33)

The exponential migration process in Spain has led to a large-scale social and demographic transformation, with important implications for social policies, particularly those of social protection encompassed under the welfare state. With migrant populations, new social needs have emerged, related not only to the increase in the demand for social services but also to its diversification (Fuentes 2007). In January 2000, ‘Ley Orgánica 4/2000’ (Organic Law 4/2000), came into force. This law “represented a paradigmatic reorientation of Spanish immigration policy” (Laubenthal 2007:114) given that it expanded significant social rights to immigrants (Hierro 2016). A significant change was the universalization of access to the public healthcare system, including coverage for undocumented migrants.

Another critical legislation for contextualizing this research is related to the social protection of domestic workers. As Karla’s case, most of the women participants in this research, and the ones migrating to Spain work in the domestic work sector. In terms of portability of social security benefits, particularly pension, Spain has community agreements and bilateral social security agreements with various countries, but not Nicaragua.¹⁰

Moreover, the country has not yet ratified the International Labor Organization Convention on Domestic Workers (ILO 189). In 2011, after years of significant efforts from domestic workers’ organizations, the Spanish government advanced a reform in the Social Security Regime of Household Employees (SRHE). SRHE adheres to the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers (ILO 189), and thus at the moment of its introduction was seen as “a positive step toward improving the conditions of care work in private households” (Ibáñez & León 2014:111).

The positive effects of this legislation, nevertheless, have been minimal (see Ibáñez & León 2014; Pavlou 2016). On the one hand, despite efforts to formalize and regulate domestic work employment in private households, this

¹⁰ Spain: Migrant Domestic Workers (USP 2030)

sector remains highly unregulated, and thus domestic workers are still highly vulnerable to face abuses and precarity in their work. On the other hand, a significant amount of domestic work remains informal and unreported by both employers and employees (Ibáñez & León 2014). Furthermore, even under this new reform, domestic workers remain excluded from unemployment benefits. A final consideration which might be obvious yet important to highlight is that SRHE only provides coverage to documented migrants, excluding those who are in most need of protection. Table 1 below indicates the changes between the Social Security Regime of Household Employees from 1985 and the updated reform passed in 2011.

Table 1
SRHE before and after 2011: Working conditions and social benefits
of the Special Regime for Household Employees (SRHE)

	1985	2011
<i>Conditions of Employment</i>		
Obligation of employment contract	No	Yes
Salary	National minimum wage	National minimum wage
Salary reduction for live-in domestic workers	Possibility of a 45% reduction	Possibility of a 30% reduction but subject to conditions stipulated by Workers' Bill of Rights
Regulation of working time	No	Yes
Unpaid 'presence' time	Yes	No
Overtime compensation	Unspecified	Yes (in employment contract)
Minimum time off (including holidays)	Unspecified	Yes (in employment contract)
Type of work to be performed	Unspecified	Yes (in employment contract)
Social security contributions	Fixed rate of 140 euros/month only if working more than 72 hrs/month	Depending on income and number of hours worked.
<i>Social entitlements</i>		
Sickness benefit	After 29 days of illness	After the 4th day of illness
Statutory maternity leave	No	Yes
Unemployment benefit	No	No
Old age pension	Yes (flat rate minimum contributory pension)	Yes (possibility of a higher pension for those with higher contributions)

Source: Elaborated from Ibáñez and León (2014:122)

3 Building a framework for approaching the study of transnational social protection

In this chapter, I provide a review of relevant literature on the theorization of transnational social protection. The first section considers the emergence of transnational social protection as a recent research agenda and analytical concepts for its study. Then I turn to a discussion on the migration-social protection nexus. Two views are displayed: one that considers migration as a social protection strategy and the second, which underlines migration as a process that can increase risks and vulnerabilities of migrants, demanding new types of social protection. Relevant attention is given to the concept of precarity to understand migrants-specific risks and vulnerabilities as a social condition that affects their engagement in social protection. In the third subsection, I approach a discussion of gender within a context of transnational migration and transnational social protection. The chapter concludes with proposing a conceptual framework that adopts these three lenses to approach the study of transnational social protection: a transnational angle, the migrations-social protection nexus, and gender.

3.1 Transnational social protection: current debates and analytical concepts

Scholars define transnational migration as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992:1). This approach challenges ‘bipolar models’ of migration, which assume that migrants in host societies “settle, assimilate, and ultimately forsake ties to their homeland” (Mahler 1999:691). Instead, it views migrants as agents who maintain strong ties with their country of origin. A transnational perspective does not dismiss the national nor local level, but embraces the different cross-border dynamics that take place within the national territories and societies where migrants are ‘simultaneous embedded’, and the ways in which they are interconnected and related (Grabska 2017; Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004; Levitt 2012; Levitt 2017a; Mazzucato 2011). This “transnational way of being” (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004:1001) shapes migrants’ access and use of social protection (Faist et al. 2015) in transnational social spaces.

The theorization and academic consideration of TSP for migrants, however, is a relatively recent development. Previous studies focus on social protection based on citizenship and assume that individuals remain in one country throughout their lives (Bilecen and Barglowski 2015). As such, they suffer from what Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002:302) label “as methodological nationalism, the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world”. In recent years, nonetheless, TSP has emerged as a relevant agenda in transnational migration research challenging this assumption, motivated by the fact that the transnational lives migrants call for “different forms of organization of social

protection” (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015:204). Authors emphasize “the hallmark of a transnational approach” (Faist 2013:7) in relation to the study of how social protection is organized across borders, and that such a perspective can encompass the mobility and complex realities of migrants (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015; Boccagni 2011; Faist 2013; Levitt et al. 2017). Accordingly, TSP has emerged as a transnational social question (Faist, 2009; Faist 2014).

Levitt et al. (2017:8) advance a research agenda, where they propose a conceptualization of TSP and define it as

“the policies, programs, people, organizations, and institutions that provide for and protect individuals’ across national borders in the categories of old age, survivors, incapacity, healthcare, family benefits, active labor market programmes, unemployment, and housing assistance”.

Another definition comes from Lafleur et al. (2018:n.p) who approach TSP as “migrants’ cross border strategies to cope with social risk in areas such as health, pensions, unemployment, etc. that combine entitlements to host and home state-based public welfare policies and market and community based practices”. Hence, TSP is understood beyond the approach that social protection is only a transaction between individuals and states, as it also considers how migrants create strategies and mobilize resources to engage with social protection across borders.

Furthermore, authors introduce various concepts beyond the definition of TSP to understand how migrants organize these strategies and resources. For instance, Levitt et al. (2017:6) coined the term of ‘resource environment’, which refers to “the combination of all the possible protections available to them from four potential sources (states, markets, third sector actors and individuals’ social networks)”. As migrants move across borders, migration regimes, and welfare states, their resource environments are prone to change. The concept of ‘resource environment’ is a “tool to map and analyze variations in TSP over time, through space, and across individuals” (Ibid.:3).

Another vital concept comes from Bilecen and Bargłowski (2015), who suggest that migrants negotiate and combine ‘assemblages’ of formal and informal types of social protection. These assemblages intermingle state and non-state actors which “interact in addressing social risks and social inequalities” (Faist 2013:10). While formal social protection is provided by states and organizations, informal social protection emerges by migrants’ personal networks and community initiatives (Bilecen and Bargłowski 2015:203).

Mingot and Mazzucato (2017) provide a typology of transnational social protection, which includes formal, informal and semi-formal types of social protection. Nonetheless, “this distinction is merely analytical” (Boccagni 2011:169) and migrants’ strategies to engage with social protection include a wide array of sources, suggesting there is a blurred line between formal and informal social provisioning. Thinking of social protection as ‘assemblages’ implies that provisioning schemes “may be cross-cutting the borders of nation states” (Bilecen and Bargłowski 2015:208). We could think, for instance, of portability of benefits across borders or transnational care arrangements as

examples. Consequently, the term ‘assemblages’ lays out a “dynamic concept of social protection” (Ibid.) which is suitable for understanding how migrants engage with social protection in a context of cross-border migration.

Also, authors examine how migrants’ use social protection in relation to the meanings they attach to different types of provisioning. Speroni (2007) indicates that strategies of transnational social protection do not only depend on availability but that these are also directly linked to subjective meanings that guide migrants’ use and engagement with such strategies. This also relates to the viability of transnational social protection. Bilecen and Bargłowski (2015) indicate that even when having access to formal social protection, some migrants prefer to choose to engage with informal social protection as this might seem not only more desirable but also more viable.

Additionally, authors have also drawn attention to how the organization of transnational social protection reproduces existing social inequalities or create new ones (Faist 2014; Faist et al. 2015; Lafleur & Vivas Romero 2018). Further, others have paid attention to the resources and services that non-migrant kin facilitate to migrants. Mazzucato (2009) refers to this as ‘reverse remittances’, noting that flow of resources in migration contexts does not only follow a unilateral trend (usually North-South) but can also occur the other way around.

TSP through a ‘Social Protection from Below’ Lens

In the context of mobility, migrants have to “think of their social protection” (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015:204) and the ways they can ensure welfare for their families across borders. Often, people on the move develop ‘bottom-up’ strategies in order to compensate for the welfare gap of weak formal social protection systems in the countries of origin and destination. These strategies can be understood as ‘social protection from below’, the process through which migrants mobilize resources to create a system of social protection for themselves and their families (Bilecen 2013; Boccagni 2015; Boccagni 2017; Faist 2013; Grabska 2017).

These grassroots ways of support have “an important role in securing migrants’ livelihoods and realizations of life chances” (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015:208). Boccagni (2017:174) points out that examining social protection from below renders attention to the informal support migrants provide to their families, which is “the less visible but more substantive side of migrant social protection”. A ‘social protection from below’ lens does not only visibilize migrants’ efforts but also highlights their agency in these processes. It is relevant, nonetheless, to situate and understand migrants’ ‘bottom-up’ strategies in relation to ‘top-down’, “macro-political scenarios” (Ibid.:170).

3.2 The migration-social protection nexus

The link between migration and social protection has been well established (Avato et al. 2010; Sabates-Wheeler & Waite 2003; Sabates-Wheeler & MacAuslan 2007; Swemmer 2013), with some authors noting that “[M]igration is arguably the most important social risk management instrument available to mankind” (Sabates-Wheeler & MacAuslan 2007:27). When public provisioning of social protection in sending countries is weak, migration can help in providing safety nets and resources to migrants and their families (Avato et al. 2010; Swemmer 2013). In this regard, significant attention has been paid to remittances and their impact on the development of sending countries, as well as their potential for poverty reduction. What is interesting is that in policy discourses, migrants have come to be celebrated as ‘heroes/heroines’, ‘agents of development’ and key ‘providers of social protection’ (Faist 2013:10; Sørensen 2012:62), both in sending and receiving societies. Rarely, however, is the well-being and security of migrants a focus of attention (Boccagni 2014).

Although migration can be a strategy for migrants to manage risks and ensure the welfare of their families, it can also increase migrants’ vulnerabilities and generate new risks, which increases the demand for diverse forms of social protection (Boccagni 2017; Sabates-Wheeler 2007; Swemmer 2013). Some migrant-specific risks are the exclusion of welfare systems, legal status, lack of personal networks and information, discrimination, and poor working conditions (Boccagni 2011; Swemmer 2013).

Further, it is not only risk but also precarity that many migrants face due to migration. The concept of precarity “captures both atypical and insecure employment and has implications beyond employment, pointing to an associated weakening of social relations” (Anderson 2010:303). This is relevant for comprehending not only the structure of vulnerability but also the source of the vulnerability for migrants (Sabates-Wheeler & MacAuslan 2007).

3.3 Bringing gender in

“Gender matters. To incorporate gender in migration research is not to ‘privilege’ it but accord it the explanatory power it merits” (Mahler & Pessar 2006:51).

3.3.1 Gender in transnational migration

Today, women represent almost half of the 244 million international migrants in the world (UN Women 2015). However, for a long time, migration research was gender-biased, and primarily overlooked migrant women’s experiences. The only times they were featured in migration studies were as passive, dependent migrants. The development of a thorough gender analysis in human mobility issues arose in the 1970s and 1980s when migrant women began to be considered “subjects of scholarly inquiry” (Mahler 1999:693). Still, most of this scholarship understood gender only in terms of incorporating sex as a variable

and did not consider it a fundamental organizing principle in migration processes (Ibid.). Nonetheless, extensive literature on migration exists today, which highlights the importance of 'bringing gender in' (Pessar and Mahler 2003) to migration research.¹¹ Through this literature, feminist migration scholars advocate that migration research ought to consider a "relational understanding of gender" (Donato et al. 2006:5), rather than only seeing it as "a dichotomous tool to analyze society" (Elliot 2016:75).

Hence, there seems to be a consensus now that gender matters in migration and that migration itself is a gendered phenomenon (Boyle 2002; Donato et al. 2006; Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Lutz 2010; Mahler & Pessar 2001; Mahler & Pessar 2006; Padilla 2013; Pessar & Mahler 2003; Sørensen 2005; Vives 2012). Gender represents a constitutive, organizing element of migration (Ibid.), which also influences migrants' lives, choices and strategies in their immigration contexts (Lutz 2010:1651). Consequently, migration processes cannot be fully understood without a gender analysis, as there are many relevant aspects of human mobility which are clearly affected and shaped by gender, such as labor markets and immigration policies (Padilla 2013:4).

Mahler and Pessar are the leading scholars theorizing on gender in transnational migration. They suggest that "there are innumerable transnational sites where gender matters" (2006:45), and hence the need to analyze transnational migration from a gender lens. Moreover, the different transnational spaces that have emerged as a result of current global economic, social, and cultural dynamics are not gender-neutral (Dannecker 2005). The high demand for female labor in gendered and segregated labor markets is an example of the gendered dimensions of these processes. Therefore, a migration analysis from a transnational perspective that brings in gender can elucidate the various gender ideologies and power hierarchies that are specific to migrants' countries of origin and destination, and which are historically contingent in the case of migrant women (Padilla 2013:4).

The concept of Gendered Geographies of Power (GGP) proposed by Mahler and Pessar (2001) provides a helpful framework to understand the scope and dimensions of these cross-border dynamics. GGP helps to capture the multiple dimensions: geographies, social locations, and power hierarchies, where gender operates in migration processes. In a transnational context, the social locations migrants occupy in their countries of origin might vary from those they occupy in their host societies. So often, if not always, gender organizes and regulates those social locations (Ibid.). Thus, GGP becomes a valuable and suitable analytical tool in transnational migration research insofar as it captures the ways in which "gender operates simultaneously in multiple social scales across transnational terrains" (Ibid.:445). By doing so, it highlights the dynamics and power relations that are produced, reproduced, or resisted on a transnational level.

¹¹ For an exhaustive literature review on the incorporation of gender in migration studies see Donato et al. (2006).

3.3.2 Transnational social protection and gender

Different studies examine how transnational migration changes or reconfigures gender relations, as well as its effects on the social reproduction in transnational spheres (See Bastia & Busse 2011; Dannecker 2005; Mahler 1999). There is not much scholarship, however, which approaches transnational social protection from a gender perspective. Yet, transnational social protection is a site where gender certainly matters. Throughout their migratory trajectories, women face many challenges, among which is the lack of access to social protection (International Migration Research Center 2018) or limitations in providing social protection for themselves and their families across borders. At the same time, migrant women act upon these limitations, navigating different social protection systems, to ensure the provision of transnational welfare.

Most of the research on transnational social protection which incorporates gender in the analysis focuses on social protection and care in the context of gender relations and emphasizes the role of migrants as both social protection givers and receivers (IMISCOE 2018). Merla (2017) stresses that migrant domestic workers in Belgium sit at the interface of care and social protection systems in their countries of origin and host societies. Boccagni (2014) examines the needs of Ecuadorian migrant care workers. His research highlights that while they rely on residual support from sending or receiving societies, Ecuadorian migrant women are also crucial providers (often the main providers) for their significant others left behind. Boccagni suggests, however, that little is known about these women's needs as 'transnational mothers' or about the types of social provision and support available to them on a transnational level (Ibid.). Along these lines, some studies examine the ways in which informal strategies of social protection such as transnational care arrangements and remittances are gendered practices (See Boccagni 2011; Wong 2006).

In addition, authors have brought attention to the ways in which migrant women access and provide social protection for themselves and their families and how their gender shapes this, and the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. For instance, Zontini (2004:1118) notes that it is predominantly women who negotiate the provisions of social protection for their families in various welfare systems "across the transnational social field to which they [are] entitled". Similarly, Castellani and Martín-Díaz (2019) examine from a gender and generational lens how Ecuadorian migrant domestic workers' combine formal and informal social protection to create safety nets for their families. In 'Adolescent Girls' Migration in The Global South', Grabska et al. (2018) provide a detailed account of how migrant and refugee young girls from Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sudan provide social protection for themselves and their households. The authors underline that these girls' engagement with social protection is embedded in their gendered adolescence and that their role as providers of social protection intersects with their roles as daughters, wives, or sisters.

3.4 Toward a conceptual framework for transnational social protection

This chapter has provided an account of relevant efforts to theorize and analyze TSP. In order to approach my research question: How do Nicaraguan migrant women access and provide social protection in Nicaragua and Spain? I have developed a three-pronged framework to guide my research, grounded on a view of ‘social protection from below’. I suggest that three prime lenses should be taken into account when analyzing social protection on the move.

In order to understand the ways in which migrants’ access and provide social protection, a transnational angle is needed. There is a straightforward justification for this: the increasing transnationalization of migrants’ lives demands new ways of theorizing social protection. I particularly draw on the work of Bilecen and Bargłowski (2015) on ‘assemblages of social protection’, as this concept implies that TSP is a dynamic and fluid process, which takes places across borders and involves state and non-state actors.

In addition, looking at TSP as ‘assemblages’ highlights the different levels of analysis: the local, the national and the transnational, as well as the level of formality and informality in social protection arrangements that migrants engage with across borders. The distinction between formal and informal social protection is relevant insofar as it allows for an identification of different sources of social protection and the gaps that exist in formal social provisioning systems. In this sense, the researcher can identify “the resource flowing in informal networks together with formal welfare structures” (Ibid.: 212). As authors have suggested, nonetheless, the distinction is merely analytical and will be informed by the particular context and case at hand (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015; Boccagni 2011; Faist 2013). Hence, the focus here should not be on seeing formal and informal social protection as opposites, but as interacting and intersecting entities and processes.

The second angle is the migration-social protection nexus. Why this focus? Well, because “migration challenges the way social protection is organized” (Bilecen 2017:80). The migration-social protection nexus emphasizes the double character of migration. On the one hand, migration can be a form of social protection which improves migrants’ life changes and livelihoods. On the other hand, mobility can heighten migrant-specific vulnerabilities and risks which demand further, and sometimes new forms of social protection. Here, the concept of precarity provides an excellent framework to approach the study of transnational social protection. These tensions are vital for understanding the opportunities and challenges migrants have to engage in social protection.

The final and third lens I propose to approach the study of social protection on the move is gender. Given that my research explores Nicaraguan migrant women’s engagements with social protection at a transnational level, gender represents a central category of analysis. Not for the fact that my research focuses on women, but because it examines these women’s engagement with social protection in relation with men and with other women

(i.e., those women who stay in Nicaragua). Hence, gender comprises a “constitutive element of social relationships” (Scott 1986:1067). I suggest that this framework allows for a better understanding of how migrants engage with transnational social protection.

4 A multi-sited research methodology

Most studies dealing with social protection and migration take place in one given moment and leave out the changing nature of migrants' engagement with social protection arrangements. A multi-sited methodology tackles this limitation by providing an interesting angle of analysis to examine the changes in social protection arrangements migrants experience across their trajectories. Consequently, this methodology is suitable for the study of cross-border phenomena, such as Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with transnational social protection because it facilitates "a more holistic research on the challenges and opportunities emerging from the interconnectedness of existing social protection" (Mingot & Mazzucato 2017:788) arrangements in Spain and Nicaragua.

To develop a transnational framework for the study of Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with transnational social protection I designed a research methodology which privileged their transnational processes and allowed me to gather data on both the immigration and the emigration countries. Given the limitations of doing research simultaneously, as others researching transnational migration issues do (See Amelina & Faist 2012; Mazzucato 2009), I conducted research in Spain and Nicaragua sequentially. Similar methodologies are used by Mahler (1999), Grabska (2014) and Winters (2018).

Additionally, a multi-sited methodology encourages consideration of other relevant transnational actors, such as migrants' family members in the country of origin. Therefore, even though my research focuses on Nicaraguan migrant women's engagement with social protection, I also include the voices of non-migrant individuals whose lives are also affected by this migration. Therefore, participants' narratives are complemented with observations and interviews I conducted with their family members in Nicaragua. This was done in order to reflect the transnational character of participants' migration journey and their engagement with transnational social protection both in Spain and Nicaragua.

Accordingly, the findings of this research are the result of an interactive process of data creation and knowledge production between Nicaraguan migrant women in Zaragoza, their family members in Nicaragua and key informants who are involved in working with the Nicaraguan migrant community in Zaragoza.

4.1 Access to participants

My research builds from my collaboration with Association Atarraya Centroamérica (AAC). AAC is a non-profit organization comprised of Nicaraguan and Spanish members. It was founded in 2007 to provide support to the Nicaraguan and Central American community in Zaragoza. My involvement with this organization not only helped me identify Nicaraguan migrant women participants but also exposed me to relevant information about the dynamics of Nicaraguan emigration to Spain. Javier Arce¹², the President of the association and one of my key informants was also my gatekeeper. He facilitated access to Nicaraguan migrant women and provided logistical support during my stay in Zaragoza. This meant, however, that Nicaraguan women in my research present a specific profile: they are organized with the association, which allowed them to encounter a network of support and solidarity in Spain.

Participants' sociodemographic profile

Nine Nicaraguan women participated in my research. They were between the ages of 29 and 64 years old. All nine identify as cis-gender and heterosexual women. Seven of them have been in Spain for more than five years and already obtained residence permits. The other two came not more than one year ago and are currently undocumented but hope to obtain their residence permits in the next couple of years. Five of the women have completed some type of tertiary education in Nicaragua, while the other four only finished high school. Six of the women work as domestic workers. The others work as a janitor, one has two part-time jobs as a waitress and geriatric care assistant, and the last one is currently unemployed. This research focuses on third-country migrants from Nicaragua who work in low paid, low qualified jobs in Spain. All of them are mothers. Seven are single mothers, and two of them are married and raising their children together with their partners. The women consider themselves to be working class in Spain, but middle class in Nicaragua. Income among the women varies, but they all report earnings below the Spanish minimum wage, which amounts to €858.55 per month.¹³

4.2 Data collection methods

I divided my data collection period into two different stages, between Spain and Nicaragua. I used a variety of qualitative methods to gather knowledge on how Nicaraguan migrant women engage with different forms of social protection across these geographies. During the first part of my fieldwork, I spent 30 days in Zaragoza, Spain, from July 1st to July 30th, 2018. In this stage, I collected data through in-depth interviews and organized one focus group discussion (FGD) with Nicaraguan migrant women. I also carried out semi-

¹² Key informants gave me their permission to keep their real names in my research instead of using pseudonyms to refer to them.

¹³ Retrieved from <https://www.cuidum.com/blog/salario-empleadas-del-hogar-2018/>

structured interviews with key informants who work on issues related to migrant communities in Spain. Furthermore, I engaged in participant observation, which took place every day, in sociability and everyday interactions with participants. For the second stage of my fieldwork, I traveled to Nicaragua, from August 3rd to September 4th, 2018. During this period, I carried out semi-structured interviews with family members of three of the women I interviewed in Zaragoza. In what follows, I review the different qualitative data collection techniques I used during my fieldwork.

Migration life-story interviews

Using people's stories can be a powerful way to gather knowledge and information about a given issue. The purpose of using the life-story method was not to examine Nicaraguan migrant women's lives as a whole but rather to focus on a life-course approach in relation to the women's migratory trajectories and their cross-border engagements with social protection.

I decided to focus on the life-course perspective because it "seeks to describe the structure and sequences of events and transitions through an individual's life" (Bailey 2009:407). By engaging with participants' migratory histories, this approach allowed me to understand their trajectories and the transitions they have experienced as Nicaraguan women, accessing and providing social protection for themselves and their families at a transnational level, in the various "spaces and times they flow through" (Ibid.:408). In addition, this method offered a vital opportunity to take migrant women's agency into account and hence contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how gender shaped participants' migration journeys and their transnational engagement with social protection.

I developed specific criteria to select participants. I only interviewed women who had migrated at least five years ago because they could convey a broader perspective on their engagement with social protection in a complex context of mobility, continuity, and change at a transnational level, throughout several years and through multiple geographies. Out of the five participants, four had migrated at least ten years ago and one migrated seven years ago.

I met with each respondent individually twice. Each encounter lasted between two to three hours, though oftentimes they would extend as the participants invited me to keep the conversation going in their homes or while strolling around Zaragoza. My first encounter with the women was usually somewhere nearby the city center, in a café or local bar. I asked participants to choose the venues for the interviews because I wanted them to be in a comfortable, familiar space. I was also aware of participants' time constraints and always proposed to meet them when and where it was convenient for them. In all interviews, I requested participants' oral consent to record and use the information they shared with me. Interviews followed a conversational, informal structure, to allow participants themselves to open up and talk about their migratory trajectories and issues they deemed relevant.

Focus group discussion

Besides the interviews, I also conducted one focus group discussion (FGD) with seven Nicaraguan migrant women. The FGD covered four main themes: migratory trajectories, access, and provision of social protection in Spain and Nicaragua, the viability of social protection and reconfiguration of gender relations. I did not set any criteria for choosing participants in this activity. Instead, I aimed to provide a space where Nicaraguan women, newcomers, and longtime immigrants, could come together and share their experiences about their engagement with social protection.

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted seven semi-structured interviews. I interviewed four key informants in Zaragoza, two academics and two NGOs workers who informed me about available sources of social protection for Nicaraguan migrant women and provided contextual knowledge about the migration and welfare regimes in Spain. In Nicaragua, I carried out three semi-structured interviews with family members of Nicaraguan women I interviewed in Zaragoza. For this, I followed a matched sample methodology (See Mazzucato 2009).

Participant observation

Furthermore, I complemented my research with participant observation to contextualize the narratives shared by participants through the other data collection methods. I carried out my observations daily during my time in Zaragoza at relevant sites where Nicaraguan migrant women socialize, particularly being getting involved in activities related to AAC, such as the organization's meetings and outings.

4.3 Data analysis

Interviews and the FGD were recorded, transcribed and later translated from Spanish to English. I conducted preliminary analysis putting together participants' migration life-stories and identifying relevant life elements related to engagement with social protection. This provided a framework to later approach the FGD and interviews with family members in Nicaragua. Informed by my research questions, I identified recurrent themes within the narratives 1) access to social protection, 2) provision of social protection from migrants to families in Nicaragua, 3) viability of social protection and 4) reconfiguration of gender relations. The data were manually coded and analyzed.

4.4 Reflections on positionality, reflexivity and ethical considerations

In doing research of this nature, where I share a similar cultural and migration background with participants, yet differences are also evident, questions about my position as an ‘insider/outsider’ of researched subjects emerge. However, as Wolf suggests (1993:7), “‘insider’/‘outsider’ categories are rarely so pure or simple, but rather, layered with complex and multiple facts”. For instance, Nicaraguan migrant women saw me as an insider due to the national and cultural background we share as Nicaraguan women. As such, we had a similar understanding, a common language, for talking about topics related to gender violence, women’s rights, or the social position of women in Nicaraguan and Spanish society which facilitated the development of trust between us.

In addition, being a migrant woman myself, with a complex migratory trajectory, helped build rapport and a sense of relatedness with participants. These similarities incited a sense of empathy among us. Yet, other times, participants perceived me as an outsider. As a middle class, bilingual, young Nicaraguan woman, currently pursuing a Master’s in the Netherlands, I was seen as a ‘*mujer preparada*’, a highly skilled, well-educated, migrant woman. Nonetheless, this did not affect my research in any negative way, and perhaps even validated my credibility as a young researcher. This is in accordance with Vives (2012:62) who emphasizes that egalitarian relationships can stem not only necessary from “sameness” but also from “empathy [and] reciprocity” between researcher and participants.

Diane Wolf (1993:1) suggests that “fieldwork as a research method poses particular challenges for feminists because of the power relations inherent in the process of gathering data”. Throughout my interactions with participants I was reminded of the power relations and potential inequalities that exist in these exchanges; for instance, something which struck me, in particular, was that in my daily interactions with the women of AAC, I evidenced the pressing preoccupations that undocumented Nicaraguan women experience daily.

Actions which I took for granted, such as walking down the streets of Zaragoza, or using public transportation proved intensely stressful and worrisome situations for these women, who feared being detained by the police, and the negative consequences that could bring. Although participating in my research did not directly expose these women, evidencing these dynamics made me reflect about the vulnerabilities and uncertainties experienced by some participants, as well as the constant efforts they make to try to remain at the margins of society and not get caught, which paradoxically represents too, a strategy of resistance. These dynamics gave way to ethical considerations in my research.

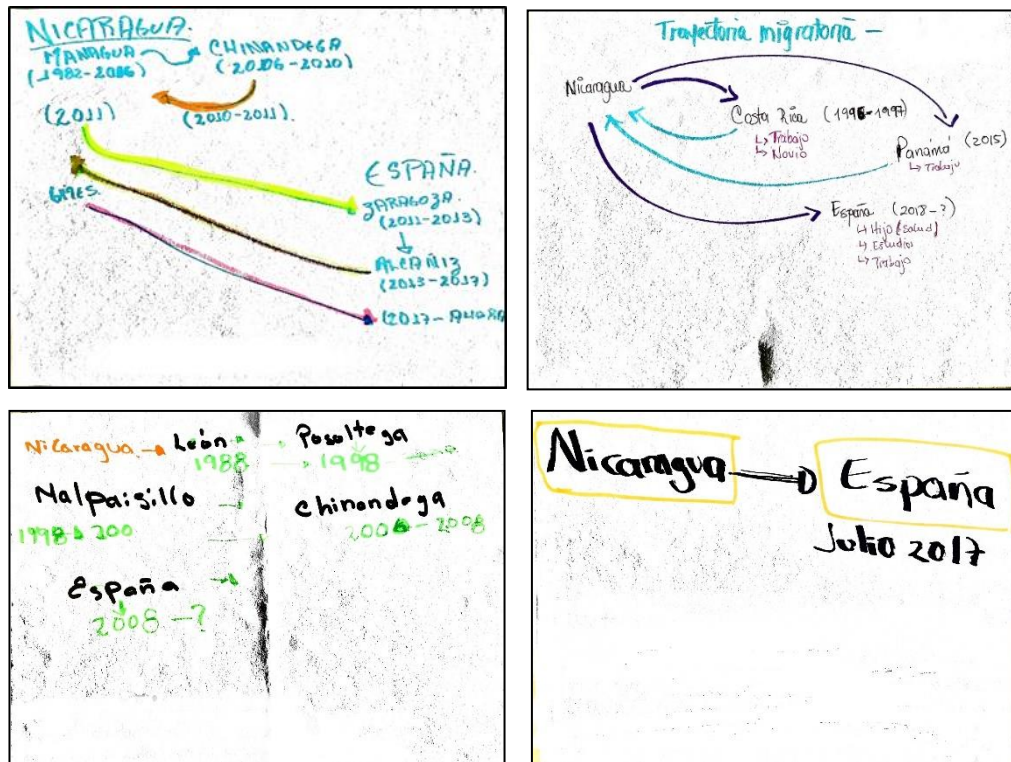
I ensured confidentiality and anonymity of participants by using pseudonyms to refer to them, with the exception of key informants for whom I have retained names. Although none of the participants cared if they were identified by their names, I still decided to utilize pseudonyms. This came about from a process of reflexivity, a “continual internal dialogue and critical

self-evaluation” (Berger 2015:220) of my own positionality in relation with participants and their lives. Seeing and learning about their daily experiences, motivations and fears, and being aware that some participants were still in an irregular situation, it was vital for me to protect respondent’s identities and prevent any risk of harming them or their families, for that matter. In a sense, as Berger (2015:220) suggests, this meant a

“turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied”.

5 Between *here*, *there* and *somewhere else*: mapping Nicaraguan women's migratory trajectories

Figure 1
Display of migratory trajectories of four Nicaraguan migrant women



Source: The author (July 2018). Research participants sketched their trajectories as part of the activities during the FGD.

This chapter is based on the migration life-stories of Karla, Olga, Fatima, Mariana, and Sonia, as well as insights from the FGD participants, Valeria, Amanda, Claudia, and Silvia. In order to understand how Nicaraguan migrant women engage with social protection, it is relevant to look at their migratory trajectories. First, because often the search for social protection takes migrants to different places, as social protection is not always achieved in one single location. Moreover, second, because engagement with social protection is contingent upon migrants 'markers of heterogeneity', such as immigration status and gender. In this chapter, I discuss common mobility patterns in women's migratory trajectories. Then I provide an overview of the organization of participants' transnational lives.

5.1 Mobility patterns

I started my first interviews with participants with the following question: *Can you tell me the story of your migration?* Two important patterns emerged from the women's narratives: the reasons for their migration are related to social protection, and trajectories follow a non-linear path.

5.1.1 *Reasons for migrating: searching for social protection and more*

Participants' reasons for migrating are significantly linked to improving access or provision of social protection for themselves and their families. The hope of economic improvement is the most salient factor shaping participants' migratory projects. The women speak of this in terms of increasing the welfare of their families, particularly their children's. While it is the women deciding to migrate, often "children are the central axis of family migration and often a critical reason why families move back and forth and sustain transnational ties" (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004:1016). This is articulated by two participants:

"I had two small children and the economic situation was not improving for my family. My mother migrated first, and then I followed. I did it because I wanted my children to have a better life" (Amanda, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

"I have a vision that by coming here I can change my economic status and help my two daughters in Nicaragua. We all come with the illusion of improving our economic situation. That is the goal, but I have to see what really happens" (Valeria, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

The illusion of improving one's economic condition is a recurrent theme in participants' narratives. Yet, this expectation is "also embedded in the construction of a world abroad" (Dannecker 2005:663). As the following fragments suggest, the migratory projects of these women are often coupled with *personal aspirations* which are usually related to gaining more autonomy and a desire to 'see the world':

"I took the decision to migrate because we were struggling. It was becoming difficult to make ends meet and I had to find a way to provide for my children. But I also left because I had never been abroad. I wanted to experience *something different*" (Karla, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

"I did not come to Spain because of economic hardship. More than anything, I came because I wanted to escape from the authority of my father. I wanted to make my own decisions and *live my life*" (Sonia, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Non-economic elements are also significant in shaping participants' decision to migrate, particularly access to healthcare. In doing research with Andean transnational migrants in Belgium, Colombia and Peru, Lafleur and Vivas Romero (2018:9) found that "health plays a key role both as a trigger for mobility but also as an opportunity to access care that is not available in the

home communities”. This is also the case for Olga, who migrated to Spain because she needed to get treatment for her eyes. Therefore, Olga found in migration an avenue to improve her health:

“I had a good life in Nicaragua. I would not say very well, but in the context of Nicaragua it was good. If I emigrated here it was not for economic reasons, nor for political things or anything like that. I emigrated because I had a problem in my eyes, because of my health. I wanted to fix them” (Olga, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Participants report that *family reunification* is another significant reason for their migration. This is the case for Fatima who migrated to Spain to reunite with family and get support from her personal networks:

“When I was 17 my mom migrated to Spain. After a year, she decided to bring me because I was the youngest of my three siblings and I missed her a lot” (Fatima, July 2018, Zaragoza).

These accounts emphasize the complexity of migratory movements and go beyond the mainstream discourse of migration as a strategy to overcome poverty. Furthermore, they display the women’s agency and the multifaceted dimensions of their decision-making. In this sense, as Bonifacio (2012:6) explains “*migration is personal*. Although migration touches families and communities, the experience is deeply personal”.

5.2 Between here, there and somewhere else: non-linear migratory trajectories

Nicaraguan women’s migratory trajectories are not always linear (i.e., from point A to point B). Instead, like Karla’s example in the introduction chapter, the search for social protection takes these women in complex and contingent migration journeys, with multiple origins and destinations as well as different mobility patterns (See Figure 1). Migratory trajectories of participants circumvent mainly two spaces, here, Spain and, there, Nicaragua; but also expands to somewhere else, those locations where Nicaraguan migrant women had lived and worked before and after settling in Spain, sometimes even including migrating internally within Nicaragua, mainly from one city to another, or from rural to urban areas.¹⁴

Nicaraguan migrant women’s narratives suggest that for them and their non-migrant families, here and there, and sometimes somewhere else evoke particular meanings and exist in continuous confluence: events in Spain deeply affect the lives of those in Nicaragua and vice-versa. The here and there, and somewhere else thus are social, political, cultural, and subjective sites which are in constant dialogue, interacting through different transnational processes and dynamics. For example, a recent event that is significantly affecting participants’ life in Spain is the political and socioeconomic crisis that erupted

¹⁴ Table 7 in the Appendices section details the multiple migratory trajectories of the Nicaraguan migrant women who participated in this research.

in Nicaragua since April 2018. Since the crisis, many have been sending remittances more often and in higher amounts to help members of their families due to the deteriorating economic situation in Nicaragua. When I talked to participants, they often mentioned that they now need to reorganize the provision of social protection, in the form of remittances, to provide a safety net to those in Nicaragua; while also more generally, migrants' significant contributions represent one of the main pillars keeping the Nicaraguan economy afloat in this time of crisis.¹⁵

5.2.1 Organization of Nicaraguan women's transnational lives

Participants identified events that were crucial in shaping their migratory trajectories and the organization of their transnational lives. A significant aspect is their migration status. The women indicated that when they first arrived to Spain, they remained undocumented for at least two years, in some cases for even a more extended period. Being in an irregular situation is a precarious "social condition" (Schierup & Jørgensen 2016:2). One of the women mentioned feeling like an 'invisible woman', and others equated being undocumented with a feeling of 'powerlessness'. In this regard, "migration may be experienced as immobile: simply a trial to be endured before being able to look back at a better time" (Sheller 2018:4).

This is also aggravated by the migration regime in Spain, where most resident permits are linked to employment contracts. For Nicaraguan migrant women who mostly work in domestic work or in other temporary, precarious jobs, this means that linking their status to their "work situation is in many cases a precarious and uncertain bond" (Malgesini Rey et al. 2004:86). Participants suggested that this arrangement makes them fall back and forth into irregularity. Menjívar (2006:1008) coined the term 'liminal legality' to refer to this condition, which takes place when migrants hold "neither an undocumented status nor a documented one, but may have the characteristics of both". Moreover, she suggests that liminal legality

"is neither a unidirectional nor a linear process, or even a phase from undocumented to documented status, for those who find themselves in it can return to an undocumented status when their temporary statuses end" (Ibid.).

Fatima's case illustrates this experience:

"I got my residence permit after two years in Zaragoza. After another two years, my residence permit expired. At the time, I was unemployed and without a job contract I knew I could not re-apply for a residence permit. Again, I had no choice but to become undocumented again. Three years after I had my daughter who was born a Spanish citizen and I was able to apply for a new residence permit through the 'family rootedness' process. I am now hoping to apply for the Spanish citizenship" (Personal interview, July 2018, Zaragoza).

¹⁵ The first trimester of 2019 experienced an increased in remittances of 8.6 percent compared to the year before (Calero 2019).

Another participant emphasized the effects of remaining in a state of legal liminality in terms of her work:

“It is hard to experience that ambivalence. If you don’t have a regular situation then employers commit abuses: they don’t pay you, they don’t make it easy for you. It’s a radical change to go from being documented to undocumented (Silvia, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

In his study with Bolivian migrants in Spain, Speroni (2017:88) highlights that “‘los papeles’ [the papers] is a symbolic landmark for migrants and have a vital impact on the mobility dynamics and strategies”. Similarly, the women reported that being documented facilitated their engagement with social protection, as it allows them to work in the formal economy, earn higher wages and opt for live-out jobs, which they see as less precarious. Moreover, a regular status facilitates circular migration and visits to Nicaragua. As Winters (2018:7) notes, obtaining residence permits and the required paperwork not only facilitates these women to access “jobs and housing in Spain, but it also enables migrants to visit home, to return to Spain, and/or to move onwards, expanding their trajectories”.

Another key aspect in the organization of participants’ transnational lives is their job or employment. In their first years in Spain, Nicaraguan migrant women choose to work as live-in domestic workers because that arrangement provides a faster avenue to save money. Participants suggested that for undocumented migrants, working as a live-in domestic worker can also bring a feeling of safety as they do not have to be exposed in the streets where police could stop them and request their documentation.

At the same time, participants pointed out that there are downsides in being employed as a live-in domestic worker, notably the isolation and the high risk of experiencing abuses from employers. This is why, after some years, most of the women shift from being a live-in to a live-out domestic worker, an event that usually takes place after the women get their residence permits. Seven of the nine women participants started working as live-in domestic workers when they first came to Spain. Now, five of them have moved onto working as live-out domestic workers or got new jobs in other service sectors. This significant change has allowed them to get involved in more activities outside work due to more flexible schedules, furthering their integration in Spanish society.

In addition, in their first years in Spain, it is very common for the women to send from half to almost all their monthly income to their families in Nicaragua. One of the participants noted:

“In my first years here, I would send almost all my money. I only kept with me the little I needed” (Mariana, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Most participants reported that as years go by, they significantly decrease the remitted amount, only sending money in case of an emergency or due to significant events like the current crisis in Nicaragua.

To sum up, analyzing migratory trajectories of people on the move contributes to understanding social protection in a context of migration

(Grabska et al. 2018). This is evidenced by the fact that throughout their migratory trajectories, Nicaraguan migrant women embrace different roles directly linked to the ways in which they engage with social protection transnationally. On the economic dimension, these women are often the breadwinners and primary source of income for their families in Spain and Nicaragua. In this sense, migration represents the main avenue to ensure social protection and provide better life chances for themselves and their families, even when that also means facing hardship in the host country. Socially, participants consistently maintain transnational links as mothers and daughters who care for their children and parents from afar.

The women's trajectories reveal that their "positionalities before, during, and after migration shape the opportunities that are open to them" (Vives 2012:67) in terms of engagement with social protection. At the same time, participants' trajectories change and evolve as the women negotiate and navigate opportunities and limitations brought by migration.

Table 2
Nicaraguan migrant women's life configuration in Spain, based on migratory trajectory

Life event	Less than four years residing in Spain	More than four years residing in Spain
<i>Immigration status</i>	Irregular	Regular
<i>Type of work</i>	Live-in domestic workers	Live-in & live-out domestic workers
<i>Housing</i>	Living at the workplace	Combination between living at the workplace and renting a room/apartment
<i>Days off at work</i>	One or two days off per week	Diversity in organization of women's time, depending on their work schedule
<i>Social Relations/Integration</i>	High level of social isolation. Fear of being detained by the police	More level of autonomy and mobility. More awareness of the social context. Nicaraguan migrant women feel safer due to (temporary) residence and work permit
<i>Transnational links with Nicaragua</i>	Relations and contact with Nicaragua via cellphone, internet, remittances and gifts. Traveling to Nicaragua is not feasible	Links are maintained via cellphone, internet, remittances and gifts. Visits to Nicaragua are now possible
<i>Remittances</i>	Remittances are sent periodically. Women send half or more of their monthly income to their families in Nicaragua	Remittances are sent sporadically. Women send smaller amounts and keep more for themselves. Some stop sending remittances altogether

Source: The author, based on data gathered during fieldwork. Table adapted from Hernández Cordero (2015:55).

6 “Women make the world go ‘round’”: on how Nicaraguan migrant women access and provide social protection

In this chapter, I analyze Nicaraguan migrant women’s engagement with transnational social protection, in terms of access and provision of social protection. I first distinguish the primary sources of social protection reported by participants, viewing Nicaraguan women as receivers of social protection. For analytical purposes, I make a distinction between formal and informal social protection arrangements in order to “illuminate the influence of formal social institutions and measures, or the lack, therefore, on the ‘strength’ of informal migrants’ social networks” (Boccagni 2017:170). In the second part, I examine how women ensure social protection for their families in Spain and Nicaragua, viewing them as providers. Findings reveal that participants employ two main strategies to ensure social provision: remittances and transnational care arrangements. Together, these dynamics depict the constellation of participants’ ‘assemblages’ of social protection across borders (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015).

6.1 Nicaraguan migrant women as receivers of social protection: formal and informal arrangements

6.1.1 Formal social protection: navigating state provision systems in Spain and Nicaragua

In Spain

As I discussed in Chapter 2, health and education are conceptualized as social rights for any person residing in Spain, regardless of their migratory status. Nicaraguan women highly appreciate having access to public healthcare. All of them reported having received different types of treatment during their stay in Spain; for example, Olga had cataract surgery. Sonia delivered her baby as an undocumented migrant with no issue, and recently had gastric bypass surgery, all covered by the public healthcare system. A few years ago, Karla had a back problem and was able to get treatment in the local hospital. Mariana injured her arm, and she is currently receiving physiotherapy. In addition, provision of public education, along with access to free healthcare, is also an essential element for those women who are mothers and whose children live with them in Spain, like in Fatima’s case.

Nonetheless, provision for healthcare for migrants is not *always* guaranteed. In 2013, Spanish President Mariano Rajoy passed ‘Real Decreto-Ley 16/2012’, a law which revoked undocumented migrants’ rights to public healthcare. The Spanish government justified this change in healthcare legislation by noting that such law “would prevent foreigners from gaming the system for the purposes of welfare tourism, discourage illegal immigration, and save the government money” (Dobbs & Levitt 2017:57). However, studies suggest there is no evidence that migrants ‘abuse’ the public healthcare system

or any other form of public formal social provisioning (See Carpio & Cabrero 2005; Fuentes 2007). After Law 16/2012 was passed, undocumented migrants could only seek medical attention in the case of children, medical emergencies or prenatal care (Dobbs & Levitt 2017). This of course put migrants and their families in a very precarious and vulnerable situation, which Sonia articulates in the following passage:

“When Rajoy took away the access to healthcare many undocumented migrants had a hard time. If you got sick you couldn’t go to the pharmacy because they would not sell you anything without a prescription and the only way to get a prescription was by seeing a doctor. People only relied on herbal medicine, as that was the only thing available. And even if they had a medical emergency, many avoided going to the hospital because they feared they could be deported” (Personal Interview July 2018 Zaragoza).

Despite this law, specific autonomous communities have made flexible requirements to facilitate undocumented migrants’ access to social services. This is the case of Castilla and León, the autonomous community where Zaragoza is located. Others autonomous communities have set in place specialized parallel mechanisms to address vulnerable populations, including migrant populations. Generally, this has been achieved in collaboration with organizations of the third social sector, such as charities and locals NGOs (Carpio & Cabrero 2005).

The other important source of formal social protection for participants is social security through the SRHE. Nevertheless, the women reported that under this scheme, they do not feel protected or ‘cared about’ by the Spanish state. A participant emphasizes this:

“How is it possible that still we do not have unemployment benefits?! They do not care what happens to us when we do not have a job” (Fatima, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Moreover, participants explained that often, employers refuse to register them in the system as they do not want to pay the employer’s contribution, making it difficult for them to access this service. Other types of formal social protection that participants reported having access to were ‘*ayudas*’, or basic social assistance in the form of conditional cash transfers, or subsidies for food or rent from the municipality in Zaragoza. However, these were very limited, and the women cannot rely on them as a secure source of social protection.

In Nicaragua

Many Nicaraguan migrant women have registered with the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) while working and living in Spain. The women pay a monthly contribution towards what is known in Nicaragua as ‘*seguro facultativo*’, or voluntary social security insurance. Although this is not a migrant-specific scheme, it allows Nicaraguans living abroad to access coverage (Cruz 2018). It works in the following way. The women pay a monthly contribution set at the amount they wish to pay (the minimum quota per month is \$18.00 USD) for the required quotas before retirement, which in

Nicaragua amounts to about a minimum of fifteen years. Once they reach retirement age, these women will be able to get a monthly pension. This has become a strategy for migrant women to ensure social protection in the upcoming years by securing a monthly pension, especially for those who will not be able to claim a pension in Spain. One of the participants put it this way:

“It’s a good option because the contribution is not too expensive. Given that I won’t have access to a pension here in Spain, at least I know I will have something in Nicaragua” (Karla, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Gaps in formal protection for migrants

Although the Spanish state grants access to specific social protection program such as education and health, the provision of other social protection, highly relevant to tackle the precarious lives of Nicaraguan migrant women, such as social security, is not always guaranteed. For those who work as domestic workers, SRHE’s reform emerged as a mechanism to provide better social protection for them, however, its implementation has been limited. Besides, the reform does not address structural conditions that increase risks and vulnerabilities of domestic workers, particularly (undocumented) migrants.

Hence, this analysis reflects structural issues beyond the availability of social provision, which have to do with the precarious and vulnerable status of Nicaraguan migrant women concerning access to social protection. As Fuentes (2007:180) underlines, “eligibility does not translate to an equal level of entitlement and quality of the healthcare system, nor in the standardized usage of those services by different social groups”.

6.1.2 Informal social protection: ‘reverse remittances’, local organizations, solidarity fund and personal networks

Mingot and Mazzucato (2017:792) underline that informal social protection can be seen as a “versatile social protection because it might fulfil different functions”. In a transnational context migrants’ access to formal social protection is usually limited so they rely on informal sources of social protection (Bilecen & Bargłowski 2015; Boccagni 2011; Grabska et al. 2018; Mingot & Mazzucato 2017). In the case of Nicaraguan migrant women, these sources are their families back home, local organizations in Zaragoza that provide social services to migrants, and their personal networks.

Migration studies usually “conceptualize migrants as providers of social protection for people back home” (Dankyi et al. 2017:81). However, Nicaragua migrant women are also *receivers* of social protection. The forms of support provided by non-migrant kin to these women can be conceptualized as ‘reverse remittances’. Mazzucato (2009) coined this term to refer to the resources and services that those left behind facilitate to migrants and help them achieve their migratory projects. It suggests that a flow of remittances can be *two-dimensional*. In a context of transnational social protection, this becomes relevant because it sees migrants as both providers and receivers of social protection.

The care provided by non-migrant kin to migrants' children or parents is an example of reverse remittance that represents "an integral system of global social protection" (Dankyi et al. 2017:80). Baldassar and Merla (2014) call this "care circulation", which refers to the negotiated and reciprocal processes that transnational families use to establish care arrangements across borders.

All the women I met, access informal social protection through transnational care arrangements. These arrangements are usually a device to provide care for their children. Moreover, seven of the nine women are single mothers, without any support from their children's biological fathers. The most significant support system comes from maternal grandparents, especially grandmothers, who often assume the role of the children's 'social mothers'. This is the case of Laura, Karla's mother, who in the absence of their father, became the primary caretaker of her daughters two children in Nicaragua. Laura shared,

"Their father never, never, helped. Not even with a penny. The only one who has supported Karla is me. Her children love me like a mother. That's why she left happy and without being too worried because she knew that her children were in good hands" (Laura, August 2018, Chinandega).

These care arrangements can also fulfill a symbiotic function, as children left behind can also become care providers for their elder grandparents (Mingot & Mazzucato 2017:792). Such dynamics took place in the families of Valeria and Mariana:

'My daughters who are 16 and 17 live with my mom. My mom makes sure they are alright but at the same time my girls also take care of my mom. The support is mutual' (Valeria, FGD July 2018, Zaragoza).

"When my mom left for Spain we stayed with our maternal grandparents. They took care of us until my brother and I grew up and could live independently. And now it's us who help in taking care of my grandmother" (Alex, August 2018, Chinandega).

Another key form of 'reverse remittances' than the non-migrant kin offer to Nicaraguan migrant women is supporting with organizing paperwork for specific procedures across borders. For instance, Karla lives in Spain, so she is not able to make her monthly payments to social security in Nicaragua. In turn, it is her mother who helps her to complete this transaction. Karla explains,

"Every month I send my mother \$100.00 USD for the social security payment in Nicaragua. She goes to the bank in Chinandega to get the money and at the same bank she deposits the \$100.00 USD in the Social Security" (Personal interview, July 2018, Zaragoza).

In the same way, for Sonia, the support of her family in Nicaragua has been significant. Together with her husband, she started a small parcel service between Spain and Nicaragua. In this process, her father's support was significant in securing the success of their company:

“In the beginning, my dad helped us to set up the business in Nicaragua. He was the visible face of our company in there – while we were here in Spain, he supported us there in Nicaragua with making the customs clearance, the distribution, and everything. He did it without charging us. He said, ‘I support my daughter because this is her business’” (Personal interview, July 2018, Zaragoza).

In addition to reverse remittances, getting involved in activities at AAC represents an essential aspect of participants’ access to social protection. It is in this space, through the interaction with other women that they can inform themselves about reforms in social security both in Spain and Nicaragua, and other useful information on health services, job opportunities, employment rights, legal processes for visas and resident permits, courses and trainings for improving their work opportunities, and social services from charities and local NGOs.

Faith-based organizations can also play a relevant role in providing social protection to migrants (Mingot & Mazzucato 2017). Some of the women receive support from catholic associations in Zaragoza. Karla is one of them:

“The people running the organization gave me things: second-hand clothes, dishes, cutlery. They also furnished my apartment. When I needed, they also gave food vouchers and helped me find a job” (Karla, interview July 2018, Zaragoza).

Moreover, some of the women are members of a rotating and credit association (ROSCA), an initiative that emerged within ACC and is now managed by the association’s board and Nicaraguan migrant women themselves. Participants call it a Solidarity Fund. Through this ROSCA, Nicaraguan migrant women can save money and obtain micro-credit loans at a one percent interest rate. This initiative has had much value, especially for undocumented migrants who are not able to access banks in Spain. Thieme (2003) suggests that ROSCAs are ‘multi-functional organisations’ given that they not only offer financial support, but they are a space where members can exchange relevant information. Two participants describe their favorable experiences with this initiative:

“Every month we meet for the Solidarity Fund. It is nice because we help each other, we catch up on everyone’s life. It’s a space to share. It makes it easier for us to save money or to ask for a loan when we need” (Personal interview July 2018 Zaragoza).

“I broke my glasses on the bus. So, I asked for a loan and got new glasses. And now that I had to pay the deposited for my new apartment, I also got a loan. It has been really helpful because it takes you out of trouble if you have an emergency” (Personal interview July 2018 Zaragoza).

As other research suggests, personal networks are also crucial in facilitating access to social protection (Bilecen 2016; Boccagni 2011; Grabska et al. 2018). Menjívar (2002) notes that migrant women’s personal networks help them access medical services. Similarly, for Nicaraguan migrant women in

Spain personal networks are essential in facilitating access to social protection services or employment through referrals. Socialization, although sometimes limited, is crucial for women to learn about formal and informal social protection provision. It is usually on Sundays when they have the chance to socialize. As Pavlou (2016:161) notes, “Sunday as a full day off gives domestic workers the opportunity to meet and socialize with their peers; this is an essential condition to collective organization and mobilizing”.

6.2 Nicaraguan migrant women as social protection providers: remittances and transnational care arrangements

Boccagni (2011:170) sees migrant’s informal TSP “as the aggregate outcome of leavers and stayers’ everyday practices of mutual support and concern, such as remittances and transnational care”. For Nicaraguan migrant women, remittances are the most significant avenue to ensure social protection for their families. Economic status has improved in the women’s transnational households thanks to the flow of remittances. They have been able to invest in house renovations and pay for private schools and universities for their children. In addition, these are mostly “re-feminized remittances”¹⁶, as the sender and the recipient are usually women. Also, remittances also allow families of migrants to cope with risk (Wong 2006). This is reflected in participants’ experience, whose remittances help their families in Nicaragua to manage risk; for example, in cases where someone loses their job, or in times of economic crisis. Alex, Mariana’s son, articulates this:

“Since my mom went to Spain, she has always been supporting us, especially when we have faced bad times. Now that I am unemployed, she supports me a lot: she sends me money to support my child. She also sends some for my grandmother. Because of that I try to do as she says” (Personal interview, August 2018, Chinandega).

Furthermore, Boccagni (2017:17) addresses that “critical to the impact of remittances on social protection is also the interdependence between money transfers and other forms of care”. The second way that Nicaraguan migrant women provide social protection to their families is by engaging in transnational care arrangements through which they give “emotional and practical support at a distance” (Merla 2015:159). In this process, technology has become crucial for women to care for their significant others across borders. Especially for women whose children are in Nicaragua, the Internet and social media become tools to be *virtually present* and to engage in transnational mothering. The following fragment illustrates this:

¹⁶ Personal interview with Ana Romea, July 2018, Zaragoza

“Technology allowed me at least to coexist with my children, despite the distance. I would help them with homework or if they asked me something. I also punished them if I had to punish them. More or less it helped me to be *present*, despite the distance, to be always present, in anything, always with them” (Amanda, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

The women’s transnational mothering challenges the notion of the ‘care drain’, suggested by scholarship on Global Care Chains (See Hochschild 2000), which assumes that when women migrate to work in care-related sectors, a care drain takes place in the families left behind (Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck 2012). However, as Piperno notes (2007:67), “female emigration does not merely produce a care drain”. This is the case for participants who despite the physical distance, continue to care for their significant others in Nicaragua, particularly their children.

Visits to Nicaragua are another way in which Nicaraguan migrant women maintain connections and care for their non-migrant families. The women share a strong desire to spend time with their families in Nicaragua. However, having their significant others visiting them in Spain is uncommon as it often requires considerable time and financial investments. For some women like Karla, Mariana, and Sonia, visits to Nicaragua became frequent after they obtained their residence permit. However, other women have not returned once since they arrived in Spain. Olga, for example, has not been back to Nicaragua after twelve years of residing in Spain. She says, “I have not gone back because it takes much money and I think it is a better investment if I use that money to help my children” (Personal interview, July 2018, Zaragoza).

In doing research with Salvadorian migrants in Australia, Merla (2015) found that many did not visit their families in El Salvador because their precarious conditions posed financial limitations, restricting the possibility of visits. This is very similar to the situations Nicaraguan migrant women experience in Spain, who prioritize sending remittances instead of paying visits to their families back home. For the women with an irregular status, visits to Nicaragua are not a feasible option as they risk not being able to reenter Spain. Hence the women wait until obtaining their ‘papers’ to be in a more stable position to go back.

In conclusion, Nicaraguan migrant women create ‘assemblages’ of social protection, resourcing and organizing different types of formal and informal social protection in Spain and Nicaragua. In these assemblages, the women are both receivers and providers of social protection.

Participants access formal provisioning in Spain in the health and social security sectors. However, this protection is sometimes residual, especially for social security coverage for domestic workers. Also, some women are enrolled in the social security system in Nicaragua to ensure a pension in the future. Nevertheless, this is only viable for women who have family members in Nicaragua who can support them with the paperwork and payments required to engage with this social security option. To date, the Nicaraguan government has not introduced any formal migrant-specific social protection program. Despite some access to formal provisioning, the women mostly rely on

informal sources of social protection, particularly their families in Nicaragua, local organizations, and their personal networks. Remittances and transnational care arrangements, particularly transnational motherhood, are the two main channels that participants use to provide welfare for their families left behind.

In my interview with Javier Arce, he depicted the significant efforts of participants by saying that these ‘women make the world go ‘round’. They play an essential role for their families, both in Spain and Nicaragua, and are continually negotiating access and provision of social protection, as well as the gendered expectations of such engagement at the transnational level. The next chapter will delve into these complex dynamics.

7 Effects of transnational social protection on Nicaraguan migrant women

This chapter considers the effects and implications of transnational social protection for Nicaraguan migrant women, in terms of viability and reconfiguration of gender relations. In this first part, I address women's efforts and sacrifices to make social protection viable for them and their families. The second section discusses whether women's engagement with social protection leads to a reconfiguration of gender relations in a transnational context.

7.1 “Even when it is not viable, we make any sacrifice to make it viable”¹⁷: viability of social protection

When I asked participants if they thought social protection was viable for them and their families, their responses were ambivalent. The women highlighted that providing social protection is more viable in Spain than in Nicaragua. In researching Ecuadorian migrants' engagement with TSP, Boccagni (2011:218) found that “working overseas remains the key means of social protection for migrant families despite the social and emotional costs for those who migrate and those left behind”. This is also the case for participants who reported that although employment conditions are precarious and insecure in Spain, and that being far from their loved ones is always difficult, they have more economic opportunities in Spain than in Nicaragua.

One of the participants suggested that “if you are here in Spain, it is easier for you to provide for your family” (Valeria, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza). Similarly, another woman indicated that “the fact of being in Spain does not limit you as much as being in Nicaragua. You can do more here” (Claudia, FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza). In this sense, migration makes social protection viable because it gives Nicaraguan women higher chances to provide social protection for their families.

Also, participants emphasized the extent to which they can provide for their families is linked to being employed and earning an income. One of the participants suggested that “as long as you have a job, it is viable” (Silvia, FGD, July 2018 Zaragoza). However, finding a job can be difficult, especially while being in an irregular situation. Valeria shared the arduous struggle she faced when arriving in Spain:

“At the beginning I would go to job interviews, but they only asked: papers, papers, papers? They would not hire me without a permit” (FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Further, during their first years in Spain, Nicaraguan migrant women's work is not only informal but also precarious. The concept of precarity is not only related to migrants' work sphere but “transcends it and interacts with workers' wider livelihoods and social locations” (Siegmann & Schiphorst 2016:116). In this sense, it is not only their work as domestic workers that

¹⁷ Quote from a conversation with Amanda during the FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza

make their live precarious, but also their status of migrant, especially when they are in an irregular situation. This precarity manifests in various ways, from the struggle of finding decent housing as an undocumented migrant, to trying not to be caught by authorities. A significant factor which heightens participants' precarity is their low wages. The minimum monthly salary stipulated for domestic workers in Spain for 2018 is €858.55 euros. Nevertheless, none of the women reach that amount. One of the participants describes her struggle to make ends meet:

“At the end of the month I’m always tight on money. Only in rent, water and electricity I pay 500 euros, 500 euros! I pay 300 euros for my apartment. For electricity, water, hot water, and other services I pay another 200 euros. Only on those things I need 500 euros already. Then the food, the tickets, the internet, the cell phone, what I send to my family in Nicaragua and maybe the small treat you want to give yourself. Do you know how hard is to pay for all that, my god! *No me cabe la vida para trabajar* [my whole life is not enough for all the work I have to do]” (Olga, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Other participants spoke of viability in terms of the future. For example, Amanda suggested that in the long-term, sending remittances is not precisely viable given that the remitted amount could be money she could be saving to invest in her future and the future of her children who now live with her in Spain. However, she feels it is a ‘moral obligation’ to support her in-laws in Nicaragua. Hence, remittances are also shaped by negotiations of reciprocity and obligation between Nicaraguan migrant women and their significant others in their country of origin. Sonia articulates this feeling of ‘moral obligation’ or responsibility in a few but strong words: “the money for remittances is sacred; you must send it” (FGD July 2018). As Amanda’s quote reflected in the title of this sub-section, these women make any sacrifice to make social protection viable, often financially restricting themselves, to provide for those in Nicaragua. Even when their situation is very precarious, participants provide for their families. This precarity, of course, affects the way women can access and provide social protection. As they emphasize, better paid, improved access and more stable jobs would facilitate the viability of social protection, but often, that is a meager option even for those in a regular administrative situation.

7.2 “I do the working; my husband does the cooking”: (re)configuration of gender roles

Informed by Mahler and Pessar’s concept of Gendered Geographies of Power, this sub-section discusses how “gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains” for Nicaraguan migrant women. This analysis is linked to examining if and how engagement in social protection can transform (produce, reproduce, or contest) gender relations in both Spain and Nicaragua. As evidenced in other studies (see Grabska et al. 2018), the provision of social protection is linked to migrant women’s gendered roles as mothers and daughters of those left behind.

The two channels through which Nicaraguan migrant women provide social protection, remittances, and transnational motherhood, reinforce gender norms which are embedded in the social and cultural transnational context. For instance, when I talked to the families of the women in Nicaragua, they suggested that their daughters or mothers are more 'reliable' than male members when it comes to providing support to their families. Being a good mother or daughter, caring from afar, and providing help are social expectations, particularly assigned to migrant women whom their families see as the ones responsible for their wellbeing. It is interesting to note that although most of the women I spoke to were single mothers, their children did not expect their fathers to provide for them, neither financially nor emotionally. The responsibility of providing protection and care seems to fall exclusively on migrant mothers, who are expected to be present and provide for their families. These dynamics are embedded and informed by context, as in Nicaragua absence of fathers is common and a matrifocal household organization is widespread (Cupples 2002:76).

For Nicaraguan migrant women, their migratory trajectories and transnational experiences have given them new ways to perceive gender relations. For instance, participants emphasized that through the process of migration, they have become the primary breadwinners in their families and have gained awareness of their own money and their sense of selves. As Assis et al. (2004:205) underline, "other than as a means to help promote their family's well-being, women also see in migration a journey of self-discovery".

Family members in Nicaragua also change the ways they see women. Migrant women occupy a prominent place, not only as providers but also as decision-makers in relevant matters. It is them, rather than their male counterparts, who usually decide who will be next in the migration chain and to make use of remittances. What is also relevant is that participants see themselves as the heads of their transnational households, a leadership role which is shared by other women in Nicaragua, usually their mothers or sisters.

However, the reconfiguration of gender roles does not happen without tension. As Liu (2015:81) underlines, for migrant women "the material burden of reproductive labor located in the patriarchal household in the home country is not discontinued—instead, it is intensified through their transnational care". In the case of Nicaraguan women, they embrace the role of breadwinner along with that of "traditionally 'female homemaker' identities - which, far from home, [are] possibly reshaped but by no means denied" (Boccagni 2014:226). This tension creates feelings of distress and anxiety, given that being a 'traditional female homemaker' implies substantial emotional effort from a distance.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that some respondents acknowledge their jobs as domestic workers reinforce traditional gender norms. This is a significant change for those women who prior to coming to Spain held office jobs in Nicaragua, which allow them to delineate the private and public spheres clearly; but whom now, as domestic workers, feel relegated to the private sphere, where traditional gender norms (i.e., considering domesticity is an essential feature of women) are reconstituted and reproduced.

This also relates to the double marginalization of migrant women in Spain, in terms of the stratification and segmentation along gender and ethnic lines of labor markets. Nicaraguan migrant women do not only establish themselves in the most precarious and less remunerated sectors, but this also reinforces gender roles, given that they have to perform the work that Spanish women do not want to do in the domestic and care sectors.

In their lives as transnational migrants, Nicaraguan women contemplate the gender roles they have in Spain and Nicaragua, comparing these two 'life-worlds'. Bonifacio (2012:6) underlines that the new and different culture of migrant women's host societies can "offer many ways to challenge, transform, or negotiate traditional prescriptions of womanhood, women's work, and identities, among others". For instance, participants emphasize that given the configuration of their lives in Spain "men have begun to share the responsibility for childrearing and housekeeping, thereby redefining other aspects of gender dynamics in more egalitarian terms" (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004:1015). This behavior contrasts with gender expectations in Nicaragua. Amanda, who brought her husband from Nicaragua, experienced this shift in gender roles within her family. Now in Spain, he is a stay-home father. She explained:

"In Nicaragua, in your family, in your relationships, in marriage women are the ones expected to do the cleaning, the cooking, raising the children, but here it is different. We are more equal" (FGD, July 2018, 2018).

Sonia is married to a Spanish man and they have a daughter together. They work together in their own parcel business, but it is Sonia who runs it. In the FGD she shared the following:

"In my house I do the working. My husband does the cooking. I am the one in charge of the business, I answer the phone and deal with customers while my husband is the one who does more chores at home. I was not used to a man like this before!" (FGD, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Participants highlight that engaging in work can be a way of transgressing traditional gender roles. Karla works experiences in El Salvador, where she set up her own business in an economic activity which was dominated by men, reflects such transgression:

"When I went to El Salvador I started a bicycle food cart business. My ex-husband told me then: 'Hahaha, you will not be able to do it because that's for men'. And I said to him, 'I will prove you wrong'. Against the odds, I ran my business for a whole year, and had up to 5 bicycles, 3 of my own. I showed him and other people that a woman could do it" (Personal interview, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Therefore, women participants "have pushed the gendered frontiers of the productive sphere forward through their participation as independent labour migrants across international borders" (Assis et al. 2004:201). Besides, participants also speak about the reconfiguration of gender relations in terms of empowerment. Yet, as Cornwall suggests, in this context empowerment should be seen as a relational process:

“Empowerment can be temporary, and some pathways of empowerment can lead women into experiences of disempowerment, from which they may or may not surface empowered. What empowers one woman might not empower another: there are no one-size-fits-all recipes for empowerment” (2016:344).

On the one hand, participants explain that their precarious work conditions, being away from their families, and the isolation can be very disempowering. The sacrifice entailed to provide social protection for those in Nicaragua is very high. On the other hand, the women are empowered through their personal networks and relationships, particularly by their involvement with ACC.

“As I said, I came at 18 years old, and I was working as a live-in domestic worker. Now, over the years, I have felt the need to support and promote gender equality and the rights of the domestic workers. I have learned a lot through the Association, through the social networks. I feel an empowered woman in all aspects. When you do not know anything is hard to be empowered. Like when I came here, I did not know the laws about family, parental authority, my rights, etc. But now I know about these things, but today I feel empowered” (Fatima, July 2018, Zaragoza).

Summarizing this chapter, participants make social protection feasible by engaging in different formal and informal social protection arrangements and strategies. Furthermore, the extent to whether the viability of social protection is possible is highly related to the volatile lives and precarious work of Nicaraguan migrant women. Findings suggest that engagement with transnational social protection can lead to a reconfiguration of gender relations, but this does not happen without tensions. Winters, who also researched the migration of Nicaraguan women to Spain, suggests that moving “across public and private domains, this type of migration and labor may those make the research participants feel both ‘caged’ and more free at the same time” (2018:6). Women gain more agency, autonomy, and decision-making power within their families. In Spain, these women “encounter and enjoy other norms of how women can and should behave” (Ibid.), which sometimes leads Nicaraguan migrant women to feel empowered. Nonetheless, working in such a private space, a household, such engagement can also reconstitute traditional gender roles.

8 Conclusions

This research has emphasized the need to carefully examine how migrants, especially women, engage in transnational social protection, and the challenges and opportunities this brings to their lives and the lives of their families. The experiences of participants illustrate that formal protection is hardly effective in addressing the various risks and vulnerabilities that people on the move face. It is instead through a combination of informal and formal social protection arrangements that migrants make welfare viable for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, this comes at the expense of migrants' enormous sacrifices, such as precarious life conditions and distance from loved ones.

Moreover, Nicaraguan migrant women's narratives "reveal effects of immigration legislation on personal lives, which one cannot simply read off the legal or policy texts" (Erel 2007: no page number). These narratives are important in examining the issue of social protection in a transnational context, given that they portray how women experience exclusion from social protection schemes in Spain and Nicaragua. They too highlight the ways these women actively create informal strategies to engage in social protection and ensure welfare transnationally, contesting, and resisting these structures of exclusion throughout their migratory trajectories. In this sense, although it is true that respondents do face a lot of challenges and obstacles, and experience a double-marginalization, as migrant women and domestic workers, which often positions them "as relatively vulnerable subjects in global labor and migration regimes" (Winters 2018:6), none of them "see themselves as victims of a destiny they have not chosen" (Vives 2012:75).

Instead, as this research evidences, Nicaraguan migrant women continuously make choices, sometimes out of a limited number of options, to shape and improve their lives and the lives of their families. A significant amount of these choices is directly related to the diverse ways in which they engage in social protection to ensure their own and their families' welfare transnationally. The act of migrating itself represents one of these crucial choices. Emphasizing Nicaraguan migrant women's agency and seeing them "as what they are: people with experiences before and beyond migration, with desires, aspirations, choices, and fears" (Ibid.) is essential to grasp a nuanced understanding of these transnational dynamics.

A note on the theoretical and methodological approaches

The case of Nicaraguan migrant women provides an example of the added value that the conceptual framework, proposed in Chapter 3, has for approaching the study of social protection on the move or TSP from three lenses: transnational angle, the migration-social protection nexus, and gender.

Looking at transnational social protection through a migration-social protection nexus can help identify migrant-specific needs, risks, and vulnerabilities, and social protection interventions to address such needs and which can go in accordance to current migration and transnational trends. In

this sense, this research highlights the structure of opportunities and barriers to accessing and providing social protection across borders. Such fragmentations and contradictions need to be understood and taken into consideration to provide a sharper analysis of migrants' engagement with social protection. Moreover, Nicaraguan migrant women's experiences demonstrate that transnational social protection is a gendered process, as strategies and practices of social protection, such as remittances and transnational care arrangements, are embedded in participants' family expectations, which are also shaped by gender notions in the countries of origin and destination.

Furthermore, this work evidences the methodological contributions of multi-sited research when studying issues of transnational migration. The multi-sited methodology allowed me to interact with diverse actors in both the sending and receiving states to comprehend better how Nicaraguan migrant women engage with social protection transnationally. Doing empirical research across borders provided me with multiple perspectives of the diverse degrees of mobility and transnational ties among Nicaraguan migrant women and their non-migrant families in Nicaragua. In this sense, only through a prism of immobility, I was able to understand mobility and its consequences for those who are immobile.

Further research

Future research that combines transnational and gender approaches is relevant and required to redefine and comprehend migrant's engagement with social protection across borders, in terms of understanding gendered dynamics within different forms of transnational social protection, and whether engagement in transnational social protection challenges or deepens gender inequalities in sending and receiving countries.

Policy recommendations

The experiences and everyday lives of migrants reflect the various ways in which they provide vital contributions to the socioeconomic development of their country of origin and host society, particularly in the context of transnational social protection. Most research participants are migrant domestic workers who contribute significantly to fulfilling the demand for care in Spain, a country whose welfare system, as it is the case in many other in migrant-receiving countries, has become a beneficiary of the irregular, precarious and underpaid work that undocumented migrants do (Moreno Fuentes & Bruquetas Callejo 2011; Mingot & Mazzucato 2018); yet Spain lacks policies or initiatives to provide these migrants with a life of dignity and protection.

Considering this reality, I want to suggest specific policy recommendations for enhancing the social protection of Nicaraguan migrant women. First, Spain and Nicaragua could develop bilateral agreements in place to allow Nicaraguan migrants to migrate in a regular fashion and to allow for portability of benefits. Taha et al. (2015:3) suggest that "the portability of social protection is an important transformative reform needed to respect the human rights of

migrants, who are required and generated by the global economic system”. As such, this initiative could help migrant populations reduce risks and vulnerabilities related to migration, and thus can facilitate other informal forms of social protection, such as transnational care arrangements.

The Nicaraguan government must begin to value the monumental contribution of migrants beyond the discourse of remittances and implement policies and programs to support the Nicaraguan migrant population abroad, as well as their non-migrant significant others in Nicaragua. Some countries, such as Ecuador and the Philippines have already set institutions in place which grant services to migrants and their families within the border of their countries and abroad and could serve as models of reference (See Boccagni 2011; Olivier 2017).

In the case of Spain, the Spanish government should work on elaborating a more humane immigration reform to facilitate the regularization of undocumented migrants, which would also improve the access of migrants to the social security system. Ratifying the Convention 189 and enforcing the application of the SRHE’s recent reform would also represent significant steps towards improving the precarious lives of hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers.

Finally, as Levitt (2017b) emphasizes, “families and communities cross borders but the legal, pension and education systems that serve them do not”. Therefore, today and in the time to come, the topic of social protection on the move will remain a relevant matter of contention in the fields of social policy, development, and migration. Perhaps then the transnational social question that we must envision to tackle should not only be how migrants access and provide social protection across borders, but also how can *more just, inclusive and transformative* forms of social protection be provided and ensured for people on the move.

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Appendices

Annex 1. List of Research Participants

Fieldwork Part I: Zaragoza, Spain

Table 3
Interviewees (Nicaraguan Migrant Women)

Name	Age	Dates
Sonia	35	July 10 2018 July 25 2018
Mariana	53	July 11 2018 July 13 2018
Olga	64	July 11 2018 July 12 2018
Karla	48	July 11 2018 July 18 2018
Fatima	29	July 18 2018 July 22 2018

Table 4
Interviewees (Key Informants)

Name	Organization/University	Date
Erika López	Casa de las Culturas	July 2 2018
Ana Lucía Hernández Cordero	University of Zaragoza	July 5 2018
Ana Cristina Romea	University of San Jorge	July 14 2018
Javier Arce	Association Atarraya-Centroamérica	July 16 2018

Table 5
Focus Group Discussion Participants

Name	Age	Date
Fatima	29	July 22 2018
Olga	64	July 22 2018
Sonia	35	July 22 2018
Amanda	32	July 22 2018
Silvia	45	July 22 2018
Valeria	42	July 22 2018
Claudia	40	July 22 2018

Fieldwork Part II: Nicaragua

Table 6
Interviewees (Family Members of Nicaraguan Migrant Women)

Participant	Relation to Participants in Zaragoza	Age	Date	Place
Alex	Mariana's son	27	29 August 2018	Chinandega
Carmen	Sonia's mother	65	29 August 2018	Managua
Laura	Karla's mother	60	30 August 2018	Chinandega

Annex 2

Table 7
Participants' Sociodemographic Information

Name	Age	Years in Spain	Arrival Year	City of Origin	Migration before/after Spain	Children	Partner	Head of household	Education	Employment
Sonia	35	7	2011	Managua	Yes, internally in Nicaragua. And also in Spain, from Zaragoza to Alcañiz	1 in Spain	Married	Together with husband	Agricultural engineer	Owens a small parcel business
Mariana	53	9	2009	Chinandega	No	1 in Spain and 2 in Nicaragua	Married	Together with husband	High School	Live-in domestic worker
Olga	64	12	2006	Managua	No	4 in Nicaragua	Single	Yes	Trained as a nurse in Nicaragua	Live-out domestic worker
Karla	48	13	2005	Chinandega	Yes, before to El Salvador (4 years)	2 in Nicaragua	In a relationship	Together with husband	High School	Live-out domestic worker
Fatima	29	10	2008	Jinotega	Yes, after to Costa Rica (2 years) and then returned to Spain	1 in Spain	Single	Yes	High School/Currently studying nursing	Waitress/Geriatric care assistant
Amanda	32	10	2008	Chinandega	Yes, internally in Nicaragua because of Hurricane Mitch.	2 in Spain	Married	Together with husband	Technical degree in accounting	Live-out domestic worker
Silvia	45	15	2003	Jinotega	Yes, came to Spain for 3 years went back to Nicaragua and returned to Spain after 2 years	3 in Spain	Single	Yes	High School	Janitor
Valeria	42	1	2017	Chinandega	No	2 in Nicaragua	Single	Together with mother in Nicaragua	Technical degree in accounting	Live-in domestic worker
Claudia	40	0.5	2018	Managua	Yes, to Costa Rica and Panamá for work.	1 in Spain	Single	Yes	Master's degree/Currently studying accounting	Unemployed

Map 1
Location of Zaragoza in Spain



Map 2
Location of Chinandega
in Nicaragua



Map 3
Location of Managua
in Nicaragua

