

Identification of Colombian Households with Emigrants: A Methodological Exploration Through Administrative Records and Census Data

Identificación de hogares colombianos con emigrantes: una exploración metodológica mediante registros administrativos y censales

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and characterize Colombian households with emigrants, addressing their limited visibility in national information systems. To achieve this, a methodological strategy is employed that links administrative records (REMI and REBP) with the 2018 Census, allowing an indirect estimation of these households. The results indicate that 1.8% of Colombian households have at least one emigrant member and highlight the feminization of migration, along with a reduction in household size. Household typologies are analyzed by comparing those with and without the effect of emigration to identify differences in structure, life cycle, and intergenerational composition. This study contributes to the sociodemographic understanding of households with emigrants and demonstrates the usefulness of linking administrative records and census data as a methodological alternative for their identification in the absence of a direct information source.

Keywords: 1. international migration, 2. household, 3. demography, 4. indirect methods, 5. Colombia.

RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar y caracterizar los hogares colombianos con emigrantes, abordando su escasa visibilidad en los sistemas de información nacional. Para ello se emplea una estrategia metodológica que vincula los registros administrativos (REMI y REBP) con el Censo 2018, permitiendo una estimación indirecta de estos hogares. Los resultados indican que 1.8 por ciento de los hogares colombianos tiene al menos un miembro emigrante y evidencian la feminización de la emigración, junto con una reducción en el tamaño de los hogares. Se analizan tipologías de hogares, comparando aquellos con y sin el efecto de la emigración para identificar diferencias en estructura, ciclo de vida y composición intergeneracional. Este estudio contribuye a la comprensión sociodemográfica de los hogares con emigrantes y demuestra la utilidad del cruce de registros administrativos y censales como una alternativa metodológica para su identificación en ausencia de una fuente de información directa.

Palabras clave: 1. migración internacional, 2. hogar, 3. demografía, 4. métodos indirectos, 5. Colombia.

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INTRODUCTION

The various and diverse consequences of migration on family life have already been widely documented in academic literature since the 1980s, highlighting its impact on family structure, dynamics, and interaction (Boyd, 1989; Murray, 1981; Zlotnik, 1995). Studies on the topic have multiplied steadily over the past two decades, evidencing the need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches to its analysis (Baldassar et al., 2014; Bryceson, 2022; Glick, 2010; Kofman et al., 2022; Riaño, 2012; Uterreiner, 2024; Waters & Yeoh, 2023).

Although migration and family have been addressed from a variety of disciplines, demographic studies have been key to understanding this relationship. According to Ariza and De Oliveira (2004), the interaction between family and migration in Latin America has been explored mainly from three analytical approaches within demography. The first analytical approach understands migration as an economic strategy for the family. The second analyzes how migration transforms the family structure, internal dynamics, and relative stability of households. The third, which emerged later, is the transnational approach, which positions the relationship between migration and family within the context of economic globalization, highlighting interactions and networks that transcend national borders (Ariza & De Oliveira, 2004).

The notion of the transnational family has emerged from this last perspective, as a fundamental analytical category for understanding how families operate in migratory contexts. This analytical addition has made it possible to identify the practices, dynamics, and links that keep families together despite geographical scattering, defining them as family units in which one or more members reside in different countries, but keep emotional, economic, and social links that transcend national borders (Baldassar et al., 2014; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Still, from a demographic perspective, the priority unit of observation is not the family, but the household. Although the two concepts may overlap and complement each other, they are not equivalent. The family is defined as a network of emotional, social, and economic relationships between individuals united by ties of kinship, marriage, or adoption, who may or may not share the same living space. Its configuration transcends co-residence and is maintained through symbolic, material, and emotional ties (Cicerchia & Palacio-Valencia, 2018).

Contrastingly, the household is a unit of coexistence defined by co-residence, regardless of familial ties. According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, acronym in Spanish for *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*, 2018), a household is “a person or group of people, whether related or not, who occupy all or part of a dwelling space, meet their basic needs with a common budget, and generally share meals” (p. 20).

Given this distinction, not all households are made up of families, and a single family can be distributed across several households (Flórez, 2004). This difference is particularly relevant in the study of migration, where family organization forms are shaped by mobility, interconnectivity, and the keeping of ties across borders (Baldassar et al., 2014; Fernández-Hawrylak & Heras, 2019; González, 2016; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Nonetheless, this type of information usually

cannot be collected from conventional demographic sources, as statistical measurement tends to focus on household analysis. This is why this study assumes that identifying an emigrant in a household registered in the 2018 Census provides an indirect approximation to the likely presence of a transnational family, even if the existence of emotional and economic ties between its members cannot be empirically verified.

Additionally, in many countries, the lack of specific questions in national censuses and surveys further hampers the identification and analysis of transnational families (Campos, 2018). Such is the case in Colombia, where there are no information sources that allow for the direct identification and characterization of the magnitude, structure, and composition of these households. Although the country has historically been a major source of migrants, and a destination and transit point in more recent times, statistical records have not evolved at the same pace as migration flows. This lack of data prevents a precise understanding of the size and characteristics of these households, which in turns limits the possibility of studying them and their visibility in the design of public policies (Ramírez-Martínez et al., 2021).

It is in this context that this study seeks to answer the following question: How can Colombian households with emigrants be identified through linking administrative and census records, and what changes in their composition and structure take place before and after the emigration of one of their members? For this purpose, we present an exploratory methodological strategy that links administrative records from various official sources with households registered in the 2018 Census.

While the integration of sources is not a methodological innovation in itself, this study is a path-opener in the case of Colombia, as it applies this linking of sources for the specific purpose at hand. Its implementation constitutes a significant advance in the identification and demographic characterization of households with international emigrants, in a context where there is no direct source of information for their study. This work not only demonstrates the viability of linking administrative and census records as a methodological alternative for identifying these households but also provides a basis for future research on the matter and for the design of more informed migration policies. Moreover, it introduces a strategy that can be replicated in other countries of Latin America and the global South that may face similar challenges in terms of statistical data availability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative and exploratory approach to estimate and characterize Colombian households with emigrants, this by means of a methodological strategy based on information triangulation. Given the absence of a direct source in the National Statistical System (SEN, acronym in Spanish for *Sistema Estadístico Nacional*), this methodology mitigates the statistical invisibility of these households and sets forth a framework for their identification and analysis.

Statistical systems operate under the premise of the household as the unit of observation (Flórez, 2004), which implies that many family relationships are excluded from statistical analysis, as

measurement is restricted to co-residence and does not capture ties that may transcend living and geographic space. The sources informing this study—administrative records and census data—follow this approach, and thus the household is adopted as the unit of analysis, allowing us to approximate the identification of households with emigrants and their sociodemographic transformations. This decision is consistent with the available sources of information but does not entirely discard the previously mentioned methodological limitations, particularly when it comes to identifying emotional and economic ties between the members of these households.

Whereas the study provides a quantitative approximation of households with emigrants in Colombia, the results are still subject to the limitations of the administrative records used. In particular, the Statistical Registry of International Migration (REMI, acronym in Spanish for *Registro Estadístico de Migración Internacional*) only records regular emigration, and the Population-Based Statistical Registry (REBP, acronym in Spanish for *Registro Estadístico Base Población*) relies on the availability of administrative data, which may underestimate the actual magnitude of the phenomenon. Furthermore, people of an irregular migratory status are not included, which challenges the complete characterization of households with emigrants.

Now, although the unit of observation in this study is households, specifically those where migrants are identified, it is acknowledged that not all such households can be considered transnational, as emotional, economic, and social ties are not always preserved in mobility, these ties being fundamental elements in the definition of transnational households. However, this work assumes that households with migrants can be a methodological approximation to transnational families, although in demographic terms it is not possible to determine with certainty whether these households actually meet the criteria for such categorization.

Specifically, the REMI and REBP registries were made use of to identify households with migrants; these registries were then integrated with information from the 2018 National Population and Housing Census (CNPV, acronym in Spanish for *Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda*). This allowed obtaining an estimate of the magnitude and characteristics of these households.

The matching between these administrative records and the 2018 Census was carried out by means of a deterministic procedure based on identification and location variables. The population identification number was used when available, in addition to complementary criteria such as sex, age, and geographic location of the censused household. This process minimized errors in assigning households to emigrants, ensuring that individuals identified in administrative records were correctly linked to their household of origin in the census.

Descriptive statistical techniques were used for data analysis, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, so as to identify distinct sociodemographic patterns between households with and without emigration. Unlike previous studies, which have addressed Colombian transnational families from qualitative approaches (Ciurlo, 2013; Puyana et al., 2013; Rivas & González, 2009; Zapata, 2021) or with limited data, this study provides a broader and more

representative estimate of the sociodemographic structure of households with international emigrants in Colombia.

Sources

Statistical Registry of International Migration (REMI)

The REMI is a key source for this study, as it allowed for the analysis of the flow of entries and exits from the national territory. This information is compiled and published by DANE in the Statistical Yearbooks of International Movements. To this end, DANE adopts the United Nations (1999) definition as a criterion for identifying emigrants, which considers a long-term migrant to be any person who moves to another country for at least 12 months without re-entry registered at an immigration checkpoint.

In this study, the REMI allowed the identification of Colombian emigrants between years 2005 and 2020, estimating a total of 3 125 716 emigrants during that period. However, in order to ensure their connection with census households, only emigrants from 2018 to 2020 were taken into account. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics and limitations of the REMI.

Table 1. Characteristics and Limitations of the Statistical Registry of International Migration (REMI)

Source	Main characteristics	Limitations
REMI (Statistical Registry of International Migration)	Records entries and exits from Colombia since 2005, based on information from the Colombian Migration Service (<i>Migración Colombia</i>). Prepared by DANE. Allows integration with registries such as the REBP.	Does not record irregular migration. Does not allow estimating recent migration (last year not available until completing 12 months without re-entry). Requires non-anonymized data for matching with other sources.

Source: Own elaboration based on the Applied Sociodemographic Statistics Report (*Informe de Estadística Sociodemográfica Aplicada*) provided by DANE (2021a).

Population-Based Statistical Registry (REBP)

The REBP is an innovative data source in Colombia, designed to improve the accuracy of demographic estimates using administrative records. Its implementation responds to the need to update population information between census periods, thus reducing dependence on traditional censuses. This study benefitted from this database by using it as a key input for identifying households with emigrants, this way allowing for a more detailed analysis of how these households are reconfigured after the departure of their members (DANE, 2021b).

This registry is constructed from multiple administrative sources, which integrate information on identification, health, education, social programs, and migration records, consolidating individual information into a single database. Its development follows international standards adopted by countries such as Sweden and Norway, pioneers in the integration of administrative records to produce sociodemographic statistics.

The deterministic matching of the REBP makes it possible to identify records corresponding to the same person in different databases, by means of identification (ID number, sex, age) and location (department, municipality) variables. This process minimizes errors in linking individuals to censused households, thus ensuring greater consistency in the identification of households with emigrants.

The REBP was essential for this exploratory study, as it allowed for the identification of households with emigrants when integrated with the REMI and the CNPV 2018. Its link with the REMI made it possible to identify emigrants who have left the country, and its cross-referencing with the CNPV 2018 allowed those emigrants to be linked to their household of origin, which would have been otherwise impossible (see Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics and Limitations of the Population-Based Statistical Registry (REBP)

Source	Main characteristics	Limitations
REBP (Population-Based Statistical Registry)	<p>Prepared by DANE, based on administrative records of national coverage (2018-2020).</p> <p>Allows for comparative assessments with the 2018 Census.</p> <p>Integrates demographic, geospatial, and identification variables, facilitating the sociodemographic characterization of populations.</p> <p>Enables longitudinal and life trajectory analyses, due to the constant updating of records.</p>	<p>Does not directly identify transnational households; it only allows them to be inferred as potential.</p> <p>Underestimates the actual magnitude of transnational households, as it does not link emigrants prior to 2018.</p> <p>Requires complementation with the 2018 Census for household composition.</p> <p>Limited data stability, as household composition can change over time.</p> <p>It does not include information on remittances, which limits the identification of transnational ties.</p>

Source: Own elaboration based on the sociodemographic statistics report provided by DANE (2018).

Integration of Sources and Key Variables

The linking of the REMI, the REBP, and the CNPV 2018 allowed for an estimate of the magnitude and characteristics of households with emigrants. Each source provides essential variables for this matching (see Table 3).

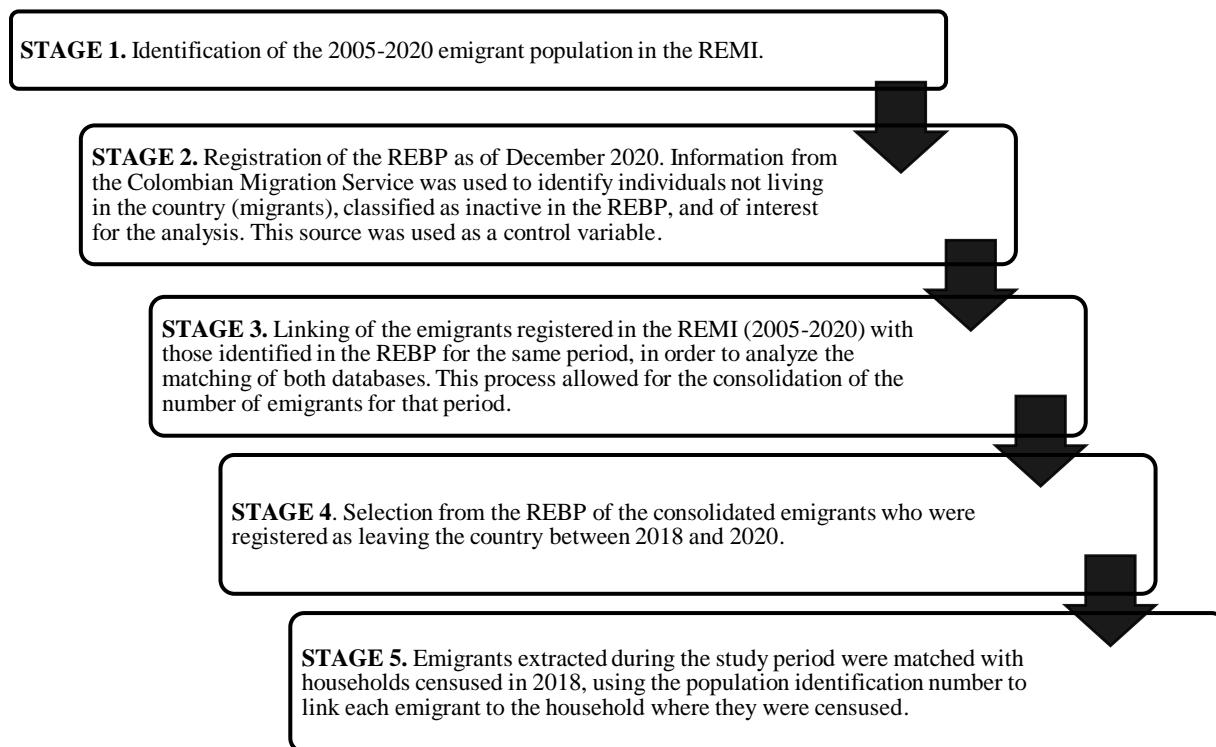
Table 3. Key Variables from the Sources Used, and Their Application in the Study

Source	Key variable	Application in the study
REMI	Date of departure, destination country, nationality, reason for travel.	Identification of emigrants
REBP	Population identification, geographic location, age, sex.	Linking to censused households
CNPV 2018	Household composition, relationship with household head.	Analysis of structure and changes in households after emigration

Source: Own elaboration.

Methodological Process

The methodological process consisted of integrating three sources of information: the REMI, the REBP, and the CNPV 2018. Migrants were identified in the REMI, linked to their information in the REBP, and finally, associated with their censused household in the CNPV 2018. This procedure was carried out in several stages, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stages of Integration of Statistical Information Sources

Source: Own elaboration.

Given that this analysis involved linking multiple sources of information, the sizes of the population universes used in the description of the indicators were adjusted as the data integration

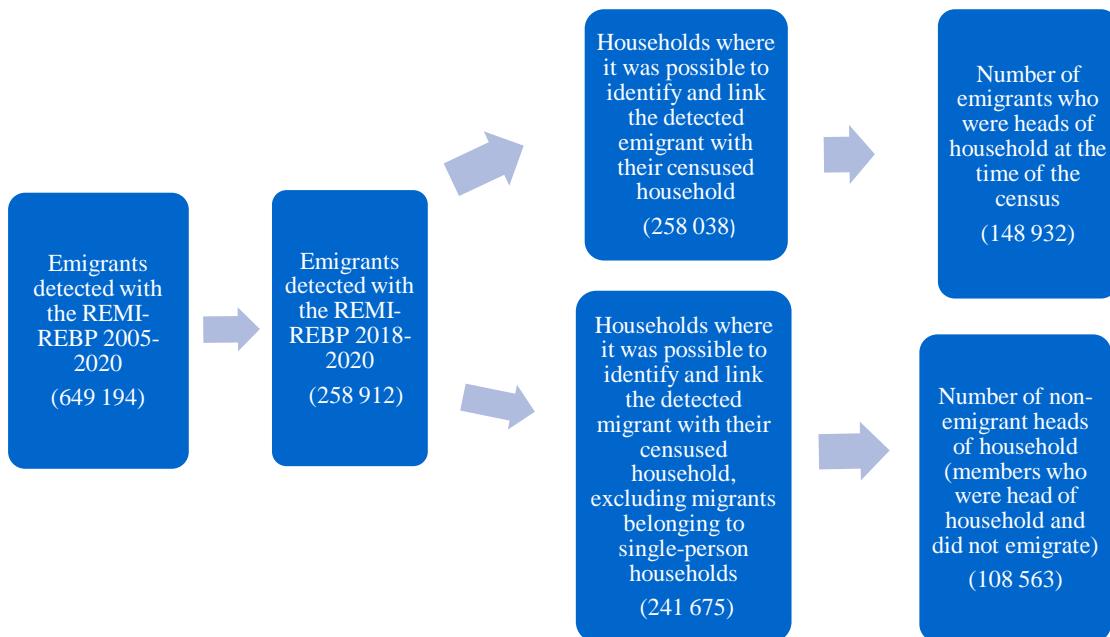
processes progressed. At first, the total number of people identified as emigrants between 2005 and 2018 was 649 194. However, when the observation period was narrowed down to 2018-2020, the emigrant population count was reduced to 258 912 people (see Figure 2). Of these, 258 038 qualified for processing in terms of the information available on them, allowing a total of 724 365 people to be linked to potential transnational households in the 2018-2020 period.

The 2018-2020 observation period was selected due to its consistency with the latest available census source, allowing households to be linked to emigrants by means of up-to-date data. Emigrants prior to 2018 were excluded,² as their households of origin were not recorded in the census, which prevented their linkage with recent sociodemographic information. This time delimitation ensured greater precision in the estimation of households with emigrants.

During the matching of emigrants with censused households, it was identified that many emigrants belonged to single-person households, which prevented their association with other household members. From this, the final number of households with emigrants decreased to 241 675, of which 148 932 had the emigrant as the head of household, and 108 563 corresponded to households where the emigrant had another role (Figure 2). This finding is relevant, as it evidences that emigration does not necessarily imply the nuclear reconfiguration of households.

² As the 2018 Census was conducted year-round, some emigrants had left before the time of data collection, which prevents them from being linked to the censused household.

Figure 2. Construction of the Proxy Variable to Identify Households with Emigrants Through the REBP³



Source: Own elaboration based on information from the REBP.

Although the methodology employed allowed for a robust approach to identifying households with migrants, it has some limitations. First, the estimate relies exclusively on administrative records, which excludes irregular migrants or those not captured in official records. Second, the unit of observation is the household, which prevents capturing family dynamics that extend beyond the household nucleus. Third, the methodology assumes that the households censused in 2018 have not experienced significant changes in their composition between the time of the census and the emigration of the identified individual, which can introduce bias into the household characterization.

Moreover, the link between emigrants and censused households depends on the quality of data matching, which can lead to underestimations if the identification information is inaccurate or if there are changes in household residence after the census. Also, the impossibility of measuring emotional or economic ties between household members with emigrants limits the categorization of these families as transnational in a strict sense. Lastly, this work takes into account at least three major assumptions: 1) all migrants identified in the database are still alive; 2) none have entered the country through unauthorized immigration checkpoints; and 3) they remain linked to the censused household.

³ A proxy variable is an indicator used as an approximation when the variable of interest cannot be measured directly.

These methodological limitations affect not only the accuracy of the estimates but also the interpretation of households with emigrants as units of analysis. The inability to capture transnational family dynamics means that the results should be understood as a demographic approximation and not as a comprehensive measurement of familial transnationality.

RESULTS

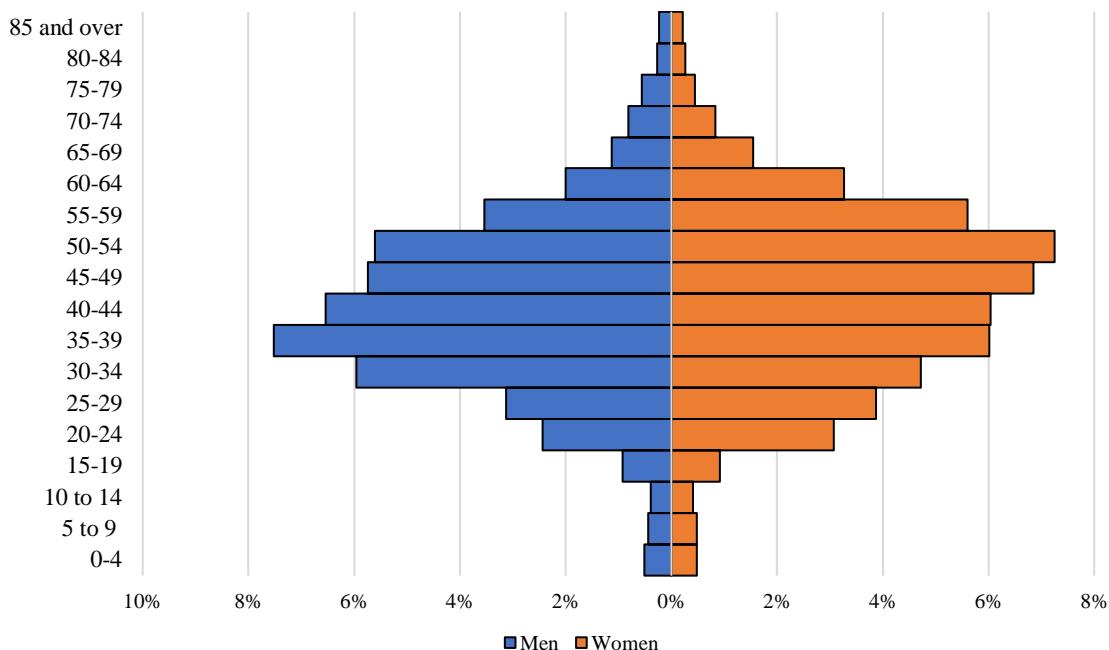
Profiles of the Colombian Emigrant, 2018-2020

The characterization of emigrants presented in this section corresponds to 258 038 people of Colombian origin or nationality, who left the country between 2018 and 2020 and who, after spending at least one year abroad, had not returned to Colombia as of December 31, 2020. Given the size of this population, it is essential to analyze its demographic structure, since aspects such as age, sex, and educational level not only influence migration patterns but also family and economic dynamics, in both the country of origin and that of destination.

The results show that Colombia continues to consolidate the trend toward the feminization of migration, with a 52% female predominance among recorded emigrants in the 2018-2020 period. These results are consistent with recent censuses and official records in the United States, Spain, and Chile, where women represent between 54% and 58% of Colombian migration. This pattern reflects the growing female role in international migration flows, aligned with dynamics observed in other countries in the region, and largely responding to the demand for female labor in sectors such as caregiving, domestic work, and health services (International Organization for Migration [IOM] and UN Women, 2023).

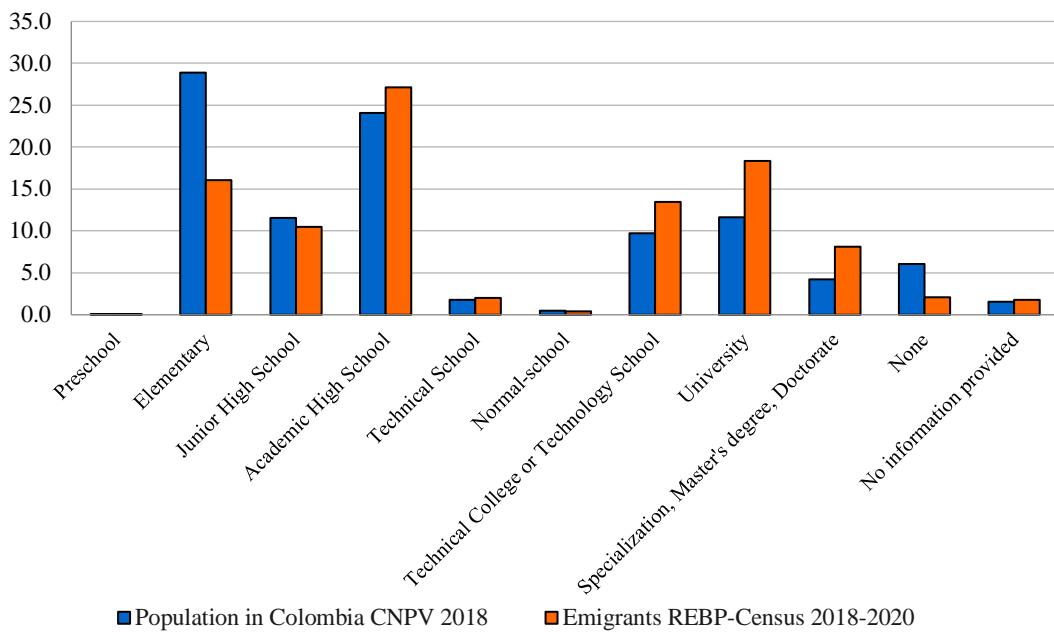
The age and sex distribution of the emigrant population is shown in Figure 1, which confirms not only the female predominance in migration flows but also its concentration in certain age groups. Colombian migration is highly concentrated among the working-age population (30-64 years, 77%), suggesting that the primary motivation remains economy- and employment-based. Conversely, the participation of minors under 15 years of age is low (3%), reinforcing the presence of transnational families, while the migration of older adults is insignificant (6%), demonstrating that migration flows continue to predominantly consist of working-age individuals.

Graph 1. Colombia. Distribution of the Emigrant Population by Age and Sex, 2018-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Graph 2 compares the educational level of emigrants with that of the total Colombian population. The results show that Colombian emigration has higher proportion of people holding university (18%) and postgraduate degrees (8%), when compared to the country's general population. This evidences a significant flow of skilled migration, possibly driven by the search for better job and academic opportunities. However, 26% of emigrants have only attained primary or secondary education, suggesting the coexistence of different migratory profiles. Whereas some migrants have attained high academic levels, others belong to less-skilled sectors, possibly seeking employment in less specialized labor markets. Furthermore, the low representation of technical training (2%) among emigrants suggests that this educational level is not a determining factor in international mobility. These differences in educational composition reflect the dynamics of the labor market in destination countries, where the demand for skilled workers and labor in informal sectors coexist, shaping the mobility patterns of the Colombian population.

*Graph 2. Educational Level of Emigrants by Sex, 2018-2020**

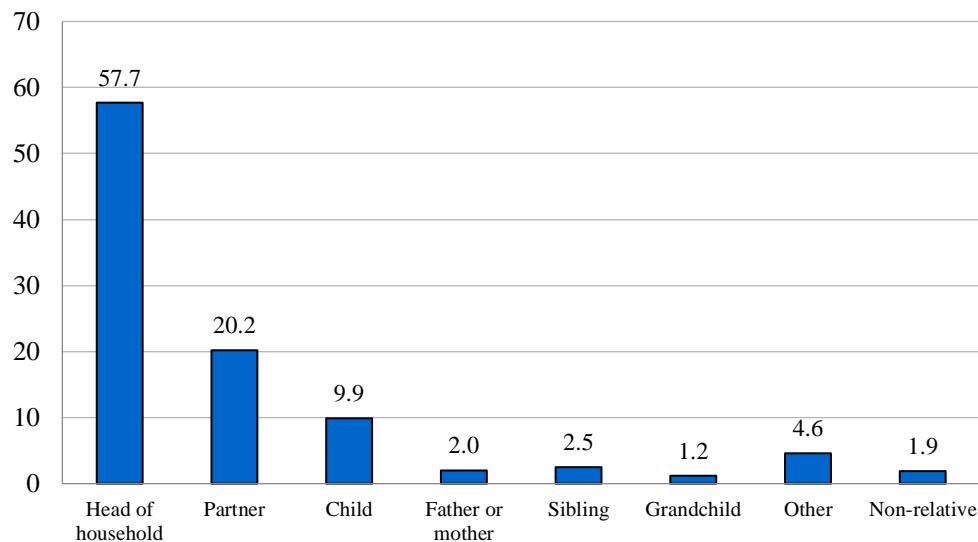
Note: *Indicator calculated for the population aged 25 and over.⁴

Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Graph 3 shows that the majority of Colombian emigrants (57.7%) were heads of household in their homes of origin before emigrating, which could indicate that migration is a key economic strategy for households. The departure of the head of household can generate reconfigurations in family organization, delegating responsibilities to other household members or fostering new dynamics of economic dependence. Also, 20.2% of emigrants are partners of the head of household, which may reflect a staggered migration pattern, in which the migrating spouse initially does so alone, intending to first settle and later reunite with their family. Contrastingly, the proportion of sons and daughters among migrants is lower (9.9%), reinforcing the idea that in many cases the children stay in Colombia under the care of other relatives, thus consolidating transnational family structures. The low representation of fathers/mothers of the head of household (2%) and grandchildren (1.2%) indicates that migration continues to predominantly consist of adults of working age, while the 4.6% of migrants without a direct kinship with the head of household suggests the influence of migration networks and previous residence in extended or shared households.

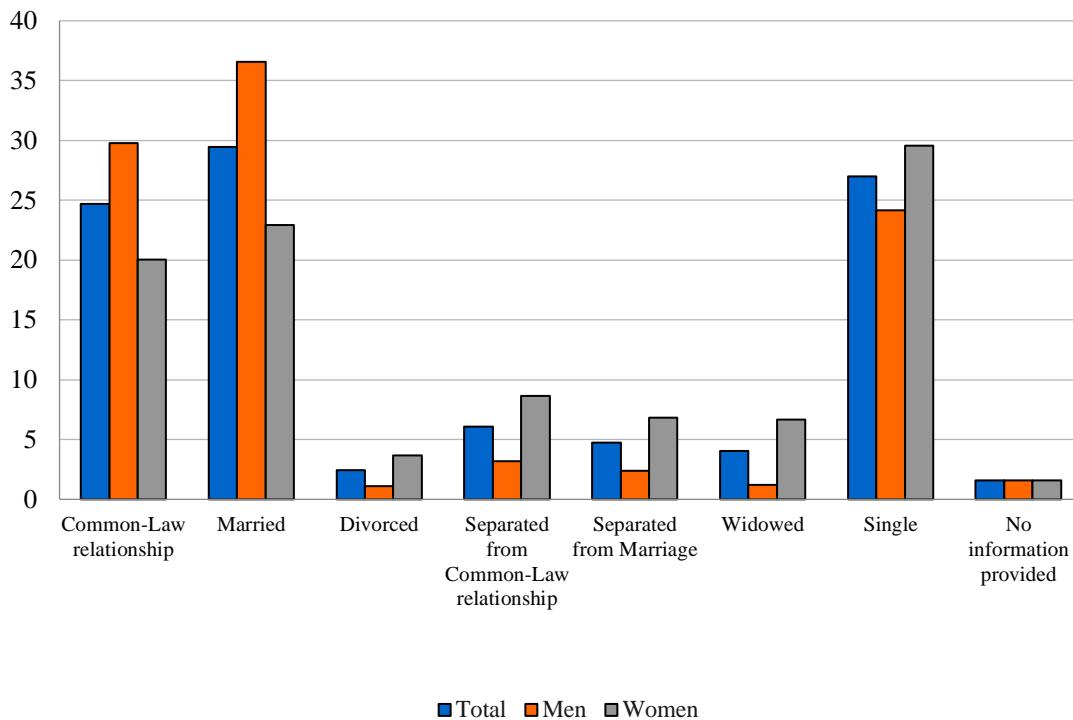
⁴ The educational level estimate captured in the 2018 Census was not filtered by place of birth.

Graph 3. Kinship with the Head of Household, 2018-2020



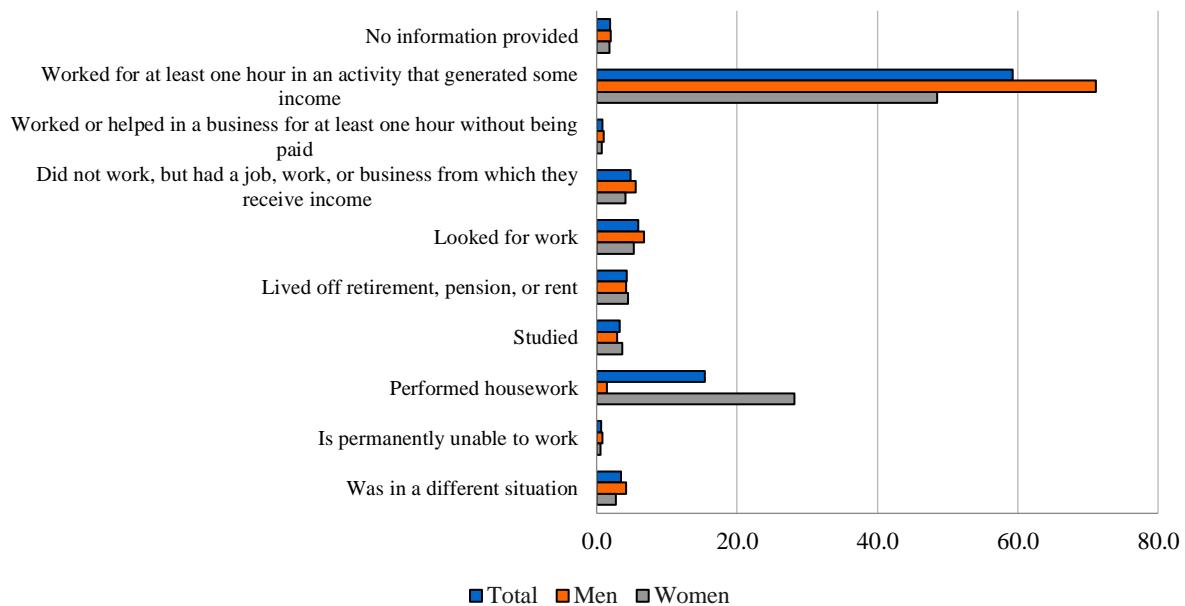
Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

The analysis of the marital status of Colombian emigrants shows that more than half (55%) were in a marital relationship at the time of migration (30% were married and 25% were in a common-law relationship), indicating that migration is not exclusively an individual phenomenon and may respond to a family economic strategy, in which one spouse migrates in search of employment to send remittances and thus support the family back home. Additionally, 26% of emigrants were single, this suggesting that a significant portion of the migrant population is made up of people without direct marital responsibilities, possibly seeking better employment or educational opportunities. In contrast, 14% were separated or divorced, which could indicate that some people choose migration as an individual mobility strategy after a marital breakup. Finally, the low representation of widows and widowers (4%) suggests that Colombian migration continues to be largely comprised of people of working age, rather than older adults (see Graph 4).

Graph 4. Marital Status of the Emigrant Population by Sex, 2018-2020

Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

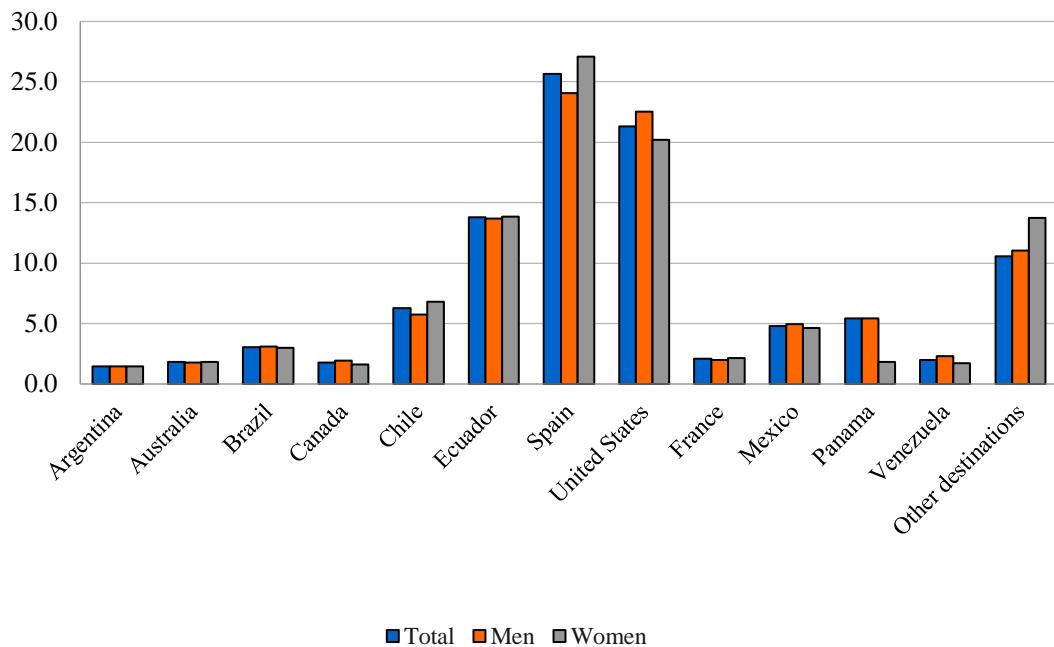
Graph 5 shows the employment status of emigrants before leaving the country. The majority (60%) had income-generating activities as their main occupation, indicating that migration is not necessarily a response to a lack of employment, but rather a search for better employment and economic opportunities. These findings are consistent with those reported by Castro (2016) in a study conducted in Colombia, where he also found that emigrants were employed before their departure, reinforcing the idea that international mobility is driven more by expectations of improvement than by a total lack of employment. However, significant differences were found by sex: while 72% of men were employed before emigrating, only 49% of women were; therefore, migration can facilitate their insertion into the labor market at the destination country. Furthermore, 28% of women were engaged in housework, in contrast to only 1.5% of men, this reflecting a strong gender segmentation in occupation prior to emigration.

Graph 5. Employment Status of the Emigrant Population by Sex, 2018-2020

Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Internationally, the four main destinations for Colombians during the period studied were Spain (25.7%), the United States (21.3%), Ecuador (13.8%), and Chile (6.3%) (Graph 6). Significant differences were observed by gender: while Spain has a greater proportion of women, possibly due to demand in care and domestic service sectors, the United States has a higher male representation, which could be linked to the insertion of male migrants in sectors such as construction and transportation. France also appears as a prominent destination, which could be associated with student and skilled professional migration. The importance of Ecuador and Chile highlights the significance of intraregional migration, while the *other destinations* category suggests that Colombian migration continues to diversify, exploring new labor markets and international mobility opportunities beyond traditional destinations.

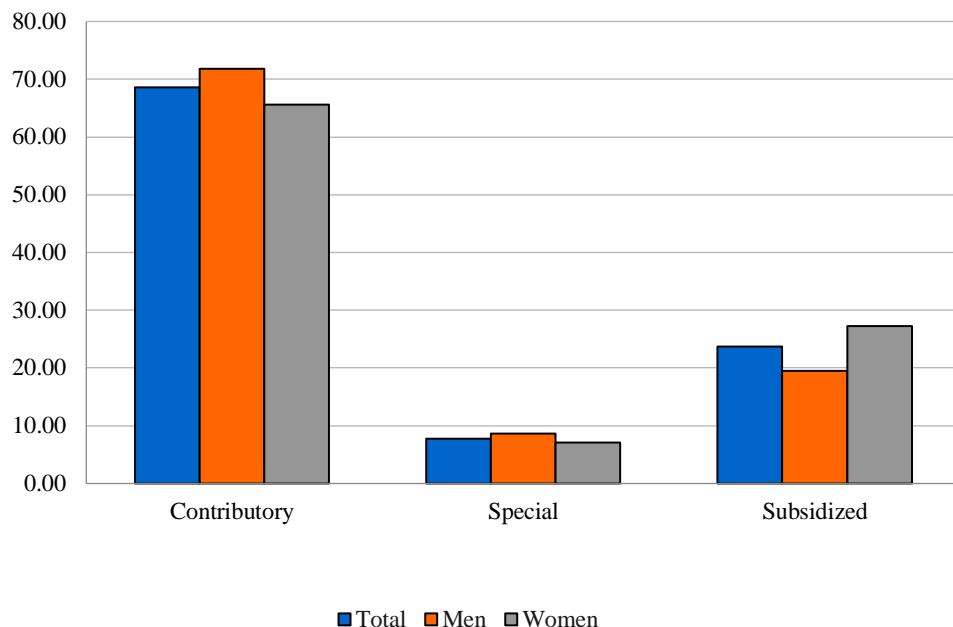
Graph 6. Countries Of Residence of the Emigrant Population, 2018-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Graph 7 shows that 88% of Colombian emigrants were enrolled in the health system before migrating, indicating that migration was not related to a lack of health coverage. The majority belonged to the contributory system⁵ (69%), suggesting that they were formally employed or received sufficient income to contribute to social security. In contrast, 24% were enrolled in the subsidized system, suggesting that, although a portion of the migrant population was not living in extreme poverty, there were migration profiles of greater economic vulnerability. Gender differences were observed, with a greater representation of men in the contributory system and more women in the subsidized one, which may be related to the gap in access to formal employment before emigrating. Finally, only 8% of emigrants were enrolled in special systems, indicating that migration is not predominant among sectors with job stability, such as the military or State entities.

⁵ Healthcare in Colombia functions under two systems: contributory, for those with income and the ability to pay contributions, and subsidized, for people living in poverty, funded by the State. Both guarantee access to healthcare services under the General Social Security System (SGSSS, acronym in Spanish for *Sistema General de Seguridad Social en Salud*).

Graph 7. Health System Affiliation, 2018-2020

Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Transnational households with and without the effect of emigration

The processed information allowed us to identify a total of 258,038 emigrants who could be associated with a censused household. Taking the total number of households registered in the 2018 CNPV (14,243,223) as a reference, households with identified emigrants⁶ limited to the study period (2018–2020) represent 1.8% of the national total.

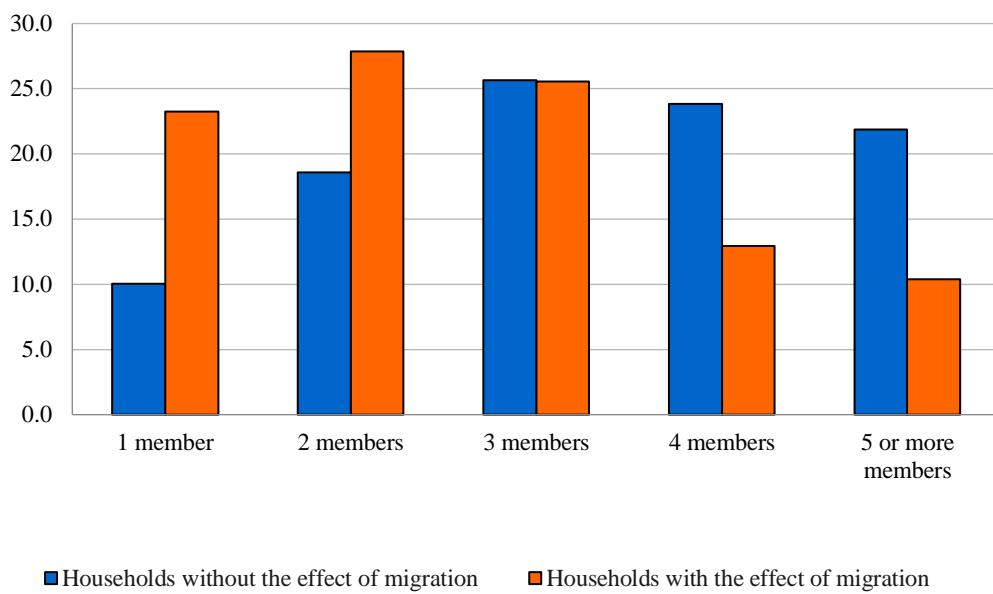
The results evidence that emigration has an impact on the structure of households of origin, as a decrease in the average household size after emigration was observed, from 3.5 to 2.9 people per household.

Graph 8 shows the changes in household structure following emigration. There is an increase in single-person households, reaching 23.3%, reflecting that, in many cases, the departure of a migrant leaves one person living alone in the place of origin. Furthermore, households made up of two members become the most common (27.8%), while three-member households represent 25.6%. In contrast, households with four, five, or more members decreased significantly, falling below the percentage recorded in the 2018 Census for this type of household (16.8%). This phenomenon has been documented in previous studies, which indicate that households with

⁶ For the purpose of this study, households with at least one migrant will be analyzed as if they all met the transnationality criterion and will be studied as transnational households.

emigrants tend to be smaller due to the departure of young members of working age (Canales, 2005; Pardo & Dávila, 2017).

Graph 8. Households Without and with the Effect of Emigration by Number of Members, 2018-2020



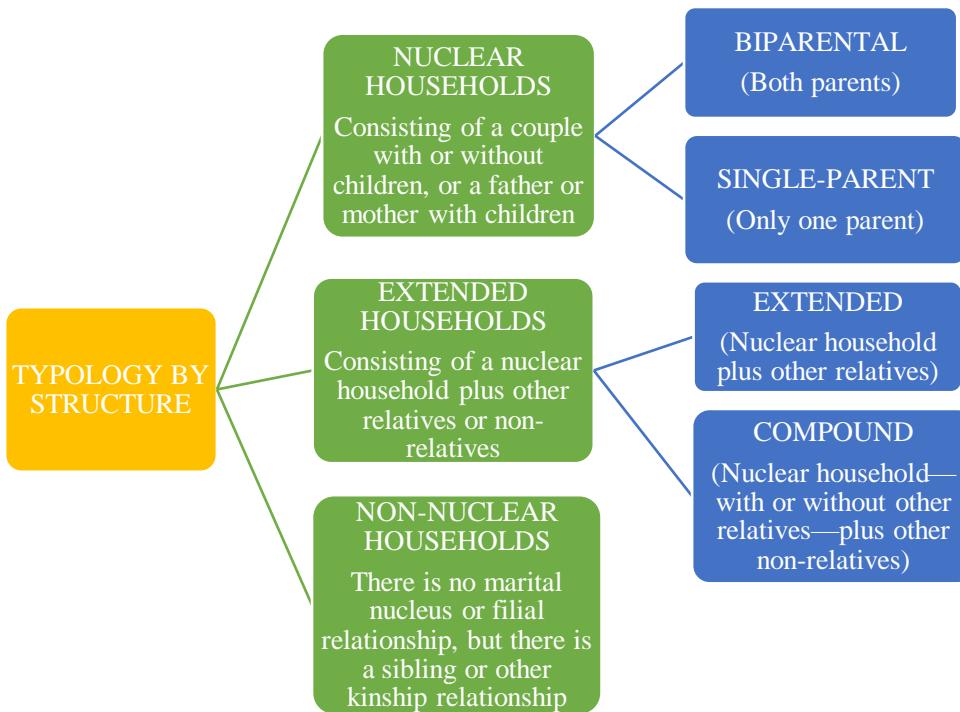
Note: * Households with the effect of emigration exclude those comprised of a single person.
Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Typologies Of Households with International Emigrants

The household classification is based on a fundamental distinction between family and non-family households. Family households are made up of individuals who share ties of consanguinity, affinity, or legally recognized ties, and their structure is organized around a marital, filial, or close kinship with the person identified as head of the household. From a statistical perspective, the kinship variable is key to classifying households and analyzing their dynamics in different sociodemographic contexts.

In the case of households affected by international migration, their classification is essential for understanding the structural impacts of transnational mobility on family organization. For this analysis, we adopted the typologies set forth by the Observatory of Families in Colombia (2021), based on the contribution of Ullmann et al. (2014). These typologies are structured in terms of three analytical dimensions: family composition, generational distribution, and household life cycle. Based on these categories, this study examines the diversity of households with migrants and their configuration in response to the effects of transnational mobility. Figure 3 shows the main classifications based on structure.

Figure 3. Household Typology Based on Relationship with the Head of Household



Source: Own elaboration based on the typology proposed by Ullmann et al. (2014).

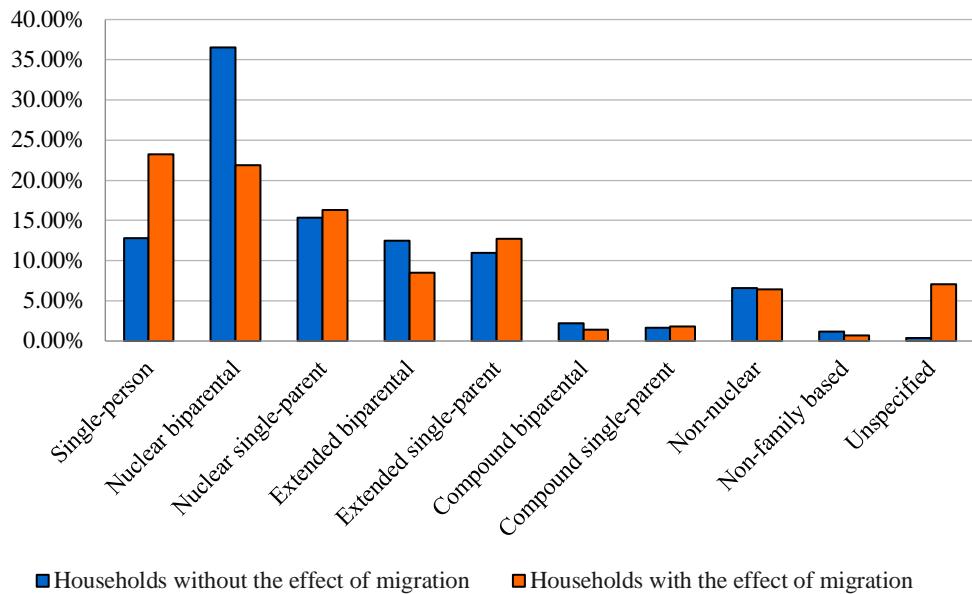
It is noteworthy that family households, both nuclear and extended, can be classified as biparental or single-parent, depending on the presence or absence of the spouse of the person identified as the head of household (Flórez, 2004).

Analysis of household typology according to kinship structure reveals that most households from which international migrants originate are family-based (99%). Within these, nuclear households are the most prevalent, representing 52% of the total, with a marked representation of two-parent structures (36.5%). Extended households come second, comprising 22% of the total, with a relatively balanced distribution between biparental (9%) and single-parent (13%). Compound households, on the other hand, are marginally represented, not exceeding 4% of the total.

If a marital nucleus (biparental household) is analyzed separately, without differentiating between nuclear and extended households, it is observed that these represent 49% of households. However, after the emigration of one of its members, the proportion of biparental nuclear households decreases significantly, falling by 15 percentage points to 22%. In biparental extended households, the decrease is more moderate, with a drop of three percentage points (Graph 9). Despite this reduction, nuclear households remain the predominant type, representing 38% of all

households with emigrants. Meanwhile, single-parent households constitute almost a third of the total (29%), with nuclear households predominating (16.3%) over extended households (12.7%).

Graph 9. Distribution of Households with and Without the Effect of Emigration, by Disaggregated Typology of Family Structure



Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

These findings reflect how emigration reconfigures household structure, with a marked decrease in biparental households and an increase in single-parent households. This suggests that, in many cases, the emigrant's departure entails a redistribution of roles and responsibilities within the household. The notable reduction in biparental nuclear households indicates that spousal migration can generate a transformation in household headship, with an increase in women assuming this role, in line with the feminization of household headship in migration contexts.

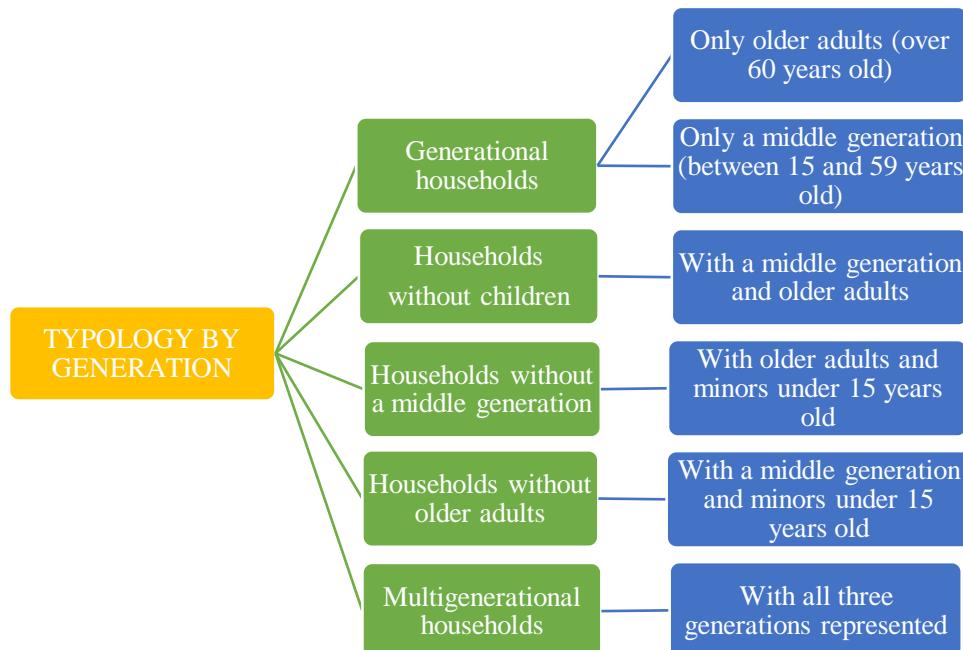
On the other hand, the persistence of nuclear households as the predominant form of organization suggests that, despite geographic distance, family ties continue to structure the daily lives of those who stay in their country of origin. The transnationalization of family dynamics implies that these households keep active ties with their members abroad, adapting to new forms of organization and care. As such, the data confirms that migration does not dissolve family structures, but rather transforms them, giving rise to potentially transnational households in which marital and family relationships persist across borders.

The impact of emigration is not only reflected in the structure of the household based on kinship, but also in the generational composition of those who stay in the country of origin. The departure of a household member can alter the coexistence between generations, redefining dynamics of care, economic support, and the distribution of roles within said household. In this

sense, generational typology allows understanding how households are organized according to the age of their members, and how emigration can influence these arrangements.

The classification of households according to their generational composition is based on Ullmann et al. (2014), but in this study it has been adapted in consideration to Colombian legislation. In particular, Law 1276 of 2009, in its Article 7, establishes that a person is considered an older adult from the age of 60. Based on this, categories have been established that allow for the analysis of household configuration according to the generations that comprise them. This classification facilitates the identification of changes in the age structure of households as a result of emigration, thus providing a more detailed view of how international mobility impacts intergenerational coexistence (Figure 4).

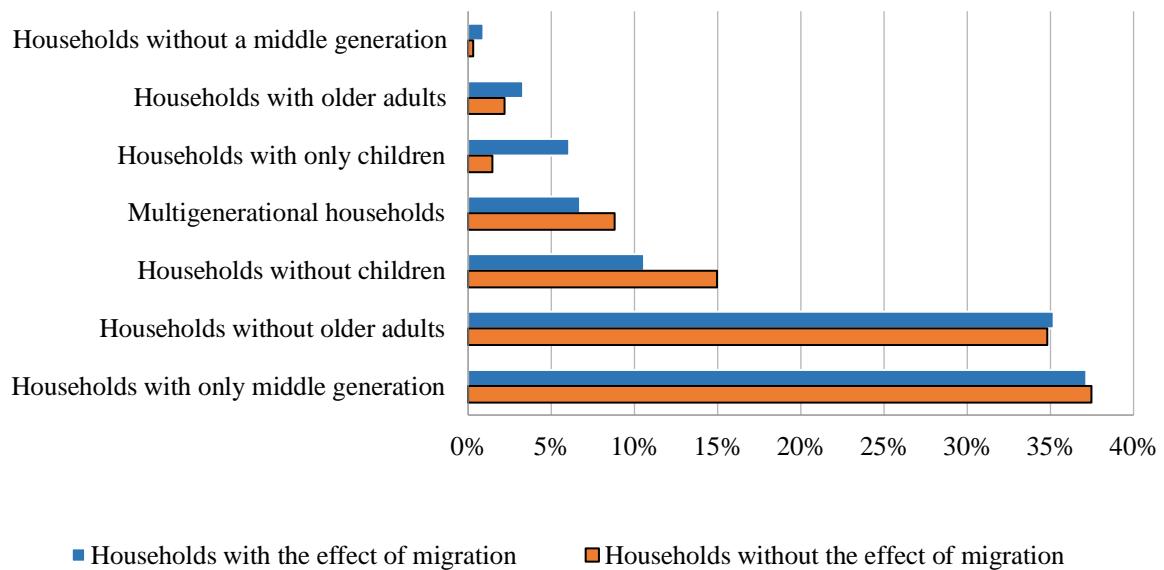
Figure 4. Typology Based on the Generations Present in the Household



Source: Own elaboration based on the typology proposed by Ullmann et al. (2014).

Figure 4 introduces the categories used to analyze the generational composition of households. Graph 10 shows the distribution of households with and without the effect of emigration, highlighting changes in intergenerational coexistence as a result of international mobility.

Graph 10. Distribution of Households with and Without the Effect of Emigration, by Generational Typology



Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Graph 10 shows that international emigration impacts the generational composition of households to different extents. First, it is evident that emigration occurs mainly in households made up solely of the middle generation (15–59 years old), representing the largest group, both before and after emigration, with a share close to 38%. This evidences that migrants tend to be adults of working age without dependents, a condition that facilitates their mobility and reduces family restrictions on emigration.

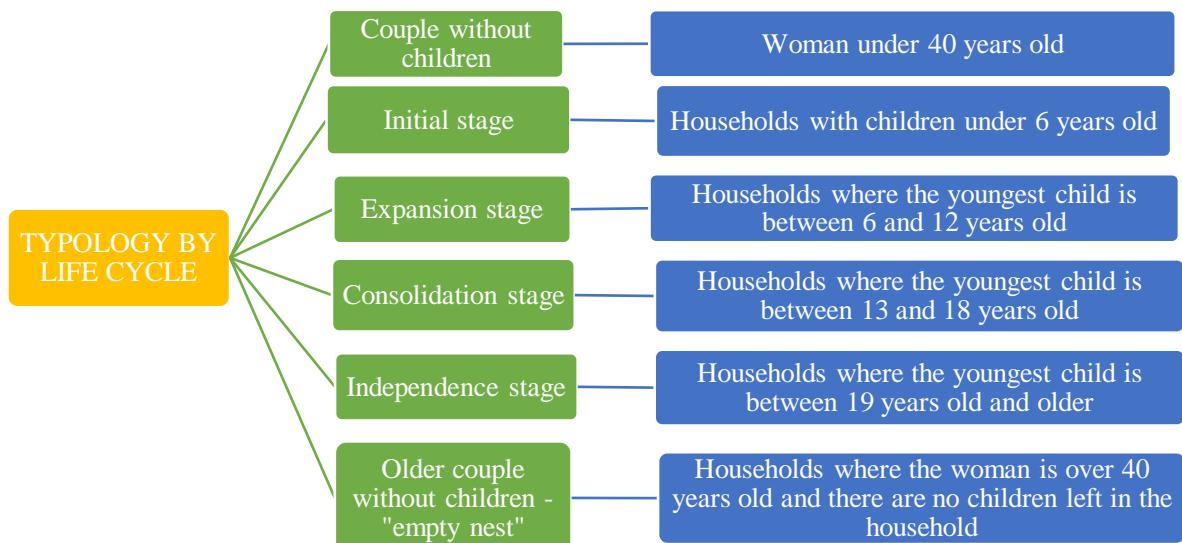
On the other hand, the stability in the proportion of households with older adults after emigration, with a variation of less than 2%, shows that the presence of this generation can act as a factor of stability within the household. It is possible that, in households where older adults live together, the emigration of a member does not necessarily alter the generational composition, since the permanence of the older adults could be associated with the need for care and territorial rooting.

Conversely, a slight increase was found in households without older adults, which rose from 30% to 33%. This growth indicates that emigration occurs more frequently in households composed of working-age adults and children, which likely implies a reconfiguration of caregiving responsibilities after the migrant's departure. Likewise, the reduction in multigenerational households from 12% to 10% and in households without a middle generation from 5% to 3% shows that emigration not only affects the immediate family structure but can also generate reconfigurations in intergenerational coexistence.

These changes reflect that international migration is not an exclusively individual phenomenon, but rather one which transforms household organization and redistributes family dynamics. While some households manage to keep their structure despite emigration, others experience transformations that may respond to adaptation strategies to balance the absence of key members.

Another way to classify households is through family life cycle analysis. All the existing models agree on identifying relatively stable sequences or stages, beginning with the formation of a couple and culminating in the “empty nest” stage, when children form their own households. The intermediate stages are marked by living with children and are defined by significant milestones, such as changes in their educational levels, their entry into the labor market, or their independence from the family (Arriagada, 1997). According to Ullmann et al. (2014) and Arriagada (1997), this classification comprises six categories, represented in Figure 5.

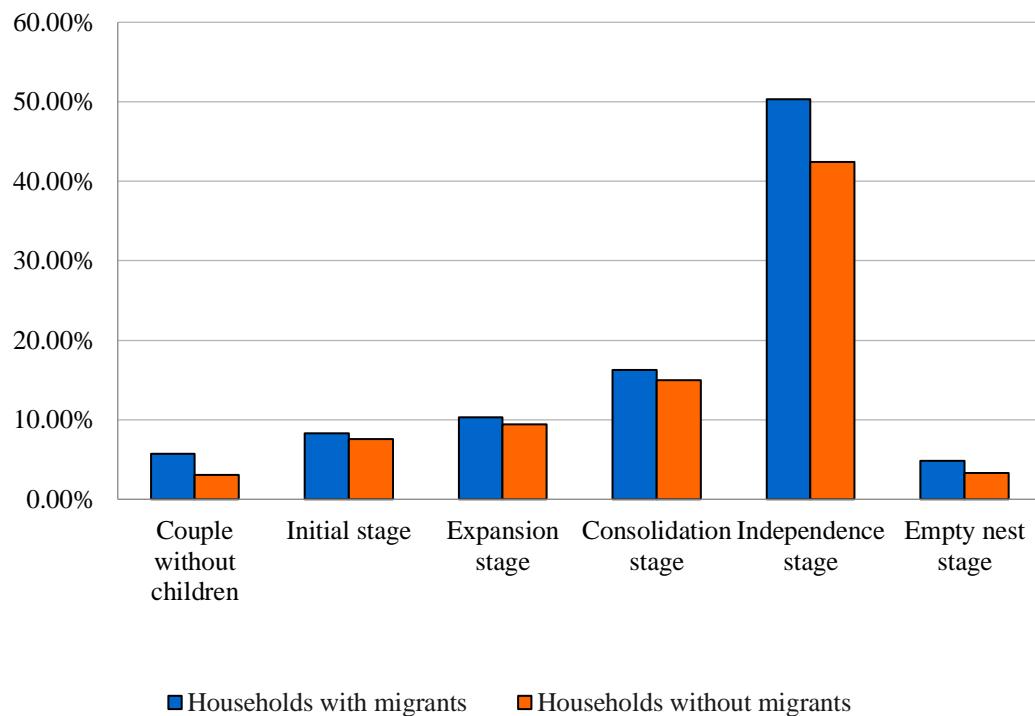
Figure 5. Typology Based on Family Life Cycle



Source: Own elaboration based on the typology proposed by Ullmann et al. (2013).

Based on this classification, Graph 11 shows the distribution of households before and after emigration, allowing us to identify how international mobility impacts the different stages of the family life cycle. This comparison displays the changes in household structure and composition, highlighting the transitions most affected by emigration.

Graph 11. Distribution of Households with and Without the Effect of Emigration, by Life Cycle Typology*



Note: *Includes only nuclear households, single-parent or biparental, with or without children.
Source: Own elaboration based on the integrated database provided by DANE (2022), linking the REMI (2018-2020), the REBP (2018-2020), and the CNPV (2018).

Figure 11 shows that international emigration primarily impacts households in the independence stage, whose participation decreases from 50% to 42%. This confirms that migrants are usually young adults in the process of independence, suggesting that international mobility is a strategy linked to the transition toward personal and economic autonomy. To a lesser extent, households in the consolidation stage also experience a slight decrease in representation, indicating that some emigrants come from families with adolescent children. This finding suggests that, although emigration can occur at different times in the family life cycle, it is less frequently so when children are still economically dependent on their parents. On the other hand, households in the initial and expansion stages, which include families with children under 12 years of age, maintain a stable participation after emigration. This indicates that international mobility occurs more among people of working age and has a lower incidence in households with young children, possibly due to childrearing responsibilities and family roots, which make the decision to emigrate more difficult.

These changes in household composition highlight that family trajectories do not always follow a linear and stable pattern, which calls into question the validity of traditional family life cycle classifications in migration contexts. In this sense, while the family life cycle typology has been a

key tool for analyzing household evolution over time, its application has been heavily criticized for assuming a homogeneous sequence of transitions (Moratto et al., 2015). This criticism becomes even more relevant in migration scenarios, where geographic separation, the reconfiguration of ties, and household fragmentation result in more flexible and diverse family trajectories.

CLOSING REMARKS

This study proposes a methodological strategy for identifying and quantifying households with international migrants in Colombia, offering a viable alternative given the lack of a direct question on it in the 2018 Census. The analysis based on linking administrative records and census data confirms that this strategy allows for a reliable estimate of these households. Although it does not replace the precision of a specific question on emigration, the results are consistent with data recorded in the main destination countries for Colombian migration, reinforcing its validity as an alternative when censuses omit information on this phenomenon.

The use of indirect methodologies, such as the one proposed in this study, aligns with previous methodological efforts that have sought to identify transnational households in the lack of direct records (Kraler et al., 2011), serving as a useful tool in contexts where the lack of census data and specific sources on emigration limits their study. Beyond its methodological value, this strategy also makes it possible to highlight key dynamics of Colombian emigration, including the growing participation of women in international migration flows.

This phenomenon, in line with the trends observed in Latin America, is not a homogeneous or irreversible process, but rather responds to the specific dynamics of each context (Prieto, 2019). In this sense, the differentiation of migration destinations reflects dynamics that vary according to available job opportunities and market demands in the host countries. While the greater female presence in Spain suggests an insertion in care and domestic work sectors, the male predominance in the United States could point to a link with activities such as construction and transportation. These differences show that the feminization of migration is not uniform, but rather conditioned by the economic structures and migration policies of each destination.

The prominence of Colombian women in international migration not only reinforces a regional pattern and the segmentation of labor markets but may also be generating changes in the organization of transnational households. The absence of emigrant women generates a redistribution process of family responsibilities that is not always equitable. In Latin America, previous studies have shown that, when mothers, partners, or daughters leave, family networks—particularly grandmothers, sisters, and older daughters—often assume caregiving and household support tasks (González et al., 2018). Still, this reorganization does not necessarily imply greater gender equity, as domestic and care work continues to fall on other women within the family, this reinforcing structural inequalities. Furthermore, as Pedone (2021) points out, female migration not only transforms the distribution of domestic labor but also transforms the ties of transnational motherhood. Migrant mothers must maintain their role as caregivers from a distance, negotiating

their authority and presence in their children's lives through transnational caregiving strategies, such as sending remittances and keeping virtual contact.

Even if this study does not delve into the specific effects of this transformation in the Colombian case, it is still evident that the redistribution of responsibilities within transnational households affects not only care work, but also the structure of authority and economic support. In this context, in Colombia, the increase in female headship in households affected by migration entails a reconfiguration of roles within transnational families. The departure of a male head of household not only redistributes economic and caregiving responsibilities but also highlights the central role of women in the sustainability of these households. However, this change does not always imply greater autonomy for these women, as in many cases they assume the head of household role under conditions of work and emotional overload, combining paid work with household management and caring for dependents. This feminization of the household leadership poses challenges both in terms of gender equity and of access to support and social protection networks, highlighting the need for policies that recognize and support the role of women in transnational households.

On the other hand, the differences in educational levels and employment status among migrants demonstrate that migration cannot be understood as a homogeneous process, but rather as a phenomenon that reproduces and, in some cases, amplifies pre-existing inequalities. These differences have direct implications for the structure and sustainability of transnational households, since the economic stability of those who stay in the country of origin may depend on the migrant's employment profile. In many instances, these dynamics not only affect income distribution but also reshape the composition and internal organization of households.

Along these lines, the results of this study show that migration impacts the structure of Colombian households, reducing their size and increasing the proportion of single-person and single-parent households. These changes reflect a transformation in family composition following the departure of a member from the household, without necessarily implying a fragmentation of family ties. Rather, they suggest a reorganization of the domestic structure, where the reduction in biparental households and the increase in single-person households may be mitigated in some cases by extended family networks that assume new configurations of coexistence.

From a transnational perspective, Skrbis (2008) points out that migration not only modifies the structure of the household but also reconfigures its emotional ties, as the sense of belonging and emotions play a key role in the sustainability of family relationships despite distance. Subsequently, Alarcón and Prieto-Flores (2021) warn that the physical absence of a household member can generate deficits in daily support, forcing the reconfiguration of family and social strategies so as to sustain the well-being of those who stay in their country of origin. More recently, Barros et al. (2024) highlight that the digitalization of family ties has mitigated the impact of separation, enabling the preservation of transnational relationships. In the case of Colombia, Zapata (2021) demonstrates that the transnational household is maintained beyond physical co-residence, through ritualized communication practices, remittance sending, and long-distance celebrations.

Meanwhile, results on household typologies with international migrants show that international migration not only transforms household structure in terms of size and composition but also reconfigures intergenerational coexistence dynamics and family life cycles. The decrease in biparental households and the increase in single-parent households suggests that emigration generates a reorganization of responsibilities within the family, while the stability of biparental extended households indicates that family networks can play a key role in mitigating these changes. From a generational perspective, most emigrants come from households made up solely of working-age adults, which explains the relative stability of households with older adults and the lower incidence of migration in households with young children. As for the life cycle, emigration primarily affects households in the independence stage, that is, those where children are in the process of becoming independent, reinforcing the idea that international mobility is driven by individual decisions rather than collective family movements. These findings emphasize the need to analyze migration not only from the perspective of household structure, but also from its internal and transnational dynamics.

In this sense, if we are to advance a better understanding of this issue, it is essential to foster studies with a quantitative approach that allows for a more precise identification of the transnational family dynamics. First, longitudinal research is needed to analyze the evolution of transnational households over time, measuring changes in their structure, composition, and economic sustainability. Next, it is key to improve the collection and cross-referencing of administrative, census, and survey data, optimizing record-linking methodologies for a more robust estimate of households with migrants. Additionally, it is necessary to move forward in the standardization of indicators that allow for international comparison and the analysis of trends in different migration contexts. Finally, statistical modeling studies can contribute to the identification of predictive factors in the configuration and permanence of transnational households, contributing to a more structured understanding of their sociodemographic and economic patterns.

If we are to improve in the identification of transnational households and move beyond the classification of “potentially transnational,” it is essential to develop quantitative strategies that allow for verifying the existence and continuity of transnational ties among family members. It is necessary to incorporate measurable variables such as the receipt of remittances, registered international visits, affiliation with social protection systems in different countries, and household composition before and after emigration. It would also be pertinent to develop specific modules in household surveys that identify the existence of family members abroad, the frequency of contact, and the forms of economic and social exchange. Finally, the use of more detailed administrative records, with information on family connections beyond physical residence, could contribute to a more accurate identification of transnational households.

The omission of these families from social protection strategies not only limits their access to essential resources but also perpetuates structural inequalities in the distribution of care and economic well-being. Acknowledging them in public policies is not only a necessity, but also a

pending debt to a population that plays a key role in the country's economy. A better quantitative understanding of these families will contribute not only to a more precise understanding of the migration phenomenon, but also to the design of more effective policies based on empirical evidence.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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