

# Labor trajectories of Nicaraguan women in the Costa Rican pineapple agribusiness

## Trayectorias laborales de mujeres nicaragüenses en el agronegocio piñero costarricense

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of the labor trajectories of Nicaraguan women who work or have worked in the pineapple agribusiness in the Huetar Norte border region of Costa Rica. From a qualitative perspective and based on the biographical method, their work experiences in fresh fruit monoculture are analyzed within the framework of broader and more complex work trajectories that encompass their individual projects and the structural determinants that shape their course and movement. The life stories of 12 Nicaraguan women settled in the study area are reconstructed through semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted between September and October 2023. The main finding is that their precarious condition in the pineapple farms is not only due to their mobility status, but also to their representation as otherness based on their nationality and ethnic-racial background.

Keywords: labor trajectories, extractivism, agribusiness, human mobilities, border.

### Resumen

El artículo se centra en el análisis de las trayectorias laborales de mujeres nicaragüenses que trabajan o han trabajado en el agronegocio piñero de la región fronteriza Huetar Norte de Costa Rica. Desde una perspectiva cualitativa y partiendo del método biográfico, se analizan sus experiencias laborales en el monocultivo de la fruta fresca, enmarcadas en itinerarios de trabajo más amplios y complejos, que condensan sus proyectos individuales y las determinantes estructurales que delinean su transcurrir y movimiento. Se reconstruye el relato de vida de 12 mujeres nicaragüenses asentadas en la zona de estudio, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y a profundidad realizadas entre septiembre y octubre de 2023. Como principal hallazgo, sobresale que su inserción precaria

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en las fincas piñeras responde no solamente a sus estatus migratorios, sino también a su representación como otredad según su nacionalidad y referente étnico racial.

Palabras clave: trayectorias laborales, extractivismo, agronegocio, movilidades humanas, frontera.

## Introduction

The movement of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica is not new. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, it has gained momentum that remains unabated to this day. The reasons for this have been diverse, with political factors (political-military conflicts), socio-environmental factors (disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes) and socioeconomic factors (worsening poverty and inequality) standing out (Chaves-González & Mora, 2021).

These mobility patterns, specifically from the 1980s onwards and, more notably, during the 1990s, coincide with the transnationalization of the Costa Rican economy and the transformation of the agricultural sector toward exports and the introduction of new products such as pineapples (Granados et al., 2005), which has enabled the absorption of large contingents of Nicaraguan labor. Since then, the boom in agribusiness has been evident, as reflected in Costa Rica becoming the world's leading pineapple exporter by 2025 (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura [FAO], 2023; Harvard's Growth Lab, 2023).

The expansion of fresh fruit monoculture has not been ignored by scientific and academic research, which has focused on analyzing its socio-environmental impacts. When referring to the social impacts resulting from this extractivist logic, studies have highlighted land grabbing, the proletarianization of peasants, and the precarious working conditions of those employed in this form of production (Aravena Bergen, 2005; Carazo et al., 2016; Salgado Ramírez & Acuña Alvarado, 2021; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015).

Low wages, long working hours, hiring through intermediaries, instability and lack of social security, among other factors (Acuña González, 2009; Carazo et al., 2016; Voorend et al., 2013), reveal that monoculture production is based on labor exploitation. Despite these findings, the literature remains incipient, given the contemporary nature of this phenomenon.

Therefore, it is considered relevant to highlight the specific characteristics of Nicaraguan women employed in the pineapple agribusiness in the Huetar Norte Region (HNR) of Costa Rica, where 68% of the country's pineapple production is found (Monitoreo del Cambio de Uso y Cobertura de la Tierra en Paisajes Productivos, 2022). It is important to understand the extent to which their experiences as workers differ from those described above, and the factors influencing their integration into this extractivist logic.<sup>1</sup>

From a longitudinal perspective, this analysis provides an opportunity to focus not only on the current conditions of Nicaraguan women in the pineapple agroindustry

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<sup>1</sup> The growth in female employment in the export agribusiness sector reflects broader structural patterns in Latin America that have been in place since the 1980s (Soto Baquero, 2012). In this context, it is important to analyze how this phenomenon is reflected in the experience of Nicaraguan women linked to the Costa Rican pineapple agribusiness sector.

(2023) but also on their long-term work experiences. Their work in pineapple monoculture is part of broader trajectories, so the objective of this study is to unravel the complexity of their labor trajectories by analyzing the continuities and ruptures that characterize them.

The paper is structured in six sections: the first refers to the theoretical framework underlying the analysis; the second refers to the methodology adopted to address the subject of study; the third contextualizes the site where the research is conducted; the fourth describes in detail the labor trajectories of Nicaraguan women; the fifth offers a discussion of the main findings; and the sixth and final section provides concluding thoughts for debate.

## Theoretical basis

### *Human mobility*

The starting point for this paper is a critical and dialectical understanding of human migration, viewing it as a particular dimension of a broader logic of movement. It enables moving beyond static, positivist and reductionist ideas that have defined migration as mobility between two distinct places (Cresswell, 2006; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014).

To break with these traditional views—which pay little attention to the complexity of human movement and do not fully transcend the origin-destination dichotomy—the mobility paradigm has emphasized the procedural, relational and differential nature of human mobility (Adey, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2016). This perspective politicizes the movement of people by closely observing differences in individuals' mobility and their possibilities, and by considering factors of inequality, such as gender, class, ethnicity, nationality and other identities that imply inequality.

According to Tesfahuney (1998), “different forms of mobility reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position based on race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global” (as cited in Hannam et al., 2006, p. 501). This is a critical aspect of the paradigm, which shows that human mobilities are mediated by power relations that establish and maintain conditions of otherness and inequality, privileging the movement of some people while stigmatizing, obstructing and criminalizing others (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013).

Nonetheless, given that this research is situated in a border territory, it is essential to analyze the correlation between human mobility and borders. As Benedetti and Salizzi (2011) point out, the border is not a fixed, immutable boundary but a dynamic space constantly redefined by mobility flows. Consequently, the border is not only the materialization of nation-states' territorial control, but also the result of diverse territorialities constructed around the mobility of people. Hence, “national territoriality has been and continues to be challenged by other territorialities and, therefore, by other borders” (Benedetti & Salizzi, 2011, p. 152).

Thus, the paradigm of mobility facilitates an understanding of human migration from a broader, more critical perspective, in which movement is not an isolated phenomenon but rather part of a network of power relations, exclusion and resistance. By analyzing mobility at the border, it is possible to highlight the mechanisms of

control and securitization that limit the movement of certain individuals, while recognizing the strategies they deploy to circumvent these restrictions and construct new territorialities.

### *Labor trajectories*

The study of life trajectories has been approached across the social sciences, using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research that adopts a longitudinal perspective. Its most basic conception refers to the diachronic dimension, in that it involves monitoring various life processes over time (Elder, 2001).

These trajectories are not rigid or orderly sequences, as they depend on the interrelation of multiple domains (work, mobility, family, etcetera), making them a dynamic, relational process. They are framed by historical temporalities that structure them (Rivera Sánchez, 2012), thus condensing the subjectivity of individuals and their decisions, as well as the macrosocial context that outlines their passage and movement.

In terms of labor trajectories, reference is made to personal work experiences, paying attention to their continuities, transitions or turning points (Blanco, 2002; Roberti, 2012). In other words, the aim is to track a vital process such as work from a long-term perspective that reflects subjective itineraries framed within particular socio-historical contexts.

Specifically, Roberti defines labor trajectories as: "... heterogeneous, unpredictable, and discontinuous trajectories that are outlined in the working lives of individuals" (Roberti, 2012, p. 267). Hence, it becomes essential to combine workers' decision-making and action frameworks with the socioeconomic conditions at a given time and place. According to the Centre for Sociological Studies on Everyday Life and Work:

The labor trajectories of individuals occur within social and productive structures... within a highly segmented labor market that not only determines working conditions at a given moment, but also the possibilities for occupational and social mobility. (Centre d'Estudis Sociològics sobre la Vida Quotidiana i el Treball, 2011, p. 30)

In this regard, the role played by the aforementioned structural factors in work itineraries is undeniable, as are other determinants such as class, gender, nationality, ethnic-racial background and other markers of inequality that shape their course. Nonetheless, this does not mean denying people's subjectivity, as the labor trajectories approach attaches importance to the meanings, points of view, assessments, strategies and courses of action that people deploy in their work-related experiences (Roberti, 2012).

## Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on the biographical method, which gives a leading role to Nicaraguan women and the way they experience and interpret their labor trajectories (Velasco & Gianturco, 2012). The continuities, transitions and turning points in these trajectories were collected through their life stories, recreated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women who met the following criteria: *I*) being Nicaraguan nationality; *II*) having mixed immigration statuses; *III*) having worked in the pineapple agribusiness for at least one year.<sup>2</sup>

A selective or propositional qualitative sampling (Martínez-Salgado, 2012) was carried out according to the criteria outlined above to approach the women who participated in this research. The snowball technique was used as a starting point, enabling the study to approach the women through key contacts established in the field.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted between September and October 2023 in the communities of Santa Fe and Medio Queso of Los Chiles. This number was not determined *a priori* but was established using the criterion of theoretical saturation, which states that the sample is defined when an additional interview yields no new or relevant information regarding the analytical categories of the object of study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987).

In each case, an informed consent form was signed, stating the purpose of the research and its ethical implications. These provisions were read to each interviewee, who was assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation. Table 1 provides relevant information about each participant.

**Table 1. Demographic data of interviewees**

Community	Interviewee (pseudonym)	Marital status	Immigration status	Schooling
Santa Fe	Carla, age 52	Separated	Asylum seeker	Complete university education
	Janneth, age 43	Separated	Irregular status	No schooling
	Maricela, age 39	Separated	Asylum seeker	No schooling
	Tatiana, age 38	Separated	Irregular status	No schooling
	Judith, age 31	Separated	Resident	Incomplete elementary school
	Dinora, age 22	Cohabitation	Nationalized	Incomplete university education
Medio Queso	Mayra, age 48	Married	Naturalized	Incomplete elementary school
	Dolores, age 44	Married	Asylum seeker	No schooling
	Nadia, age 43	Separated	Irregular status	Incomplete middle school
	Mayela, age 39	Separated	Asylum seeker	Incomplete elementary school
	Melissa, age 30	Separated	Special category	Incomplete middle school
	Jennifer, age 20	Single	Asylum seeker	Incomplete middle school

Source: created by the author based on fieldwork interviews (2023)

<sup>2</sup> The criterion was defined as women having worked for at least one year in the pineapple agribusiness, regardless of whether this had been a continuous or discontinuous process. This was based on the understanding that some women might be involved in this work on a seasonal or intermittent basis.

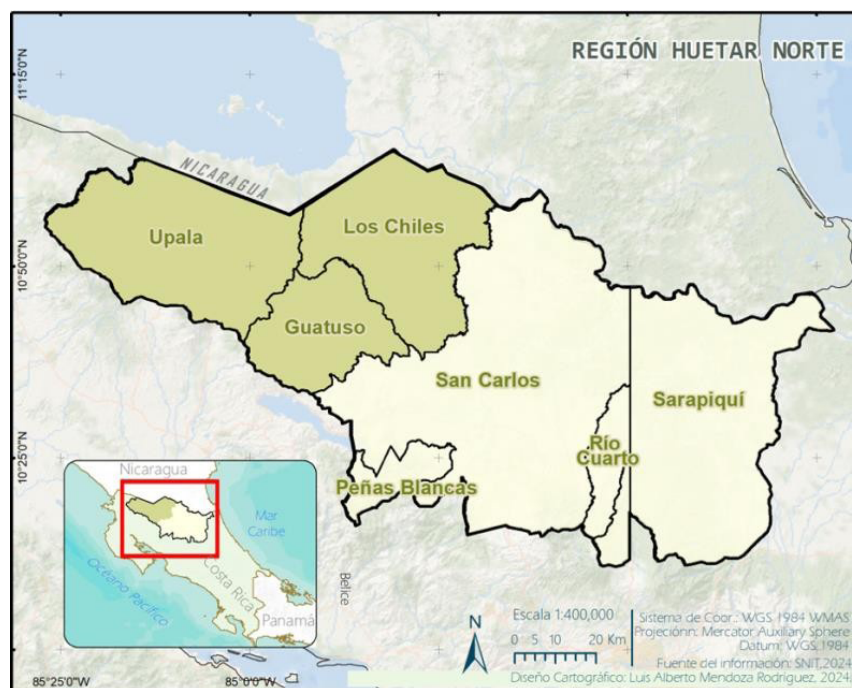
The information collected through the interviews was complemented with non-participant observation in the study communities and with documentary review for triangulation and analysis of the data.

## Site of study

### *Northern Huetar region of Costa Rica*

The HNR corresponds to a political-administrative division proposed in 1974 by the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy (Mideplan) and is composed of various territories in the northern part of the country. The map in Figure 1 illustrates its location.

Figure 1. Map of the Huetar Norte region of Costa Rica



Source: created by Luis Mendoza in 2024 at the author's request

Starting in the 1980s, this region underwent a process of productive restructuring, in line with the structural adjustment policies that promoted the neoliberal agenda in Costa Rica. This involved a transition from an agricultural structure focused primarily on traditional products for regional, national and international markets to one focused on non-traditional crops, such as tubers, roots and fruits, including pineapple, almost all of which are destined for export (León Araya, 2015).

The pineapple agribusiness boom grew rapidly in the region thanks to optimal conditions such as soil quality, the lack of need for artificial irrigation and the availability of land ready for production (previously used for livestock) (Acuña González, 2009), which

attracted companies and investors who saw an opportunity in this area. In addition, the increase in pineapple production in the territory was made possible by the introduction of technologies, crop varieties, legal and fiscal incentives and technical support from the Costa Rican government, which boosted its expansion (León Araya, 2015).

The growth of agribusiness in the region is evident in the increase in cultivated area, from 3 020 hectares of pineapple in 1995 to 44 193 hectares in 2018 (Vargas et al., 2020, cited by Pérez Núñez, 2022). Furthermore, for 2019, the *Monitoreo del Cambio de Uso y Cobertura de la Tierra en Paisajes Productivos* (2022) showed that of 65 442.41 hectares of pineapple nationwide (representing 1.28% of Costa Rica's territory), 68% was concentrated in the HNR.

The fact that more than half of production is concentrated in this area is not coincidental; rather, it reflects optimal conditions for its development, linked to its border location and peripheral situation. The weak presence of the Costa Rican state in regulating this form of production, the prevalence of historical cross-border dynamics, and access to cheap labor from Nicaragua (Granados et al., 2005; León Araya & Montoya Tabash, 2021; Rodríguez Echavarría & Prunier, 2020) make the HNR a space in which human mobility and pineapple agribusiness mutually shape each other.

Monoculture has created a dependence on labor from across the border, as Nicaraguans are willing to work for wages below the Costa Rican national average, leading to a general decline in their pay and working conditions (León Araya & Montoya Tabash, 2021). Consequently, the expansion of pineapple industry has relied on the vulnerability of thousands of workers from Nicaragua, as well as on the lack of regulation by public institutions responsible for overseeing it.

### *Santa Fe and Medio Queso of Los Chiles*

Santa Fe and Medio Queso of Los Chiles are located in the northernmost part of Costa Rica, a few kilometers from the northern border with Nicaragua, which has historically shaped the lifestyles and identities of both communities. The map in Figure 2 illustrates their location.

These peasant settlements were formed in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s by Nicaraguans fleeing the armed conflict associated with the Sandinista revolution's victory and the subsequent civil war between Sandinistas and the counterrevolution (Bataillon, 1998). As a result, the population structure of both communities has been shaped since their inception by people of this origin, who have continued to enter the territory over the years.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, the political crisis facing Nicaragua, which began in 2018 and continues to this day (2025), has triggered the migration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica. This crisis, caused by opposition to the government regime from various sectors, has led to the displacement of thousands of people for political and economic reasons (Osorio Mercado & Rodríguez-Ramírez, 2020).

Figure 2. Map of Santa Fe and Medio Queso



Source: created by Luis Mendoza in 2024 at the author's request

It is important to note that Medio Queso comprises two sectors: the community's center and the El Triunfo settlement, pejoratively known as "El precario" ("the slum"). The latter arose from a land recovery by Costa Rican and Nicaraguan peasants in 2011, who to date continue the process of formalizing the titling of their plots with the Institute for Rural Development (Inder, Spanish acronym for *Instituto de Desarrollo Rural*) (Mayela and Nadia, personal communications, October 2023).

Traditionally, the locals in both communities have engaged in subsistence agriculture and livestock farming; nevertheless, changes in the HNR, including the promotion of non-traditional products for export, also affected these territories. This is reflected in the introduction of monocultures such as oranges and pineapples, which currently employ most of the inhabitants.

The labor demand that has accompanied the pineapple agroindustry has enabled Nicaraguans to maintain a constant presence in the area. Some of these people are there temporarily, others have patterns of circular mobility, while others have settled permanently in the two localities, as is the case with those interviewed in this study. This has fostered the prevalence of cross-border practices and a significant binational identity, as has been confirmed in the fieldwork.

Nonetheless, the work offered by agribusiness has been insufficient to guarantee decent living conditions for most families, which is why many households engage in other agricultural work and informal jobs to diversify their income. In line with what is presented in the HNR, the expansion of fresh fruit monoculture in communities, as can be seen *in situ*, has not necessarily brought improvements for their inhabitants, who experience conditions of poverty and manifestations of inequality and social exclusion.

Based on field observations and the accounts of Nicaraguan women, it was also possible to verify limited access to basic services (drinking water, electricity, health care, education and so on), as well as evidence of domestic and social violence (insecurity, sex trafficking, drug trafficking, among others).

### Labor trajectories of Nicaraguan women<sup>4</sup>

The interviewees are characterized by their rural and peasant origins, which meant that their first experiences of unpaid work during childhood and adolescence in Nicaragua were in the countryside, supporting their families by planting and harvesting crops and caring for animals for subsistence or small-scale sale.

In terms of paid work in their country of origin, in addition to agriculture, jobs largely associated with gender stereotypes stand out, such as cooks, dressmakers, nannies and domestic workers, among others, which are characterized by informal employment, low pay and a lack of basic guarantees. In this regard, Maricela, from Medio Queso, mentions: "I would go to the maquila at six in the morning and sometimes leave at 11 or 12 at night. In my area, they made us stay overtime, but they didn't pay us fairly; it was hard" (personal communication, September 10, 2023).

One exception is Carla, a resident of Santa Fe, who, after working at a cocoa collection center, served as a promoter for the organization Médicos del Mundo for 2 years and later, from 2008 to 2018, at the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health. Her foray into the health sector prompted her to study nursing while working, which allowed her to devote herself to patient care and, later, to coordinating a maternity home. Her experience marks a turning point in her labor trajectory, which sets her apart significantly from the other eleven interviewees.

Regarding the work experiences of Nicaraguan women in Costa Rica, both in occasional mobility and after settling, tasks related to the countryside also stand out. Except for Dinora (from Santa Fe), all the interviewees have been involved in this type of activity beyond their experiences in the pineapple agroindustry, working with crops such as coffee, oranges, beans, tubers and timber, mainly in the HNR. Mayra, from Medio Queso, for example, has been involved in Costa Rican agriculture for more than 30 years: "I started working with coffee and oranges when I was about 14. When I came here permanently, I worked for a lady in her house, but I didn't like being bossed around. I preferred the countryside, planting sticks, oranges, you name it" (personal communication, October 10, 2023).

Agricultural work has traditionally been temporary, poorly paid and, once again, lacking in guarantees, which means that women have been forced to change jobs frequently and, as a result, to move within the HNR and other parts of Costa Rica. This constant mobility has meant they have had few opportunities to find work under decent conditions that would provide stability and allow some improvement in their quality of life.

On the other hand, low-skilled jobs characterized by informality have been identified that the interviewees have performed at some point during their stay in Costa Rica, either before, during or after their experience in the pineapple fields. Jobs such

<sup>4</sup> For a better understanding of labor trajectories, please refer to Figure 3 and Figure 4.

as nannies, domestic workers, waitresses and food and clothing sellers are examples of the tasks performed. This highlights a multi-activity that seems almost mandatory, given the impossibility of dedicating oneself solely to the employment offered in the fresh fruit agroindustry.

### *Experiences of Nicaraguan women in pineapple monoculture*

The interviewees' trajectories in the pineapple agribusiness are diverse. Their backgrounds range from one to ten years of work on farms located in the HNR and, mainly, in the communities under study, where three companies stand out: Agroexportaciones Norteñas de Santa Fe, known as La Norteña; Piñas Cultivadas de Costa Rica in Medio Queso, popularly known as La pcc; and Grupo Visa, located in Cuatro Esquinas (see Figure 2).

The work carried out in these companies is characterized by constant rotation among a variety of tasks, most of which are directly related to fieldwork. In the experience of Nicaraguan women, it is common to have performed more than one task, such as weeding, sowing, harvesting and seed selection.

According to the interviewees, the tasks are carried out by mixed crews of 15 to 20 men and women who perform the same functions. This shows a discrepancy with most of the existing literature on pineapple monoculture in Costa Rica, which describes a sexual division of labor in which men are responsible for field work and women are responsible for packing the fruit (Aravena Bergen, 2005; Carazo et al., 2016; Segura Hernández & Ramírez Mora, 2015), a distinction that is not apparent in this study.

According to the women, these work groups are composed exclusively of Nicaraguans, and they identify only a few foremen and contractors who are also Nicaraguan but hold residency in Costa Rica or have become naturalized Costa Rican citizens. In addition, the women point out that only a few people from Costa Rica are employed as machine operators, in administrative tasks and in management positions. This is indicative of labor segmentation, in which the more skilled jobs are reserved for nationals, while a largely migrant workforce performs the less skilled jobs.

The work is carried out in two ways: on a fixed daily basis or on a piecework basis, the latter being the main trend on farms. In the first case, the interviewees work from Monday to Saturday from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., with Sunday as an unpaid day off. In the second case, they usually work the same schedule, but their hours may increase as production needs increase, especially during the fruit harvest. Table 2 summarizes the most relevant information regarding women's work.

Most of the tasks mentioned are perceived as exhausting and dangerous due to exposure to high temperatures, sun, rain and thunderstorms. In addition, cuts from machetes or fruit leaves, exposure to agrochemicals and the presence of snakes are highlighted as negative aspects of working directly in the fields.

**Table 2. Work performed by Nicaraguan women in pineapple companies, by community of residence**

Work	Interviewees
<b>Weeding:</b> land clearing; piecework payment (per hectare)	6 from SF and 2 from MQ
<b>Harvest:</b> fruit picking; piecework payment (based on weight)	2 from SF and 5 from MQ
<b>Selection:</b> classification of plants according to size; piecework payment (by quantity)	2 from SF and 5 from MQ
<b>Sowing:</b> planting of plants; piecework payment (by quantity)	2 from SF and 1 from MQ
<b>Debracting:</b> removal of leaves from fruit to prevent shading; piecework payment (per hectare)	1 from SF and 1 from MQ
<b>Fertilizer irrigation:</b> application of agrochemicals using spray pumps; piecework payment (based on the amount of agrochemical used)	1 from SF and 1 from MQ
<b>Belt sorting:</b> sorting seeds on semi-automated belts according to size; piecework payment (by quantity)	3 from MQ
<b>Wrapping:</b> placing paper wrapping around the fruit to prevent damage from the sun; fixed daily wage	2 from SF and 2 from MQ
<b>Quality supervision:</b> monitoring the performance of field workers, reporting to management; fixed daily wage	1 from SF and 1 from MQ

Source: created by the author based on fieldwork interviews (2023)

One element that stands out concerns the treatment Nicaraguan women receive from crew leaders or farm contractors.<sup>5</sup> Carla, Janneth, Maricela and Tatiana from Santa Fe, and Dolores, Jennifer, Mayela, Mayra and Nadia from Medio Queso, refer to different forms of abuse by their bosses, such as verbal abuse and shouting, denial of work breaks, extended working hours and disregard for accidents, among others, as discussed in the next section.

## *Working conditions and access to labor rights*

### *Employment contracts, guarantees and employee benefits*

According to Costa Rican law, an employment contract is presumed to exist when a person provides services in exchange for a salary, and it must be in writing, except for occasional or temporary agricultural and livestock work that does not exceed 90 days, in which case the contract may be oral (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2004). Despite these provisions, the interviewees' experiences with contract signing have varied, depending on the company they work for and whether they are employed directly or through contractors.

<sup>5</sup> Reference is made to foremen and contractors in the masculine form, since the interviewees did not mention having had any working relationship with other women in the positions mentioned.

As for La Norteña,<sup>6</sup> it should be noted that Janneth, Judith and Tatiana (from Santa Fe) did not sign a written document with the intermediaries involved in their hiring, despite having worked for more than three consecutive months at the company (personal communications, September 2023). In Janneth and Tatiana's experience, this led to irregularities, including the non-recognition of social security, vacation pay and Christmas bonuses, as well as dismissal without access to benefits such as advance notice and severance pay. This is evident in the following account:

I worked there from 2015 to 2018, when I was fired. Since I never signed a contract, I didn't get any holidays, vacations or bonuses; I wasn't entitled to anything. When they asked me to leave, it was due to staff cuts; they dismissed quite a few people... they didn't pay me a penny, I was left, so to speak, "in limbo". (Janneth, personal communication, September 10, 2023)

The exception to such situations is found in Judith's testimony, who, despite not having signed a contract, agreed to insurance and was granted vacation time and a Christmas bonus during her three years of work with the aforementioned company. This could be because the interviewee has Costa Rican residency, which gives her greater security *vis-à-vis* her employer than Janneth and Tatiana, who were in an irregular situation when they worked for the company.

Another exception is found in the case of Carla, an asylum seeker who signed an indefinite contract with her first intermediary upon starting work for the company in 2018. However, upon the arrival of a new contractor in 2020, no new document was signed, and she has been affected by several irregularities, including the loss of her social security due to her employer's arrears.

Regarding the interviewees' experience with La PCC, it is noteworthy that the existence of a contract depends on whether they were employed directly by the company or through an intermediary. In the case of Dinora, Janneth and Maricela from Santa Fe, and Dolores, Jennifer, Mayela, Mayra, Melissa and Nadia from Medio Queso, it was observed that they signed a contract when they were hired by the company's human resources office (personal communications, September and October 2023). This has given them access to social security, vacation time and a Christmas bonus, as well as severance pay in the event of dismissal or resignation. Nonetheless, Jennifer, Mayela and Nadia question whether they received the correct amounts for benefits when their employment contract ended.

As for the interviewees who have been employed through an intermediary or contractor at La PCC, the anomalies are even more evident, regardless of whether or not they were in an irregular immigration situation. This is due to the lack of a written or oral contract, as well as social security, Christmas bonus and vacation pay, and of advance notice and severance pay in the event of unjustified dismissal or employer liability (personal communications, September and October 2023).

Finally, Nadia's experience at Grupo Visa has been through a contractor, since, as she points out, the lack of a valid immigration document prevents her from being hired directly by the company. Since she did not sign a contract, she is unsure whether she is entitled to vacation time and a Christmas bonus, and she does not have Social Security.

<sup>6</sup> All field staff at La Norteña are hired through two contracting companies operating as corporations (Salgado Ramírez & Acuña Alvarado, 2021).

### *Remuneration or salaries<sup>7</sup>*

According to the Costa Rican Ministry of Labor, the average daily wage for agricultural work in 2023 was 11 738.83 colones (USD 22),<sup>8</sup> which would be equivalent to a gross monthly salary of 281 731.92 colones (USD 537) (2023). While these amounts are useful as a reference, it is important to remember that the interviewees are usually paid on a piecework basis rather than for a fixed working day.

The piecework payment method is questioned by the interviewees, who consider that there is little clarity or transparency in determining remuneration for each task. At the same time, the amounts set by companies—and, in many cases, by contractors—are perceived as unfair and vary according to their convenience. An example of this is that both Janneth, who worked at La Norteña between 2015 and 2018, and Judith, who has worked at the company from 2020 to September 2023 (when she was interviewed), reported approximate biweekly incomes of 120 000 colones (USD 229). This indicates not only the lack of wage increases over the years, but also the prevalence of piecework wages, which, although paid by the piece, are lower than those established by labor legislation for ordinary working hours when converted to hourly rates.

A similar situation can be seen in the case of Nadia (from Medio Queso) and her salary at Grupo Visa, where she receives approximately 131 000 colones gross every two weeks (USD 250), from which 10.67% is deducted for insurance, as well as a discount for providing her with a paycheck. As a result, the interviewee earns around 114 000 colones every two weeks (USD 217) after these deductions, which is significantly less than the minimum wage established by the Ministry of Labor and highlights a significant irregularity in the way she receives her salary.

In addition, it is noted that sometimes crew leaders and intermediaries do not properly record the work performed, resulting in an underestimation of the weight or quantity worked to justify a lower wage (Maricela and Tatiana, from Santa Fe, and Dolores, Jennifer, Mayela and Mayra, from Medio Queso, personal communications, September and October 2023). In this regard, Dolores mentions: “To be honest, there is a lot of cheating so that the contractor gets a lot. In other words, they steal a lot out of your salary. When I got here and left with 30 *rojos*, with 25 *rojos*<sup>9</sup> a week, it was a disappointment for me” (Dolores, personal communication, October 10, 2023).

In jobs such as harvesting, higher incomes are reported, as in the case of Mayela and Nadia, who say they have earned up to 100 000 colones gross per week (USD 191) at La PCC (personal communications, October 2023). Nonetheless, this involves working more than 12 hours without overtime pay and in clear violation of Costa Rican legislation on working hours.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In Costa Rica, wages correspond to the remuneration of workers per unit of time (month, fortnight, week, day and hour) or per piecework (*Código de Trabajo de Costa Rica*, 1943).

<sup>8</sup> The conversion from colones to us dollars was made according to the exchange rate on June 18, 2024, which is used as a reference to calculate the equivalence of all amounts mentioned in this section.

<sup>9</sup> 30 and 25 rojos refer to 30 000 and 25 000 colones, respectively. The word “rojos” is the colloquial name for the Costa Rican currency. These amounts are equivalent to USD 57 and USD 48, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> According to the *Código de Trabajo de Costa Rica* (1943), daytime working hours should not exceed 48 hours per week, mixed working hours should not exceed 42 hours per week, and nighttime working hours should not exceed 36 hours per week. Nevertheless, the experience of women in harvesting reveals a combination of working hours that does not comply with these limits.

Belt sorting is also one of the tasks that allows for higher earnings, with gross weekly earnings between 70 000 and 90 000 colones (USD 133 to 172) (Mayra and Melissa, from Medio Queso, personal communications, October 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to note that this work is done on a rotating schedule: one week they work from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and the next from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., that is, a mixed schedule that exceeds the number of hours allowed per week by Costa Rican law.

With regard to the tasks paid on a regular workday basis, involving wrapping and quality control at La pcc, Dinora and Janneth from Santa Fe, and Nadia from Medio Queso, report incomes that coincide with the minimum established by law, which represents an exception in terms of compliance with current provisions for remuneration in Costa Rican agriculture.

### *Access to work equipment and transportation*

The work performed by Nicaraguan women on farms requires appropriate equipment to ensure their protection: overalls, goggles, gloves, hats and sleeves to cover their arms from the sun's rays. For the interviewees who have worked at La Norteña and La pcc, this equipment is provided free of charge; nonetheless, it must be returned if they resign or are dismissed. Furthermore, if any item is lost, its cost is deducted from their wages.

Regarding the Visa Group, Nadia (from Medio Queso) mentions that, despite performing weeding tasks, the contractor only provided her with overalls, for which he charged her, so she has not had access to gloves and goggles, which are essential for her safety: "Here at this company, I have been working without equipment, and there's a great danger of losing your eyesight because you don't have goggles. It's really dangerous, but what can you do?" (personal communication, October 6, 2023).

As for transportation, despite the significant size of the pineapple farms and the long distances to be traversed to reach and move between their various sectors, the interviewees lack this service and must travel by their own means. According to them, on some occasions, they have been assigned a cart for harvesting; nonetheless, this only happens when the land is very far from the companies' offices.

The lack of transportation means that all the women have had to walk to and from work at some point, traveling routes that can take between 30 minutes and up to three hours. This situation is viewed negatively because it is exhausting, consumes a significant amount of their unpaid time, and exposes them to risks when traveling on poorly lit dirt roads in the early morning and sometimes at night.

### *Hygiene, nutrition and rest conditions*

Of all those interviewed, only Mayra and Melissa, from Medio Queso, have access to a toilet, located on the floor where they work as conveyor belt sorters. The other ten women have to find somewhere to hide to relieve themselves: "If you need to go to the toilet, go, head for those mountains. If you want to urinate there, run and get ready and watch out for snakes" (Dolores, Medio Queso, personal communication, October 10, 2023).

This reveals not only a lack of privacy but also a lack of basic hygiene conditions, which could be even more challenging if women are menstruating. In addition, it is noted that crew leaders limit toilet breaks or pressure workers to use the toilet as quickly as possible, even leading some women to avoid using the toilet altogether.

Regarding breaks, interviewees have 15 minutes for breakfast at 8:00 a.m. and 30 minutes for lunch between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. During harvest season, when the workday can last up to 12 hours, no breaks other than those mentioned above are usually provided. The interviewees state that there are no designated areas for eating, so they sit in ditches or on dirt roads outside the farms, in areas that ideally offer shade or protection from the sun and rain.

### *Workplace accidents and work-related ailments*

According to Costa Rican law, all employers (including contractors) are required to purchase a work accident and injury insurance policy from the National Insurance Institute (INS, Spanish acronym for *Instituto Nacional de Seguros*) for each of their employees. They must report any incident so that the institution can provide medical care and assess the need for disability benefits (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2004), a procedure that, according to the interviewees, is often omitted at La Norteña and La PCC. The reluctance to report to the INS could be attributed to the non-payment of the aforementioned policies or to the need to find replacements for disabled workers.

This means that the interviewees continue to work despite injuries, impacts or ailments associated with their work, and that, in only a few exceptions, are they assessed by the companies' medical staff. Hence, they seek care at health centers if they have medical insurance, or they manage their ailments by purchasing over-the-counter medications or resorting to home remedies.

In terms of health problems related to working in pineapple fields, the interviewees mentioned sunstroke, dehydration and episodes of hypotension and hypoglycemia as the most common ailments, associated with exposure to the sun and high temperatures, insufficient fluid or food intake and physical exertion. In addition, the women cited muscle, joint and bone pain resulting from the effort required to perform farm tasks, as well as the long distances they traveled on foot and exposure to inclement weather.

Another issue mentioned by Janneth and Tatiana, from Santa Fe, and Dolores, Jennifer, Mayela, Mayra and Nadia, from Medio Queso, has to do with exposure to agrochemicals used in pineapple production, mainly associated with conditions such as respiratory allergies, skin problems and poisoning (personal communications, September and October 2023). In Tatiana's case, the effects of the agrochemicals were so significant that, after two years in La Norteña, she developed asthma and was unable to continue working: "The chemicals from the pineapple went to my lungs... and that's when I started to get sick, when I was totally unable to work anywhere" (Tatiana, personal communication, October 7, 2023).

### *Immigration status and working conditions*

Given that the interviewees have different immigration statuses, it was sought to determine whether these statuses have influenced their working conditions in the pineapple fields. Based on their accounts, there appear to be no major differences in access to basic rights and benefits, regardless of whether they are asylum seekers, residents, naturalized citizens or under the special temporary category.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, these differences seem more evident among women who have worked in irregular situations in La Norteña.

In the experiences of Janneth and Tatiana (from Santa Fe), the company's lack of social security, Christmas bonuses and vacation time is evident, as are unjustified dismissals that fail to recognize benefits. This could be attributed to the fact that they were in an irregular situation when they worked for the company, leading to unfair treatment by their contractors. This is not reflected in the cases of Carla and Judith (from Santa Fe), who do have social security and access to the guarantees mentioned above, despite also working through intermediaries; the difference is that they are in a regular immigration situation.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond those interviewed, less favorable conditions are observed for those in irregular situations who are employed by La Norteña and who commute daily between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Their working hours are even less clearly defined; they tend to receive lower wages than those who are settled in Costa Rica, they do not receive medical care in the event of accidents, and they have no guarantees whatsoever, in addition to being constant victims of unjustified dismissals (Carla and Tatiana, Santa Fe, personal communications, September 2023).<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that, in the case of La PCC, changes were made to its hiring processes following the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that, as of 2020, this company no longer employs people with irregular immigration status. Nevertheless, intermediaries make exceptions and use the services of people without valid documentation, which results in anomalies such as the non-recognition of guarantees, as well as lower wages than those of people with regular status (Dinora, from Santa Fe and Dolores, Jennifer and Mayra, from Medio Queso, personal communications, September and October 2023).

As for the Visa Group, Nadia, from Medio Queso, does not know whether the working conditions of undocumented migrants are less favorable than those of documented migrants, as she sees no differences in her work crew, which includes workers with different immigration statuses.

Although it may seem that the working conditions of undocumented individuals are less favorable, the interviewees' access to guarantees does not differ significantly by immigration status, but rather by whether they are hired directly by companies or through intermediaries. In other words, access to basic rights depends not so much on the immigration category to which they belong, but rather on the way in which they were hired.

<sup>11</sup> This category allows Nicaraguans to regularize their immigration status if their asylum application has been rejected, for a maximum of two years.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that Carla and Judith enjoy better conditions could also be due to the fact that their work experience at La Norteña is more recent and subsequent to the strike action that began in 2016, which led to some improvements in terms of the recognition of basic labor rights.

<sup>13</sup> During fieldwork in Santa Fe, groups of Nicaraguans were frequently observed being transported daily from the border area of La Trocha to the company's various farms.

## Discussion

The labor trajectories of Nicaraguan women, particularly in pineapple monoculture, reveal a clear denial of their rights. Their involvement in these precarious situations is due to the nature of their stay in Costa Rica—namely, their regular or irregular immigration status—and to their Nicaraguan nationality and ethnic and racial background in relation to Costa Ricans. In terms of their immigration status, it is noteworthy that women face inclusion through exclusion (De Genova, 2015), given that, although their irregular mobility is necessary for the expansion of the pineapple agribusiness, it is also illegalized by state control policies that operate under the legacy of the colonial system. Given that extractivism in the HNR is largely sustained by its border location and the availability of Nicaraguan labor, it is possible to assert that there is no absolute impediment to the irregular mobility of Nicaraguan nationals. Rather, what is involved is inclusion characterized by marginality, which points to the significant impact of structural constraints on their labor trajectories.

In other words, processes of bordering are evident, which, for Nail (2020), means that there is no total denial of irregular mobility across nation-state borders, nor complete exclusion of those who migrate in this way, but rather criminalized and subordinated inclusion in informal and poorly regulated economies. Despite this, job insecurity in the fresh fruit agroindustry is also experienced by women who are asylum seekers, residents or who have been assigned to another category that allows them to stay legally in Costa Rica.

Vulnerability in terms of working conditions depends not only on possession of immigration documents, but also on the interviewees' employment status (directly employed or through contractors) and on each company's own provisions regarding compliance with labor rights. Therefore, it can be said that other markers of inequality, such as nationality and the ethnic-racial background of the interviewees, are also in play. This is again due to how agribusiness operates in the HNR, which is sustained by the border and, by generating processes of differentiation and otherness, allows Nicaraguans to be relegated to jobs with the worst conditions.

Nail's words are valuable in illustrating the above point:

Nationalism, xenophobia and racism also play a structural role in the bordering process of primitive accumulation because they socially devalorize and thus cheapen the labor and lives of migrant workers. If migrants arrived but were not thoroughly racialized and discriminated, their labor would be too valuable for capitalist investment to bother appropriating them in the first place. (Nail, 2020, p. 202)

Discrimination based on race and nationality is essential for pineapple monoculture to take advantage of the undervalued labor force of migrant women. Their role is crucial as they take on precarious jobs with lower wages than those earned by Costa Ricans (León Araya & Montoya Tabash, 2021).

On the farms studied, there is clear labor segregation by nationality, with workers from Nicaragua performing the least recognized and lowest-paid tasks, while Costa Ricans occupy management and supervisory positions. According to Ruhs and Anderson

(2010), migrant workers are often willing to accept worse conditions than nationals, allowing employers to ensure labor availability, minimize labor-guarantee costs and maximize profits.

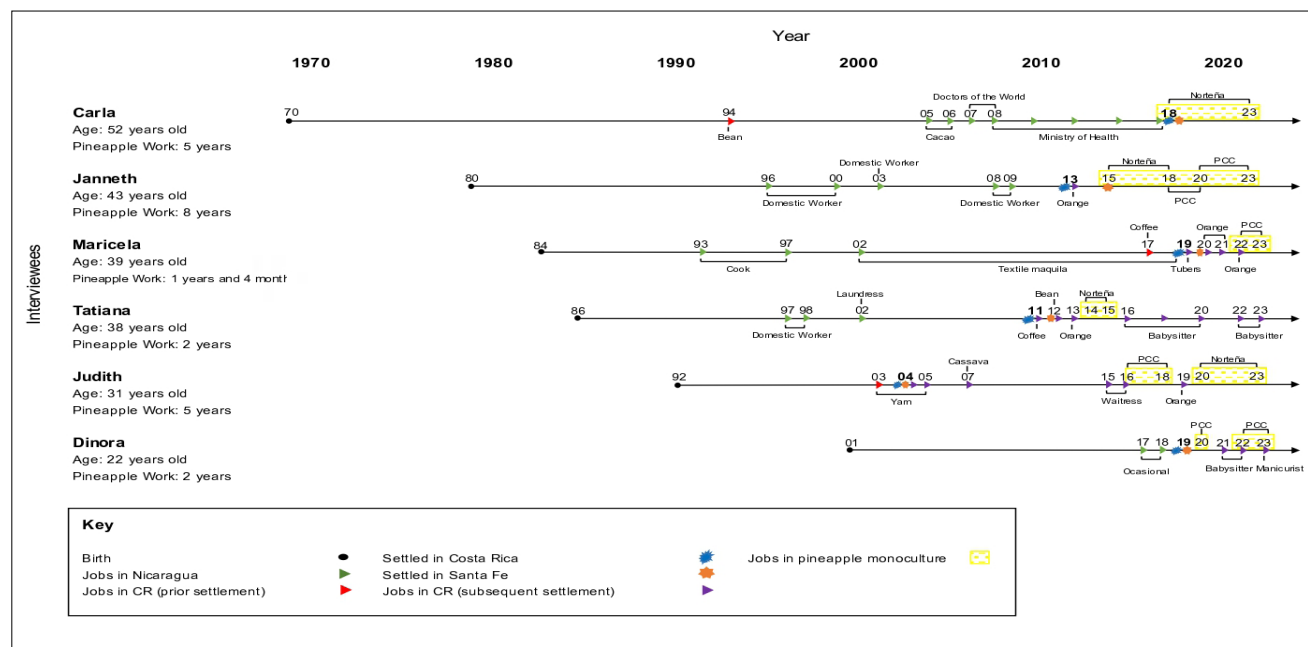
Stratification based on ethnic and racial differences has led to precarious labor trajectories, as well as dehumanizing practices by Costa Rican employers. Particular episodes of subordination in women's lives can be highlighted, such as facing sexual harassment at work (Jennifer, from Medio Queso) or keeping a pregnancy secret for fear of dismissal (Melissa, from Medio Queso). Furthermore, more generalizable but equally worrying experiences have been identified, such as not having access to basic facilities such as a toilet (forcing them to endure physiological needs unlike men), traveling on roads in the early hours of the morning and at night despite the fear of sexual abuse, and long working hours that prevent them from fulfilling their family responsibilities, among others.

Thus, it is important to note that, when analyzing women's labor trajectories, gender operates as a key marker of inequality that causes ruptures and breaks in these paths. This is because labor trajectories overlap with other life trajectories, conditioned by socially assigned mandates and roles that assume most of the interviewees are responsible for the entire productive and reproductive burden of their households.

The diverse experiences of the interviewees suggest that fresh fruit monoculture acts as an attractor and integrator of subalternities, that is, of people who, due to their gender, social class, immigration status and nationality, find themselves working in conditions that fundamentally undermine their dignity. Such a degree of precariousness has meant that their labor trajectories in monoculture are largely fragmented and discontinuous, as the exploitation they experience in their jobs makes it difficult for them to remain for long periods, let alone indefinitely.

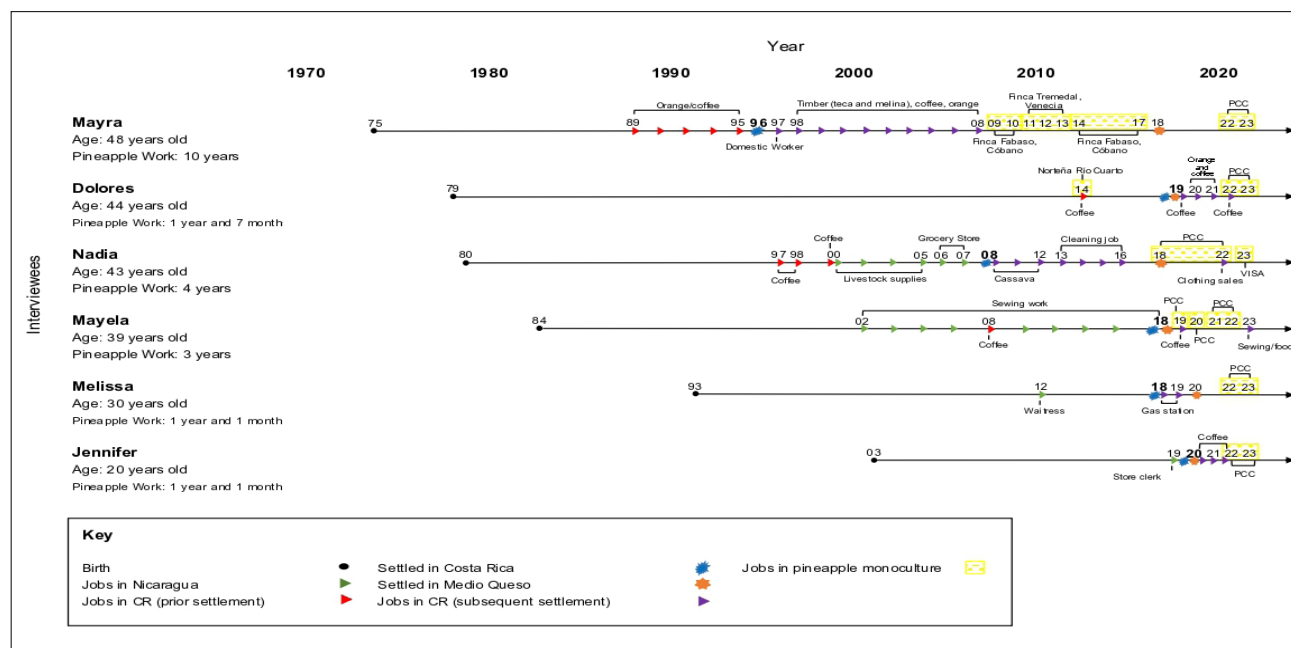
Hence, most of the interviewees have been employed intermittently at different times, sometimes hired by companies or through intermediaries, repeatedly entering and leaving these jobs, either due to unfair dismissals, because they could not continue with the precarious conditions that afflicted them, or because they sought different means to ensure their subsistence. Nonetheless, their experience in other jobs has not necessarily been different, since in other agricultural-related jobs and feminized tasks associated with gender stereotypes, their temporary nature, insufficient remuneration and lack of guarantees have led them to change jobs frequently or resort to multiple jobs as a survival strategy (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Figure 3. Labor trajectories of interviewees living in Santa Fe



Source: created by the author based on fieldwork interviews (2023)

Figure 4. Labor trajectories of interviewees living in Medio Queso



Source: created by the author based on fieldwork interviews (2023)

## Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of labor trajectories as the combination of women's biographies and their structural constraints, marked by sequences and consistencies, as well as by ruptures and breaks (Blanco, 2002). In particular, it contributes to understanding the specificities of Nicaraguan women who work on pineapple farms in the HNR, particularly in the communities of Santa Fe and Medio Queso of Los Chiles, based on a study on the subject. In their experiences in Costa Rica's pineapple agribusiness, the interviewees have faced grueling working hours, contract noncompliance and a lack of benefits, among other issues, reflecting their precarious employment status at companies such as La Norteña, La PCC and Grupo Visa. This has contributed to their work itineraries in monoculture being fragmented and discontinuous, as they face conditions that violate their most basic labor rights and complicate their sustained presence in this job.

The fact that the interviewed women are precariously employed in the fresh fruit agroindustry and in other jobs already mentioned is due not only to their mobility status, but also to their nationality and ethnic-racial background. In other words, the subordination they face in their jobs is not only due to whether or not they have documentation supporting their "legal" status in Costa Rica, but also to their status as outsiders with respect to the national ideal.

In this regard, Sandoval García (2002) points out that an imaginary of criminality, political radicalism, blackness and poverty has been constructed around Nicaraguans, which clashes with the ideals of peace, freedom, democracy, whiteness and economic prosperity of the supposed Costa Rican identity. This has given rise to nationalist, xenophobic and aporophobic discourses and practices, which, according to the author, have turned the country's northern border into a racialized boundary, presenting Nicaraguans as poor, dark-skinned "others" who are threatening and under suspicion (Sandoval García, 2002).

In addition to being represented as others based on their class, nationality and ethnic-racial background, Nicaraguan women have faced discrimination due to their gender, which is evident in the overlap between their labor, sexual-emotional and reproductive trajectories. Thus, their daily lives are spent struggling to balance domestic and family care tasks—which are not valued socially because they are unpaid and their partners or ex-partners do not share responsibility for them—with the demanding workdays in the pineapple agribusiness.

Despite the forms of discrimination described above, it is important to note that oppression is met with various forms of resistance. The interviewees have repeatedly challenged Costa Rican immigration controls, refusing to return to their country of origin and settling in communities such as Santa Fe and Medio Queso, where, despite the exclusion and violence they face, they have managed to find small improvements in their lives.

Their approach reflects the ambivalent nature of the border, which constitutes material and symbolic constraints beyond the formal boundary, but which has also been a resource and an opportunity (Benedetti & Salizzi, 2011). Ensuring the subsistence of their families, imagining life projects (having their own home, continuing their studies, etcetera), and weaving relationships of cooperation and closeness are examples of their silent resistance and the configuration, at the local level, of multiple and diverse territorialities.

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