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The Southern European paradox revisited: Union formation in Spain and Portugal

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the linkages between changing gender roles and women's union formation patterns in two Southern European countries: Spain and Portugal. During the past decades, both countries have undergone a profound process of modernization. Broad transformations in the economic, political and social fronts have brought about a radical change in the standard of living, life-style and attitudes of recent Spanish generations. Perhaps the most significant transformation in these societies has been the changing role of women, as reflected in their recently achieved parity with men in education and in their rapidly increasing participation in the labor force, which has been accompanied by a significant delay in union formation and childbearing. Public opinion concerning premarital sex, alternative family forms and women's professional careers have also undergone rapid change, and nowadays society display very tolerant attitudes towards behaviours that were considered "immoral" only thirty years ago. Despite these changes, Southern Europe remains typically portrayed as "traditional" in family patterns, women's integration in the labour force and social attitudes towards gender roles. Our objective is to assemble relevant age-specific indicators in order to assess whether this portrayal is accurate. Several aggregate indicators usually employed to illustrate the North-South divide in gender equity are often misleading, because of the large generational gap regarding women's roles that prevails in Southern European societies.

The main objective of the paper is to study women's union formation behaviour in a context of rapidly changing gender roles, education and labour market participation. Spain and Portugal share similar recent trajectories in the economic, political and social fronts: they exited a dictatorial regime almost at the same time and entered the EU the same year; they belong to the same ideal type of welfare state and their social organization is characterized by relatively strong family-ties and low investment of public policies on family. Also, despite secularization, their Catholic inheritance has left its imprint on some legislation and institutions. Although similarities are numerous, there are also significant differences: for instance, Portugal has traditionally displayed higher rates of female labour force participation than Spain.

In order to address these topics, we will use a variety of data sources. We will first present a description of the evolution of women's education and labor force participation at the aggregate level, as well as of some indicators of changes in family-related behaviour and social attitudes towards new family forms and gender roles. Then, we will focus on women's choices of union formation: marrying, cohabiting or remaining single, and relate women's partnership transitions to their educational attainment, employment spells and proxies of gender roles attitudes. The analysis will be based on the Fertility and Family Surveys of Spain (1995) and Portugal (1997), and will employ event history analysis techniques. We will also use the 2001 Census microdata, to explore the prevalence and characteristics associated to cohabitation, although Census data only allow a cross-sectional approach.