

Immigrant-Native Disparities in Mothers' Labour Market Participation: The Role of Formal and Informal Childcare

Abstract

Both formal and informal childcare are closely related to maternal employment, as they help to balance motherhood and paid work. Although immigrants' access to childcare is more limited than that of natives, less is known about whether and to what extent the immigrant-native differences in childcare use are associated with mothers' employment. Using data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey on mothers of children aged 0–3 years, we estimate the odds of maternal employment by immigrant status and childcare arrangement. Our results show that, for both immigrants and natives, childcare use is positively associated to maternal labor force participation. Nevertheless, without the use of external childcare, immigrants show 77% lower odds of employment than natives. These findings confirm the importance of childcare availability in addressing social and economic inequalities between native and immigrant groups, thus contributing to immigrant women's integration processes in the new country.

Extended abstract

Introduction

A growing body of research has shown that female labor force participation is strongly related to the transition to motherhood, as the increased childcare responsibilities associated with traditional gender expectations largely constrain mothers' ability to reconcile work and family life (Bousselin, 2022). While both formal and informal childcare are central to facilitating mothers' employment after childbirth, differences in structural resources and unequal network capital pose additional challenges for immigrant mothers (Biegel et al., 2021), which may exacerbate inequalities in labor force participation between native and immigrant women. Although research on migration and integration policies has provided insights into the immigrant-native differences in childcare use (Guzi et al., 2023; Mussino & Ortensi, 2023), it remains unclear whether these contribute to or alleviate labor market hierarchies between native and immigrant mothers. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine whether and to what extent the interaction between immigrant status and childcare use is associated with women's labor market outcomes after childbirth.

The Spanish case is particularly interesting given its prominence as a receiving country in the European context on the one hand, and because of its Mediterranean welfare regime, which provides insufficient public childcare services and emphasizes strong family obligations to compensate for weak state provision (Ferrera, 1996), which results in a more pronounced immigrant-native childcare gap.

Data and Methods

Data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey (SFS) are used in the analysis. Conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE), this survey was addressed to immigrant and native women between the ages of 18 and 55 at the time of the interview. Since child's age is a major determinant of childcare arrangements, we restrict the analysis to mothers of children aged 0–3, as this is the most critical period for intensive childcare (Furfaro et al., 2020). The questionnaire includes employment history, as well as information on education, cultural values, partner's income, and a number of other socioeconomic and demographic variables. Most importantly, for the purposes of this study, respondents were questioned on the nature of their child care arrangements by the question "*What the weekly frequency use (number of days per week) of the following childcare alternatives? (Babysitter, day-care centers, extracurricular activities, grandparents, other relatives, and others)*". Based on the frequency with which the respondent used the childcare alternatives, we classified the childcare arrangements into four categories: no external childcare use (with 0 use for all items), formal childcare (with only use of the 'day-care centers' item), informal childcare (with any other alternative use except 'day-care centers'), and a combination of formal and informal childcare arrangements (with 'day-care centers' combined with any other alternative use of childcare). An overview of the characteristics of the respondents in the sample is presented in Table 1.

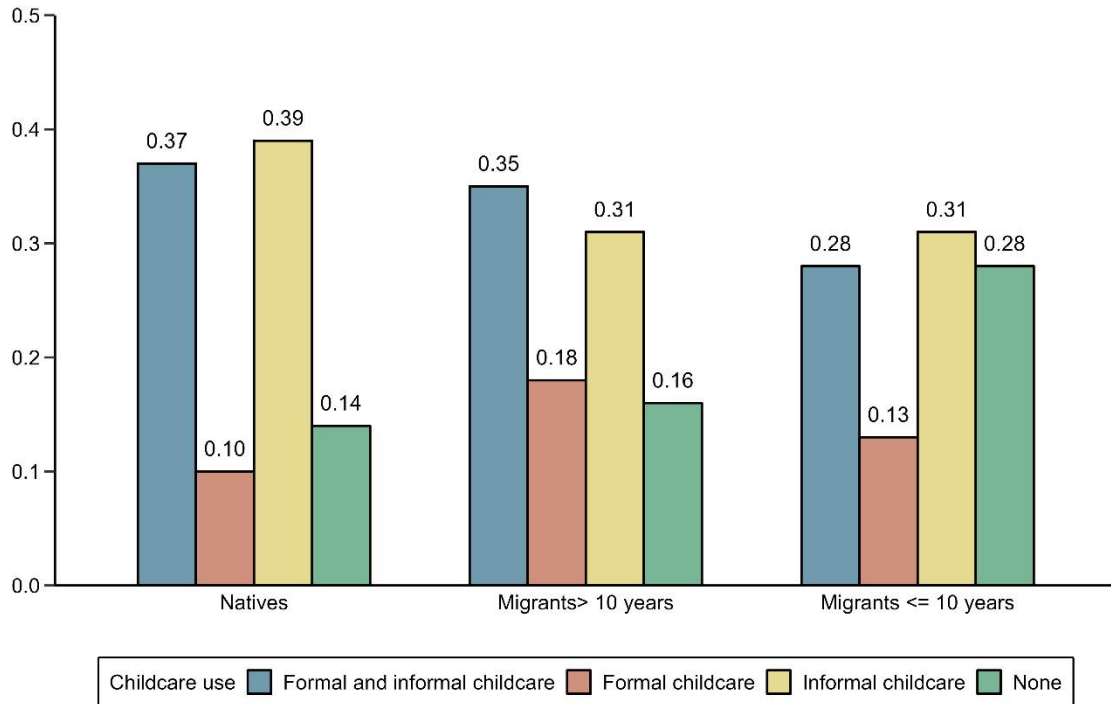


Table 1. Childcare use of mothers by immigrant background

Data source: 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey

Key Measures

Our main outcome compares mothers who were unemployed or inactive with those who were employed. One of our key predictors, respondents' migration background, is defined by individuals' citizenship to distinguish immigrants from natives. We use binomial logistic regression models with three different models. In Model 1, we describe the interaction between migration background and childcare use, controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of mothers—age (reference = 18-22), education (reference = primary level), area of residence (reference = urban), gender attitudes by question: *For a woman, the priority should be her family rather than her professional career* (reference = agree)—to analyze to what extent these factors account for the interaction between immigrant status and childcare. In Model 2, we also include the characteristics of their partners—income (reference = 0–500) and citizenship (reference = Spanish). In Model 3, we include the controls from Models 1 and 2, as well as family background characteristics: partnership status (reference = married) and perceptions of economic hardship (reference = none).

Findings

The adjusted odds ratios (ORs) and the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for maternal employment associated with immigrant status and childcare are presented in Table 2. The full models show that, first, when compared to natives without childcare, immigrants show 77% lower odds of employment, which suggests a disadvantaged labor market position of migrant mothers with respect to childcare availability (OR = 0.23). Second, both formal and informal childcare are closely associated with mothers' labor market participation, with mothers with access to formal childcare, informal childcare, and multiple arrangements having higher odds of employment than their counterparts without childcare in the same migrant background group. Third, despite the relatively low overall odds of employment among immigrant mothers compared to native mothers, when multiple arrangements of both formal and informal childcare are taken into account, the odds of employment are higher among immigrants than natives.

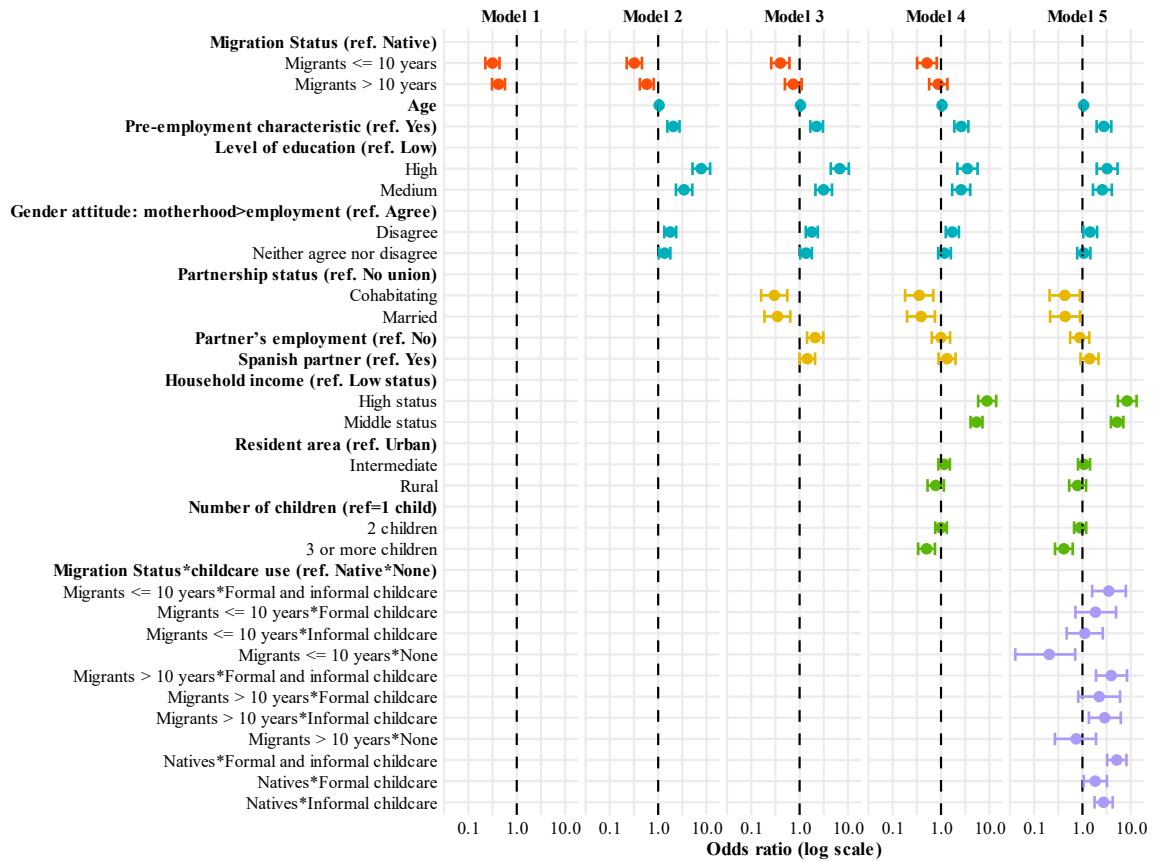


Fig. 1 Odds ratios for maternal employment by migration background and use of childcare.

Discussion

This finding is in accordance with findings from previous studies (Boyle et al., 2009; Maes et al., 2021), in which immigrant mothers are more vulnerable than natives to the informal economy in Spain, which is characterized by high rates of unemployment, temporary work, and job insecurity (Bernardi & Martínez-Pastor, 2010). Therefore, these findings confirm the importance of childcare availability in addressing social and economic inequalities between native and immigrant groups, thus contributing to the integration processes of immigrant women, and draw attention to the challenge that parenthood poses for mothers of immigrant origin in terms of employment, but also to the role of childcare in the labor market of mothers in Spain.

The next step of our analysis is, first, to take a closer look at how (in)formal childcare are linked to different maternal labor market outcomes by decomposing the employment status into two occupational categories: full-time employment and part-time employment by conducting a multinomial logistic regression; and second, to revisit the theory on immigrant motherhood, showing the factors that have contributed to immigrant-native employment gap by different childcare use.

Table 2. Odds ratios for mothers' labor market participation by immigrant status and use of childcare, estimated with binomial logistic regression.

| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | |
|---|---------|--------|-------|---------|--------|-------|---------|--------|-------|
| | OR | 95% CI | | OR | 95% CI | | OR | 95% CI | |
| Interaction between migration status and childcare use (ref. Natives without external childcare use) | | | | | | | | | |
| Immigrants without external childcare use | 0.23 | -2.24 | -0.76 | 0.22 | -2.41 | -0.71 | 0.23 | -2.39 | -0.64 |
| Immigrants with formal & informal childcare | 2.36 | 0.35 | 1.38 | 2.58 | 0.38 | 1.52 | 2.80 | 0.45 | 1.62 |
| Immigrants with informal childcare | 1.63 | -0.03 | 1.01 | 1.68 | -0.05 | 1.09 | 1.93 | 0.07 | 1.25 |
| Immigrants with formal childcare | 1.25 | -0.40 | 0.85 | 1.36 | -0.39 | 1.01 | 1.69 | -0.20 | 1.25 |
| Natives with formal & informal childcare | 4.40 | 1.08 | 1.89 | 4.34 | 1.05 | 1.89 | 4.97 | 1.17 | 2.04 |
| Natives with informal childcare | 2.76 | 0.63 | 1.40 | 2.65 | 0.58 | 1.37 | 2.82 | 0.64 | 1.44 |
| Natives with formal childcare | 1.81 | 0.11 | 1.08 | 1.85 | 0.12 | 1.12 | 2.09 | 0.23 | 1.26 |
| Age (ref. 18-22) | | | | | | | | | |
| 23-27 | 2.01 | -0.20 | 1.68 | 1.61 | -0.58 | 1.64 | 1.82 | -0.50 | 1.81 |
| 28-32 | 3.52 | 0.43 | 2.18 | 2.84 | 0.07 | 2.15 | 3.08 | 0.10 | 2.28 |
| 33-37 | 7.21 | 1.15 | 2.89 | 5.73 | 0.77 | 2.84 | 6.03 | 0.77 | 2.95 |
| 38-42 | 4.58 | 0.69 | 2.44 | 3.60 | 0.30 | 2.38 | 3.92 | 0.33 | 2.52 |
| 43-47 | 5.50 | 0.77 | 2.72 | 4.16 | 0.35 | 2.61 | 4.64 | 0.40 | 2.77 |
| 48-55 | 5.68 | 0.04 | 3.70 | 3.49 | -0.64 | 3.35 | 5.00 | -0.36 | 3.77 |
| Educational level (ref. Primary education) | | | | | | | | | |
| Secondary education | 2.80 | 0.63 | 1.44 | 2.69 | 0.56 | 1.42 | 2.75 | 0.57 | 1.46 |
| Tertiary education | 4.86 | 1.18 | 1.99 | 4.18 | 1.00 | 1.86 | 3.67 | 0.86 | 1.75 |
| Resident area (ref. Urban) | | | | | | | | | |
| Intermediate | 0.87 | -0.39 | 0.11 | 0.82 | -0.46 | 0.06 | 0.84 | -0.44 | 0.10 |
| Rural | 0.67 | -0.76 | -0.05 | 0.68 | -0.74 | -0.02 | 0.69 | -0.73 | 0.01 |
| Cultural value: family > professional career (ref. Agree) | | | | | | | | | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1.19 | -0.11 | 0.45 | 1.19 | -0.12 | 0.47 | 1.14 | -0.17 | 0.44 |
| Disagree | 1.43 | 0.07 | 0.65 | 1.39 | 0.04 | 0.64 | 1.33 | -0.03 | 0.59 |
| Partner's income (ref. 0-500) | | | | | | | | | |
| 500-1500 | | | | 1.68 | 0.12 | 0.92 | 1.44 | -0.05 | 0.78 |
| 1500-2500 | | | | 2.03 | 0.25 | 1.16 | 1.37 | -0.17 | 0.79 |
| 2500+ | | | | 2.03 | 0.09 | 1.36 | 1.16 | -0.51 | 0.82 |
| Partners' citizenship (ref. Spanish) | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | 0.79 | -0.73 | 0.13 | 0.72 | -0.77 | 0.11 |
| Partnership status (ref. Married) | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | 1.15 | -0.14 | 0.41 |
| Self-reported perceptions of economic hardship (ref. No) | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | 0.33 | -1.37 | -0.85 |
| Observations | | 1722 | | | 1630 | | | 1630 | |

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