

“If I lose this, I have nothing”: ‘carrier’ women during the Spanish-Moroccan border closure

“Si no tengo esto, no tengo nada”: mujeres porteadoras durante el cierre fronterizo entre España y Marruecos

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Abstract

The closure of the Spanish Southern border between Morocco and the Spanish city of Melilla induced by Covid-19 disrupted the work and life course of thousands of women crossing merchandise on the border. This research analyzes the survival strategies of these women after the border closure and the transformations of this unequal region. Using a Grounded Theory approach, participant observation and interviews to carrier women and informants were conducted in Melilla in 2021. Migration, family support and other precarious feminized jobs were found to be the most common survival alternatives. The conclusions point out that the border closure and the changes affecting the region of Nador may be the end of this income source for these women. This analysis contributes with new data on the global feminization of survival, although further research on these strategies is needed due to the constant changes in this border.

Keywords: carrier women, Spanish Southern border, feminization of survival, cross-border work, Melilla.

Resumen

El cierre de la frontera sur española entre Marruecos y la ciudad española de Melilla por la COVID-19 ha roto la trayectoria laboral y vital de miles de porteadoras marroquíes que se dedicaban al contrabando transfronterizo. Este trabajo analiza sus estrategias de supervivencia tras el cierre de esta frontera marcada por la desigualdad y las transformaciones macro en la región. Siguiendo la Teoría Fundamentada, en 2021 se realizó observación participante en Melilla, y se entrevistó a porteadoras e informantes clave. Los resultados señalan como alternativas de subsistencia: la migración, el apoyo familiar y otros trabajos precarios feminizados. Se concluye que este cierre y los cambios en la región de Nador suponen el fin de este

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medio de vida para estas mujeres. Este análisis contribuye al introducir nuevos supuestos de la feminización global de la supervivencia, aunque es necesario seguir investigando estas estrategias ante los cambios constantes de esta frontera.

Palabras clave: porteadoras, frontera sur española, feminización de la supervivencia, trabajo transfronterizo, Melilla.

Introduction

On March 14, 2020, the border between Morocco and Spain was closed as a containment measure for COVID-19. From the labor perspective, this closure had a visible consequence: the loss of employment for thousands of people who crossed the Moroccan border daily to two adjacent Spanish autonomous cities to work. This article focuses on the city of Melilla, with an area of 12 km² and located on the north coast of Africa. This location makes it, together with the city of Ceuta, the only external land border between the Spanish territory and Morocco, serving as borders to Europe. The daily border circuits that existed between these territories and the adjacent Moroccan provinces were interrupted overnight by the border closure, which disrupted the life trajectories of thousands of people.¹

Until the arrival of COVID-19, the geographic and fiscal singularities of the autonomous cities promote activities related to smuggling and the so-called "atypical trade". This consisted of buying merchandise on the Spanish side of the border and selling it on the Moroccan side, thus avoiding the payment of tariffs because such goods were considered personal luggage (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018). This activity was carried out almost daily by so-called "carrier women". This term refers to Moroccan women who reside in the municipalities adjacent to the border and who transport goods on their shoulders in extreme conditions from the Spanish territory to the Moroccan territory (Fuentes-Lara, 2019).

Although there is more literature on the precariousness of women in cross-border contexts between Spain and Morocco, it focuses on other sectors, such as domestic and care work (Galán Pareja, 2012; Ramírez, 2020) or work in export manufacturing companies (Nair & El-Khamlichi, 2016; Trinidad Requena et al., 2019, etc.). Research on carrier women is scarcer; however, in recent years, some studies have addressed this population, focusing especially on carrier women in Ceuta (Fuentes Lara, 2017; Fuentes-Lara 2019; Soriano Miras & Fuentes Lara, 2015). The situation of vulnerability of these women is framed in what Sassen (2003) calls the global feminization of survival, through which women experience the most serious consequences of poverty and maintain responsibility for reproduction and caregiving.

¹ On May 22, 2022, this border was reopened under Order INT/424/2022, of May 13, although with substantial changes in the crossing conditions, many of them contemplated in this work. The restriction of passage only to those cross-border workers with an employment contract of 40 hours per week and the prohibition of the passage of goods stand out. Thus, despite the border being open again, carrier women were still unable to recover their livelihood.

The aim of this work is to explore *a)* the strategies adopted by carrier women to survive after the loss of their livelihood due to the border closure and *b)* the changes in the border regions that conditioned these strategies at the macro level. These transformations and the (im)mobilities in the Melilla-Nador border context are marked by global dynamics of inequality between the Global North and South that create commercial circuits, often traveled by women in vulnerable situations. This link and the possibility of agency from this vulnerability is presented in the first part of the article. The methodological section describes the analysis strategy, which is based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Subsequently, the results are provided: first, the macrolevel processes that are taking place on the Melilla-Nador border are exposed, and second, the profile and agency of these women are described. The article concludes with a reflection on how global or transnational phenomena affect local actors—in our case, carrier women—without forgetting the specificity of the border context in which the action takes place.

Border circuits crossed by inequality: between the global and the local

For decades, an intense debate has developed around the definition of the term “globalization”; for this work, the most accurate meaning is the process of liberalization to create a world economy without borders (Scholte, 2005). However, although the borders of States have been made more flexible for the mobility of capital and goods, this process has not occurred in a homogeneous way with the people; their greater or lesser freedom of movement is conditioned by the position of the countries within the world economy (Sobczyk et al., 2020; Soriano et al., 2016).

In this logical inequality between States, Braveboy-Wagner (2003) noted that a distinction can be made between countries in a North-South orientation based on their position in the global market. Fraser (2010) points to the appearance of “the global poor”, without forgetting the existence of those who gain thanks to this asymmetry. Other authors note the appearance of similar categories in global processes; Sassen (2015) refers to those expelled from the global economy and to the new “serving classes”² (Sassen, 2003).

These global dynamics require overcoming methodological nationalism (Pries & Seeliger, 2012) and analyzing the interaction between the global and the local following the theory of the localized global economy (Trinidad Requena et al., 2015). These effects of global processes on the daily life of local actors are greater in border contexts, in which changes in the national configuration are more visible (Morales, 2010). In

² Sassen (2003) argues that as a consequence of economic globalization and the internationalization of manufacturing production, a global proletariat is constituted in conditions of overexploitation formed mostly by women and immigrants.

addition, they are more notable even in those territories in which the continuous and frequent mobility of the inhabitants grant such territories the classification of "cross-borderness" (Tapia Ladino, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to analyze the Melilla-Nador border region as a unique border context, which is at the same time mediated by dynamics of encounter between the Global North and South.

The development of contexts based on the movement of people means that borders cannot be conceived as limits or places of static control between territories. In the last half century, this idea has given rise to other more flexible concepts of borders, considering them from symbolic elements that build ethnicity (Firpo Reggio, 2019) to places where social experiences are created (Newman, 2006). The mobility between these regions does not meet the properties of migration but rather of circular movements of the population that do not seek to establish themselves in the destination country (Solé et al., 2016); as such, these populations must be studied from a cross-border or transnational approach (Magalhães, 2021).

Within these crossing movements, the existence of asymmetries between regions configures interactions experienced differently on each side of the border (Bustamante, 1989; Aparna & Kramsch, 2022). One of these possible interactions promoted by inequality is the creation of merchandise exchange circuits and cross-border smuggling (Hernández Hernández, 2021). From an economic perspective in our research, the inequality between Morocco and Spain has grown since the latter's accession to the European Union in 1986. In 2020, Morocco ranked 121 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index—which considers, among other factors, gender inequalities—and Spain was ranked 25 (United Nations Development Program, 2020). Regarding the position in the world economy, according to GDP, Spain ranks 25 and Morocco 58 (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

Thus, economic differences between regions favor trade, including illegal trade flows such as the phenomenon of illegal smuggling called "atypical trade" (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008; López Sala, 2012). "Atypical trade" includes the pedestrian crossing of merchandise from the Spanish territory to the Moroccan territory in bundles as luggage. Female participation in trade is no exception on this border. The use of women's bodies to cross and sell merchandise is a pattern present in different borders of the world, turning these women into vulnerable subjects due to the precariousness they experience and because they do not serve as workers in any institution (Fuentes-Lara & Quesada Herrera, 2019; Veloz Contreras, 2019).

In other feminized and precarious jobs, such as domestic work, Parella Rubio (2003) describes a triple discrimination against migrant women from countries of the Global South whose options are limited in Spain. Although in the case of carrier women they are not considered migrants, Moroccan women who crossed the Spanish southern border to work were associated with more precarious jobs than the locals did not want to do (Ramírez, 2020). Thus, the intersectional perspective allows us to analyze the interaction between these discriminations that give rise to specific positions of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 2017). This vulnerability, although it limits their options, does not prevent them from having agency capacity as subjects in search of their own interests; rather, the agency is exercised from this vulnerability (Gandarias Goikoetxea, 2019).

Methodology

The objectives of this paper are to analyze the strategies developed by carrier women to survive the loss of their way of life during the border closure and to explore how macrolevel transformations in border regions have conditioned these strategies. For this, following the precepts of grounded theory enunciated by Glaser and Strauss (1999), a qualitative approach has been used that allows us to reveal how this new reality is built. This method seeks to detect similarities and differences in the data to establish patterns of behavior around social processes (Trinidad Requena et al., 2012).

The main data production technique was participant and unstructured observation (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019), which was carried out in the summer of 2021. During this time, daily contact was maintained with cross-border workers and professionals at an NGO in Melilla who served this population. Informal discussions were also held with other cross-border workers (e.g., truckers). This contact made it possible to prepare a field diary with varied experiences about the operation of the cross-border circuit. In addition, this strategy enabled continuous contact with different carrying situations through the snowball technique.

Given the irregularity associated with the work of carrier women together with the impossibility of direct recruitment in their work context given the border closure, several strategies were combined to access the population "hidden by choice" (Noy, 2008). The aim was not to obtain a representative sample but to find various first-person experiences and give an account of their context (Bertaux, 2005). For this, the focus of attention has been placed on the most representative population involved in carrier work on the Melilla-Nador border and the consequences of the border closure. Thus, in line with what is established by grounded theory, sampling does not imply a representation of a population but rather aims to develop a theoretical category (Charmaz, 2012). The profiles of those interviewed were as follows:

- CW1: carrier woman born in a locale with 300 000 to 500 000 inhabitants, 30 to 40 years old, separated, 2 children, without studies;
- CW2: carrier woman born in a locale with 30 000 to 50 000 inhabitants, 41 to 50 years old, divorced, 2 children, primary education;
- CW3: carrier woman born in a locale with 100 000 to 200 000 inhabitants, 41 to 50 years old, married, 3 children, primary education;³
- RS: journalist who has specialized for years in cross-border work and carrier work; and
- DLI: Director of Labor and Immigration of the Delegation of Melilla.

³ Story obtained through a friend who acted as mediator/interpreter due to lack of knowledge of a common language.

The analysis of the data, which in the grounded theory methodology takes place simultaneously with data production, began with the transcription of the first interview and open coding (line by line), and the information was complemented with the field journal produced during the observation process. In this process, interview transcripts and field journal notes were continuously compared, seeking to saturate the emerging categories and their properties with data. Variation in these categories and relationships that occur between them were sought. To fill these categories, memos were written to structure the script of the interviews and successive observations. Atlas.ti 9 software was used throughout the data collection and analysis process.

After the first coding phase, the second phase of selective coding began, relating categories and ranking them, which allowed reaching a greater stage of analytical abstraction (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, by following the canons of grounded theory, the information collected allowed the elaboration of a theoretical scheme (see Table 1) that responds to the objectives of the study (Foley et al., 2021). The coding process continued until the live code was saturated, resulting in the emergence of a central category: "If I lose this, I have nothing".

In addition, categories allowed visualizing two basic social processes (BSP) that facilitated the construction of a multilevel model by adding the macrosocial axis in the analysis. This approach connects social structure with social interaction and understands the need to break macro-micro tensions by considering the realities of the structure and the experiences of individuals as a continuum (Magliano, 2015). The first BSP, "Redefining cross-borderness", is related to the macro context of border regions in recent years, and "Fleeing forward: woman, worker and cross-border", refers to the agency capacity of these women from their position in the structure (see Table 1).

Redefining cross-borderness

Destruction of the traditional border lifestyle

The sudden closure, on March 14, 2020, of the border in the face of the crisis caused by COVID-19 brought as a direct consequence the loss of thousands of jobs held by thousands of people who crossed the border to work.⁴ It is estimated that approximately 20 000 people were affected; if one takes into account that the population of Melilla is slightly higher than 80 000 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n. d.), these flows had great weight in the economy of the city. In fact, given the large volume of these crossings and their regularity, an institutionalized commercial circuit and a cross-border labor market developed in this space (Ananou & Jiménez Bautista, 2016).

This is related to the exception that Spain has to the Schengen agreement, which established that, specifically in Melilla, Moroccans residing in the province of Nador could enter the city without having a visa. [...] In no case could they spend the night in the city. (DLI)

⁴ Morocco announced a unilateral border closure on March 13, 2020. Spain regulated the closure of its border a week later with the implementation of Order INT/270/2020, of March 21.

Table 1. The emergence of the central category: "If I lose this, I have nothing"

Substantive codes	Conceptual codes	BSP
<p>1. (Unequal) consequences of the temporary closure of the border</p> <p>1.1. Melilla-Nador border singularity 1.2. Job destruction 1.3. Unintentional expulsion from the vital worlds 1.4. Deprivation of <i>services</i> 1.5. Separation of families</p> <p>2. Economic restructuring in Nador</p> <p>2.1 Economic investment in Nador 2.2 Tense relations between Spain and Morocco 2.3 End of atypical trade</p>	<p>Destruction of the traditional border lifestyle</p> <p>Reconfiguration of the border region of Nador</p>	<p><i>Redefining cross-borderness</i></p>
<p>3. The "servitude" of carrier work as a last resort</p> <p>3.1. Precarious workforce from the Global South 3.2. Carrier women as heads of household: frustrated providers 3.3. Breaking the traditional role of women 3.4. "Taking a piece of bread out of the mouth of a lion": carrying conditions 3.5. Feminized work history of carrier women 3.6. Gender segmentation in carrying</p> <p>4. Immigration decisions</p> <p>4.1. Border inequality as a job opportunity 4.2. Migration after the border closure 4.3. The support network as a key in the decision</p> <p>5. Availability of a support network/resources</p> <p>5.1. The value of family 5.2. Community solidarity values 5.3. Social unprotection</p> <p>6. Search for economic resources after the border closure</p> <p>6.1. Precarious feminized jobs 6.2. Sale of or change in properties 6.3. Begging 6.4. Obstacles</p> <p>7. Orientation toward the future</p> <p>7.1. Facing uncertainty 7.2. Future linked to the border 7.3. Possibility of new job options with the establishment of factories in Nador</p>	<p>Trajectory on the border marked by triple discrimination</p> <p>Feminized survival: options after the border closure</p>	<p><i>Fleeing forward: woman, worker and cross-border</i></p>

Given this particularity, strict border control was maintained from these cities to the rest of Spain to ensure that no Moroccan could enter Europe irregularly (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008); the border of the Global North remained "defended" (Paasi, 2011). This filtering policy (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2018) at the border with certain people and merchandise led to the emergence of an "atypical trade", within which there is pedestrian carrier work; thus, migrations were blocked, but circular or cross-border movements were allowed. The institutionalization of this trade was such that one of the four border crossings between Melilla-Nador remained enabled in 2018 for such activity: Beni Enzar, where a commercial customs office was established until its closure that same year and from then at a Chinese neighborhood border crossing. In comparison, through the Farhana pass, male cross-border trade was carried out by bicycle or own vehicles.

This trade and the flow of people across the border has made trade the engine of economic activity in Nador, also indirectly affecting other sectors (Ponce Herrero & Martí Ciriquián, 2019). In fact, these dynamics benefited this province, and this trade was a vital component of the economy of the northern part of Morocco (White, 2003). This sector was also essential for Melilla, whose merchants found a market to distribute products. Although it is difficult to estimate the informal flow of merchandise, the president of the Confederation of Entrepreneurs and the Association of Merchants of Melilla stated that in 2020, approximately 70% of the merchandise that was imported to Melilla went to Morocco (Felipe, 2022). In fact, industrial and primary sector activity in Melilla is practically nil, and most companies are engaged in commercial activity (Ciudad Autónoma de Melilla, 2021).

Another advantage for the Melilla economy was the large volume of low-cost labor that arrived on work days. Thus, there was a mutually beneficial relationship between regions:

It benefited cross-border workers because they had a way of life that they did not have in Morocco [...]. In Spain, benefits were generated for entrepreneurs who obtained a workforce that was not so demanding, cheaper, more docile... (DLI)

This reality configured a dual labor market in Nador in which cross-border workers occupied precarious positions with low salaries and conditions that were difficult for locals to bear, a dynamic also found in Ceuta (Fuentes Lara, 2016). Therefore, the consequences of this closure have had different repercussions in the two regions, not only due to the nature of their work but also due to the different social protections against job loss depending on the country of origin:

Cross-border workers who were employed by companies have been included in the ERTE,⁵ but they are not receiving any type of benefit from Spain because cross-border workers cannot receive unemployment benefits because they are not residents [...]. Cross-border workers who have stayed on the other side of the border have been having a hard time. (DLI)

⁵ Temporary Employment Regulation Document by which an employer can suspend or reduce the employment contract of its workers temporarily; this tool was widely used in Spain during the confinement due to COVID-19.

For the Moroccan population, the closure of the border also meant the loss of certain services to which they had access through crossing to Melilla, such as health care, a higher level of public services (Liberona Concha et al., 2017), and educational centers: "There are children who have stopped studying because they do not let their parents enter" (CW2).

In addition, the radical nature of the border closure caused people who occasionally inhabited a territory that was not their place of residence to witness unintentional expulsion from their vital worlds: "There were cross-border workers who had stayed overnight when they should not have; then, they were trapped here in the city (DLI)"; "There is a friend of mine who has been locked up in Melilla" (CW2). Apart from the documentary problems that this entailed and that were partially solved with the issuance of work permit extensions to those Moroccans who were working legally in Melilla, at first it also meant the separation of families.

This pause in the border lifestyle presents other macrolevel processes that began before the appearance of COVID-19 and that already pointed to changes in mobility between territories: "In case they reopened, the Moroccan authorities and the Spanish authorities have already warned us that the border will never be the same again" (CW2).

Reconfiguration of the border region of Nador

Prior to the closure of the border due to the coronavirus, the Moroccan government initiated a process to end atypical trade at the border, within which carrier work is included. One of the most important reasons is the intention of Morocco to collect tariffs on goods, which it loses with atypical trade through the border. The intention to economically boost the eastern region is reflected in the Royal Initiative for the development of the eastern region in 2003 and successive strategic investment plans in the Rif area (United Nations, 2012).

These plans include the expansion of the port of Beni Enzar, the construction of a new commercial port in West Nador (Port Nador West-Med) (see Figure 1) and the installation of an export zone (approximately 5 000 hectares) next to this port to establish industrial activities within the framework of the National Port Strategy with a horizon to 2030 (Ministère de l'Équipement et de l'Eau, 2018). Although the citizens of the region see these advances as an employment opportunity, they do not see it as a short-medium term option: "Investments are very slowly. Most of the companies are studying the terrain. They are going to open many factories. They are going to open a new port here in the Nador area" (CW2).

The Nador West-Med port project aims to attract foreign capital through the availability of low-cost labor and tax advantages in an operation similar to that carried out in Tangier (Trinidad Requena et al., 2019). Once again, the project is committed to an economic development model based on the attraction of foreign investment (Soriano et al., 2016) under the presumption of alleviating structural unemployment and the informality of employment that the region suffers (Lakhloufi & El Majidi, 2021).

Figure 1. Map of Melilla and nearby ports of the province of Nador

Note: Puerto Beni Enzar (1) next to the Barrio Chino border crossing (2), and Puerto Nador West-Med (3)
Source: own elaboration from the Atlas.ti program

In this context of industrial and economic development in the Nador region, atypical trade from Melilla represents a problem for the Moroccan kingdom due to competition from products other than national products. This is a variable that States take into account when regulating the porosity of their borders to merchandise (Oladopo et al., 2021). In fact, for a long time, border control was increasing in Melilla, and Morocco had ended atypical trade in Ceuta in 2019. The only thing that COVID-19 has caused has been to accelerate the process of normalization of the situation.

The operation was as follows: the carrier women entered the city, took the goods and crossed them into Morocco without paying any type of tariff. This, for the Moroccan economy, is not acceptable because they do not pay the corresponding taxes. In the months before the closure, border crossing became more complicated because Moroccan policemen began to be more scrupulous and did not allow large quantities of merchandise to pass through; on many occasions, they requisitioned it. (DLI)

In addition to the visa exemption for Nador residents, other factors that conditioned the existence of this smuggling and Morocco's intention to intensify controls are the tax regime of Melilla and its strategic commercial position, characteristics that it shares with Ceuta. Both cities are not part of the customs territory of the European Union, and the importation of merchandise is subject to different taxes than in the rest of Spain. For example, these products are taxed through the IPSI (Spanish acronym for the Tax on Production, Services and Importation), which ranges between 0.5% and 10% of the value of the merchandise. This import tax is lower than the VAT, which is usually applied in the rest of the Spanish territory (from 4% to 21%) (González Fernández & López-Guzmán Guzmán, 2009).

Thus, importing merchandise through the port of Melilla instead of directly to Morocco was very attractive given the savings in import taxes. In fact, the free port of Melilla is the most important freight exchange route in the eastern half of Morocco and maintains the economy of the province of Nador (Ponce Herrero & Martí Ciriquián,

2019). The last problem that merchants on both sides of the border had to solve was how to reduce costs when moving the merchandise that arrived at the port of Melilla to be taken to the province of Nador. This issue was solved through "atypical trade", with goods camouflaged as personal baggage⁶ and, specifically, as narrated in an interview, through carrier women (Fuentes-Lara, 2019), who have increasingly experienced restrictions and controls in recent years.

As Ananou and Jiménez Bautista (2016) point out, other factors that appear in the course of the investigation are the tension between Morocco and Spain due to Morocco's claim to sovereignty over Ceuta and Melilla. This tension has been exacerbated in recent years by episodes such as the reception of the leader of the Polisario Front in the context of the conflict over the Sahara. However, a new period of negotiations is expected for the reopening of the borders of Ceuta and Melilla and other issues after the meeting, in April 2022, between the President of Spain and the King of Morocco (La Moncloa, 2022).

Therefore, economic and political interests are intertwined in the decision to end atypical trade, as it is increasingly restrictive in the crossing of merchandise in an illegal way:

Crossing merchandise will never be the same again because the closure of the border is the consequence of the political confrontation between Morocco and Spain, Spain with Algeria against Morocco, and Morocco takes away... closing the border. (CW2)

The development of this new industry and infrastructure, together with the changes that are expected in the new restrictions on the crossing of people and goods at the border, seem to reconfigure the movement of people; however, they will give rise to other job opportunities in the region of Nador. How do the people most affected respond to this reconfiguration of the cross-borderness that disrupts their way of life?

Fleeing forward: woman, worker and cross-border

This BSP allows visualizing the agency capacity of the local actors. To frame this agency, the structures of subordination that operate in an intersectional way and that in most cases are intimately connected with the capitalist economic system that characterizes the global system through multiple expulsions are described (Sassen, 2015).

Trajectory on the border marked by triple discrimination

The authors of this article agree with Fuentes Lara (2016) observing that carrier women are not a homogeneous group, although they present characteristics that help to identify a profile: women between 30 and 60 years of age, with a low educational

⁶ Decree Law 1-77-339 of October 9, 1977, which regulates the entry of goods into Morocco, establishes that any person who crosses the border with merchandise does not have a weight limitation as long as he or she complies with the requirement to carry it on his or her body.

level and relevant family responsibilities, without the possibility of reconciling. "In total, there are 29 people in the house: my parents, my four sisters... I am the oldest of my sisters. I have assumed the responsibility of supporting the family" (CW2).

In this way, being the head of the family appears to be a determining factor in the investigation. The responsibility of supporting a family emerges as an essential motivation when starting to work as a carrier ("I am going to change my life for my daughter"), but it limits options, such as emigrating or searching for jobs with inflexible schedules.

However, what circumstances have led these women to be part of the "serving classes"? (Sassen, 2003) First, in Moroccan society, there is a clear distinction between the roles assigned to men and women. Although equality in the workplace is recognized in the Moroccan Labor Code, it considers that the most appropriate place in which women can develop their role as mothers, wives and caregivers is within their home (Soriano Miras & Fuentes Lara, 2015). Regarding the Human Development Index, only 21.4% of women are part of the national workforce, with men accounting for 70.4% (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2019).⁷ However, although gender roles condition women's entry into the labor market, a second obstacle is added, i.e., the educational gap.

Regarding education, they are usually women without an education or a low educational level because female education is not prioritized in Morocco. Normally at 11-12, when you get your period, they take them out of school, and they start doing housework. For the testimonies that I know, in the less rural and more urban areas, it is more regulated. (RS)

Literacy levels among those over 15 years of age are 83.3% for men and 64.4% for women (Institute for Statistics, 2015). Thus, the structural situation of these women, who start with a low educational level, low social class, and outside the model marital status, leads them to work in precarious sectors and, therefore, to be feminized. They become what Amorós (2005) defines as the figure of the "frustrated provider", that is, an invisible and unpaid domestic worker, and as a "generic" worker for neoliberal globalization with a salary conceived to be secondary to men and higher levels of precariousness. There is double exploitation: by the capitalist economic system and by the patriarchal system in the domestic sphere (Cobo, 2005; Fajardo Fernández et al., 2022).

In this way, the work trajectory of these women prior to or alternately to carrier work has been framed in feminized sectors, sectors that appear as an alternatives when the option of working as a carrier is lost: "When I spoke to carrier women, they would say 'Either I dedicate myself to this or I dedicate myself to cleaning houses' [...], and on the other hand, there were other women, especially the younger ones, who said 'I become a prostitute'" (RS).

Although it has been found that men have gradually been incorporated into carrier work, this is still feminized work:

⁷ When considering these data, it should be borne in mind that the informal sector is home to at least as many workers as the formal sector in Morocco, where participation in the informal economy is much higher for women (Fiedler et al., 2014).

And so, that was the smuggling on foot that women normally do, and then, there is the one that was done through Farhana, which is mostly the smuggling where they drive, because more men than women drive, and load the cars with bales or whatever, and they were crossing cars through Farhana. Male smuggling is traditionally with vehicles. (RS)

Thus, a double dual market is developed: precarious jobs are reserved for workers from the Global South, and within this category, there is a segmentation by gender, where women can choose from a much smaller number of sectors with higher levels of precariousness (De la O Martínez, 2008). Moreover, in the context of Moroccan society, traditionally, there seems to be a certain modesty when a woman claims that she would perform the same job as a man (Soriano Miras, 2006). This division by gender was also found by Fuentes Lara (2016) in the case of Ceuta, where there are masculinized cross-border work activities, such as hospitality and construction, and feminized activities, such as domestic and care work and prostitution.

The daily experiences of pedestrian carrier work are summarized in long hours of queuing carrying bales of more than 70 kilos on the back, attacks on the border, abuse by the authorities, shoving, stampedes, which have sometimes resulted in deaths at the border, and a way of "earning a living" characterized by total uncertainty: "The conditions are very complicated. It is like putting your hand in the mouth of a lion to get a piece of bread" (CW2).

The working conditions in this job systematically violate the human rights of carrier women, and no type of security measure is implemented given the unlawful framework in which this work is carried out. These violations of their rights occur against international treaties and conventions signed by both countries (Soriano Miras & Fuentes Lara, 2015).

However, despite these conditions and the fact that work as a carrier is not perceived as a process of empowerment of these women, according to Mernissi (2000), labor insertion is configured as the first step for such empowerment. This research shows how the daily space of carrier women is not linked to a male figure as the main provider and reveals in these women other hidden or imperceptible female agencies (Aixelá, 2008): "normally, the profile of a carrier women is women who are alone, in the sense that they are widows, repudiated, divorced or their husband is disabled" (RS).

For this reason and without ceasing to consider the deplorable conditions of carrier work, it is seen as an opportunity to abandon other jobs, such as prostitution, or avoid dependence on a male supplier: "I am proud; now, I am a working woman [...]. I no longer want men" (CW1). Thus, inhabiting the border allows women to question the patriarchal patterns imposed and inhabit traditionally masculinized public spaces, being "an ambivalent place of inequality and opportunity" (Magalhães, 2021, p. 19).

Within this agency process, many of these women, when they had been without resources, decided to migrate from different parts of Morocco attracted by the job opportunities offered by the border. However, reducing this decision to an economic or labor issue would be simplistic because other variables come into play, such as family strategy or social networks. These decisions are mediated by gender (Domínguez Amorós & Contreras Hernández, 2017) because these women on many occasions had to consider their care tasks within their strategies:

Those from more remote areas that I have spoken with usually came to the vicinity of Nador or Melilla because they had a support network of friends or family; they came with their children and the elderly, and they stayed for a while. Now, with the border closure, there are those who decided to stay here because it is the only support network they have. (RS)

These migrations without the presence of a male partner break with the idea that the migrant Moroccan woman accompanies the family (Oso, 2018; Solé, 1994). In the cross-border context, many of them make the decision to migrate taking their dependents with them, breaking—again—with social traditions.

However, in the context of the border closure, survival is very complicated; therefore, some of the women who at the time made the decision to migrate to the border looking for work opportunities without a support network have decided to return to their place of origin, seeking support from their family network again, e.g., "(...) then, there are others who have returned to Casablanca or Fez, the cases that I know, because they say 'I do not have a job here', and there they have their family network, like grandparents" (RS), or from their social support network, e.g., "the family network is still very important, and the network of friends and neighbors, the community network, so to speak" (RS). Now, this help is temporary. While waiting for the border opening that never comes, these women began to look for alternatives to survive.

Feminized survival: options after the border closure

Although between March and April 2020 there were moderate social protests in Nador due to the closure of borders, there was no structural response from the Moroccan government to provide social protection to the thousands of people who had lost their jobs, which has caused women, most of them heads of families, to have had to look for alternatives. The process of uncertainty has remained constant since the sudden closure of the border, and some of these women see the reopening of the border as their only job option: "The women who worked with me, the majority, are busy looking for a way to make it day by day" (CW2).

Although there is a growing institutionalization of a global proletariat in "the South", characterized by the feminization of precariousness, in the 21st century, this situation is turning into a "feminization of survival", according to Sassen (2003), because the people living in extreme poverty are mostly women. In addition to the responsibilities of reproduction and care falling on them, due to the need to seek—and find—alternatives to guarantee their own survival and those of their dependents, they must be employed in the informal economy, obtaining more deregulated jobs with worse conditions, status and salaries (Solé & Parella, 2003). In the subsistence process, informal work, prostitution and emigration, among others, become alternatives for women (Lopera Mesa & Hillón Vega, 2015).

Survival is not only a theoretical concept, but it is configured as a true reflection of the current situation of women with low educational levels and relevant family responsibilities located in cross-border contexts: Interviewer (I): "And they had some kind of savings or family member to help them?", CW3: "Nothing. My friend has suffered hunger". Carrier work was a job that did not allow saving, only "living day by day".

There are two basic survival strategies: (1) return to the previous place of residence, and (2) maintain a place of residence in Nador and look for other alternative work. In some cases, these were precarious and unstable jobs in feminized sectors, such as domestic work through "making the stop"⁸ or prostitution; some have also looked for work in the fields and have dedicated themselves to selling vegetables: "However, doing the cleaning... they still pay you for an hour, or in the best of cases a day, not hiring you like here [Melilla], you know?" (CW2).

When the options to find a job are reduced due to the impossibility of family reconciliation or the impossibility of finding a job or other source of income, begging and the sale of personal belongings are complementary survival strategies: "Women who worked with me, many times to survive, they had to sell all their furniture to pay the rent and to keep going" (CW2). Despite their efforts, many carrier women and their families have been challenged in regard to meeting their basic needs, not only for food but also for housing:

They have returned to an old house owned by the husband's grandfather. Old. And they are living there because they cannot pay the rent [...]. However, now in this house... the electricity has already been given by the neighbors with a cable, but no water or anything. (CW3)

In this survival situation, when the closure occurred, a comparative advantage appeared in being in Melilla and not in Nador: "if the border closes, and you are in Melilla, you have food" (CW1). In the same way, differences appear in survival strategies if the carrier was in Spanish territory at the time of the border closure, both due to the existence of associations to receive help and the willingness to seek "masculinized" jobs, e.g., washing cars.

Finally, among other labor strategies, industry and transport serve as options, although the volume of employment is insufficient, as the industrialization of this area is in the initial phase:

Some women have found work because in Morocco, a factory for the treatment of used clothing and another factory for the treatment of shrimp were opened [...]. The textile factory that treats used clothing has employed only 120 people, almost nothing. (CW2)

The appearance of this labor niche does not have a clear correlate in the destiny of these women:

That textile factory with direct and indirect jobs was going to hire I think that in the long run the last figure is a thousand jobs [...] a large part of those thousand jobs are for women, between direct and indirect jobs but also for male drivers, carrier women, machinery or whatever. (RS)

While these factories are opening, many of the carrier women are waiting for the reopening of the border. In fact, although the reopening conditions are still being negotiated, a delegate of the Government of Melilla communicated in May 2022 that although this reopening was close, Spain does not intend for the terms to be similar to before the closure, explicitly referring to carrier work: "The image

⁸ In Morocco, it is common for workers to meet at a specific point where employers come to offer them informal work. Normally these jobs are for a single workday or even for a few hours.

of thousands of carrier women or those images that we saw on the Farhana border will not happen, and very specific profiles will enter" (Delegación del Gobierno en la Ciudad de Melilla, 2022). Thus, in the collective imagination, the difficulty of returning to the same conditions in which they worked before the border closure takes on an increasing presence:

I: Sure, if they reopen the border, will you return to doing carrier work?

CW3: If the border is as it was... of course I will.

I: And do you think it will be the way it was?

CW3: [laughs] I don't think so.

By way of conclusion: the survival of carrier women in the context of globalization

The objective of this article was to explore the survival strategies of Moroccan carrier women during the closure of the Melilla-Nador border. Additionally, the macro processes in which the border regions were submerged have been analyzed, exploring how the global affects the local. The border closure has revealed the existence of two social processes associated with pedestrian carrier work: *Redefining cross-borderness* and *Fleeing forward: female, worker and cross-border*. Regarding the first, the border closure puts an end to the formal crossings between the border regions and highlights the inequality of the border as a job opportunity.

In recent years, there have been economic changes in the province of Nador—such as the upcoming opening of the Nador West-Med port and an industrial park around it—which protect the area from reverting to the conditions at the border established before the closure. Furthermore, the tense relations between the countries involved will influence these negotiations. Data suggest that the controls will be more exhaustive, that free entry between the regions for registered citizens will be rethought, and that atypical trade will end with the intention of Morocco to import merchandise directly through its ports. This will mean not only the end of the border lifestyle but also *the loss of cross-borderness property*; therefore, the dimensions of the new situation will have to be studied.

This phenomenon is encompassed within the dynamics of globalization that favor very particular development models, such as the relocation of companies on the borders between the North and the Global South (Trinidad Requena et al., 2019). This process is well advanced in the province of Nador and encourages Morocco to defend its economic interests in the negotiations of the conditions for the reopening of the border.

The pause, end or reconfiguration of this cross-borderness has a direct impact on local actors, starting with cross-border workers who crossed the border every day to work. Among them are carrier women, who are in a position of special vulnerability; not only were they forced to carry bales of up to 70 kilos without any type of protection or rights, but the income they received was unstable and low, without the possibility of saving, and on many occasions, they were destined to support an extended family.

The triple intersection (female, worker and cross-border) limits the employment options of these women, who already have very precarious previous career paths in feminized sectors, also marked by a low educational level. In fact, within the carrier work, the conditions for women are harsher because they do it without vehicles, as is common among men, and are paid less. As a survival strategy for them and their families, they are forced to look for other alternatives, from which emerges the second BSP *Fleeing forward: woman, worker and cross-border*.

In the medium term, the most accessible job opportunities in the province of Nador are for generic workers without training, who receive low wages and work in precarious conditions, such as care work. However, given the high supply of labor in the province after the loss of cross-border jobs, even accessing these low-paying jobs is difficult. Although women and immigrants have a greater possibility of being part of this "global proletariat" (Fraser, 2010), concrete situations emerge in the border context, such as work in companies that relocated to the Global South, for example the textile industry or other export products and the consolidated sector in the Tangier region (Kopinak et al., 2020; Naïr & El-Khamlichi, 2016; Soriano et al., 2016). However, it will be necessary to investigate these companies and their working conditions in the Nador region to see if they present similarities with other processes of labor liberalization and precariousness in similar contexts.

During the border closure, survival became more complicated due to the limitation of labor sectors to which women could access, a survival that is not only typical of these women but is becoming feminized globally. In addition to these feminized jobs, other survival strategies that have emerged are migration, the support of the family and community network, the sale of personal property and begging. The need to find an alternative means of subsistence to the precariousness of carrying is clearly reflected through the following "in vivo" code: "If I lose this, I have nothing".

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