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Colombian Diaspora and Spain: colonial ties and emerging profiles

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, political instability, armed conflicts, and economic recessions have expelled a large number of Colombians, first to their neighbouring countries such as Venezuela, then to the USA, and most recently to European countries such as Spain. This continuous emigration resulted in the formation of a large diaspora community, which is growing fast, changing socio-demographically, and contributing to the expansion of diaspora space in the new host countries. With the help of the UN Global Migration Database and Spanish national registers, this paper 1) explores the expansion of the Colombian diaspora and the position of Spain in it; 2) examines the characteristics of the flow (size, structure, and composition) of Colombian immigrants to Spain and its impact on their population in Spain; and 3) studies the changes in the socio-demographic characteristics and territorial distribution of the Colombian population in Spain over the last two decades.

Key words: Colombian diaspora, migration system, socio-demographic profile, territorial distribution, Spain.

1. Introduction

Between the end of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, the acceleration of the globalised economy gave way to globalisation, characterised by the transnationalisation of the production process, of finance, and of the circuits of capital accumulation, with the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (Robinson, 2021), one of its main components being the intensification of the mobilisation of labour on a planetary scale and, as a consequence, the creation of new ‘migratory systems’ in the sense that the geographer Mabogunje (1970) had already described them in the 1970s, as flows of people, accompanied by goods and information between different areas. These migratory systems have resulted in the formation of several Diaspora communities around the world that maintain and strengthen transnational ties and work as a bridge between the place of birth and place of residence for millions of people across national borders. The Colombian diaspora is one of the major diaspora communities in the world, which is expanding and contributing to the development of Colombia and the host countries.

Till the middle of the twentieth century, Colombia was a country of immigration, receiving a large number of immigrants from their neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. Since the 1960s, political instability, armed conflicts, drug cartels, and the economic recession have forced a large number of Colombian citizens to migrate from their homeland in search of better job opportunities and living conditions. Since the 1990s, the implementation of neoliberal policies and the globalisation of production

processes have accelerated the emigration of Colombians to more developed countries in North America, Europe, and Oceania.

In Spain, Colombian immigration was one of the protagonists of the first wave of international migration from 2000 to 2007, with a clear preeminence of women, related both to the “global care chain” (Hochschild, 2001) and to the attraction factor exerted by both the labour and marriage markets in Spain (Domingo et al., 2014). After the Great Recession, from 2014 onwards, Spain once again experienced a second migratory boom, only interrupted temporarily by the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, flows from Colombia were among the first, along with other old flows such as those from Argentina and Peru and other new ones such as the Venezuelan diaspora and the emergence of flows from Central America, led by Honduras. However, in this second stream of Colombian immigration to Spain, the economic factors of expulsion and the existence of migratory chains supported by an extensive Colombian population already settled in Spain explain the unique and differential nature of the flows and the immigrant population between 2014 and 2022.

During the last decade, several authors have tried to explore different characteristics of the Colombian population living outside of their country of birth (Guarnizo and Diaz, 1999; Diez, 2006; Cruz Zúñiga et al., 2008; Garay Salamanca and Medina Villegas, 2008; Mejía Ochoa, 2012). However, due to the lack of flow data for all countries, it was not possible to study the expansion process of the Colombian diaspora community around the world. In this paper, with the help of the bilateral international migrant stock data published in the UNGMD and the methods proposed by Abel and Cohen (2019), we have estimated the flow of Colombian immigrants to all countries around the globe and tried to explore the evolution of the Colombian diaspora to the third largest diaspora community from Latin America. With the help of national registers and the Spanish census of 2011 and 2021, we are also going to study the emergence of Spain as one of the most important destinations in the Colombian diaspora and the changes in the profile of Colombian immigrants during the last two decades. Our main hypothesis is that both the gender and age composition of the flows in the first and second waves, as well as the socio-demographic profiles of the residents who arrived in both waves, differ, with an increase in the diversity of profiles in the second wave and an increase in the number of men, while in the first wave the profile was essentially female, with an active population and slightly lower levels of education than in the second wave.

In this paper, our main objectives are: 1) to quantify the flow and find the direction of the Colombian emigration and explore the evolution process of the Colombian diaspora during the last three decades and the position of Spain in it; 2) to examine the flow (size, structure and composition) of the Colombian population to Spain and its impact on the immigrant population of Colombian origin in Spain by comparing the two boom periods, i.e., 2000-2007 and 2014-2021; and 3) to study the changes in the socio-demographic characteristics and territorial distribution of the Colombian population residing in Spain over the last two decades, with a special focus on the comparison between those arriving before and after the Great Recession.

This paper has seven sections. Section 2 presents the definition and evolution of the concept of diaspora population and space, which helps us understand the expansion of the Colombian immigrant population as a diaspora community. Section 3 describes the data sources used in this study. Section 4 explores the evolution of the Colombian diaspora

during the last three decades and the emergence of Spain as an important destination for Colombian migrants. Section 5 analyse the growth of the influx and stock of Colombian immigrants in Spain and their changing profile during the last two decades. Section 6 examines the evolution of the territorial distribution of Colombian immigrants in Spain during the last two decades. Section 7 presents some concluding remarks.

2. Diaspora: population and space

The meanings of the term diaspora have remained evolving with time (Tölölyan, 1996). It was first used to explain “the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion” (Safran, 1991: 83). The classic definition of diaspora is based on three criteria proposed by Sheffer (1986): the dispersed people must have a distinct collective identity across international locations; the dispersed group must have some kind of internal organisation; and the dispersed group must maintain ties with the homeland, which may be symbolic or real. According to Safran, “Today, diaspora and, more specifically, diaspora community seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court” (Safran, 1991: 83). He explained that the concept of diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original center to two or more peripheral, or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. Brah (1996: 620) defined the concept of diaspora as “an interpretive frame referencing the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of contemporary forms of migrancy (refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, expats, etc.).” She developed a more inclusive notion of diasporic space linking those who had moved to those who have stayed. Later, Cohen (1996) introduced the concept of “victim diaspora” to describe the forced migration of people due to specific events triggered by political, social, and religious reasons.

In its more inclusive form, Vertovec (1997) defined diaspora as an umbrella term often used to describe practically any population that is considered deterritorialized or transnational—that is, which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe. He conveyed at least three discernible meanings of the concept of diaspora: as social form, as a type of consciousness, and as a mode of cultural production (Vertovec, 1997: 277). More recently, Cohen (2023) described different types of diaspora communities: victims (Jews and Armenians), labour (Indentured Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Turks, Italians, and North Africans), imperial (British and Russians), trade (Lebanese and Chinese), professionals (Indians, Chinese, and Japanese),

deterritorialized (Caribbean, Romani, Sindhis, and Parsis), and incipients (Afghans, Gulf workers, and Turks), which covers a wide range of people, from refugees to professionals, who are living out of their country of birth. In this paper, we will see how the Colombian diaspora evolved during the last five decades and how we can categorise it.

3. Data Sources

In this paper, we use a combination of statistical sources to explore the expansion of the Colombian diaspora and the position of Spain in it. First, to explore the size and growth of the Colombian diaspora population and space during the last three decades (1990–2020), we used the United Nations Global Migration Database (UNGMD). This is a comprehensive compilation of empirical data on the number of international migrants by country of birth and citizenship, sex, and age, based on population censuses, population registers, nationally representative surveys, and other official statistical sources for more than 200 countries and territories around the world. Since the UNGMD only provides 5-year estimates of the stock of migrants in all countries and regions of the world from 1990 to 2020, to estimate the size of the flow of Colombian emigrants to different countries around the globe, we are using the estimated bilateral international migration flows reconstructed for 200 countries by Abel and Cohen (2019). In these data, estimated total flows to a country provide the number of immigrants, while total flows from a country reflect the number of emigrants.

In order to study the evolution of Colombian immigrant flows and their internal movements (up to the municipal level) in Spain, we use data from the Residential Variation Statistics (EVR), which the National Statistics Institute of Spain (INE) compiles based on the management and updating of the municipal registers with the City Councils. Since 2001, the statistics have been obtained directly from the INE census database. The EVR provides information on the number, age, sex, place of birth, citizenship status, and previous address of the people entering the municipality. In the case of foreigners, it collects the information of the country of precedence and enters it into the register as *altas*.

To study the evolution of the size, structure, and composition of the Colombian immigrant population and its spatial distribution (down to the census section level) in Spain, we are using data from the *Padrón Continuo*. It is the administrative register where the residents of the municipality are recorded and whose annual results allow us to know the numbers of foreigners regardless of whether they are regularised or not. In this sense, it is useful for reflecting the volume of foreign migration. In addition, to explore the impact of legislative changes in Spain on the flow, stock, and socio-demographic characteristics of Colombian immigrants in Spain, we use data published by the Permanent Immigration Observatory (OPI), which is a collegiate body that brings together all available statistical information on foreigners, immigration, international protection, and nationality.

Lastly, to study the evolution of the socio-demographic characteristics of the Colombian population in Spain, we use data from the population censuses of 2011 and 2021, prepared by the National Statistics Institute (INE) of Spain. In addition to providing figures for the foreign population in Spain, it also allows us to obtain the socio-demographic characteristics of the immigrant population during the census period.

4. Colombian diaspora population and space

Colombia had positive net migration until the mid-twentieth century. However, with the start of the internal armed conflict in Colombia in the 1960s, this trend changed significantly. In 1964, far-left revolutionary groups like FARC and ELN formed, and a number of other groups, such as drug cartels and paramilitaries, became part of this civil war. These events, along with the neoliberal policies and economic recession of the late 1990s, forced millions of Colombians to emigrate from the country in search of a better future elsewhere (Actis, 2009). According to the UNGMD, in 2020, the Colombian diaspora, with 3.02 million people worldwide, was the third largest diaspora in South America, after the Mexican and Venezuelan diasporas, with 11.2 million and 5.1 million people, respectively. Around 6% of the Colombian population lived abroad. Among all the diaspora communities worldwide, the Colombian diaspora ranks 25th and represents 1.13% of the total population living outside their country of birth. A unique feature of this diaspora, which separates it from other large diasporas, was the predominance of women. The sex ratio of the diaspora population was 0.84 men per woman.

Previous studies have shown that since the 1960s, there have been three waves of emigration that have contributed to the formation and expansion of the Colombian diaspora (Cárdenas and Mejías, 2006). In the first wave (1965–1975), the majority of Colombians emigrated to Venezuela, the USA, Ecuador, and Panama, which accounted for 95% of Colombians abroad in 1970 (Cardona et al., 1980). The neighbouring country of Venezuela was the most preferred destination for low-skilled people in the agricultural sector (Lamela et al., 2012). For centuries, Colombia and Venezuela have been part of the same territorial entity under Spanish rule. Due to their common history, the two countries continued to exchange cultural and human heritage and were often called “*Naciones Hermanas*” (Sister Nations). In the early 1970s, with the oil boom, Venezuela became one of the richest nations in South America, which attracted a large number of Colombian workers seeking better living conditions. The majority of emigrants were from departments close to the border, such as Norte de Santander, Santander, Cesar, and Guajira. This flow declined with the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. Contrary to this trend, the initial flow of Colombians to the USA was mainly composed of university professionals, particularly doctors and engineers (Guarnizo, 2004). This high-skilled immigration was supported by some important reforms to immigration legislation in the USA. These early migrants established a social network, which paved the way for new migrants directly from Colombia or from their previous destinations. During this period, two major enclaves for Colombian immigrants developed in the USA, i.e., in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and South Florida. These areas provided very diverse job opportunities for the Colombian migrants, and until the mid-1970s, a large number of low-skilled workers, traders, entrepreneurs, and students also started immigrating to the USA.

In the second wave (1980–1995), much of the emigration was related to the rise of drug trafficking in Colombia, and the most important destination was the United States. During this period, the expansion of drug curtailments to the Colombian enclaves in the USA strengthened the growth of the Colombian community, especially in the south of Florida. The country’s migration flows began to stabilise from 1985 on. Since 1990, the unprecedented increase in Colombian migration has been caused by the expansion of the armed conflict and the economic crisis at the end of the century. By comparing the first two waves, we can conclude that during the first wave, the pull factors, such as the oil

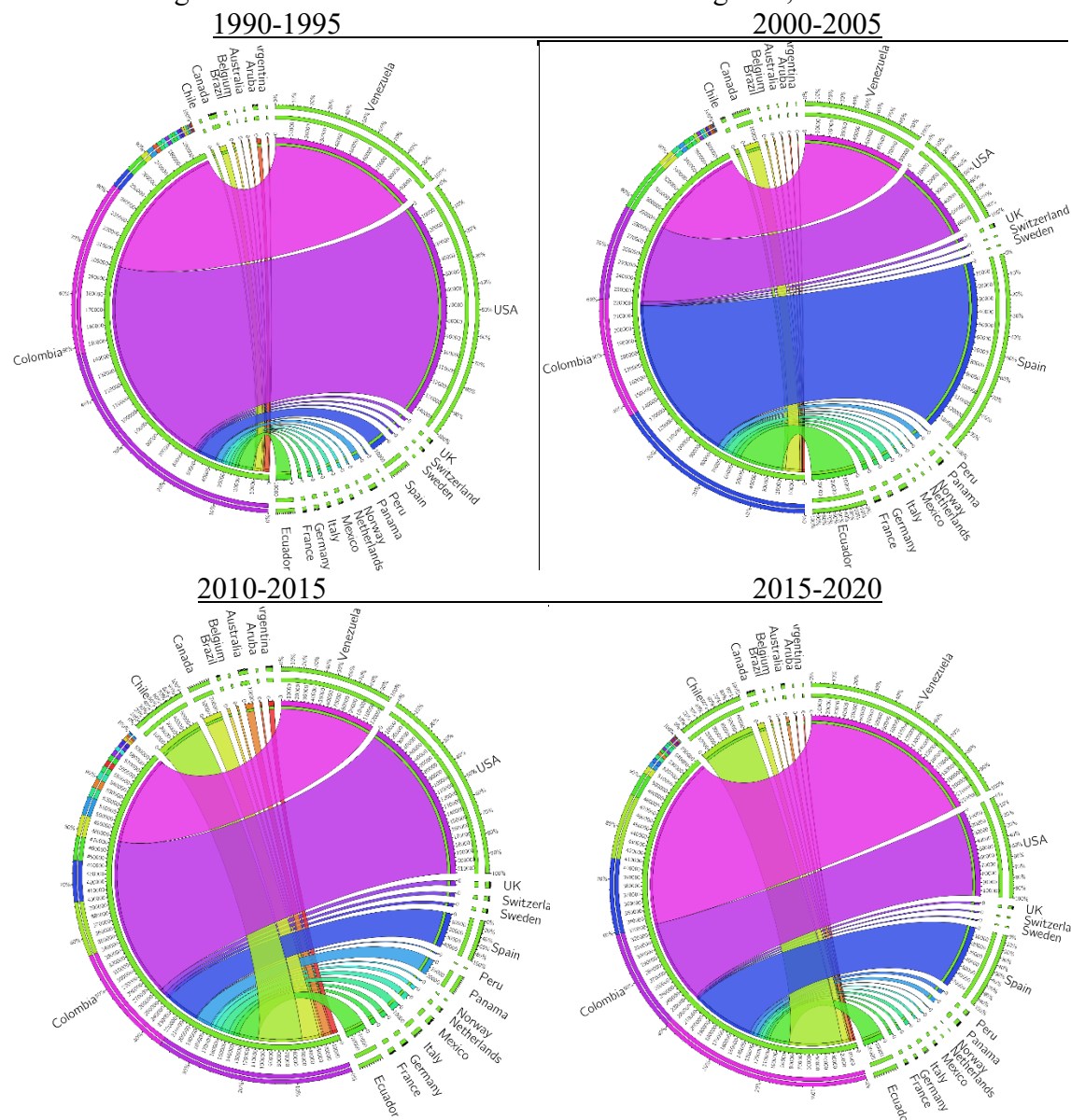
boom in Venezuela and favourable changes in US immigration legislation, played an important role in attracting low- and highly skilled immigrants; however, during the second wave, the push factors, such as the expansion of the drug trade, internal conflicts, and the economic recession, played a crucial role in expelling people out of the country. In the third wave (1996–2013), a large number of middle- and upper-class people emigrated from Colombia in an increasingly globalised world. Their main destinations were the United States, Spain, Venezuela, and Ecuador. According to Cárdenas and Mejía (2006), the high propensity of Colombians to emigrate was basically explained by four fundamental factors: the economic situation, the availability of migratory social networks, migration policies, and the political situation (including violence and confrontations between the state and terrorists). This third wave extended until the global financial crisis of 2008–2013. In these historical waves, we can also add a new wave, which started in 2014 and is still going on. During this wave, a large number of students and highly skilled professionals emigrated to different parts of the world, expanding the diaspora space from Sweden in the north to Australia in the south.

In the past, the absence of flow data has made it difficult to study the expansion of the Colombian diaspora community around the world. By using the method proposed by Abel and Cohen (2019), we estimated the size and direction of the flow of Colombian immigrants to different countries during each of the five-year periods starting from 1990–1995 until 2015–2020 (Figure 1). During the 1990–1995 period, 304.5 thousand people emigrated from Colombia, of which 79.9% of the emigration flow was directed towards the USA and Venezuela alone. The USA (145.4 thousand) was the leading destination for Colombian emigrants, followed by Venezuela (98.2 thousand), Spain (11.4 thousand), Ecuador (10.2 thousand), Canada (4.4 thousand), and Panama (4 thousand). In 2000–2005, not only did the number of Colombian emigrants increase to 374.8 thousand, but their most favourite destination also changed from the USA to Spain. During this period, 139.8 thousand Colombians emigrated to Spain, which makes up 37.3% of the total flow from Colombia. After Spain, Venezuela (82.6 thousand), the USA (65.3 thousand), Ecuador (36.7 thousand), Canada (11.7 thousand), Italy (5.5 thousand), and Panama (4.3 thousand) received a significant number of Colombian emigrants.

After the global economic crisis of 2008, the number of Colombian emigrants increased to 614.9 thousand in 2010–2015. Due to the increasing unemployment among the immigrant population in Spain, which increased to 36 percent in 2012, the number of Colombians emigrating to Spain declined swiftly to 44.9 thousand. It encouraged many immigrants to return to their countries of origin (Bermúdez, 2020) or remigrating to other destinations in Europe, such as Germany or the UK, making Spain a country of dispersion for the Colombian immigrants in the diaspora (Bermúdez and Cuberos-Gallardo, 2021). The USA emerged as the leading receptor for Colombian immigrants (216.1 thousand). Most interestingly, with 59.9 thousand emigrants, Chile has become the third major destination for Colombian emigrants. In addition to their previous destinations, Colombian emigrants also moved to new destinations such as Australia (10.2 thousand), Germany (7.1 thousand), Argentina (6.9 thousand), France (6.9 thousand), the UK (6.7 thousand), and the Netherlands (4.8 thousand), expanding the Colombian diaspora to Western Europe and Oceania. During the last period, 2015–2020, the total number of emigrants from Colombia declined to 563.3 thousand. The highest decline was registered by the USA (-109.5 thousand). This is mainly due to the tougher stance on illegal immigration to the USA during this period. Venezuela, with 223.3 thousand emigrants, emerged as the leading receptor of Colombian emigrants, followed by the USA (106.6

thousand), Spain (79 thousand), Chile (68.8 thousand), and Ecuador (25.6 thousand) (Figure 1). In this period, 60.6% of the total flow of Colombian migrants was limited to Latin American countries, followed by 20.4% towards North America and 17.9% towards Europe.

Figure 1. Main destinations for Colombian emigrants, 1990-2020.

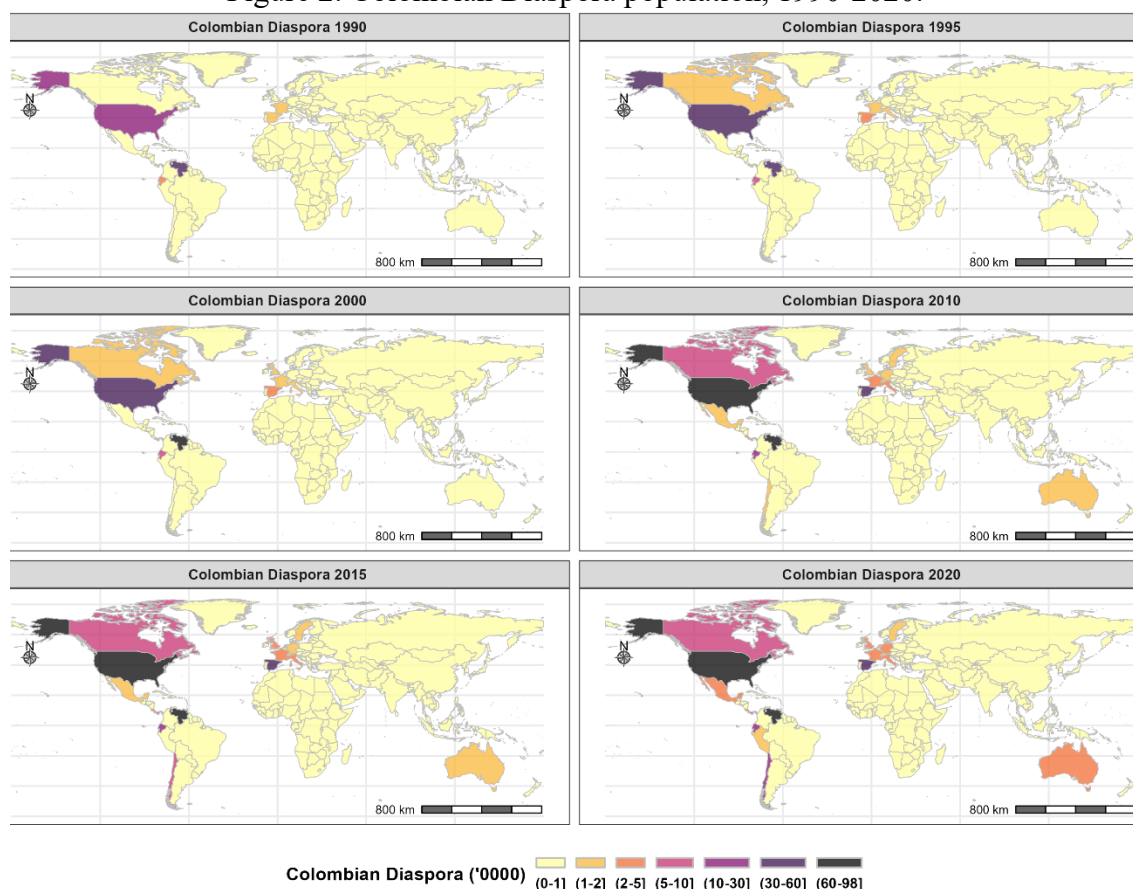


Source: Own elaboration with the data from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020

These continuous waves of emigration from Colombia have resulted in a large diaspora community around the world. The destinations for Colombian emigrants largely reflect colonial, cultural, and economic ties with countries in Europe, North America, and Latin America. According to the UN Global Migration Database (UNGMD), in 1990, the size of the Colombian diaspora was 1 million people who were born in Colombia and resided in 58 countries around the world. With 88.9% of the total diaspora population, Venezuela, the USA, Ecuador, and France were their main destinations. Spain was their sixth-largest destination (12.5 thousand, 1.2%). At the regional level, 63.7% of the total diaspora population was settled in the Latin American and Caribbean region, followed by North

America (29.1%) and Europe (6.9%). Under the impact of globalisation and the country's growing political and economic instability, the size of the Colombian diaspora doubled to 1.9 million in 2005 (Figure 2). In 2005, the Colombian diaspora spread to 61 countries. Venezuela and the US maintained their top two positions; however, with a massive influx of Colombians from 2001 onwards, Spain reached third place with 270 thousand Colombian immigrants. From 2005 to 2010, another 0.6 million people emigrated from Colombia, increasing the diaspora population to 2.6 million in 2010. After 2010, the pace of emigration slowed down due to the global financial crisis. During this period, the growth of the Colombian diaspora was fuelled by returnees and re-emigrants, with Spain becoming a source country for Colombian migration, both in terms of return and re-emigration to other European countries or the USA, in both cases some with Spanish nationality (Bermúdez, 2020; Bermúdez and Paraschivescu, 2020).

Figure 2. Colombian Diaspora population, 1990-2020.

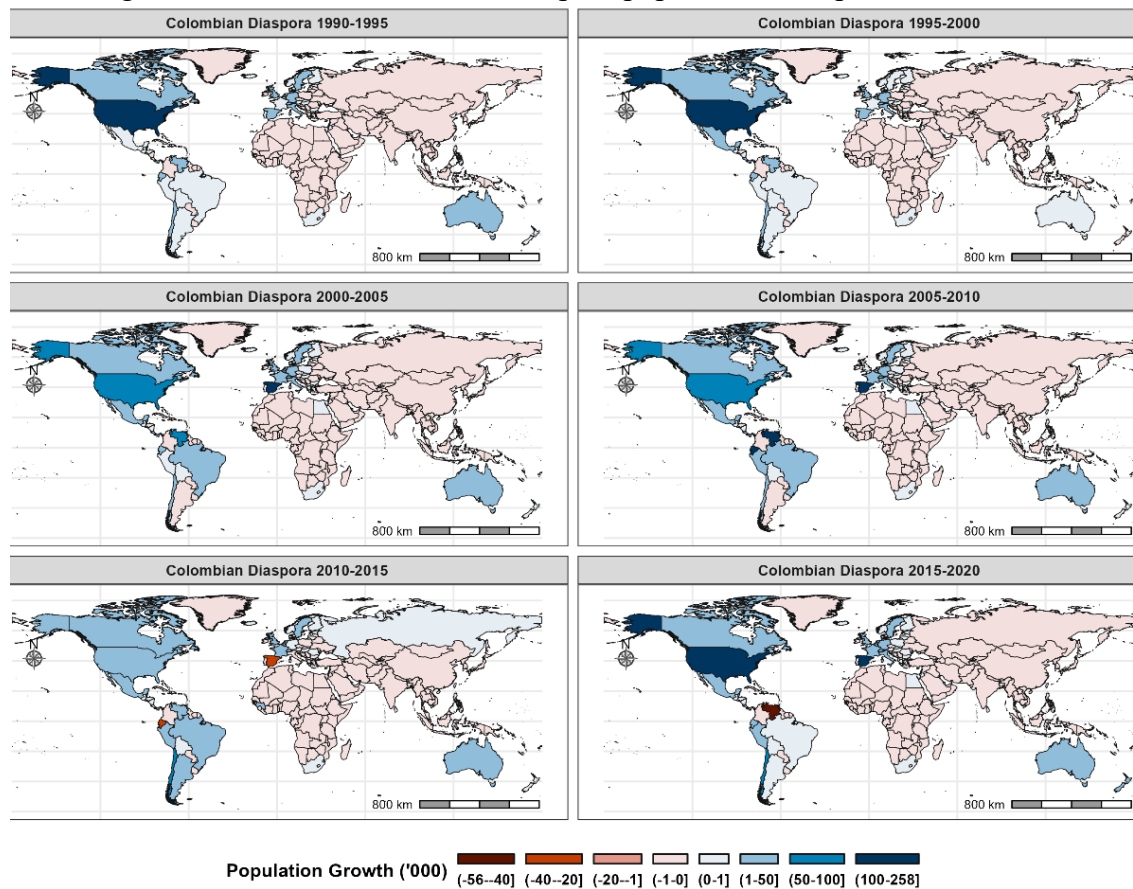


Fuente: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020.

After 2015, with a new wave of emigrants with different profiles, motives, and destinations than the first waves, the Colombian diaspora showed some recovery, and the diaspora population reached 3.02 million people in 2020. In this period, the Colombian diaspora spread to 66 countries around the world. Of the total diaspora population, 48.1% was settled in Latin America, in which Venezuela (917.8 thousand), Ecuador (194.7 thousand), Chile (173.5 thousand), and Panama (50.7 thousand) were their primary destinations. Remaining 29.5% of the total diaspora population was settled in North America, where the USA (817.6 thousand) and Canada (75.4 thousand) had a large number of Colombian migrants. 21.2% of the Colombian diaspora population was settled in Europe, in which Spain (450.4 thousand), Italy (41.5 thousand), France (31.2

thousand), the UK (25 thousand), Germany (24.5 thousand), and Sweden (12.9 thousand) boast the largest Colombian diaspora communities. The growth of Colombian migration to Spain can be seen in the context of the extension of the Colombian diaspora and Colombia's own transformation into a country of migratory transit. This transformation has occurred especially after the arrival of migrants from Venezuela, with more than 1.7 million in 2020, but also from African and Asian countries (Ramírez Herrera, 2022). A small proportion (1.2%) of Colombian immigrants were also settled in the Oceania region, where Australia (28.3 thousand) and New Zealand (2.8 thousand) were their main destinations. In Asia and Africa, the number of Colombian immigrants was around 3 thousand permanent residents (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Growth of Colombian diaspora population and space, 1990-2020.



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). *International Migrant Stock 2020*.

In sum, we can say that the Colombian diaspora has seen considerable growth in terms of population and space during the last three decades. The characteristics of the diaspora population have also changed remarkably. During the period of 1960–1990, with a large number of refugees and asylum seekers who were expelled by armed conflicts and political instability in the country, the Colombian diaspora was a victim diaspora. In the 1990s, with the large number of labour migrations fuelled by globalisation, this diaspora turned into a labour diaspora. Since 2015, with the migration of highly skilled professionals, this diaspora has been transforming into a professional diaspora. The dispersion of the diaspora population and strengthening of transnational links have helped the Colombian economy recover and stabilise (Khoudour-Castéras, 2007; Ramírez Herrera, 2022). To recognise the role of Colombian emigrants in the development of Colombia, the Colombian government has provided dual nationality to their citizens and

allowed them to participate in the national elections with representatives in the national parliament (Moreira et al., 2024).

5. Colombian diaspora and Spain

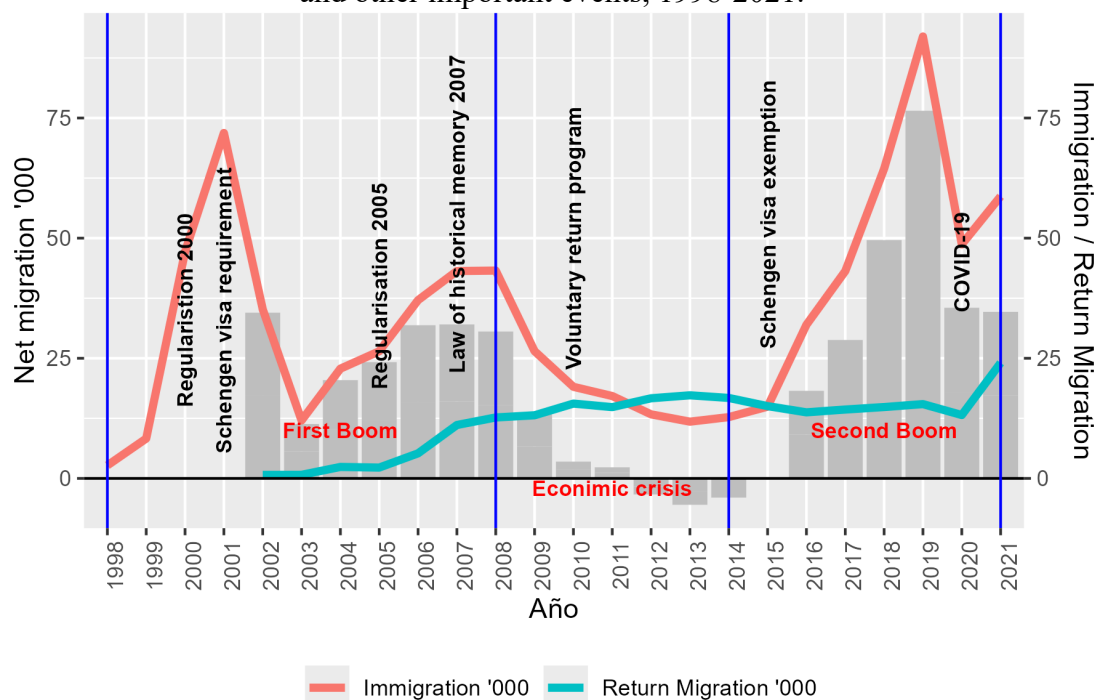
5.1. Flow of Colombian immigrants to Spain

With a detailed analysis of the annual flow of Colombians to Spain over the last two decades, we have identified two migration booms, i.e., before and after the global economic crisis, which hit Spain in 2008 and lasted until 2013. According to the EVR data, during the first boom, 1998–2007, 306.8 thousand Colombians entered Spain and only 22.4 thousand left, creating a net surplus of 284.4 thousand. This migration flow was accelerated by a combination of eminent economic factors of expulsion and attraction (Domínguez et al., 2020; Domingo and Bayona, 2024). The economic recession of the late 1990s and internal conflicts in Colombia worked as push factors and expelled a large number of low-skilled labourers to Spain, especially women in the growing domestic help sector and men in the construction sector. At the same time, the demand for ‘reproductive work’ (as explained by Fraser 2017) in Spain and the demand for brides in the Spanish marriage market made women the protagonists of these flows (Domingo et al., 2014). The immigration laws in Spain also played an important role in attracting new immigrants from Colombia, and in consolidation of a migratory system between Colombia and Spain. Preferential access to the Spanish Citizenship due to colonial past (Izquierdo Escribano, 2002; Domingo and Ortega 2015), as Colombians only require 2 years of uninterrupted and legal residence in Spain to become eligible for Spanish nationality, in contrast to other Asian or African immigrants who have to wait for 10 years, and cultural proximity (Spanish language) strengthened this migration system. In addition, the legislative changes, such as the 2000 regularisation program, which gave an opportunity to all irregular immigrants to regularise their status in Spain, attracted a large number of Colombians to Spain, making them one of the largest immigrant groups of Latin American origin. The seasonal worker agreement with Colombia (21 May 2001) also helped a large number of Colombian workers to enter legally in Spain, most of them later settled permanently in Spain (Ripol Carulla, 2001). The imposition of the Schengen visa requirement for Colombians in 2001 restricted this flow to 12.1 thousand in 2004. However, it increases the number of family reunions among the Colombian migrants, who were regularised in 2001 and have the residence permit of more than 1 year in Spain. The 2005 regularisation program and the 2007 Law of Historical Memory, which helped a large number of descendants of Spanish migrants who migrated to Colombia during the Franco regime in Spain to return to their ancestral land, revived this flow to 43.3 thousand in 2008.

During the crisis period, i.e., 2008–2013, the flow of Colombian immigrants decreased to 131.1 thousand and 90.2 thousand left Spain, resulting in a net addition of 40.9 thousand people to the Colombian population in Spain. Lack of work opportunities and a high unemployment rate in Spain forced many immigrants, including Colombians to leave Spain and return to their country of origin or remigrate to other European countries or the USA (Parella Rubio and Petroff, 2014). The voluntary return program, which started in 2010, helped a large number of Colombians return to their country of origin. During the second boom, i.e., 2014–2021, 366.6 thousand Colombians entered Spain and 127.4 thousand left Spain to return to their country of origin or another destination in Europe or North America. With the exemption of Schengen visas for Colombian citizens

in 2015, the influx of Colombian immigrants started to grow fast. The recent modifications in the Spanish immigration laws, *Real Decreto 629/2022, de 26 de julio*, which gave work permit to students who are enrolled in some educational institute in Spain, also made Spain an attractive destination for the Colombian students. This flow continued until the COVID-19 crisis. After the removal of COVID-19 restrictions on the movement of people, this flow revived again and reached the pre-pandemic level in 2021 (Figure 4). In this flow, a large number of Colombian students and skilled workers migrated to Spain for better education and jobs in the service sector.

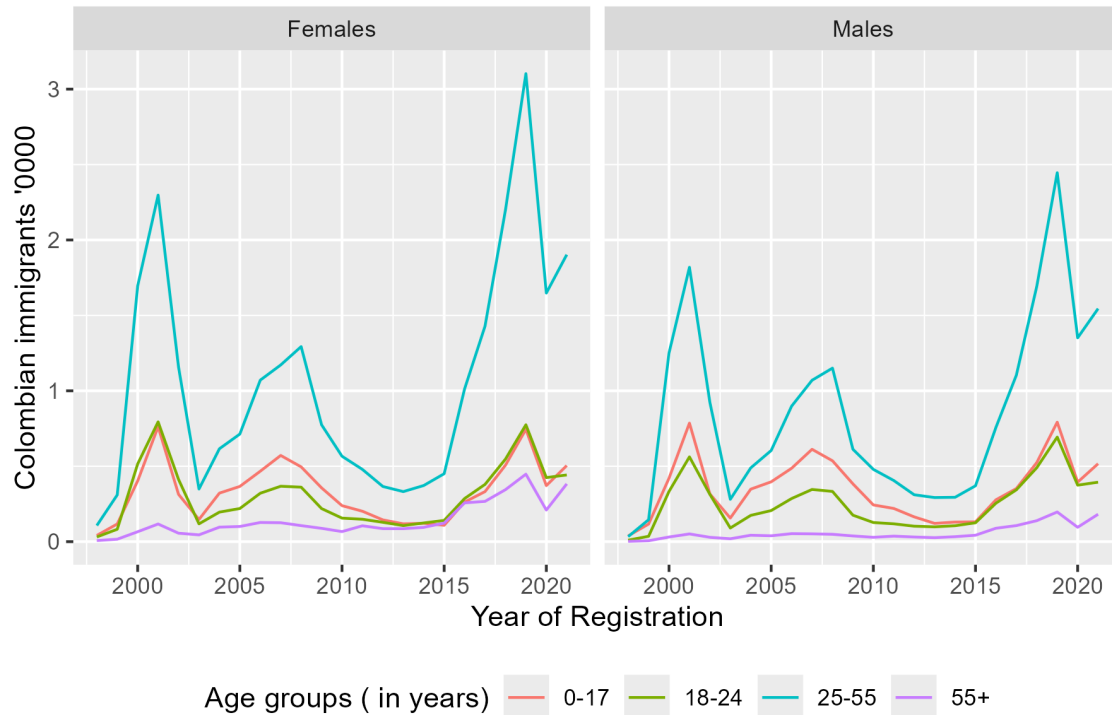
Figure 4: Annual flow of Colombian immigrants to and from Spain, legislative changes and other important events, 1998-2021.



Regarding the gender distribution, Colombian immigration to Spain has continued to be dominated by women, who migrated to Spain to fill the demand for domestic workers or by marrying Spanish men. During the first boom, the sex ratio of Colombian immigrants was 0.83 men per woman, which decreased to 0.80 men per woman in the second boom. The largest increase in the sex ratio occurred during the crisis period, when the sex ratio increased to 0.87 men per woman. Similarly, the age structure of Colombian immigrants has shown a remarkable change in both boom periods. During the first boom, the proportion of young men and women (0–17 years) in the total population was 26.5% and 20.9%, which decreased to 19.1% and 14.5%, respectively. This shows the decline of family reunions in the second boom period. The proportion of young adult men (18–24 years old) increased from 16.9% in the first boom to 17% in the second boom; however, the proportion of young adult women decreased from 18.2% in the first boom to 15.4% in the second boom. The proportion of adult men and women (25–55 years) has increased from 54.2% and 56.4% in the first boom to 58.5% and 59.6%, respectively, in the second boom. The concentration of Colombian immigrants in working-age groups shows the economic nature of this migration flow, with a very small proportion of dependent populations. Finally, the proportion of older men and women (55+) has risen from 2.3% and 4.5% in the first boom to 5.4% and 10.5%, respectively, in the second boom. This shows that Spain is also becoming a preferred destination for older Colombians,

especially women who migrate to help their children with domestic work and take care of their grandchildren (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Age and sex profile of Colombian immigrants in Spain, 1998-2021



Source: Residential Variation Statistics (EVR), 1998-2021.

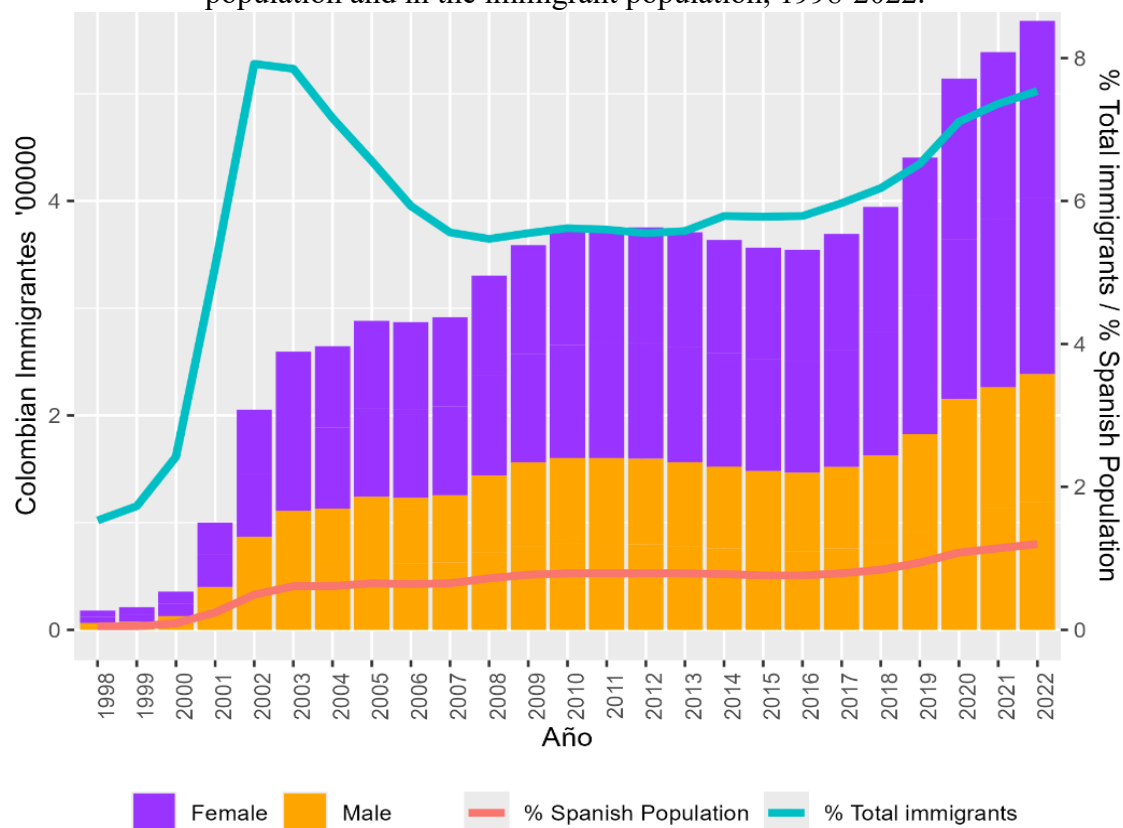
The preferred destination cities for Colombian immigrants in Spain also changed during the boom periods. During the first boom period, the province of Madrid, with 31.4% of Colombian arrivals, was the most preferred destination for Colombian immigrants in Spain. This percentage dropped to 23.6% in the second boom. In contrast, the share of Colombian immigrants arriving directly in Barcelona increased from 8.2% in the first boom to 13.9% in the second boom. This shows the expansion of social networks of Colombian immigrants in Spain, which helped new immigrants arrive in different provinces of Spain directly.

5.2. Colombian population in Spain

The regular flow of immigrants from Colombia has given rise to a very large and rapidly growing community of Colombian immigrants in Spain. According to data from the *Padrón Continuo* (INE), in 1998, the number of people born in Colombia and resident in Spain was 17.8 thousand, representing 1.5% of the total immigrant population and 0.05% of the total population in Spain. During the first immigration boom, the number of Colombians in Spain increased to 205.3 thousand in 2002, and their share in the immigrant and total population also increased to 7.9% and 0.5%, respectively. At the end of the first boom and the beginning of the global economic crisis in 2008, the number of Colombians increased to 330.4 thousand. During the economic crisis period, i.e., 2008–2013, the growth of the Colombian population first slowed and then became negative. In 2012, the Colombian population reached its maximum, i.e., 375.5 thousand, and then started declining. In 2016, the Colombian population was 354.5 thousand. During the second boom, another 213.6 thousand people joined the Colombian community in Spain.

As a result, in 2022, with 568.0 thousand immigrants, Colombians became the second largest immigrant group in Spain, after Moroccans, and the largest immigrant group from Latin America. Their share in the total and immigrant populations of Spain increased to 1.2% and 7.54%, respectively (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Annual growth of the Colombian population in Spain and its share in the total population and in the immigrant population, 1998-2022.



Source: Padrón Continuo (INE), 1998-2022.

5.3. The socio-demographic characteristics of the Colombian population in Spain

In this section, we will explore how the socio-demographic profile of Colombians in Spain has changed over the last two decades, focussing on different aspects of their lives.

5.3.1. Age structure and sex composition

During the last two decades, women have been over-represented in the Colombian population in Spain. During the first migration boom, the sex ratio of the Colombian population was 0.73 men per woman, which decreased to 0.71 during the second boom. This shows a relative decline in the number of men and a predominance of women, who initially emigrated (in the first boom) as domestic workers or wives and later (in the second boom) also as skilled workers, students, or grandmothers. Regarding the changes in the age structure of the Colombian population in Spain, the average age of Colombian men and women in the first boom was 29.6 and 32.1 years, respectively, which increased to 35.9 and 40.1 years in the second boom. During the first boom, the proportion of youth (0–17), adults (18–45), mature (46–65), and elderly (65+) in the Colombian population was 17.9%, 68.4%, 12.3%, and 1.4%, respectively. In the second boom, the proportion of young and adult populations decreased to 7.7% and 59.7%, respectively, while the

proportion of mature and old populations increased to 28.6% and 4%, respectively (Figure 6). This has been due both to the natural ageing of the immigrant population itself and to the increase in the average age of new emigrants, especially due to the increase in the number of elderly women, linked to reproductive work, in the recent influx (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Age and Sex distribution of Colombian population in Spain.

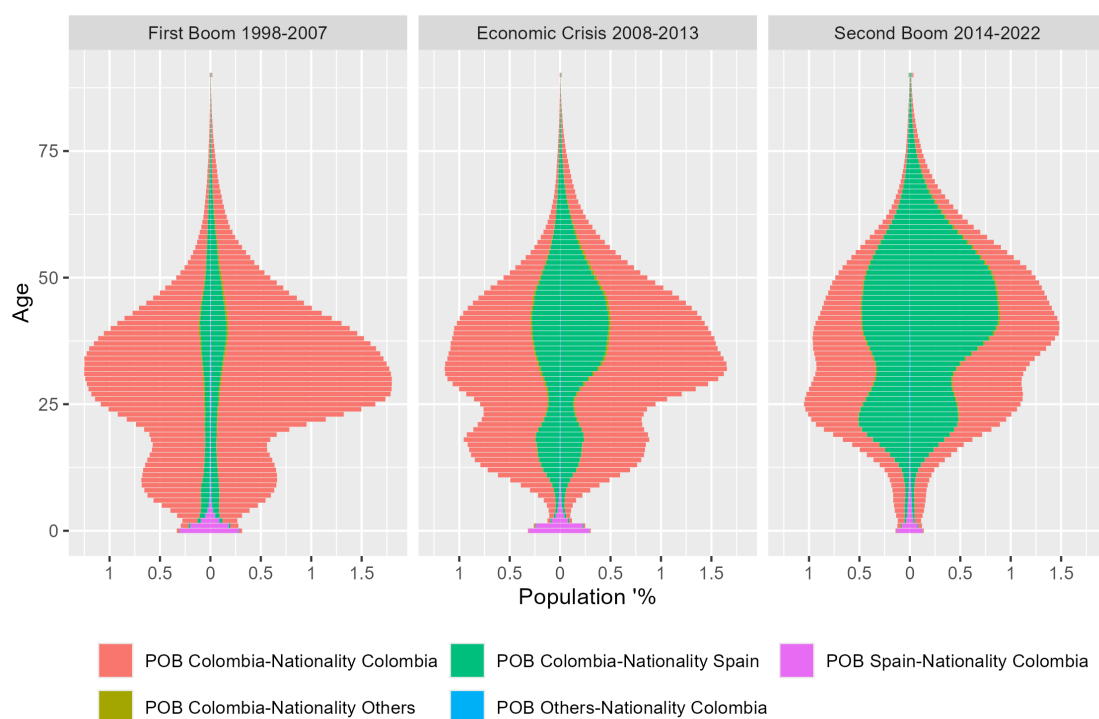


Source: *Padrón Continuo (INE), 1998-2022.*

5.3.2. Nationality and place of birth

As a result of the preferential access to Spanish nationality for Colombian immigrants, like other Latin Americans, the number of nationalised Colombians grown rapidly during the last two decades. According to *Padrón Continuo* data, in 1998, the number of Colombians (by nationality) in Spain was 9.9 thousand, much lower than the total number of people born in Colombia and resident in Spain (17.8 thousand), which shows that a large number of Colombians had acquired Spanish nationality (47.3%). Until the end of the first migration boom (2007), the number of Colombians by nationality in Spain increased to 261.5 thousand, and the number of Colombians by place of birth was 291.7 thousand. This means that the proportion of Colombians by birth who had attained Spanish nationality fell to 12.2%. During the second boom, the number of Colombians by nationality increased to 314.7 thousand and, at the same time, the number of Colombians by place of birth was 568 thousand, showing that the proportion of Colombians by birth who had acquired Spanish nationality increased again to 45.9 percent. In 2022, the number of Colombians with Colombian nationality or with birth in Colombia was 575.5 thousand, of whom only 307.2 thousand had both Colombia as place of birth and nationality. This shows a growing number of Colombians (260.8 thousand in 2022) who have become Spanish nationals or were born in Spain and whose parents are from Colombia (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The Colombian population in Spain according to nationality and place of birth (POB).



Source: *Padrón Continuo (INE)*, 1998-2022.

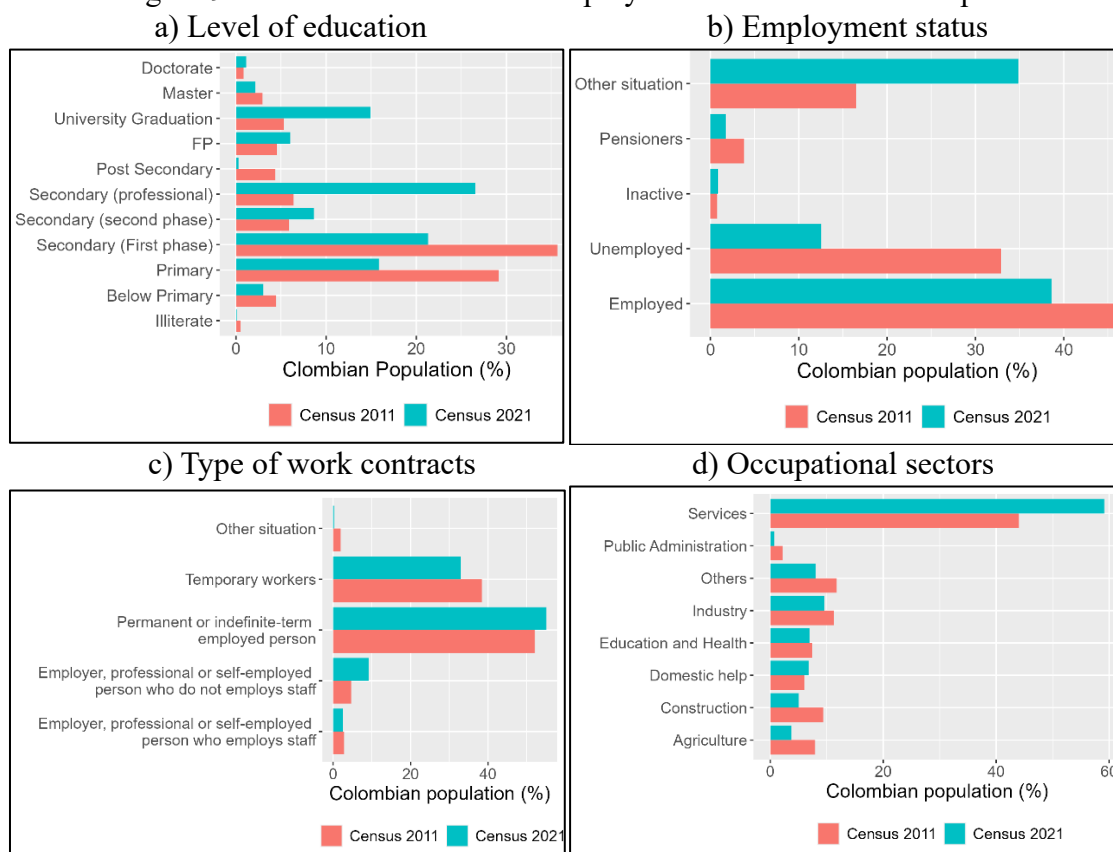
5.3.3. Education and employment

At the beginning of the 21st century, the main occupation of Colombian women in Spain was domestic work, with an educational profile where elementary levels stood out, without detriment to numerous cases of over-qualification in the sector. However, the educational level among Colombian immigrants improved substantially during the second boom. In 2011, the proportion of illiterate people was 0.47%, which dropped to 0.08% in 2021. Similarly, the proportion of people with primary education decreased from 24.8% in 2011 to 14.3% in 2021. In contrast, the proportion of people with university education and vocational training has increased from 17.6% and 5.1% in 2011 to 22.7% and 6.8% (Figure 9). According to data from the Permanent Immigration Observatory, Colombian immigrants obtained the highest number of study visas and residence permits for educational reasons in Spain during the last decade.

In addition to education, over the last decade, the employment status of Colombians has also changed markedly. The proportion of employed, unemployed, and pensioners decreased from 46.1%, 32.8%, and 4.5% in 2011 to 40.3%, 17.4%, and 1.7% in 2021. In contrast, the share of students and other inactive persons in the Colombian population increased from 16.5% to 40.6% in 2021 (Figure 9b). The considerable increase in the share of inactive population can be associated with the changes in the data collection process related to employment in 2021 census, which does not consider the reproductive work or irregular work as an economic activity. In relation to the employment stability of Colombian immigrants in Spain, in 2011, the proportion of Colombian workers with permanent contracts was 52.1%, while 38.4% had temporary employment contracts, 4.7% were self-employed, 2.8% were self-employed and employers, and 1.9% were in other situations. In the following decade, the labour market situation improved significantly, with an increase in the proportion of workers with permanent employment contracts (55.1%) and self-employed (9.2%). However, the share of temporary workers and entrepreneurs decreased to 32.9% and 2.6%, respectively (Figure 9c). Regarding the participation of Colombian workers in the different occupational sectors in Spain, in

2011, 44% were employed in the services sector, followed by 11.2% in the industrial sector, 9.4% in construction, 7.9% in agriculture, 7.4% in education and health, and 6.1% in domestic help. In 2021, the share in the service and domestic help sectors increased to 59.1% and 6.8%; in contrast, the share in the industry, construction, education, health, and agriculture sectors decreased to 9.5%, 5%, 6.9%, and 3.7%, respectively (Figure 9d).

Figure 9. Level of education and employment of Colombians in Spain.



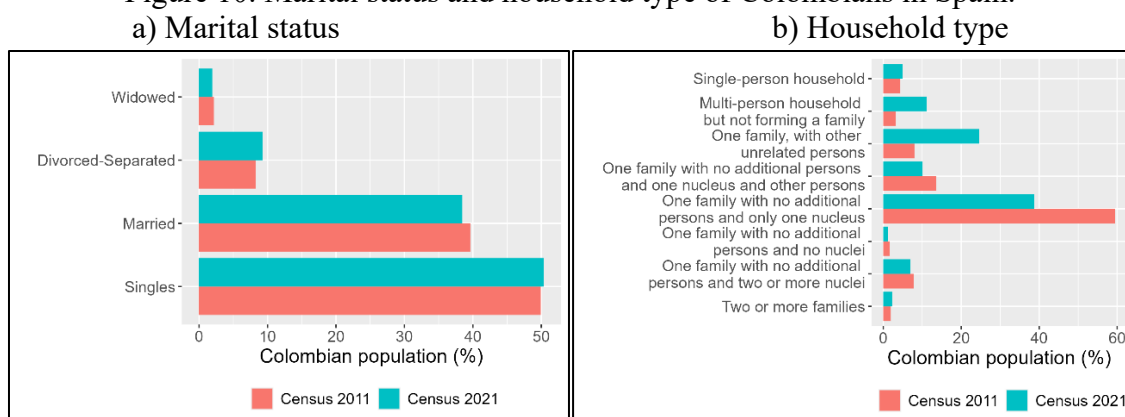
Source: Census 2011 and 2021, INE, Spain

5.3.4. Marital status and household type

According to changes in marital status, in 2011, 49.9% of Colombians in Spain were single, 39.6% were married, 8.3% were divorced or separated, and 2.2% were widowed. In 2021, the proportion of single and divorced/separated adults increased to 50.4% and 9.3%, respectively. In contrast, the proportion of married and widowed Colombians decreased to 38.5% and 1.7%, respectively (Figure 10a). The increasing share of divorced or separated people in the Colombian population shows the continuation of the trend observed by Clavijo Guevara and Perdomo Blanco (1999) in the late 1990s. In terms of household types, in 2011, the most common household type of the Colombian population in Spain was one family household with no other additional persons and only one nucleus (59.5%), followed by one family household with no other additional persons and one nucleus and other persons (13.6%), one family household with other unrelated persons (7.9%), one family household without additional persons and two or more nuclei (7.8%), one-person household (4.4%), and multi-person household but not forming a family (3.2%). In 2021, the proportion of one-family households, households with other unrelated persons, and multi-person households not forming a family increased threefold

to 24.7% and 11.1%, respectively. In the same period, the proportion of one-family households with no additional persons and only one nucleus decreased to 38.7%, a decrease of 20 percentage points (Figure 10b). This shows that most Colombians share a flat with other extended family members or non-family members, which increases the proportion of complex households. This can be associated with rising rents and house prices in Spain, which have made it difficult for new immigrants, often with limited resources and job security, to rent or buy a flat for their family. In 2021, two-third of the total Colombian population was living in rented apartments.

Figure 10. Marital status and household type of Colombians in Spain.



Source: Census 2011 and 2021, INE, Spain

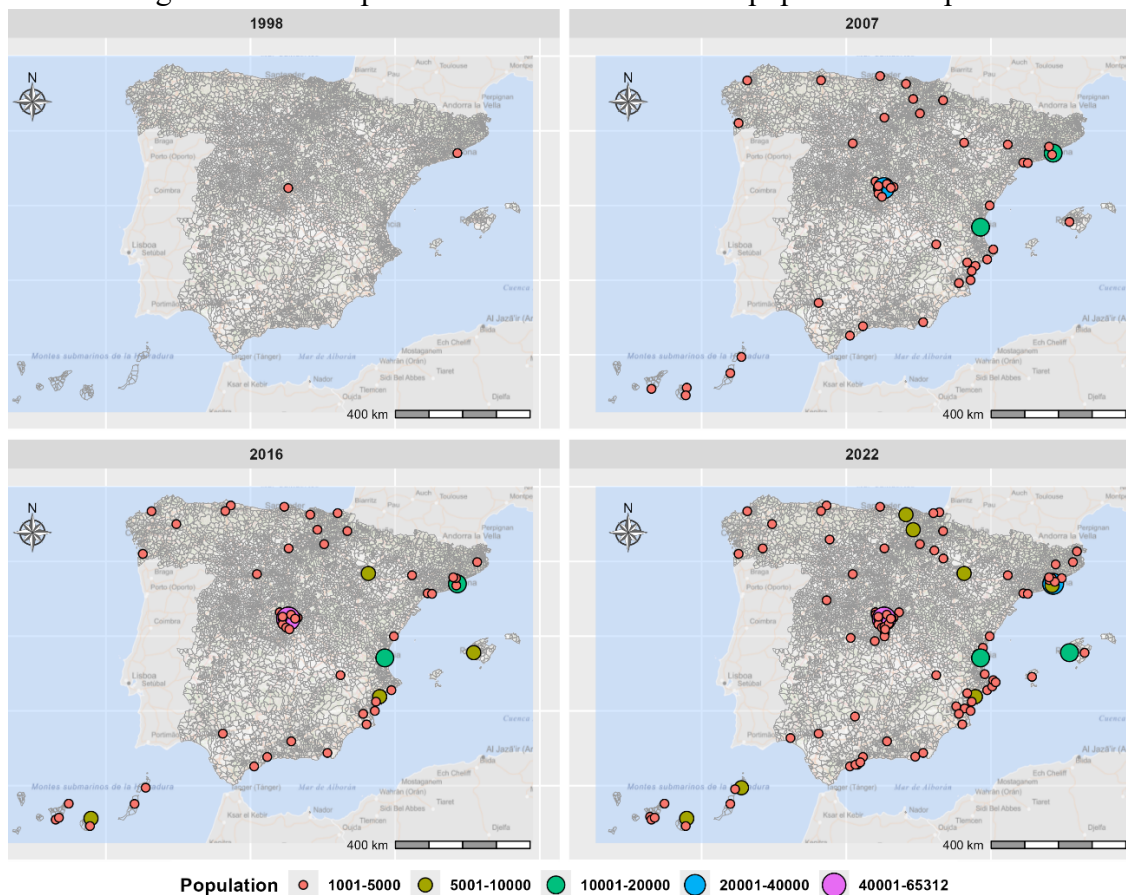
6. Territorial distribution of the Colombian population in Spain

Over the last two decades, with the changing profile of immigrants from Colombia and their internal migration to different provinces in search of employment opportunities, the spatial distribution of Colombians in Spain has also changed notably. The traditional destinations for Colombian immigrants (or descendants of Spanish migrants who migrated to Colombia decades ago) were their ancestral lands, i.e. Canary Islands, Galicia and Basque country, where they have some previous familial or social ties. However, the concentration of economic activities in large cities attracted a large number of Colombian workers, who immigrated in search of work opportunities. According to *Padrón Continuo* data, in 2000, 35.0% of all Colombians were settled in the autonomous community of Madrid, followed by 15.9% in Catalonia, 9.8% in the autonomous community of Valencia, and 7.1% in Andalusia. In 2022, the proportion of Colombians in Madrid decreased to 21.9%; however, in Catalonia, Valencia, and Andalusia, it increased to 17.2%, 15.1%, and 7.9%, respectively, which shows the expansion of Colombians in different autonomous communities.

At the municipal level, in 1998, the Colombian population was concentrated in the municipalities of Madrid and Barcelona. These two municipalities had 31.9% of the total Colombian population in Spain. During the first boom, the Colombian population initially settled around the municipality of Madrid, which was their primary entry point in Spain, and then moved along the Mediterranean coast in search of jobs and better housing conditions. The municipalities of Torrejón de Ardoz, Leganés, Getafe, Alcalá de Henares, Fuenlabrada, and Móstoles in the province of Madrid received a large number of Colombian immigrants. Similarly, along the Mediterranean coast, in the north, the municipalities of Barcelona, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Terrassa, Sabadell, and Badalona in Catalonia emerged as new centres of the Colombian population. In the middle of the

Mediterranean coastal region, the municipalities of Valencia, Alicante, Torre Vieja, Palma, Elche, and Murcia, and in the south, the municipalities of Sevilla, Malaga, Arrecife, and Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, become home to a large number of Colombian immigrants. In addition to these areas, a significant number of Colombians also settled in the north of Spain, where the municipalities of Bilbao, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Alava, and Zaragoza attracted a significant number of Colombian immigrants. After the economic crisis and the start of the second boom period, Zaragoza and Bilbao in the north, Alicante in the middle, and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the south attracted a large number of new Colombian immigrants and emerged as their major destinations. Till the end of the second boom, in 2022, the municipalities of Vitoria-Gasteiz, Arrecife, and L'Hospitalet de Llobregat also joined the list of municipalities with more than 5 thousand Colombians, and the municipality of Palma de Mallorca joined the list of municipalities with more than 10 thousand Colombians, i.e., Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Municipal distribution of Colombian population in Spain.



Fuente: Padrón Continuo (INE), 1998-2022.

7. Conclusions

Over the last three decades, the Colombian diaspora has become the third-largest diaspora community of Latin American origin. Colombia was a country of immigration until the first half of the twentieth century; however, due to economic and political instability in the country and better working opportunities abroad, a large number of Colombians emigrated in search of a better life outside of their country of birth. In addition, the

acceleration of the globalisation process and neoliberal policies adopted by the Colombian government in the 1990s gave momentum to Colombian emigration, creating a diaspora community of 3.02 million people worldwide. Today, the Colombian diaspora has reached 66 countries, including the USA and Canada in North America; Spain, the UK, Italy, and France in Europe; and Australia in Oceania. The number of Colombian emigrants in Asia and Africa is still very small, making them irrelevant in relation to the Colombian diaspora. Due to different pull and push factors behind emigration of Colombians, we can conclude that the Colombian diaspora has transformed from being a 'victim diaspora', made up of people expelled by political unrest and armed conflicts in the country, to a diaspora of 'deterritorialized' (Vertovec 1997) people, mainly economic migrants and professionals (Cohen 2023), expelled by neoliberal economic policies and economic crises in the country, or attracted by better economic opportunities in North America and Europe. In contrast to other large diaspora communities, the Colombian diaspora is dominated by women, who migrated in large numbers as domestic workers, following the "global care chain" (Hochschild, 2001), and in some cases, such as in Spain, spouses of Spanish men. The sex ratio of Colombian population is much skewed in favour of women in European countries, such as Italy, Spain, and France, as compared to their neighbouring countries and North America.

With the turn of the new millennium, Spain has become the leading recipient of Colombian emigrants in Europe. Following the colonial routes and reversing the trend of people migrating from Spain to Colombia, a large number of Colombians entered Spain, first as refugees and asylum seekers, and then as workers in different occupational sectors. Since 2001, Colombians have been the second-largest immigrant group in Spain, after Moroccans. For the last two decades, the Colombian population in Spain has been dominated by young women who emigrated to work in the domestic care sector. The sex ratio has dropped to 0.71 men per woman in the second boom, making them the most feminised immigrant group in Spain. Regarding the age structure, the Colombian immigrant group in Spain is ageing fast. Due to low fertility and less migration of young people, the average age of the Colombian population in Spain has grown by almost 5 years for both sexes. The immigration of old women during the second boom has contributed to the increase in average age. Due to the colonial past and cultural proximity (knowledge of Spanish language, religion, and social ties), the acquisition of Spanish nationality is a relatively easy process for Colombian immigrants as compared to their Asian and African counterparts. The number of Colombians of Spanish nationality is growing fast. In addition, the possibility of dual nationality makes it easier for Colombians to acquire Spanish nationality while keeping their Colombian nationality. The easy access to Spanish nationality also contributed to the expansion of Colombian diaspora to other EU countries. As a citizen of an EU member state, the nationalised Colombian can move freely to other EU countries.

During the last decade, the educational and occupational profiles of Colombian immigrants have changed considerably. The new wave of immigrants is mainly composed of Colombians with a higher level of education compared to the previous boom. Colombians have the highest number of study visas and permits to stay for educational purposes in Spain. The increasing share of old women, who are migrating to perform reproductive work, also contribute to the transfer of cultural memories of Colombia to the Spanish born children, which strengthens the transnational ties between the descendants of Colombians living in Spain and their ancestral land. The share of permanent and self-employed workers is growing fast, which shows the growing employment stability in the

community. The share of people working in the service sector is growing, while in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing it is declining. A large number of Colombian women are still active in domestic care services.

The household structure of Colombian immigrants has also changed considerably with the increasing number of complex households ‘with one family and other people’. It is associated with the increasing number of Colombian families sharing apartments to deal with the increasing rents and housing prices in all major cities in Spain. Lastly, the territorial distribution of Colombian immigrants has also changed considerably, with new immigrants moving to other provinces, such as Bilbao, A Coruña, Navarra, Sevilla, Malaga, and Zaragoza, as opposed to their predecessors, who were mainly concentrated in Madrid, Valencia, and Barcelona.

In sum, we can conclude that during the last five decades, the Colombian diaspora has expanded to North America, Europe, and Australia, making it the third largest diaspora community of Latin American origin. It has converted from the victim's diaphora to a diaspora of economic migrants. Spain has become the largest destination for Colombian migrants in Europe. Their educational and occupational profiles have significantly improved. In the future, it will be interesting to see how the descendants of Colombians and new migrants expand their diaspora space to new territories while maintaining close ties with their homeland.

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