

Article

Structural Racism? The Socioeconomic Segregation of the Immigrant Population in Spain and Its Drivers

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of structural racism and the process of ethno-stratification affecting immigrants from the Global South in Spain. Drawing on national survey data and recent research, it analyses the socio-economic incorporation of immigrants in the aftermath of the Great Recession and subsequent economic recovery, emphasising both their rootedness in Spanish society and their continued segregation. The findings indicate that immigrants remain disproportionately concentrated in low-wage and temporary employment, positioned beneath the native-born precariat and distant from average living standards. This persistent segmentation cannot be explained solely by immigrants' qualifications or cultural adaptation, but rather by an interplay of structural, institutional, social, and ethnic factors. At the core lies the Spanish "Mediterranean" development model, characterised by a low-productivity economy dependent on cheap labour, a limited welfare state, and strong family-based social protection, which together generate continuous demand for flexible immigrant workers. Additional drivers include migration and labour policies, gendered labour segmentation, and ethnic discrimination, all reinforcing immigrants' vulnerability. The article concludes that immigrant labour has become essential to Spain's economic and demographic model, yet its enduring segregation underscores the need for renewed public policies that promote social cohesion and intercultural integration.

Keywords: ethno-stratification; immigration; Spain; development model; ethnic discrimination; racism; poverty and labour segmentation



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1. Introduction

Structural racism is understood as a process of ethno-stratification whereby a majority segment of immigrant workers from the Global South becomes confined to the lowest positions in the labour and social structure [1]. Structural racism has been a recurrent topic in the academic literature on international migration in Western countries and, more specifically, in the Spanish case [2–9]. Following the recession and the subsequent economic recovery, the immigrant population in Spain has continued to grow and has remained structurally connected to the country's development model, while continuing its process of incorporation and settlement. In 2024, immigrants represented 18% of the Spanish population, with 33% of this group having been naturalised [10]. This percentage increases significantly within certain age groups; for instance, immigrants constitute 31% of the Spanish population aged 28. Furthermore, one in three children born in Spain is the child of an immigrant mother [11].

This new ethnic segment, although strongly rooted and integrated within Spanish society nonetheless suffers an intense process of segregation and ethno-stratification, emerging as one of the most vulnerable groups within Spanish society [12]. Immigrants have thus traditionally been incorporated into the lowest ranks of the Spanish labour and social structure, forming a sort of ethnic precariat beneath the native-born precariat, with lower wages and higher rates of temporary employment and poverty [7,13].

In this context, the present paper seeks to investigate the persistence and reproduction of this ethno-segmentation within Spanish society in recent years. Specifically, the two basic research questions addressed in this article are as follows:

- RQ1: Does the immigrant population continue to be concentrated and segmented at the bottom of the Spanish socio-economic structure?
- RQ2: What are the main factors or drivers currently explaining this ethno-stratification?

In the Section 2, we outline the method and data used to address the research questions. Section 3 then characterises the process of socio-economic segregation among immigrants in Spain and its main causes. Finally, Section 4 summarises the key features and drivers of the current ethno-stratification process, situating them within the literature and proposing specific guidelines for public intervention.

2. Materials and Methods

There are a variety of terms and concepts used to address the issue of immigrants' ethno-stratification in Western countries: ethnic segregation, native advantage, ethnic segmentation, racialization, ethnic closure, and so on [3,5–7]. In this article, although these terms are referenced, we have chosen to use the classical concept of structural racism which refers to the social process by which a specific ethnic or racialized group—in this case, immigrants from the Global South—is confined and subordinated to the lowest labour and economic positions within the host country's social structure, due to a set of factors [1].

Beyond this conceptual definition, the key issue is the explanatory framework. There are essentially two main and recurrent theoretical approaches to this topic [6,8,9].

On one hand, there is a unidimensional perspective that seeks to explain immigrants' subordinated labour and economic position by their low human capital, specifically their lower levels of education and skills, or their lack of natives' social capital and labour experience [14]. On the other hand, there is a more holistic and comprehensive approach that brings together various political, economic, and social factors and drivers to fully understand the processes of immigrants' economic segregation and its reproduction and persistence over time [4,8,12].

In this article, we adopt this latter, more classical sociological approach, which seeks to articulate social structures, communities, and individuals within specific historical processes [15,16].

In this sense, it is necessary to take into account the host country's social and economic structure—particularly its development model—as these help explain the mobilisation and incorporation of immigrant populations into the lower rungs of the host country's labour and economic hierarchy [1,2,4,16].

Secondly, it is important to consider political and institutional factors—specifically, the host country's migration policies, including both policies managing international migration flows and those governing integration—as these are fundamental tools for recruiting and incorporating immigrant workers into the labour market as cheap and flexible labour [3,4].

In this sense, the concept of institutional racism highlights how ethnic discrimination becomes embedded in migration policies and institutional practices, reinforcing the socio-economic segmentation of migrants and their descendants [17,18]. This occurs through measures such as legal barriers to the labour market, 'national preference' in certain sectors,

restrictions on foreign investment and business creation, and the non-recognition of foreign qualifications and work experience.

Thirdly, several authors have emphasised the need to consider social class, gender dynamics, and the ethnic factor to fully understand the process of immigrants' economic segmentation [1,3,19,20]. Class, gender, and ethnic categories are mobilised and used in specific social contexts by different groups and social classes to legitimise and justify the economic segregation of immigrants. This approach, which intersects class, gender, and ethnic factors, has been repeatedly employed in the Spanish academic context to understand immigrants' economic segregation in Spain [5,6,21].

Finally, it is essential to consider the resources and family and community strategies that immigrants mobilise to sustain their life projects and cope with the economic segregation they often experience in host countries [4,6].

To address the research questions and analyse the ethnic segmentation of Spain's immigrant population, we draw on three types of data. First, we use secondary data from the Continuous Population Survey (ECP)—quarterly estimates of population size, demographics, and mobility that complement the Population Register; the Labour Force Survey (EPA)—the main quarterly labour market survey measuring employment, unemployment, and worker/job characteristics; the Wage Structure Survey (EES)—a four-yearly survey providing detailed wage information by worker and firm attributes; and the Living Conditions Survey (ECV)—an annual EU-harmonised survey on income, poverty, material deprivation, and social exclusion, all produced by the National Statistics Institute (INE) [10,22–24]. We also use labour market statistics from the State Public Employment Service (SEPE) [25]. These constitute the principal official data sources of the Spanish state.

Second, we draw on the FOESSA Social Integration Survey, a large-scale, nationally representative study conducted by the FOESSA Foundation and Caritas España [26]. It provides comprehensive information on social exclusion, inequality, living conditions, household vulnerabilities, and the multidimensional processes shaping social integration in Spain.

Finally, we use the ENPOI (Encuesta Nacional a Población de Origen Extranjero) survey on the immigrant-origin population, conducted by Comillas University and Caritas Española and published in 2020 [9]. The survey covers foreign-born residents aged 18+, using 2017 INE municipal register data for population size and structure. Owing to census-access and budget constraints, a non-probabilistic quota sample of 1200 cases was constructed by country of birth, sex, and age group (18–34; 35+). Fieldwork focused on the regions of Andalusia, Catalonia, Madrid, Valencia, the Basque Country, and Murcia (Spain), which together host 72% of Spain's immigrant population. Quotas were proportionally distributed across regions, with controls for nationality (34% naturalised), education (23% university-level), and period of arrival (75% arrived between 1990 and 2008; 25% arrived between 2009 and 2017).

3. Results

In this section we will illustrate the main characteristics and dimensions of the ethno-stratification process of the immigrant population in Spanish society and try to establish the multiple drivers and factors that explain this vulnerability, starting from its development model.

3.1. *The Spanish Development Model That Attracted and Recruited Migrants from the Global South as Precarious Workers*

'The true determinant of migration flows is the process of economic development in the industrial region, particularly the number and character of jobs available' [27].

The incorporation and segmentation of immigrants from the Global South into the Spanish social structure are determined by the Spanish development model and the labour positions assigned to immigrants within it.

The development model in Spain, structurally similar to that of other Mediterranean countries, underwent a drastic transformation during the 1980s and 1990s, abandoning the previous low-wage Fordist model. This new model was built on three interrelated pillars: a pattern of low-productivity economic growth based on labour-intensive sectors; a limited and reduced welfare state, which expanded rapidly in the 1980s but was subsequently constrained in the 1990s to fit the logic of the low-productivity economy and its need for abundant and cheap labour; and, finally, the traditional 'Mediterranean' family as a protective institution to address poverty and life risks, providing basic care and effectively 'complementing' and containing the development of welfare provision.

This new development model has generated an enormous demand for low-waged and flexible labour from the 1990s onwards, initially targeting the local labour market and, subsequently, through connection with earlier international migratory flows, recruiting immigrant workers from the Global South and mobilising and incorporating them into the Spanish economy [16,28]. Specifically, two decisive structural processes underpinned this significant labour demand and the progressive incorporation of immigrant workers.

First, there was a new pattern of economic growth. Following the process of deindustrialisation in the 1980s, Spain specialised in labour-intensive sectors such as tourism, construction, agro-export, and basic low-value-added industries. The dynamism, competitiveness, and profitability of these sectors in globalised markets critically depend on the continuous mobilisation and supply of cheap and temporary labour [12,28,29].

This shift in the economic growth pattern was accompanied by an intense process of economic restructuring, based on massive externalisation of direct production work from the big private companies and the creation of a new manufacturing sector comprising small and medium-sized enterprises [2,16]. This restructuring expanded the economic asymmetries between productive and commercial capital and the segmentation of the Spanish labour market, consolidating a growing segment of precarious employment in elementary occupations linked to the low-productivity sectors of the Spanish growth model and to the demand for personal and care services from the new urban middle classes [5,15,30].

Since the mid-1990s, the consolidation of this new growth pattern triggered a strong demand for cheap and flexible manual labour. Initially, this demand was met by native workers from the working classes, especially young people and women, and progressively, as the new economic model expanded, by international migrant workers who were mobilised and incorporated as low-wage and precarious labourers: construction workers, waiters, and other low-skilled service employees in hospitality and tourism, agricultural day labourers in new agro-export chains, logistics workers, and so on [13,16,28,29].

The second structural process linked to this large demand for immigrants' cheap labour is the social transformation in both family organisation and the social role of women.

Since the 1980s, Spanish society has experienced a set of interconnected changes: improvements in the educational and employment trajectories of women; the emergence of new lifestyles, work patterns, and leisure activities among the new urban middle class; growing population ageing; and the rise of new cultural and social norms regarding couples and fertility [5,31]. These social transformations abruptly altered the traditional and asymmetric gender-role family in Spain, which was based on the caregiving woman and the male breadwinner, resulting in a significant reorganisation and increase in households' need for protection and care, roles that had traditionally been fulfilled by women due to strict gender norms.

The increased care and protection needs of Spanish households, as in other Southern European countries, have not been met by the welfare state, but rather by two social resources: the double burden on women and the hiring of external labour to do the family domestic and care tasks. This second structural “solution” led to a growing demand for cheap and highly flexible labour in the domestic and care sector, which was first met by native working-class women, and, progressively since the mid-1990s, by immigrant women from the Global South [2,5,32].

Therefore, the new Spanish development model—with its pattern of low-productivity growth, limited and constrained welfare state, and a family pillar undergoing change and retreat—has generated, since the 1990s, an enormous demand for cheap and flexible labour. This demand has increasingly been met by recruiting workers from the Global South, who are concentrated at the bottom of the occupational structure [7,12].

For example, during the expansion period of 1994–2008, the Spanish model created 8.2 million jobs, mainly temporary positions in manual occupations, of which immigrant workers accounted for 2.8 million—representing 33% of the total [22].

Following the crisis (2008–2014), and during the current expansion period (2015–2025), the demand for cheap labour has intensified due to the continuation of the economic model through a new round of wage devaluation, cuts, and containment in social spending and the progressive weakening of the family as a protective and caregiving pillar. This demand has increasingly been channelled towards immigrant workers, incorporating them as cheap and flexible labourers in the country’s labour-intensive sectors [31].

Thus, between 2015 and 2023, the Spanish economy incorporated an average of 677,467 immigrants annually, while annual departures averaged 334,860, resulting in a net positive balance of 342,000 foreign-born people per year [33].

At the same time, during those years, as the new expansionary cycle unfolded, total employment grew by 4.04 million jobs, a 24% increase. Immigrant labour was, if anything, even more decisive, representing 44% of all new jobs during those years [22]. Social Security affiliation data also support this: between 2015 and 2024, affiliation among immigrants increased by 78%, compared to 18% for natives [25].

3.2. Immigrants at the Bottom of the Social Structure

The Spanish development model, with its strong structural dependence on low-wage and temporary labour, has thus become the central factor explaining the mobilisation, arrival, and recruitment of immigrant workers from the Global South and their significant concentration at the bottom of the labour and economic hierarchy.

This process of ethno-stratification, which existed before 2009, has been maintained and reproduced after periods of crisis and recovery due to the general advance of the precariat in Spain and the deeper economic and labour adjustments experienced by immigrant families [34]. In the following pages, the main features of this socioeconomic segregation of immigrants in Spain will be presented.

Firstly, immigrant workers remain predominantly concentrated in elementary manual occupations within the labour-intensive sectors of the Spanish development model. Labour segregation is not completely and directly related to their levels of education or skills, which are very similar, albeit slightly lower, to those of the Spanish population due to migratory selectivity [26]. According to official data from the EPA (INE), educational attainment levels among native and immigrant populations are relatively similar. Among natives, 42.3% have only compulsory education, compared to 44.4% among immigrants. Technical or vocational training accounts for 21.9% of natives and 29.7% of immigrants, while tertiary education reaches 35.7% and 25.8%, respectively [22].

According to data from the ENPOI, 59% of immigrants from the Global South—61% of women and 56% of men—work in elementary occupations in the Spanish economy, mainly as waiters, kitchen assistants, cleaners, domestic and care workers, agricultural, industrial, and construction labourers, logistics workers, and so forth [9].

Data from the EPA also reflect this labour segmentation. Thus, in 2024, 60.2%—compared to 60.4% in 2008—of Latin American immigrants in Spain, the country's largest ethnic group, and 53% of the overall immigrant population, continued to be concentrated in these elementary occupations of the Spanish model, while 'only' 28.7% of natives worked as elementary labourers. At the same time, the proportions in the highest ranks of the occupational hierarchy are reversed: 27% of native workers are employed as managers or professionals compared to only 8.4% of immigrants [22].

Similarly, data from SEPE also demonstrate this segregation of immigrants in the Spanish labour market [25]. For example, in 2024, one out of every two contracts (50.6%) signed with immigrant workers was for these elementary occupations, compared to 27.8% among natives. Immigrant workers have also become the main workforce in the key labour-intensive sectors of the Spanish economy: in 2024, they accounted for 60% of domestic employees, 55% of agricultural labourers, 34% of bricklayers, 32.3% of cleaning staff, 40.6% of kitchen assistants, 35% of salaried cooks, and 28% of salaried drivers [25].

Secondly, beyond this occupational segregation, immigrant workers are subject to intense labour precarity, significantly greater than that experienced by natives. In fact, only 27% of immigrant workers, compared to 54% of natives, are employed in the socially normative form of employment—regular, full-time jobs—which is the foundation for social integration in Western societies. The remaining 73% of immigrants are in precarious employment situations: temporary contracts, part-time work, low wages, hourly contracts, and so on [9]. According to SEPE, only 22% of contracts with immigrants in 2024 were for regular full-time employment. The rest were atypical: 22% were discontinuous permanent contracts, 24.7% were part-time, and 31.3% were temporary full-time contracts [25].

Reflecting these labour conditions, immigrants' wages are low: 89% of the immigrant population earn less than EUR 1500 per month, clearly below the salaries of natives—38% lower than the average wage income of natives—and only 9% of immigrant workers earn more than the average income in Spain [9]. This ethno-racial division is confirmed when analysing average wage data from the Wage Structure Survey (EES) of the INE. In 2023, immigrant workers from the Global South earned 35% less than natives, with strong segmentation by gender: 28% less in the case of men, and 41% less for women [23].

Finally, the unemployment rate for immigrants remains higher than that of natives, despite the expansionary period. For example, in 2024, native men had an unemployment rate of 9.7% and native women 12.6%, both significantly lower than the rates for men (16.3%) and women (18.9%) from Latin America, and men (17.9%) and women (28.4%) from African and Asian countries [22].

The immigrant population in Spain has an annual income that is markedly lower than that of the native population. In 2023, the annual income of immigrants from the Global South represented just 60% of the Spanish average annual income [24]. The average income for the immigrant population, as reported by EAPN was even worse, at only 57.6% of the Spanish average in 2024 [35].

This substantial economic inequality is reflected in the poverty risk rate, which is much higher for immigrants from the Global South (44%) than for natives (15%) in 2023 [24]. In fact, immigrants are overrepresented among the poor in Spain, accounting for 29% of all people in poverty while making up only 13.4% of the total population. Furthermore, severe poverty affects a much greater proportion of the immigrant population (24.3%) than the native population (5.3%) [35].

Moreover, the AROPE rate of poverty and social exclusion, the official EU indicator, places an alarming 54.1% of the immigrant population in a situation of poverty and exclusion in Spain, compared to 20.8% of natives in 2024. This indicator, however, has declined since 2022, when it stood at 60.4% [35].

The EINSFOESSA index, based on Caritas' national surveys—which uses 35 indicators and divides society into four segments (integrated, precarious, and excluded, with exclusion itself split into moderate and severe)—confirms this process of ethnic economic segmentation in Spain. Thus, in 2024, 19.3% of the Spanish population was in the exclusion zone—of whom 74% were Spanish and 26% immigrants—while 35.7% were in the precarious integration zone and 45% in the full integration zone. These figures represented a slight improvement compared to 2021, immediately after COVID-19 [26].

However, when the data are analysed by ethnic origin, a clear divide emerges between natives and immigrants. Among immigrants from the Global South—measured here through the Latin American population—41.8% are in the exclusion zone, compared to 15% of natives; 38% are in the precarious zone, compared to 31.2% of natives; and only 23.3% are in the integration zone, compared to 54% of natives [26]. These disparities are even greater for people from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa: 76.7% are in the exclusion zone, 23.3% in the precarious zone, and less than 0.5% in the integration zone [26].

Finally, 19.4% of the immigrant population is affected by some form of severe material and social deprivation (CMSS), compared to just 6% of the native population [35]. Indeed, 65% of immigrants struggle to make ends meet, compared to 44.3% of natives; 48.4% cannot afford to take a one-week holiday each year, compared to 31.5% of natives; 34% cannot afford to keep their home adequately heated, compared to 16% of natives; and 62.5% are unable to cover unexpected expenses, compared to 31.5% of Spaniards [24].

This vulnerable and segregated labour and economic condition of the immigrant-origin population in Spain is also reflected in their residential situation, generating three fundamental effects.

First, immigrants and their families are concentrated in the most working-class neighbourhoods and municipalities of the country due to their low incomes. These are social spaces where, since 2008, social and material needs have increased considerably, while public services, having been cut, are under increasing pressure.

Second, immigrants have relatively low access to home ownership—only 23.6% of immigrants compared to 75% of Spaniards [24]. Home ownership, in a country marked by a weak and expensive rental market, has become a central element of material and vital protection.

Third, immigrants are inserted and concentrated in the most precarious segments of the Spanish housing stock: old, small, and deteriorated working-class housing. Residential strategies in response to exorbitant housing prices include high levels of overcrowding among immigrants. Thus, the room, rather than the flat or house, has become the basic housing unit for many immigrant families, as it is the only viable strategy for accessing accommodation in a context of high prices and low and irregular salaries [12,29]. For example, since 2014, the average rental price has increased by 39.3%, while deflated incomes have risen only 17.3% [24]. At the same time, people living below the poverty threshold in Spain—44% of immigrants—devote 35.5% of their income to housing costs, and 54.4% if they are renting [24].

Finally, as noted throughout this section, ethnic division in Spain is also intersected by gender and ethno-national origin. Thus, within the immigrant-origin population, women and those from the Maghreb—especially Morocco—and sub-Saharan African countries have the worst labour, economic, and residential conditions [36].

3.3. *The Other Factors: “Manufacturing” Vulnerable Workers*

In the processes of ethno-stratification associated with international migration, at least two fundamental forces are recurrently at work. The first drives the mobilisation, recruitment, and incorporation of immigrant workers into vulnerable labour and social positions in the host country. The second seeks to immobilise, maintain, and confine these “foreign” workers in such devalued labour, residential, and economic conditions [7,9,37].

The development model in Spain—and, specifically, its structural need for cheap and precarious labour, generated by its pattern of low-productivity growth and the growing demand for household services and care—has been the driving force behind both the arrival and the persistent incorporation of immigrants at the bottom of the country’s labour and social structure.

However, alongside this factor, it is also necessary to highlight the existence and role of other social and institutional factors that channel and confine immigrant workers from the Global South into these vulnerable labour and social positions, thereby contributing to the formation and reproduction of ethnic segmentation in Spain.

In this section, we analyse in detail these “other” factors that transform immigrants into socially and institutionally vulnerable workers—rendering them, as a result, available for devalued and precarious labour and residential conditions.

3.3.1. Spanish Migratory Policies

In Spain, since the mid-1990s, there has been broad political and business consensus regarding the structural need for cheap and flexible immigrant labour, driven by the requirements of the country’s development model.

The state attempted to channel and manage this demand for labour through regular labour migration programmes such as annual quotas and recruitment at origin. However, due to the difficulties and costs associated with these regular programmes, successive governments and the private sector ultimately chose to address the demand for and arrival of immigrant workers through a *laissez-faire* policy, leaving the management of migratory flows and their social integration largely “in the hands” of the market [12,21,38].

This *de facto* migration policy managed and regulated essential labour migration for the country through three sequential actions. First, it maintained a degree of selective “permissiveness” regarding the regular entry of international migrants, especially Latin Americans, primarily as tourists and via airports, while simultaneously sealing off the Southern Border and regular access for migrants from other regions of the Global South. Second, it demonstrated effective acceptance of irregular stay in the country by these migrants from the Global South, and their informal incorporation into the labour market, mostly in low-skilled occupations tied to the intensive sectors of the Spanish growth model: construction, tourism, hospitality, agro-export, personal services, and so on. Third, once incorporated into the labour market, a broad process of legal recognition and regularisation was established, primarily through various regularisation processes intended almost exclusively for those already present in the country, working informally, and holding a formal job offer. These regularisation processes were initially extraordinary but since 2006 have been channelled through ordinary procedures based on “*arraigo*” (rootedness).

Through this “flexible” model, successive Spanish governments allowed the ‘market’ to summon and manage international migration in response to the Spanish economy’s demand for cheap labour. This approach mobilised thousands of immigrant workers from the Global South and channelled them into the elementary and precarious occupations of the Spanish development model.

In short, despite strong political and media rhetoric on border control and opposition to irregular immigration, in practice, irregular stay and informal employment have been

central to Spain's model of managing, adjusting, and subordinating migrants to Spanish labour market needs.

This laissez-faire policy, supported and legitimised by the state and the private sector, in practice largely abandoned the formal and regular labour migration models—such as the Guestworker or Bracero programmes—due to their excessive logistical, bureaucratic, and labour costs, and instead adopted a flexible model with periods of irregularity, which better suited the growing need for fluid, temporary, and cheap labour in the Spanish economy.

This lax and ethnically selective migration model largely continued during the period of economic expansion, consistently attracting and channelling immigrant workers—regardless of their educational and professional qualifications—into the elementary occupations of the intensive model, as well as into domestic, care, and personal services demanded by increasingly ageing Spanish middle-class households.

Nevertheless, this migration policy has, at least so far—and unlike in other Western countries—firmly supported regularisation processes for immigrant workers and access to basic public services through registration (*empadronamiento*), thus avoiding the formation of permanent pockets of irregularity in conditions of severe vulnerability.

In parallel, three other institutional mechanisms have contributed to processes of ethnic segmentation in Spain. First, there is the tightening of legal requirements and administrative procedures for recognising and accrediting studies, qualifications, and competencies obtained by migrants. This policy prevents the recognition of such qualifications and pushes migrants into elementary occupations.

Second, there exists a strong link between access to and renewal of residence permits and to having a job offer or being actively employed. This association undermines immigrants' "bargaining power" in the labour market, renders them available for any job or employment conditions, and ultimately helps channel and fix them into the cheap and precarious elementary occupations of the Spanish model [21].

Third, mechanisms exist that favour and give preference to natives in the labour market, which, as they restrict immigrants' access to other sectors and occupations, tend to relegate and push immigrants into the least desirable and most precarious jobs in the economic system.

In this sense, it is possible to speak of a kind of institutional racism in Spain, whereby a series of prejudices, stereotypes, and negative representations about immigrants from the Global South are incorporated into and crystallise within the institutional mechanisms and legal frameworks that manage international migration, facilitating their treatment as a precarious and devalued workforce and promoting their ethno-stratification [1,4,5].

3.3.2. Social Class and Poverty

The social origin of migrants is another key factor explaining their vulnerability in Spain. In the case of immigrants, the class factor relates not so much to their cultural and educational capital—since their educational levels and qualifications are generally similar to those of the native population—but rather to the difficulty of activating that capital in the Spanish labour market, and above all, to the conditions of poverty and material vulnerability that characterise their process of integration in Spain.

The poverty experienced by immigrant households, in the first place, drives various household members, both young people and adults, into the labour market to pool wages and increase household income, negatively affecting their educational trajectories and their capacity for intra-family care.

The poverty of immigrants and their urgent need for income also operates as a burden that compels and disciplines them in the labour market, forcing them to accept devalued jobs and employment conditions. As an Ecuadorian migrant explained, poverty forces

them to work “in whatever comes up” and to “put up with” these jobs, since “you endure it because you are in need and you have to endure it,” thus accepting intensified work rhythms, low wages, endless working days, or deregulated contracts [9].

This material insecurity, as described above, tends to be more intense than that experienced by native workers, who are generally better protected—through more robust welfare support, home ownership, greater economic coverage, and wider family and social networks—and therefore have greater capacity to safeguard educational trajectories and negotiate employment conditions.

Finally, many migrants in Spain are also pressured by the economic needs of family members in their country of origin and the obligation to send remittances, a commitment that is sometimes at the heart of their migration project and separation. This transnational pressure, which originates in their home country, materialises in Spain as a persistent urgency that weighs on immigrant workers and pushes them to accept and remain in devalued jobs.

The material and domestic insecurity faced by immigrants thus acts as a mechanism that channels and fixes them in elementary, low-paid, and precarious occupations, ensuring the continuous supply of workers for devalued jobs and the reproduction of ethnic segmentation in the country.

3.3.3. Gender Asymmetries

Asymmetric gender roles have played a central role in the process of impoverishment of women of immigrant origin in Spain. As we have seen, these women experience even worse living and working conditions than immigrant men.

The sexual division of labour and prevailing gender definitions regarding women’s work—characterising it as unskilled and light, the ideology of the supplementary wage, and the division of domestic roles—are used in the labour market to provoke and justify the selective recruitment of women into certain sectors and tasks, such as cleaning, domestic, and care work, and their employment under devalued and precarious conditions [5,32].

At the same time, these asymmetric gender codes shape migration projects and their social and domestic organisation [20,32]. These codes, when reproduced within the family and social environment, further undermine the living and working conditions of migrant women: the over-utilisation of female labour as family workforce both inside and outside the home, the representation and use of women’s wages as a complementary and secondary income, and the unequal distribution of domestic and care responsibilities and burdens.

These asymmetric gender codes, constructed and employed within the family and community as well as in the labour market, thus become a factor that helps explain the processes of ethnic segregation in Spain and the gap between immigrant men and women.

3.3.4. The Ethnic Factor

Ethno-racial discrimination is another key factor explaining the economic segregation of immigrants in Spain.

Group prejudice towards immigration generally includes four basic elements: the portrayal of migrants as the strange and different “other” who do not belong to the community; the depiction of immigrants as an inferior, primitive, and backward social condition, to whom a series of negative traits—with clear colonial roots—is attributed; the belief in native advantage throughout various spheres of society, which relegates immigrants to secondary social positions; and finally, the representation of immigration as a group threat to that native advantage [18,39].

This perspective on the immigrant “other” turns the stereotypical ethnic markers into cultural categories, and ultimately, into a kind of second nature attributed to people of immigrant origin [7,19].

These devalued categories of group prejudice, whose labels are dynamic and ever-changing, are widespread and deeply rooted among the native population, and are recreated and used by them, and their different political and economic strata, to justify and legitimise native advantage and the process of discrimination and subordination of immigrants within the social and economic system [6,7].

Discrimination operates according to a logic of ethnic or social closure [40]. In a given context, the local population or particular interest groups mobilise and assign certain traits to immigrants from the Global South, with the purpose of, on the one hand, excluding them from desirable positions or preferred social goods reserved for natives, and, on the other hand, incorporating them into the economic system but assigning them to devalued occupational, social, or residential positions—thus facilitating their use and exploitation as cheap and low-status labour [6].

In previous works, we highlighted that the constant attribution of negative ethnic labels to immigrants served this clear material function.

For example, as we have shown previously, immigrants were frequently described by natives and employers as a “raw labour force” with a supposed natural inclination for intense manual and operational work. In other cases, they were depicted as representing a backward, primitive, and poor social condition— “as if we had just come out of the jungle half-naked” or “as if in our countries we were starving.” For instance, a Latin American woman recounted that, on her first day of domestic work, her Spanish employer “took me to a little room and asked me—pointing to the washing machine—if I knew what it was.” Or a native neighbour, speaking about the residential overcrowding of immigrants in a working-class Spanish neighbourhood, justified it by saying, “they are used to living like that in their countries, all packed together.” [9,18].

These and other labels, thus, are used in specific productive and social contexts to justify, for example, assigning immigrants to precarious, exhausting, and poorly paid jobs in Spain’s labour-intensive sectors; renting them old, small, and substandard housing at high prices; or, conversely, legitimising their exclusion from certain residential spaces, jobs, working conditions, or other social goods [5,7,18].

Indeed, paradoxically, in many Spanish productive sectors that rely heavily on immigrant labour, the structural dependence on these workers coexists with discourses that systematically devalue and undermine their qualifications, skills, and even their productive role and local presence. This apparently contradictory duality—labour dependence on the one hand and dehumanisation and negative labelling on the other—makes possible and legitimises their continual incorporation into the labour market, though under precarious contractual arrangements and degraded wage conditions [7,28].

Ethnic prejudice, therefore, is not merely a cognitive or moral failure, but, above all, a group and social mechanism that contributes to the labour, residential, and economic discrimination of immigrants in Spain, and their ethnic segregation—ultimately associated with the economic interests of the native population and its different social classes [1,18,19,41].

3.4. Resources Against Poverty

The resources available to immigrant workers and their households in Spain to combat processes of segregation and impoverishment are essentially twofold: first, the benefits, services, and assistance provided by the Spanish welfare state; and second, the systems

of mutual support rooted in family households and in wider social and community networks [6,42,43].

The Spanish welfare state, which is primarily contributory in nature, plays an essential redistributive role, effectively helping mitigate the high poverty levels in Spain. In 2024, for instance, state social transfers reduced the poverty rate from 42.6% to 19.7%, thereby lifting 11.1 million people out of poverty [35]. Nonetheless, its effectiveness is limited, as the impact of the Spanish welfare state on poverty is among the most restricted in the European context. In fact, while the Spanish welfare state reduces the poverty rate by 22.4 percentage points after social transfers, the European average is 26.7 points, and in Italy, a country with some structural welfare similarities to Spain, it is 27.7 [44].

The impact of public social protection on the poverty levels of the immigrant population, although relevant, is significantly lower than that observed among the native population. In contrast to the distorted narrative that accuses immigrants of abusing the welfare system, the data show that immigrants are underrepresented within the Spanish public system and that their net contribution is positive: they contribute more than they receive [9,45].

This is fundamentally due to four reasons. Firstly, immigrants' precarious employment positions provide them with weaker access to resources and benefits within a system as contributory as the Spanish one. For example, although immigrants are overrepresented among the unemployed—accounting for 23.96% of all unemployed people in Spain—they represent only 12.83% of unemployment benefit recipients [22,25].

Secondly, their presence within the pension system is marginal, owing to the low percentage of immigrants over 65 and their relatively short contribution trajectories. Pensions are the most significant social transfer in Spain, reducing the poverty rate by 16.7 percentage points in 2024 [35]. Thirdly, immigrants are heavily concentrated in working-class neighbourhoods and municipalities, where—despite a sharp increase in social needs since 2008—public services and social support have faced successive cutbacks. Fourthly, their vulnerable legal and administrative status, combined with the development of preference-based legislation, hinders their access to certain jobs, services, and benefits.

Despite experiencing worse socioeconomic and welfare conditions, immigrants benefit from stronger family ties and social support mechanisms than natives. These larger, more supportive families, together with active social networks, provide crucial resources such as housing, access to the labour market, and affordable goods and services, thereby protecting them against labour insecurity and poverty [9,26,42].

In recent years, Spanish households and family networks have continued to weaken and move away from the asymmetric breadwinner model due to various economic, social, and cultural changes. Between 2009 and 2023, the proportion of single-person households rose from 22.4% to 28.42% [46]. Meanwhile, the average household size has declined from 2.61 members per household in 2010 to 2.53 in 2022 [47].

Immigrants, however, generally continue to maintain strong family households and networks that provide their members with protection and care against poverty and vital risks. In these households, women continue to play a central role as wage earners and providers of domestic care and services [31]. According to the ENPOI survey, the average number of people per immigrant household is 3.34, rising to 3.8 among households of Moroccan origin. Furthermore, the most common household type among immigrants is the four-person household—accounting for 34% of all immigrant households—whereas among natives, two-person households are the most common. In fact, more than half of the immigrant population in Spain—62%—lives in households of four or more members, compared to only 40% for the population [9].

In addition, immigrants benefit from robust systems of support rooted into their social networks in Spain, in which the presence of natives is increasingly notable. These systems continue to provide a range of essential resources for their strategies to combat poverty and ensure the provision of services and care.

In conclusion, the family—along with, to some extent, the community—shield, which for years constituted one of the three main pillars of the Spanish development model, appears to be weakening among native households. Among immigrants, by contrast, it seems to remain more resilient, offering protection and care against insecurity, poverty, and vital risks, thereby partially compensating for their secondary position within the public welfare system.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In Spain, after thirty years of international migration flows, a situation of structural racism persists [1]. The data gathered in this research show that job insecurity, poverty, and inequality remain structural problems in Spain, and more importantly, beneath the native precariat, an ethnic precariat, formed mainly by a population with Global South immigrant backgrounds, has been consolidated since the 2008 crisis [26,48].

In line with other studies, the findings show, thus, that a substantial number of immigrants from the Global South and their families remain significantly concentrated—and, to a great extent, confined—at the bottom labour and socioeconomic rungs of Spanish society, far removed from the average patterns of the native population [8,21,49].

Our findings on Spain—characterised by persistent ethnic labour and economic segmentation and by the concentration of immigrants in low-wage, low-status, and elementary occupations—are broadly consistent with evidence for Europe as a whole. Studies on Germany and other EU-15 countries similarly document a long-term shift in migrant workers from comparatively protected industrial jobs into expanding service-sector niches marked by deteriorating employment conditions and rising low-wage risks [50]. These labour market dynamics are closely linked to poverty outcomes: in Spain, immigrant households display significantly higher poverty rates, driven by precarious employment, unstable working hours, and limited access to contributory welfare schemes, while European studies likewise report that migrants face disproportionately high levels of in-work poverty and material deprivation, even after controlling for education, household composition, or years since arrival [51,52]. Moreover, the Spanish pattern of initial concentration in deprived neighbourhoods and segmented local labour markets echoes findings for the UK, where local deprivation dampens wage trajectories and slows immigrants' escape from poverty [53]. In sum, although Spain exhibits specific features associated with the Southern European migration model, the mechanisms driving migrant disadvantage in earnings, job quality, and poverty align closely with broader European patterns linking labour market dualisation, institutional configurations, and the persistent allocation of immigrants to the most precarious tiers of contemporary employment systems [51,54–57].

This persistent process of ethno-stratification cannot be understood through the recurring, and at times simplistic, unilateral frameworks that seek to explain the socioeconomic positions of immigrants as a direct consequence of their ethno-national origin, their supposedly low qualifications and education, or the penalties arising from their lack of personal and social adaptation to the country.

Overcoming this unilinear perspective, it is necessary to advocate for more global and complex narratives—ones that combine the structural economic processes causing social and ethnic segmentation with the “other” factors—political–institutional aspects, social class, gender, and ethnicity—that account for the process by which immigrants

are transformed into vulnerable, stigmatised, and impoverished workers, available for precarious working and living conditions [4,12,21,58].

From the analysis, some drivers should be emphasised in the Spanish Case.

The 'Mediterranean' Spanish development model is based on three interrelated pillars: a low-productivity economic model dependent on labour-intensive sectors; a constrained and limited welfare state; and the family as a fundamental resource for providing care and protection against poverty and life risks.

This development model, renewed in a downward direction after the period of crisis and economic recovery with wage devaluation, continues to generate a formidable demand for cheap and flexible labour, essential to its functioning and reproduction. This demand is increasingly less covered by the ageing native working classes and ever more by the immigrant-origin population settled and rooted in the country, as well as by new international migratory flows that are attracted and incorporated into the Spanish labour market [29].

This immigrant labour force, summoned and displaced by its development model, has become one of its crucial elements, providing the cheap and flexible "hands" that sustain the competitiveness and profitability of the Spanish low-productivity economic pattern and the intense reorganisation of care, domestic, and personal services in the country. This latter process has enabled native middle-class households to access these services affordably and with extensive coverage, in a context of limited welfare provision and the decline and transformation of family networks [59].

Alongside this central structural factor, it is also necessary to consider the role of other institutional and social factors in the process of labour and economic segregation of immigrants in Spain [4,51,57]. These factors have pushed immigrant workers—whose levels of education and qualifications are relatively similar to those of natives—into elementary occupations and precarious employment relationships, thus creating a workforce that is essential for the Spanish development model and highly advantageous for its businesses and households [7,12].

Spain's laissez-faire migration policy has attracted immigrants from the Global South as cheap, temporary labour, funnelling them—through initial irregularity—into informal jobs and tying residence permits to job offers. These mechanisms weaken their bargaining power and labour mobility, effectively forcing them into devalued, low-skilled occupations [3]. Institutional devices, such as native preference in hiring and obstacles to recognising foreign qualifications, further entrench this position [21,38]. Thus, racism and ethno-racial discrimination become embedded in political and administrative frameworks, producing institutional racism that relegates immigrants to vulnerable legal and social conditions and ultimately to the lower tiers of the labour market and social structure [17,60].

Social origin, and, above all, the poverty of immigrants, is another factor that helps explain ethnic segmentation. Scarce and unstable incomes and material insecurity transform migrants into weak workers in the labour market—workers with an urgent need for income, who are driven towards devalued and precarious jobs and disciplined into remaining in them.

Asymmetric gender roles also help explain ethnic segmentation. These roles—which continue to reproduce many aspects of the sexual division of labour, such as caregiving responsibilities, supplementary wages, and so-called "women's work"—help explain the lower wages and more devalued employment conditions experienced by women in the labour market and the fact that feminised sectors such as domestic and care work remain deeply fragmented and devalued within the Spanish labour market [5,12,31].

Ethnic and racial discrimination, finally, acts as both a symbolic and material operation [58]. From a widespread group prejudice towards the "other," it constructs a

specific and stereotyped social and ethnic condition—that of immigrants from the Global South—to whom a set of negative and devaluing traits are attributed, thereby justifying and naturalising their subordinate social and economic position [1,3,19,21,41].

These ethnic labels, derived from group prejudice, are thus used in the Spanish labour and housing markets by employers, intermediaries, and real estate actors to assign immigrants to vulnerable and devalued jobs and residential positions [12,21]. These stereotypes are even more negative and pronounced in the case of those of Moroccan and sub-Saharan African origin, which helps explain their worse labour and residential positions, and thus, their greater socioeconomic segregation [28,36].

Immigrant workers and their families are essential for Spain's economic and demographic model. They have also become an integral part of Spanish society, especially within its working-class sectors, deeply rooted and integrated in the country. However, most of these new Spaniards of immigrant origin continue to be deeply segregated at the bottom of the country's social and economic structure, enduring working, material, and residential conditions clearly distant from average standards.

The complexity of the factors underpinning socio-economic and ethnic segregation, together with Spain's new demographic and ethnic reality, makes it necessary to rethink public policies. At a minimum, these should incorporate two transversal and mutually reinforcing dimensions.

First, promoting social cohesion requires a renewed cycle of economic, labour market, educational, and housing public policies aimed at improving conditions for both natives and immigrants—through measures such as reducing labour segmentation, strengthening educational support, and increasing access to affordable housing in low-income and increasingly diverse neighbourhoods.

Second, managing diversity demands an intercultural approach that encourages contact, mutual understanding, and equal rights, supported by local intercultural plans, anti-discrimination mechanisms, and community-based initiatives that engage the whole population.

Ultimately, effectiveness depends on integrating social-cohesion and diversity policies and coordinating action across state, regional, local and municipal levels, combining strategic capacity with proximity to communities.

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