

Women's Labor Participation Rates in the Kingdom of Castilla in the Eighteenth Century

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Oral sources, and even some written ones, have always claimed that women and children actively participated in a multitude of work activities on a daily basis in eighteenth-century Western Europe. However, the truth is that the documentation, at least that concerning the late years of the *Antiguo Régimen* (Old Regime) in much of Western Europe, does not reflect that reality. There are various reasons for the considerable gap. Perhaps the main ones are that in the European past, the household was considered a unit headed by the man and the labor guilds and associations were exclusively male.

New documentation sheds light on participation rates. Using detailed records from the mid-eighteenth century Ensenada Cadaster, the most comprehensive census of the Kingdom of Castilla during this period, Ricardo Hernández seeks to answer the following questions: How many women and children actually worked? Can we calculate the activity rates (that is, labor force participation rates) for women and men for mid-eighteenth century Spanish society?

The Ensenada Cadaster. Conducted as part of an ultimately unsuccessful tax reform proposed by Fernando VI (1746–59), the Ensenada Cadaster evaluated the economic, family, and work situation of all the inhabitants of Castilla in 1750. Although the proposed, unified tax was to be based on the incomes of adult men, women and children's labor was also reported in many localities, which helps develop a realistic picture of labor participation rates at the time. The author studied the original documentation used to develop the cadaster, specifically the *Memoriales* (Memoranda), handwritten reports provided by each head of household or neighbor. The analysis of this documentation for a dozen localities in the current province of Palencia, which is situated in the heart of the kingdom of Castilla and may be used as a valid sample for the overall scale, reveals that the great

majority of the population had to work, and actually did so, earning only a meager livelihood.

High rates of women and girls' labor force participation (LFP). The data confirm a labor participation rate of 76.9 percent for the population between 10 and 60 years of age in 1750. When male and female participation rates are differentiated, the participation of men – the breadwinners, in classic analysis – stands at 86 percent; the rate for female participation is 67 percent, a figure much higher than those found for other parts of Western Europe during same period. Another interesting finding is the differentiation between boys and girls (ages 6 through 14). Although it was not very common for children under 10 years to engage in paid work, it was more common for girls than for boys. And, while elementary school attendance was low in general, boys attended school more often and longer than girls (thereby receiving more training). As a probable consequence, boys' labor force participation rate of 62.1 percent is lower than girls' rate of 73.3 percent.

A challenge to traditional studies. Finally, perhaps the least-known fact the study reveals is that women and girls were engaged in all types of work, both in manufacturing (mainly in intensive, small-scale textile production), services (domestic service and as laundresses and seamstresses), and as land laborers at all times of the year and under similar conditions as men. (In the populous town of Astudillo, married women with one child had a labor participation rate of 83 percent – higher than that of married women without children.) This finding suggests that the living standards may in fact have been higher than generally assumed, since traditional studies calculated such standards with only men's earnings in mind.

Read the article in full at

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