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Social work and migration: the Spanish case

Trabajo Social y Migraciones: el caso español

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ABSTRACT

The following article studies the role of the social work profession in Spain with regard to the increasing importance of migratory phenomena in the planning and management of public policies. The objective is to review the academic publications that have been made on this topic from 2016 to 2020 inclusive through a systematic review of the main scientific databases (Web of Science and Scopus). The results of this work provide an overview of the situation and detail the social work topics being researched in the field of immigration, which principally concern women, health and cultural education. The methodology of the articles studied is fundamentally qualitative, although it would be beneficial if more triangulated approaches were carried out. It should also be noted that more than half of the articles analysed do not place the social work professional in a central role. Finally, the study highlights aspects that still need to be covered or improved, which could provide guidance both for the development of future research and for orienting decision-making at the political level.

RESUMEN

El siguiente artículo estudia el papel de la profesión de Trabajo Social en España en relación con la creciente importancia de los fenómenos migratorios en la planificación y gestión de las políticas públicas. El objetivo es revisar las publicaciones académicas que se han realizado sobre este tema entre 2016 y 2020 ambos incluidos a través de una revisión sistemática de las principales bases de datos científicas (Web of Science y Scopus). Los resultados de este trabajo ofrecen un panorama de la situación, detallando los temas de Trabajo Social que se investigan en el campo de la inmigración, que conciernen principalmente a la mujer, la salud y la educación-cultura. La metodología de los artículos estudiados es fundamentalmente cualitativa, aunque sería deseable realizar aproximaciones más trianguladas. También cabe señalar que más de la mitad de los artículos analizados no sitúan al profesional del Trabajo Social en un papel central. Finalmente, el estudio destaca aspectos que aún necesitan ser abordados o mejorados, lo que podría servir de guía tanto para el desarrollo de futuras investigaciones como para orientar la toma de decisiones a nivel político.

KEYWORDS

Academic publications;
social work; research;
migrations; Spain

PALABRAS CLAVE

Publicaciones académicas;
Trabajo Social; Investigación;
Migraciones; España

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Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of migration has become increasingly important all around the planet, in connection with a process of globalisation (Kuznetsova et al., 2022). At present, while there are no universally agreed definitions of the concepts of migration and migrant, several definitions that come from a variety of contexts are nevertheless widely accepted. One of these definitions is provided by the IOM Glossary on Migration, which refers to 'migrant' as the 'generic term not defined in international law that, by common usage, designates any person who moves outside his or her usual place of residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons' (OIM, 2019). This definition encompasses several well-defined legal categories, as well as others that are not included in international law but are widely used. For the purposes of this paper, the study will refer only to international migrants, understood as any person who is outside a State of which he or she is a citizen or national, either on a permanent or temporary basis, whether they are moving regularly with the required documentation, as well as those who are in an irregular situation. Within this concept, our study will be made of the case of people who have migrated to Spain. Although there are many different reasons for emigrating, this paper does not differentiate between various subtypes of immigrants based on these reasons, but rather on their situation once they have arrived in their destination country.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in its latest published report, in 2020 there were approximately 281 million international migrants in the world, a figure equivalent to 3.6% of the world's population. Globally, the estimated number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. The 2020 estimated total of 281 million people living in a country other than their home country was 128 million higher than the 1990 figure and triple that of 1970 (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Although this report was written in 2021 and the effects of the pandemic (border closures, exhaustive control of entry and exit, vaccination passports, etc.) were still in force in many countries, the figures serve to provide a sense of the scale of the phenomenon, albeit in terms of numbers. According to the latest IOM report, Spain ranks tenth as a destination country, and third within the European Union (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

If we focus on the legislative landscape, the picture is complex. The first evidence of this complexity can be found in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states the following: 'Everyone has the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence within the territory of a State, and everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country'. According to this article, people have the right to move freely and to choose their residence, but the right to migrate *per se* is not recognised and, ultimately, it is the country's decision based on its legislation and agreements on how to manage its borders (which often include the externalisation of borders in the so-called transit countries or third countries) (Reslow, 2012). According to the work by Solórzano (2020), this border management in destination countries is currently causing human harm that, far from being mitigated, is actually increasing. His study, focused on the cases of the southern US border and the European borders, shows how the migration policies of the receiving countries have opted for a position far removed from the human rights paradigm, maintaining a border system aimed more at criminalising migrants than protecting them.

Associated with the migratory phenomenon, a whole series of prejudices and negative stereotypes have also been detected in recent times, fed by the proliferation of fake news and populist discourses that are generating a sense of social alarm (Bello, 2022; Rodríguez-Justicia & Theilen, 2022). However, this alarm is not supported by data. Taking the case of Spain as an example, the authors Lacomba Vázquez et al. (2020) in their exhaustive report on the beneficial contribution of immigration to Spanish society, use verified information to illustrate the great benefits that the immigrant population generates, not only with regard to the demographic aspect but also at the labour and sociocultural level, of which the receiving society is the main beneficiary.

In addition to the society being especially benefited by the contributions made by the immigrant population, the case of Spain is interesting because it has undergone a very rapid transformation in terms of its situation with migratory phenomena. The main element of this change resides in its shift from being principally an emigrant-sending country to becoming a receiving country in only a short period, to the point that there is still a generation that remembers having been an emigrant (Jofre-Monseny et al., 2016; Martínez, 2015; Paz & Abad, 2018). This change owes much to three main factors: first, the end of the Francoist dictatorship, in 1975; second, Spain's entry into the EU, in 1985; and third, its entry into the Schengen Agreement, in 1995 (Jofre-Monseny et al., 2016). In this context, since approximately the 1990s, there have been several waves of migration to Spain that have fluctuated according to the economic situation of the country, since after a significant arrival in the boom years between 1999 and 2008, a slower phase followed due to the 2009 economic crisis and that of COVID-19 in 2020 (Paz & Abad, 2018; Simon et al., 2021).

Parallel to this change from being a sending to a receiving country, legal developments have gradually been implemented in an attempt to respond to these new realities (Martín-Pérez & Moreno-Fuentes, 2012). Some, such as the Law on Foreigners or those related to residence permits and access to Spanish nationality, are not exempt from controversy (Calavita, 2007), nor is the increase in the number of international borders, in correlation with the creation, consolidation and enlargement of the EU. These borders, which are political and legislative as well as physical, make what is happening in Spain particularly relevant for the EU since this country forms part of one of the most relevant and controversial borders, the so-called 'southern border', together with Italy and Greece (Pérez et al., 2019; Queirolo Palmas, 2019). Current news stories of statements made by EU leaders (Baczynska, 2023) clearly show that the intensification of border control and a restrictive migration policy is a higher priority than the safety of migrants and the fulfilment of human rights.

Regarding the characteristics of migrants themselves, there is a wide range of features (including country of origin, language, culture, religion, level of education, social class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual identity and orientation, and the reasons that lead to the migratory process) that cause migrants to differ considerably. Within the host country, all these characteristics influence how these migrants are perceived, bringing about different levels of acceptance or rejection, which, when taken to the extreme, can lead to situations of xenophobia and racism. In this regard, migration is a phenomenon that has many facets; and migrants, the individuals who embody this phenomenon, are at the centre of a whole series of representations and imaginaries in the social and political spheres (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2021). The level of well-being or vulnerability of migrants will vary considerably depending on how the aforementioned factors interrelate and intersect.

In this context, Spain has a group of professionals from different disciplines and perspectives who work to ensure that the rights of migrants are enforced by the receiving country. Within this group, social workers, along with other social and health professionals, are those who are most frequently in contact with immigrants in their daily work, both in public services (social services, health services) and in non-governmental organisations. The presence of social workers in the context of migration is not only limited to Spain but also extends to the international sphere.

On a general level, ever since professional social work first emerged in Western societies at the end of the nineteenth century, and up to the present day, it has been consolidating as a discipline that deals with a wide range of social situations. It focuses mainly on the causes and consequences of inequality and the influence they have on people's lives, as well as on the promotion of social justice and human rights (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) & International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), 2014; Kjellberg & Jansson, 2020). In this sense, research in social work is an activity that enables interventions in reality based on a rigorous knowledge of the subject, it being a field in which research and training are especially relevant to practice (Iturrieta, 2014).

Among the issues that social work addresses and that have gradually gained importance in recent years is the phenomenon of migration. If analysed on the international level, substantial evidence

can be found in the scientific literature of the interest in social work and migration, such as the very recent studies by Androff and Mathis (2021) on social work and human rights in asylum seekers, or that of Scott and Aronson (2021) on the role of social workers in the face of legal and bureaucratic barriers encountered by migrants at borders. In the European context, studies such as that of Righard and Boccagni (2015) offer a perspective on the relationship of social work with the changing dynamics of international migration and its social context, as well as the perception of the concept of 'mobility' in contemporary societies. In this sense, social work itself, as an academic discipline and as a professional practice, varies significantly between countries with regard to the individuals/groups and social problems it addresses, the methods and techniques employed and its form of organisation and funding. In the case of Spain – which in 2020 was the second country in the EU in terms of the number of asylum requests received, after Germany (European Commission, 2020) – the work of social work professionals in the migration process is especially relevant. If this is combined with the fact that a large number of the asylum requests received in Spain are rejected (CEAR, 2020), and that this entails a situation of supervening irregularity, the mediating role of the social work professional in these cases is even more necessary.

For this reason, the praxis of social work with migrants requires theoretical and methodological support to guide the interventions and provide them with certain guarantees of success. In current social work with migrants and refugees, we find references to a wide range of theories, approaches, concepts, as well as techniques and tools that are used in professional activities, although not always in a conscious, logical and articulated manner (Lacomba, 2020). To respond to this situation, various models of social work with migrants have been developed, including the community model, the human rights and gender approach, or the intercultural, intersectional and anti-discrimination models, each focusing on different aspects (Bolzman, 2009; Carballeda, 2016). These aspects are not mutually exclusive but can in fact complement each other, making social work intervention more complex, encompassing different expressions of social problems, generating a cross-cutting vision and making a political impact that allows professionals to fight for social justice and guarantee the rights of migrants (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2021; Finch et al., 2019; Hagues et al., 2021; Mut Montalvá, 2020).

Therefore, due to the fundamental role of this profession and the growing importance of the migration issue in Spain and Europe for the planning and management of public policies, this analysis aims to review the publications that have been made on this subject in the last five years. The results of this study will provide an overview of the situation and illustrate the nature of the activity being undertaken on social work in the field of migration, as well as reveal what more could be done and which aspects still need to be covered or improved. It could serve both to guide future research and decision-making at the policy level and to further reflect on the current ways that the profession considers and researches the field of migration, and how it intervenes in it.

Methodology

The review was carried out in 2021 following four stages: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion.

For the first identification stage, a search was conducted on the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS CC) and the Scopus database, establishing a temporal restriction to articles published between 2016 and 2020. To this end, a search equation was designed that included terms related to social work and migration in the title, abstract and keywords. A total of 54 records were found in WoS and 51 in Scopus. The search equations performed are available in the supplementary material.

In the screening stage, the inclusion criteria applied were: (a) the appearance of any of the search terms in the title, abstract or keywords; (b) papers to which full access was available; (c) only 'article' or 'review', regarding the type of document; and (d) papers in English or Spanish.

At this stage of eligibility, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Deals with immigration issues
- Mentions social work
- Context in Spain
- Must be published between 2016–2020
- Must be published in Spanish or English

A total of 105 records were downloaded from the two databases and duplicates were eliminated. From here, a double-blind manual review was performed by two of the authors of the paper to ensure the relevance of the studies. After this process and the sharing of the assessment, 37 relevant documents were obtained for analysis, 20 were in both WoS and Scopus, 9 were only in WoS, and 8 only in Scopus (Figure 1). The following descriptive information was collected for each document:

1. Title
2. Source database
3. Authors
4. Abstract
5. Year of publication
6. DOI
7. Name of the journal

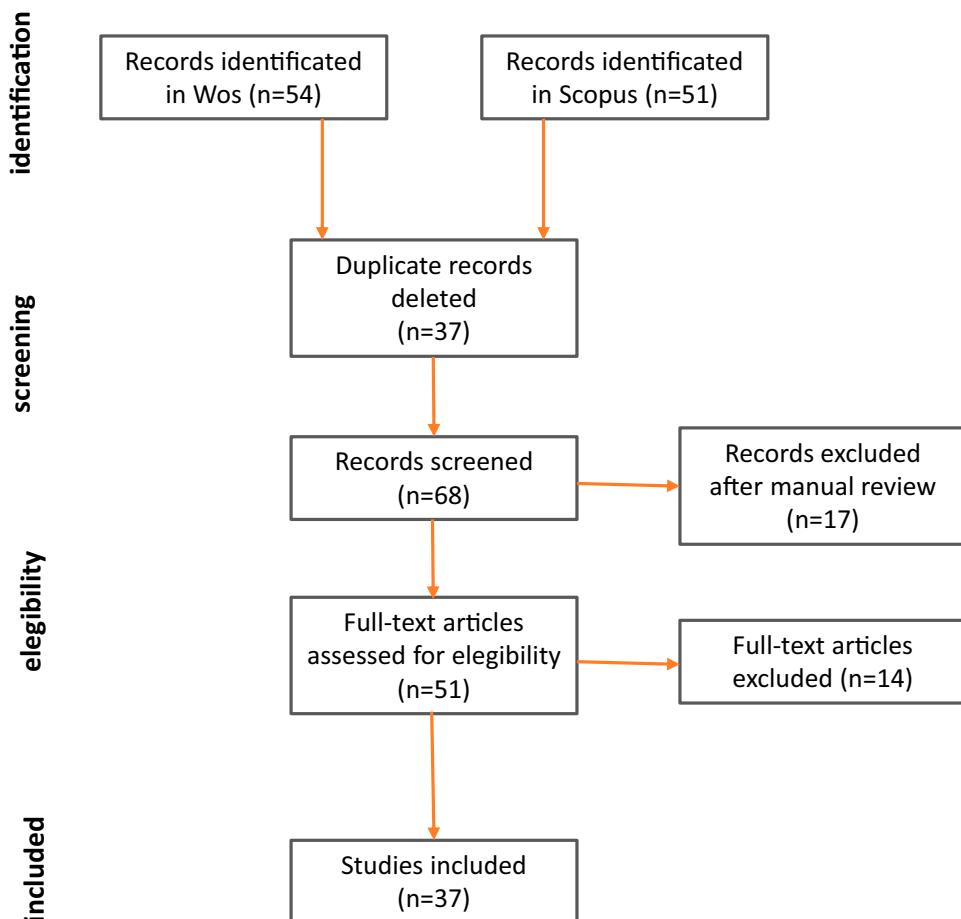


Figure 1. Diagram of works included in each stage of the search process.

As for the variables considered for the analysis of these 37 documents, they were as follows:

- Linkage with social work.

It was determined whether social work and social work professionals have a predominant role in the study.

- Thematic categories

The following categories were used: employment, youth, women, housing and education-culture. The category of 'other' was also recognised for those papers that did not fit into any of the above categories.

- Subject of the journal

The subject of the journal in which the retrieved papers were published.

- Methodology used

A differentiation was made between the three main groups: 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' studies, and those combining both methods, i.e. 'triangulated'.

- Techniques

Within the qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the techniques used are specified.

- Territorial delimitation and language

The following delimitations were considered: local, provincial, regional, and state. The language in which the study was published was included.

Results

For the presentation of the results, the variables that were collected for each study analysed were considered. Table 1 of the supplementary material shows a summary of the information obtained.

Thematic categories

The most frequent thematic category is related to women ($n = 13$), followed by health ($n = 9$), education-culture ($n = 8$), minors and youth ($n = 7$), employment ($n = 6$) and housing ($n = 5$). The possibility that the same article could be in more than one category was considered. Five papers were not classified in any of these categories, either because they deal with migration more generically without focusing on a specific subtopic, or because they address an area that had not been previously included. Of those that focus on the issue of women in relation to the phenomenon of immigration in Spain, most revolve around various forms of violence suffered by migrant women: from gender-based violence or violence against women to violence that is also gender-based but especially extreme, such as that involved in trafficking women and children or female genital mutilation, as well as in connection with precarious work, with a special emphasis on domestic workers. The women studied come mainly from Latin America. If this theme is examined in relationship to others, a special relationship between women's issues and those of health and employment can be observed.

As for health issues, these mainly revolve around the healthcare received by migrants in Spain. The focus of these studies is on the assessment of the quality of public healthcare, especially from the point of view of migrants as users entitled to this service. Concerning the other topics, health with regard to women is especially predominant.

Regarding the studies on education and culture, fundamentally concern two aspects. On the one hand, they refer to strategies that are carried out to foster the inclusion of migrants, both those that focus on migrants as recipients in school and university contexts or in social education projects, such as those that focus on professionals and their training needs in terms of empathy and interculturality in migration processes. On the other hand, this group of articles includes those that deal with ethnic and cultural diversity and the social networks of migrants in relation to the activities they carry out in the host country to maintain their traditions and generate mutual support, as in the case of the studies on the sense of community of Latin American people in Malaga, or also on the civic, political and social life of Latin American people in Madrid and Barcelona.

The studies dealing with minors and youth are principally focused on migrant minors in Spain. Particular attention is paid to minors from especially vulnerable groups, such as the so-called 'unaccompanied foreign minors' and minors living in very precarious housing conditions. Furthermore, aspects related to integration and inclusion are also addressed, as in the case of young refugees in educational contexts, or relation to social skills. Concerning other topics, work related to young people does not have a particularly predominant relationship with any one topic but is equally linked to themes of employment, education, housing and women.

With regard to employment, the topics of those papers focused on the labour market revolve around the difficulties faced by migrants in accessing the labour market in Spain, precariousness, the difficulty of accessing regular work, as well as issues related to the labour impact of migrants on the population as a whole. These studies are mainly related to the issue of women, concerning women who occupy jobs linked to care and in the service sector under very precarious conditions.

Finally, regarding housing, it was noted that the topics chosen by the studies are related to situations of difficulty in accessing decent housing, such as energy poverty, homelessness and substandard housing (especially shantytowns), in which migrants are forced to live.

Subject of the journal

The most frequent subject covered by the journals is social work and social services ($N=12$), followed by health or social and health-related topics ($N=6$), migration issues ($N=5$) and social sciences in general ($n=5$). There were two journals in the area of social work, one Spanish (*Cuadernos de Trabajo Social*) and the other international (*Journal of Social Service Research*) that appeared more than once.

Linkage with social work

The first thing to note is that 19 papers were classified as having a tangential/secondary link and 18 as having a predominant link to social work. Of the 18 papers in which the social worker is at the centre of the study, the research is particularly focused on the areas of women, youth and housing, and less on those classified as addressing employment, health and education. These studies make special reference to the work of social workers in the processes of reception and bridging between migrants and the receiving society, especially when it comes to making their rights effective. Furthermore, in studies that deal with social work in a cross-cutting manner, the topics most addressed are those related to health. Additionally, in those that deal with social work both transversally and directly, the most used methodology is qualitative. Among the most used techniques is the in-depth interview, followed by the survey.

Geographical delimitations and language

Regarding the territorial delimitations of the studies, the most frequent are local ($n=15$) and state ($n=15$), followed by regional ($N=8$). Within the local studies, the most frequent cities are the capital, Madrid, followed by Barcelona. Of the 16 local studies, 8 focus only on a single municipality, while 7

consider a region, autonomous community or several municipalities (see Table 1 in the supplementary material). The studies at the national level are more frequently only tangentially linked with social work. Concerning the language of the papers, 16 are written in Spanish and 21 in English. Most of the articles written in Spanish coincide with publications in Spanish-speaking journals (details of which are in Table 1 of the supplementary material).

Research methodology and techniques

Concerning the methodology used in the studies, it should be noted that it is mostly qualitative, in line with the epistemological approaches most used in the field of social work. Thus, about half of the studies ($n = 17$) are based on this methodological approach. Secondly, a quarter of the studies employ quantitative studies ($n = 8$) while, in third place, there are triangulated studies ($n = 3$) that combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Next, although although they have a smaller or even a token presence, are review articles ($n = 2$), participatory action-research ($n = 2$), reflection ($n = 2$), intervention ($n = 2$) and legal-administrative analysis ($n = 1$). As far as research techniques are concerned, the use of interviews ($n = 18$) is most prevalent. If a focus is placed on its different modalities, two main types of interviews are observed: the semi-structured interview ($n = 9$) followed by the in-depth interview ($n = 5$). In terms of qualitative techniques, three studies use focus groups and two use participant observation. Regarding quantitative techniques, surveys ($n = 8$) are predominant here.

Discussion

This review inquired into research in social work on issues related to the migration process in the Spanish context. For this purpose, the period from 2016 and 2020 was taken, obtaining a total of 37 documents that were analysed based on a series of established variables. The results that emerged from this review revealed a snapshot of the topics on which social work has focused when addressing migration issues in recent years and also the deficits that still exist in terms of specific research in this profession.

Firstly, this work has been able to discern that the subject of migrant women (from different perspectives) has been of particular interest in social work research in Spain in recent years. In the case of the studies analysed, interest is principally focused on two types of violence: labour/administrative and gender violence. Concerning gender violence, its interest within the field of social work is not only limited to the migratory phenomenon but is also observed in other studies, such as that of Petersson and Hansson (2022), which is focused on the context of COVID-19 and its impact on gender violence. In one way or another, it would be desirable that, progressively, more studies incorporate the gender perspective in both a focused and cross-cutting manner.

As for labour/administrative work, this refers to the precarious and frequent work that migrant women are forced to do, with special emphasis on domestic work, care work and the service sector. This type of work, which is frequently performed in the absence of a legal contract and where the majority of workers are women of Latin American origin, may well be related to the numerical significance in Spain of groups from Latin America. There is also a greater presence of women due to the characteristics of the labour market in Spain and the care crisis in Western societies, which favours the employment of women in these sectors. This reality is not only present in Spain, as other studies such as Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. (2011) in the case of California, or Nelson (2018) in the case of New York present similar dynamics.

In terms of administrative violence, the related to access to health services cannot be ignored, it having been observed not only in relation to women but also in a generalised manner in several of the studies analysed. This concern is manifested by the administrative barriers encountered by migrants when accessing public health care. In the case of Spain, health care is theoretically defined as universal, so that anyone, regardless of their origin, can have access to it, since health

care is linked to the condition of being a citizen and not exclusively to that of being insured for exercising an occupational activity or receiving financial benefits from social security. However, reality reveals that this is not always simple and that it varies greatly depending on the autonomous community, since the law allows them a great deal of room to make their own interpretations and decisions (Delgado del Rincón, 2019). This causes significant inequalities between territories, a circumstance that has been denounced by various social organisations working with migrants (Fernández García & Polentinos Castro, 2018).

Another issue addressed in the works analysed is that of migrant children and their living conditions. This concern is also shared by other European countries, as can be seen in this study by Raabe (2019), which takes a sample of school classes in England, Germany and Sweden to determine the influence of poverty and social exclusion suffered by migrant minors with poor school performance. In relation to the topic of minors, special attention is paid to unaccompanied minors, known in Spain as 'MENA'. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Spain either, as other countries also report cases of this plight where very young individuals, boys and girls in many cases, try to cross the border alone in search of better opportunities than those they have in their own countries (Menjívar & Perreira, 2019).

In a transversal manner to all these issues, the works analysed have also detected interest on the part of social work and social services in themes related to housing, employment and education. These issues are undoubtedly closely related to the previous ones and constantly intertwine with them. Access to health and the conditions in which women and minors find themselves, and those who fall within the social category of being a migrant are especially vulnerable, are in turn closely related to precarious work, education and housing conditions. Thus, the lack of any of these aspects has a direct influence on the others. Social work professionals have historically carried out their work by taking into account the conditions of health, housing, employment and education from the outset of their careers, so it is not surprising that they link these issues to that of migration, because of the influence they have on each other and the importance of not treating them as isolated compartments (Moore et al., 2018; Moretti, 2017).

Regarding the subject of the journals in which the papers were published, it should be noted that the area of social work and social services is that which included the most publications on migration and social work in the context of Spain. This was reflected both in the title of the journals and in their scope. In addition, it was observed that journals covering migration issues were also among the most frequent. Although this result is not surprising, it is worth noting the high presence of journals from the health field, making clear once again the relevance of health aspects in migration issues.

Regarding the methods and techniques used in the studies analysed, it is noteworthy that the main approaches to collecting, analysing, interpreting and presenting research data are qualitative in nature. This is not surprising since, throughout its history, social work has most frequently resorted to the qualitative method and places great value on it in training (Shaw et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2020). Next, studies of quantitative character are found, but with a lower presence in the field of social work, as reported by several studies (Mahtani, 2004). To explain this situation, some interpretative keys can be highlighted. First, the target groups and collectives of social work are often difficult to access and in situations of risk or vulnerability, which require close and in-depth approaches and do not make them suitable for quantitative methodologies that are more epistemologically focused on seeking objective regularisations or empirical generalisations than on capturing the meaning that people give to their actions. As was observed in this analysis, in those studies where social work and the migration phenomenon are approached, the qualitative methodology is used for the most part. In a subject of such complexity as the reality of migrants and their situation in the country of destination, where underlying realities that are not visible to the naked eye and hidden populations are the order of the day, the relevance and usefulness of qualitative methodology becomes evident. However, perhaps it would be desirable to develop more triangulated studies since, although the combination of different methodologies may not always be pertinent or desirable according to the object of study, in many cases the use of quantitative approaches may favour, for example, approaches that allow social problems to be better contextualised in their full magnitude which

would lead to empirical generalisations. On the other hand, it is worth noting and highlighting that several works are characterised by the use of a variety of methodologies, which could be classified as critical, innovative or creative, and are very interesting since they place social justice issues at the centre of the analysis (Bryant, 2015).

It is important to point out that, according to the analysis carried out, and despite the direct use of concepts such as 'social work' and 'social services', no clear majority of studies was found that place the social work professional in a central role. This could be due to a certain lack of research tradition in the discipline, as highlighted by authors such as Acero Sáez (1988), or to them having prioritised action over reflection or research (Vélez, 2003). Given this, it is important to re-emphasise that in a profession such as social work, which is specifically entrusted with the task of improving the living conditions of individuals, groups and communities, scientific research becomes fundamental as a way of guaranteeing the design of social policies and programmes that serve the real purpose of promoting welfare and social justice in our societies (Mora, 2020).

Finally, two points should be noted regarding language and territorial delimitations. Regarding language, it is significant that 43.2% of the studies were written in Spanish, despite English being the predominant language in scientific communication (Aliaga et al., 2013). If the reasoning of Martínez-Brawley et al. (2013) is employed, regarding the scientific field, then the use in social work studies of other languages rooted in society – such as, in the Spanish case, Valencian/Catalan, Basque and Galician in addition to the predominant ones – could be considered an example of good practice. Finally, regarding territorial delimitations, it was detected that the studies most closely linked to social work are those at the local level, which is consistent with other studies since in Spain there is an extensive transfer of management and financing of everything related to social services from the state level to the autonomous and local levels (Sixto-Costoya et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This systematic review study enables to know the situation of the scientific production on social work and migrations in the Spanish context to be known. It presents the topics addressed, the most frequently used methodologies and techniques, and the role of the social work professional in these studies. In this sense, with regard to research topics, women's studies stand out, followed by health and education-culture. Of those focused on women, most revolve around different types of violence suffered by migrant women, especially gender-based violence and labour/administrative violence. The health issues revolve mainly around health care in the public health system, while the education-culture issues focus, on the one hand, on migrants' access to training to enable their social integration, and on the other, on the intercultural training of professionals working in the field of migration. The close link that has existed between the discipline of social work and the immigration (or refugee) sector in Spain since the origin of the profession highlights the need for more research on this topic, considering both the importance of the number of people served in social and health services and the dynamic and changing situation in the migratory and refugee phenomena. An example of the latter would be the current situation with the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences, which are still difficult to measure in terms of the movement of refugees. Furthermore, this work provides a vision of the challenges for social work professionals to provide solutions to the needs of groups of people from different backgrounds and cultural codes, which are very diverse. It also offers a perspective on the methods used, which are mainly qualitative, although it would be beneficial if more triangulated approaches were carried out.

Limitations

The Web of Science and Scopus databases were employed for this study on account of their relevance and pertinence. Nevertheless, the use of other databases could provide a broader view of this subject.

Future directions

For future projects, it would be interesting to delve deeper into the qualitative dimensions and their attributions to the variables studied, perhaps through approaches such as grounded theory, content analysis or discourse analysis. These approaches will enable the most significant issues identified in this study to be explored in greater depth and further progress to be made in this line of research. Furthermore, the study carried out and the methodology used could inspire new work focused on other countries, allowing broader comparisons to be made.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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