

Women's Economic Participation on the Eve of Industrialization: Bizkaia, Spain, 1825



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Women's economic response to industrialization and its evolution over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remain unexplored within the field of economic history. The Police Census of Bizkaia (Biscay) of 1825 represents a vital source for the study of women's labor force participation (LFP) and its determinants of supply and demand in some Spanish regions in the first half of the nineteenth century. Using data for several towns from the Police Census, Pilar Pérez-Fuentes analyzes the impact of supply factors (marital status, family life cycle, and occupation of household head) and of the opportunities in the local market on women's labor force participation. The results show that supply factors do not explain the variance in women's activity as it has traditionally been emphasized.

A diversified economy. In 1825, Bizkaia was a highly diversified economy in which agriculture had less weight than the iron industry, trade, seafaring, and fishing. Metallurgical production for the international market employed many men in urban centers, who were associated in guilds. The surrounding rural population of small landowners and tenant farmers satisfied the demand for labor generated by the rapid development of proto-industrial iron production (that is, production marked by the involvement of agrarian families in market-oriented crafts). Farming families were mostly woodcutters and charcoal burners who were also engaged in iron extraction and transportation. In coastal areas a greater part of the population undertook fishing, seafaring, and subsidiary activities such as net making, brining, and pickling, and transportation and trade to inland communities. The capital Bilbao was the triangular trade hub between Northern Europe, Spain, and the American market and had a strong artisan sector and services.

Beyond the guilds. The Police Census depicts a society in which women had a high level of LFP. At least 68.6 percent of women ages 15–64 were registered with an occupation. However, there were notable differences between municipalities. In rural localities the labor activity rate among adult women reached 94.3 percent. Proto-industrial environments, where agriculture, unskilled and outsourced labor, and salaried work were beyond the control of the guilds, afforded more opportunities

to women than the urban artisan economy in which LFP was linked to a socially recognized qualification and marked labor identity. These urban artisan economies included Durango, with 17.6 percent women's LFP, and Balmaseda, with 33.9 percent. In the fishing-based economy of Lekeitio, where women carried out subsidiary tasks, their LFP was also high, 78.5 percent. Bilbao was also an area of opportunity for women – servants and services – with a rate of 75.1 percent, much higher than in handicraft urban economies with a strong presence of guilds.

Women's LFP and local opportunities. Variables related to the life cycle, including marital status and the number of dependent children, affected women's LFP, but they were not significant. A probit analysis shows that supply factors do not explain the variances in women's activity. On the other side, women's LFP is highly positively related to their local economic opportunities. Differences in the LFP of single and married women, and widows according to their socioeconomic context – rural, urban, fishing – underline the importance of demand. In Bilbao, where the most marked LFP differences due to marital status are observed, 62 percent of married women were economically active compared to 87 percent of single women and 75.2 percent of widows. However, in rural proto-industrial and fishing areas there were hardly any variations by marital status. The same occurs with the number of children under age 10 in the household, a variable that has only a weak negative relationship with women's LFP.

Motherhood does not always matter. In short, the key variables in the life cycle do not adequately explain women's LFP in Bizkaia, and it is clear that supply factors (children, marital status) do not have the negative impact that has traditionally been emphasized. In other words, motherhood did not act as a determinant of women's paid labor activity in every time and context. On the contrary, in Bizkaia, during the first half of the nineteenth century, household job needs and local economic opportunities for women appear to be strongly related to women's work.

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