

Singlehood in Spain in the 21st century: gender models and new immigration patterns

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Information in registers and surveys repeatedly indicate that the proportion of single people living with their parents as a dependent person has been substantially falling in Spain since the beginning of the 21st century. This would indicate a clear change in trends since the mid 1970's, when the proportion of single young men and women living in their parental home started to continuously increase and did not stop growing during the 1980's and 1990's (Miret 1997). Are couples being formed progressively earlier once again? However, admitting it was correct, the reasons behind this trend could not be the same as those which led to a similar scenario half a century ago (Miret 2007b), as Spanish values and living conditions have radically changed since then. Therefore, even though both trends could, at a first sight, seem the same, they must be profoundly different if they are analysed in depth. In effect, on one hand, the education level for both sexes has radically changed, increasing quickly. Moreover, the relationship between genders, in this area, has been inverted. While, in earlier times, medium and high levels of education were exclusively found in men, women presently study more extensively than their male counterparts and females also enter later the labour market. Women have as well gained access to parts of the labour market from which they were widely vetoed in the past, particularly in the moment in their life course when they got married and started their own family. These transformations would, undoubtedly, imply that the model relating education and labour market participation with couple formation should be renovated.

Even though the choice of our data source might be considered, to a certain extent, surprising, the Spanish Labour Force (SLF) is an excellent source of data to capture this phenomenon. It can be considered as the best primary dataset to analyse 21st century Spain, as it appears every three months, fieldwork is punctual and micro-data is exquisitely spread. Moreover, 60,000 households which are representative

of the whole Spanish territory are interviewed for each wave, that is to say, about 180,000 people, a considerable amount if you compare it with other surveys. The first time in which this survey asked for the marital situation of all the members in the household was in the first quarter of 1999. Therefore, it has become our initial observational point. The study ends in 2009: an eleven year period in Spanish history, a period in which the economic situation substantially improved up, just before the present crisis hurled an abrupt and bitter end to it from the second quarter of 2008 onwards.

Our independent variable is made up from these two factors and identifies the individuals who have never been married (those who remain single) and who were not living with a partner when the survey was carried out (as nobody in the household could answer to the status of being their couple). The evolution between 1999 and 2009 shows that the proportion of single young men and women not cohabiting with a partner has reduced between these dates among young people aged less than 30. From a complementary point of view, we can state that couples being formed by the youngest men and women have substantially grown in Spain. In summary, even though marriage indexes in Spain did not indicate a recovery in this period (Miret and Cabré 2005), on a first impression, everything would indicate that unions outside marriage have been able to make couple formation grow in this last decade, which was not the case at all the decade before (Miret 2007a). Which were the factors provoking an increase in the formation of couples among the youngest men and women? We suggest that it can possibly be related to an improvement in young men and women's labour conditions. A second hypothesis –somehow related with the previous one- would be that a higher gender equilibrium pattern has also had an impact in the labour market. So, more labour market involvement would as well mean improving couple formation, independently from the sex we are taking into account. On the other hand, in this second hypothesis, remaining single would also be related with having an unstable link with the labour market (for example, for those who are unemployed).

As a statistical technique we will be using logistic regression for panel data, in which the odds of being single and not cohabiting (response variable) will depend on a series of independent co-variables. We will start by analysing the effect of sex and age, so that we can control them. Then we will study the wave of the LFS, to observe the phenomenon's historical evolution. The effect of education and that of labour market participation will be considered together so we can introduce present gender models in those spheres. Finally, we will look at nationality to take into account that Spanish people and foreigners have different cultural models and

therefore analyse whether this can be behind the increase in union formation in 21st century Spain.

As in multivariate analysis all co-variables should be crossable, we have to place the maximum education level attained at high school, when crossing education level with age, as we are analysing people over 18, and at that age it is only feasible to have finished high school, and a university degree is normally not obtained until the age of 23. Therefore, the variable on education level has four categories: 1) s/he has not finished compulsory education (without any formal education), 2) s/he has finished compulsory education, 3) s/he has carried out professional training and 4) s/he has reached high school or has a university degree. Labour market is another key independent variable in this research. Firstly, young employment has grown, in relation to labour market participation, or in other words, unemployment has been reduced. However, the present crisis has abruptly stopped this trend, and it would seem that it has even been reverted. Secondly, full-time employment is another relevant labour market difference by gender: while virtually all men are working full-time, 10% of women are working part-time. Finally, we should characterise those having a tenure contract among those working full time. When we analyse the influence of labour market participation on the probability of being single and without a partner, the gender model appearing is extremely complementary.

Nevertheless, neither the education level nor labour market participation are able to give an answer on why the proportions of young single people have fallen in Spain after twenty years with the opposite trend. That is to say, the increase in the number of couples being formed has been due to a factor which has nothing to do neither with the educational level nor with employment nor with a change in gender patterns. The answer is in the patterns of non Spanish young population. Indeed, once the particular cultural norms of immigrants are taken into account, the probability of being single and unpartnered among men essentially did not vary with time. These “imported” cultural norms were those that were creating the illusion that couple formation was increasing in Spain during the first years of the 21st century. Indexes were rising, but only those of immigrants.

References

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