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# The Migration of Skilled Women: A Case Study in the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

This article concerns the case of Spanish women with higher education and their migration to the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2012. Based on an analysis of available statistical data and qualitative research (participant observation and 12 in-depth interviews), we explore the work and living conditions of migrant women. The results indicate: 1) that the number of migrants during the crisis is lower than previously thought and that, according to the available data, it cannot be classed as skilled migration; 2) similarly, that the socio-demographic profile is heterogeneous and, 3) that there are diverse economic conditions upon entry, often resulting in situations of vulnerability and social exclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

In the past two years the migration of Spaniards has notoriously increased and continuously plays a significant role in the press and political agenda of the country. There are panicked voices that speak of the hundreds of thousands of migrants, qualifying the process as “brain drain”, a waste of the resources invested in education and a threat to the future of the country. The predominant stereotype in these accounts is one of young unemployed migrants with higher education who find a more promising future on foreign lands.

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This article gives an analysis of the available statistical sources with the objective to give a quantitative measure of the phenomenon. In the same way, using qualitative research techniques (participant observation and 12 in-depth interviews conducted in the United Kingdom between May and August of 2012), we explore the work and living conditions of migrant women with higher education. The results of the study indicate that the number of migrants during the crisis is lower than previously thought; that there is a balanced number between the sexes; and that there are heterogeneous socio-demographic profiles. The entry experiences to destination locations are diverse, and in many cases we find that there is social exclusion in situations dealing with migrants with higher education. This “brain waste” has already been found in other skilled migration flows (Beckhusen, Florax, Poot and Waldorf, 2013).

## 2. New arenas for the study of skilled migration

The most well-known characteristic of skilled migration has been that of *Brain Drain*, coined in the fifties as a way to characterize the “loss” of physicians in the United Kingdom to the United States, but it was quickly adopted by other countries and regions in order to problematize the migration of professionals and scientists. Thus was born a fruitful academic debate that polarized itself into two antagonistic positions: “internationalism” being the position which promoted the free circulation of human resources and “nationalism” being the one that maintained that human resources are a key factor in national development, and consequently, should be anchored to a designated Nation State. The arguments adopted systemic and structuralist approaches that carried weight in the social sciences. Adams (1968) summarizes this controversy.

As time passed, the topic lost importance in the scientific sphere and in political agendas; however, in the last two decades it has gained ground in a host of new settings. The first of these has been the economic stage. The consolidation of a global economy, synchronized in real time, where knowledge, information, and technological innovation have transformed into basic consumables for the growth of productivity and competition, has transformed human resources into a central aspect of economic and social development, indispensable for countries.

The second and third reimagined settings, which are also closely tied to the first, have been work and education. The definition of salaried work which industrial modernity has established and the social life that results from it have drastically changed the last few decades; hence adding to a pattern of flexibility. Education is also experimenting with severe transformations especially in terms of how now the formation of new generations of workers is counted amongst social functions (e.g. Carnoy, 2001).

The fourth reimagined setting has been the demographic. The statistics show that skilled migrations have incrementally increased in the last two decades. On average for the whole planet, the percentage of people migrating from the pool of those with higher education climbed from 5 to 5.4%, with medium education rose from 1.4 to 1.8%, and those with low education decreased from 1.2 to 1.1%. It seems that migration tends to be higher amongst those with higher education (Docquier and Marfouk, 2006). Moreover, the composition of such migrations has changed favoring women and the young. The first is a logical consequence of the greater female presence in education and in the area of production (see Docquier, Lowell and Marfouk, 2009); the second is due to an increase in international migration of the youth seeking better education (see Adnett, 2010).

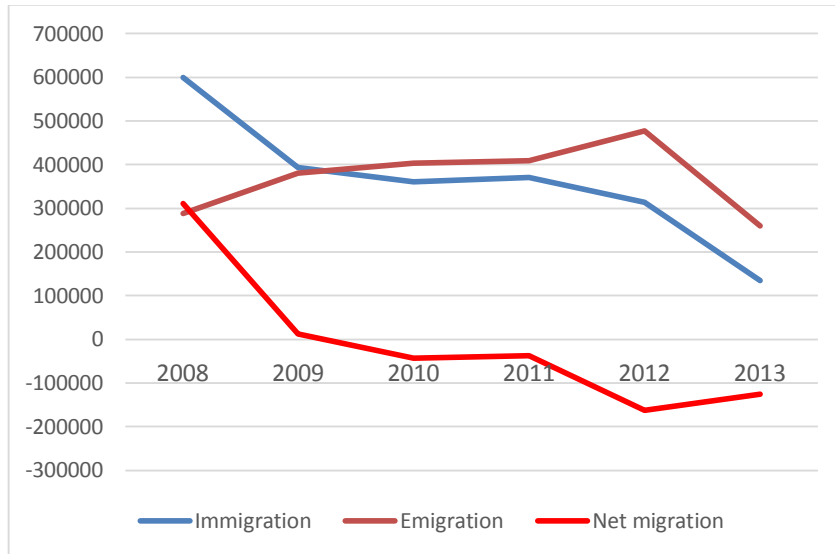
On the other hand, although the United States continues to be the main receiver of skilled migrants (more or less half of the OCDE group), the map of destinations has diversified with the incorporation of new countries, following the general tendency of international migration flows (Castles and Miller, 2003).

The fifth reimagined setting has been the theoretical debate over skilled migration itself. The “development” of a transnational perspective in the study of migratory processes (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999) rescued the old concept of *diaspora* and transformed it into the center of new perspectives (*Brain Circulation and Brain Exchange*) (e.g. Martínez Pizarro, 2005; Pellegrino, 2001). These new approaches questioned the negative repercussions of skilled migration for the development of the countries of origin (*Brain Drain*), with proposals that maintain that the loss is compensated for by mechanisms of exchange and temporal mobility of human resources between developing countries and those more economically developed. Later, after questions over skilled migration resulted in confirmation that it leads to both positive and negative effects, visions surfaced that were less deterministic like “beneficial *Brain Drain*” (Beine, Doquier and Rapoport, 2008, 2009) and *Brain Strain* (Lowell, Findlay and Stewart, 2004).

### 3. Statistical Analysis of Actual Migration of Spaniards

Between 2000 and 2008 Spain saw the greatest increase in migratory flows coming into the country. Foreigners grew from 924,000, 2.3% of the total population, to 5.3 million. During this period, Spain served as the main receiver of migratory flows in the European Union and has only been surpassed by the United States within the OCDE. After experiencing an explosive growth of foreign immigration during the last decade, beginning in 2010 new negative migration deficits began to take effect: 42,675 people during the same year, 37,699 in 2011, 162,390 in 2012, and 124,915 during the first semester in 2013, according to the latest reports filed by the National Statistics Institute (INE). In conclusion, in the last couple of years there has been a steep growth in migration (around 300%) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Foreign Migration and Migratory Deficit in Spain (2008-2013)\*



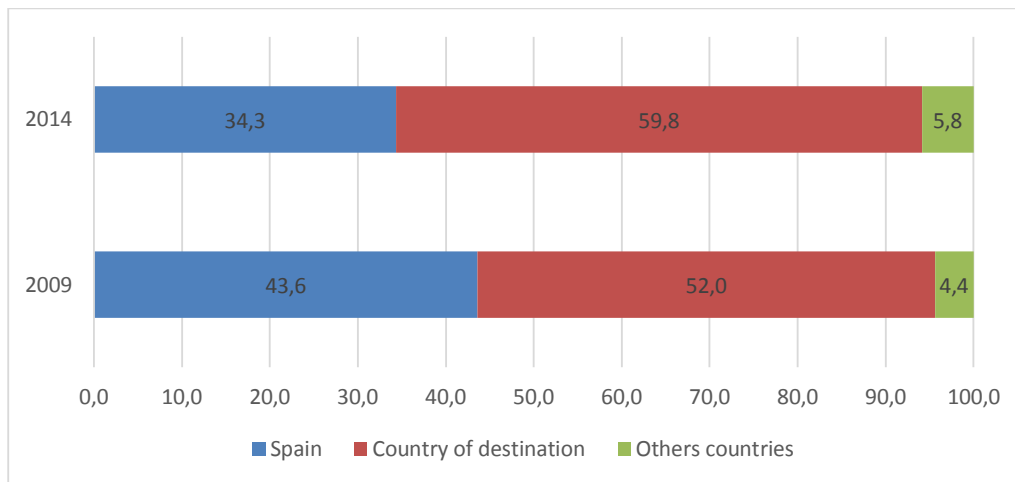
\*The 2013 data only refer to the first semester.

Source: Register of Inhabitants, INE

This data made the social alarms go off. According to the numbers provided by the INE, according to the Register of Inhabitants conducted on the first of January of each year, the Spanish population had shrunk by 113,902 people (0.2%) during 2012 and by 118,238 in the first half of 2013 (0.2%), constituting the first annual census decline of inhabitants since 1971. At the same time, according to the Register of Spanish Residents Abroad (PERE), in the last 4 years (2010-2014) the Spanish population abroad has increased by 30% (from 1,574,123 to 2,058,048) reaching the two million mark. This includes inscriptions of those that while enjoying Spanish nationality, live habitually abroad, whether or not this is their only nationality. It is constructed by the existing data from the Enrollment Registry of each consular office.

However, a more in-depth analysis of the data reveals that the actual migration of Spaniards may have more modest dimensions. On the one hand, from the pool of Spaniards residing abroad, only 34% were born in Spain; this means that only 34% can be classed as truly emigrants. The rest are nationalized Spaniards abroad, mostly (60%) people who were born in their resident country and therefore, could not be classed as migrants (Fig. 2). On the other hand, from the pool of Spaniards born in Spain and reside abroad, 90% (633,750) were already gone by 2009.

Fig. 2. Spanish Citizens residing abroad categorized according to birthplace (2009 and 2014, by percentages).



Source: PERE, INE

In conclusion, from the above data we can deduce that the new Spanish migrants, who abandoned their country at the cusp of the economic crisis (considering the period between 2009-2013), are a small group in comparison to the group of individuals with Spanish nationality that reside abroad (68,984 people against 2,058,048). These migrants constitute less than 0.1% of the Spanish population. In addition, the published data up to now does not take into account the level of education of the emigrated population, for which it is impossible to classify this migration as “brain drain”.

Depending on the countries and continents of residence, Spanish migrants may be classified according to three types:

- Spanish migrants that moved to countries in the center and north of Europe. One can distinguish the old migrants that left in the 60s and 70s from those that have actually migrated now by observing how many Spaniards there were before the economic crisis and how many there are now. According to PERE, in the beginning of 2009 there were 329,449 Spaniards in Europe while in 2014 there are 365,490, an increase of 36,041 (11%).
- Old and new migrants that have transplanted themselves to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. They are 252,596 people, less than a fourth (21%) of the Spanish citizens that reside in the American Subcontinent. Amongst this group, the great majority (238,147; 94%) already resided in the region since 2009. Taking this into account, the increase produced during the crisis has been 6% (14,449).
- Spaniards in other parts of the world (Asia, Africa, Oceania), especially those in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. In 2014 they total 181,461 people according to PERE. However, only a part of this growth is due to Spaniards born in Spain and the greater growth from 2002 originates with people not born in Spain or in the country of residence. The case of the U.S., which is the primary migratory destination of Spaniards after Europe and Latin America, clearly shows that it is the number of those not born in Spain (18%) nor in the U.S. (44%) that has grown, that is, those born in other countries (54%). We are dealing with people that have acquired Spanish nationality, mostly Latin Americans that emigrated to Spain and then the U.S. In 2014, less than half of the Spanish citizens living in the U.S. were born in Spain (45,481; 44%).

As González Enríquez (2013) states, this kind of analysis can obscure two types of migratory processes. First, it could be that the number of real emigrants was greater than was reported in the statistics, given that many migrants, especially the most recent, do not report themselves to the corresponding consulate and therefore are statistically invisible as migrants. In order to evaluate this possible misrepresentation, the author has compared the Spanish data

with those of the statistical offices in four countries that receive 76% of Spanish migrants in Europe (Germany, United Kingdom, France, Switzerland). According to this comparison, the author concludes that the statistical sources of Spain did not underestimate the number of Spanish residing abroad.

Another situation that could be happening is that Spaniards could be trying their luck in other countries on a temporary basis and do not stay long enough to register at their respective consulates. It could also be that the data is not reporting significant flows that are coming and going, that is, that Spanish migrants are abandoning their destination countries at the same time that others are arriving. This is what seems to be the case in the data obtained from Germany and the United Kingdom: the number of Spaniards arriving grows but the number of residents is not proportionally modified, which implies that others are leaving.

Finally, if we pay attention to how Spanish women, born in Spain, are distributed as migrants abroad, we find that virtually all of them reside in European (53%), Latin American and Caribbean (35%) countries. The ones residing in Europe are found in four destinations: France (33%), United Kingdom (14%), Germany (15%) and Switzerland (12%). These are all veteran receivers of migrants since the 60s. As soon as residents in Latin America and the Caribbean also reach such growth, the majority of migrants will most likely reside in former colonies founded by old migrants: Argentina (41%), Venezuela (21%), Brazil (10%) and Mexico (6%). In the aforementioned countries there is an equal representation of men and women (see Table 1).

### 5. Ethnographic Analysis of Migration of Skilled Women

As a result of fieldwork it has been found that the composition of migration is much more diverse than previously thought. The press paints a stereotype of migrants characterized as young with a university degree that have abandoned their country for lack of opportunities and, in a majority of cases, “reach their goals” abroad. However, the ethnography gathered in the United Kingdom allows us to talk about diverse profiles and situations. On the one hand, scientists and professionals with extensive careers were indeed a category of those whom emigrated, however, there were also recently graduated young persons with little or no work experience, manual laborers without university education (with and without work experience) and women that traveled for the primary reason of keeping their family together (migrants without a migratory goal). On the other hand, destination situations reflect very different experiences: women who went beyond their initial expectations (in terms of income and prestige) and others that were close to social exclusion.

Focusing on the migratory experiences of women with degrees in higher education, we observe that profiles here are also varied. We will now deal with the following typical cases (Heinemann, 2003: 205-206): 1) Estefanía and Ana, scientists with skilled employment; 2) Inma, a migrant “consort”; 3) Mariola, Begoña, and Ainhoa, manual laborers.

Estefanía, who is 33 years old, is a scientist (Biomedicine) and a Marie Curie scholarship recipient with a European project about infant cognitive development. “I knew that if I wanted to continue with my research then I had to emigrate”. Her wish came true. Ana (44 years old), is also a biologist, but she has been living in the United Kingdom for 20 years and has a stable job in her profession. In both cases the transition from university to the business world was automatic, without having to climb the proverbial job ladder. In the same way, both scientists arrived for the first time in the United Kingdom as Erasmus students; it was an experience that, they assured me, was defining in terms of their later migration, confirming a hypothesis that is elaborated upon in the bibliography regarding skilled migration (OCDE, 2004, amongst others).

Inma, who is 31 years old, is an architect and has work experience. She was unemployed when she decided to accompany her partner to Edinburgh. Her migration can be classed as “familial” because her objective in moving was to keep her family united. Once there, “I went into hospitality and now I work as a waitress in a very well known Spanish restaurant (...) although it wasn’t the type of work I trained for, I think I managed to integrate myself and feel more at home”.

Mariola (27 years old) graduated in 2009 in business administration. Since then, she has bounced around with temporary and practical jobs ranging from waitressing to receptionist. She emigrated to London with the goal to learn English and find a place of skilled employment; however, she remains in London working in hospitality. She shares a place to live with other young migrants in a crowded living area and complains about the deterioration of her lifestyle due to an inability to find adequate living conditions that support her needs.

“In order to rent there are many restrictions, like paying in advance, and it’s also very expensive. In the end, you end up working for your rent. It’s not worth it (...) London is a very difficult city. Looking for a place to live is a

nightmare, everything is too expensive and, in general, badly maintained and old. Also, transportation is awful. If it wasn't because there are no jobs in Spain, I would return, because living like this".

Begoña (28 years old, licensed in audiovisual communications) had a job but decided to leave it to "focus" on English. She arrived at Liverpool with the idea of being there only four months; however, she had been living there a year and a half with a student visa and working as a waitress. She defined her work conditions as precarious (long and intense work hours, a temporary contract, low salary, she has no union coverage or possibility of promotion) and her living conditions as "miserable".

"The experience that I'm going through is unique, but the hard part is accepting where you're at, that your life has changed and your level of life has diminished (...) sometimes I'm scared that I'll get used to this new life that is so miserable. I think I've grown accustomed to wanting less material things, riding a bicycle or consuming less".

Ainhoa emigrated to Cardiff (Wales) in 2009 with the goal of looking for work (as a social-worker) and work on her English. She had friends in the city from her "time as an *au pair*" in the summers, "to make a few bucks while I was at school". In reality she has two jobs: she works in a hotel in the morning and a pub in the evening.

"The first two years were like hell. I couldn't find a way to fit in and I couldn't stand being away from my family. Also, the weather was unbearable, it rained every day. My English was horrible. Now it is a lot better, but I still can't see any possibility of finding a better job. I don't have any free time to look for other work or to better myself. I'm falling behind".

## 6. Conclusion

An analysis of the available statistical data reveals that the number of Spaniards born in Spain and residing abroad has only increased by 69,000 people since the beginning of the economic crisis (between 2009 and 2014). A number which is much lower than that published in the press (around half a million). Only 34% of Spaniards residing abroad (two million) were born in Spain, this means that only they can qualify as true emigrants; of this pool, 90% were already out of the country once the crisis began. Migratory flows figure an equal representation of the sexes which is contrary to the worldwide tendency that favors women in migration. The statistical data does not provide any information about the level of education of the migrants; therefore, the recent relocations cannot be classified as "skilled migration".

Focusing on emigrated women with higher education, the ethnographic analysis allows us to draw diverse work and socioeconomic profiles but they can be grouped, analytically, into two types:

- Migrants with skilled labor. Their level of income and social status is higher than before relocation. They migrated with "knowledge of the terrain" that is, they counted on previously established social networks and a "first hand" knowledge acquired through prior stints involving study or work (Erasmus Program, Au Pair).
- Migrants with non-skilled work. They are employed in the secondary job market characterized by low wages, long work days, no union representation, and lack of promotion. These conditions tend to perpetuate themselves and result in life conditions that come close to social exclusion.

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