

Revisiting Women's Labor Force Participation in Catalonia (1920–36)

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During the 1960s and 70s, social and women's historians began to use the term "delay" to refer to the late entrance of women into the Spanish labor market – late, that is, compared to when women in other countries entered the industrialized labor force. The supposed delay was blamed on a confluence of factors, including a perceived "failure of the Industrial Revolution," the country's belated economic modernization, and the influence of Catholicism and political conservatism on gender roles. Strengthening the notion of delay or backwardness was the data on women's labor activity published by country's National Census of Population. It was generally understood that the Census under-registered women's labor overall, as well as the differences between localities, but the extent of under-registration was not clear.

Misrepresentation of women's labor. Over the past few decades, studies began to quantify this under-registration. They found that it was much greater than expected – in particular, the labor of married women with children was underreported – and that women in the labor force were more heterogenous. Cristina Borderías aims to reconstruct women's labor force participation rates in the leading textile areas of Catalonia, which represented 20 percent of the whole Catalan textile labor force during the first third of the twentieth century. Within this context of a high demand for female employment, due to the almost complete feminization of the textile sector, the paper also reviews the hypotheses provided by neoclassical economics and labor economics regarding the determinants of women's labor participation. The author assumes that some of these hypotheses – in particular the assumption that the presence of young children discouraged and thus delayed women's labor participation – result from statistical misrepresentation due to the extensive under-registration of female employment, particularly that of married women with children.

Women at work in "the factory of Spain." Catalonia has been called "the factory of Spain" because of its importance in the second half of the nineteenth century in cotton textile production, which led the region's industrialization process. Catalan industrialization generally corresponds to the development model of the principal regions of proto-industrial Europe – the Europe of rural manufacturing and cottage industries that existed prior to more modern, urban factory production. But, driven by the need to cut prices, the Catalan cotton textile industry adopted the intensive use of female labor to an even greater degree than in Great

Britain. Since the 1970s, historiography has recognized the discrepancies between the importance of female labor – documented since the mid-nineteenth century by the statistics and reports of social reformers of the time – and the low women's labor force figures released by the National Population Census. However, the difficulty of finding alternative data left no recourse but to continue using the census account of male labor force activity, producing very significant biases in knowledge of structural change and Catalan economic growth, the productivity of economic sectors, the evolution of living standards during industrialization, the economic contribution of women to their families, and the determinants of their activity.

Toward more accurate participation rates. Yet it is possible to reconstruct more realistic rates of women's labor activity. Catalan municipal archives contain sources that offer more accurate quantification than the National Census of Population. These archives include the municipal censuses (Enumerator Books) undertaken by city councils, and the Labor Censuses carried out by local Social Reform Boards and the Ministry of Labor during the first third of the twentieth century. Using these, Borderías has reconstructed more realistic rates of women's participation and shown that rates of this participation were very high in places where labor market demand offered work opportunities for women. The Catalan case shows how the impact of industrialization on women's work was fundamentally influenced by the characteristics of local labor markets.

A limited role for the traditional breadwinner model. In many areas of Catalonia, the development of the textile industries created a specific, growing demand for women, who in turn responded to these opportunities – even married women with very young children. In fact, the presence of small children incentivized women's market participation instead of discouraging it. One of the most important conclusions of Borderías's research is that demand played a much more important role than classical historiography has maintained. Conversely, supply factors like marriage and the occupation and status of the husband had minor importance. The high participation rates of married women with children (for example, 60 percent in 1920) reveals that during the first third of the century the traditional breadwinner model had little influence among the working classes from the textile areas that played a leading role in Catalan industrialization.

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