

## **Children's Work in Spanish Textiles during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.**

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This essay deals with industrial Spain, and more specifically the Spanish textile industry. This fact implicitly limits the geographical focus to Catalonia, in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula. Since the 17th century, Catalonia has been the most dynamic Spanish region for manufacturing, especially textiles, and mercantile activities. During the second half of the 19th century, coal mining and iron and steel industries emerged in the northwest of Spain, in the Basque Country and Asturias regions, but these industries never made extensive use of children. While this essay focusses on Catalanian textiles, Spanish historiography has highlighted children's work in a variety of other industries including agriculture (Borras-Llop 1999; 2002), lace-making and personal services (Sarasúa 1998), the galician canning industry (Muñoz-Abeledo 2003), and tobacco manufacturing (Galvez 2000).

### **Why Were Children Working in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish Textile Factories?**

Meagre living standards and high levels of exposure of women and children to paid production were a matter of concern of Spanish political authorities. "Comision de Reformas Sociales" and "Instituto de Reformas Sociales" were created in the late 19th century with the aim of removing women and children from paid work, or at least from the most dangerous and unhealthy economic activities. Nonetheless, this regulation proved to be very ineffective (Borras-Llop

1999). In a country like Spain with very low levels of social capital, both employers and working class families were ready to defy the law in order to defend their economic interests. In the social reformers' inspection reports, reliable information was difficult to obtain because women and children were often hidden when the inspectors were present. Before the advent of the welfare state in the post-Francoist years, the resources of the state to deal with social welfare were very scarce. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the economic and cultural elites regarded women's and children's work as damaging, the state was unable to effectively control the real conditions of work for laboring children.

Instead, the structure of earnings and expenditures, over the life course of men and women, in a labor market with low wages, put pressure on families to employ all the labor resources at their disposal, including children and women. In such a situation, it was unlikely that any state would be able to successfully eliminate children's work since it represented a basic economic resource for the household. Even a government rich in financial resources would have been hard pressed to remove children from economic activity.

There is a common misconception that, in the past, families had large numbers of children because they could use their labor to profit from their meager wages. It may be true, in some historical contexts, that inheritance laws lead to family arrangements where children, once grown, provide financial support and care of their parents when they grow old. But the idea that the main reason to conceive children to profit from their labor is erroneous. It has been shown that children were not financial assets in 19<sup>th</sup> century England (Williamson 1990) or in poor countries today (Mueller 1976). Nor were children financial assets in industrializing Catalonia (Camps 1995).

Figure 1 simulates the balance of the family budget (income minus expenditures) for the year 1890 in the town of Sabadell, referred to by contemporary citizens as “Catalan Manchester.” Based on estimates of household expenditures, and using existing wage rates for adult males, adult females, and children, the figure depicts the net contribution to the household budget of all three (adult males, adult females, and children) based on the age of the head of the household. Notice the current deficit contributed by children over most of the course of the family life cycle. Sons and daughters only began to positively contribute to the family budget when they became adults co-residing with their parents. It is clear that children were an economic burden, even when they attended school only before the age of 10 (on average, for 1.5 years), and were then employed in factories. Precisely because of the high financial costs the family faced in rearing children, all family members had to work in order to secure economic subsistence.

Women, too, yielded very poor economic returns to the family over most of the course of the family life cycle. Females generally worked before marriage and as young mothers. But when the first child reached working age, the child replaced their mother in the work force. In fact, the wages of children were very similar to those of women. In other words, a working child represented the same money input to the family budget as the mother, and therefore, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish textiles, women and children were nearly perfect substitutes.

In the case of Spanish textiles, where families exerted only limited control over fertility, and where children represented an economic burden, the inadequacy of household incomes relative to expenditures normally implied that all children had to undertake paid work in industrial activities after ages of seven to ten. Otherwise, the family could not cover the very basic expenditures of the household. Notice in Figure 1 that even when the family made full use of its labor resources, including women and children, the household went through two periods of

the family cycle in which current expenditures were higher than current incomes, and therefore the household had a current deficit. The first of these periods, when the household head was between ages 35-45 and the birth of successive children who were still economically inactive raised family expenditures. The second period occurred after the age of 60, with the beginning of the inactivity period of the household head. To face these deficits the family made use of all its human resources, including children, and the final financial balance from this allocation of family labor time was a very modest savings capacity of the household at the end of the family life cycle.

In Catalonia, obedience to inheritance laws implied that the first born male inherited the family property, even if it was very modest. But, in exchange, he had to take care of his parents when they were growing old. These wealth transfers were agreed at the moment of marriage. Parents on both sides were explicit about their contribution to supporting the newly created couple and, in return, the son and daughter-in-law agreed to their obligations to the parents. This is why, in Catalonia, children were, in the long term, a financial asset to sustain the elderly. But in fact, for a long period before arriving at adulthood, having children represented a net drain on resources of the family

Since children had to work from very young ages, they could not attend school. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish Social Reformer authorities explicitly recommended school from age six to nine. But under the economic circumstances confronting families, it is obvious that education could not be made mandatory. Ultimately, public authorities were unable to remove children from paid economic activities. Unfortunately, this had a very high opportunity cost for Spain in the lack of educational investments in children. The consequences of this included very

low literacy levels throughout Spain, but also in industrializing Catalonia. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, less than half of all Spanish adults were literate (Nuñez 1992).

### **When and Why Were Children Removed from the Labor Force?**

From the wage structure according to age and gender presented in Camps (1995), the marginal financial contribution of a child was equivalent to that of the mother, and children and women were perfect substitutes. In the Catalan textile sector, the wage levels of women aged 25-30 were very similar to the wage levels of a boy or a girl aged 10. As long as this remained the case, it made economic sense for children to replace their mothers in the labor market as soon as they were able. This point is important to understand the reasons why Catalan working families were able to remove children from the labor force.

The exogenous factor that triggered a number of changes were a series of specific human capital policies pursued during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were designed to improve the economic condition of adult women in the rural textile factories of the Catalan region. These policies yielded important increases in the labor productivity of women which boosted their hourly wages. In contrast to the historical stagnation of women's real wages, from 1900 to 1936 the hourly real wage of women increased by 80 percent (Llonch 2004). The average wages of women remained lower than those of men, but their situation had improved considerably. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the gender wage gap (women's wage / men's wage) in Sabadell was placed around 50 percent. By 1925 the gender gap had improved to 64.6 percent. It now made economic sense for mothers to remain in the work force, since they could earn more than their children.

The increasing value of women's paid work, in turn, raised the opportunity cost of their unpaid work of child bearing and child rearing (Camps 2006). As a result, couples sharply

reduced fertility. By 1930, fertility rates had dropped below the replacement rate (Cabre 1999). This reduction in the quantity of children made possible an increase of their quality as families began to invest in their education.

Nonetheless, in a backward country like Spain, the incentives to invest in formal education were not yet very high. In Sabadell in 1925, the “literacy premium” remained very low, particularly for girls. Literate male workers only earned 15 percent more than illiterate workers, while in the case of women the marginal literacy premium was only 1.6 percent. Therefore, the incentives to study provided by this industrial society were very low. This is an additional reason why parents of boys, and especially girls, did not invest in their formal education until the period after World War I.

### **Conclusion**

The main reason for the persistence of children in the labor force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the inadequacy of the family structure of incomes and expenditures by age and gender, coupled with the very small economic incentives for investment in education provided by Spanish society. The first fact implied that, other things being equal, families had to employ all their labor resources in paid production, including children. Even in this situation in which children began to provide earnings to the family from the age of ten, the savings capacity of the family was very low. This meant that at times of economic crisis or social distress, or because a wage earner was afflicted by illness and could not contribute as an active wage earner to the family, working class families could fall below the primary poverty line. On the other hand, parents had very low incentives to invest in the education of their children, particularly girls. The economic returns to education were very low and, in average terms, did not compensate for the economic contribution made by children to the household in the short run.

This situation only changed by means of social policies promoting the increase of women's labor productivity and real wages through their specific human capital investment. The increase in the value of women's work had an impact on the family's preferences in labor allocation. It shifted women's activity from unpaid (including child rearing and child bearing) to paid activities. As a result of this set of phenomena, Catalan fertility declined to levels below the replacement rates by the 1930s. The increase in the educational level of women meant that families could begin to make a rational choice calculation in their decision-making regarding quantity and quality of children. Lower fertility rates meant the family could begin to invest in the education of their children. This is why children up to the age of 14 were removed from the labor force during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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FIGURE 1. Simulation of Current Incomes minus Expenditures According to Kin and Age of the Head of the Household.

