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Poverty and Material Deprivation in the Crisis: Italy and Spain

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Abstract

This paper assesses the impact of the economic recession caused by the global financial crisis on income poverty and deprivation in Italy and Spain to identify the most vulnerable groups and to guide policy makers. We consider the main socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals impacting on their labor market status. The analysis is carried out separately for male and females to detect possible gender differences. Our results show the growth of material deprivation. Furthermore, the higher exposure of females to income poverty and material deprivation is verified in both countries despite of the efforts made to close the gender gaps in their labor markets.

Keywords: unemployment, labor market, income poverty, material deprivation.

JEL Classification: C50; D31; I32.

Introduction⁹

The economic downturn brought about a marked and incessant rise of unemployment affecting income of individuals and simultaneously constraining public budgeting. In addition, the measures to overcome the crisis have been directed through the strict control of public spending, especially in Southern countries of the European Union. So, a more disadvantaged population could be in risk of poverty if social support policies are dismantled.

In line with the previous comment, our analysis evaluates the impact of the economic downturn on income poverty¹⁰ and material deprivation¹¹ (Fusco *et al.* 2011) and identifies the most vulnerable collectives in Italy and Spain considering possible gender differences. For this, we use the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) surveys referred to 2007 and 2010.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 compares the selected countries. Section 3 reviews the economic literature on the links between labor market situation and income poverty

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¹⁰ Those households or individual under the poverty line. In our analysis, those under the 60% of the median equivalent disposable income calculated using the OECD modified equivalence scale to take into account differences in household size and demographic composition.

¹¹ According to the European 2020 Strategy we define materially deprivation as a household (or individual) that is not able to afford at least three of the basic needs.

and material deprivation. The data, methodology and results will be presented in the later sections. The final section will offer conclusions and highlight policy implications.

Conclusions and policy implications

This paper deals with poverty and material deprivation in two Southern European countries that have been deeply hit by the crisis. We compare the risk of income poverty and material deprivation for individuals aged over 15 in the two countries by gender and highlight the impact of different factors by multivariate analysis.

Our findings show the increase of incidence and severity of poverty and the widening of poverty gap in Spain, as well as the growth of material deprivation as a consequence of the economic crisis in both countries. Furthermore, the higher exposure of females to income poverty and material deprivation is also verified in both selected countries.

With special regards to the employment status, we show how unemployment significantly increases the risk of being income poor or materially deprived in the two countries with a larger effect on income poverty for those who found themselves unemployed and not having been employed before. The latter is related to the system of unemployment benefit in the two countries that leads to inequalities in terms of sustainability of unemployment amongst different types of unemployed. So, major reforms of them are necessary to avoid a widening of these clear social fractures in crisis time. Thus, special attention should also be paid to the reinforcement of active policies of employment, which are clearly relegated to a low priority in these Mediterranean social protection models.

Non-standard work is found to increase income poverty and material deprivation in both countries. The effect on income poverty is larger in Italy for part-timers and full-time temporary and for self-employed in Spain. Therefore, additional measures should be adopted to turn these job options into real alternatives to unemployment, as it is wished by Spanish policymakers.

Both countries show heterogeneity in the risk of poverty and material deprivation across regions with a higher probability of income poverty and material deprivation in Andalusia and Extremadura in Spain and in the South of Italy. The inadequacies of social policy decentralization to close or at least prevent the widening of territorial fractures especially in Spain are clearly showed, so they should be reconsidered in order to avoid a higher risk of poverty or material deprivation and to avoid an increase in inequalities across regions.

In addition, our results stress that the demographic and economic challenges faced by the retirement system should take into account the need of preventing the risk of income poverty among the eldest individuals. Moreover, the impact of public budget cuts in the areas related with this age cluster should be considered.

Furthermore, social support to lone parent families and families with children should be improved in both countries to reduce the risk of income poverty and material deprivation of these groups of the population. Moreover, with regards to Spain, the education system should be improved to raise the qualification level of the labour - force, with the aim of reducing the gender gap, since less skilled workers are more affected by job destruction and, therefore, are more exposed to poverty and material deprivation.

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