


Women's wages and subsistence family income in Mendoza (Argentina) at the beginning of the 20th century

Salarios de mujeres e ingreso familiar de subsistencia en Mendoza (Argentina) a principios del siglo XX

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ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

This article aims at estimating women's wages and their relative weight in the income of families in popular sectors during the expansive cycle of the Argentine economy, between the end of the 19th century and 1914, by considering the city of Mendoza. It analyzes the evolution of the wages of laundresses, seamstresses, cooks and ironers as well as their contribution to the income of cohabiting groups. Furthermore, the wage gap is examined in relation to men and women's labor mobility in public institutions. Finally, comparisons are made with the wages of seamstresses and ironers employed in the City of Buenos Aires and the wage gaps related to male occupations, such as the unskilled building labourer.

The methodology consists of the construction of series of prices and wages, and of the total income of eleven cohabiting groups. It compares incomes deflated with two consumption baskets, one prepared according to local sources (which was more expensive due to higher protein consumption and rental costs) and another one drawing on the methodology proposed by Robert Allen for some cities in Europe.

Our results show several patterns of interest. First, and according to the national population censuses of 1895 and 1914, the most frequent female occupations continued to be the same (laundress, seamstress, cook and domestic), although in 1914 two thirds of the women did not declare any occupation; the same occurred in relation to men (day laborers, farmers and merchants). Second, the nominal wages received in public hospitals (which included the mentioned occupations) did not experience any changes, even when the cost of living doubled between 1907 and 1914. In turn, women and men working in similar trades received the same wages, which allows hypothesizing the formal nature of state employment and opens up new research questions. Women did not occupy positions of hierarchy and obtained an income that met 30% of the family needs. Third, a comparison with Buenos Aires, with very different levels of development, shows that the lowest-skilled workers earned more there than in Mendoza; while the rest of the categories charged practically the same, realizing the attractiveness of the city of Buenos Aires as labor market. Finally, women's remunerations were essential to ensure group support in 1910 when the rest of the men or women who lived in the same house performed low-skill occupations (unskilled building labourer or laundress); only those with medium qualifications (midwives and ward head nurses) could afford the cost of the family basket. This was due to the stability of nominal wages, even in periods of high inflation, making the income of the "head of the family" insufficient for group support. This result contrasts with other documented realities for the United States and Europe, in which greater participation in the labor supply was not necessarily tied to subsistence.