



Socioeconomic Context, Family Regimes, and Women's Early Labor Market Experience: The Case of Colombia and Venezuela

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Summary. — This paper compares the early labor market experience of mature and young cohorts of women in Bogotá and Caracas. The cross-country, cross-cohort comparisons demonstrate the importance of both rising women's human capital and family regimes to women's labor market behavior. While divorce was a central stimulus of women's work in both contexts, the more stable, patriarchal family regime in Bogotá more strongly conflicted with employment than the matrifocal and flexible pattern in Caracas. Results also show important changes in the dynamics of female employment, as younger cohorts exhibit more intermittent and unstable employment patterns.
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Key words — female employment, family regimes, Latin America, Colombia, Venezuela

1. INTRODUCTION

Female labor force participation in Latin America has increased considerably in recent decades, from 20% in 1970 to 30% in 1990. During this period female labor became an important source of household income, improving the living conditions of dual-earner families and providing a buffer against economic instability and high levels of male unemployment (Bustos & Palacios, 1994; ECLA, 1998). Furthermore, as women became more economically independent and contributed more to family subsistence, power relationships within the household tended to become more egalitarian, further improving the social status of women (Babb, 1990; ECLA, 1993). Within this general trend, however, there is considerable variation in levels of women's work across countries in the region, and in many cases relatively similar improvements in women's socioeconomic characteristics and fertility declines resulted in very different rates and age patterns of female employment.

In addition, the extent to which increases in female labor force participation have been accompanied by changes in the dynamics of women's work remains unclear. Recent socioeconomic changes are likely to have affected not only the level of female employment but

also the cycles of labor market entries and exits. Understanding the social and family forces affecting cross-country differences in levels of female employment and labor market attachment is of central importance for assessing variations in the social position of women and their labor market prospects across Latin America (Oliveira & Ariza, 1999; Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1992a,b, 1993).

Accordingly, this paper compares the socioeconomic and family factors affecting women's labor market entry and attachment over time across two Latin American countries, Colombia and Venezuela. The empirical analysis uses retrospective data to analyze the early labor market experiences of a mature and a young cohort of women residing in the capital city and surrounding areas of Bogotá and Caracas. Despite a common heritage, similar demographic trajectories, and comparable levels of female labor force participation, Bogotá and Caracas differ significantly in the age patterns of female employment, the occupational opportunities available to women, and the constraints imposed by family life on market work.

The cross-cohort and cross-country comparison capture women's labor market behavior at

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two points in time and under different socioeconomic and family contexts. The mature and young cohorts in Bogotá and Caracas were roughly 20 years old in the 1960s and late 1980s, respectively, and represent employment behavior before and after a period of rapid and profound socioeconomic and demographic change. In addition, the two metropolitan areas represent very different family regimes. Caracas more closely resembles the flexible and unstable family structure prevalent in Caribbean societies, while Bogotá approximates the traditional patriarchal family structure typical of the rest of Spanish speaking South America (Barrow, 1996; Parrado & Tienda, 1997; Rosero-Bixby, 1996). The very different socioeconomic conditions represented by the two cohorts and the distinct family regimes of Bogotá and Caracas present an ideal setting to assess the socioeconomic and family conditions affecting women's work in Latin America.

The empirical analysis is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes the decision to enter the labor market for the first time. The main objective of this analysis is to evaluate how rapid socioeconomic changes affected patterns of female labor market incorporation in Bogotá and Caracas. This entails determining the extent to which compositional changes in women's human capital and family characteristics explain cohort differences in employment entry, and also the extent to which the relationship between human capital and family characteristics and women's work changed across cohorts. The second part of the article extends the analysis of labor market incorporation by examining the degree of labor force attachment across cohorts and countries. The main objective of this analysis is to identify the social and family factors behind women's decisions to remain in, exit, and reenter the labor market. Once again, this entails examining both compositional changes among women over time, and evaluating whether and how the impact of socioeconomic and family factors changed across cohorts.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most studies of female labor force participation in developing countries recognize the importance of human capital considerations in determining women's employment behavior. Families differentially allocate their members' time between market work, home production,

and leisure, according to the expected payoff of these activities, which is critically determined by household members' education, employment experience, and other human capital characteristics (Becker, 1991; Mincer, 1962). Thus, the probability of a woman working outside the home depends on the expected remuneration from market work relative to the "shadow wage" from home production (Falaris, 1995; Hill & O'Neill, 1992). Improvements in women's social conditions during the course of development, such as increased educational and occupational opportunities, raise the returns to female work and thus promote female employment.

The importance of human capital to female employment in Latin America has been corroborated by numerous empirical analyses (Bustos & Palacios, 1994; Garcia & Oliveira, 1994; Herz & Khandker, 1991). For instance, in a series of cross-country comparisons Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1992a,b, 1993) showed that women with higher educational attainment were far more likely to work outside the home than their less educated counterparts, particularly among married women.

Women's labor force participation, however, is not determined solely by human capital endowments. Particularly in Latin America, the demands of family life and the centrality of the roles of wife and mother have been important constraints on female employment (Bustos & Palacios, 1994; ECLA, 1993; Garcia & Oliveira, 1994; Wainerman & Recchini de Lattes, 1981). Marriage has traditionally marked a clear dividing line in women's employment history with women entering the labor market when single and exiting around the time of marriage. While some mature married women reenter the labor force when their children become independent, the labor force incorporation of younger married women is more complex and is restricted by childrearing responsibilities, lack of childcare services, and a relatively rigid gender division of labor.

Nonetheless, comparative studies have found that the constraints imposed by family life on market work vary significantly across societies (Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1992a,b, 1993), with less patriarchal family regimes and those with higher divorce rates exhibiting greater female employment (Babb, 1990). The stereotype of the Latin American family is the traditional, patriarchal family, characterized by high rates of formal unions, marital stability, and male breadwinners. Indeed, numerous countries fol-

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