

Invisible Agents in the Atlantic Frontier: Gender, Migration, and Legal Agency in the Canary Islands (1580–1640)

Javier Luis Álvarez Santos

IATEX – Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.
Email: [javier.santos\[at\]ulpgc.es](mailto:javier.santos@ulpgc.es) ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7845-6521>

Received: 31 October 2025 | Revised: 6 December 2025 | Accepted: 15 December 2025

Abstract

The historiography of Atlantic migration has traditionally marginalized the role of women, particularly those from peripheral territories. This study addresses the invisibility of Portuguese women who migrated to the Canary Islands—specifically Tenerife—during the Iberian Union (1580–1640), a period marked by intense trans-imperial mobility and the consolidation of Atlantic networks. Despite their scarce representation in official records, these women played a significant role in shaping island society through familial, economic, and legal agency.

The purpose of this research is to reconstruct the presence and protagonism of Portuguese women in Tenerife by analyzing notarial and inquisitorial sources through a gendered and transnational lens.

The study reveals that, although numerically scarce in the records, their juridical and economic actions—such as granting powers of attorney, drafting wills, and engaging in trade—demonstrate significant agency. Some were recognized professionals, notably vendors of wine and oil, active in local and international commerce.

This research demonstrates that Portuguese women were significant agents in the formation of transatlantic family networks and in the transmission of cultural and economic heritage. Their visibility increased during moments of juridical autonomy, such as widowhood, and their actions challenge conventional narratives of passive female migration. The research affirms the agency of women in frontier societies, recognizing their strategic role in processes of integration, mobility, and identity construction in the early modern Atlantic world.

Keywords

Portuguese Women; Atlantic Migration; Transnational Family Networks; Female Agency; Notarial Documentation; Identity; Island Commerce; Social Integration; Trans-imperial Mobility; Frontier Societies



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Невидимые агенты на атлантическом фронтире: гендер, миграция и правовая субъектность на Канарских островах (1580–1640 гг.)

Альварес Сантос Хавьер Луис

IATEX – Университет Лас-Пальмас-де-Гран-Канария. Лас-Пальмас-де-Гран-Канария, Испания. Email: javier.santos[at]ulpgc.es ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7845-6521>

Рукопись получена : 31 октября 2025 | Пересмотрена: 6 декабря 2025 | Принята: 15 декабря 2025

Аннотация

Историография атлантической миграции традиционно маргинализировала роль женщин, особенно выходцев из периферийных территорий. Настоящее исследование обращается к проблеме невидимости португальских женщин, мигрировавших на Канарские острова (прежде всего на Тенерифе) в период Иберийской унии (1580–1640), отмеченный интенсивной трансимперской мобильностью и консолидацией атлантических сетей. Несмотря на их скудное представительство в официальной документации, эти женщины играли значимую роль в формировании островного общества посредством семейной, экономической и правовой агентности.

Цель данного исследования – реконструировать присутствие и субъектность португальских женщин на Тенерифе через анализ нотариальных и инквизиционных источников с учётом гендерной и транснациональной оптики.

Проведённое исследование показывает, что, хотя численно они представлены в источниках незначительно, их юридические и экономические действия (такие как выдача доверенностей, составление завещаний, участие в торговых операциях) демонстрируют высокую степень агентности. Некоторые из них выступали признанными профессионалами, в частности, торговали вином и маслом, активно вовлекаясь в местную и международную коммерцию.

Данное исследование демонстрирует, что португальские женщины были важными агентами в формировании трансатлантических семейных сетей и в передаче культурного и экономического наследия. Их видимость возрастала в моменты юридической автономии, такие как вдовство, а их действия бросают вызов традиционным нарративам о пассивной женской миграции. Исследование утверждает агентность женщин в фронтирных обществах, признавая их стратегическую роль в процессах интеграции, мобильности и конструирования идентичности в раннем Новом времени атлантического мира.

Ключевые слова

португальские женщины; атлантическая миграция; транснациональные семейные сети; женская агентность; нотариальная документация; идентичность; островная торговля; социальная интеграция; трансимперская мобильность; фронтирные общества



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Introduction

During the period of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), the consolidation of the Atlantic world unfolded through intricate transoceanic networks that linked European, African, and American territories under a shared imperial framework. Within this context, the Canary Islands – specifically the island of Tenerife – emerged as a strategic node in the Atlantic system, undergoing significant economic and social transformations. The shift from sugar cultivation to viticulture redefined the insular economy and attracted new social actors, among them a Portuguese community whose demographic weight and long-term settlement contributed decisively to the shaping of island society.

This study focuses on a historically marginalized group: Portuguese women who migrated to Canarias – specifically to the island of Tenerife – during the early modern period. Their presence in official records is scarce, yet the traces they left reveal patterns of integration, mobility, and agency that challenge conventional narratives of Atlantic migration. Through a methodological approach grounded in primary sources – namely notarial, inquisitorial, and chronicler records – and informed by gender and Atlantic studies, this research seeks to reconstruct the role of these women as active agents in the formation of familial, economic, and cultural networks within a frontier society in the making.

The research adopts a dual analytical lens: national origin and gender. Being both women and foreigners placed these individuals in a liminal position within the host society, demanding a methodological approach sensitive to the complexity of their lived experiences. Accordingly, a multifocal approach has been employed, viewing these women as migrants, economic actors, and transnational connectors. In this framework, gender functions not only as an analytical category but also as a heuristic tool that reorients historiographical perspectives toward historically excluded subjects.

The documentary corpus draws mainly from notarial records held in the Provincial Historical Archive of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, complemented by inquisitorial files and contemporary chronicles. Tenerife was selected as the focal point of analysis due to both the quality of its archival preservation and its prominence as the most internationally connected island during the period under study. Over 40,000 deeds dated between 1575 and 1650 were examined, of which approximately 11.5% involved individuals from outside Castile. Among these, Portuguese individuals constituted the majority (51.7% of the foreigners), underscoring their significant presence in the island's social and economic fabric. Nevertheless, Portuguese women are scarcely represented in the records, which underscores their limited documentary visibility – though not necessarily their marginality within society.

Due to the scarcity of sources, the documents have been reinterpreted through an inclusive lens – one that does not merely incorporate women into

a preexisting narrative, but instead proposes new ways of understanding the historical processes in which they participated. Particular attention has been paid to documentary practices that reveal female agency: powers of attorney, wills, commercial contracts, and marriage strategies that illuminate the construction of transatlantic family and economic networks.

The findings demonstrate that, despite their numerical minority, Portuguese women played notable roles in articulating connections between Atlantic territories. Some were recognized professionals, including vendors of wine and oil, active in both local and international trade. Others acted as administrators of property, granting powers to manage estates in Portugal or other Macaronesian islands. Their appearance in notarial records, though exceptional, often coincided with moments of juridical autonomy – widowhood, absence of male representatives – that enabled them to act decisively in defense of familial interests.

Rather than offering precise quantification, this research seeks to identify behavioral patterns and social roles that shed light on the presence of Portuguese women in island society. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced historiography that acknowledges the significant role of women in migration, integration, and identity formation within frontier spaces. Moreover, it aligns with the most innovative currents in regional history, Atlantic studies, and transnational historiography by offering a reading that connects the local with the global, the everyday with the structural, and the feminine with the political.

Furthermore, this research engages with historiographical debates on liminal spaces and frontier societies, situating the Canary Islands within broader discussions of mobility, gender, and frontier dynamics. By recovering the trajectories of these women within a context of trans-imperial mobility, the work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of female agency in peripheral territories of the early modern Atlantic world.

Between Margins and Agency: Women as Migrants and Outsiders

The Portuguese who emigrated to the Canary Islands during the period of the Portuguese crown joining the Hispanic Monarchy were an exogenous element to the Archipelago which, like other foreign national groups, incorporated their socio-cultural baggage within a recently formed population that was still establishing its own identity. However, unlike other European communities, the longevity of the Portuguese population on the Islands facilitated, firstly, their integration and assimilation and, what is more, assisted and contributed to a process involving their cultural symbiosis and social mimetism with the local population (Álvarez Santos, 2019, pp. 139-154).

On this conceptualisation of identities, Baena Zapatero, in her study on Creole women in New Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries questions “how is it possible that half of the population was excluded from the process of

constructing their own identity” (2018, p. 17). It is precisely this dilemma that is addressed in this paper in order to reveal and identify a specific population group.

The focus of this study has involved a dual perspective, namely that of origin and gender. The methodology employed in this research must therefore address the particular aspects of these individuals through these two singular aspects. As such, the method of analysis utilized examines these individuals in their triple aspects as woman, migrant and outsider. To operationalize this inclusive re-reading, the analysis focused on identifying moments of female juridical autonomy – such as widowhood, absence of male representatives, or explicit legal agency – within the documentation. Agency was also inferred through the presence of women in economic transactions, property management, and transatlantic correspondence, especially when they appeared as grantors or beneficiaries in notarial acts. These criteria allowed for a reconstruction of female protagonism beyond mere demographic presence.

Monzón Perdomo (2008, p. 1884) points out that analyzing the past of women is more feasible today than ever before. In the last decades of the twentieth century and, above all, since the first years of this century, important methodological and theoretical advances have been made in the field of the history of women. As a consequence of these tendencies, there are now considerations, concerns and reflections on women and gender relations in every aspect of everyday life as well as in academic fields. Historiography had traditionally justified the difficulties in developing research on the so-called “question of women” due to the scarcity or absence of sources. However, these impediments have now been overcome “through the application of appropriate analytical tools, gender relations, and a methodology in accordance with the characteristics of the human group to be studied” (Monzón Perdomo, 2008, p. 1884).

As such, dealing with the everyday lives of women in the past methodologically entails a complex analysis of the social relations within a given community and the study of the different elements that form these. This approach aligns with recent developments in trans-imperial history and mobility studies, which emphasize the fluidity of identities, the permeability of imperial boundaries, and the role of subaltern actors in shaping cross-border dynamics. By focusing on Portuguese women as agents of familial, economic, and legal connectivity across Atlantic territories, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that redefines migration not merely as displacement, but as a process of negotiation, adaptation, and integration within overlapping imperial frameworks. In this regard, Baena Zapatero delves deeper in his study on the identity of Creole women. He deduces that the “invisibility” in the sources is due to the patriarchal model of the Hispanic society of the time, which involved the existence of a division of roles between men and women. While the former were responsible for activities in the public sphere, the latter were responsible for taking care of the home and reproduction (2018, p. 137). Consequently, the author continues, contemporary historians interpreted

these women as passive subjects who were not involved in the major socio-political processes that needed to be studied, as they had been created by men (2018, p. 17).

Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 24) states that, despite the fact that the study of the mobility of women within the Castilian colonial territories offers an in-depth study of migratory processes, as well as circumstances regarding the place of origin, cross-border networks and family strategies, the truth is that there have been few studies on female emigrants to Castilian America during the Modern Age. Nesology (Santana, 2009), applied to the spatial sphere, and Atlantic studies, from a cisatlantic perspective (Armitage, 2004, p. 20), are the two theoretical frameworks covering this research on Portuguese women in the Canary Islands. In this line, Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 31) continues by emphasizing that Atlantic History has proven its worth in the area of gender analysis. Although it is a line of work that has hardly been developed, the historian highlights the work of Verena Stolcke (2006), Bianca Premo (2010) and Karen Graubart (2011) and Susan D. Amussen and Allyson M. Poska (2012) for their use of the category of gender to carry out a trans-imperial analysis and their vindication of the relevance of gender in the organization and connectivity of Atlantic empires: "Gender not only provides the basis for a trans-imperial analysis of the Atlantic world but also enables us to reorient our scholarly perspective in the Atlantic" (Amussen & Poska, 2012, p. 342). Furthermore, in order to understand these Atlantic dynamics from the category of gender, as Judith P. Zinsser (2000, p. 203) points out, it is necessary to rethink classic terms such as "economy" or "kinship networks". In this first era of globalization, dowries and powers of attorney granted to women were not only legal instruments but also key mechanisms for financing transatlantic family businesses. This dynamic will be further explored in the section on notarial documentation, where such practices are analyzed in detail through primary sources from Tenerife.

In the American sphere, historiography has complexified the vision of indigenous, mestizo or black women (Almorza, 2018, p. 31). However, there are few works which, such as Sullón Barreto (2016, pp. 267-292), have dealt specifically with the migration process and the integration of outsiders. Almorza Hidalgo argues that "studies on transatlantic emigration processes have recognized the importance of the female presence, although specific analyses on gender and long-distance migration are scarce" (2018, p. 23) as these studies have focused, as Baena Zapatero (2018, p. 18) has also argued, on male mobility. Therefore, she concludes, we must include the category of gender in the analysis of such transatlantic family mobility and, in the case of our focus of study, transnational migrations.

As regards the area of this study, although there has been some research such as that of Fajardo Spínola (2013), which analyses the role of women in island emigration to America at the end of the Modern Age, no research has focused on non-Castilian immigrants who settled or passed through the Islands during the period of Atlantic consolidation and the dynamization of the island economies (Macías Hernández, 2001).

Studies have in fact focused on the concretization of identities, both Spanish or Creole in Spanish America and Portuguese in Portuguese overseas territories. Herzog points out that the distinction between “Spanish” and “Portuguese” is a post-Restoration ideological construct. For the continental area he states that the union allowed the emergence of certain practices that, in fact, sometimes allowed such identification to be ignored, confusing and linking what in theory were separate territories or, on the contrary, distinguishing and dividing what should be unified (Herzog, 2012).

In this regard, Monteiro and Cardim (2013, p. 3) point out that studying this Hispanic perspective on the basis of the simple duality between Portugal and Spain is not enough to explain the complexity of the scenario with which we are dealing.

Hespanha (2019, p. 34) states that “there are few sources of an unofficial origin that do so from the other empire in the shadows”, to which he adds that “foreign sources speak more about these peripheral communities than Portuguese sources”. Within this context of the expansion and consolidation of the Iberian presence in frontier areas, he concludes that the “Portuguese” were one more “tribe” among all the nations mentioned in these chronicles. Accordingly, Hespanha (2019, p. 37) argues that the “Portuguese” component in these areas far from the metropolis is an identifying element in the community in which they arrive, but like so many other possible elements, as part of the variable and relational identity geometries of local societies.

Although people could be classified into groups according to legal definitions, these groupings were not entirely determinant, since that which most influenced the social order was related to factors of solidarity and human cooperation (Herzog, 2000, p. 125). Origin and foreignness were not a fixed status, but rather a classification that reflected the situation that some people had in relation to the social group around them, a reflection that was not only continuously changing but which was also polyvalent (2012, p. 27).

This fluidity of social classifications and relational identities provides a conceptual backdrop for understanding how, during the Iberian Union, the Canary Islands themselves operated as a multidimensional frontier. Conceiving the islands as frontiers-in-process underscores temporal oscillation, adaptive complementarities, and the procedural negotiation of belonging. This perspective aligns with Atlantic historiography that foregrounds fluid identities and permeable imperial boundaries, where subaltern and middling actors reconfigure space from below.

As borderlands, the Canary Islands exemplify social categories under continuous negotiation: “natives” and “foreigners” emerge as relational statuses rather than fixed essences, and the Portuguese/Spanish divide functions more as an ideological afterimage than as a stable boundary in everyday practice.

Envisioned as contact zones, these islands reveal how legal instruments (powers of attorney, wills), market routines (vendor networks, sureties), and kinship strategies generated durable ties between the archipelago and its Portuguese orbit, transforming insular microspaces into macro-connectors across the Atlantic.

Economically, the islands constituted a redistributive node linking interinsular complementarities (grain, wine, oil) with transatlantic circuits; ports such as Garachico, Santa Cruz, and the La Orotava area operated as bridges between local agrarian production and Atlantic markets. This pattern reflects an insular economy anchored in complementarity, reciprocity, and maritime connectivity, positioning the islands as an inner Atlantic hinge rather than a mere periphery.

Juridically, Tenerife illustrates a frontier of legal pluralism where local *cabildos*, notarial practices, and imperial jurisdictions overlapped. Categories such as *vecino* and *estante*, the widespread use of powers of attorney, and the capacity to administer estates across islands and Portugal illuminate a legal space of negotiation and mobility rather than rigid normativity.

Reconstructing Presence: The Portuguese Female Footprint in Island History

For the Western Islands, especially Tenerife, there have been practically no studies that have dealt with the representativeness of the Portuguese community in relation to the population as a whole. The historian Bello León (2002) carried out a study on the Portuguese community during the first decades of the 16th century that had settled in the city of La Laguna. However, it barely mentions the presence of women from Portugal. The only data provided by island historiography for the Iberian Union period is that taken from the inquisitorial census of 1626 (Fajardo, 2004). With the aforementioned reservations about the information provided by primary sources, this register mentions 95 Portuguese individuals having recently settled in the Canary Islands. Of these, 75 lived in Tenerife, divided between La Orotava (35), La Laguna (31) and Garachico (9).

This census was commissioned in 1625 by the *Consejo de la Inquisición* and was intended to delineate all those Portuguese who had recently settled in Castile, many of them fleeing repression in Portugal. The very need for the information it provides leads us to a very clear demographic study within its own organized structure. It not only provides the names, but also details regarding the specific origin, age, family, profession, and even explains their international economic relations.

A priori this is an advantage, and it is even possible to recognize individuals who without this text we would not know were Portuguese, but it is not without its limitations and risks. It limits us, first of all, to examining those who settled “in the last few years”. This means that this does not include all the Portuguese who lived there, but only those who had recently settled. Even more biased were the witnesses themselves, who had to judge who was sufficiently integrated, naturalized, and testify about those who had recently arrived and could still be considered to be foreigners. And there is no doubt that the commissioners of the Holy Office applied their own interpretation, assessment and intentions when undertaking this. Secondly, they were only interested in adult males. Indeed, neither

women nor children were explicitly mentioned, but in some cases, they were referred to when describing families.

Women were also under-represented in this register. They were only visible when all household members were mentioned in the census¹. Of the 95 people listed in the census, nine were women. They would have emigrated to the islands from Portugal while accompanying their husbands. However, these were not the only Portuguese women mentioned in the census. Fajardo Spinola (2004, p. 313) indicates that two thirds of the marriages for which we have data were entered into in the Canary Islands: most, as far as we know, involving women from the islands, but also to Portuguese women or daughters of Portuguese individuals. In several cases, to Portuguese women who were widows of Portuguese men. Therefore, the author continues, there was “a process of social integration through marriage, but also a phenomenon of endogamy”. In addition to these nine Portuguese who settled on the island, the census mentions nine other wives of Portuguese emigrants who remained in Portugal. This fact, as the historian points out, led to cases of bigamy. Testimonies from this register refer to the fact that two of these individuals who married in the Canary Islands were also married in Portugal (Fajardo, 2004, p. 313). Given this, bigamy was one of the main crimes for which Portuguese women were charged². The proximity and strong links between the Archipelago and its Portuguese neighbours – both the islands and the mainland – would have made it difficult to definitively break parental ties. However, as Baena Zapatero (2018, p. 77) points out, in the case of Castilian women who emigrated to the Indies, they “carried the antecedents of bigamy within their cultural baggage, were perfectly aware of the restrictions imposed by marriage and knew how to avoid them”.

Reading the Unseen: Female Agency in Early Modern Narratives

These historiographical and methodological tendencies applied to primary sources as tools for studying the past of these women underpin the results presented in this paper. This research is based on a systematic analysis of documentation for the period from the Canary Islands which has been preserved. Initially, contemporary island chronicles and histories were utilized to establish a first approach to the object of study³.

These chroniclers, from the period of the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy, focus on the Portuguese community settled

- 1 In this regard, for the issue in question, the 33 “*Informaciones de Solterías y Viudedades*” (Information on Single Women and Widows) documents preserved in the Historical Diocesan Record of San Cristóbal de La Laguna (AHDSCLL) between 1612 – the date of the first one – and 1650, the last, were consulted. Likewise, in the testimonies provided in these files, only Portuguese men and bachelors were mentioned, never women.
- 2 Although they were accused of bigamy, this was not the main crime for which they were being prosecuted. These were their statements, followed by superstitions and, to a lesser extent, Judaism.
- 3 This refers to Gaspar Frutuoso, Friar Alonso de Espinosa, Leonardo Torriani, Abreu Galindo and Núñez de la Peña.

in the Islands and show that they formed a dynamic element within Canary Island society. They engaged in carrying out economic activities and the construction of an island identity based on foreign contributions. Portuguese women formed part of this exogenous community that settled and integrated in the Canary Islands. To sum up, they were active agents in the shaping of island society and the chroniclers understood and communicated both the unique aspects of these women and their contributions to island society. A reflection of the social routine into which Portuguese emigrants were incorporated can be found in this short passage from Frutuoso: [The women of the island of La Palma] are very beautiful, white and discreet, courteous and well educated, with some married to Portuguese, and others to Castilians [...] they embroider well, but they hardly know how to spin or weave, something they leave to the Portuguese women (Frutuoso, 1964, p. 109)

Although information is scarce, as shown in the analysis of notarial and inquisitorial records, as well as their aptitude for transferring knowledge and experiences, and the transnational cultural and professional elements transported from the Portuguese world to the insular space. In short, unlike other official sources, chroniclers, as witnesses to this everyday life, depict and reveal Portuguese women through their accounts as active, dynamic agents in Canary Island society and bearers of exogenous cultural knowledge and images that would become part of the every day and which would form part of the identity of a border society under construction.

Despite the sparse information provided by the chroniclers, the truth is that, as Monzón Perdomo (2008) points out, it was not until the last decades of the twentieth century that historiography, in this case Canary Island historiography, managed to recover women as part of its historical accounts. However, the presence of foreign women in these chronicles did not imply that they were considered as a proper object of study.

Given this, a second step in this research, along with the utilization and study of new archival sources, has been the systematization and analysis of all the references to Portuguese women in the documentary records that other historians published as a documentary appendix in their works. This is referring to a series of publications, which were mainly published during the 1990s, which had the aim of studying the composition of Canary Island society in modern times by compiling information from contemporary documents, which were mainly inquisitorial and notarial sources (Anaya Hernández, 1990).

Firstly, the main peculiarity of these works is that, although they represent the first studies of social history applied to the period of the *Ancien Régime* in the Canary Islands, and they analyzed minorities¹ (foreign, religious, etc.) as well

1 Examples have been cited including the work of Anaya Hernández (1990) on minorities in the Canary Islands, that of Brito González (1993) on the foreign presence in Tenerife during the *Ancien Régime* and Fajardo Spínola (1998) on foreign Protestants in the Canaries.

as marginalized and unprotected groups¹ (slaves, the poor, etc.), women were not directly considered as a subject of study. Women in the Canary Islands, and particularly foreign women, were not the main themes of either areas of research or specific studies. Only in certain academic publications at the end of the 20th century were they included as part of their studies as their actions complemented their objects of research.

Furthermore, it should also be borne in mind that, although these researchers aimed to study the complexity of a frontier society such as the Canary Islands, the documentation employed was utilized to solve historical issues where the agents were mainly male (the setting up of institutions, commercial activity, etc.). As a result, their work was, with little questioning of this, based on an exclusively male-constructed narrative.

Despite this difficulty, it is felt that these documents contain sufficient information to show the mark of Portuguese women in the Canary Islands. As such, the aim here is to re-analyze these sources which have already been used, but in this case with the aim of constructing an inclusive discourse in which these women are incorporated as active agents in society. As Baena Zapatero points out, it is not enough to “add” women to the pre-existing narrative. It is about building new narratives and approaches to old questions. It is therefore worth rethinking concepts in the insular world and comparing processes with other areas of the Spanish Monarchy.

The Gender of the Deed: Women’s Presence in Notarial Documentation

Notarial documentation from the island of Tenerife is one of the pillars on which this research is based, due to the type of information it provides and the variety of matters with which it deals². With all their limitations and reservations, these writings show the everyday life of the individual, his or her relationship with their surroundings and their interaction with other members of society. Two types of sampling were carried out for this research for the period between 1575 and 1650. The first involved a series of years – 1575, 1576, 1587, 1588, 1603, 1604, 1625, 1626 and 1650 – with the aim of visualizing the evolution over time of female movement to Tenerife as well as reconstructing transatlantic family relations at key moments in the period when the Atlantic world was being consolidated. The second analyzed all the deeds of two notary offices in the two main centres of the island – La Laguna and Garachico – in order to reflect the spatial configurations of

1 Mention can also be made of the work of Lobo Cabrera (1982) on slavery in the Islands and that of Santana Pérez on marginality in the Canary Islands (2009).

2 Tenerife was selected as the focal point of this research for two interrelated methodological reasons. First, the island’s notarial documentation stands out for its remarkable state of preservation, offering a continuous and reliable archival corpus that surpasses that of other insular territories within the archipelago. Second, during the period under study, Tenerife occupied a privileged position within the Atlantic world, distinguished by its international projection and its role as a nodal point in transoceanic exchanges.

the island itself and also to obtain an ample and consecutive chronological perspective¹.

The study of the Portuguese community presents a series of particular aspects and difficulties. Homonymy represents the main difficulty in identifying these subjects. The syncretism between Canary Island and Portuguese society, favoured by their cultural similarity, facilitated the adaptation and Castilianization of Portuguese names and surnames. The similarity between these names has made it difficult to locate these individuals in the document, especially as the notary used the spelling of the period. This is why only those individuals whose origins are known have been studied. Portuguese individuals were understood as being all those who in the documentary description appear referred to as “Portuguese” or with any other comment alluding to their origin being from some part of Portugal. It is evident that this filter leaves an undetermined number of individuals out of this analysis, but this prevents contamination and the misrepresentation of the data sample. The aim is not to provide an absolute figure concerning the number of Portuguese women on the island, but to show trends.

Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that – mainly in notarial deeds – it is the individual referred to in the deed who defines him or herself and ultimately decides to include his or her origin as a relevant element of the deed. In this respect, whether origin is included depends on the intended purpose of the authority granting the document – ranging from a testator to an inquisitor – as well as on the signature of the notary who ratifies what is stated therein, the consideration that society has for a certain individual – depending on the degree of integration – and the interests that are expressed in the deed. Therefore, besides the percentage figures, the documentation analyzed is able to communicate the perception of society with regard to this group.

Despite all these methodological reservations, the notarial documentation preserved for the island of Tenerife has provided an in-depth study of the process of the integration of Portuguese individuals – and in particular women – within island society, contributing quantifiable values to the study which, without enabling absolute figures, has provided a perception of the migratory fluctuations from 1575 to 1650 and the level of intensity of the Portuguese mark made on Tenerife society.

The notarial records allow us to perceive the mark left by the actions of foreign agents on island society. A first approximation to the mark left by non-Castilians on the island during the 1575-1650 period shows how frequent these foreigners appear in notarial documentation². Of the 40,052 deeds studied, 4,607 involve

1 Given the durability and richness of its records, the analysis has focused on the documentation produced by the offices of Rodrigo de Vera Acebedo (1608–1612) and Salvador Fernández de Villarreal (1613–1644) in La Laguna, as well as that of Salvador Pérez de Guzmán (1608–1630) in Garachico. These protocols, preserved in the Provincial Historical Archive of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (AHP SCT – *Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santa Cruz de Tenerife*).

2 The designation “non-Castilian” is employed here to refer to individuals born or originating beyond the territorial bounds of the Crown of Castile, irrespective of whether they were subjects of the Hispanic Monarchy. This classification reflects the perception of foreignness as constructed within the insular documentary culture

foreigners. This figure indicates that 11.5% of the notarial agreements signed in the island territory related to an individual from outside Castile. These records are mostly a reflection of economic activities on a different scale. Some 45.2% of the documents consulted related to agricultural contracts which, along with the 16% of the deeds that deal with commercial agreements, form well over half of these documents. However, the notarial records also show certain signs of assimilation and integration into island society. 32.2% of these letters mention aspects of private life, such as endowments or wills.

It is particularly noteworthy that over half of the non-Castilian individuals referenced – either directly or indirectly – in the island’s notarial records were of Portuguese origin, accounting for 51.7% of the foreign presence documented. Trailing behind the Portuguese were the Flemish, who comprised 17%, followed by the English at 14.2%, and the French at 13.8%. The remaining national groups – each representing less than one percent – include Italians, Scots, Irish, Germans, Dutch, Aragonese, Swedes, Danes, Moors, and Levantines. While numerically marginal, their appearance in the documentation attests to the diverse and transnational character of the insular society, shaped by the convergence of multiple migratory currents and the porous nature of its social and cultural boundaries.

These percentages provide an initial idea of the Portuguese presence in Tenerife and, in general, in the Canary Islands during the period of the Iberian Union. However, they need to be improved and developed for the object of the study, namely that of Portuguese women on the island of Tenerife.

Historiographic research has paid some interest to the Portuguese presence in the Canary Islands. Various proposals, even opposing ones, have debated the number of Portuguese who settled in the Islands since the inclusion of this island territory within the Crown of Castile. However, these publications have been characterized by the fact that they are partial works, dedicated to specific areas and periods.

In the case of Tenerife, the most dynamic island with the greatest outward projection, the Portuguese mark on the island during the period of the Iberian Union has hardly been dealt with. With all the reservations that can be made, the aforementioned inquisitorial census of 1626 has been the main source of information – together with chronicles – for the study of the Portuguese population in the island territory.

The analysis of the notarial documentation that has been carried out has made it possible, firstly, to connect the Portuguese community to other non-Castilian groups through its different samples. In more than half of the deeds consulted in which a foreigner is involved, the foreigner is Portuguese. Chronologically, this pre-eminence remained stable over time, except at certain junctures, until 1650, when a drastic decrease in the number of Portuguese registrations in the notarial documentation was detected. Therefore, the data obtained shows a solid tradition

of the period, where origin often functioned as a relational and negotiated category rather than a fixed legal status.

of such ties, which go back to a time before the period of study concerned with here.

In the same way, it is worth noting that, while the other non-Castilian communities dealt with the island for a limited period of time, depending on economic interests and royal permissions, the Portuguese situation was characterized by the fact that it was a long term one and adapted to the different situations in which Tenerife found itself, at least until the Restoration. Moreover, the proximity to the other islands of Macaronesia and the continuous contact with the surrounding Portuguese area favoured the continuity of these links.

The presence of this Portuguese mark, while constant, underwent alterations over time. Although the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy did not lead to a substantial increase in the Portuguese influence in the notarial records, on the contrary, other events such as the outbreak of plague in the insular territory or the Dutch occupation of Portuguese America, marked a certain setback in the relations between the two territories. However, the Portuguese uprising marked the definitive break between the island and its Portuguese neighbours.

Likewise, based on the analysis of notarial documentation and the identification of Portuguese individuals who registered their presence in Tenerife, it has been possible to draw up an approximate study of this group and their relationship with the island territory. Firstly, it was found that although the percentage of Portuguese women is low, their role within the community was significant in terms of forming the backbone of transatlantic parental relations. In terms of their inclusion, these women were characterized through the stable nature of their settlement and the undertaking of paid activities.

This quantitative and qualitative profile of Portuguese women in Tenerife not only highlights their demographic presence and patterns of settlement but also opens the door to a deeper understanding of their functional roles within frontier societies. Beyond mere inclusion, their actions reveal how legal, economic, and kinship strategies intersected to shape agency in a transatlantic context. Examining the notarial protocols allows us to move from a descriptive approach – focused on presence and stability – to an analytical perspective that uncovers the mechanisms through which these women negotiated autonomy, mobility, and identity across multiple jurisdictions.

The actions of Portuguese women found in the Tenerife protocols confirm two well-known features of female agency in Atlantic frontier settings. First, widowhood often acted as a threshold of juridical autonomy, enabling women to issue powers to collect debts – such as mandates directed to Lisbon – and to manage trans-insular inheritances that linked Portugal and the Canary Islands. Second, agency displayed a trans-jurisdictional character, grounded in maritime routes and kin networks that allowed women to delegate, empower, and administer beyond the confines of a single notarial district. Taken together, these patterns reveal that

in frontier societies, the capacity to act unfolded as a process in motion rather than as a stable, place-bound status.

At the same time, the cases complicate models that confine women's work to the domestic sphere. The professional visibility of female vendors in sectors such as wine and oil – evidenced through surety bonds and inventories that record shop activity – signals public-facing roles guaranteed by men yet operated by women before the notary. Moreover, women appear not only as grantors but also as mandataries and administrators, displaying practical legal literacy through reciprocal powers, collection instructions, and movement clauses. These practices transform the islands from “passive margins” into active laboratories of gendered legality. Added to this is the strategic self-designation of origin in specific deeds, which suggests a performative use of identity to unlock credit, trust, and kinship channels across archipelagos.

Taken in the aggregate, these interventions place women at the center of frontier as process. Through routine yet decisive paperwork – powers of attorney, wills, sureties, inventories – they convert insular borderlands into contact zones that extend credit, property, and obligation beyond a single jurisdiction. Far from anecdotal exceptions, these actions mark procedural thresholds where law, commerce, and family converge, thereby refining existing models of female agency in the early modern Atlantic.

Diasporic Lives: Gender, Community, and Integration in the Canary Islands

The aim of this research is not to provide absolute values for the number of Portuguese who passed through the island during the Iberian Union. Due to the methodological problems presented by such Portuguese casuistry, the statistical data presented here show trends that can enable us to discern the behaviour of the Portuguese community in Tenerife.

For the purposes of this study, an instance of agency is understood as any documented act in which a woman exercised decision-making power with concrete legal or economic implications, going beyond mere routine appearances. Such actions include granting or receiving powers of attorney, drafting wills, administering property, engaging in commercial transactions, or acting as guarantors in contractual agreements. Mentions limited to passive roles – such as being named solely as a spouse without further involvement – were excluded, as they do not convey autonomous protagonism. The cases considered were selected according to two interrelated criteria: the explicit identification of Portuguese origin in the notarial deed and the presence of juridical or economic initiative by the woman concerned. These parameters allow the analysis to focus on substantive interventions rather than nominal demographic presence, situating female agency within its biographical and procedural context. In cases of mixed marriages and second-generation women, ‘Portuguese’ was coded only when the deed explicitly

recorded origin or communal affiliation, in line with the period's documentary self-ascription practices. This conservative approach privileges analytical clarity over numerical expansion.

The notarial documentation consulted for the 1575-1650 period indicates a total of 593 individuals of Portuguese origin involved in cases in the notary offices of Tenerife¹. In the initial analysis of this group, it is worth highlighting the extremely limited number of women in these registers and, therefore, the modest trace left by Portuguese women. There were 10 women of Portuguese origin on the island present in the registers, representing only 1.68% of the total number of individuals².

These figures are similar to those already provided by other studies involving notarial sources for the Eastern Isles. Brito González (1993), in his research on the 17th century, located 6 Portuguese women in Gran Canaria and 15 in Lanzarote. This data extracted from the aforementioned study represents, respectively, 1.95% and 3.79% of the total number of Portuguese individuals who settled in these islands during that century. Furthermore, Torres Santana, in her studies on Madeirans and Azoreans in Lanzarote during the Iberian Union, found six women from Madeira and three from the Azores. These women represent 4.4 per cent of the Madeiran contingent and 16.6 per cent of the Azorean contingent. Lobo Cabrera (1982), in his study of Portuguese marriages on the island of Gran Canaria, notes that 8.7% of the brides and grooms were women from the Azores. Such data collected from primary sources demonstrates strong migratory links between the islands of Macaronesia, especially between the Portuguese archipelagos and the island of Lanzarote. This link among women is even stronger. Although a greater number of Portuguese arrived on the island of Tenerife, it seems that the island of Lanzarote received a higher percentage of women. It can be supposed that this difference is due to the greater presence in Tenerife of Portuguese people with exclusively commercial interests and with activities involving a certain length of stay, given that they formed part of commercial networks. The same would have happened in Gran Canaria. Meanwhile, the strong traditional ties between the Portuguese islands and Lanzarote, as well as the proximity between the two areas, would have facilitated mobility and family regrouping.

Furthermore, the research carried out by Fajardo Spínola (1998) on the basis of inquisitorial records from the Canary Islands shows that a total of 12 Portuguese women were prosecuted in the Canary Islands during the period of the joining of the Portuguese Crown with the Spanish Monarchy, all of them between 1581 and

1 A Portuguese person here is understood to be an individual who is mentioned in the documentation, either as a native or as a resident of one of the territories that made up the kingdom of Portugal. In both cases, the express condition that the individual before the notary was either a native or resident of Portugal alludes, more than to an origin within a delimited geographical area, to the perception of this subject as belonging to a community or nation.

2 Given the documentary universe, the conclusions presented here do not seek statistical representativeness but rather aim to make visible patterns of female agency in moments of legal autonomy and specific economic practices.

1629. This time interval demonstrates the constant and active presence of this group at least until the Dutch occupation of Brazil and the loss of the main consumer market for Canary Island wines. Moreover, through the references he uses, the settlement of Portuguese women from the beginning of the 16th century can be observed and, therefore, this data confirms the traditional links between Portugal and the Canary Islands. Therefore, going back to an earlier period, 23 Portuguese individuals were prosecuted by the Inquisition in the period from 1524 to 1579.

Comparing this island data with other similar studies for other regions of the Castilian overseas territories, such as the research carried out by Sullón Barreto regarding Lima, it can be concluded that Portuguese emigration to the capital of the Peruvian viceroyalty, as in the case of the Canary Islands, was undertaken mainly by men². For the years 1600 to 1680, this historian located a total of 165 Portuguese emigrants, of whom only eight were women; that is, 4.85% (Sullón, 2014, p. 273). Although this percentage is somewhat higher than that given for the islands, it is probably due to the fact that the number of individuals identified is also higher. Finally, if these percentages are compared with those provided by Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 58) for transatlantic emigration between the Iberian Peninsula and America, it is possible to see that the mobility of women between areas under the same sovereignty was substantially higher. This historian indicates that these women accounted for almost 30% of emigrants to the Indies in 1580, although in the 1620s these movements underwent a radical decline. Be that as may, it can be seen that most of the journeys to Castilian territories in the Atlantic were made by men, whether they were natives of the kingdom or foreigners. For Almorza Hidalgo (2018, pp. 91-93), female emigration had its own development conditioned by the mobility of the family group, the conditions for their departure and their reception and the need to ensure their safety was covered.

Secondly, from the data obtained, it can be seen that the settlement of Portuguese women in Tenerife was characterized by the fact that they underwent stable and long-lasting migratory processes. This settlement was related to the displacement of the family unit, whether this was the movement of all family members in a single movement or a strategy of regrouping after the arrival of one of its members.

Few men would have brought their wives, so emigration to the Archipelago must have consisted mostly of single Portuguese men. Many of them chose to marry island women as a way of integrating into the host society, but there were also links between members of the Portuguese community. This duality shows us that, although social mimetism mainly involved mixed unions between Canary Islanders and the Portuguese, endogamy was an equally valid and profitable mechanism for consolidating roots. This national link made it possible to maintain distant community or family ties, while at the same time these unions would not be consid-

2 The documentary source used by the historian Sullón Barreto, like this study, was mainly notarial registers kept in Lima's General Archive of the Nation (*Archivo General de la Nación* – AGN).

ered as alien in the eyes of the islanders, as there were other elements beyond the marriage contracts that pointed to their social inclusion.

In the case of Gran Canaria, of the four Portuguese women whose legal status is known, they were all neighbours. In Tenerife, in a similar fashion, most of the women of Portuguese origin – seven – specified they were neighbours, compared to three from the rest of the island. These two islands of the crown, due to their dynamism and international projection, would have encouraged the establishment of roots and the development of economic activities, while islands such as Lanzarote would have been a transit area in the migratory process until arrival at a more definitive location in the Canary Islands or returning to the Portuguese islands after a temporary period of settlement. On this eastern island of the archipelago, there is therefore a predominance of female residents – ten – compared to four female neighbours of Portuguese origin. This mobility, according to Torres Santana's study, would have been greater among the Azorean women, since of the three Azorean women he located, one was a neighbour and the other two had settled and were residents.

In the same way, all of those who had roots in the Islands and whose legal status is known were married or widowed. On the other hand, it is significant that the only one of those who did not live in the same vicinity that we have information on was single¹. This was the case of Ana Antonia, a unique testimony. Her will informs us that her arrival on the island of Tenerife would have taken place recently, five years before she signed the deed in 1624. She herself mentioned that she was not married and did not have an estate, so she did not have any heirs or ascendants. However, she belonged to a family unit that had settled on the island. She at the least had dealings with a cousin, her brother, a priest, to whom she owed some debts and whom she left as an executor².

The lack of data does not enable us to determine the origin of these Portuguese women. Sources indicate that they came from parts of mainland Portugal, both inland, such as Portalegre, and from the coastal regions of Beira Litoral and Minho. In the same way, in these documents, Portuguese island areas – such as the island of Santa Maria in the Azores – are also indicated as a place of origin³. This disparity of places of origin allows us to assert that Tenerife, more than in the cases studied for Gran Canaria or Lanzarote, maintained greater international projection and, consequently, favoured the arrival of women from various parts of Portugal in search of a more prosperous place to live offering greater opportunities.

Although it is true that it is more difficult to find women in rural areas through the sources used, due to the scarcity of registers and the difficulties for women

1 This data differs from that provided by Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 71) concerning Castilian emigration to America. She noted that while there was a decline in the late 16th century, 60 per cent of emigrants were single and the remaining 40 per cent were married or widowed.

2 AHPST, leg. 3411, f°445.

3 In a recent work published by the researcher González Marrero (2019), he mentions 13 Azorean women who settled in the town of La Orotava in Tenerife during the 16th century. Furthermore, all but one of them would have arrived on the island before 1580.

to bring actions before notaries, it can be surmised that women were predominantly located in urban island areas where commercial activity was carried out at a local and international level. The settlement locations on the island of Tenerife were varied, although the data points to a greater presence of women in the capital and its district – four in La Laguna and one in Tacoronte, – followed by the Orotava Valley and the port of Garachico. There was also a pattern of urban settlement on the island of Gran Canaria¹. This data does not imply that these women settled in mainly urban areas, since we know that the main activity carried out by the Portuguese was working as peasants, and this is linked to the rural area, but rather that the number of deeds and the type of documents produced in the cities and ports is much greater due to the diversity and quantity of activities that were carried out in these areas.

As such, although the commercial activities in these areas – at least those mentioned in the documentation – are characteristic of men, we were able to detect through these sources another particularity of Portuguese women. Although it is possible to infer that the arrival of foreigners and the choice of their place of settlement were associated with their family's economic activity and that they were not recognized as having any occupation, there is a unique aspect among these Portuguese women. The Portuguese women would be the only outsiders to be recognized as having a profession, namely that of saleswomen. Brito González's (1993) study refers to five saleswomen from Portugal who settled in Gran Canaria and Lanzarote during the 17th century. In the case of Tenerife, three of the seven women living in Tenerife had a trade and one of them described herself as a "free woman". These women were engaged in small-scale commerce, as wine and olive oil sellers or stallholders². Although the practice of this profession by Portuguese women can be observed in the notarial documentation, mainly from the deeds of bonds granted by men to these women as guarantors of their trade³, this documentary source also contains references to the fact that these saleswomen created a business together with their husbands⁴ and even formed an international mercantile network. This was the case with María Luis, a Portuguese saleswoman settled in La Laguna who in 1612 owed 85 *reales* to a Portuguese merchant from Tavira⁵.

Despite the small number, the fact that these Portuguese women had occupations with remunerated activities was a unique feature of the Portuguese nation in the Canary Islands⁶. Baena Zapatero points out, for the area of New Spain that

1 All the Portuguese women who settled on this island did so in the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, except for one who settled in the town of Guía.

2 This was the case with Catalina González, a Portuguese resident of Garachico. AHPST, leg. 2085, no fol.

3 For example, Diego Monsalve granted a bond to the Portuguese woman Maria Hernandez, *the pregnant woman*, so that she could sell in his shop. AHPST, leg. 920, no fol.

4 In 1614 the mayor of Tacoronte acknowledged that Elena González, a Portuguese woman, had been buried and that both she and her husband had been salespersons, and described an inventory of goods left by the deceased with a value of 2,130 *reales*. AHPST, leg. 1532, f°469.

5 AHPST, leg. 1532, f°30.

6 On the regulation of the profession of saleswomen in Tenerife, see the work of Monzón Perdomo (2010) on saleswomen in the retail trade on the island of Tenerife in the *Ancien Régime*.

creole women, “far from complying strictly with the established patriarchal model” were present in the public sphere and that, therefore, contrary to the historiographical model that had been suggested, these women would have participated actively beyond the domestic area. It is true that, in the case of the Canary Islands, Castilian women also held some public offices. However, the same sources consulted do not tell us about trades carried out by non-Castilian women who were not Portuguese or those who undertook mercantile activity on an international scale. However, due to the type of documentation used, this data needs to be clarified. It is understood that this model of entrepreneurial women represented a minority, but it is precisely this exceptionality that led to their names appearing in these deeds.

Santana Pérez points out, with regard to the subject of saleswomen in La Laguna in the mid-17th century, that:

as always in these cases, some of them include their nickname or some physical characteristic or their origin. Thus, some appear with aliases such “la parga”, “la pintura”, “la vizcaina”, “harnenera” or “la abadesa”, as well as certain characteristics such as being black, Portuguese or being a Canary Islander. (Santana Pérez, 2002, p. 44).

This profession was undoubtedly carried out by a sizeable number of Portuguese women, and this is reflected in the documentation of the time. However, not all Portuguese women were sellers and not all sellers were of Portuguese origin. The documentation consulted has shown Portuguese women who were married to artisans, farmers and merchants who, most probably, would have worked or collaborated in the work of their husbands.

If this data is compared with that for *Ciudad de los Reyes*, the sources studied by Sullón Barreto (2014, p. 278) indicate that they “mostly engaged in small-scale trade [...] We also know that some of them alternated this trade with lending capital”. She further states that:

as autonomous women – whether in managing their businesses or in administrating and disposing of their property –, [...] they were fully integrated within their environment, creating interpersonal links with their neighbours – both natives of the kingdom and other foreigners –, and also developing a certain sense of belonging. (Sullón, 2014, p. 275).

Although it is possible to infer similar patterns in the archipelago, in terms of the administration of goods, commercial management and the consolidation of cross-border links, the environment of Lima did not show that Portuguese women, in addition to carrying out these economic activities, had a recognised trade or job as they did in the Canary Islands.

Table 1. Synthetic list of Portuguese women in Tenerife notarial records, 1575–1650

Name	Marital status	Document type	Role performed	Geographic scope
María de Viana	Married	Power of attorney	Grantor – empowers husband to collect rents from her inheritance	Tenerife ↔ Portugal
Bastiona Déviz	Married	Power of attorney	Grantor – authorizes absent husband to sell her parents' estate	Tenerife ↔ Madeira
Blanca Rodríguez	Not stated	Will	Testator – debts owed, Misericordia brotherhood, burial in San Francisco (Garachico)	Porto (origin) ↔ Garachico
Ana Antonia	Single	Will	Testator – recent arrival, no heirs; appoints priest cousin as executor	Tenerife (res.) ↔ Portugal (kin)
Catalina González	Not stated	Notarial reference (profession)	Vendor (Garachico)	Garachico (Tenerife)
María Hernández 'la preñada'	Not stated	Surety (bond)	Vendor – receives surety to sell in a shop	Tenerife
Elena González	Widow (implied)	Postmortem inventory	Vendor – inventory acknowledged by the mayor of Tacoronte (2,130 reales)	Tacoronte (Tenerife)
María Luis	Not stated	Obligation (debt)	Vendor – debtor (85 reales) to a Portuguese merchant from Tavira	La Laguna (Tenerife) ↔ Tavira
Isabel Jorge	Married	Power of attorney	Mandatary – receives power from husband (silkworker) to collect debts; clause to bring her to Tenerife	Terceira (Azores) ↔ Tenerife
María González	Married	Power of attorney	Mandatary – authorized to sell/lease vineyard and house in Calheta	Madeira (Calheta) ↔ Tacoronte (Tenerife)

Women between Worlds: Legal Instruments and Diasporic Ties

The role of Portuguese women in the Canary Islands during the Iberian Union extended far beyond demographic presence or statistical representation. These

women were significant agents in the construction and maintenance of transatlantic family networks, acting as legal, economic, and social intermediaries in frontier societies. Their agency is documented through notarial and inquisitorial sources, which reveal a complex web of powers of attorney, wills, marriage strategies, and property management.

Women frequently granted and received powers of attorney to manage estates, collect debts, and administer property across the Atlantic. María de Viana empowered her husband to collect rents from her inherited estate in Portugal¹, while Bastiona Déniz authorized her husband to sell her parents' property in Madeira². These legal instruments positioned women as conduits between archipelagos, facilitating the circulation of wealth and familial obligations.

Although most Portuguese women arrived during the Iberian Union, archival evidence shows that some had settled earlier, reflecting longstanding ties between the Canary Islands and Portuguese territories. Blanca Rodríguez, a native of Porto and resident in Garachico, left a will that included debts owed to her, donations to the Misericordia brotherhood, and burial instructions. Her testament reflects both economic integration and social belonging³.

Out of 58 Portuguese individuals with known relationships, only three women were identified as spouses. However, three wills from Portuguese women were located: two from single women and one from a married woman whose husband resided in Cape Verde⁴. These documents reveal the complexity of female legal status and their role in managing transatlantic estates⁵.

In another case, a Madeiran resident in Tenerife granted power of attorney to a Dominican friar to manage a vineyard shared with his daughters and deceased wife⁶. This joint ownership and delegation of authority illustrate the intergenerational transmission of property and the key role of women in preserving family assets.

Migration often followed a phased pattern, with men settling first and later summoning their wives and children. The 1635 bachelorhood file of Francisco González documents how his cousins brought their wives to Tenerife after establishing themselves⁷. Similarly, Alonso Ponteado, facing legal constraints, delegated authority to bring his family from Lagos⁸.

1 AHPST, leg. 1512, f°657.

2 AHPST, leg. 1357, f°98.

3 AHPST, leg. 2066, f°338.

4 AHPST, leg. 684, f°154v.

5 Comparable trends have been observed in other Atlantic territories, as evidenced by the comparative data presented by Almorza Hidalgo (2018, p. 166). In the case of Lima, for instance, women accounted for approximately 5% of the wills registered during the seventeenth century. These testatrices were predominantly widows or married women, although single women also appeared with relative frequency. Such data reinforces the notion that female legal agency, while limited, was exercised across different imperial contexts, often under specific social or familial conditions. (Almorza, 2018, p. 269).

6 AHPST, leg. 1540, f°228.

7 AHDSCLL, *Fondo Histórico Diocesano* (Historical Diocesan Record), *Informaciones de Solterías y Viudedades* (Information on Single Women and Widows), 1635, leg. 1.

8 AHPST, leg. 446, f°295.

Portuguese women were also embedded in professional networks. Gaspar Hernández, a cooper from Punta Delgada, married the daughter of a Garachico cooper, reinforcing guild ties¹. His sons later migrated to Angola and Buenos Aires, continuing the family trade². Such marriages linked Portuguese craftsmen to local guilds and extended their influence across the Atlantic.

Women's visibility in notarial documentation increased in exceptional circumstances, such as widowhood or absence of male representatives. Beatriz Suárez, widow of Antonio Gies, claimed debts in Lisbon and granted power of attorney to collect them³. These records challenge the notion of female invisibility, showing that women acted decisively to protect family interests.

Portuguese women were custodians of family memory and identity. Francisca Hernández, widow and administrator of her children's assets, empowered a fellow Portuguese to manage their inheritance from grandparents in Portugal⁴. Such deeds illustrate how women preserved lineage and ensured the transmission of cultural and economic heritage.

The case of Gaspar Moreno and his wife Jerónima exemplifies how powers of attorney facilitated genealogical reconstruction. Their family, originating from Graciosa in the Azores, maintained property and kinship ties across islands⁵. These networks fostered diasporic cohesion, with women often serving as the linchpin.

The evidence presented demonstrates that Portuguese women were not peripheral figures but key agents in the formation of Atlantic societies. Through legal instruments, marriage alliances, and economic transactions, they shaped the contours of migration, settlement, and identity. Their role as cross-border family nexuses challenges traditional historiographical models and invites a rethinking of gendered agency in early modern history.

Concluding Remarks

This research has made it possible to partially recover the historical footprint of Portuguese women who migrated to the Canary Islands – specifically to the island of Tenerife – during the early modern period. Despite their limited representation in notarial and inquisitorial records, their presence reveals social, familial, and economic dynamics that position them as active agents in the shaping of island society and in the articulation of the Atlantic space. These women, in their dual condition as foreigners and females, faced structural barriers that restricted their individual agency, yet they participated in collective processes of integration, mobility, and cultural transmission.

The documents examined show that, although many of these women were unable to write or sign their names, their voices resonate through the notarial

1 AHPST, leg. 1436, f°78v.

2 AMC, *Inquisición*, XLIV-13.

3 AHPST, leg. 916, no fol.

4 AHPST, leg. 2066, f°323v.

5 AHPST, leg. 1171, f°147.

deeds, which record their origins, family ties, economic activities, and patrimonial decisions. In these texts, Portuguese women appear not merely as companions to male migrants, but as protagonists in strategies of settlement, consolidation of cross-border networks, and property management. Their role as transmitters of family memory and as connectors between Atlantic territories is essential to understanding the human dimension of migration in frontier societies.

The sources also reveal that some of these women were recognized as professionals, particularly as vendors – a notable exception within the insular context. This professional visibility, though limited, indicates that certain women succeeded in entering the public sphere and participating in remunerated economic activities, even within international commercial networks. Furthermore, their ability to grant powers of attorney, draft wills, and administer property demonstrates that they were acknowledged as legal subjects with decision-making capacity, at least in exceptional circumstances such as widowhood or the absence of male representatives.

Moreover, this study not only recovers the female footprint in an Atlantic insular space but also nuances interpretations constructed from colonial contexts. For instance, compared to Lima – where Portuguese women were slightly more visible yet equally constrained by family strategies – the Canary Islands display an agency more closely tied to legal management and the articulation of inter-island networks than to integration into consolidated urban markets. Unlike prevailing models for Castilian America, which explain female mobility primarily through group migration and dowry logic, the insular case reveals patterns shaped by frontier conditions: cross-jurisdictional powers, administration of dispersed assets, and visible occupations such as vending. These practices confirm that female agency does not follow a single template; rather, it is reconfigured according to the nature of space – archipelago, port, frontier – and the opportunities it affords.

Ultimately, these women were not only Portuguese, nor solely women – they were islanders. Their integration into Canary Island society, though shaped by multiple constraints, was expressed through everyday practices that contributed to the formation of a plural and dynamic insular identity. A rereading of the sources through a gendered and transnational lens allows us to recover their trajectories and affirm their role in Atlantic history. This study does not seek to exhaust the subject, but rather to open new avenues of inquiry into female agency in migratory contexts and the construction of identities in peripheral spaces of the early modern world.

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Authorship and Contribution (CRediT)

Conceptualization, methodology, and writing of the manuscript – Javier Luis Álvarez Santos.

Policy on Preprints and Previous Versions

Author confirms that there is no preprint/working version.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts

Funding

No Funding

Use of Generative AI and Supporting Tools

AI tools were not used to write the manuscript

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Acknowledgments and Contributions without Authorship

Not available

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