

# Tradition is more important than education in determining participation European immigrant women's role in the workforce

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through Santander universities. Credit: UC3M

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Through his latest research, Javier Polavieja, a professor Sociology in the Social Sciences Department who holds a UC3M- Santander Named Chair of (Cátedra de Excelencia), has shown how European women who emigrate to other countries within the same continent take the cultural norms of their home countries with them. Those norms are decisive when it comes to determining their work behavior.

To reach this conclusion, the researcher compared the attitudes of over three thousand immigrant women from some twenty European countries with those of over forty thousand non-emigrant compatriots with similar characteristics. The study shows that immigrant women from the same country of origin tend to share values of traditionalism and religiosity regardless of the country they have settled in. Using this propensity, which is seen as a predictor of the women's work behavior, Polavieja found that the negative impact of traditional values on female participation in the workforce proved to be much greater than what had previously been believed: its influence on the likelihood of a woman participating in the workforce is so strong that it is twice that of education.

## **An innovative method for studying the impact of culture**

With this research, which was recently published in the journal *American Sociological Review*, Polavieja also offers a new way to respond to some of the great social science and economic questions: How does culture influence people's behavior? This apparently simple question poses one of the most important methodological challenges facing the social sciences, explains Polavieja. In the words of the author, "the problem is that individuals' values, tastes and preferences (their cultures) are determined by the social context they are immersed in, which in turn influences their opportunities and behavior as well. This makes it terribly difficult to separate the role of values, tastes and cultural preferences from social surroundings when human behavior is being explained." Polavieja's research proposes using the phenomenon of migration to separate the effect of culture from the effect of social surroundings, for which the study developed an innovative statistical method.

This research was carried out using data from the European Social Survey. The survey measured the traditionalism and religiosity of over three thousand women from 23 European countries, including Turkey and the Ukraine, who are residents in 25 different European countries. The immigrant women's attitudes and values were compared with over 40,000 non-emigrant European women who were interviewed in the home countries.

### **The Spanish immigrants, among the least traditional in Europe**

According to the study, the women from Turkey, Portugal, Poland and Ireland are the most traditional of the European immigrant women,

while the Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish and Spanish women were the least traditional. The degree of traditionalism was defined by noting the importance the women gave to following customs, norms and values transmitted through religion and the family. The degree of traditionalism decreased as the level of education increased in all of the groups that were studied. This cultural characteristic was associated with "[strong gender norms](#) in public and in private," explains the researcher.

The rate of participation in the workforce for the Spanish immigrant women (77%) was among the highest of the intra-European immigrants, clearly higher than the rates of the women from other countries in the southern part of the continent, such as Italy (60%) or Greece (53%). This figure was only higher in the cases of the women from Sweden (84%), Norway (82%) and Finland (80%) and it was significantly higher than the rates of the French immigrant women (62%), the German (61%) and the British and Irish (both at 59%). The Turkish [immigrant women](#) had the lowest rate of participation in the workforce (43%) of the 23 groups that were studied.

The possible applications of the methodology used by Professor Polavieja for this research transcend the relationship between traditionalism and the labor market. He explains this himself when he states that the method that was developed can be used to study any type of cultural impact on human behavior, as long as it can be measured using surveys. This research is part of the Competition, Adaptation and Labor Market Achievement (CALMA) project, which is part of the sixth national program of the Ministry of the Economy and Competitiveness's Scientific Research Plan (Plan de Investigaciones Científicas del Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad).

**More information:** Polavieja, Javier G. 2015. "Capturing Culture: A New Method to Estimate Exogenous Cultural Effects Using Migrant Populations". *American Sociological Review* Vol. 80(1) 166-191.

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