
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN ARGENTINA, BOLIVIA, AND PARAGUAY: A Comparative Study*

Catalina H. Wainerman, Ruth Sautu, Zulma Recchini de Lattes
Centro de Estudios de Población (CENEP), Buenos Aires

Sex has been and continues to be one of the most important elements that differentiates the functions performed by members of society, particularly those related to the social division of work. From a strictly biological perspective, the primary difference between men and women lies in the fact that, during specific periods of the life cycle, women direct a considerable part of their energy to the reproduction of the species. Beyond this difference, the physical and intellectual capacities of men and women are relatively similar. Nevertheless, it is a general fact that the levels of male and female participation differ extensively.

Although the potentially available labor force, whether female or male, fundamentally depends upon the age structure of the population, actual participation depends upon economic, social, and cultural factors. Although these factors affect men as well as women, they appear to be more consensual for men, in space as well as in time. In almost all known societies, male participa-

*Project executed under the auspices of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), contract No. 3-9-76-0009-02, and with the participation of CENEP (Argentina), the Centro de Investigaciones Sociales (CIS, Bolivia), and the Centro Paraguayo de Estudios Sociológicos (CPES, Paraguay).

Translated by the Duke Translation Service with funds provided by The Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation, Inc.

tion is regular and predictable, while female participation varies substantially among societies, as well as within them. In general, the absolute majority of men are expected to be in the labor force throughout adult life, without interruption (whether employed or unemployed) from entry to retirement. The economic participation of women, on the other hand, in some societies reaches levels as high as those of men and in other societies is almost nonexistent. Where women are integrated into the labor market, their active lives are discontinuous, frequently marked by several entries and departures coinciding with stages of the family cycle.

There has been little research on this topic in Latin America, where the level of economic participation by women is relatively low, notwithstanding marked national differences. With few exceptions, neither the size, structure, nor determinants of the female labor force have been the object of systematic research. This was one of the factors that prompted the project summarized here, which involved three Latin American countries that differ substantially in demographic, economic, and sociological terms: Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. A feasibility study was first designed to examine the sources of data available and the institutions and human resources capable of carrying out the studies locally in the three countries. The decision to base the project on secondary data (predominantly of a census type) and on available tabulations, together with the desire to assure comparability among the three national studies, limited the research objectives that could be proposed. It was decided to analyze:

1. the intensity and direction of the changes that occurred since the post-World War II period in the size, differentiation by sex, age, and place of residence, and in the structure by industries, occupational groups, and categories of female economic participation;
2. the distribution of women into the present economic structure in terms of industries, occupational groups, and categories, determining, moreover, the typically female occupations, in order to identify differential markets by sex; and
3. some of the sociological factors (especially education and family situation) that account for the differences in the present levels of female participation.

The first objective, which furnished the historical perspective, was accomplished through a diachronic study of the period 1945–75; the others through a synchronic study centered on 1970–75.

The project gave rise to three national studies that were developed by local teams, under the coordination and direction of the Argentine team, between June 1976 and July 1977. The use of a common research design, the elaboration of which was the responsibility of the Argentine team, also made it possible for them to make a comparative study, which was completed between July and December of 1977. The three country teams were made up of specialists in demography and sociology. The quantitative sources used were the last three national censuses of Argentina (1947, 1960, 1970) and of Paraguay (1950, 1960, and 1972), and the last national census available for Bolivia (1950; the 1976

census was not available at the time of the study), as well as the National Demographic Survey completed in that country in 1975. With the exception of only one special tabulation made by CELADE, based on the data contained in the OMUECE 70 program, the tabulations used were available in published or unpublished form. All the sources, except the National Demographic Survey of Bolivia, contain information about several economic characteristics of the active population. The economic materials covered in the Bolivia survey include information solely about the condition of activity of those interviewed. The relatively scarce data for Bolivia (especially the lack of a national census after 1950 and of economic information in the National Demographic Survey of 1975) placed limitations on the Bolivian study. These made it impossible to perform a diachronic analysis of the changes that occurred in occupational composition according to industry and occupational category.

Following are summaries of the results achieved by the individual researchers in charge of the different objectives. Emphasis is placed on the comparative study.

TENDENCIES IN THE DIFFERENTIAL LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION AND IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE FEMALE LABOR FORCE: 1945–1975

Zulma Recchini de Lattes

The relation between female participation and economic development has been repeatedly proposed as a curvilinear U relation. To state it schematically, this curve would show a relatively high level of participation in the earlier and later stages of development and relatively low participation in the intermediate stages. Nevertheless, cases have been found that deviate from this pattern and run counter to the generalization, and synchronic studies that suggest that such a relation does not exist. In this investigation we have adhered to the thesis that an adequate formulation of the relationship requires further qualification by disaggregating the levels of analysis. One of the customary responses within this field attributes any inconsistencies found—apparent or real—to the poor quality of the data. In the cases studied in this project, such a response would not appear to be adequate. Since neither the census procedures nor the cultures were very different, it seemed appropriate to search for another line of analysis.

Only one of the terms of the relation, the participation by women in economic activity, was utilized. That was studied in three countries characterized by different degrees of development, with the greatest level of disaggregation allowed by the existing data and available resources, over a period of about a quarter century. (That socioeconomic changes occurred during the period in all three cases is implicit in the analysis.) As the levels of analysis were disaggregated, the interpretation of the differentials of participation of the three countries on the one hand, and the patterns of change in each country on the other, became more coherent.

We began by analyzing the concepts used in each of the sources of information, and the industry classifications and occupational groups were made

compatible. However, the extent to which the data are comparable within each country for different dates and among the three countries could not be established. It is obvious, nevertheless, that the proportion of the population economically at subsistence level varies significantly from country to country, and the question concerning the extent to which the people under that rubric were included in the different census surveys remains open. In order to overcome some of the problems that could result from this lack of comparability and that would affect some industries, occupations, and occupational categories more than others, refined rates of activity for each were used: that is, rates in which the numerator included women in specified occupations, industries, and categories, and the denominator comprised the total of women fifteen years of age and older. In this way, a subenumeration in agriculture, for example, could not affect the measurement of participation in services, commerce, etc.

At the beginning of the period studied (ca. 1950), overall measurements showed large differences between Bolivia on the one hand, and Argentina and Paraguay on the other, and similarities between the two latter cases, which began to diverge around 1970. The similarities are surprising since we are dealing with countries undoubtedly at different stages of economic development. Equally surprising was the enormous difference between Bolivia and Paraguay, which lessens considerably ca. 1975, since the customary classifications of these countries according to degree of economic development place them in fairly similar stages. On the other hand, the tendencies shown in the overall measurements made tempting the simplistic affirmation that the three cases would be a good example of the U curve: Bolivia, the descent phase; Paraguay, the lowest point of participation (trough of the curve), from which point Argentina would be ascending (ascent phase).

The study showed that the similarity between Argentina and Paraguay exists almost exclusively at the overall measurement level, since the tendency in Argentina is clearly growing, while in Paraguay it is oscillating. The two cases are different from each other not only in terms of tendencies but also in terms of level, if only the respective urban areas are taken into consideration: urban women in Paraguay present a greater stable level of participation, in contrast to urban women in Argentina, who begin at a significantly lower level but who continue raising that level during the period analyzed.

The tendency toward growth in overall participation observed in Argentina appears even more clearly in the behavior of the central age cohorts: in any span of the life cycle between 20 and 55 years of age, the younger cohorts work more than the older, and some even increase their participation, between 1960 and 1970, at mature ages (through re-entries or first entries into activity), which are usually characterized by retirements. In Paraguay, by contrast, the behavior is very different: on the one hand, the cohorts decrease their participation less abruptly than in Argentina as they advance through the life cycle; on the other hand, there are very slightly marked differences between the younger cohorts and the older as they move through equivalent spans of the life cycle. These differences are undoubtedly related to the types of occupations prevalent in each society, which give Paraguayan women who need a remunerated activity a

greater permanence (in large measure because they are self-employed). Thus, the greater participation of Paraguayan women in comparison with Argentine women, as farm workers on the one hand and as artisans, craftswomen, etc., on the other, to a great extent is accomplished within the family unit, which allows these women to be economically active without implying a break with traditional feminine roles (housewife and mother). In Argentina, participation in professional, administrative, and similar occupations performed within business or government organizations and generally entailing a greater degree of preparation is notably higher than in Paraguay. However, participation as craftswomen, artisans, etc., is not only less evident there than in Paraguay but in Argentina is also primarily conducted outside the family, in a manufacturing firm. It is even possible that participation in domestic service, of similar quantitative importance in the two countries, has somewhat different characteristics in each.

The enormous differences observed between Bolivia and Paraguay, especially at the beginning of the period investigated, not only nearly disappeared toward the end, but also changed direction when the analysis refers to the urban areas. In effect, urban women in Paraguay showed somewhat higher rates of participation in 1972 than their Bolivian counterparts of 1975. Bolivian women in rural areas, employed mainly in agricultural work and as family helpers, show participation levels several times greater than that of Paraguayan women. Whether traced to reasons of subsistence, or to cultural traditions dating from the Inca period, the fact that Bolivian women in rural zones participate much more than those from Paraguay, Argentina, and most of the Latin American countries in which Hispanic culture is more important than indigenous culture, is apparently a response to an actual situation rather than to any deficiencies in the data. In the same way, it can be supposed that the change of direction observed in Bolivia between 1950 and 1975 (descending) also reflects an actual situation certainly linked with agrarian reform.

Last, the differences between Argentina and Bolivia are accentuated or better delineated by disaggregating the levels of analysis: the difference in participation in farm work in each country is even more marked than in the comparison between Bolivia and Paraguay. Also, the differences are made quantitatively more pronounced by comparing participation in occupations not related to agricultural jobs. Circa 1950, Argentine women participated significantly more than Bolivian women, particularly in specialized work as professionals, administrators, etc., but in domestic service as well. Information is not available for a more recent date, but it could be presumed that, although the differences have lessened, they should remain significant.

THE FEMALE LABOR MARKET

Ruth Sautu

This report is an attempt to apply a conceptual schema to a group of data, and to deduce a conceptual schema from a group of empirical regularities. The point of departure is that economies undergoing recent development are characterized

by a relatively high degree of structural heterogeneity—varying according to country—that is evident in the coexistence of activities and enterprises of different sizes and different degrees of technological modernity. This heterogeneity affects the labor markets, establishing segmentations that correspond to the subsystems that operate on the level of the production of goods and services. Thus, the level of absorption of manpower and its degree of qualification and specialization is understood to depend upon the activity and characteristics of the production units and technologies involved. The assignment of occupational roles among groups of people is based upon social class (to which qualification attributes are linked), and ethnic group. Sex and age act as secondary criteria for admission.

Which activities and firms offer employment opportunities to women and at what levels of qualification? In the analysis, we retained the division of the three sectors of activity—agricultural, manufacturing and commerce, and other services—since the data were collected in this manner; different types of activity were also differentiated within each. In some cases, the subsystems into which the economy is divided imply a grouping of related activities that are separated in the sectoral classification; they also imply consideration of the geographic location of economic activities, a task that was undertaken only for the primary sector.

In agricultural activities, poverty and female labor go hand in hand. Poor women work—as daughters and wives in families in which everyone must participate in the domestic unit, or working outside for others. They may also work during the harvest when this is done manually; in the more prosperous areas where cereals are cultivated, machines do the harvesting. Those who are not so poor—members of middle-size family holdings—also work, but their labor is not computed as productive because its products are not sold. Even if the woman does assist in the production of goods that are sold, her labor is best not counted, since she will be replaced by paid labor when the family situation improves.

Women are more likely to find employment the simpler the technology and the smaller the size of the manufacturing firm. They are found working in handicrafts and small industries that produce nondurable consumer goods. In the labor market oriented toward larger and more modern businesses in which more money is earned, women are employed less often. The exception is when the technology used requires a fairly high level of training and manual dexterity in a repetitive job—then women are incorporated in the labor force.

The tertiary sector recruits the two extremes: either women who have at least an intermediate level of formal education or women with very few qualifications. In the process of expansion of all types of services—excluding transportation—an important number of new positions are occupied by women. Here a double process is observed: on the one hand, the greater complexity of the system leads to the expansion of tertiary activities that offer employment opportunities to women; on the other, when the system does not grow at a rate in accordance with the increase in manpower availability, those who do not find employment in the organized labor market create their own employment. They

go on to form the informal sector in which work conditions are among the least favorable. This sector has been the domain of women and internal migrants.

When the system requires the performance of nonmanual or specialized administrative jobs—if possible at a lower salary—employment opportunities for women exist. When the family requires that all its members work in order to subsist, women also have their opportunity. The woman is least acceptable at specialized levels of manual activity and at top levels of management and administration.

DIFFERENTIAL LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY: SOME DETERMINANTS

Catalina H. Wainerman

This section of the project centered on two aspects that influence the supply of female labor to the labor market: the educational level and the marital and reproductive characteristics of women. There are numerous studies concerning the factors that affect the participation of women in the labor force and those that affect fertility. Even though these studies recognize education as a most significant factor, until now there has been almost no attempt to elucidate the interrelation of these three. This investigation was guided by that attempt.

Argentina and Paraguay were the objects of analysis. The latest census data available for those countries revealed that women with the greatest tendency to enter the labor market are the most educated, those who do not have a spouse (single, widowed, divorced), and those who have one or no children. Given that the marital and reproductive patterns of women in both countries differ according to educational level—the most educated tend with greater frequency to postpone marriage, and to have fewer children or none—it was considered pertinent to investigate whether the fact that women higher on the educational scale showed a greater propensity to participate was due to the effects of education itself, or to family situations that are more compatible with the performance of an occupation in the market, situations that are more common among educated women. To this end, education was considered in terms of primary, secondary, or higher levels achieved and whether incomplete or complete; and the family situation was considered in terms of the absence or current presence of a companion in the home and whether there were no children, one child, or two or more children. Because of the lack of comparable data, it was impossible to analyze the urban and rural figures separately.

The examination indicated that education is a more significant factor than family situation. In other words, among women who are alone, as well as among women who belong to large and complete family units, those who tend to be employed are proportionately more likely to be among those who reached the highest degree of formal education than among the women of the same age and family situation with little or no formal education. This does not mean that family characteristics have no influence: women who have a companion (legally or consensually married), who is usually primarily responsible for the economic

obligations of the family, are less likely to work. But the fact is that the higher the educational level achieved, the less difference having or not having a companion, or having many, few, or no children, makes in terms of a woman joining the work force.

It is true that access to higher levels of education—which precedes the stage of family formation—is related to class origin, and that more specialized training increases the probability of access to better paid employment, which means greater possibilities for purchasing in the market that replacement of services inherent in the domestic role. But it is also true that for the women whose education opens to them many employment opportunities, the objective and subjective opportunity cost of remaining outside the market is much higher than for their less educated counterparts.

However, it was not the most educated women who, ca. 1970, were making the greatest contribution to the female labor force in Argentina or in Paraguay. This role fell to less educated women because, in strictly numerical terms, they constituted the absolute majority of the female population in the active age bracket. The conclusion is clear: depending upon the degree to which the benefits of formal education are extended to more women, even assuming their propensity to participate in the labor market will be constant as long as the conditions of demand are favorable, it is possible to anticipate a substantial increase in female human resources available to the labor market in the immediate future, a fact that cannot fail to encourage long-term growth of the economies of both countries.

Caution must be used in applying to other countries the conclusion that education is a variable of greater significance than family situation for understanding the economic behavior of women. Analysis of the little data collected in 1975 suggests that in Bolivia, which is less developed than Paraguay and where the proportion of the active female population which is illiterate and the proportion occupied in subsistence activities is greater, family situation appears to influence the participation of women in the labor force more than the degree of education achieved. The fact that the Bolivian economy is little diversified and has a lower demand for a qualified work force may explain this finding. It may also explain why, in contrast to Argentina, Paraguay, and many other countries, the rates of activity of illiterate women in Bolivia are greater than those of women with only a primary education although less than that of the few women with secondary and higher education; these rates are, however, much below their Argentine and Paraguayan counterparts.

The greater influence exerted by education in comparison to family situation and the uniformly increasing relation between education and the employment of women probably hold above certain sociodemographic and economic parameters but not below them. We clearly need additional case studies to judge the validity of the findings of this study based on only two cases.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Argentina

- Zulma Recchini de Lattes and Catalina H. Wainerman. "Empleo femenino y desarrollo económico: algunas evidencias." *Desarrollo Económico* 17, no. 66 (1977).
- Zulma Recchini de Lattes and Catalina H. Wainerman. "Marital Status and Women's Work in Argentina: A Cohort Analysis." *Genus* 34 (1978).
- Zulma Recchini de Lattes. "Las mujeres en la actividad económica en Argentina, Bolivia y Paraguay." *Demografía y Economía* 13, no. 1 (1979).
- Zulma Recchini de Lattes. *La participación económica femenina en la Argentina desde la segunda posguerra hasta 1970*. Buenos Aires: Cuadernos del CENEP, forthcoming.
- Ruth Sautu. "The Female Rural Worker in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay." Study presented at the IX World Congress of Sociology, Research Committee on Sex Roles in Society, Upsala, Sweden, 14–19 August 1978.
- Ruth Sautu. "The Female Labour Force in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay." Study presented at the Conference on Economic and Demographic Change: Issues for the 1980s. Sponsored by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, Helsinki, Finland, 28 August–1 September 1978.
- Ruth Sautu. *Oportunidades diferenciales por sexo en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Cuadernos del CENEP No. 10, 1979.
- Catalina H. Wainerman. "Educación, familia y participación económica femenina en la Argentina." *Desarrollo Económico* 18, no. 72 (1979).
- Catalina H. Wainerman. "Women as Suppliers of Labor Force to the Markets of Argentina and Paraguay." Study presented at the Workshop on Women's Roles and Fertility, sponsored by the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, 25–27 June 1979.

Bolivia

- Hugo P. Torrez. *La mujer boliviana y sus características demográficas en la fuerza de trabajo 1975*. Ediciones CIS, 1977.
- Antonio Cisneros C. and Hugo P. Torrez. *La mujer boliviana en las actividades económicas: un estudio socio-demográfico*. Ediciones CIS, 1977.
- Antonio Cisneros C. *La participación femenina en las actividades económicas de Bolivia desde 1950 hasta 1975*. Ediciones CIS, 1977.

Paraguay

- Fulvia Brizuela de Ramirez and Juan Schoemaker. *Tendencia de la población económicamente activa femenina desde 1950 hasta 1972*. Asunción: CPES, vol. 2, 1978.
- Luis Galeano. *Las mujeres como proveedoras de fuerza de trabajo en el Paraguay*. Asunción: CPES, vol. 3, 1978.
- Luis Galeano and José Morinigo. *Cambios en las características económicas y la demanda de la fuerza de trabajo femenina en el Paraguay*. Asunción: CPES, vol. 4, 1978.