

Marriage patterns: Age at first marriage and family institution in Latin America

Silvana Maubrigades

Universidad de la República - Uruguay

silvana@fcs.edu.uy

Abstract

Different studies confirm the view that women's empowerment is key for economic development. One crucial mechanism for this is via human capital formation and fertility: the level of education of women to a large extent determines the quantity and quality of offspring. Marriage systems that reflect the bargaining power of women have a large, independent effect on this, but can gradually change under the impact of urbanization, economic growth and increased employment opportunities for women.

The analysis of the evolution of marriage patterns in different countries in Latin America can be interesting to extend the explanatory causes of different performance between countries.

This paper examines age at first marriage for women and the evolution of family institutions from 1920 until 1960. Using a dataset of five Latin American countries (Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Uruguay) this paper tries to explore which variables correlate with differences in marriage patterns at the country level. We look at the influence of GDP pc, labor market and education.

Introduction

Theoretical approaches, already present in the last decades of the twentieth century, have argued that female empowerment is important for development. Different indices exist that attempt to measure the freedoms achieved by members of both sexes, such as the gender inequality index, the gender gap and the gender empowerment index.

In terms of freedom, gender inequality may be reflected in unequal access between men and women to the benefits generated by development as well as in their contribution to achieving it.

An example of this is that women's access to formal education has an impact on fertility rates, child mortality and human capital formation in present and future generations.

If women are half the population, it is clear that a low participation level or skill level for women in the economically active population (EAP) tends to reduce the potential growth of a country.

Given that increased participation of women is important for the development of the whole society, not only because of their contribution to economic growth, but also due to the greater participation in the increase of quality life in the future, it is necessary to account for how this process has unfolded at different periods of time and to gain an understanding of its determinants.

As Van Zanden has said (2011), studies confirm the view that women's empowerment is key to economic development. This was the case in Western Europe in the centuries leading up to Industrial Revolution; the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern prepared the way for the fundamental transformation of European society. This appears to remain true when looking at recent

experiences in economic development. One crucial mechanism for this is via human capital formation and fertility: the level of education of women determines to a large extent the quantity and quality of offspring. Marriage systems – which determine the bargaining power of women – have a large, independent effect on this, but can gradually change under the impact of urbanization, economic growth and increased employment opportunities for women.

The marriage contract is considered by societies to be a link between men and women and is related with the social and cultural evolution of different generations. Less visible, but no less important, is the link between the social contract and economic relations that are generated at a given time.

The age at which people enter marriage, especially women, can indicate the level of institutional development achieved by a society. It may also reflect the degree of freedom that both parties to the marriage have in establishing this link. From an economic point of view, marriage has often meant the exit of women from the labor market, temporarily or permanently, in order to spend time caring for the children and home.

Therefore, the age of first marriage for men and women, but especially for the latter, may be an interesting indicator of the opportunities available in the labor market and to improve their human capital through work.

In addition, the delay in marriage also involves a delay in the age of reproduction for women, and therefore a restriction on the number of children they will have.

De Moor and Van Zanden (2010) have offered a new interpretation of the functioning of the European Marriage Pattern and its emergence in Western Europe in the late Middle Ages, stressing that its core institution was that marriage was a voluntary contract between the two partners, and therefore based on consent. Women and men had a great deal of agency about their marriage

decisions, which strengthened the position of women in society, and weakened that of the parents and of men. Moreover, because both men and women could choose their own marriage partner, marriage was postponed, and a new life cycle emerged in which individuals had time for education and other forms of human capital accumulation (as apprentices and servants) during their teens and early twenties. This reduced fertility in two ways: by postponing marriage until age 23-30 and by producing better educated women.

However, all of these considerations depend to the formality of the relationship and the institutional importance of marriage in different societies. In Latin America, levels of informality in marital relations are higher than those observed in other societies, such as Europe. This behavior may be influenced by cultural factors, such as the lag of formal institutions being adopted in rural areas and, for some countries, the presence of large indigenous populations.

In this regard, the presence of large immigrant populations in some countries in the region may produce the opposite effect. In this case, the immigrants came from Europe and brought with them cultural patterns related to institutions such as marriages.

Gender inequality in Latin America in Historical Perspective

Presently, gender inequalities in Latin America are studied by international agencies such as ECLAC, UNRISD, World Bank, women's movements, NGOs and researchers from different disciplines in the social sciences. These approaches include a variety of indicators for measuring economic, political and social inequalities. However, there are few references that present quantitative approaches for studying gender inequality in historical perspective.

Among the researchers that have studied gender inequalities in regard to education, Thorp (1998) has distinguished several patterns in the evolution of the

gender gap in literacy rates from the late century to 1990, with data availability varying by country.

Thorp finds a positive relationship between the percentage of indigenous people in the population and the gender gap. However, this also correlates with differences in rural and urban populations. Thus, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, Ecuador and Paraguay are a group of countries where the gender gap has declined continuously, reaching very low levels of inequality in 1990. The same behavior, although starting from a smaller gap, can be seen in Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay and Jamaica. In the last two countries, illiteracy rates of men have recently begun to increase.

In regard to the educational level of the population (not only literacy, but also years of schooling), current research shows that the region is far behind other groups of countries. The lag is mainly at the secondary school level: a large majority of the population has access to primary education, but drops out in high school, and only a small proportion goes to university.

If we look at performance over time, in the 1960s the gender gap for education was large for most of the countries in Latin America, with the exception of the Southern Cone countries.

By 2000 most countries had reduced the educational gap between men and women, although it was still high in countries like Peru, Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti, all countries where there is a significant percentage of indigenous people in the population. In the Southern Cone, women surpassed men in years of education during this period.

Just like the analysis of education as an indicator of gender inequality, the study of the participation of men and women in the labor market shows different patterns between countries. However, producing evidence on the evolution of the

participation of women in the labor market for Latin America throughout the 20th century is a difficult task due to the lack of reliable statistics. The female labor force has generally been poorly surveyed.

There is little information about the participation of women in the labor market during the first three decades of the twentieth century, although the little statistical evidence that does exist suggests a decline in their levels of participation. This fall can be partly explained by demographic factors. During the period there was an increase in the number of marriages, and married women have lower rates of participation in the labor market.

In the period 1930-1970, during the state-led industrialization model, different studies support the thesis of a decline in labor market participation for women (Todaro 2004; Espino and Azar 2007). Espino and Azar for Uruguay and Todaro for Chile say that the government promoted a nuclear family model that confined women to the home and men to the factories. For Chile, Godoy and Diaz (2011) find, through a review of the reports of social workers and women's magazines, an ideology against women's work outside the home. This work was said to constitute a threat to stability family.

In summary, looking at the evolution of different indicators, a reduction in gender inequality can be observed, especially during the latest period. Women strongly improved their education levels throughout the 20th century, while their performance in generating income remained lower than for men. Inequality persists also at the level of the return to human capital and the existence occupational segregation.

In addition, the large increase in the informal sector during this period, for which less data are available, is strongly biased towards the participation of women. Furthermore, the accumulation of inequalities throughout the period, explain both

the gender inequalities that still exist today and the inequality relative to other regions.

Marriage and families in Latin America during the 20th Century

The family as an institution was transformed during the modernization process at different times in different countries. From an historical perspective, the family in traditional societies was an economic unit of production and reproduction; it played different roles such as offering financial support for education, health care, socialization and protection of its members (Hajnal, 1985).

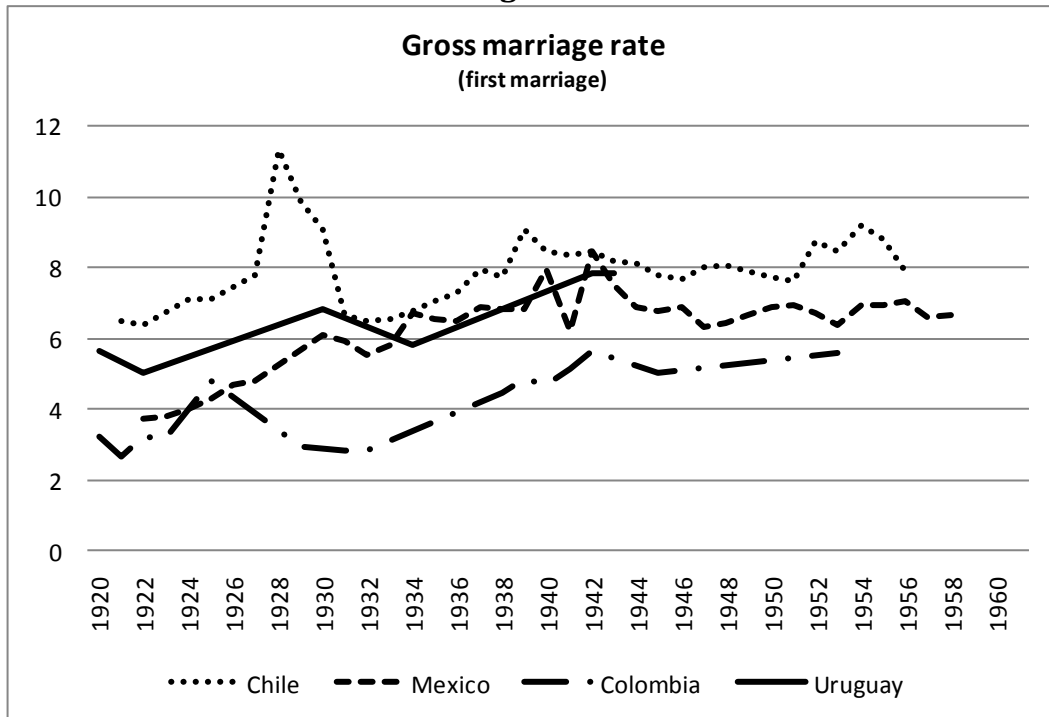
In the contemporary world, the family has become the core of biological reproduction and emotional protection; the other roles have been delegated to other institutions, especially the State. Despite this, the family arrangement has changed, and the formation and dissolution of marriages are more common. This process is also linked to the increase of women in the labor market.

Studies of marriage patterns in Latin America help explain the consolidation of family institutions and how this process has impacted on the delay in women fertility choices. Historical studies show that in pre-transitional European societies, mainly in northern Europe, changes in the age of marriage and the number of married people were the traditional mechanisms of regulation of population growth. In the case of Latin America, the rules imposed by consecrated Catholic marriage acted as the legitimate framework for the exercise of sexuality and procreation.

The average age at first marriage characterizes individual marriage timing decisions. Economic growth in Latin America during the 20th century, the

substitution industrialization process and greater urbanization, stimulated earlier marriage and smaller family size.

Figure 1



Sources: Marriage, Country Statistical Yearbooks. Population, MOxLAD.

Note: Chile, 1921, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1957. Colombia, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950. Mexico, 1922, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960. Uruguay, 1920, 1930, 1942. The number of marriages each year by age group and by sex has been obtained from the statistical yearbooks of each country. These sources present age of marriage data in ranges of 5 to 10 years. Consequently it is not possible to obtain the exact age of marriage by sex.

During the first international crisis in 1929 a clear decline in the marriage rate can be observed in all countries, demonstrating the strong impact of economic crises on family arrangements in different countries

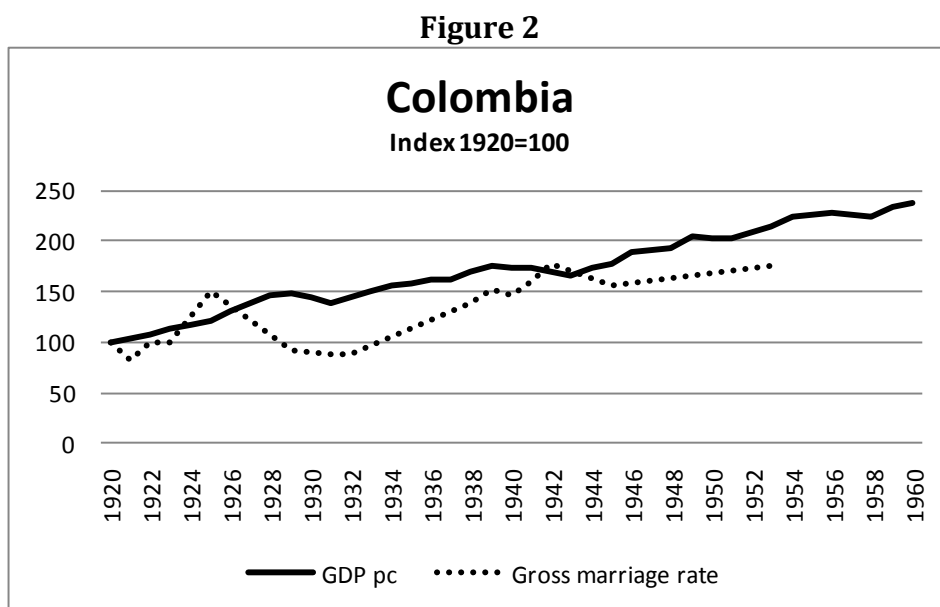
The years after World War II, and especially in the early 50's, the age of first marriage was reduced and the number of children increased. This occurred under welfare state policies that promoted family institutions and a clear division between male and female parenting roles.

It is from the mid 60s and during the 70s that this trend was reversed. The marital choices of today are related to changes in the status of women in society. The increased participation of women in the labor market and improvements in their education level help to explain these changes.

The case of Colombia

Among the different family types identified in the early 20th century, the patriarchal family is the predominant model for the middle and upper social classes (Pachon, 2007).

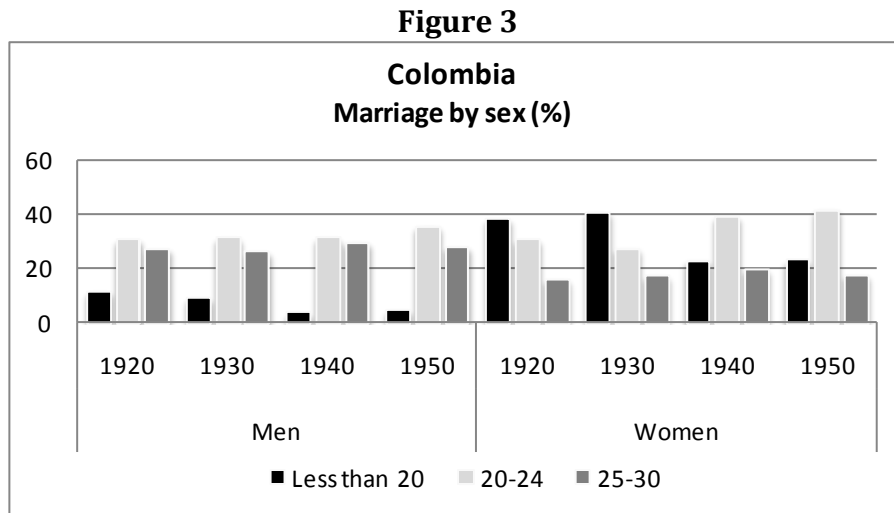
This model was strongly influenced by Spanish colonization and the Catholic values that resulted. In this type of family, the female space was the home environment and her tasks were caring for children. But the nuclear family was dominant for the lower classes



Sources: Marriage: Statistical Yearbooks 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950. Population: 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950 MOxLAD. GDP pc 1920-1960: Dollars G-K 1990, Maddison

By mid-century, changes in family arrangements had appeared, including the reduction of family size. Women began slowly leaving the domestic space, divorce

increased and campaigns against illegitimacy are strengthened. It was estimated that by 1934, in Bogota, illegitimacy was 50%, and if Atlantic coast departments are considered, it was 60%.



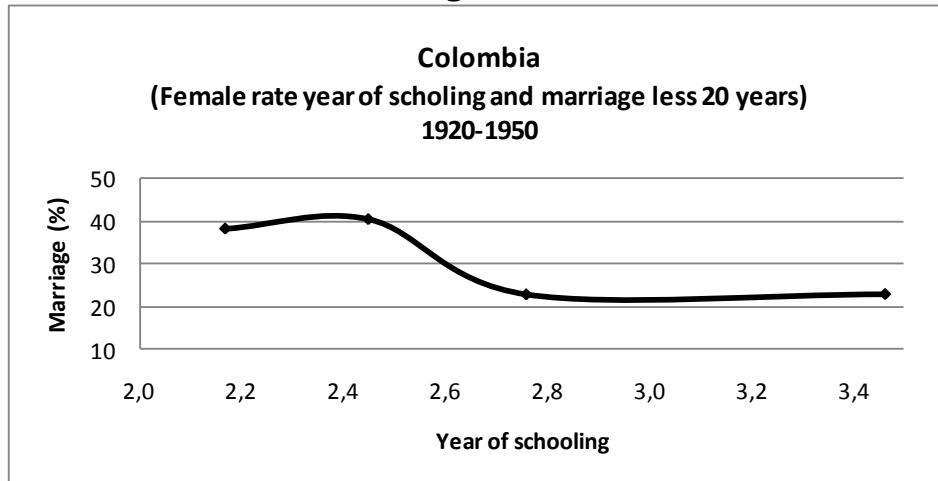
Sources: Statistical Yearbook Colombia.

Note: The rate is of total marriages in the country in each year, according to age ranges reported in the statistical yearbooks.

Dividing the population into three categories by age, at the start of the period the largest group of women was under 20 years old. After the 40s, the largest group was between 20 to 24 years of age.

In the case of men, throughout the period, the largest group was in the age range of 20 to 24 years.

Figure 4



Sources: Female marriage in Statistics yearbooks. Year of schooling Minnesota Population Center. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International: (2011). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota. Version 6.1 [Machine-readable database].

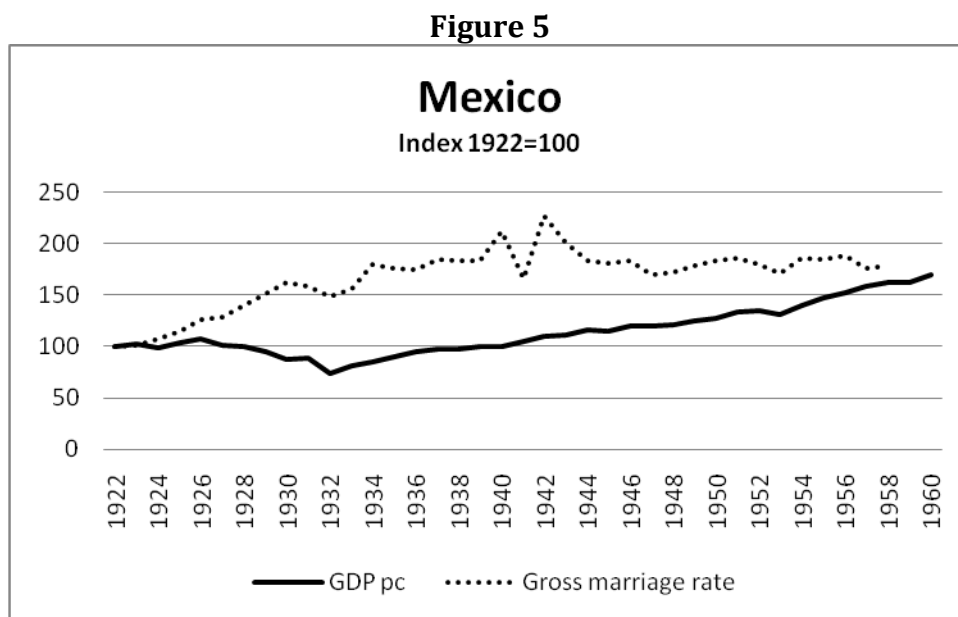
As can be seen in the graph above, the increased levels of schooling attained by the population, and especially by women, have a positive effect on female age of marriage; this shows that increased education leads women to marry later.

Even if we don't have evidence of female participation in the labor market for those years, it is possible that the high level of education contributed to women working in greater numbers and generated a reduction in the number of children per household.

López Uribe, P. (2011) says that from the thirties on, women increased their participation in the labor market as a result of educational policies and changes in the structure and organization of the national economy. Because of the demand for more workers and increases in the cost of living, it was necessary for women to leave their homes to join the economy. However, women were mainly concentrated in low and medium skill jobs, such as those in the service sector, mainly in areas such as education and health, which did not require physical strength or large amounts of training.

The case of Mexico

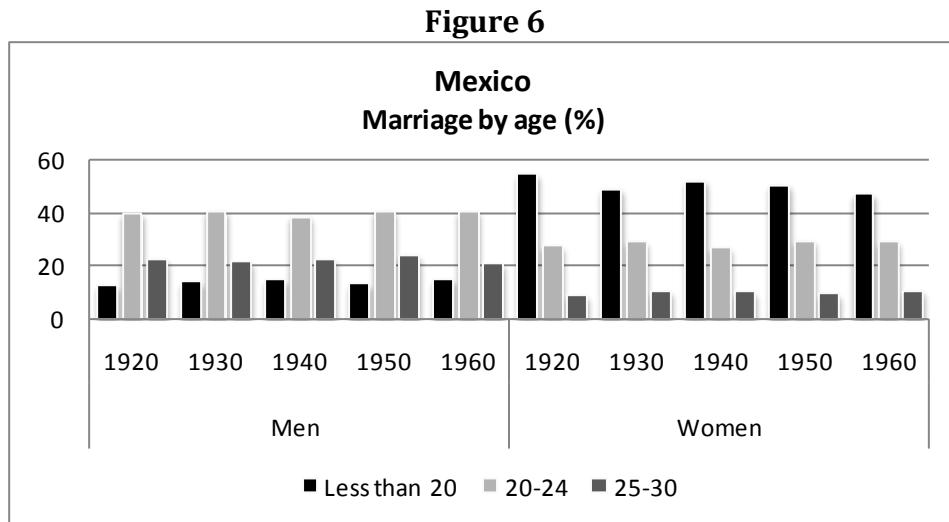
Marriage institutions in Mexico, from the Spanish colonization and until 1859, were in the hands of the Church. From the second half of 19th century it was the State that administrated this legal arrangement. However, in practice the population took a long time before they considered civil marriage as valid, and legislation processed slowly until late in the decade of the 1930s (Quilodrán, 2010).



Sources: Marriage: Statistical Yearbooks 1921, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960. Population: 1922, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960. MOxLAD. GDP pc 1922-1960: Dollars G-K 1990, Maddison

Between 1920 and 1960, a period in which civil marriage was institutionalized, the marriage rate began to rise, especially among younger generations. The sharp decline in marriage during World War II may reflect the impact of economic events, similar to what occurred during the years after the 1929 crash.

Over the course of the selected period, the average age at first marriage for men was higher than that for women. Interestingly, the trend of age at first marriage by sex has changed little over time.

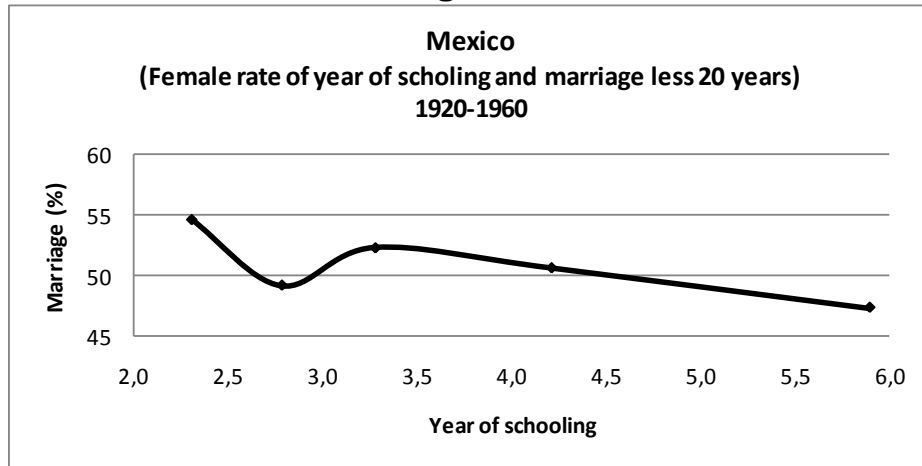


Sources: Statistical Yearbook Mexico.

Note: The rate is of total marriages in the country in each year, according to age ranges reported in the statistical yearbooks

The Mexican case is somewhat different from other developing countries in terms of marriage timing. Although in general the increased participation of women in economic activity has had a large impact on women's expectations, opening up options other than marriage and motherhood, it is difficult to observe this effect in Mexico.

Figure 7



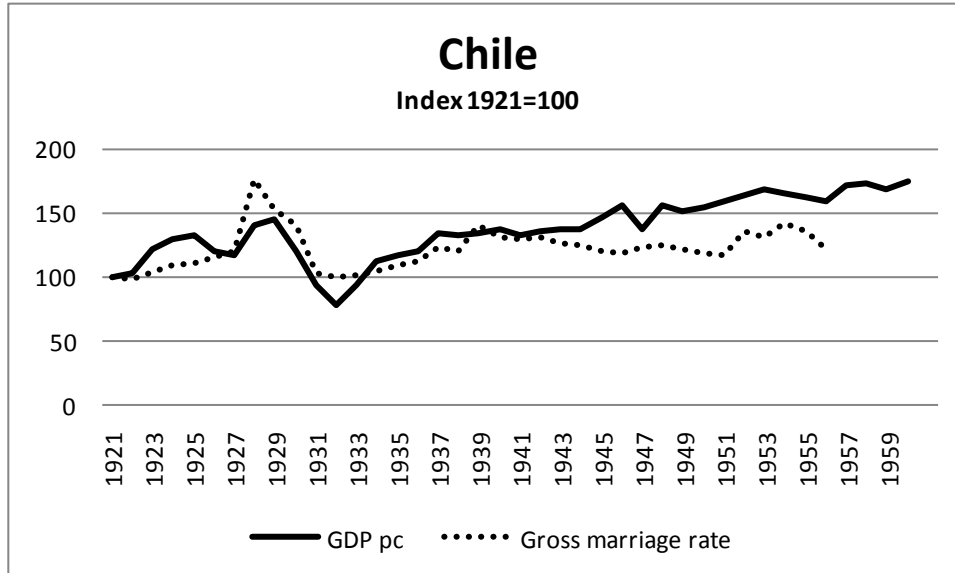
Sources: Female marriage in Statistical yearbooks. Year of schooling Minnesota Population Center. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International: (2011). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota. Version 6.1 [Machine-readable database].

One variable that seems to have a positive impact in delaying the marriage age for women is years of schooling. Despite not having the years of education by age, the data show a slight decrease in the age of marriage for the younger generation of women, especially at the end of the period.

The case of Chile

In Chile, gross marriage rates tended to drop slightly in the late 19th century, with a steep decline in 1890 that reflects the secularization of marriage (Valdes, 2007). The scarce presence of Civil Registers in towns and small cities and the custom of marrying in churches slowed the process of validation of civil marriage.

Figure 8

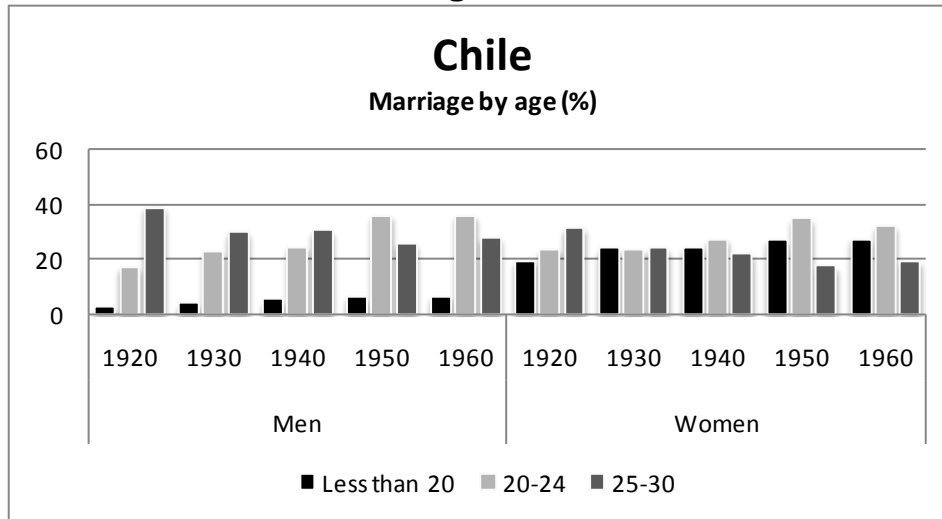


Sources: Marriage: Statistical Yearbooks 1921, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1957. Population: 1921, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1957. MOxLAD. GDP pc 1922-1960: Dollars G-K 1990, Maddison

During the 1920s, the marriage rate began to increase. The crisis of 1929 and its impact on the national economy caused a sharp drop in marriages that took a whole decade to recover from. Later, marriage rates remained relatively stable over the period without being affected by the economic performance of the country.

The data show a reduction in the age of marriage for both sexes, opposite to what occurred in other countries. Both men and women start the period with a high age of first marriage and end the period with a lower level.

Figure 9



Sources: Statistical Yearbook Mexico.

Note: The rate is of total marriages in the country in each year, according to age ranges reported in the statistical yearbooks.

To explain this process is important to highlight that there were a package of policies and administrative actions carried out by the state to promote legal marriage, giving the new marriage social benefits (Valdéz, 2007). These laws were promoted especially in order to influence the behavior of the working class between 1924 and 1973.

In 1953, universal labor laws were passed, under the principle of "moral motherhood and family wage," which created economic arrangements for men to receive family benefits for his wife and children. In this context, most women returned to domestic roles, the education of children and maintenance of the home, while men received a salary in order to support them.

Figure 10



Sources: Female marriage in Statistics yearbooks. Year of schooling Minnesota Population Center. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International: (2011). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota. Version 6.1 [Machine-readable database].

Because of this, it should not be surprising that the increase in years of education for women was not an incentive to delay entering into these unions.

Between the 30s and the 60s, Chilean society was composed of legalized marriage unions. At the end of the 60s, marriage as an institution was accepted across the whole territory and in these years less than 16% of marriages were illegal.

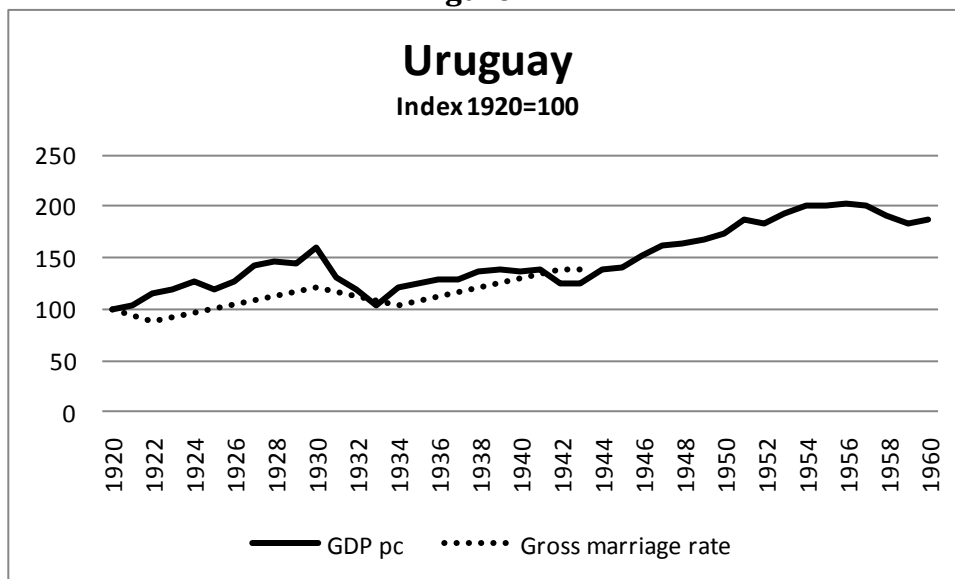
The case of Uruguay

Civil marriage in Uruguay was installed as an important institution in the late nineteenth century as the state removed control of this social arrangement from the hands of the church. Nevertheless, Uruguayan society in early 20th century, which had a high foreign population, had a high share of single people (Camou & Pellegrino, 1993).

This propensity towards non-marriage was particularly high in the local population. In Montevideo, the largest city, 62.3% of native-born men and 56.6% of native-born women were not married in 1908. (Cabella, et al. 1998).

At the same time, high fertility outside of marriage suggests that marriage was not the first option for the procreation. That occurred in particular among the lower classes and in rural areas. However, as the century advanced and the welfare state was constructed, the institution of marriage was consolidated as the primary form of family organization and child rearing.

Figure 11



Sources: Marriage: Statistical Yearbooks 1920, 1930, 1942. Population: 1920, 1930, 1942. MOxLAD. GDP pc 1920-1960: Dollars G-K 1990, Maddison

Accompanying the above trends, the average marriages rate during the period studied does not show significant changes. Despite having less data than in other countries, the tendency for the marriage rate to accompany the economic development of the country can be confirmed.

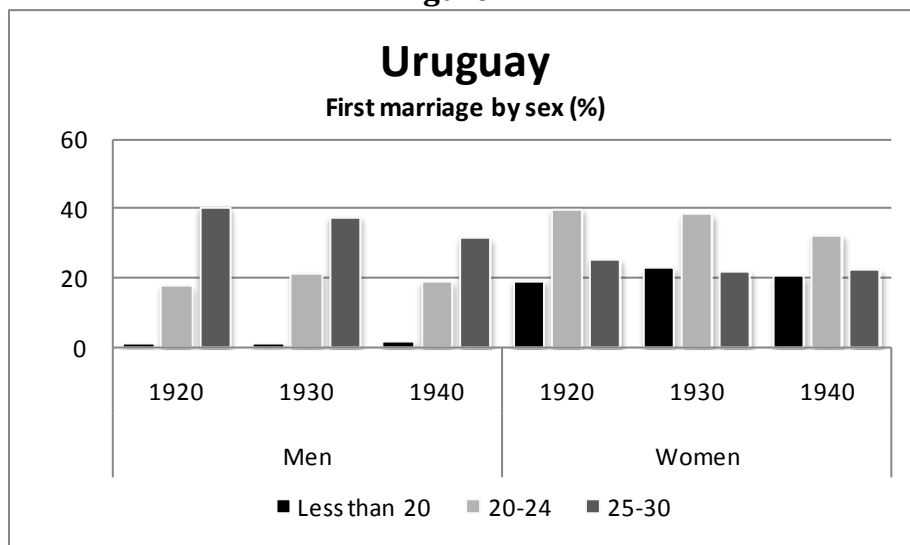
One explanatory factor for this trend is the declining share of children and youth in the total population. This fall in the population of young people directly impacts the number of first marriages.

With respect to the age of marriage, no substantial changes were detected over the course of the 20th century (Cabella et al. 1998).

It can be argued that in Uruguay, as with several European countries, the number of women who end their reproductive life without having children was very high in early 20th century, which suggests that the age of formalization of links to a partner was delayed relative to other countries on the continent (Camou & Maubrigades, 2011).

This early reproductive behavior also had an impact on the formation of families. Women delayed having children and gradually reduced the number of children they had over their lifetime. Consequently, the nuclear family with two children ended up becoming the "ideal type" of household.

Figure 12



Sources: Statistical Yearbook Mexico.

Note: The rate is of total marriages in the country in each year, according to age ranges reported in the statistical yearbooks.

Contrary to what is observed in other countries, men and women in Uruguay entered into marriage at later ages. Women maintain a steady age of marriage between 20 to 24 years old, while men marry later.

Among the many explanations of this phenomenon of fertility, the indicators related to social status, participation in the labor force and place of residence are of great influence. However, the education of women is the variable of highest incidence.

In regard to long-term participation in the education system, significant progress has been made both in improving literacy levels and increasing the number of years of study. However, the trajectories of men and women have not been the same. If we focus only on the process of literacy, women have improved their levels in the second half of the 20th century, reaching the literacy rates for men.

Conclusion

This paper introduces a discussion about marriage patterns in Latin America using gross data about four different countries. Each case has been analyzed separately.

The examinations of the long-term trends in the marriage rate cannot yet provide evidence about the existence of different marriage patterns in Latin America. Indeed, the decline in the rate of marriage since World War II in the four countries studied is consistent with the notion that marriage is weakening as a social institution.

How do we explain this change? Part of the answer may be that the increasing economic independence of women has led them to have less to gain from marriage than in the past. Another answer would be rising school enrolment and attainment that have caused young peoples to delay marriage.

In any case, this paper only provides a first step in the exploration of this phenomenon in Latin America. The next step in this line of research will be to examine the second half of twentieth century. It is necessary to integrate the

process of urbanization in Latin America to the analysis, and examine the differences in the evolution of marriage in urban and rural areas.

It is also necessary to study in detail the evolution of the labor market in each country and the process of women's entry to it. It is therefore important to study the different sectors of economy and wage levels of men and women. This will highlight the issue of timing in age at first marriage as women gain greater economic independence.

References

- **Azar, P.; Camou, M.M. and Maubrigades, S. (2011);** *The theoretical debate about gender inequalities and development; notes for analyses of the Latin American case.*
- **Cabella, W.; Paredes, M.; Pellegrino, A. (1998)** - *La familia desde la perspectiva de la demografía.* Documentos de Trabajo, nº 41. Unidad Multidisciplinaria, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales.
- **Camou, M.M. and Maubrigades, S. (2011)** *Sesgo de género en la educación y el mercado de trabajo: comparaciones latinoamericanas.* 5tas Jornadas de Historia Económica; 23, 24 y 25 de noviembre de 2011, Montevideo.
- **Camou, M.M. and S. Maubrigades (2007)** *Desigualdades de género en Uruguay en perspectiva histórica.* Boletín de Historia Económica Año V, No. 6: 35-51.
- **Camou, M.M. and Pellegrino, A. (1993)** "Una fotografía instantánea de Montevideo" in *América Latina y España: de la Colonia a la Constitución de los Estados Nacionales.* Ediciones del Quinto Centenario. Universidad de la República, Montevideo. Pp 125-189.
- **Camps, E., Camou, M.M. et al. (2006)** *Globalization and Wage Inequality in South and East Asia, and Latin America: A Gender Approach.* Working Paper No. 970. Barcelona, Departamento de Economía y Empresas, Universidad Pompeu Fabra.
- **Carmichael, S. (2011);** *Marriage and Power: Age at first marriage and spousal age gap in Lesser Developed Countries.* CGEH Working Paper Series. N° 15. <http://www.cgeh.nl/working-paper-series/>
- **De Moor, T. and Van Zanden, J.L. (2010);** *Girl power: the European marriage pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period.* Economic History Review, 63, 1 (2010), pp. 1-33.

- **Espino, A. and P. Azar (2007)** *Cambios de la política económica desde una perspectiva de género: de la sustitución de importaciones a la apertura económica*. 1er Congreso Latinoamericano de Historia Económica, Montevideo.
- **Godoy Catalán, L. and Díaz, X. (2011)** *El empleo femenino en Chile, 1880-2000. Evolución, características y representaciones*. Gender Inequalities and Development in the Twentieth Century, Montevideo.
- **Hajnal, J. (1985)** "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective" in Glass, D.V. & Eversley, D.E.H. (Eds) *Population in History. Essays in Historical Demography*, E. Arnold, Londres, pp 100-143.
- **Häkkinen, A. (2010)** *Family structure, marriage patterns and the slow industrialization of Finland*. Section of Social Science History, University of Helsinki, Finland.
- **López Uribe, P. & Gaitán Guerrero, L. (2011)** "Desigualdades de género a lo largo del siglo XX en Colombia". Gender Inequalities and Development in the Twentieth Century, Montevideo.
- **Ono, H. (2003)** *Women's Economic Standing, Marriage Timing, and Cross-National Contexts*. Journal of Marriage and Family, Vol. 65, No. 2 (May, 2003), pp. 275-286 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600076?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.
- **Pachón, X. (2007)** "La familia en Colombia a lo largo del siglo XX" en *Familias: cambios y estrategias* / eds. Yolanda Puyana, María Himelda Ramírez. -Bogotá : Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas :Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá. Secretaría Distrital de Integración Social.
- **Quilodrán, J. (2010)** "Hacia un nuevo modelo de nupcialidad" en *Población* / Brígida García y Manuel Ordorica, coordinadores -- 1a. ed. --México, D.F. El Colegio de México. (Los grandes problemas de México ; v. 1)
- **Thorp, R. (1998)** Progreso, pobreza y exclusión. Una historia económica de América Latina en el siglo XX. New York, BID.
- **Todaro, R. (2004)** Chile under a gender lens: from import substitution to open markets, Unrisd.
- **Valdés, X. (2007)** "Notas sobre la metamorfosis de la familia en Chile" in *Futuro de las familias y desafíos para las políticas públicas*. CEPAL. UNFPA, Santiago, 22-23 Noviembre.
- **Van Zanden, J.L. (2011)** *In Good Company: About Agency and Economic Development in Global Perspective*. Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 23/11 (December, 2011)