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Working Women, Working Men

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Women workers in South America (nineteenth-twentieth centuries)

Mirta Zaida LOBATO

By the end of the nineteenth century, most Latin American nations had been integrated into the international trade system through agricultural, mining or livestock exports and the import of manufactured goods. Urbanization and the expansion of transport (mainly rail) had accelerated. Many new towns sprung up and cities were transformed and beautified by the construction of new buildings, parks and gardens. The demand for labor stimulated significant population movement – from rural zones to urban centers, between the various countries of the region and from the more distant countries of Europe and Asia.¹

The world of work became more complex and specialized. The notion of freedom of contract was extended, even though today it would be a matter of debate. Freedom of movement and the modernization of transportation allowed a vast labor market to develop. Wage labor prevailed, even if situations of constraint and forms of non-wage remuneration persisted up till the early twentieth-century. Many activities were developed to satisfy consumer demands. In the factories and workshops of the largest Latin American cities, workers (men and women, children and adults, the native-born and foreigners, aboriginals, mestizos, black and white) produced goods for domestic consumption and export. In addition to gender issues, ethnic and racial conflicts accompanied the transition from slave labor to free labor and the migration phenomena.

¹ I would like to thank Andrea Andujar, Silvana Palermo, Valeria Pita and Cristiana Schettini for their comments.

This article centers on the experience of female workers in factories and workshops between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. These social and professional spaces were characterized by their heterogeneity and the instability provoked by cycles in importation and production, and by the demand fluctuations characteristic of periods marked by economic and political crisis. My aim here is to consider various situations and problems under certain issues, such as the industrial labor force participation rate for women, some prominent aspects of factory discipline and the tense relationship between work and virtue. At the same time, I locate my discussion in the context of a historiography that has developed in South America over the last quarter of the twentieth century: despite some points of divergence, there are numerous points of agreement.

The female proletariat

In 1906, the Chilean anarchist journal, *El Alba*, noted:²

The proletariat is not only made up of the mason, the blacksmith, the mechanic, the carpenter, etc., who are the only ones we acknowledge; it is necessary to speak and act on behalf of women workers - the mothers, partners, sisters and daughters of those masons, blacksmiths, mechanics and carpenters - who are forced by their "*comfortable living conditions*"³ to invade factories and workshops and to comb the streets of OUR CITY heading for the job-registry and shop that wants to rent their labour at the price fixed by the fief. Hunger demands adaptation!

Women's labor, stimulated by the insufficiency of male salaries, was a typical and recurrent subject of the workers' press, whether anarchist, socialist, trade unionist or communist, depending on the period.⁴ The above quotation above shows that the proletariat did not only consist of men and that it was necessary to act (organize) and speak out (protest) on behalf of women. Yet the notion of an exclusively male proletariat long persisted, even in the historiography of the world of work.

² Cited in Hutchison 2001: 36 (*italics in the text*).

³ In the original text the term "*bolgura*" is used, ironically, to refer to the lack of adequate living conditions of this sector.

⁴ Lobato 2009.

In nearly all countries, including those of Europe, labor history, whether written by labor movement activists or professional historians, has primarily sought to respond to the following questions: who were the workers? What kind of work were they doing? And, above all: what kind of organizations did they create? Which were their dominant ideologies and which were the means of protest taken by them? The answers to these questions have focused on male industrial workers, with women being absorbed into the masculine experience of work. As I have noted elsewhere, this way of writing history was part of a broader, worldwide movement tied to the emergence and appeal of a structure of thought (Marxism) in which industry and its workers were assigned a central role.⁵ While the research that renewed social history in the 1960s stimulated many discussions, it did not succeed in integrating women workers into history. It was only in the late 1980s that, despite their differences, feminist historians were able to make progress in the discussions that crystalized into what became known as women's history and gender studies. Whatever the starting point (feminists, women, gender), it was a genuine challenge to seek new sources, re-read old ones and reformulate questions and theories in social history.

It is no easy task to briefly review the complex, heterogeneous and heterodox transformations of labor history. It is clear, however, that when women finally made their appearance there, it was in the context of a literature long characterized by androcentrism. For Latin American scholars, the Marxist-inspired notion of social class appeared as ethno and Eurocentric well before more recent debates on women workers. Research on South America showed that labor histories often omitted national, racial, ethnic and gender differences and particularities.

Moreover, studying the world of work was not a central preoccupation of academic history. In Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, it was only in the aftermath of the dictatorships of the second half of the twentieth-century that labor history was developed in the academic world. At the same time, a number of historians, most of whom were women, began to rethink historical processes in order to

⁵ Lobato 2008.

incorporate women, to re-read the sources in the light of the questions raised by feminist debates as well as by the problems, themes and methodologies of social history, and to reconsider several historical periods through the light of changing and enduring configurations of gender relations.

Several sources favored by economists and sociologists, such as censuses, have been revisited under this perspective. As the above quotation from the anarchist journal *El Alba* clearly shows, women had invaded the streets, factories and workshops in search for work. But it was difficult to quantify this phenomenon. Sociologists, demographers and women historians questioned the criteria of measurement used by censuses, which minimized women's participation in paid employment outside home. The systematic elaboration of what are considered modern statistics appeared along with the development of nation states. The need for knowledge regarding the nation's territory and population – its rate of economic activity, production, education and institutions – encouraged the centralized development of statistical tools characterized by universality, simultaneity and the individualization of social, economic and cultural actors. Statistics – in particular, national censuses – consolidated the national imaginary in Europe and America alike. In Argentina, several authors have claimed that statistics helped establish the notions of *people* and *nation* via two mechanisms: each country's collective self-identification, and differentiation and comparison with other states.⁶ But the statistical apparatus had other consequences as well: it identified concrete individuals, the bearers of certain distinct characteristics based, not only on the usual criteria (age, urban/rural residence, national/foreign origin), but also on differences of sex.

Diego de la Fuente, director of Argentina's first national census (1869), believed that statesmen should take decisions on the basis of reliable information: "For those who know how to interpret them, statistics reveal organic conditions – physical, moral, social and political – that are rich in lessons for the government of peoples."⁷ From this mass of data which he believed to be important for any

⁶ Otero & Velázquez 1997: 125; González Bollo 2004.

⁷ *Censo Nacional*, vol. 1, 1895: CXLII.

statesman's action, the chapter "Women's occupations" stands out. It shows not only that women carried out many tasks, but also that the "female working class" was a voice that had been excluded from the construction of citizenship – a fundamental theme of recent studies of political history.

The introduction to that census mentions that woman had "neither the vote nor any place for making known her needs and sufferings": it would have been difficult to more clearly describe the marginalization of women relative to political decision-making or the impediments they faced in publicly expressing their problems. The text also underscores the moral character attributed to women's labor: when women found themselves in need, work served to protect their "innocence".⁸ Working outside home was not yet being denounced for standing in the way of the reproductive function, as it would be the case in the early twentieth century. All of these themes – exclusion, the need to work, the tension between work and virtue – were at the time seen as the keys to explaining the characteristics of female labor.

In the mid-nineteenth century, statistical reporting and the press in general justified the large scale employment of women by making reference to the lack of "regular means of subsistence" and "effective assistance", themselves the consequences of political conflict and internal war.

Argentina's 1895 census introduced the theme of women's fertility, above all in marriage, since it characterized women who looked after their "home" as being "of no occupation". However, by excluding from the census reproductive or paid female labor in the home [i.e. outworking] and privileging moral arguments concerning the primacy of married life, the statistics reinforced the idea that the main function of women was to look after their husbands and families, while husbands were to provide for the needs of the family and participate in political and labor union structures. These criteria were not again discussed until the mid-1960s, and it would take many more years of feminist debate before the tools of statistical measurement were finally modified at the end of the twentieth

⁸ *Ibid.*: XLVIL.

century. The introduction to the 1895 census noted that the woman has been deprived of her "own means of subsistence" because she had to "place herself under the protection of man". This fact found statistical expression in a falling rate of female participation in the economy. Elsewhere, as in Chile, two factors explain this drop: economic crisis and statistical under-representation.⁹ The issue of under-estimation complicates analysis and obliges scholars to seek out additional sources. But even biased data show that women played an important role in industry, that they were concentrated in certain sectors of manufacturing and services (food, textiles, clothing), especially in large firms, and that they dominated the market for outworking done at home. Statistics also demonstrate the significant place they occupied in the domains of health care and education. Argentine, Uruguayan and Chilean censuses between 1854 and 1960 show that women made up over 20 per cent of the industrial workforce, even in periods when women's work was less than assiduously recorded. If we add to this outworking and housework, female labor begins to assume major quantitative proportions.

What's more, even when one takes the bias of under-representation into account, a careful analysis of the censuses shows that in 1895, the Argentine garment, hair product and beauty industry employed the most women (34 per cent), followed by the chemical products field (21.6 per cent). In the food and printing industries, meanwhile, respectively 12.6 and 11.1 per cent of employees were women. In 1914, the majority of those hired by the textile and garment industries were women (61 per cent of contracts). Many women also worked in the food industry (14.6 per cent). In 1935, the situation was more diversified, with women working, not only in textiles, but also in paper, cardboard, rubber, food and leather. And the 1947 census presents a really complex picture, subdividing certain activities and distinguishing between manual workers and white collar employees, men and women.

One might carry out similar analyses for other South American countries. In the Colombian city of Medellín, women worked in cigarette and cigar, textile, food and drink factories, while in the

⁹ Hutchison 2006.

factories of the Colombian town of Antioquia, 68 per cent of employees were women. In Ecuador, the workshops of Guayaquil and the textile factories of Atuntaqui, Riobamba and Quito also employed many women. In Mexico, large numbers of women were already employed in the textile and clothing industries from the early decades of the twentieth century, even if the best-known example there is the intensive manual labor performed by women in the 1960s and 70s, manufacturing electronic and electric devices, clothing and so on for General Electric, RCA, NCR, Texas Instruments and General Motors, etc. In Brazil, 33.7 per cent of the industrial labor force consisted of women in 1920, with the figure at 51 per cent in textiles, 40 per cent in clothing and 31 per cent in the chemical sector.¹⁰ At the beginning of the twentieth century, 50 per cent of workers in São Paulo's textile industry were women. As Ferraz Petersen has further pointed out, a careful examination of the Brazilian world of work beyond the Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis would reveal a more complex picture.¹¹

The world of female factory labor in South America thus reflects several convergent processes. On the one hand, the integration of raw materials economies into the global market and the expansion of the import-export trade gave rise to a growing demand for goods produced in urban workshops and factories by a male and female labor force. On the other hand, internal and international migration created a flexible labor pool that included women, as recent examinations of the phenomenon have shown. While women were significantly represented in urban, rural, homeworking and household labor, many were also employed in factories and workshops. As María del Carmen Feijoo long ago underscored, merely locating the places where women worked is not enough; one must also account for the particularities of their professional experience.¹²

¹⁰ Pena 1981.

¹¹ Ferraz Petersen 2009.

¹² Feijoo 1990.

The factory: a “substitute for the abandoned home”

The construction of “factory towns”, worker towns and lodgings, or “company towns” offers a common thread for the analysis of women’s employment in many Latin American countries. In Uruguay and Argentina, several businesses established their companies on both sides of the Rio de la Plata. The entrepreneurs Salvo and Campomar numbered many women among their employees. After forming Campomar and Soulas Ltd. in 1929, they established manufacturing operations in both Juan Lacaze and Buenos Aires. The Argentina-based Steverlynk group had subsidiaries in Uruguay and the Belgian Congo.¹³ In 1932, the group set up a factory in a neighborhood of Montevideo as well as the Flandria mill in the Argentine town of Jáuregui. Both of them employed many women. In Brazil, 33 per cent of the workers in the Cruzeiro factory were women.¹⁴ This figure was not much different from that for New England’s Lowell and Amoskeag factories or companies in Europe.

“Social paternalism” governed the work of men and women alike. It consisted in the establishment of programs to promote employee well-being, such as the construction of houses, schools, clubs and churches. Most women working in companies practicing this form of social paternalism were young and had been educated according to a model that placed family and children at the center of their lives. While it is true that this social model was widespread, paternalist bosses insisted on motherhood and the family as moral forces for individual improvement. In the factories of the Steverlynk group, for example, speeches and publications extolled motherhood, religious education and sacrifice as fundamental aspects of women’s lives.¹⁵

In many companies, social Catholicism, based on a search for harmony and balance in business and society, was embodied in the daily practices of executives, deputies and directors (though with some nuances). This is why, though tensions are apparent at various historical moments, sometimes as a result of national political events, conflict was generally defused. In the textile factories of Medellín,

¹³ Ceva 2010.

¹⁴ Von der Weid & Rodrigues Bastos 1986: 231.

¹⁵ Ceva 2010.

efforts to control the working-class family by controlling women found particular expression in employer surveillance of workers.¹⁶ Companies made chastity a condition of employment, and each year a “factory queen” was elected. In Argentina and Brazil, beauty queens were also elected but the meaning assigned to them was different. For many entrepreneurs, like those of Medellín, the election helped enforce moral principles while also showing that work did not threaten the natural order of the patriarchal family: women were to be chaste and feminine, and the queens were expected to be virgins. Farnsworth Alvear has shown the complexity of female labor and the ways in which women could negotiate (or not) with the rigid discipline of the factory. Cases of unchaste queens and dismissal as a result of concealed pregnancies show that women did violate the norms, thus limiting the control exercised by employers. These offenses were related not only to excessively long working hours, employer abuses and wage discrepancies, but also to the tensions and contradictions between the sexual ideology of the workplace and the daily practices of workers and employers.

Sometimes this paternalism was limited to factories and hardly extended to the community, as in the case of the Patent Knitting Company’s textile factory in the Argentine town of Berisso. The factory manufactured fabric and thread for the hosiery trade as well as the cloth in which exported meat was wrapped. The mill maintained a direct relationship with its employees, most of whom were single, unmarried women. While there was a personal and direct relationship with the management, with some attention given to the problems raised by women workers, and cooperation in resolving personal difficulties, there was no construction of houses, schools, clubs or churches, as in some other companies.

Most often, female labor in workshops and factories was not governed by company paternalism. The food industry is an interesting case in this respect. Cake, pasta, candy and drinks factories and, above all, large meat-exporting companies (particularly in Argentina and Uruguay) employed a large female labor force. From the point of view of the women workers employed in the Swift and

¹⁶ Farnsworth Alvear 2000.

Armour refrigeration plants in Berisso, the beef industry perfectly embodied the relationship between the concentration of capital and the concentration of women.¹⁷ Between 1870 and 1930, the production and export of meat along the banks of the Rio de la Plata had grown so much that it had become the leading export industry. Thousands of workers of all ages – male and female, Argentine and foreign – were employed at the Berisso factories. The majority were Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, Russian or Spanish. Cycles of employment and unemployment converted these businesses into great revolving doors through which workers entered and exited in time with the rhythm of production. This fact affected the labor union organization as well as the life of workers' families. A woman could take on or quit a factory job depending on the needs of her family. Often, she could combine domestic outworking with factory labor or even keep a shop while working shifts in the refrigeration industry.

In the early twentieth century, male and female factory labor had much in common: long working hours, a lack of protection or social benefits and the slow and gradual establishment of protective legislation for all workers. But there were also major differences. On the one hand, laws seeking to preserve the "health of the race" protected working mothers, well before labor law became a reality for all workers. On the other hand, women found themselves in the predetermined tasks and occupations considered appropriate to their sex. Often, these were unskilled in nature, though the criteria upon which the notions of skilled and unskilled labor are based are subject to debate. Depending on the activity, moreover, certain specificities must be underscored. In the meat and food industry, women were incorporated into the more general population of unskilled or semi-skilled workers, whereas, in the printing industry, their employment in the workshops was the result of a process of mechanization.¹⁸ No matter the job, women were paid less than men. An examination of the trajectories of women workers as recorded by some businesses shows that women rarely reached the most highly skilled positions. The apparently neutral terms "operator", "practical operator", "semi-

¹⁷ Lobato 1995 and 2000; Rocchi 2000.

¹⁸ Badoza 1994.

skilled” and “skilled” in fact possessed a gendered content, for differentials were maintained at all levels.¹⁹ In this sense, it can be claimed that, although the dates and forms varied on the Latin American scene, the consolidation of trade unions strengthened gender inequality by writing it into collective agreements.

Nevertheless, gender-based economic inequality is not specific to Latin America; it is also to be found in the United States, Canada and European countries. Certain prejudices have also affected pay levels. The most significant and lasting of these presents maternity as a woman’s vocation; her labor is seen as fundamentally temporary and, as such, subordinate and complimentary to that of men. The idea of women’s labor as a “substitute for the abandoned home” was advanced by labor union organizations as well as by doctors, lawyers and politicians.

As I have already noted, some factories and workshops established rigid moral codes, which were sometimes contested or used in personal interests. In the 1920s and 1930s, factory work was expanded in many countries and new cultural practices emerged, such as spread of practices associated with the promotion of health and the body. In keeping with the ideal of the harmonious body, several companies created women’s teams (basketball and swimming). The image of the beautiful and harmonious body entered into competition with that of the poor working woman, skinny and unattractive.²⁰ Indeed, a 1948 Argentine labor conflict turned precisely on the idea of feminine grace and beauty. A court case brought on behalf of a female worker sought compensation on the grounds that “a magnificent young single woman suddenly found herself aesthetically uglified, her social success abruptly turning to failure”. A workplace accident had destroyed her beautiful figure (she had previously been seen as desirable to men) and thus, it was claimed, had blocked her chances of marriage and motherhood.”²¹

In the same period, “Queens of Labor” began to be elected on the First of May under the presidencies of Juan Domingo Perón. Among other things, it should be noted that these elections, which regularly

¹⁹ Lobato 2000.

²⁰ Lobato 2005 and 2007.

²¹ Lobato 2000.

took place from 1948 to 1955, challenged the traditional opposition between work and beauty. Since Peronism was an Argentine phenomenon, it cannot be said whether this practice was extended to other Latin American countries or not. The literature only mentions one Chilean Queen of Labor being present in a procession in Buenos Aires in 1951. Like the factory queens studied by Farnsworth, the phenomenon of labor queens provides evidence that, as with the factitious opposition between work and virtue, work and beauty were not necessarily opposed.

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Since the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, many Latin American women have engaged in factory work. In the present article, I have examined some situations that may help supply a general framework for studying the population of female factory workers. In the end, my analysis has revealed a situation that is very similar to that found in many European countries: the difficulty of measuring the extent of female labor, spatial segregation, pay disparity vis-à-vis male workers, reinforcement of the notions of subordination and complementarity, and tensions between virtue and work, as also between beauty and work. Here, too, we encounter rigid moral codes that are at once accepted and contested.

If female labor in Latin America is now recognized as an object of historical study, it is due to the research by many women historians. By lifting the veil covering female labor and examining its social and political implications, classic studies in labor history have been profoundly transformed. Despite significant and innovative research, however, much remains unknown: a number of historical periods have yet to be explored and many questions remain to be answered.

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