



Working Women Worldwide. Age Effects in Female Labor Force Participation in 117 Countries

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Summary. — In this article, we investigate the effects of economic conditions, families, education, and gender ideologies on the labor force participation rates of women in eleven age groups in 117 countries. We find that participation rates of young and older women are partly explained by sector sizes and the level of economic development. However, to explain the labor force participation rates of women between 25 and 55 years, we need to study families and gender ideologies. We find these women are more likely to participate when paid maternity leave schemes exist, enrollment in pre-primary education is higher, and countries are less religious.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Women are increasingly seen as the motor of sustainable human development (UNDP, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2014). Policy makers interpret women's emancipation as a proxy for equal opportunities (UNDP, 1995), micro loan projects invest in women to improve the welfare of entire families (World Bank, 2012), women's labor market integration enhances potential for economic growth (World Economic Forum, 2014), and female labor incomes help reduce poverty (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997). Women's work is thus framed as a major force in shaping countries' economic and human development. In consequence, a growing number of policies are geared toward improving women's position and participation in societies.

However, some debate exists as to the extent to which these policies are beneficial to women themselves. First of all, as the World Bank Commission on Growth and Development (2008) comments in its final report, there are vast and unexplained differences in countries' experiences. Secondly, several authors have warned that in the case of women's employment quantity and quality cannot be equated (c.f. Horton, 1999; Norris, 1992). Labor force participation is not always a free choice (Elson, 1999) and may be limited to low-paid and labor-intensive sectors and occupations (Kucera & Tejani, 2014; Çagatay & Özler, 1995). Low economic activity may also be desirable for some women, in particular when education or retirement is substituted for employment (Clark & Anker, 1993; Van Klaveren & Tjzens, 2012).

While in the third case education is clearly preferable to employment, the first two dilemmas certainly include a trade-off. Jordanian female teachers interviewed by Adely (2009) describe both how they entered paid work out of necessity and that it offers them new social networks and a legitimate space outside the domestic sphere. In a more material consideration, Sassen (1996) argues that even low-paid work increases women's autonomy and grants access to the public domain. Considerable evidence exists that paid work strengthens wives' position in the household (c.f. Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Schultz, 1990). Gray, Kittilson, and Sandholtz (2006) point out that women's labor incomes offer an avenue for mending at least part of their general disadvantage and Iversen and Rosenbluth (2008) find it is associated

with a greater presence of women in the public domain. We do not argue here that female labor force participation equals gender equality, but will advance that it can be a starting point of a long process toward emancipation.

Any beneficial effects of female labor force participation, however, require that policy effectively targets the group of prime age women that sustain families. In order to do so, we need to deepen our insights into the way in which female labor force participation differs across countries and between groups of women. Yet, our understanding of its dynamics is far from complete. In their recent overview article on female employment patterns, Steiber and Haas (2012) point out that the large majority of studies either compare different women in a single country or women in different countries, but rarely both. In addition, with a few notable exceptions (c.f. Bloom, Canning, Fink, & Finlay, 2007; Lincove, 2008), research in the last decade has been split into studies of industrialized countries on the one hand, and developing nations on the other.

In order to overcome this binary developing-industrialized divide, this article contributes to the discussion by evaluating which country characteristics can explain aggregate female labor force participation in 117 countries at very different levels of economic development. Moreover, we distinguish between age groups, arguing that women in various stages of a life course are confronted with different encouragements and impediments to labor force participation. We focus on four domains of country characteristics that have been established to affect female labor force participation rates in previous research. We firstly look at much studied indicators of overall female labor force participation, including economic conditions ruling the necessity and opportunities to work, as well as education. We then include two domains affecting mothers in particular: families, including both family composition and care demands, and gender ideologies that govern the extent to which women are encouraged or discouraged from working. We argue that previ-

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ous macro studies have underestimated the effects of those domains by looking only at the female labor force as a whole, ignoring that policies may affect women of various ages in different or even opposite ways.

In order to disentangle the respective influences of the four domains and explore their interaction, we study them separately and refrain from employing the commonly used composite indices (such as the UN Gender Empowerment Measure or the Gender Development Index). We draw on a variety of international data sources to construct a unique country-level dataset of female labor force participation rates for eleven age groups in 2010 and selected indicators that can be attributed to the four domains in 117 countries. In Section 2, we review the previous literature and Section 3 details the methodology and dataset. Section 4 reports the results and shows that models that take account of both country and age differences lead to a fuller understanding of aggregate female labor force participation. Section 5 concludes and explores avenues for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

We are far from the first researchers to look into the dynamics of aggregate female labor force participation. Many authors have pointed out that labor can take many different shapes, both productive and reproductive (for an overview of the debate, see [Tancred, 1995](#) or [Benería, 1992](#)). In this article, however, we aim to shed light on women's remunerative work, because we research the conditions under which women join the labor market. In line with the [ILO \(1982\)](#), we define labor as paid, productive work, performed outside the purely familial sphere, but not necessarily in the formal labor market.¹ We thus focus on access to the labor market, rather than women's position in it.

Since the 1970s, scholars from various fields of social sciences have researched a range of formal and informal institutions to explain country differences and similarities in the extent to which women join the labor force (c.f.; [Boserup, 1970](#); [Clark & Anker, 1993](#); [Lincove, 2008](#); [Pampel & Tanaka, 1986](#); [Semyonov, 1980](#)). Their work shows us that women's attachment to paid labor is rarely, if ever, unconditional. Around the world, women divide their time between household work, child rearing, home making, family enterprises, and the formal or informal labor market ([Bardasi & Gornick, 2000](#); [Barrientos & Kabeer, 2004](#)). Women might both work or stay at home out of sheer necessity, societal status, or beliefs ([Haas, Steiber, Hartel, & Wallace, 2006](#)).

Female labor force participation, then, is informed by the way societies facilitate or impede it ([Chang, 2004](#)). In this context, institutions, defined as "webs of interrelated rules and norms that govern social relationships" ([Nee, 1998, p. 8](#)) are essential. Various scholars have categorized countries according to their ideal-typical institutional settings or "gender regimes", describing "the key policy logics of welfare states in relation to gender" ([Pascall & Lewis, 2004, p. 373](#)). Some institutional arrangements, these scholars have convincingly argued, are more conducive to the labor force participation of women than others' equality (c.f. [Chang, 2000, 2004](#); [Korpi, 2000](#); [Whitehouse, 1992](#)).

In addition, we argue that these institutional constraints weigh differently on women of different ages due to their distinct position in the life course (for an overview of life course theories, see [Heinz & Krüger, 2001](#)). Education may keep school age women out of the labor market, while increasing the opportunities for graduates. Care tasks are omnipresent

in the lives of mothers and grandmothers, but much less so for young women. While the timing of life courses is different in various parts of the world, we argue that, on the aggregate level, women everywhere go through stages of school-going, transitions to adulthood, motherhood with care for young children, care for older children, and grand-motherhood. In short, we view women's capabilities to work or not, as revolving around a balance of economic, educational, family, and gender ideological influences that affect women in different manners depending both on the country they live in and their position along the life course. In the remainder of this section, we study the relation between each of these four domains and the aggregate female labor force participation rate (FLPR).

(a) Economic conditions

Economic conditions can provide both the necessity and the opportunity to work. While in some societies labor force participation is required to make ends meet, in others families may designate a single earner ([Steiber & Haas, 2012](#)). Furthermore, the availability of suitable jobs may draw women into the labor market or keep them out. Economic conditions affect female labor force participation through economic necessity and through the sizes of its respective sectors, which determine the kind of work that is available ([Pampel & Tanaka, 1986](#)).

The relation between the *level of economic development* and aggregate female labor force participation is generally observed to be u-shaped ([Haghighat, 2002](#); [Lincove, 2008](#); [Tam, 2011](#)). However, as [Semyonov \(1980\)](#) observes, while economic development may be indicative of the opportunities women have in a labor market, the association is created by social factors. In recent years, Semyonov's argument has been confirmed in multi-country studies by [Chang \(2004\)](#) and [Lincove \(2008\)](#) who both find that there is no u-shaped relationship when countries at similar levels of development are compared or when studying countries' changes in economic development and in FLPRs concurrently.

The u-shaped relation, then, should be attributed to various social relations and labor market structures associated with higher and lower levels of economic development. Economic necessity is the first of those explanations. Increases in the welfare of workers in periods of industrialization are associated with the material possibility for wives to withdraw from paid labor as a sign of affluent family status (see [Goldin \(2006\)](#) for the USA, [Safa \(1977\)](#) for Latin American or [Bhalla and Kaur \(2011\)](#) for India). [Elson \(1999\)](#) describes this as the move from labor force participation for survival to a genuine choice for (middle class) women to work or not. In a study of Western and Eastern European countries, [Haas et al. \(2006, p. 767\)](#) too, argue that theorizing should "take account of the economic necessity for many women in less prosperous countries to work full time". Thus, where income from work is desirable in high-income countries and essential for survival in low-income countries, withdrawal from the labor market can be a luxury of sorts in middle-income countries. We expect that *the relation between a country's level of economic prosperity and the FLPR is u-shaped (H1a)*.

However, it is questionable whether the abovementioned economic conditions have the same effect throughout the life course. Looking specifically at labor force participation of older women and men in 151 countries, [Clark and Anker \(1993\)](#) conclude that the FLPR of older women decreases with economic development and accompanying changes in the organization of society, such as the availability of old age pensions. The same expectation can reasonably be voiced for young people, who benefit from the increased educational

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