

FEMALE WORK AND FERTILITY IN ARGENTINA:  
IDEATIONAL ORIENTATIONS AND ACTUAL BEHAVIOR

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BRINGING CULTURE IN

The relationship between fertility and female labor force participation is among those which have drawn the greatest attention from students of female economic activity. In spite of the numerous studies already available, not only the direction of the relationship remains unclear but even its very existence is still a matter of debate. Though the evidences of a negative relationship are numerous, those of no relationship are not to be overlooked.<sup>1</sup>

This lack of clarity and the abundance of contradictory findings is partly due to methodological reasons - heterogeneity of concepts, of indicators, of universes studied - and partly to the adoption of a simplistic analytical approach to study a phenomenon which calls for a complex holistic one. For it is not only the sheer number of children which affects the probability a woman has to enact the role of worker (in the sense of member of the labor force), but also their age, the overall composition of the domestic unit, the "convenience of work"<sup>2</sup>, and also the culturally valued behaviors

<sup>1</sup> For an exhaustive review of the literature see G. Standing, *Labor force participation and development*, Geneva: International Labor Office, 1978, chap. 7.

<sup>2</sup> A concept which Darian uses to qualify a job in terms of being at or away from home, with flexible or rigid hours, part-time or full-time. Cf. J. Darian, Convenience of work and the job constraint of children, *Demography*, 12, 1975, pp. 245-258.

and expectations regarding the role of mother, the sexual division of labor prevalent in the society, etc.

A research conducted in Argentina in 1970 revealed, as many other studies have done, a strong negative association between female activity rates and the presence or absence of children.<sup>3</sup> But, interestingly enough, it also revealed that association to be much *weaker* than the one discovered between female activity rates and the presence or absence of a husband at home. In fact, the activity profiles of women without husbands (single, widowed, and divorced), whatever the number of children, always surpassed those of women with husbands (married), whatever the number of children. That the domestic burden derived from the presence of children is neither the exclusive nor the main cause which keeps women away from the labor market is made conspicuously evident when comparing the average length of the active life of childless married women (13.0 years) with that of childless single, widowed, and divorced women (23.7 years) aged 20 to 54 years.<sup>4</sup>

Nothing like this happens among men. The length of their active lives is independent of their family situation, as it is of their age, schooling, etc. It is already well established that whatever the level of development of the society, the activity rates of males aged 20 to 54 years are generally around 90 per cent, whereas among women the range of variation in activity rates among countries is wide (85 per cent in the URSS and 7 per cent in North Africa c. 1970), almost as wide as it is within countries among women from different age groups, marital status, number of children, level of schooling, etc.

The contention here is that the differences between the labor behavior of women with and without a husband at home, as well as those between men and women, and also those associated with the sexual segmentation of the labor market, are accounted for by cultural reasons, more specifically, by the cultural definition of both sexes and by the sex-role division between the productive and the reproductive functions which prevail in each society. There already exists enough empirical evidence showing that demographic, economic, and sociological features, though major determinants of the size and structure of the female - as well as of the male - labor

<sup>3</sup> C.H. Wainerman, The impact of education on the female labor force in Argentina and Paraguay, *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 24, 2, part 2, 1980, pp. 180-195.

<sup>4</sup> The crude years of active life of women aged 20 to 54 years ranged, among those with husband, from 5.3 (with 2 or more children), to 7.3 (with one child), to 13.0 (with no child), whereas among those without husband the corresponding figures were 18.0, 21.5 and 23.7.

force are not the only ones.<sup>5</sup> And, even though the recognition of the status of the "cultural components" exists, they have generally been treated in a residual way: the unexplained variations in female activity rates among societies with similar levels of development and economic characteristics are assigned to cultural differences without further investigation of its content.<sup>6</sup> Boserup's influential work on African, Asian, and Latin American women is a conspicuous exception.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, it is asserted that a more satisfying explanation of female labor force participation requires to bring the elements of the ideational system in, more specifically, an analysis of the culture's normative dimension which regulates the relation between domestic (reproductive) and extradomestic (productive) roles. This approach shares Oppong's basic assumption that

"an understanding of aspects of women's position vis-à-vis men in a particular socio-economic context especially with regard to culturally valued role behaviours and expectations is vital for an understanding of demographic issues ..."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As regards demographic factors, cf. G. Brancroft, *The American labor force*, New York: John Wiley; 1958; J.D. Durand, *The labor force in the United States, 1890-1960*, New York: Social Science Research Council, 1948; V.K. Oppenheimer, *The female labor force in the United States: Demographic and economic factors governing its growth and changing composition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; as regards economic and sociological ones, cf. E. Boserup, Employment of women in developing countries, in L. Tabah (ed.) *Population growth and economic development in the Third World*, vol. I, chap. 3, Liège, Belgium: Ordina Editions for IUSSP, 1975; N. Youssef, *Women and work in developing societies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Such is the case of A.O. Collver and E. Langlois, The female labor force in metropolitan areas: An international comparison, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 10, 4, 1962; of E. Boserup, 1975, op. cit.; of J.D. Durand, The labor force in economic development and demographic transition, in L. Tabah (ed.), op. cit., vol. I, chap. 2; and *The labor force in economic development*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> E. Boserup, *Woman's role in economic development*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> C. Oppong, A synopsis of seven roles and status of women, mimeo, paper read at UNESCO meeting, Paris, November 1980, pp. 3-4.

## INVESTIGATING CULTURAL CONTENTS: A RESEARCH PROGRAM

The ideas just expounded started a research program which aims to identify and describe the value orientations prevailing in Argentina during the XX century concerning female participation in the labor market. But, since for most females - though not for most males - taking an occupational role implies adding one which conflicts with the reproductive role, it was believed necessary to identify and describe also the definition of male and female and the roles ascribed to them within the society in general, and specifically, within the domestic unit.<sup>9</sup>

Because in the long run there is an interest in exploring the links between the realm of *ideas* at the social level and that of *behavior* at the individual level, the research program is centered around four points in time chosen because of their social, economic, and political significance in the history of Argentina, and because there exist (except for one) population censuses which have recorded the economic behavior of women. The four dates are around 1910, 1930, 1950 and 1970.<sup>10</sup>

The analysis addresses the societal and not the individual level for, as in the Durkheimian and the Marxist tradition, the possibility that the states of the collective consciences may be explained by the states of the individual consciences is denied. The research takes it as a basic premise that the idea systems of any society - i.e. the cultural values which shape social expectations - antecede the individual actors and, though they nourish and exert a coercive power upon their values and attitudes, do not coincide with them.

The ideational orientations investigated are those produced and diffused within five social realms: religion, law, school, science, and mass media. The Catholic church (with its official status in Argentina), a primary producer of ideology, inculcates norms and puts forward values with a view to controlling behavior. It was chosen for this research because its concern with the family, trustee of unquestioning religious beliefs, makes it devote special

<sup>9</sup> An extended presentation of the research program, its theoretical framework and methodological aspects is contained in C.H. Wainerman and M. Navarro, *El trabajo de la mujer en la Argentina: un analisis preliminar de las ideas dominantes en las primeras décadas del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires: CENEP, *Cuadernos del CENEP*, 7, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> A preliminary analysis of the first two points in time is contained in C.H. Wainerman and M. Navarro, *op. cit.*

attention to the roles that both sexes shall fulfill within and outside it. The legal realm was chosen because it is the set of norms most formally institutionalized and with the greatest coercive power in society. Primary school - which in Argentina is and was under State control - is the institution responsible for the formal socialization of the future citizens; it plays a major role in the transmission of the ideas dominant in the official sphere. Unlike the other realms, science is not normative; its inclusion responds to the interest in learning about its position regarding women as human resources. Mass media (the "fourth power") include a sector specifically addressed to females; that is why women's magazines were selected for the analysis.

The nature of the messages produced and diffused within these contexts vary. Those from the religious, legal, and educational realms have the widest coverage, and are the most strongly institutionalized, even though they differ with respect to the degree of legitimate coercion they might exert. Those embedded in the scientific and the mass media discourse are addressed to more restricted segments of social reality, and in fact the degree of coercion they exert is lower, though indeed the degree of informal coercion is not equally lower.

As regards the data used in this research, it is worth noticing that, even though society does not keep a record of its ideational orientations - as it does with "hard" facts through population and economic censuses, vital statistics, and so on - it does produce unintentional "traces". They take the form of what Veron calls a "text", which is

"any set of signs belonging to a given discourse universe limited by a code, whichever it may be - language, plastic codes, TV images, etc - and which is transmitted in a given situation upon a physical support distinguishable from the recipient's behavior".<sup>11</sup>

In other words the empirical translations of the idea systems are "messages" which circulate at the social level, consisting of "texts" which take the form of children's books, legal norms, religious documents, scientific papers, films, etc. These entities, which are observable, constitute the (qualitative) data on which this research program is based. In all cases they are written texts.

<sup>11</sup> E. Veron, *Conducta, estructura y comunicacion*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1968, p. 145.

The "reading" of the texts combines the aim of the semi-logical analysis with the techniques of the content analysis.<sup>12</sup> The texts are approached with a series of categories such as: conception of female and male (physical and psychological traits, roles assigned), conception of the family (roles assigned to it in society and roles ascribed to its members on the basis of sex), conception of work (occupations assigned to females and males, consequences attributed to work on the one and the other), etc. The aim is to detect configurations which in turn allow the reaching of the systems of meaning underlying the texts. For instance, learning that until 1974 women and minors were dealt with together in labor law (and also with Indians until the beginnings of the XX century) shows that common features - weakness, helplessness, need for protection - are found in both, but not in adult men. The emphasis on the qualities of mother and wife, or on the humanitarian rather than on the scientific or artistic achievements of famous female scientists, artists, and writers presented in textbooks as role models, tells that even for "extraordinary" women, the true place is at home, in the service of their husbands and children.

This paper contains an example of what can be achieved with such an approach and such kind of data. It offers a succinct view of the central ideational orientations concerning women as agents of production and reproduction prevalent in the five above-mentioned social realms in Argentina around 1950.<sup>13</sup> It should be clear that the focus is on the sender rather than on the receiver pole of the communication; in other words, no speculations will be essayed regarding the effects of these messages upon the behavior of the individual.

#### THE IDEATIONAL CLIMATE AROUND WOMEN AND WORK IN 1950 ARGENTINA

A series of evidences points out that around 1950 a substantial change took place in the history of female labor force participation in Argentina. The end of the era of import substitution initiated a new style of development. Deep

<sup>12</sup> Developed, the former, by A.J. Greimas and R. Barthes in France during the 50s, and the latter by B. Berelson and H. Lasswell in the United States during the 40s.

<sup>13</sup> This part of the research program was made possible by grant 15/79-27 from PISPAL (Programa de Investigaciones Sociales sobre Poblacion en América Latina).

political transformations occurred associated with the emergence of Peronism and with Peron's government (1945 to 1955). This was the time when female economic participation reached the lowest level of the country's recorded history, and started recovering slowly towards 1960 and rapidly towards 1970, with a possibility of keeping the ascendent trend in the near future.<sup>14</sup> This is, on the other hand, the time when the low crude natality rate (around 25 per thousand) - which in fact had been decreasing without interruption since the end of the XIX century - raised deep concern in certain circles and gave origin to the National Board to Fight Low Natality, and to numerous articles in several journals blaming female economic participation for the (perceived) natality fall. And it is also the time when women acquired political rights (1947), when they first entered Parliament (1951), and when they massively joined a political party, the feminine wing of the Peronist movement.

The listing of the texts analyzed follows. Within the religious realm the analysis focused on texts produced at the universal and the local level. This included all the conferences and documents produced by Pope Pius XII from 1945 to 1958, the published Argentine pastorals concerning family problems, and all the (weekly first and bi-monthly later) issues of *Criterio* (the oldest Argentine Catholic journal) from 1945 to 1955. The legal texts include normative as well as evaluative messages. All laws and decrees in force, all judgments issued, and all relevant congressional debates that took place with regard to female labor law and aspects of family law between 1945 and 1955 were analyzed. Within the school system, the analysis focused on primary school textbooks, whose use is obligatory and whose content is under the absolute control of the National Board of Education. In all, 42 textbooks were included; they were selected from among the seven elementary grades. The scientific ideas were traced in economic journals. All issues published (monthly) from 1940 to 1950 of the *Revista de Economía Argentina* and the *Revista de Ciencias Economicas* were included. The sector of mass media chosen is the one specifically addressed to females. All issues (60) of an upper-class woman's magazine (*El Hogar*) and one issue per month (42) of a middle-class one (*Para Ti*) published (the former monthly and the latter weekly) from 1946 to 1960 were subjected to investigation.

<sup>14</sup> The Argentine activity rates of females aged 14 years and over described a U curve: 58.8 per cent in 1869, 27.4 per cent in 1914, 21.7 in 1947, and 24.3 in 1970. (Data from Z. Recchini de Lattes, *Poblacion economicamente activa*, in Recchini de Lattes, Z. and A. Lattes (eds.) *La poblacion de Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 1975.

The analysis of the Catholic messages revealed very high consistency between the ideas and behavioral patterns sustained by both the universal level and the local level. The basic notion is that both sexes are essentially different and that the differences, which are biologically based, are established by holy law. The woman is the trustee of affects, of the heart; she is a weak creature who needs protection. Her natural habitat is the domestic and the private one. The man is the trustee of intelligence and authority, of the head; he is a strong creature who, because of that, is destined to give protection. His natural habitat is the outside and the public one. Within the family, he is to be the master and the sole provider of economic needs, whereas she is to be his submissive, obedient companion, the sole responsible for the reproductive activities.

Pius XII would say that

"it is evident that whereas the male, by his temperament, is generally led to deal with outside, public matters, the female is more shrewd and has a finer tact to know and to solve the delicate problems of the domestic and family life ..." <sup>15</sup>

And the Argentine bishops, in a collective pastoral issued in 1947 (*On the Defense of the Family*) would say that

"in accordance with the Christian tradition, inspired in her very nature, the woman has to be, above all, the soul of the home. There is her true kingdom, it is there she has to fulfill her true destiny, that of wife and mother. By complying with this double function she will meet her own happiness, that of her relatives, and will render the best of all possible services to the Church and society."

Participation in the labor force is not valued proper for females, especially if married, for it competes with their natural vocation: motherhood. It is accepted only in cases of extreme necessity, when the natural provider, the man, is absent, disabled, or incapable of making a sufficient contribution. In those cases, work means a sacrifice for women because it compels them to withdraw from their very nature. On the contrary, work is for men an inalienable right, a way of participating in the holy work of Creation. Although the rejection of labor activity is very strong for married women, it is not absent (though less intensely) for single women - who are in fact perceived as potential

<sup>15</sup> Women's duties in social and political life, discourse pronounced on October 21, 1945.

mothers. It is feared that exposure to the "many dangers abundant in the workplaces" might lead women to resign their mission as the mothers of the future generations.

Although the decade under the aegis of the Peronist government was prodigal in measures addressed to protect workers (and to enhance the political status of women by granting them the right to vote), it was not equally prodigal with regard to the civil and labor status of women. Legislation, judgments, and jurists kept handling women's labor together with minors' labor - as they had done since the beginning of the century -, something which implies attributing to them a certain degree of incapability and weakness demanding protection (from adult males).

Both sexes are assigned different physical and psychological capacities. Intelligence and strength are man's province. Within the family, he is the authority and the sole responsible for the provision of the family sustenance; with regard to his wife, he is the heir of her father's duties and rights. Affect and weakness, coupled with submission, are female traits. Marriage - the same as achievement of the legal age of majority - grants emancipation to men, whereas it diminishes the civil capacity of women (which is yielded to their husbands), even if they have reached the age of majority.

In the legal field, women's economic behavior is discouraged because it competes with their fundamental responsibility: the reproduction of the future generations.

The more remarkable trait of the messages contained in primary school textbooks is their non-ambiguous, rigid structure, which is applied to a stereotyped and simplified description of reality. The other remarkable trait, as or even more remarkable than the former, is the extent to which their content remains static as society changes. <sup>16</sup>

The books in use during the period - those approved by the National Board of Education before Peron's government as well as those approved under his government, i.e., the "non-Peronist" and the "Peronist" books - present similar images of both sexes. Women are shown as "naturally" weak, in need of protection, specialized in the sphere of affects, their natural habitat is indoors, in the inner space, their major role in life is the mother's role in which they start their training early in life playing with their dolls. Men,

<sup>16</sup> An extended life is a feature common to most of these books. A case in point is *El sembrador* (The sower) which, originally published in 1925 is still in use in 1956 without any changes in content and with only minor changes in the graphic aspects.

on the other hand, are "naturally" strong, intelligent, active, their natural habitat is outdoors, in the outer space, their major role in life is the productive role in which they start their training playing to be a policeman, a fireman, a soldier, and the like.

Evita herself (Eva Peron) in her book *La razon de mi vida* (The meaning of my life), extensively quoted in the "Peronists" textbooks, would say that

"the home is the sensitive center of the heart of the country, and the specific place to serve it and to exalt it. In turn, the woman - as mother and daughter - is the corner stone on which the home rests ... The woman's problem is always, in every place, the deep and basic problem of the home. This is her great destiny, her unavoidable destiny ..."

and with regard to the feminine Peronist movement she comments that:

"More than a political action, the feminine movement has to develop a social action. Precisely because social action is something that we, women, carry in our blood ! To serve others is our destiny and our vocation, and that is social action."<sup>17</sup>

Aside from school teachers - who in fact are depicted in schoolbooks as (second) mothers rather than as members of the labor force - the feminine characters shown as economically active are very few. Those who work - in a short range of activities (36), most of which demand only a low level of qualification - do so because of extreme economic necessity, never because of mere desire or special skill or burning talent, and because they lack a male figure (father or husband) who provides for their sustenance. For them work is a sacrifice. When men work, instead, they do it, with joy, to supply the daily needs, in a broad range of activities (194), which demand a varied range of qualifications.

Within the scientific realm, for the collaborators of the *Revista de Economía Argentina* (Argentine Economic Review) - many of which were recruited within the ranks of Catholicism -, every human being has a natural vocation. That of women is motherhood, that of men is related to production. Whereas within the family she is the one responsible for raising the children and caring for the family, he is responsible for the provision of the family needs.

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced from the textbook by A.C. de Palacio, *La Argentina de Peron*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Lasserre, p. 106.

Participation in the labor force is rejected for women because motherhood - which is assumed to be her natural vocation - is conceived as a full-time, lifelong occupation. Extradomestic work is accused of restricting fertility and of causing family disorganization, aside from being perceived as in competition with men's employment, and the cause of a fall in salaries.

The economist Carlos Moyano Llerena considered that moving away from home to enter the factory

"is particularly harmful for women not only because of the desertion of their domestic chores but also because of the noxious atmosphere which is frequently encountered there as regards morality and as regards the destructive political and social ideologies so easily diffused ..."<sup>18</sup>

Another student of social problems, Ovidio Ventura considers that

"the true problem (regarding women's economic participation) lies in the abandonment of home to take up activities which are improper for a woman and through which she competes with men because, on account of their low salaries, females remove men from their posts reversing then the domestic hierarchy, and reducing the earning power of the family. In so doing, females go against the patriotic and social duty of natality".<sup>19</sup>

In this realm, the rejection of female economic participation is particularly strong with respect to married women and, judging by the occupations mentioned, with respect to middle-class ones.

Both women's magazines analyzed, *El hogar* (Home) and *Para Ti* (For You), present their readers - from the upper middle and middle classes respectively - with two kinds of female images: the woman-mother and the woman-sexual object. The former, the character of fiction and in articles, is closely attached to the home and to the reproductive role, with no other alternatives outside the domestic context, procreation, dependence, and submission. The other - the character of ads for beauty products - is mainly oriented to consumption. For both of them love, romanticism, and chasing a husband are the central goals in life. For both,

<sup>18</sup> C. Moyano Llerena, *El futuro de las industrias domesticas*, *Revista de Economía Argentina*, October 1945, p. 502.

<sup>19</sup> O. Ventura, *Consecuencias economicas y sociales del trabajo femenino*, *Revista de Economía Argentina*, June 1944, p. 203.

beauty is the most precious asset to success in life, which means to succeed in love and in the conquest of a husband. Both achieve self-realization through their husbands first, and through their children later. It is the husband, who is active and dominant, who provides financial and emotional sustenance, he offers security and support.

There is no reason for a woman to go to work, because it is the man's duty to provide her with luxury and comfort. The possibility that the productive and the reproductive roles might be shared is denied, hence, labor activity has to be avoided by married women, except in cases of extreme economic deprivation (which is not solved by a husband), or else, among high-class women, when there exists a strong vocation (generally in the world of arts). Single women, on the other hand, in addition to being trained in running a family and a house, may engage in economic activity, but only until they get married, a point at which they will start depending on their husbands. Presumably, these women are merely marking time until marriage.

In both magazines, among the fiction heroines, those economically active do not exceed one third, and they are recruited among young, middle-class, single women which are employed in clerical and secretarial jobs. The few working married women have jobs which are less incompatible with the domestic role; they are farmers or laundresses (if they are lower class), and actresses, painters, or writers (if they are upper class), that is, they are not necessarily obliged to comply with a fixed, full-time schedule, and away from home.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The redundance emerging from the summarized presentation of the core ideational orientations underlying the messages produced and diffused within the religious, legal, educational, scientific, and mass media realms is an indicator of its surprisingly high level of consistency. It brings to mind the suggestive ideas of the American social psychologists Sandra and Daryl Bem about nonconscious ideology. The Bems say that when an individual's reference group conflicts,

"Alternative ideologies are suddenly brought into awareness, and he is forced to select explicitly his beliefs and attitudes from among the competing alternatives. But what happens when all his reference groups agree, when his religion, his family, his peers, his teachers, and the mass media all disseminate the same message? The consequence is a non-

conscious ideology, a set of beliefs and attitudes which he accepts implicitly but which remain outside his awareness because alternative conceptions of the world remain unimagined ... only a very unparochial and intellectual fish is aware that his environment is wet ... Such is the nature of a nonconscious ideology. A society's ability to inculcate this kind of ideology into its citizens is the most subtle and most profound form of social influence. It is also the most difficult to challenge because it remains invisible".<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the dominant ideational orientations traced in the five realms with regard to women as agents of production and reproduction, and disregarding some ideational shades, the consistency found is overwhelming. The ideational core underlying this mass of messages finds its cradle in the realm of the Catholic church for which there exist essential differences between both sexes which, being biologically based and established by holy order, are unmodifiable, unalterable, indifferent to any influence from the social environment. If one dare speculate about the nexus between the ideational level and the behavioral level, it should not be surprising that around the 50s the contribution of women to Argentina's labor force was only 20 per cent, the lowest figure of the whole recorded history of female economic participation. The strongly differential participation in the labor force of women with and without a husband should not be surprising either. Around 1960, for instance, there was only one married woman for each five single ones in the labor market, a relationship that by 1970 had narrowed down to about one in three and a half.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> S. Bem and D.J. Bem, Case study of a nonconscious ideology: Training the woman to know her place, in D.J. Bem (ed.), *Beliefs, attitudes and human affairs*, Belmont, California: Bootes/Cole, 1970, p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> There are no equivalent data available for the 1947 census.