

The Southern European social model and the high rates of female employment in Portugal

Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece have the same model of welfare, family and employment regime and share a number of characteristics that differ from the other European countries. One of the key traits of a hypothetical *Southern European social model* is its pronounced *familialism* (Karamessini 2008). This feature has been used to explain why female employment rates tend to be low in Spain, Italy and Greece. However, the high rates of female full-time employment in Portugal make this country the unexplained exception.

This paper discusses whether the patterns of full-time continuous employment of Portuguese women are compatible with the inclusion of Portugal in a *familialistic* Southern European social model. It draws on case-study research involving qualitative interviews with women employees, employers and collective actors in two female labour-intensive sectors: clothing manufacturing and hospitality.

The data revealed the women in these sectors had long job tenures, enjoyed considerable employment security, and had access to publicly-funded childcare. Moreover, the trade unions had been engaged in facilitating the work-life balance of employees, namely by restricting working time and promoting a favourable absence regime.

These findings suggest that Portugal is significantly less *familialistic* than its southern European neighbours. Due to women's strong attachment to employment, the family cannot be relied upon to provide most of the childcare and the state is increasingly taking on this role. The engagement of trade unions in supporting women's work-life balance provides further evidence of institutional recognition of the role of women as workers, rather than dependent family members and carers. This research has implications for debates around the existence of a distinctive South European social model.