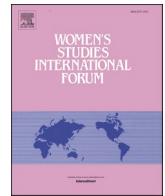


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From precariousness to prostitution: Experiences of Moroccan migrant women with trafficking and sexual exploitation in agricultural settings

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of migrant women of Moroccan origin arrive in southern Spain every year to work seasonally in the agricultural sector with the commitment of returning to their country of origin once the season ends. However, many Moroccan women do not return to their country of origin in search of better living conditions. By remaining in Spain irregularly, without living or working permits, women end up living in isolated settlements and precarious housing, increasing their risk of being trafficked. The objective of this study was to describe the experiences of Moroccan migrant women who worked as seasonal workers in the settlements of Huelva and Almería, in situations of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Between 2023 and 2024, we interviewed 26 Moroccan women living in rural settlements in Almería, who arrived in Huelva to work in the agricultural sector seasonally, and who suffered sexual violence or human trafficking. During a phenomenologically-informed interpretive analysis of the data, three themes were identified: Being a Moroccan woman in an agricultural context: exploitation, precariousness, and abuse; From precariousness to slavery: drivers of sex trafficking; and the destructive consequences of abuse and human trafficking on women's health and wellbeing. The results of this study show how the situation of social vulnerability of migrant women exposed them to situations of sexual abuse and exploitation, which damage their physical and mental health. This study highlights the urgent need for public institutions to implement preventive strategies and for migration policies to be reformed in order to safeguard the welfare of these women.

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon, resulting from the violation of the most fundamental human rights (Stöckl et al., 2021). Its prevalence is difficult to estimate due to underreporting and unreliable data (Hosey & Palokas, 2025). Globally, over 49.6 million people are affected, including 6.3 million victims of forced sexual exploitation, 98 % of whom are women (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; Marti et al., 2021). In Europe, trafficking is consolidated as one of the

most lucrative illicit businesses, reaching profits of \$3 billion annually (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Networks involved in human trafficking highlight Spain as a strategic location for their transit and settlement, with 664 victims identified (98 % women) in 2023 (Ministry of the Interior, 2023).

Sex trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, or transfer of a person through coercion, deception, or force, for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2023). Factors like the need to migrate, limited education and low socioeconomic status increase women's vulnerability to trafficking

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networks (Van Rooy et al., 2025). This situation facilitates forced prostitution and heightens migrants' risk of being trafficked at various stages of their journey (Alberti et al., 2023; El Mouali, 2021). Migrant women face overlapping discrimination tied to gender, nationality, race, socioeconomic status, and working conditions (Klabbers et al., 2023). The intersectionality theory explains how multiple, interconnected, and intertwined power systems affect members of society considered less privileged (Carbado et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1989). Stratification based on class, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability reinforces these inequalities (Hailemariam et al., 2020). In this case, power and vulnerability are shaped by disparities based on gender, race, and class (Fernández-Pacheco & García, 2020), disproportionately affecting women (Andrade-Rubio et al., 2024).

In recent decades, the number of migrant women of Moroccan origin arriving in Spain has increased exponentially (López-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Poverty feminization, patriarchal domination, or wage inequality drive their migration to southern Spain, a key agricultural hub in Europe (Plaza del Pino et al., 2023). In seasons when labor is insufficient, there is a tendency to hire foreigners (European Parliament, 2021). A bilateral agreement between Spain and Morocco under the GECCO Law regulates one-year seasonal work permits, requiring return upon contract completion (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, 2021). While intended to regulate migration, and protect both workers and the labor market, it also raises ethical and legal dilemmas, particularly for migrant women (GRETA, 2023).

This recruitment process targets specific characteristics in Moroccan migrant women (MMW) seasonal workers, such as being aged 25–45, from rural contexts, with scarce socioeconomic resources and little educational background, with minor children to ensure their return (Castillero, 2020). Gendered and racialized stereotypes depict them as suitable for delicate tasks, obedient and hardworking (Moliner, 2020). However, many do not return to their country of origin, escaping from poverty or situations of gender-based violence, due to health problems, or receiving false promises of stable employment and residency (Fernández García et al., 2023). By remaining in Spain irregularly and unaware of their rights, MMW are forced to live in isolated settlements, which do not meet the minimum conditions of habitability (Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al., 2023). This increases their exposure and the probability of being trafficked (Molina-Fernández & Fernández-Quiroga, 2023).

Trafficking has detrimental physical, emotional, social, and sexual health impacts (García-Vázquez & Meneses-Falcón, 2024), often linked to the adverse living and working conditions they face, along with the biopsychosocial violence associated with trafficking (Recknor et al., 2022). Research on the biopsychosocial effects of trafficking (Toney-Butler et al., 2023), along with studies identifying risk factors in countries of origin (Klabbers et al., 2023) indicate that prevention strategies are needed. The multidimensionality of this problem requires a deeper understanding of precarious dimensions —political, legal, educational, gender, cultural, economic, and labor— that increase women's exposure (Huda et al., 2025). The current scientific evidence documents how trafficking affects the victims who suffer from it; however, it is limited to discern how to prevent this problem (Zimmerman et al., 2023). In Spain, national frameworks such as the Draft Comprehensive Organic Law against Trafficking (Ministry of Equality, 2024) commit to prevention, protection, and prosecution. Yet, in practice, early detection and support work falls to NGOs (Choi et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, interventions are fragmented and under-resourced, especially considering the lack of in-depth knowledge about the experiences of Moroccan migrant women and their systematic exposure to sexual exploitation during both transit and at destination. This study thus aims to describe the experiences of Moroccan migrant women who worked as seasonal workers in the settlements of Huelva and Almería facing sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

A qualitative study was grounded in Gadamer's (2013) hermeneutic phenomenology, emphasizing the role of prejudice, culture, tradition, and language in the co-construction of meaning. The steps developed by Fleming et al. (2003) were followed to ensure methodological consistency with Gadamer's philosophy. First, to understand the meaning that MMW assign to their experiences of sexual exploitation. Second, the researchers identified their own preconceptions regarding trafficking. The COREQ guide (Tong et al., 2007) was considered in writing this research report.

2.2. Participants and context

This study was conducted in several settlements in a province in southern Spain, between 2023 and 2024. The 26 participants were recruited using convenience sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: being a Moroccan migrant woman, hired under the GECCO law in Huelva, having worked as a seasonal worker in Huelva and/or Almería and having experienced sexual violence or human trafficking. The only exclusion criterion was speaking an Arab dialect not understood by the interviewers. Recruitment was facilitated by professionals from an NGO that works with migrant women in settlements. After an initial meeting with key informants from the organization, potential participants were contacted and invited to participate. Of the 29 women volunteers, three declined due to scheduling problems. Table 1 includes the sociodemographic data of the 26 participants.

2.3. Data collection

Data was collected between February 2023 and March 2024 through in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) conducted in various settlements in a southern Spanish province, where participants resided. Prior to data collection, sociodemographic data was gathered, and the corresponding informed consent forms were signed. Two authors, with previous training and experience in qualitative research, conducted 17 IDIs and two FGDs, supported by NGO cultural mediators for Spanish-Arabic translation and vice versa. An interview guide facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' migration decisions, work experiences and housing conditions. FGDs lasted 81 and 79 min, while IDIs ranged from 40 to 60 min. All sessions were audio-recorded for later transcription into Spanish and analysis. Data collection concluded upon reaching data saturation. The use of IDIs and FGD enabled data triangulation, contributing to a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the research themes.

2.4. Data analysis

A phenomenologically-informed interpretive analysis was conducted following Fleming et al. (2003); Fleming and Robb (2019): (1) During data collection and transcription, researchers gained insight through dialogue with participants and recorded field notes with pre-analytic intuitions and reflections; (2) The transcripts in Spanish and the field notes were incorporated into ATLAS.ti v.23 software for analysis; (3) Two authors coded individually the sentences, identifying meaning units and sub-themes; (4) Dialogue between the researchers to define the final themes.

2.5. Rigor

The final stage of Fleming et al.'s (2003) method ensured study rigor through Guba and Lincoln (1994) quality criteria. Credibility was achieved by thoroughly documenting data collection and using researcher triangulation. Reliability was confirmed by two team members with

Table 1
Sociodemographic data of the participants (n = 26).

Participant	Age	Level of education	Moroccan Zone of origin	Years of agricultural work in Spain	Number of children
FG1-1	31	Primary	Rural	6	2
FG1-2	50	No education	Rural	8	1
FG1-3	35	No education	Rural	4	3
FG1-4	31	No education	Rural	3	2
FG1-5	34	No education	Rural	2	1
FG2-1	37	No education	Rural	7	2
FG2-2	42	No education	Rural	7	3
FG2-3	35	Primary	Rural	4	2
FG2-4	34	No education	Rural	3	1
IDI-1	37	No education	Rural	5	2
IDI-2	43	No education	Rural	6	3
IDI-3	41	No education	Rural	9	2
IDI-4	42	No education	Rural	5	2
IDI-5	41	No education	Rural	9	2
IDI-6	30	No education	Rural	6	3
IDI-7	50	Primary	Rural	2	3
IDI-8	25	No education	Rural	4	1
IDI-9	43	No education	Rural	5	2
IDI-10	34	No education	Rural	3	2
IDI-11	49	No education	Rural	5	4
IDI-12	49	No education	Rural	3	3
IDI-13	37	Primary	Rural	2	3
IDI-14	37	No education	Rural	2	2
IDI-15	26	No education	Rural	3	2
IDI-16	29	No education	Rural	2	2
IDI-17	30	No education	Rural	5	2

FG: Focus Group; IDI: In-depth interview.

experience in qualitative research and migration reviewing the analysis. Transferability was ensured by detailing the methodology employed, participants sociodemographics and context. Written notes were used to document the analysis over time and shared with co-researchers to preserve dependability. Confirmability was checked by returning the transcripts to the participants, with cultural mediators assisting in translation and validation of the findings.

2.6. Ethical considerations

Approval was requested from the Ethics and Research Committee of one University (ANONYMIZED CODE). Before obtaining the signed informed consent of the participants, they were informed of the study's objective, methodology, and voluntary nature. In addition, their confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

3. Results

Three main themes and eight subthemes related to the sexual abuse experiences of Moroccan migrant women were identified during data analysis (Table 2).

3.1. Theme 1. Being a Moroccan woman in an agricultural context: Exploitation, precariousness and abuse

This theme explores the experiences of the MMW as day laborers and their vulnerability to trafficking networks. Labor exploitation, precariousness in their homes, and relationships with bosses based on power differences are predisposing factors. The MMW faced situations of sexual exploitation or abuse by supervisors, co-workers, or others in positions of authority.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1. Gender inequalities in the labor sphere that favor vulnerability

The MMW explained that employers expected submissive and obedient behavior from them, determined by gender stereotypes. They were typically assigned tasks considered delicate, such as picking berries, while men were preferred for physically demanding work. Some participants also reported wage discrimination and fewer opportunities for re-selection in future campaigns, compared to their male colleagues.

“Men find work much easier than women” (IDI-1).

“The employer gives the contracts to women in the strawberry industry because he says the woman puts up with it all day and doesn't answer. The man can answer, and it is a problem for them” (IDI-15).

In addition, MMW reported workplace discrimination, including

Table 2
Themes, subthemes, and representative codes.

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Being a Moroccan woman in an agricultural context: Exploitation, precariousness and abuse	Gender inequalities in the labor sphere that favor vulnerability	Women, submission, obedience, fair conditions, responsibility, promotion, dismissal, racism.
	Abuse of power: Sexual exploitation in the labor context	Relationship with bosses, manager, blackmail, sexual favor, sexual aggression.
From precariousness to slavery: Drivers of sex trafficking	Residential situation: Shantytown settlements and housing insecurity	Lack of income, insecurity, fear, theft, abuse, control.
	Vulnerability and coercion: How labor marginalization leads to prostitution	Job opportunities, prostitution, scams, prejudice.
	Systematic unprotection: Process of recruitment, transfer, control and exploitation of women for sex trafficking when they do not return to Morocco	Potential victims, recruitment, destination after Huelva, end of season, reality check, signs of trafficking.
The destructive consequences of abuse and human trafficking on women's health and wellbeing	Loneliness pushes women to establish sentimental ties with partners who turn out to be their pimps	Substance abuse, isolation, friendships, lack of trust, family, power figure, abuse, support network, loneliness
	Impact of sexual abuse on migrant women's physical health	Abortion, unplanned pregnancy, infections, contraceptive methods, sexual health, and sexual violence.
	Profound psychological sequelae and physical deterioration	Anxiety, self-injury, emotional state, suicidal ideation, poor quality of sleep

denial of fair working conditions and limited access to promotion. On the other hand, when women held positions of greater responsibility than men, they were threatened with dismissal:

"Because you are a woman and have more power than them, that's when they try to make your life impossible" (IDI-1).

Women perceived that their limited language skills increased their vulnerability in the workplace, and many participants felt harassed. Shouting and threats were constant interactions. According to their testimonies, the comments made by the greenhouse managers had racist connotations and undervalued them.

"Most of us women put up with the yelling, but when you can't take it anymore the boss would tell us, 'You are lazy, you don't want to work'. He would threaten to throw me out, and I would have to go back to my country" (IDI-15).

"The managers were Spanish and racist. They made derogatory comments, such as that since I had no education, I didn't deserve more than that job" (IDI-12).

3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2. Abuse of power: Sexual exploitation in the labor context

This sub-theme shows how greenhouse managers blackmailed the MMW with job offers in exchange for sex. Work contracts were sold illegally at unaffordable prices, using the women's precarious migration status as a tool of control. Many participants felt coerced into using their bodies as a bargaining chip to obtain a labor contract.

"There comes a time when you sleep with them, or they ask for €8,000 per contract. It's a no-win situation" (IDI-5).

"We have to sleep with him (boss), well, they try to get us to go out and sleep with him if we want to work" (IDI-1).

In this context, MMW felt trapped, unable to avoid sexual harassment and extortion. Faced with possibly losing their only source of income and other reprisals, most avoided reporting. Those coerced into forced sex often felt humiliated and ashamed.

"Once my boss helped me with something at work. Afterwards, he proposed that I go with him to have sex, that he was going to pay me well. I felt terrible" (IDI-8).

"I was afraid on one occasion when one of the managers offered me sex in exchange for money. If I did not accept, I would be fired. I refused, and the manager physically assaulted me" (IDI-12).

There was a culture of abuse, where violence ranged from subtle expressions to the most serious cases of sexual aggression. As several of the victims reported, the rapes violated every human right and caused irreparable harm to the women.

"The manager wants to abuse the worker, the owner also wants to abuse her, and a migrant friend of the owner is an accomplice and also abuses the person" (IDI-3).

"I was raped in the greenhouse once. I never said it, it was a boss. I only remember that he left me lying on the floor. I went the whole day without eating or drinking until I could get up. I don't want to talk about it" (IDI-1).

3.1.3. Subtheme 1.3. Residential situation: Shantytown settlements and housing insecurity

The interviewed MMW lived in precarious and informal settlements isolated from the urban core. This increased the exposure of MMW to violence, theft, abuse, and exploitation. Many found housing by chance, through strangers who approached them. MMW described unsanitary environments which could not meet basic needs, such as access to drinking water, electricity, or sanitation. In some cases, landlords controlled access to resources, reinforcing feelings of hopelessness and insecurity.

"The house is connected by a door to the owner's house. He controls everything. I'm only allowed to cook in my room and share a single bathroom with many others. He restricted water and appliance use. I am afraid he might one day lock me out" (IDI-6).

In addition, irregular situations can become barriers to requesting help or accessing protection services. One of the participants, due to her

supervening illness, could access a shelter apartment thanks to the efforts of an NGO: *"Now I feel safe. I live with another woman in a foster apartment. We have electricity and water. I can sleep peacefully at night and breathe better. Even my asthma has improved"* (IDI-2).

However, as participants explained, accessing alternative housing was unfeasible. While some had to pay exorbitant sums to reside in these settlements, other women claimed to have accessed these shacks for free; but their testimonies suggested an implied trade-off. In several cases, access to housing appeared to be conditioned by unspoken expectations of sexual favors from those in control.

"An acquaintance contacted his relative, who made me this shack and brought me to the settlement. He has not asked me for money but sometimes he mentions that nothing is free here or that I should thank him" (IDI-14).

3.2. Theme 2. From precariousness to slavery: Drivers of sex trafficking

This theme relates how MMW are extorted by traffickers at the end of their contracts as seasonal workers. The social support network is dysfunctional and facilitates the creation of emotional ties based on abuse, with a devastating effect on the biopsychosocial health of these women.

3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1. Vulnerability and coercion: How labor marginalization leads to prostitution

At the end of their work as seasonal workers, some participants found it difficult to find job offers in agriculture or to continue their contract without forced sexual encounters. The MMW were objectified and coerced to use their bodies in order to obtain employment.

"Many stay because of the manager's threats. He tells them: 'If you don't want to come with me or sleep with me, you will never work here again." (FG1-2).

"When the strawberry contract ends and you start looking for other fruit contracts, they all tell us that they will give us the contract if we sleep with them. It has happened to me too many times!" (IDI-3).

In this sense, employment opportunities for MMW did not exist. The participants explained that their working life was limited to working single days in greenhouses when necessary. This precariousness prevented them from achieving their goals, increasing their frustration at being unable to help their families. All of this served as a push factor towards an underground economy, where it is easier for them to be exploited, deceived, and exposed to contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Their options were reduced to one: prostitution.

"Many times, I am away from home practicing [prostitution]. There is no work at all, and I have children in Morocco. They call me and say, 'Mom, I need food.' I have no one to help me" (IDI-10).

"I have had sex for money many times. Many of those times, I have had sex with people who have not wanted to pay me afterwards, and they take advantage. It doesn't matter if I use a condom, that fear always exists" (IDI-8).

The MMW sometimes expressed a strong reluctance to talk about it. According to the participants, prejudice due to their advanced age and practice was a reason to feel ashamed: *"No, I have never accepted that. I have been offered sex for money, but I am very old. It happens to me many times"* (IDI-7).

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2. Systematic unprotection: Process of recruitment, transfer, control, and exploitation of women for sex trafficking when they do not return to Morocco

Once the contracts to work as seasonal workers ended, the financial pressure to find another source of income to survive was immediate. This made it easier for MMW to accept seemingly legitimate job offers, but this led to exploitative situations. Traffickers used manipulative and coercive tactics to ensure recruitment.

"I had an agreement with a guy working on my same farm. He offered me a job in Almeria and a house to rent. He would take care of everything, but once I arrived in Almeria, I didn't find that reality. It was all a lie; he wanted

to bring me here" (IDI-9).

Regarding the transportation used by the MMW from Huelva to Almería, it was common to arrive by clandestine cab or bus. They were always accompanied by another person who organized the trip. In this context, traffickers seek to ensure that the victim does not escape or seek help.

"I came with the guy who promised me that there were job opportunities here, I didn't know him at all. I paid almost 200€ for the pirate cab, he paid almost nothing. This difference was because I was undocumented" (IDI-10).

Upon arrival at the destination, the MMW were transferred to specific apartments or farmhouses based on the escort's suggestions. They were offered a roof over their heads, food, clothes, and a certain amount of daily money. Some women quickly became aware that this was a place where prostitution was practiced. They perceived these places as unsafe, since many women and men were moving around. One of the participants who was able to escape and flee the place suffered retaliation by having her money and passport stolen.

"When I arrived, he took me to some farmhouses and he told me that I was going to stay there working, that I was going to earn 150 € every day, with food and clothes. When I went in, I found that there was a lot of movement. I didn't want to stay, and I ran away, I knew that prostitution was going on. I went to some settlements. One night, I was already asleep, but with one eye open, and I was hiding a small knife I brought from Morocco. Suddenly, the same boy who came with me from Huelva came into the room to steal my money and passport because I didn't want to stay in the other house" (IDI-9).

The participants' vulnerability facilitated the adoption of maladaptive coping strategies. Many of the MMW came from Huelva to the same apartment, known for prostitution and managed by a woman. This woman was a madam who altruistically offered them lodging, food, or help finding a job. Gradually, they were required to take on all the domestic chores until they were finally sexually exploited. Being immersed in this situation and a feeling of debt perceived by the MMW facilitated their control.

"The cab dropped me off directly here. The woman came from Huelva to this house, where a woman ran. The number of women who live here changes practically every month. We organize ourselves as if we were a family" (IDI-14).

3.2.3. Subtheme 2.3. Loneliness pushes women to establish sentimental ties with partners who turn out to be their pimps

Trying to reduce their loneliness and feel more protected, the MMW entered romantic relationships. Initially, these men guaranteed protection against possible aggression or offered them accommodation. However, they took advantage of their vulnerability and sexually exploited them to obtain economic benefits from the relationship. The study participants reported how their relationships made them feel deceived, violated, insecure, and afraid: *"I have been sexually assaulted several times, my partner knew who it was and never did anything. They were his friends. Since then, I am afraid of men"* (IDI-9).

The couple relationships described by the MMW were entirely dysfunctional. In addition to sexual exploitation, they also suffered sexual violence within the couple's relationship, without any preventive measures. On the other hand, physical and psychological mistreatment were constantly experienced by the participants. They also reported other behaviors related to being possible victims of trafficking. Some did not have access to their own income, and the partner managed their money or sold their belongings. Similarly, they were forced to take drugs in order to subjugate and manipulate them.

"I worked for him and I never collected any money, I feel robbed. He told me that if he gave me the money, I would spend it. He managed all the money for me" (IDI-6).

"I had a first partner who forced me to use. This man has caused me a lot of problems" (IDI-10).

3.3. Theme 3. The destructive consequences of abuse and human trafficking on women's health and wellbeing

Being a victim of trafficking for sexual exploitation has a devastating effect on the sexual and reproductive health of these women. The abuse leaves permanent scars on the physical, emotional, and sexual health of their victims. Therefore, this topic addresses these visible and invisible repercussions and how they severely affect the overall well-being of MMW.

3.3.1. Subtheme 3.1. Impact of sexual abuse on migrant women's physical health

Sexually transmitted infections and voluntary termination of pregnancy are some of the sequelae highlighted by the participants. Women highlighted urinary tract infections, vaginal bleeding and genital itching, associated with poor use of contraceptive methods. Fear, modesty and lack of knowledge limited their ability to seek health care, as described by one of the MMW:

"I have some pimples in my intimate area and chest that keep spurting fluid and itching. It makes me panic. I haven't seen a doctor or told anyone; how could I show them? I can't" (IDI-3).

This lack of control over their own bodies and the inability to negotiate the use of contraceptive methods exposed them to sexually transmitted infections and unplanned outcomes. Most MMW described how they had to terminate their pregnancies because of forced unprotected sex.

"I didn't use any contraceptive method because men didn't want to. The baby I had in Valencia was unwanted. I found out I was six months pregnant and couldn't have an abortion. Before that, I got pregnant by the same man, but after he hit me in the belly, I started bleeding and lost it" (IDI-6).

At times, religious beliefs complicated decisions about abortion. Many MMW did not contemplate that a pregnancy could be unwanted, viewing it as God's will. When the pregnancy resulted from rape, feelings of guilt persisted. As one of the study participants relates, she blames only herself, not just for not having the child conceived through rape, but also for feeling responsible for the sexual violence.

"I aborted because I couldn't have the child. I was raped, I couldn't raise him and felt rejection towards him and myself. But I feel like God wanted it, and that makes me feel awful. I blame myself for going alone" (IDI-4).

3.3.2. Subtheme 3.2. Profound psychological sequelae and physical deterioration

According to the participants, psychological and emotional well-being was the most affected area, leading to a decreased quality of life. Disrupted sleep patterns were a common issue. All the participants reported difficulty sleeping or numerous nightmares related to their experiences. In some cases, trouble falling asleep was due by hyper-vigilance, stemming from feelings of fear and uncertainty about their safety.

"I have frequent headaches and can't sleep well. I'm always on alert; afraid something might happen to me or that I will be kicked out. I feel alone all the time, and I have no one I trust to share what is going on" (IDI-17).

Many women coped by denying or avoiding their feelings as a protective mechanism; the reality was too painful to face. Feeling deeply sad and hopeless was a shared experience. Some sought temporary relief through friends or walks, but these were short-lived. The sense of being trapped worsened their despair. The MMW had no one to confide in, leading to loneliness and regret as their expectations in this migration project faded.

"For me, a person who looks physically well may still carry something inside they don't want to share. I don't feel healthy, but I try to appear strong, as if nothing is wrong. The reality is different. Many times, I feel alone and start to cry. I want to talk and tell someone, but who? There is no one" (IDI-3).

"Everything I expected Spain to be was taken away when I arrived. It's a very tough country; another reality. Sometimes I regret coming" (IDI-13).

Not all emotion-management strategies used by MMW were neutral. Sometimes, overwhelming feelings led them to maladaptive behaviors, including self-injury to cope with pain. Many also felt hopeless about their situation and contemplated more drastic decisions; they thought about suicide.

"Sometimes I feel inexplicable euphoria, but other times I just want to cry and hurt myself. I can't control it. I wish I could be happier, but I cannot. I have been through so much that I feel alone and unsupported" (IDI-10).

"It's as if I visualize a screen showing all the problems I've been through and I'm going through now. Nothing has a solution. Often, even if I seem fine, inside there is a constant battle. Sometimes I think life would be better if I weren't here, but then I think of my son" (IDI-17).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to describe the experiences of Moroccan migrant women who worked as seasonal workers in southern Spain, who faced sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The findings reveal how social vulnerability, linked to low socioeconomic status, limited education, and language barriers, exposed them to labor discrimination and sexual abuse (Melgar et al., 2021). Likewise, the gender ideology that transcends culture and religion perpetuates behaviors of subjugation and respect for patriarchal structures (Güell, 2022). All the study participants were mothers, an essential characteristic to be hired at origin to guarantee their return (Hellio, 2018). This, combined with rural origin and poverty, shaped a profile targeted by exploitative recruitment practices (Palumbo & Sciarba, 2018). Our results suggest that the intersection of gender, class, and migration is established as a criterion in the recruitment processes of Moroccan women.

Once in Huelva, the role of these women is paradoxical: they are indispensable for production and at the same time are subjected to exploitative working conditions and an amplification of their inequalities (Escrivà, 2022). According to Sajir (2024), their contracts often limit negotiation and link performance to job continuity, fostering uncertainty (Corrado & Caruso, 2022). These patterns mirror those found in Turkey and Italy, where migrant women endure precarious work and limited protections (Kavak & Eren Benlisoy, 2025; Palumbo, 2024). In this sense, the participants in the study highlighted abusive relationships with employers and peers, marked by coercion and complicity. Complaints of sexual abuse during harvest campaigns are frequent, yet women often avoid reporting due to fear or lack of evidence (Correa Da Silva, 2023). Some women are forced into sex in exchange for work or residence permits, leading to situations of survival prostitution (Filigrana et al., 2021; Güell, 2022). This situation and the need to continue supporting their families economically make voluntary returns less viable. After their visas expire, MMW remain in Spain irregularly, facing a lack of legal protection, surveillance, police persecution, and inadequate housing, which heightens their exposure to human trafficking networks (Molina-Fernández & Fernández-Quiroga, 2023).

Traffickers take advantage of this precariousness, deceiving women under premises of a better life, with false job offers or the possibility of accommodation in another area (Barrick et al., 2024). Similarly, traffickers use seduction strategies to trap women into abusive intimate relationships that end in sex trafficking (Casassa et al., 2024). In the study by Merodio et al. (2020) these traffickers are referred to as *Romeo Pimp* or *Loveboys*. However, there are occasions where it is other women linked to the trafficking network who recruit, manipulate, and exploit the victims (Hodgins et al., 2023). As our results reflect, escaping this reality is particularly challenging, as victims face extreme poverty and are deprived of a political voice regarding their civil and political rights (García-España, 2020).

The women's migratory project and expectations ended prematurely (Ramírez-Martínez et al., 2023), while they feel condemned to live in precarious settlements and to be labour and sexually exploited. Our study showed how the emotional toll is severe: feelings of shame,

stigma, and isolation prevent them from returning to their home country and hinder access to support (Plaza del Pino et al., 2023). This also impairs identification of victims and access to care. Similar barriers to identifying and protecting victims have been documented in contexts such as the U.S.-Mexico border and Southeast Asia, where undocumented status, fear of deportation, and stigma hinder access to support (González et al., 2020; Zimmerman, Mak, Pocock and Kiss, 2023). Women who have been sexually exploited present specific health problems, derived from the sustained violence and abuse. These include coercion through physical and verbal aggression, and in some cases, forced substance use (Casassa et al., 2023).

Sexual exploitation increases the likelihood of presenting gynecological symptoms and sexually transmitted infections, including pelvic pain, bleeding and amenorrhea (Vo & Purkayastha, 2023). Nevertheless, MMW are often reluctant to access gynecological care since sexuality is taboo. This, along with limited autonomy over sexual and reproductive decisions, often controlled by men, exposes them to unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions (Plaza del Pino et al., 2024). In some cases, religious beliefs and feelings of guilt prevent them from considering termination as an option (Granero-Molina et al., 2023). These experiences notably impact victims' mental health, increasing the prevalence of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation (Vo & Purkayastha, 2023). Given these consequences associated with trafficking for sexual exploitation, social intervention programs focused on a humanitarian approach that goes beyond the criminal context are necessary (Rodríguez-López, 2020).

4.1. Strengths and limitations

This study has several limitations. The participants lived in remote areas and were only accessible through NGO coordination. Cultural mediators were essential, but dialectal and cultural nuances may have influenced interpretation. Interviews took place in participants' homes, favoring a familiar setting but occasionally disrupted, potentially biasing the conversational atmosphere. Prior trust-building efforts and the presence of NGO staff supported emotional openness. While combining FGDs and IDIs enriched the data, FGDs encouraged shared narratives but might limit participants' willingness to reveal deeply personal information, especially regarding sensitive topics. Further research is needed on trafficking experiences among men, girls and adolescents; the latter being particularly vulnerable. Finally, these findings relate specifically to Moroccan migrant women with irregular status engaged in seasonal agricultural work in Huelva and Almería and should not be generalized to all Moroccan migrant women.

4.2. Implications

This study highlights the importance of migration policies that address gender-based discrimination, harassment, labor exploitation, and safeguards against trafficking and employer abuses. The bilateral agreement to contract women in Morocco to work in Spain temporarily should be revised by both institutions to address the structural vulnerabilities that expose women to exploitation. Health services should be trauma-informed and culturally sensitive to meet the complex needs of exploited migrant women. Strengthening protection mechanisms, reporting channels, and social integration programs is crucial. Finally, recognizing the contribution of migrant women in Spanish agriculture could promote fair labor conditions and greater respect for their rights.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that MMW who worked as seasonal workers in Huelva and Almería are vulnerable to suffering sexual exploitation and possible recruitment by human trafficking networks. Their experiences were characterized by labor exploitation, precariousness, and abuse. Despite these hardships, many chose to remain in

Spain to support their families, a circumstance exploited by trafficking networks. This had devastating consequences for their physical, mental, and emotional health. Understanding the experiences of MMW who end up as victims of trafficking could guide the development of new preventive strategies, as well as a reform of the bilateral agreement to protect the welfare of these women.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **María Kinza El Amrani Escot:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Dulcnombre de María García-López:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Karim El Marbouhe El Faqyr:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **José Granero-Molina:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Erica Briones-Vozmediano:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Data availability

Data cannot be shared publicly because of confidentiality. Data are available from the Biomedical Research Institute (IRB) of Lleida, Dr. Pifarré Foundation for researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential data.

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