



# Women and smoking – Prices and health warning messages: Evidence from Spain



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Prices and pictorial health warning labels are effective anti-tobacco policies
- Smoking determinants vary across generation cohorts
- Women from younger cohorts are more likely to smoke, even highly educated

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In Spain, fewer men are smoking every year yet the number of women smokers remains relatively high. This paper examines the impact of two anti-smoking policies (increased prices and obligatory pictorial health warning labels) on women's smoking decisions; generation cohorts are used to elucidate the determinants of those decisions.

**Data source:** We have drawn 48,755 observations of women living in Spain from the Spanish National Health Surveys of 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2011.

**Data synthesis:** Among the main results, we highlight that belonging to a particular generation modulates the manner in which individual characteristics and tobacco policies determine smoking decisions. For example, women's smoking was not considered as socially acceptable until the 1960s and therefore older women have lower smoking rates. However, for the younger female cohorts (generations X and Y) smoking was seen as an act of rebellion and modernity, so women belonging to these groups, irrespective of educational level, are more likely to smoke.

**Conclusions:** The price of cigarettes and pictorial health warning labels on cigarette packets also influence the smoking behaviour of Spanish women.

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## 1. Introduction

In Spain, smoking rates are currently falling among men but they are still increasing among women: the gender gap is narrowing (Franco, Perez-Hoyos, & Plaza, 2002; Jiménez Rodrigo, 2010). In many high-income countries (e.g. Australia, Canada, the United States of America and most countries of Western Europe), women smoke at nearly the same rate as men. In many low and middle-income countries, women smoke much less than men, for example, in China, 61% of men are smokers, compared with only 4% of women (WHO, 2008). Even if

the feminisation of smoking is not a truly global phenomenon, it is geographically widespread.

The reasons for gender differences on smoking decisions are many and complex. Increasing rates of female smoking have been attributed, among other things, to socioeconomic factors such as social acceptance and increasing economic resources.

Due to the burden of smoking related illness on public health expenditures, a wide range of policies to reduce smoking rates (smoke-free public spaces, increased tobacco taxes, restrictions on purchasing tobacco products, health warnings etc.) have been implemented around the world. However, tobacco companies overcome legal barriers by targeting specific population groups that are more likely to provide regular smokers: women and young people. Whilst tobacco companies devise strategies to attract consumers in specific target groups, anti-smoking public policies are designed to cover the broadest possible segment of the population.

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Scientific studies that produce evidence on women's smoking are especially important in a context of increasing information and awareness about the adverse health effects of smoking. This paper examines the impact of two anti-tobacco policies on the smoking decisions of women living in Spain: prices and pictorial health warning messages. Data has been taken from the Spanish National Health Surveys of 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2011. The results of this research may be of international interest given that specific indirect taxes on tobacco products and pictorial labels have been introduced by many governments around the world. The main contribution of this paper is the consideration of generation cohorts as a control for the different time periods or stages that women experience during their life cycle. People make decisions based on their past choices, experiences and messages they have received during their lives. This article examines the way that women from different generational groups have responded to two recent public policies on smoking: indirect tobacco taxes and pictorial health warning labels.

The article is organised as follows: after this [Introduction](#), [Section 2](#) comprises a review of the published literature on gender and age differences and the individual response to cigarette health warning labels and the price of tobacco products; [Section 3](#) describes the data and the econometric model; [Section 4](#) presents the empirical results; [Section 5](#) discusses the most relevant conclusions and possible implications for public policies.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of feminisation is frequently employed in contemporary social science research to describe smoking patterns among women. In this context, *feminisation* refers to smoking as a behaviour that was exclusively related to men but then adopted by women (Jiménez Rodrigo, 2010). Given the importance of the time perspective, studies on tobacco use should consider how time scales and birth cohorts modulate gender differences – female birth cohorts have revealed smoking patterns that have persisted through the years (Keyes et al., 2013). People from the same generation usually feel that they belong to a population group, but more importantly, they share behaviours and beliefs and they have lived through the same historical events (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This present study is based on four different generational groups in Spain (Garcia, Stein, & Pin, 2008):

- a) *Traditional* (born before 1950): These are practical people, they work for a living and accept that decisions are taken by the upper levels of the hierarchy and they are loyal to it. They were born during the Franco dictatorship and spent their early adulthood under the regime. These women were educated to be housewives and to take care of their families.
- b) *Baby boomers* (1951–1964): Optimistic and idealistic, they live for work and the hope of being rewarded for their efforts. They believe that decisions should be taken by consensus, so they are not subservient to the hierarchy. They were born during the dictatorship but they show rebellious attitudes towards the establishment. This group of women had access to higher and further education and were able to enter the labour market.
- c) *Generation X* (1965–1983): Sceptical and independent, they believe decisions should be taken by those who are competent. Work is seen as enjoyable but they can differentiate between private and professional life. They were born at the end of the dictatorship or during the early years of democratic Spain. These women achieved educational levels that were as high as men but there were important gender differences in the labour market that limited their salaries and possibilities for promotion.
- d) *Generation Y* also known as *Millennials* (1985–1999): Realistic and determined, they are pragmatic, creative and oriented to obtaining results. They understand the value of collectivism but they are courteous to the hierarchy. They were born when Spain was already a member of the European Union. Spain's membership of the

European Union accelerated the modernisation of many Spanish state responsibilities such as taxation and public health policies on tobacco products.

In Spain, the biggest growth of cigarette smoking among women took place during the transition from dictatorship to democracy (the 1970s). At that time, women experienced intense social changes: female liberation; migration from rural to urban areas; easy access to the job market and university education. Smoking was adopted by Spanish women as a symbol of emancipation and sexual equality (Jiménez Rodrigo, 2010).

Differences in birth cohorts underline the fact that anti-smoking policies are not only necessary for young women, they are also important for middle-aged women (Birkett, 1997; Marugame et al., 2010; Wagenknecht et al., 1998).

One of the most common measures aimed at reducing tobacco consumption is taxation. Although increasing tobacco taxes is a population-based control policy, there are differences in effect when adjusted by population groups; men and women react to tobacco taxes in the same way, but the intensity of the effect varies. Some authors have found that men are more sensitive to tobacco taxes than women (Chaloupka, 1990; Hersch, 2000; Lewit & Coate, 1981), whilst others have concluded that women are more responsive than men (Farrelly, Brady, Pechacek, & Woollery, 2001; Nonnemaker & Farrelly, 2011; Stehr, 2007; Townsend, Roderick, & Cooper, 1994). This indicates a wide dispersion in cigarette price elasticities (Stehr, 2007).

One possible explanation might be found in the proxies of socioeconomic status. In general, women have lower incomes than men and people with low incomes are usually more responsive to price changes (Stehr, 2007). Low socioeconomic status is often associated with an increased likelihood of smoking (Gilman, Abrams, & Buka, 2003; McGee & Williams, 2006), but the association is far from evident.

If men and women exhibit similar tobacco elasticities with regard to educational levels it infers that gender differences on smoking rates could be explained by gender gaps in education. In that case, policies that improve educational achievement among women might be effective in reducing women's smoking rates. Although access to education in Spain is universal, there are still socioeconomic differences, especially among older cohorts that might explain gender differences on smoking decisions. However, if men and women have different tobacco elasticities with regard to education, then education policies may even increase gender differences; for example, if education plays no role in smoking decisions among women (if educated women smoke in order to demonstrate a modern, liberal image), then policies that focus on education will reduce smoking rates among men but will have a limited impact on women.

Two very recent studies (with data from France, Germany, Norway and the United States) conclude that educational differences in smoking are strongly determined by birth cohorts. Educational differences in both daily smokers and those that never smoke increased among young cohorts and levelled off among older cohorts. This result emphasises the importance of birth cohorts when studying behaviour and social backgrounds (Pampel et al., 2015; Vedø, 2014).

In terms of public policy, it seems that anti-smoking policies may have heterogeneous effects on smoking behaviours among men and women who share socioeconomic characteristics (Bauer, Göhlmann, & Sinning, 2007; Escobedo & Peddicord, 1997). Only 2% of the gender difference in smoking is explained by socioeconomic gender inequalities, for example, in education or income; 98% can be attributed to gender disparities with regard to attitudes, beliefs and social pressure (Chung, Lim, & Lee, 2010).

Female smoking is reinforced by social, economic and political processes that change women's images and roles in society. Tobacco companies take advantage of this fact and target women, using aggressive marketing strategies (Suárez, 2011). The published literature indicates that changing gender roles lead to more women smoking, for example, even in countries such as Italy, where smoking rates are falling for both

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