



**'Kites' and 'anchors': the (im)mobility strategies of  
transnational Latin American families against the crisis in  
Spain**

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5 **families against the crisis in Spain**  
6

7 **ABSTRACT**  
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9 The impact of the recent global financial and economic crisis on migration to Spain has  
10 generated literature focusing mainly on demographic and labour impacts.  
11 Internationally, economic crises have also been linked to the increased vulnerability of  
12 migrants and return migration. However, this article reveals a more complex picture of  
13 how the crisis is producing new (im)mobilities between Latin America and Europe. It  
14 adopts a transnational family approach based on qualitative fieldwork with Colombian,  
15 Ecuadorean and Brazilian migrants. The article offers an analysis of their (im)mobility  
16 strategies framed by the socioeconomic impact of the crisis in Spain. Strategies include  
17 various configurations of return and remigration as well as permanence in the host  
18 country, involving the whole family or some members. They are the consequence  
19 mainly of the economic situation, but are also shaped by other 'crises' related to migrant  
20 status and migratory projects as well as gender, intergenerational and emotional factors.  
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23 Keywords: Crisis, (im)mobility strategies, Latin American migration, Spain,  
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## Introduction

This article analyses the strategies of spatial (im)mobility put in place by Colombian, Ecuadorean and Brazilian families in Spain since the start of the global financial and economic crisis from a transnational and qualitative perspective. The crisis that unfolded in 2008 had severe consequences for Spain<sup>1</sup>, affecting the migrant population both at a demographic level through a reduction in inflows and an increase of outflows, and in the labour market due to growing unemployment and deteriorating working conditions (see for instance, Oliver Alonso, 2013). The studies available have focused mainly on some of these demographic and employment impacts, including the phenomenon of return. However, our in-depth qualitative data provides a much richer and complex picture of how Latin Americans in Spain, one of the largest migrant groups, have sought to respond to this crisis from a transnational family perspective. Responses include multiple configurations of return, remigration and permanence reflecting not only socioeconomic considerations, but also factors related to migrant legal status, the migratory project and gender and intergenerational relationships.

We begin by situating our study within the most recent work on migration and crisis in the Spanish and international contexts, providing a brief explanation for our conceptual framework. This is followed by a short description of our methodological approach, and a section on how migration flows to Spain have evolved in the case of the three groups studied, with special emphasis on the most recent demographic trends. The rest of the text offers an analysis of the results of our qualitative research with Colombian, Ecuadorean and Brazilian migrants in Spain, focusing on the (im)mobility spatial strategies developed by transnational migrant families within the context of the economic crisis. Based on this, we start to develop a typology that includes returning to the home country and remigrating to other EU destinations, as well as remaining in the host society; such strategies can be performed by the whole family at once or in stages, or only by certain members, thus producing new family reconfigurations. Furthermore, they sometimes turn into repeated circular or multiple migrations. Such situations can generate feelings of being 'trapped' in (im)mobility. The final aim of the article is to contribute to wider theoretical and empirical debates about how the different factors identified (the diverse 'crises') articulate to produce new patterns of spatial (im)mobility. These (im)mobilities, approached from a transnational family perspective, contradict classical notions of migration and return as permanent and unidirectional movements (Cassarino, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2006). We use some cases to illustrate this in detail. The article ends with some conclusions.

### **The transnational (im)mobility strategies of Latin American migrants in Spain in the context of the economic crisis**

Latin American migration to Europe has been affected by the recent global financial and economic crisis, which has been particularly severe in Spain. Researchers have shown how economic crises have a disproportionate impact on migrant populations given their precarious socioeconomic and labour conditions or their lack of networks. In the

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<sup>1</sup> The crisis in Spain is part of the global financial and economic crisis that started at the end of 2007. According to official macroeconomic data, the economic crisis in Spain ended in 2014. However, the wider socioeconomic and political consequences are still very visible.

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4 Spanish case, since 2008, several studies have elaborated on diverse aspects of this,  
5 looking mainly at demographic changes in the migratory cycle (growing outflows,  
6 diminishing inflows) as well as the impact on migrants' labour conditions (López Salas  
7 & Oso, 2015; Domingo, Sabater, & Ortega, 2014; Garrido, Miyar & Muñoz Comet,  
8 2010; Oliver Alonso, 2013). Few studies have analysed the case of Latin American  
9 migrants in Spain (Aysa Lastra & Cachón, 2015; among others). Yet, despite its  
10 relevance this literature could be criticised for its methodological and epistemological  
11 nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), or for being based mostly in secondary  
12 statistics.  
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15 Qualitative research has sought to address this by analysing the various strategies of  
16 migrant households against the crisis, which may include the incorporation of new  
17 family members into the labour market, the use of savings and a restructuring of  
18 remittances, as well as permanent or temporary return and remigration (Torres Pérez,  
19 2014; Bastia, 2011; Cavalcanti & Parella, 2013; López de Lera & Pérez-Caramés, 2015;  
20 Sanz Abad, 2015, among others). Echeverri Buriticá's (2014) contribution, for instance,  
21 draws attention to the fact that after long processes of family reunification in Spain, the  
22 economic crisis has divided Colombian families again due to the return and remigration  
23 of some members, revealing gender and generational differences.  
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26 As for international studies, work on return migration has been approached from diverse  
27 theoretical positions, although more recently the transnational perspective has enriched  
28 this literature by questioning the idea of permanent and unidirectional migration  
29 movements and highlighting the existence of multiple types of mobility (Carling &  
30 Bevand Erdal, 2014; Cassarino, 2004; Constant & Zimmerman, 2011). Moreover, the  
31 transnational perspective helps to make visible the multiple links that migrants maintain  
32 not only with their countries of origin, but also with co-nationals in other destinations  
33 (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Levitt & Sørensen, 2004). For Latin  
34 Americans in Europe, studies have explored the relations that bind communities in  
35 different countries (Bermudez, 2016; McIlwaine, 2012), which can be a consequence  
36 and a cause of the emergence of new 'migrant corridors' (Bermudez, 2018), as well as  
37 the role of sending countries' policies in encouraging return (Boccagni & Lagomarsino,  
38 2011).  
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41 In addition, the mobilities paradigm, applied to migration studies (Sheller and Urry  
42 2006), has focused on the increased variety of movements and their consequences, but  
43 also, from a more critical perspective, on the different factors conditioning who can  
44 move and where (Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Factors can relate mainly to the  
45 economic crisis, but also interact with other key aspects such as legal status, as Ahrens  
46 (2013) demonstrates in her study of Nigerians in Spain. Our article borrows from these  
47 debates and looks at the new (im)mobilities generated as a result of the crisis, taking  
48 into account different types of mobility (returns, remigrations, circulation...), but also  
49 those left immobile (resisting in Spain) (Oso, Saiz & Cortés, 2017). By adopting a  
50 transnational family perspective (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; among others), thus  
51 overcoming methodological and epistemological nationalism, it also analyses how  
52 families separate and reunite again as different members leave or stay in response to a  
53 complex mixture of factors that go beyond socioeconomic and legal conditions. Finally,  
54 our approach seeks to situate at the forefront the agency of transnational migrant  
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families, looking at their ability to act (Godinho, 2017) as a complex game of ‘kites’ and ‘anchors’ develop, leaving migrants sometimes trapped in (im)mobility.

### **Methodological approach**

The analysis that follows is based on the data obtained during various research projects. These studies share some characteristics: they were mostly qualitative, involved multi-sited fieldwork, were carried out during a period of time that includes the economic crisis and adopted a transnational approach. Qualitative fieldwork involved in-depth, semi-structured individual and group interviews, family life histories, informal conversations and participant observation with Latin American migrants and key informants (migrant organisations, churches, ethnic businesses, social workers, public functionaries, etc.). Migrants were selected using contacts and snowballing techniques, trying to represent a wide array of experiences and profiles. The samples in London and Brussels included cases of recent Colombian remigration from Spain, while the fieldwork in Quito included return migrants.

The Colombian data is the result of a study carried out in 2014-2015 mainly in Madrid, London and Brussels that included 47 qualitative interviews. This completed almost two decades of research on Colombian migration to Europe (Bermudez, 2016). This last project focused specifically on the impact of the economic crisis on Colombian migrant communities previously studied (Madrid and London), adding the case of Brussels given transnational connections between them<sup>2</sup>. The interviews with Ecuadoreans were carried out in Madrid and Quito, where we contacted the families of migrants living in Spain. Fieldwork was carried out in 2007-2009 and 2013-2015, before and after the crisis. In total, 44 people were interviewed. In addition, a total of 12 Brazilian migrants were interviewed in A Coruña and Madrid as part of the same project. These last two projects included family life histories (interviewing several family members separately) and one group interview (6 women and 5 men) in an association of returned migrants in Quito<sup>3</sup>.

The cases analysed in some detail below have been chosen to illustrate the heterogeneity of strategies that Latin American transnational migrant families have put in place in response to diverse crises. Since the data forms part of different projects the objective of our article is not to offer a comparative perspective based on nationality, there are only some references to national factors that might explain diverse strategies. The objective is to use our cases to try to understand the interplay of various factors behind the (im)mobility strategies of transnational migrant families.

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<sup>2</sup> The project was “Crisis, migration and integration: the experiences of Colombian migrants in Madrid, London and Brussels”, and was conducted as part of a Marie Curie-COFUND Fellowship at the Université de Liège.

<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork with Ecuadorian migration was carried out in the framework of the following research projects: “El impacto de migración en el desarrollo: género y transnacionalismo” (Oso, dir. 2007-SEJ2007/63179), “Género, Transnacionalismo y estrategias inter-generacionales de movilidad social” (Oso, dir. 2011- FEM2011-26110) and “Género, moviidades cruzadas y dinámicas transnacionales” (Oso, dir. 2015-FEM2015-67164-R), funded by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (Spain)-FEDER.

### **'Kites' and 'anchors': The ambiguous game of who leaves and who stays among Latin American migrants in Spain**

Latin Americans are one of the largest migrant communities in Spain, with Ecuadoreans and Colombians being the first and second most numerous groups, and Brazilians well behind. Ecuadorean and Colombian migrants arrived in Spain mainly from the turn of the century onwards, especially between 2000 and 2004 (during the economic boom), while Brazilians, in general, migrated later, especially between 2004 and 2009 (see Figure 1). The statistics offered by Spain's municipal registries (*Padrón Municipal de Habitantes*, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE) on the stock of the population born abroad and regarding inflows and outflows (those registering and deregistering from the *Padrón-Estadística de Migraciones*) provide an initial insight into the spatial mobility of migrant families from Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil in recent years and since the start of the crisis.

[Figure 1 here]

Initially women were among the pioneers in these migrations, as Table 1 shows, with feminisation rates (women born abroad as a percentage of the stock of registered migrants) being higher amongst Colombians (64.9% in 1999), followed by Brazilians (63.2% in 2002) and Ecuadoreans (58.7% in 1998). During the consolidation of the migration process, a greater equilibrium between the sexes was achieved due to the arrival of more men through family reunification and the pull effect of the economy during the construction boom (which attracted male workers) (Oso & Catarino, 2013). However, the arrival of the crisis had a severe impact on the construction sector, thus affecting male employment more (Gil-Alonso & Vidal-Coso, 2015). This is reflected in recent increases in the feminisation rate (reaching up to 58.5% among Colombians and 53% among Ecuadoreans from 2011, and up to 65% for Brazilians from 2010), which partly suggests that men are returning or remigrating in greater quantities than women.

[Table 1 here]

Emigration rates are also higher amongst men than women in all three cases, with Colombian and Ecuadorean women showing the greatest tendency to remain in Spain (see Figure 2). It seems then that, as opposed to the initial period, when women were pioneers in transnational family migration projects, this time men are implementing new mobility strategies (as 'kites') owing to the severe impact of the crisis on male employment, while the women remain in Spain (as 'anchors'). However, our qualitative research shows a greater plurality of situations, indicating that the (im)mobility strategies of Latin American transnational migrant families in response to the crisis include multiple options, so that the game between 'kites' and 'anchors' is far more ambiguous and dependent on various factors that include but go beyond the socioeconomic impact of the crisis as analysed next.

[Figure 2 here]

### **Towards a typology to analyse the (im)mobility strategies of Latin American transnational families in a context of economic crisis**

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5 In response to some of the negative impacts of the economic crisis, Colombian,  
6 Ecuadorean and Brazilian transnational migrant families have shown a wide array of  
7 strategies of spatial (im)mobility. Based on this, our article establishes an initial  
8 typology, which we seek to illustrate analysing some cases in detail. Although our  
9 qualitative data does not allow for generalisations, it provides rich empirical material  
10 that helps identify the complex interplay of factors that explain such strategies.  
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13 **1) Versatile ‘returns’.** Amongst our data, there are cases of migrants returning to the  
14 home country as a result of the crisis on employment and socioeconomic conditions.  
15 These family strategies include: the return of the men (husband and/or sons), while  
16 women remain in Spain working; the return of the women and children, with the  
17 husband staying in Spain seeking to rebuild the migration project; the return of the  
18 entire family in stages or simultaneously; and the return of one or both members of the  
19 couple to reunite in the home country with family members that did not migrate.  
20 However, these strategies do not necessarily fit the classical idea of return as a result of  
21 ‘success’ or ‘failure’ (Gmelch, 1980).  
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#### 23 *Men returning and women staying*

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26 In the Ecuadorean case, we found several instances of men returning to Ecuador while  
27 the women remained in Spain. Some of the women, who had been the mobile pioneers  
28 in the family migration project, were now adopting the opposite role of ‘anchors’, while  
29 the men were leading the process of return (as ‘kites’). This is the situation of Carlos<sup>4</sup>,  
30 and his brother Daniel. Carlos, aged 53, was interviewed in Quito in 2015 after  
31 returning with his adult son, while the women in the family remained employed in the  
32 domestic service in Spain. Talking about his wife, he explains: ‘I’m not going to be  
33 selfish and tell her to come if she has work there’. Carlos’ wife was the pioneer in the  
34 family’s migration to Spain, arriving there in 1997 and later bringing her husband and  
35 teenage children (son and two daughters). For a while they were all working and bought  
36 their own flat in the outskirts of Madrid. However, rising interest rates and the fact that  
37 Carlos and his son, both employed in the construction sector, became unemployed as a  
38 result of the crisis meant they could not continue paying the mortgage and eventually  
39 lost their flat. It is then that the men in the family decide to return to Ecuador, partly to  
40 escape from the mortgage debt they had accrued.  
41

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43 Carlos adds: “My brother’s story is similar, his wife also migrated first and she is still  
44 there. But my brother wants to return to Spain, he has Spanish nationality, I don’t, I lost  
45 my papers”. The difference in migrant status between Carlos and Daniel means that  
46 while for the former return assumes a more permanent quality, for the latter it appears as  
47 a temporary strategy, until the situation improves in Spain. Carlos, by contrast, has  
48 started settling in Quito and has no expectations to ‘return to Spain’. However, migrant  
49 status might not be the only factor explaining this, since Carlos also considers that his  
50 decision was influenced by problems with his wife:  
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55 <sup>4</sup> All names used are pseudonyms, to protect anonymity.  
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4 You see, we tend to think that the man is the head of the family, the one who  
5 takes care of the household economy, and there, in Spain, I was suffering,  
6 because I had to ask my wife for money, and on top of that she started acting  
7 despotic, telling me I had to cook, participate in housework... and that's not for  
8 me... also, other things happened between us... I'm better here.  
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10  
11 Soon after Carlos and his son returned to Ecuador, one of the daughters arrived as well.  
12 She lost her job at a hairdresser's in Madrid after becoming pregnant. Facing new care  
13 responsibilities and difficulties finding new work, it was decided that she should return  
14 to Ecuador where she can access more family support to help her look after the baby.  
15 Meanwhile, the mother sends remittances to keep the family afloat. In this case then,  
16 kites become those members of the family who cannot contribute economically to the  
17 household and become dependent, while the anchors are those who can continue  
18 assuming the role of family breadwinners.  
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21 Thus, the direct impact of the economic crisis on male employment is important, but it  
22 interacts with other factors to explain the different strategies. Factors include legal  
23 status (which might lead to different return strategies), care responsibilities (in this case  
24 those of Carlos' pregnant daughter) and emotional crises linked to gender roles and  
25 relations. As highlighted in other work, return here can also be understood as part of a  
26 crisis of masculinity experienced by migrant men who have lost their role as  
27 breadwinners (Cortés & Oso, 2017).  
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### 29 *Return of the women and children*

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31 Research with other migrant groups in Spain, such as Moroccans, has also shown cases  
32 of the opposite, when the women and/or children return to the home country, while the  
33 husband tries to survive in the host society and send remittances (Torres Pérez, 2014).  
34 This was the strategy put in place by Gabino, a 44-year old Colombian man interviewed  
35 in Madrid in 2014, and his family. He migrated to Spain with his wife in 1996 leaving  
36 their young son in Colombia. Initially employed in the care sector, the couple managed  
37 to achieve a stable economic and legal situation that allowed them to bring their son and  
38 have other children. With time, Gabino set up two businesses in the construction and  
39 service sectors. Nevertheless, as a result of the crisis both businesses collapsed, and  
40 later he lost his job in sales. As a result, his wife, who was not working at the time, and  
41 the children (aged 21, 10, nine and four) returned to Colombia: "my family, right now,  
42 is living in Colombia because the economic situation here in Spain, well, it has changed  
43 a lot and it was more economical and favourable to keep them there, so I have had to  
44 displace them".  
45

46  
47 For Gabino, the return to Colombia of part of his family is mainly an economic strategy,  
48 hopefully temporary (he is starting a new business). He does not contemplate returning  
49 himself, because after 18 years living in Spain: "I must stay... my life is tied to Spain,  
50 because of many... situations... my family, my children, they were practically born  
51 here". As in the situation of Carlos' brother, in this case the return of part of the family  
52 is thought of as provisional, affecting those members that are less productive and more  
53 dependent, which this time around are the woman and children. The labour market  
54 situation here seems to be key in explaining who are the kites leaving, and the anchor  
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4 that stays seeking to rebuild the migration project to be able to reunite the family again.  
5 However, as before, other emotional factors interact with this.  
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8 When Gabino explains in more detail the decision for his family to return in 2009, it  
9 emerges that in the midst of all the economic difficulties they were experiencing, and  
10 after the birth of their last child, his wife had become depressed, a situation aggravated  
11 by the death of her mother. So he thought it would be better “to keep her near her  
12 family, where she could be fully supported... here, next to me, she was going into a  
13 strong depression”. As in the case of Carlos’ brother, Gabino and his family’s  
14 (im)mobility strategy is also facilitated by having Spanish nationality. In this case, the  
15 extra costs associated with having young children (not only economic but also  
16 reproductive) seems also important in deciding who are kites or anchors, while other  
17 work equally emphasises how migrant women might be inclined to return as well by the  
18 care needs of the transnational family (Cortés & Oso, 2017).  
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### 20 *Return of the entire family and family reunification*

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23 Return can also mean the migration of the whole family. For Ecuadoreans, this has been  
24 encouraged by the policies pursued by the Correa government through support  
25 programmes and public interventions inviting migrants to go back (Cortés & Oso, 2017;  
26 Boccagni & Lagomarsino, 2011). Such policies have been weaker, or even absent, in  
27 the Colombian case, which could partly explain why return seems to be a less popular  
28 option for this group (Bermudez, 2014). Brazil has also created policies and measures to  
29 assist returnees but their efficacy has yet to be demonstrated, while in this case the main  
30 pull factor explaining return could be economic growth and social improvements in the  
31 country of origin (Cavalcanti, 2015).  
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34 Two cases of Ecuadorean families show the diverse situations in which this strategy was  
35 adopted. One is the story of Ana Lucía, a 36-year old woman contacted in Quito in  
36 2015. She met her husband, Salvador, in Ecuador, where he was spending some time  
37 after several years living in Spain. Salvador asked Ana Lucía, a single mother of two, to  
38 marry and migrate with him. She accepted and after three years waiting for the  
39 documentation for family reunification she moved to Madrid in 2007 with her son and  
40 daughter (aged five and three) to join her husband. Both Ana Lucía and Salvador found  
41 good jobs and another child was born in Madrid. Nevertheless, the onset of the crisis led  
42 to the return of the family. Salvador became unemployed and although Ana Lucía was  
43 working and did not want to leave, she felt swept along by his decision; he took her to  
44 Spain and now she is “not going to let him return alone”. In this case emotional and  
45 relational factors are also at play, with Ana Lucía’s return with her family being the  
46 consequence of her husbands’ work situation and decision. This will contribute, among  
47 other factors (disenchantment with government return programmes, difficulties finding  
48 work), to her dissatisfaction once in Ecuador and her desire to ‘migrate again’ if things  
49 improve in Spain, a desire that would be facilitated by their Spanish nationality.  
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52 Finally, return can also lead to family reunification, whether as a result of a failed or  
53 completed migration project. This is the case of Luis Fernando, aged 42, an Ecuadorean  
54 interviewed in Quito in 2015. His wife migrated first, to Madrid in 1998, where she  
55 worked as a live-in carer looking after an elderly lady. Soon after, he joined her, leaving  
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4 their young son with the grandmother in Quito. The couple lived in Spain for six years,  
5 working hard and saving money, opting for not bringing over their son. Since from the  
6 beginning their migration project was planned as temporary and with the aim of  
7 maximising their resources, when Luis Fernando became unemployed as a result of the  
8 crisis they decided to go back and reunite with their son. This case represents the classic  
9 idea of return as the successful end to the migration project (Cassarino, 2004). Luis  
10 Fernando and his wife managed to do this because they worked as live-in carers in  
11 Spain, thus reducing their expenditures and building up their savings, which they  
12 invested integrally in Ecuador (buying property). Furthermore, they opted for  
13 minimising their reproductive obligations in Spain not bringing their son over, which  
14 also reduced costs and the possibility of settling down in the host country. Such a family  
15 and economic strategy allowed them to live return as a more positive experience.  
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18 The comparison between these two stories reveals also the importance of the migration  
19 project. Those transnational migrant families who developed a settlement strategy in  
20 Spain, bringing in the rest of the family or buying property there, could see return as a  
21 temporary hitch and be more inclined to leave an anchor in the host country to facilitate  
22 the resumption of their project once the socioeconomic context in Spain improves. But  
23 those who maintained their initial mobility as a temporary strategy to accumulate  
24 resources might experience the economic crisis as an excuse to accelerate their plans for  
25 return and end their migration project. Gender relations also explain why Ana Lucía,  
26 despite her reluctance to leave, instead of becoming an anchor in Spain, as Carlos's wife  
27 before, feels obliged to follow her husband, thus repeating the pattern of their initial  
28 migration.  
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31 **2) Remigration within the EU.** Remigration to another host country has also emerged  
32 as one of the key strategies that Latin American transnational migrant families are  
33 implementing. This can involve varied mobilities as well, such as returning to the home  
34 country and then remigrating again or remigrating directly from the first host country to  
35 a second. Here, we focus on the strategies of remigration put in place by some  
36 Colombian migrants, which involved moving from Spain to another EU country. As  
37 above, these strategies can comprise: one member of the family, the man or the woman  
38 (the latter generally with the children), remigrating while the rest of the family stays in  
39 Spain; the entire family remigrating in stages or together. Remigration as well can be  
40 thought of as more or less permanent, in some cases eventually resulting in other types  
41 of mobility (see below), further complicating the dichotomy 'home'-'host'.  
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#### 44 *Remigrating alone or with the children*

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46 Remigration within Europe tends to be a strategy for migrants who have acquired  
47 Spanish nationality and enjoy EU citizenship rights. However, there are cases of Latin  
48 Americans moving to other EU country with a Spanish residence permit, who as in the  
49 case of the Nigerians studied by Ahrens (2013) can be left in a state of 'semi-legal' or  
50 'in-between' category. However, this situation could be easier for men remigrating on  
51 their own, as Dylan explains. He is a Colombian man in his 40s, interviewed in Brussels  
52 in 2014. Dylan migrated to Europe in 2002, spending a few months in Brussels, where  
53 he has family, before moving to Spain after a friend found him a job there. He left his  
54 wife and daughter in Colombia and ended up staying and working in Spain nine years.  
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4 However, with the economic crisis he became unemployed and “slowly started  
5 spending the little resources I had, until I understood that... there was no way back”.  
6 Being on his own, he had resisted the temptation to buy a house in Spain, so he decided  
7 very early on to remigrate back to Brussels:  
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9         If you are on your own, why [buy] an apartment? A person on its own, especially  
10 a man, gets used to any situation. When you have family... but a man on its  
11 own... is much easier to be anywhere... I get my suitcase and leave.  
12

13 However, since Dylan only has a Spanish residence permit, his legal situation and future  
14 in Belgium is more uncertain: “I’m in this situation, semi-illegal”. Without full  
15 citizenship rights and limited knowledge of the local languages, he survives doing odd  
16 jobs and with family help. He plans to remain like this at most for another two years. On  
17 the one hand, Dylan finds attractive the idea of return to Colombia, where he finds that  
18 social life is more rewarding. But his relationship with his wife broke down with the  
19 distance and his daughter has grown up without him; his family (mother, sisters, nieces  
20 and nephews) now seems to be in Belgium. This is why, the return he actually  
21 contemplates is to Spain: “let’s see how the situation in Spain evolves, because to obtain  
22 my papers cost me a lot of sweat, a lot of work, to lose them, it would be like defeat”.  
23 Thus, for him, what is ‘host’ and ‘home’ has become quite complicated.  
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26 The Colombian women remigrating did so in most cases with their children (with, or  
27 without partners). London has become one of the preferred migrant destinations for  
28 Latin Americans (and native Spaniards) following the economic crisis (McIlwaine &  
29 Bunge, 2016). For some of the women interviewed London offered better opportunities,  
30 especially if as single mothers they could access state benefits, while for others being  
31 alone with the children had severe consequences. Marimar, aged 47 and contacted in  
32 2014 in London, where she remigrated from Spain in 2008, argued that her decision was  
33 not related to the economic crisis, but because she wanted to improve her life. She left  
34 Colombia in 2001, escaping other crises: “I worked in the health sector, there was a  
35 crisis, some fundamental changes at that time, and it affected me badly, so I took the  
36 decision to come, and that made the relationship with my partner to break”.  
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39 Marimar left his daughter in Colombia, found work in Spain in the care and domestic  
40 sectors and obtained Spanish citizenship. However, she worked so hard that it was not  
41 possible to bring over her daughter, and after a while she got tired and bored working so  
42 many hours and decided it was time for a change. This is what motivated the move to  
43 London, where she managed to bring her daughter and finally reunite with her.  
44 Accessing social benefits made it easier for her to reduce her hours of work and look  
45 after her daughter, while enriching her life with other activities such as doing voluntary  
46 work or studying English. Despite her limited economic means and some health  
47 problems, Marimar is waiting for her teenage daughter to finish her studies before  
48 deciding whether to return to Colombia or not. However, for other families in more  
49 precarious situations, the experience of remigration has been more traumatic.  
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52 *Remigrating as a family*  
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4 Several of the Colombian migrants interviewed in London remigrated as a family,  
5 together or in stages. In most cases, the economic crisis in Spain had translated into  
6 unemployment or poor employment for the men, which caused the family to remigrate.  
7 This is similar to some return stories analysed above, reinforcing the need to take into  
8 account gender roles and relations within the family to understand family mobility  
9 strategies. Other studies in different contexts, such as Fenicia et al.'s (2016) study of  
10 returns between Germany and Russia, also identify strong gendered patterns, with men  
11 feeling more inclined to return by poor employment opportunities or longing for the  
12 host country, with women following them despite their desire to settle in Germany.  
13 Having a Spanish passport was also a precondition for this strategy, sometimes dictating  
14 the timeframe and sequence of remigration. When the men remigrated before, they  
15 would do it alone, and once a foothold in the new host society was secured (through  
16 work, accommodation), the rest of the family followed, but when women remigrated  
17 first they tended to do so with the children. Remigration was almost always described as  
18 starting from zero again, although some experiences were more 'positive' than others.  
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21 The story of Armando, a 43-year old Colombian man interviewed in London in 2014,  
22 exemplifies many of these tensions. After living in Spain 14 years, he and his family  
23 (wife and two children) had achieved a good living standard. The initial period was  
24 difficult, being in an irregular migrant situation and "doing jobs that perhaps in  
25 Colombia I would not have accepted". And with the crisis, they had to start new.  
26 Armando lost his sales job and went back to the "world of informal work". This,  
27 together with obtaining Spanish nationality, motivated his remigration to London,  
28 where he had relatives, initially on his own. Transnational relations thus play an  
29 important role in many remigration decisions (as they did in initial migration). Three  
30 years later, when contacted, the family had reunited but was still in a precarious  
31 situation. Armando has various cleaning jobs: "the area in which... particularly Latin  
32 American migrants find work... especially because of language limitations"; and the  
33 family shares a two-bedroom flat with relatives. As a result, family relations continue to  
34 be strained:  
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38 When the crisis started in Spain in 2007, my relationship with my wife suffered.  
39 Despair sets in, and relationships stress... Later, when I came here... it was  
40 different but it also affected, especially the children... the situation became  
41 untenable, since they wanted me there, near them [...] [Now] working all day,  
42 you cannot juggle work and family life... I have to readjust... try and leave one  
43 job.  
44

45 It is not surprising then that Armando sees remigration as temporary; the family's plan,  
46 he explains, is to resist for another three years, and maybe return to Colombia: "I need  
47 Colombia". This potential return is thought of from an emotional perspective, but he  
48 also contemplates the possibility of returning to Spain, more from an economic point of  
49 view: "if the situation improves". Stories like this, of family tensions and difficulties  
50 during remigration, were common, but still for some interviewees, this new mobility  
51 was justified as offering better future opportunities for them and their children. Within  
52 this framework of intergenerational social mobility, remigration was considered a more  
53 permanent strategy.  
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4 The cases of remigration explored briefly share similarities with those of return above,  
5 in that they expose other factors framing the (im)mobility strategies of Latin American  
6 migrant families beyond the socioeconomic context in Spain. The impact of the crisis  
7 particularly on male employment appears as a first trigger, but the way these strategies  
8 are adopted and implemented (only some family members remigrating, the whole  
9 family remigrating together or in stages) depends also on other factors, mainly: migrant  
10 projects, migrant status and gender and intergenerational relations, articulated with the  
11 structural determinants. These factors affect also how the remigration project evolves,  
12 whether as something more temporary or permanent. The cases of Marimar and  
13 Armando, for instance, show how settling or 'resisting' in London might be part of a  
14 strategy for intergenerational social mobility (focused on their children's studies and  
15 future opportunities in the UK), even if this might represent a 'sacrifice' for the parents.  
16 Meanwhile Dylan seems to be emotionally caught between two families (his nuclear,  
17 estranged family in Colombia, and his extended family in Belgium) and considering his  
18 practical options as well (consolidating his legal status in Europe, future labour  
19 opportunities in Spain).  
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22 **3) Complex circular and multiple migrations: trapped in (im)mobility?** A third  
23 strategy identified refers to those cases of almost constant circularity or mobility that we  
24 also found among our Latin American transnational migrant families. In contrast with  
25 more classical notions of circular or stepped migration, these new mobility strategies  
26 involve very rapid or repeated movements close in time that seem to configure  
27 practically a permanent state of mobility, even if this proves to be short or medium  
28 term. They emerge as a result of the crisis in Spain and in response to opportunities,  
29 dissatisfactions or needs. They are also different from the circular migration strategies  
30 put in place by other migrant groups in Spain, such as Moroccans and Romanians  
31 (Torres Pérez, 2014), in that they do not mean necessarily migrating between the home  
32 and host countries, but can include repeated movements between the host and a third (or  
33 more) country(ies).  
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36 The story of María and her husband Adrián, aged 40 and 49, a Brazilian couple  
37 interviewed in Madrid in 2013 and 2014, and their teenage daughter, is a good example  
38 of this. They all migrated in 2001 to Spain, where María worked in domestic service  
39 and Adrián in the construction sector. With their earnings they bought a flat in Madrid,  
40 but also maintained children from previous relationships in Brazil. The latter remained a  
41 source of contention, as María often accused her husband of sending more money than  
42 what he provided for their daughter in Spain. With the arrival of the crisis their situation  
43 deteriorated rapidly. Adrián lost his job, they had to stop paying their mortgage in  
44 Madrid and eventually lost the flat. Moreover, María's earnings were not enough to  
45 sustain the family, so she decided to return to Brazil with their daughter. This first  
46 return lasted only six months, since Adrián convinced them to come back to Spain.  
47 During this time, María lost her chance to renew her documentation and became an  
48 'irregular' migrant. During this second stay in Spain, their socioeconomic conditions  
49 did not improve and María opted to return to Brazil with her daughter again.  
50 Nevertheless, she finds it difficult to settle there, both economically and emotionally;  
51 her job options are not much better and she has to live with her mother, with whom she  
52 maintains a conflictive relationship. This is why she goes back to Spain once more,  
53 enticed by her husband's continued promises that things are going to be better, but this  
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4 time without her daughter, only to realise anew that their situation has not changed.  
5 After a few weeks she returns for the third time to Brasil, consolidating what seems to  
6 be a constant circularity between the two countries trying to escape various crises  
7 (economic, emotional, relational). Despite lacking Spanish nationality, her comings and  
8 goings are facilitated by the fact that Brazilians do not need a visa to enter Spain. At the  
9 same time, Adrián, unable to survive in Spain, starts ‘commuting’ between Brussels,  
10 where he has relatives, and Madrid, aided by low-cost flights and family support,  
11 depending on where he can find temporary construction work. Their story thus seems  
12 one of being trapped in mobility.  
13

14 Although the literature on mobilities emphasises how transformations in  
15 telecommunications allows for a multiplicity of movements, recent critical approaches  
16 seek to underline how not everyone have access to the same mobilities. Thus, the same  
17 way that the cases above seem to be caught in constant circular or multiple migrations,  
18 other cases explored could be described as trapped in immobility. Depending on factors  
19 such as migrant status, employment opportunities or emotional and relational contexts,  
20 migrants might feel trapped in one situation or another. Gabino, for instance, feels he  
21 has to stay immobile in Spain, even after the family lost everything and his wife and  
22 children returned to Colombia. Dylan also feels trapped in Europe, after all the effort he  
23 has put into his migration project and everything he has lost. This is despite the fact that  
24 they remain in very vulnerable situations, socioeconomically and emotionally. Other  
25 migrants interviewed also felt they had to remain (im)mobile as the best way to support  
26 their families, both in Europe and in their home countries.  
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## 29 **Conclusions**

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32 The typology of Latin American transitional migrant strategies against the economic  
33 crisis developed above based on the narratives of our research participants  
34 acknowledges the eventuality of (im)mobility, leading us to question classic concepts of  
35 migration and return understood as permanent and unidirectional movements. Returned  
36 migrants might think of their new mobility as permanent but also temporary,  
37 contemplating the idea of ‘returning’ to the same (or other) host country. Likewise,  
38 those remigrating to a third European country can envision this new mobility as another  
39 stage in a process of comings and goings within a transnational field that goes beyond  
40 the dichotomy of origin and destination. ‘Immobility’ can also be more permanent or  
41 temporary depending on different factors.  
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44 Sometimes, the strategies adopted can be a direct consequence of the economic crisis  
45 and its impact on the labour market, but this can interact with other variables. In many  
46 cases, the actors in these new mobilities (return, remigration or circular and multiple  
47 migrations), the kites, are those members of the family in a more unstable labour  
48 situation or that have the greatest care responsibilities, while the anchors remaining in  
49 Spain are the ones with greater work opportunities. Legal status is also important, since  
50 migrants with Spanish nationality are better placed to opt for return, remigration or  
51 circular and multiple migrations. Family relations, and especially couple ‘crises’, are  
52 key as well in deciding who leaves and who does not, or who follows whom. Some  
53 strategies put in place by migrants conceal separations at an emotional level, or end up  
54 ‘forcing’ one member in the couple (especially the women) to perform undesired new  
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4 mobilities, which can lead to further family tensions. Gender and intergenerational  
5 relations have to be taken into account to be able to understand these (im)mobility  
6 decisions among transnational families, as well as migratory projects (migration  
7 conceived as temporary or permanent, involving family reunification or not, with  
8 resources invested in home or host countries). Figure 3 below summarises some of the  
9 main factors we have identified as important for understanding such strategies, and  
10 serves as a starting point that can be further developed. Within the table, we try to  
11 distinguish those factors explaining (im)mobility strategies in response to different  
12 crises that have to do mainly with structural determinants, the migration project and  
13 transnational relations, emotions, and gender and intergenerational relations, offering  
14 some examples based on our empirical data.  
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16  
17 [INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]  
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19 The data from our fieldwork highlight also how the story in these pages is one of  
20 meetings and separations; of families separating, reuniting and splitting again, as if they  
21 were an accordion playing the music of migration. Many of these families find  
22 themselves 'trapped' in (im)mobility, in a constant movement of comings and goings or  
23 remaining and resisting, in response to situations of economic crisis and precariousness,  
24 but also of emotional crises. Throughout the article we have drawn attention to the  
25 importance of analysing spatial mobility strategies in combination with immobility, thus  
26 using the idea of (im)mobility, because essentially it is the way these 'kites' and  
27 'anchors' work together that allows us to understand the phenomenon under study. In  
28 many cases, without the anchors there are no kites; without those who remain immobile  
29 there is no mobility, as they complement each other in this dynamic of complex  
30 migration strategies that happen in the context of transnational migrant families.  
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33 It is precisely the transnational and family perspective, approached from a qualitative  
34 point of view and based on multi-sited fieldwork, which helps us go deeper into  
35 understanding such complexity, bringing to the fore the various strategies of spatial  
36 (im)mobility deployed in the context of the crisis in combination with the articulation of  
37 other explanatory factors. Our qualitative analysis allows us to bring to the fore the  
38 complexity that secondary statistics hide, while the transnational approach manifests the  
39 links established not only between 'home' and 'host' but also between migrant  
40 communities in different destinations (in this case within Europe). Finally, focusing on  
41 family strategies allows us to discover how socioeconomic factors combine with other  
42 variables, especially those related to emotional and gender relations, migratory projects  
43 and other structural determinants (see Figure 3). It is these three pillars, building up a  
44 transnational, qualitative and family based approach to the study of (im)mobility  
45 strategies that represents our main contribution. Academic debate has been overtly  
46 focused on the frontiers of the nation-state and socioeconomic factors, looking mainly at  
47 the impact of the crisis on employment and demographics. However, it has failed to  
48 fully consider how strategies of spatial (im)mobility emerge in the context of  
49 transnational households.  
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## Tables

Table 1: Percentage of women within the stock of migrants born abroad according to country of birth, 1998-2018.

	Brazil	Colombia	Ecuador
1998	59.4	64.0	58.7
1999	60.5	64.9	58.3
2000	61.4	64.7	56.1
2001	62.7	60.0	50.9
2002	63.2	57.8	50.8
2003	63.0	57.3	51.3
2004	62.7	57.3	51.7
2005	61.7	57.0	51.6
2006	60.5	57.1	51.6
2007	59.2	57.0	51.7
2008	58.6	56.5	51.4
2009	59.3	56.5	51.4
2010	60.9	56.8	51.6
2011	62.3	57.2	52.0
2012	63.2	57.5	52.3
2013	63.9	57.9	52.6
2014	64.6	58.2	52.8
2015	64.9	58.5	53.1
2016	64.8	58.7	53.3
2017	64.3	58.9	53.5
2018	63.8	58.8	53.6

Source: Data from *Padrón Municipal de Habitantes*, INE.  
Provisional data for 2018

### Figure legends

Figure 1: Spain. Stock of migrants born abroad according to country of birth, 1998-2018.

Source: Elaborated by the authors. Data from Padrón Municipal de Habitantes, INE. Provisional data for 2018

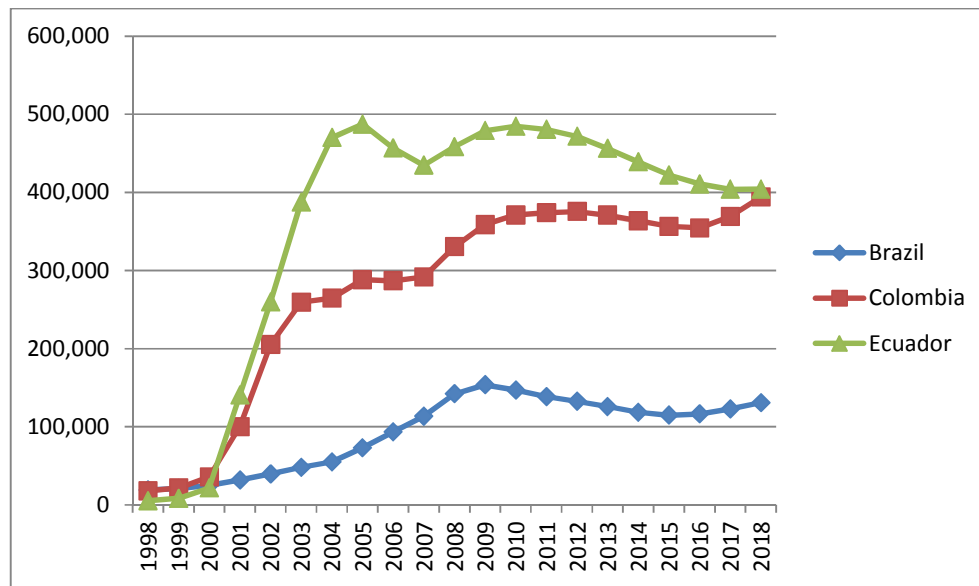
Figure 2: Spain. Emigration rates (emigration outflows/stock of population born abroad, %) according to country of birth and gender, 2008-2017.

Source: Elaborated by the authors. Data from *Padrón Municipal de Habitantes* and *Estadística de Migraciones*, INE.

Figure 3: Factors explaining the (im)mobility strategies of Latin American transnational migrant families in Spain.

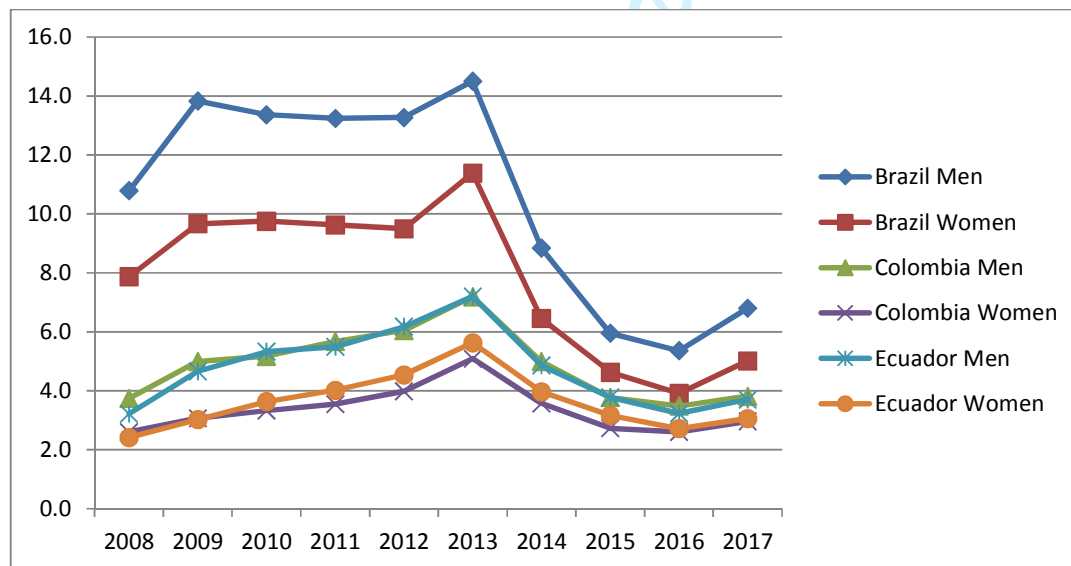
Source: author's qualitative data.

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Source: Elaborated by the authors. Data from *Padrón Municipal de Habitantes* and *Estadística de Migraciones*, INE.

Figure 3: Factors explaining the (im)mobility strategies of Latin American transnational migrant families in Spain.

<b>Structural determinants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Return policies and other measures encouraging return (especially active in the Ecuadorean case)</li> <li>-Visa policies (e.g. Brazilians do not need a tourist visa to visit Spain, which facilitates mobility between the two countries)</li> <li>-Access to naturalisation (Latin American migrants enjoy special conditions to apply for Spanish nationality) or to a residence permit (having a regular migrant status also facilitates mobility)</li> <li>-Impact of economic crisis on Spanish labour market (especially on the construction sector, affecting mostly male employment)</li> <li>-Mortgage crisis (it can motivate return or remigration as a way to escape accrued debts, but it can also lead to immobility)</li> <li>- Welfare policies (access to social benefits might facilitate remigration within the EU)</li> </ul>
<b>Migration project &amp; transnational relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Initial migration project (if the aim is to save and return and all investments have been made in the country of origin, this might facilitate return)</li> <li>-Project to settle in Spain (e.g. the desire to settle in the host country, family reunification, investing in housing or opening up a business in Spain can generate the need to 'resist' and maintain at least an anchor in the host country)</li> <li>-Access to transnational relations in the home country or new destinations (family or others who can support migrants during return or remigration)</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Emotional crises (e.g. as a result of couple separations, not been able to bring the children over, working too hard, not having a social life...; these can lead both to new mobilities or immobility)</li> <li>-Emotional attachment to the home or host country (motivating one or another strategy)</li> </ul>
<b>Gender roles &amp; relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Women's role in the migration process (as pioneer or 'follower')</li> <li>-Crisis in gender relations (e.g. men losing their role as breadwinners as a motivation to return or remigrate) (Cortés &amp; Oso, 2017)</li> </ul>
<b>Intergenerational relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Having children and their ages (smaller children require more care and can limit the parents' ability to work, they can be send to the home country to reduce immediate responsibilities). The need to care after older relatives in the home country is also a motivation for return</li> <li>-Social mobility strategies (e.g. remain in Spain or another European country because the parents think these contexts offer greater educational and future employment opportunities for their children)</li> </ul>

Source: author's qualitative data.