



## FIRST MARRIAGE AMONG WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In seeking possible explanations for variations in marriage timing and using a dataset of eight Latin American countries, this paper tries to explain the link between socioeconomic development and the age of marriage. Age at first marriage could be interpreted as a measure of the bargaining power of women and can be used as an indicator of the degree of freedom that they have when they take the decision to marry. We look at the relation with the urbanization process, educational improvement and the fertility.

To do this, first we situate our main goal within the context of our theoretical approach. Second, we examine the woman's age of marriage mainly in the second half of the twentieth century, in selected countries of Latin America. Next we present the relations between the indicators mentioned above that enrich the explanation of this process. Lastly, we will outline some reflections that can point the way to encourage further research in this area.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Since increasing women's participation is important for the development of society as a whole, not only for their contribution to economic growth (Dollar and Gatti 1999, Forsythe, Korzeniewicz et al. 2000, Berik, Rodgers et al. 2009, Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué 2012) but also because increased participation means improved quality of life in the future (Duflo 2011, Branisa, Klasen et al. 2013), it is necessary to measure how this process has developed in different periods of time and to understand its determinant factors. Several studies have tried to measure achievements in terms of for the power balance between the sexes, and include a gender inequality index, e.g. the gender gap and the gender empowerment index (Bardhan and Klasen 2000; Sen 2000, Dijkstra and Hanmer 2000). Gender inequality can be reflected in men's and women's unequal access to the benefits generated by development and its contribution to personal fulfillment (Dollar and Gatti.R. 1999, Seguino 2000, Beneria and Permanyer 2010, Duflo 2011, Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué 2012). If we consider that women are half the world population, it is pertinent to consider that the low participation levels they achieve

in different spheres of society undermine the potential for development that each country aspires to.

As noted by Van Zanden (2011), the increased participation of women in decision-making in different societies seems to be an indicator of progress linked to economic development. This was what happened in Western Europe when the marriage pattern prepared the way for the transformation European society underwent. Marriage is usually associated with the establishment of a separate household from the family of origin<sup>1</sup> and the creation of a new family. This Western European marriage pattern emerged in the sixteenth century and was maintained at least until the First World War (Foreman-Peck 2011). It had three main features: a delay in the age of first marriage for women (around 25 years old), a low proportion of illegitimate births (2% or less) and a high proportion of women who remained single (over 10%) (Hajnal 1965).

In demographical terms the changing patterns of marriage in European societies has been enormously important as a regulatory mechanism in population growth. During the demographic transition the European marriage pattern contributed to the decline in fertility by delaying the age of marriage and by increasing celibacy. In accordance with Hajnal (1954) and an important stream of historical demographers (Lesthaeghe 1971, Lesthaeghe 1983, Kreyenfeld, Andersson et al. 2012), it has been postulated that the time when the decision to marry is taken – at least in Western Europe – is an important determinant of population growth.

Marriage is considered a link between men and women and its evolution is closely connected to social and cultural changes that societies undergo. Less visibly, this link also responds to economic relations that are generated in different periods of economic development in countries and thus to the social roles assigned to each gender. Moreover, while demographic studies have examined the role of marriage

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<sup>1</sup> Social and demographic studies tend to separate the concept of family from the concept of household. The family establishes kinship relations and is considered a social institution that regulates, directs and gives social and cultural significance to reproduction and sexuality. The household or domestic unit includes cohabitation, sharing a roof and a common budget, but it does not necessarily imply a family connection. In this paper we will be making specific mention of the concept of family and the institutions that it reflects.

behavior in modern societies, economic history has attempted to link these findings with the changes that take place in economic development models (Foreman-Peck 2011).

De Moor and Van Zanden (2010) deepen the analysis of the Western European marriage pattern and emphasize that the main change is that the link between the bride and groom is voluntary and therefore based on consensus. This assumes that both parties have autonomy to make the decision to marry, which implicitly reinforces the idea that women have strengthened their position in society. Moreover, because marriage has become a voluntary choice by the two parties it can be postponed, which means there are other options such as staying longer in the educational system or in the labor market.

The decision of when and whom to marry might be the most important in a person's life course both in terms of their individual life and that of their societal context. Especially for women, the timing of the decision about when to marry and form a new family reflects the level of independence they have achieved and the role they occupy in the societies studied (Carmichael, De Moor et al., 2011; Carmichael 2011)

### ***3. DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH***

At present gender inequality in Latin America is being studied by international organizations like the ECLAC, UNRISD, the World Bank, women's movements, NGOs and researchers in various social studies disciplines. These approaches employ a wide range of indicators to measure economic, political and social inequality. However, there have been few studies that use quantitative techniques to examine gender inequality in Latin America from a historical perspective. Moreover, the studies of divergent development in Latin America can be enriched if you integrate the analysis of the differential participation of men and women in this process. Therefore, a study of marriage patterns and their evolution during the twentieth century may help to explain the differential performance of the economies of Latin America. It can also contribute to the description of economic

growth patterns identified in this period and indicate the relative weight of the involvement of men and women in generating growth in the market production.

Cardoso and Pérez Brignoli (1979) and Bértola and Ocampo (2010) classify the countries of Latin America according to a range of factors such as the type of colonial power, the kind of market each society is linked to, the kind of product that is predominant (in particular the main exports), and the various steps towards establishing a formal labor market. In this research we will consider countries which represent three of the categories based on their typology: the group of template economies that at one time were new settlements (Argentina, Uruguay and Chile), and another two groups that depend on size, the large and middle sized economies on the one hand (Colombia and Mexico) and the smaller economies, which form the largest group (Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama).



We obtained most of the measures of age at marriage from two sources: the work of Brígida Garcia & Olga Rojas (2001) research and that of the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. We work with the

Statistics Yearbooks of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay to reconstruct the average age of marriage before 1950 and to check the data of international databases. The indicators of women education level by age 15 and above are based on the Barro-Lee databases (2012). Our estimation of urbanization is the proportion of the population living in urban areas based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division(2012). The fertility rate represents the mean number of children per women based on the data of the Latin America & Caribbean Demographic Center (CELADE) Population Division of Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2012 ). Finally for GDP per capita we use the estimation available in the MOxLAD databases.

We first examine general patterns of female age at marriage in the eight countries selected. The period in this case is 1930-2000 to integrate all the information that we have, although we do not have the same data for all the countries in the sample. In our second part of the analysis we will pay more explicit attention to the possible relation between age at marriage and urban population, years of schooling, fertility rate and economic growth in the period 1950-2000. In order to focus on the female age of marriage, we do not include data on males marriage.

#### ***4. MARRIAGE IN LATIN AMERICA***

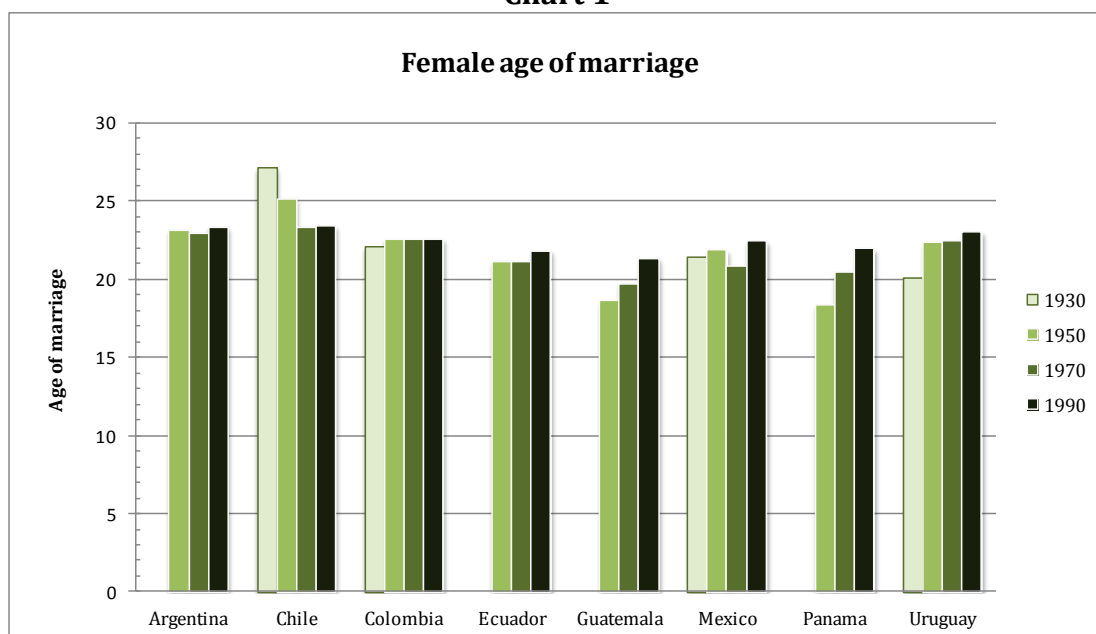
As noted above, historical studies show that in Western European societies changes in marriage age and in the number of married persons were the traditional mechanisms that regulated population growth. At the same time, each marriage may correspond to the time a new economic unit is consolidated, the emergence of a new home and the institutional changes that these events reflect.

However, all these considerations about the institution of marriage depend on the formality of the relationship and the importance assigned to it in different societies. In the particular case of Latin America, from the beginning of Spanish (and to a lesser extent Portuguese) colonization, the Catholic Church was the institution responsible for celebrating marriages and registering them. In the second half of the nineteenth century nation states started to take over this role.

Some authors agree that the introduction of civil marriage caused a brief decline in the marriage rate as legal marriage was re-located to the civil registry office. This occurred in a context of low levels of urbanization, a scarcity of civil registry offices in villages and small towns, and the custom of marrying at churches that were located inside the haciendas (big estates), the focus of power in rural areas (Valdés 2007; Quilodrán, 2010).

In spite of this, it is generally agreed upon in the demographic literature on the evolution of marriage and social and economic change in the different countries of Latin America, that the family is a core value in all social and economic classes in the region (Kuznesof and Oppenheimer 1985; Saenz 1992) and the marital links were strongly determined by existing social divisions (Saenz 1992; Jelin and Paz 1991). Family arrangements were an important part of the consolidation of marriage in the colonial period (Vitale 1987), and when nation states emerged this did not break at all the elitist nature of marriage patterns in the upper classes (Jelin and Paz 1991, Sáenz 1992, Arriagada 2005). Property ownership rights were one of the main concerns among the dominant elite families, and marriages tended to consolidate the existing structure.

**Chart 1**



Sources: Based on García, B. and O. Rojas (2001) and Statistics yearbooks of Chile, México and Uruguay. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division Note: In the case of Argentina the average of 1950 represent the 1960 decade.

In contrast to the Western European marriage pattern explained above (Hajnal, 1965), the evidence from Latin America shows that the average age of contracting marriage in the second half of the 20th Century remained relatively low.

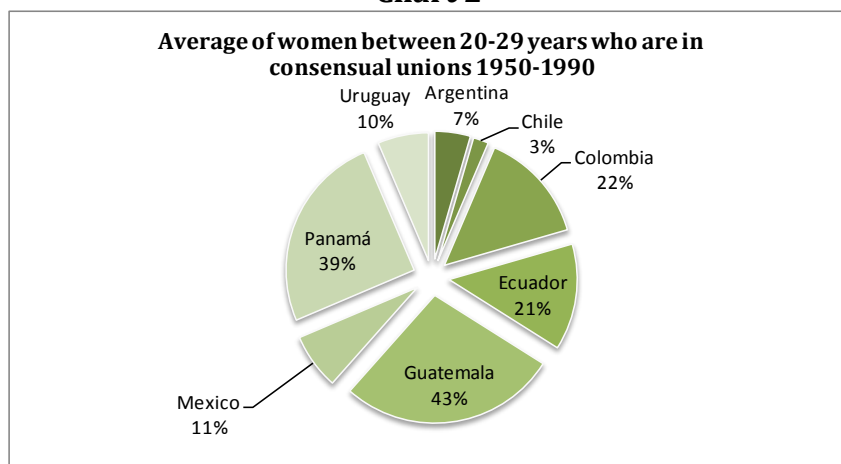
However, different trends can be identified in this process in this group of countries. One group of countries demonstrated early marriage at the middle of twentieth Century (less than 19 years old) including, Guatemala and Panama. Another group had an intermediate marriage age (21-22 years old), Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico. Finally there is a group with a relatively late marriage age (an average of 23 or 24 years old), and here we find Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. In this last group it is important to highlight that Argentina and Uruguay in particular received large numbers of immigrants from Western Europe, who arrived in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and brought with them different cultural behaviors (Camou and Pellegrino 2013). In this group the case of Chile is quite different, first because this country did not receive many immigrants; secondly, because in the second half of the twentieth century, the age at which women first married declined. It is difficult to find an explanation for this behavior, which goes against the trend of changes in the institution of marriage in the observed countries. Perhaps the answer may be linked to the cultural patterns mentioned above, in which women staying in the home has tended to be reinforced, especially by the State. To explain this process in Chile, it is important to consider a set of policies and administrative acts implemented by the State to promote legal marriage and make remarriage beneficial (Valdés, 2007). In 1953, universal labor laws were passed, under the principle of "moral motherhood and family wage", which gave family benefits for a man's wife and children. In this context, most women returned to domestic duties, the education of children and maintenance of the home, while the men went out to work (Arriagada 2005, Valdés 2007, Godoy Catalán and Díaz 2011).

Another factor that is remarkable in Latin America is the persistence of high levels of informality in marriage. Cohabitation without marriage is often associated with



a relatively large indigenous<sup>2</sup> or rural population, with a central government so weak or ineffective that it has little practical control over much of its territory. (Fussell and Palloni 2004). To the contrary, in countries with a majority of inhabitants of European descent, where the State has legitimate authority, we find that the tendency to cohabitation without marriage was lower, which may correspond to the adoption of cultural patterns from outside the region especially as regards the consolidation of the institution of marriage. Clear examples of this effect are Argentina and Uruguay.

**Chart 2**



Sources: (Fussell and Palloni 2004)

<sup>2</sup> "Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, approved by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1989, defines human groups as indigenous 'on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions'. According to information from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) (2006), in Latin America more than 650 indigenous peoples have been recognized by the region's States. Despite their differing demographic, social, economic and political patterns, these peoples share a reality of structural discrimination in the form of marginalization, exclusion and poverty. To a large extent, their exclusion and poverty is due to the historical discrimination suffered by indigenous peoples since colonial times" CEPAL, C.-D. d. P. d. l. (2008)

Country	% Indigenous population in total population								
	Male			Female			Total		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Chile (2002)	3.5	11.9	4.7	3.4	12.1	4.5	3.4	12.0	4.6
Ecuador (2001)	2.1	13.8	6.7	1.9	15.1	6.9	2.0	14.4	6.8
Guatemala (2002)	28.9	51.5	41.2	28.1	52.1	40.9	28.4	51.8	41.0
Mexico (2000)	3.1	16.3	6.5	3.1	16.3	6.3	3.1	16.3	6.5
Panamá (2000)	3.2	20.9	10.2	2.7	22.6	9.9	3.0	21.7	10.1

Sources: <http://celade.cepal.org/redatam/PRYESP/SISPP>

As noted by various researchers (García and Rojas 2001, Fussell and Palloni 2004, Guzmán, Rodríguez et al. 2006), countries that have a lower proportion of consensual unions also generally have a delayed age at first marriage. Although there is scant data about population distribution by ethnicity in the region, it is well known that rural areas have higher percentages of indigenous population and we can assume that rural areas therefore had higher levels of consensual unions.

## **5. SELECTED VARIABLES RELATED WITH FEMALE AGE OF MARRIAGE**

In order to understand the persistency of early marriage among women in Latin America, we try to link these trends with indicators in the cited literature considered: the spatial distribution of the population, the level of education of women, the fertility rate and economic growth. For each point we explain the theoretical link between each indicator and the age of marriage.

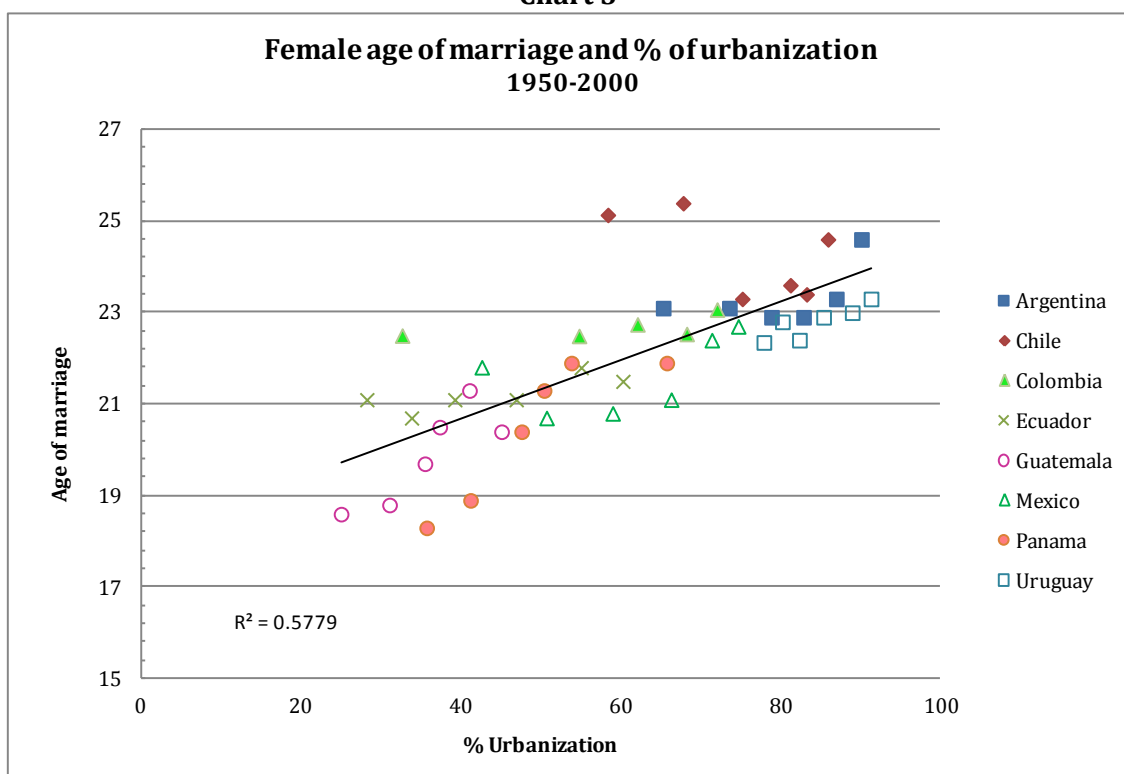
### ***5.1 Spatial distribution of the population in Latin America***

According to United Nations estimates Latin America and the Caribbean constituted the most urbanized region in the developing world at the beginning of 21st century. Today, 4 out of 10 Latin Americans live in a city of at least 500,000 inhabitants, and the majority of the population lives in towns of 20,000 or more inhabitants (Guzman, 2006; da Cunha 2003). These trends could be related to many factors like the gradual process of industrialization that started in the 1930s and led to an increase in labor market opportunities in the cities. At the same time agricultural production was modernized and land ownership was concentrated in the hands of the few, which made for an excess of rural population. Finally, the cities in general offer access to public services, in particular health and education, which could be important for families' needs.

But the effect of the population's spatial distribution on women's age at first marriage could combine in different ways. The urban-rural differences in marriage patterns can be explained, not just by place of resident in particular, but also by the differences in the composition of the population that live in urban or rural areas. In

the particular case of Latin America, rural populations have a relatively high proportion of indigenous peoples who retain their own cultural and family patterns and the social control of the communities is strong and decisive in personal matters such as marriages . However, in an urban context social control is probably less evident, in particular for women, and they could be more exposed to modern values that support delay in marriage, investment in education and increases in human capital (Singh and Samara 1996, Arriagada 2005).

**Chart 3**



Sources: Urbanization based on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Age of marriage García, B. and O. Rojas (2001) and Statistics yearbooks of Chile, México and Uruguay. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division Note: In the case of Argentina the 1950 average represent de 1960 decade.

If we compare the process of urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century with the female age at marriage in the region, a positive relation between the variables can be seen. The urbanization process may contribute to the delay of marriage among the female population. We find that countries that have a population located mostly in rural areas (Guatemala, Panama, Ecuador) are those in which a greater proportion of marriages (and also consensual unions) are undertaken at younger ages. On the other hand, in countries that have a greater percentage of the population living in urban areas (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay) the

age of first marriage is delayed. As mentioned above, cultural factors could explain part of this process and a good example would be Mexico and Colombia, which are in an intermediate position. In the rural areas the patriarchal family has persisted in the upper and lower social classes, and early marriage may be the only way for younger daughters to leave the family (García, B. and O. Rojas 2001; Pachon, 2007). But other economic factors also play an important role in this possible explanation of the observed differences between rural and urban areas. There may be aspects related to the labor market conditions prevailing in different geographical areas that affect women's opportunities to have access to paid jobs. This is linked to urbanization and changes associated with greater access to the formal education system, which led individuals to postpone their entry into formal marriage.

## ***5.2 Education improvements in Latin America***

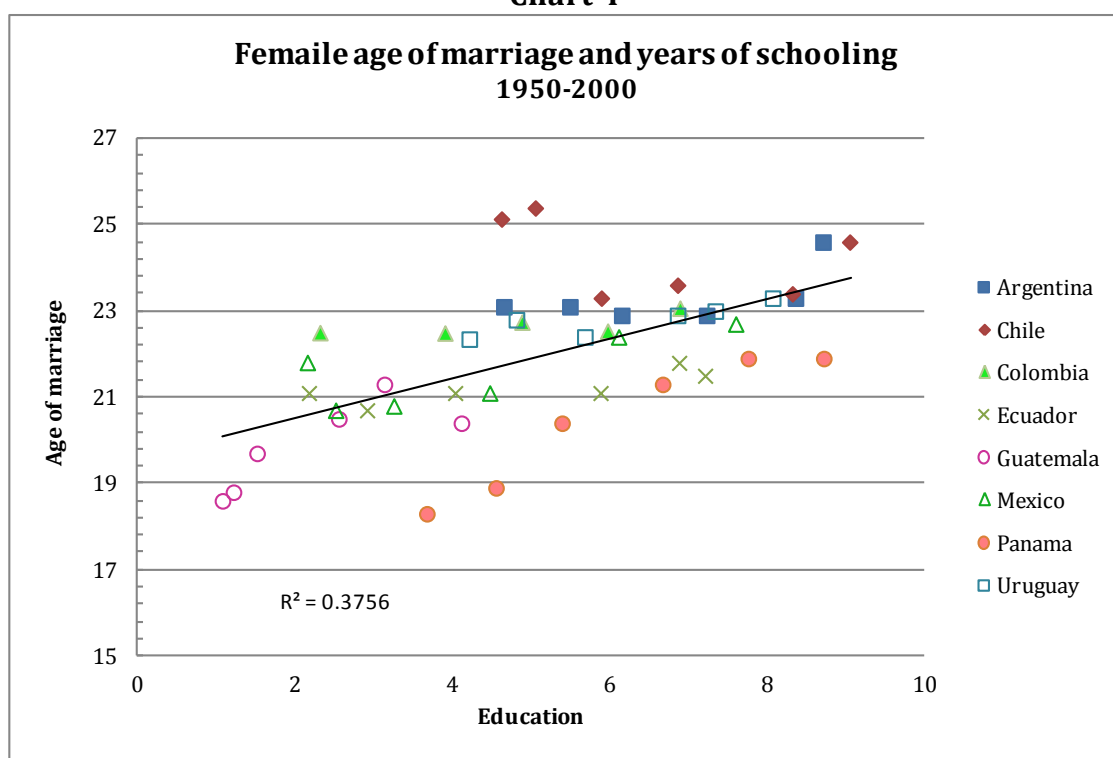
Over the last fifty years, the educational level of Latin American and Caribbean populations has progressed to an unprecedented degree. In 1950, the region had an illiteracy rate of around 40% among persons aged 15 and over, but by 2005 it had dropped to less than 10%. In all countries in the region, the proportion of persons who have completed primary schooling has increased rapidly. Nevertheless, although the educational level is rising everywhere, there are still large disparities between countries.

As mentioned above, education is one of the main factors that promotes changes in the population, especially among women, because it is related to greater personal autonomy, to the incorporation of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, to the possibility of different options to develop their human capital in the labor market and to the expansion of the scope of their own search in the "marriage market" (Oppenheimer 1973, Oppenheimer 1997, Sweeney 2002). With the increase in people's human capital, we can expect a change in the cultural patterns behind personal decisions about partner choice and procreation. Staying longer in the formal education system would tend to make women delay marriage and decide not to have children at an early age. Contrary to what happens in traditional societies, where women's social status is linked to marriage and family

formation (Mason 1987), in modern societies education is seen as more important than the social status that men and women attain through marriage.

However, the connection between increased years of study and changes in decisions about marriage is not straightforward. In the case of Latin America, the data show that women's years of study have increased but this does not have a mechanical correlation to delaying marriage. Even though general trends show a positive relation between the two variables, there are differences through countries.

**Chart 4**



Sources: Average Years of Total Schooling (Barro and Lee 2000); Age of marriage García, B. and O. Rojas (2001) and Statistics yearbooks of Chile, México and Uruguay. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division Note: In the case of Argentina the 1950 average represent de 1960 decade.

Countries such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, whose main characteristic is that marriage is later than in the rest of the group, show a positive connection (even though not very strong) between women entering into their first marriage later and years of study. In this case, we must take into account that these countries already had high levels of education at the start of the period analyzed. In fact, in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, some 95% of the women born in the 1980-1984 period completed primary schooling (Guzman, Rodriguez et al. 2006). Mexico and

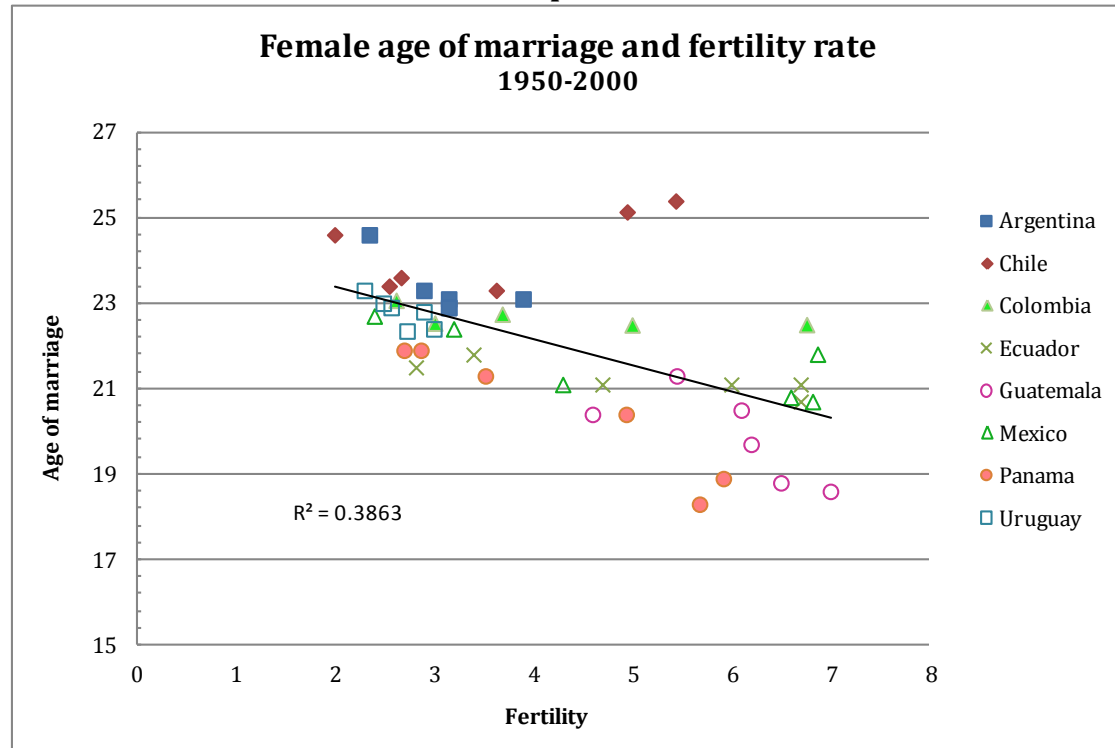
Colombia appears to contradict the general result because in spite of the increase in educational attainment, which brought these countries up to similar levels as the three mentioned above, average age at marriage has remained unchanged. Lastly, Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama show a positive relation between an improvement in women's education and delayed marriage. This trend probably reflects what we would expect as regards the importance of education for women's opportunities. This result shows that women with more education are less likely to marry young. Even though marriage age and women's education levels in this group are the lowest in the panel of countries, education probably contributed to raising the average age at marriage from 18 years to 22.

### ***5.3 Fertility rate in Latin America***

The demographic transition is one of the most important social changes that took place in Latin America over the last century. It has produced not only a reduction in the absolute number of births over the short term, but also a medium- and long term restructuring of the population pyramid. As elsewhere in the world, the models of demographic transition are very diverse. In Latin America, a number of main models can be identified; Argentina and Uruguay began their transition very early, following a similar pattern to Europe at the end of 19th Century. On the other extreme countries such as Guatemala began their fertility transition much later (at the end of 1980s) and much more slowly. The transition in Mexico also started much later, with a natural growth rate that only began falling in the late 1970s. The other countries fall into an intermediate group, the transition process was similar to that of the previous group, but started from lower rates.

Hypothetically age at marriage and fertility should be linked in that the number of children per women is expected to fall as the marriage age increases. However in contrast to what we find in other regions, especially in Western Europe where delayed age of marriage has been correlated with a decline in the fertility rate, in Latin America the birth rate indicator has fallen independent of the age of entry into marriage, which remains relatively stable.

## Chapter 5



Sources: Fertility rate [http://www.eclac.cl/celade/proyecciones/basedatos\\_BD.htm](http://www.eclac.cl/celade/proyecciones/basedatos_BD.htm). Age of marriage García, B. and O. Rojas (2001) and Statistics yearbooks of Chile, México and Uruguay. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division Note: In the case of Argentina the 1950 average represent de 1960 decade.

In a globalized world, it is only to be expected that many processes occurring in other countries, especially in more developed regions, have a massive impact on other regions. In the context of this research, advances that have occurred in developed countries in health care, access to contraception and the diffusion of more integrated family planning policies, in the first half of twentieth century, have generated positive spillovers in less developed societies. These advances happened when Latin America's demographic transition was still not complete. The region received the benefits of these advances and integrated them into its own process. This facilitated the reduction of fertility and reduced the importance of delaying marriage as contraceptive mechanism (Carleton, Lopez et al. 1965, Fussell and Palloni 2004, Guzmán, Rodríguez et al. 2006).

Historically high fertility rates have been associated with the most vulnerable economic sectors, which are further characterized by low educational levels and are located in rural areas and peripheral towns. In Latin America, studies have shown lower urban fertility and that fertility can be expected to decline as the

urban population comes to represent an increasingly large proportion of the total population (Carleton, Lopez et al. 1965). The rural sectors may include indigenous populations, which makes for additional cultural and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, we find that countries that have the lowest fertility rates are those that have achieved higher levels of education, especially among women, which results in greater control of fertility in marriage through access to contraceptives and other means of birth control (Arriaga 1970, Cutright, Hout et al. 1976, Palloni 1990, Del Boca, Aaberge et al. 2003, Guzmán, Rodríguez et al. 2006).

As said above, this transition did not occur in an homogeneous way for all Latin American countries. There was an early decrease in fertility in countries where age at first marriage was already delayed and where there were fewer consensual unions (Argentina, Chile and Uruguay) and by the 1950s the average number of children per woman was about 3. In particular, there was an early fertility transition in Argentina in the period 1870 to 1915. Susana Torrado (1999) points out that it almost exclusively involved immigrant populations residing in the metropolitan area and in the cities of the Pampas. The rest of the population, especially the native population, who lived in rural areas and peripheral regions, did not change their pre-transitional demographic balance at least until the 1930s. The more widespread fertility transition occurred among the less educated, poor, and middle-class sectors, including rural and urban women alike, beginning somewhat later and proceeding more slowly (Fussell and Palloni 2004). In those countries where earlier ages of marriage have persisted, there has been a slower decline in fertility rates and they are mainly countries with a majority indigenous populations.

#### ***5.4 Economic growth in Latin America***

From a historical perspective, the economic gap between Latin America and the more developed countries has widened. In the early period of its development, at the end of 19th Century, Latin America moved far ahead of the poorest parts of the world, but in recent decades the situation has changed and the region has lost ground to economies like those in Asia that previously were in worse positions (Bértola and Ocampo 2010). Compared to the world average of economic



performance, in some periods of the 20th century, Latin America's efforts to "catch up" with the leaders enabled the continent to improve its position, although in the long term it was unable to reach the levels of those countries. To make matters worse, the continent's performance has been particularly poor in recent decades and the various economies of the continent have undergone a marked deterioration (Bértola and Ocampo 2010; Bértola and Gerchunoff 2011).

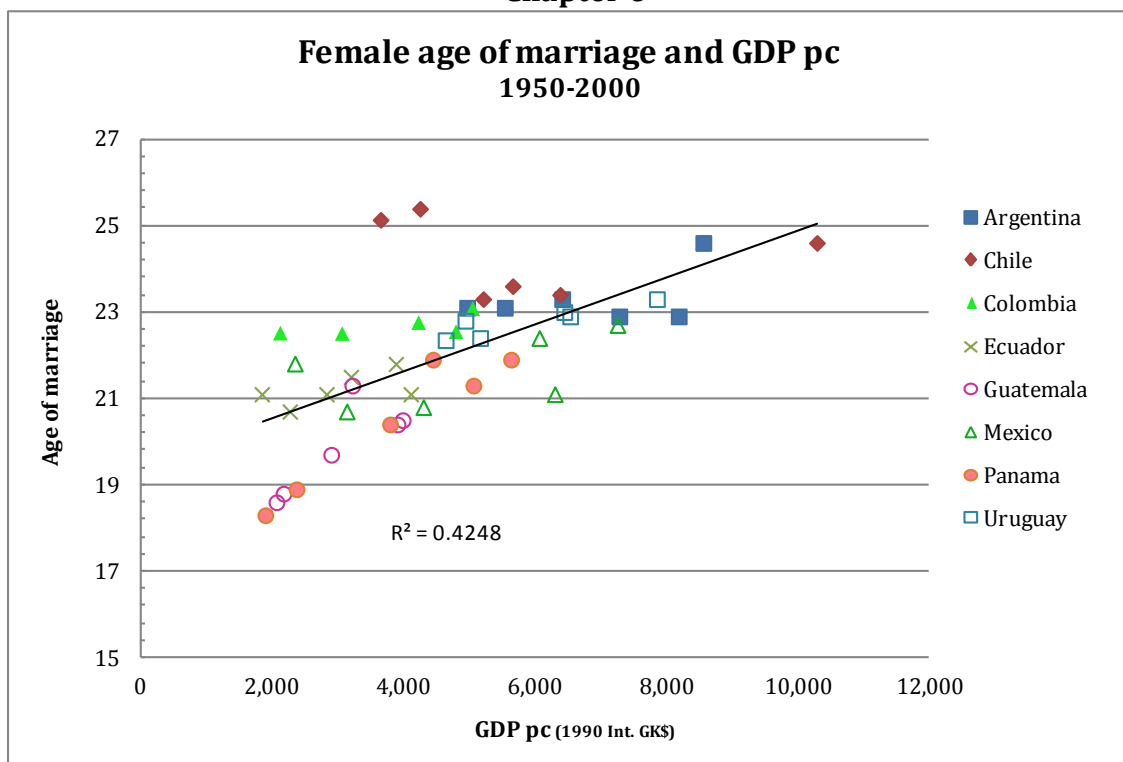
Economic growth is regarded as an opportunity to improve the well being of the population: resources could be used for investment in healthcare and education, making it possible to improve living conditions and the quality of services offered to the population. Reinvesting in economic growth provides a chance to "harvest" what is sometimes referred to as "demographic dividends," as a virtuous circle, it is possible accelerated economic growth and human development resulting from these structural demographic changes. (Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué 2012). For our research we want to highlight the relation between economic growth and the expansion of women's rights and their empowerment. If men and women have equal rights and opportunities, the marriage appears as a contract and both sexes can decide freely about it. So economic growth could bring women the possibility of different options during their lives, such as improving education levels or obtaining economic independence with a job. These provide an alternative to early marriage. Improving the effectiveness of economies and achieving economic growth is widely accepted as key elements of any long term development strategy. But successful implementation of this strategy does not guarantee gender equality.

The evidence shows that economic growth does not necessarily have a direct impact on the population decisions (World Bank 2001, Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué 2012). In fact, to discuss the economic growth effect on gender equality and in particular, the impact of economic growth on marriage patterns, policies for institutional change and economic development need to be considered and address prevailing gender inequalities in rights, resources, and freedoms.

Nevertheless, the general trend presented in the relation between GDP per capita and the age of marriage, shows that economic growth has a positive impact on

female equality. But if we analyze these result more thoroughly we can find two ways to understand what happened in this panel of countries.

### Chapter 6



Sources: GDP <http://moxlad.fcs.edu.uy/en/databaseaccess.html>. Age of marriage García, B. and O. Rojas (2001) and Statistics yearbooks of Chile, México and Uruguay. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division Note: In the case of Argentina the 1950 average represent de 1960 decade.

Clearly in those countries with historical patterns of inequality (Bértola and Ocampo 2010), the gender inequality is not an exception. As a result the impact of economic growth takes more time to play out in benefits in terms of education, labor opportunities, even in personal rights for women. Panama and Guatemala represent two societies urban population rates of around 50%, and the lowest rate of access to education among the whole population and in particular among women. To improve these conditions a spread of economic benefits is necessary but seems difficult to obtain. In the case of Argentina and Uruguay, the relation between age of marriage and economic growth can probably be better explained by the expansion of social spending and the progress of women's rights (Azar and Fleitas 2009, Azar 2012, Hallward-Driemeier, Hasan et al. 2013). The economic growth since the late nineteenth century has been based on the agro-export model of development. This kind of production did not demand much labor force and it

promoted an earlier migration to cities in search of job opportunities in the area of services and the emerging industrial sector (Camou and Maubrigades 2011, Camou and Maubrigades 2013). During the twentieth century, women joined the labor market more slowly, despite having accumulated educational improvements. The expanding education and the development of the economy since the mid-twentieth century, coupled with the industrialization process, generated increased opportunities for female participation in the labor force, and also promoted periods of strong public policies to redistribute with an important impact in women lives. Finally, the large countries, Colombia and Mexico, have caught up with the template economies (the Southern Cone) in recent years. We can suppose that this catch-up process has been due to specific public policies by States to improve the living conditions of the population. In particular Mexico has problems to balance two different situations inside the same country. On one hand, it has one of the most urbanized areas in Latin America; on the other hand, it has important rural areas with a majority indigenous population. This profile has resulted in a cultural mix that distinguishes these countries from the rest of the panel. Until the past quarter century, however, they have come closer to the pattern found in developed societies. This change has coincided with the process of improved education, especially among women, who were close to illiterate in the mid twentieth century. This could explain the stagnant age of marriage, combined with low levels of education and high fertility rate.

## **6. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the evolution of the age at first marriage of women in Latin America. We tried to find some evidence of the influence of new family formation patterns on population growth in the region and its social and economic development.

In particular, we tried to investigate the changes that the female population in the region has undergone, such as the empowerment process and being able to make choices about their own lives. In the literature on the subject, this is identified as a

process of recognizing freedom and exercising it. These processes do not occur in isolation, and we compare these trends with other variables that have an influence when people make decisions that affect their personal lives and society.

Thus, in this paper we integrate education as a key variable in the development of people. However, the increase in years of education does not seem to directly influence the change in the decisions women make as regards to the age at which they marry. In general, age at first marriage has remained fairly stable: women marry young in the countries in the region. This profile is unlike the trend in most developed countries, especially in Western Europe.

This difference between countries seems to be influenced by the proportion of indigenous and/or rural people in the total population. This feature is linked to the clear difference in marriage pattern between countries that received massive European immigrant flows during the period and countries where immigration was lower. These population differences also seem to be linked to the global pattern of demographic transition in the region, especially when it comes to fertility, which has been declining since the mid twentieth century. This trend suggests that even though women's age at first marriage has not substantially changed, the number of children per woman has changed, and this behavior may be positively related to improved education, which has been the overall trend, albeit at different rates in different countries.

The main discussion in this paper is about the prevalence of early marriage in the region. A substantial proportion of women in the panel of countries that we studied at the end of twentieth century still married at a young age. However, the data suggest there are three distinct marriage patterns in the region. First, there is the profile in the Southern Cone countries, which is the closest to the modern Western European marriage pattern. Age at first marriage is higher and we have shown that the increase in the age at marriage was linked to social structural changes and increases in educational attainment, urbanization and the participation of women in the process of economic growth.

The other countries in the region can be classified into two distinct groups depending on their size and the level of economic development they achieved in the twentieth century. The group of large countries, with Colombia and Mexico in our panel, which achieved important economic growth during the period, have populations with greater cultural and ethnic diversity. Their marriage patterns are associated with women tending to marry younger than in the first group, even though women's years of study are gradually increasing and economic growth should offer more labor opportunities for them. The third group is made up of countries in which indigenous people have greater weight in the population (Ecuador, Guatemala and Panama), and this cultural difference has made for age of marriage patterns that are even further away from the European model of reference. In these countries, whose economic growth is below the average observed group of countries, education for women appears to be improving more slowly.

In conclusion, what is important in this study is that we constructed a time series of age at first marriage and we analyze the relation with other indicators. This gave us clues as to the explanatory factors influencing the different observed behaviors, and led us to identify three patterns of marriage in Latin America. With these first results, the marriage age indicator and its explanatory potential as regards gender inequalities, we can assert that Latin American societies seem to resist change.

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