Juntos Pero No Revueltos: Estudios sobre la frontera Texas-Chihuahua

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Chapter 5 – *English translation*

Women and Work: Female Labor Force Participation on the Texas-Mexico Border

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The national female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) has risen steadily and dramatically over the past fifty years, from 28.9 percent in 1950 to 58.9 percent of all workers in 2000. As a consequence, this has also become a major determinant of family income levels.

Female labor force participation rates seem to operate as both a major determinant of family income and as a major poverty-reducing agent. Somewhat surprising is the fact that FLFPR was not a major factor in explaining differences in income levels among metropolitan areas until 1970. The highest incomes in the early postwar period were found in large industrial areas throughout the United States. Overtime employment in unionized manufacturing firms producing durable goods (e.g. steel, auto and machinery) with heavy demand backlogs meant paychecks sufficient for a husband to support a family. By the 1970s the income-dominating effect of manufacturing began weakening and the presence of a second wage earner became a key variable in family income determination (Brenner, et.al. 1999). Paralleling this development was the dramatic increase in the number of single headed (primarily female) households, as a result of divorce, or having never been married. Added to this also legislation forced education to broaden itself to access for females who quickly assimilated into the workforce, however often at sub-par wages vis-à-vis males.

This study analyzes female labor force participation in the United States–Mexico border counties of Texas and provides information regarding factors that influence participation rates as well as the impact on family incomes in eight counties in Texas – four border counties and four interior counties. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on women in the workforce. The methodology section discusses the selection of the Texas counties, which were chosen to represent border and non-border areas of the state. Following that introductory context for the research, we explore in turn the historic influence of female wage earners on family income, the impact of childbearing and marital status on female labor force participation and education and earnings gap that exists based

on race and ethnicity. All of these factors are then contextualized by information gleaned from in-depth personal interviews and four focus groups comprised mostly of Mexican or Mexican American female, low income colonia residents. We conclude with a discussion of factors and policy implications to consider that may ease formal labor market participation by Hispanic females.

While the Texas border has many unique characteristics, the challenges confronting Hispanic women in this region may serve to inform workforce development discussion in other areas of the U.S., which have high concentrations of Hispanic population. As a result of the dramatic growth rate and broader geographic distribution of the U.S. Hispanic population evidenced in the 2000 Census, this discussion is timely.

Introduction

Examining U.S. Census and state of Texas labor force data one can determine the rate of females in the labor force. It is a known fact that women's participation in the labor force helps improve the socio-economic status of families. However, Hispanic women over time have been participating in the labor force in greater numbers, and their families' income has not increased as one would expect. We gathered sufficient data to suggest that women's labor force participation in some cases is not reflected in the official data due to a variety of factors that we will explain.

Official data presents a picture of Hispanic women and their rate of participation in the labor force and their earnings. We contend that in the border region women's labor force participation is higher, though women's work is through participation in the informal economy, which is usually not reported in official records. Though women tend to participate in the labor force albeit in an informal manner, their wages are still low and would not reflect much higher income levels due to the intermittent and low wage employment. Income determination in this population is not adequately reflected in the official data, and our qualitative research provides evidence that women do participate in the labor force and also contribute earnings to the household that can be in cash, or in kind and that may or may not change a family's reported income.

Literature Review

Gender Concentrations In Occupations

Women in the workforce have traditionally been concentrated in a narrow range of occupational categories creating predominantly female occupations. The result was dilution of wage levels for both men and women who work in these “female” jobs, such as nursing or the garment industry. Macpherson and Hirsch’s (1995) longitudinal analysis, extending from 1973 to 1993, finds that as much as two-thirds of the female pay differential between men and women is explained by gender composition of occupations and skill-related characteristics of those occupations. Indeed, wages decrease as the proportion of women in an occupation increases (Killingsworth 1990). This occupational “crowding” may occur as a result of a combination of discriminatory barriers in labor force denying entry into male-dominated occupations or personal preferences of women (Bergmann 1974; Gupta 1993) or employer selection (Gupta 1993). Furthermore, labor market sorting, based on individual productivity and job characteristics, also influence the wage gap (Macpherson and Hirsch 1995). One mitigating factor in pay inequity is whether a woman is employed in the public or private sector. In general, gender wage penalties are lower in the public sector, and perhaps indicating higher levels of implementation of federal laws relating to pay equity (Cotter, Hermsen and Vanneman 1999; Macpherson and Hirsch 1995).

Interactions of Gender and Race/Ethnicity in Pay Inequity

Much of the early gender wage gap literature, if it considered the impact or race and ethnicity, focused almost exclusively on White and Black females compared to their male counterparts. In part, this is due to the limitations of data collection because the U.S. Census Bureau did not identify Hispanic individuals, who may be of any race, until 1980.

Interestingly, when non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic White and Hispanic male and female wage earners are compared, the wage gap for men between the racial/ethnic groups is larger than it is for women (Bayard et.al. 1999). While earlier studies concluded that occupational segregation resulted in concentrations of women in low-wage occupations, Bayard et.al. (1999) finds that occupational segregation generates racial/ethnic wages differences as well. Gittleman and Howell (1995) note that in the period 1973 through 1990, thirty five percent of Hispanic women held service occupations, the lowest rung on the female employment ladder, and while both African American and White women were able to move out of this sector during these same decades, Hispanic women were not. This supports the findings of Cotter et.al. (1999) whose research indicates that within gender groups a racial hierarchy in

earnings exists which consistently finds Hispanics at the bottom of the earnings ladder. Furthermore, this pay disparity increases with the age of employees (Barnum et. al. 1995).

If we think of this hierarchy as a queue where workers are constantly jockeying for position based on education and skill sets, then Hispanic women, who are already at the end of the line, are in especially precarious positions during economic downturns. If they lose their jobs, they are the least likely to be re-employed. Although entrance into the informal labor market may mitigate this fact, the cost of being an Hispanic woman is great (Splater-Roth and Dietch 1999).

Echoing the findings of occupational gender crowding, racial/ethnic crowding produces similar detrimental impacts on wages. While Bayard et.al. (1999:16) reports the negative effects for women if there are a high proportion of racial/ethnic minority group members in an occupational category, the wage differentials they report show that “segregation of Hispanic women by ethnicity lowers the wages of Hispanic women by 1.3 percent.” Furthermore, their analysis indicates that ethnic segregation produces a stronger negative effect than racial segregation, with the most severe impact falling on Hispanics. One exception to this trend is in professional and managerial employment, where Hispanic women working in the private sector increased their presence, moving from 3.4 percent in the early 70s to 10.8 percent by 1990 (Gittleman and Howell 1995).

The Impact of Nativity and Language

Foreign-born Hispanic women experience an additional earnings penalty, which is compounded by lack of language fluency, both written and spoken, in English, the language of the marketplace. They are also more likely to have only part time attachment to the labor force, frequently leaving the workforce when their total family income rises. Working from home, which allows women to care for their children, is often the preferred choice (Anderson, Dimon and Brannon 1995). Furthermore many of the Hispanic immigrants entering the U.S. arrive with lower skill levels, resulting in depressed earnings at lower and middle employment levels. “Hispanic women have always had the worst chances of any racial/ethnic group of escaping low earnings levels, and this became worse in the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen and Vannenum 1999:443).” If country of origin is taken into consideration, it is women of Mexican-origin, comprising the largest portion of Hispanic female immigrants, who find accommodation into the formal U.S. economy the most difficult.

Methodology

In order to provide a comparison between border and interior counties in the State of Texas, eight urban counties were selected for this study. Four are located on the U.S. Mexico border and the other four in non-border areas. The non-border urban counties were chosen because their major urban center represented revitalized and/or emerging cities in Texas' economy. Fundamental industrial changes occurred in the economic base of these communities in the period from 1980 through 2000 leading to increased economic prosperity. The four counties are Tarrant, with the City of Fort Worth, Travis County with the State Capitol, Austin, and Harris County, including Houston, the nation's fourth largest city and Bexar County, which includes San Antonio. They also represent major urban counties in the north, central and gulf coast areas of Texas.

Larger and more prosperous than the border region, they serve as benchmark communities for urban border counties as they seek to grapple with the impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and changing local economic bases. For the border counties to move forward economically, they must understand how they stack up against "the competition." Located on major transportation corridors with diversified, dynamic local economies, Bexar, Tarrant, Travis and Harris counties provide typical examples of urban Texas prosperity.

Within the state of Texas, there are fourteen counties on the U.S.-Mexico border. Most of these counties are rural and sparsely populated with an agricultural-based economy. Three of the border counties encompass major urban centers, El Paso and Laredo as well as McAllen-Edinburg-Mission and Brownsville-Harlingen-San Benito Metropolitan Statistical Areas. The fourth county, Starr, is non-metropolitan; however, there is an international bridge connecting the U.S. to Mexico located in the county seat, Rio Grande City (population 9,976). For the purpose of this study border counties at three geographically separated portions of the Rio Grande were selected. El Paso County representing the upper Rio Grande, Webb County the middle Rio Grande and Hidalgo and Starr Counties the south Texas portion of the border. Since the passage of NAFTA in 1994, these urban border counties have seen dramatic changes in economic development, transportation and population growth that has strained both the fiscal and physical resources of these communities.

Traditionally marketed as a low wage area with plentiful labor, all four border counties are characterized by poverty, low educational attainment and the critical need to restructure their local economies in the aftermath of NAFTA and the increasing globalization of trade. Comparing these border counties to the non-border counties, using data from the U.S. Bureau of Census' decennial surveys which have already achieved successful economic

base realignments, this study will provide insight into the role female labor force participation contributes to a community's economic vitality.

The qualitative part of our research was conducted in a colonia in Starr County, Texas. The area's unemployment rates that varied seasonally between 13.0 and 28.3 percent at a time when the seasonal variation in the State of Texas was between 4.1 and 5.5 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). Much of the work is seasonal since it is predominately an agricultural community. The majority of the residents are Mexican or Mexican-Americans. There is an elementary school within walking distance. Residents were very proud of their newly built small post office adjacent to the community center, which enabled them to receive mail. The streets are not paved and the community lacked public water and sewerage, several residents relied on septic tanks that posed challenges such as leaks, overflows and foul smells. Rainy days turn the streets into mud and slush and in dry periods an inordinate amount of dust plagues the area residents. Mobile homes serve as a foundation for incrementally built structures that were dilapidated in some instances; however we also found some finished homes with rather elaborate and costly fixtures. In 1996 Starr County had 124 colonias, where 33,546 people lived (Sharp: 1998: 127). Over 50 percent of the population lives in poverty. Per capita income in 1999 was $7,069 compared to $19,617 for the state of Texas. Almost 98 percent of the population is Hispanic. Only 7 percent of the population over the age of 25 has a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 23 percent for the state of Texas. Ninety percent of the population reported that they spoke another language other than English at home (U.S. Bureau of Census 2000)

We contacted staffers in the local congressman's field office in South Texas, who in turn put us in touch with a colonia ombudsman in the vicinity. These ombudsman positions were created by the Texas Secretary of State in the mid 1990s. The Ombudsman's role is to communicate directly with colonia residents regarding the myriad of infrastructure and colonia problems that may exist and to assist in developing legislative responses to these challenges. In the spring of 2001, thirty colonia households were selected for in-depth interviews. Staff members with the ombudsman assisted in the selection of the participants based on the following criteria: Participants had to be diverse in terms of their age, both young and old, length of residency in the colonia newly arrived and long term residents, men and women, a variety of educational experiences and different immigration status. In the end we had to turn people away who wanted to participate because their neighbors, friends of relatives mentioned the study to them. Additionally, following the same criteria 28 people (unrelated to the households) were selected to participate

in four focus groups. The intent of the project was to ascertain colonia resident perceptions of the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is designed as an annual random survey of households, pending congressional approval, which will be administered by the U.S. Bureau of Census. The goal of the survey instrument is to provide annual data on households, rather than waiting for the decennial (10 year) census. While we had a very structured questionnaire to complete, we also had to establish rapport with residents in their homes and within the focus groups that enabled us to learn a lot more about their migratory and labor trajectories. Administering this survey allowed us access to homes and people's lives that greatly added insight into the role of female residents in the household and their participation in the labor force as well as the challenges and barriers that they faced in finding and maintaining employment. Therefore, this data is a fortuitous by-product of other research. It is important to note that while this research was conducted in one colonia, the findings can be generalized to other colonias in the region, based on previous research and based on similar findings from previous research (Sharp 1998, Ward 1999, Coronado and Earle 2001, Staudt and Coronado 2002).

Findings

Female Labor Force Participation and Median Family Income

It is only over the past twenty years that female labor force participation has become a dominant factor in local income determination, as shown in Table 1. This is in sharp contrast to education which has always played a leading role. The presence of a second wage earner in a family clearly impacts median income. Forty to fifty percent of the variance in median family income is determined by female labor force participation rates, whether the woman is a second wager earner in a family or the sole earner in a female-headed household. In the race for a leading determinant of local income, the local female labor force participation rate has risen to rival college education (Thompson 1999). This does not, however, tell the whole story!

[Table 1 about here]

While the rate of female labor force participation is increasing, it may be hitting a very hard glass ceiling. Therefore, it is increasingly necessary not only to look at females' rates of participation, but the types of jobs that they hold. The availability of good jobs for women is an important economic index of the health of a community. Just as the education variable has moved from high school and college completion rates to graduate education, the

overall female labor force participation rate, as a significant variable affecting family income, has moved to female employment in higher paying professional, technical and managerial work.

The Historic Influence of Female Wager Earners on Family Income

Female labor force participation rates showed only a modest 15 percent association with local income levels in 1950, as a result the dominant effects of heavy industry in the postwar durable goods boom. Noted for their strong unions, durable goods manufacturing in the auto, steel and machinery industries, were characterized by heavy, "dirty work" requiring physical strength and stamina. Although "Rosey the Riveter" proved during World War II that she could work in industry, it was primarily the male wage earner supporting his family.

As the durable goods sector diminished in influence in the national economy, the impact of female labor force participation increased as a determinant of median family income, from 22 percent explained variance in 1960 to 32 percent in 1970. Clearly, the culture and the nature of work were changing in America. The acceptance of working wives, the increasing number of female-headed households moved female labor force participation to a high of 40 percent explained variance with median family income in 1990, rivaling education as an explanatory variable.

While some of the national interstate effect of working women on median family income is due to the undercounting of working women on the farm, the income generating power of another wage earner in the family is attested to by the fact that female labor force participation rates for all metropolitan areas have risen steadily from no relationship with median family income in 1950 to a 21 percent association in 1970 to 37 percent in 1990 (Thompson, 1999). The precipitous drop to 29 percent explained variance in 2000 undoubtedly reflects the impact of the most recent economic recession. Interestingly, metropolitan areas and the State of Texas saw an increase impact of the role of female labor force explaining over 50 percent of the variance in median family income during the past decade. This may be reflective of the fact that both areas were less severely affected by the recession than other part of the United States.

All of the counties in the study have seen increased female labor force participation throughout the 50-year period, as shown in Table 2, reinforcing the fact that border counties are not following the pattern of the more prosperous Texas urban counties in the comparison group when contrasted with the state and national rates. El Paso County began the post-war period slightly above the Texas participation rates and almost at par with national rates. By 2000, women in the El Paso labor force had diminished to 83 percent of both the Texas and U.S. rates. This

directly relates to income, as many households have no second wage earner. These figures do, however, outpace the rates of Hidalgo, Starr and Webb Counties, which have been below the State and national levels throughout the entire period. The more culturally traditional role of wife and stay-at-home mother, coupled with lower divorce rates, may be more prevalent in counties with higher percentages of Hispanic females.

[Table 2 about here]

Bexar County has had a stable level of female employment throughout the 50-year period, matching the state and national average. Tarrant, Travis and Harris Counties have all outpaced both the Texas and U.S. female labor force participation rates for the period under study, as depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The confluence of a number of factors may be driving the dramatic increased participation of women in the labor force. Growing broad-based occupational opportunities for women, increased educational attainment, which may fuel the desire for external employment and the economic pressure of low income households, have all combined such that female labor force participation now matches education as a determinant of median family income. However, there is evidence based on research conducted by the University of Texas at Arlington on trade-impacted communities that “the relationship between FLFPR and income may be “U” shaped. High participation at low incomes due to the need to work to bolster family incomes is balanced by high participation at high incomes due to higher education and desire to express professional and managerial skills (Brenner, et.al. 1999:32).” This research is confirmed by Goldin (1994). She finds that social stigmas exist for women with low educational levels, who are usually engaged in low skill manual work, encouraging their exit from the workforce as soon as family incomes rise while the stigmas against outside work evaporate at higher educational levels when women enter the white collar workforce. As Waldfogel and Mayer (1999:8) report, "Declines in the gender wage gap for workers with less than a high school education occurred mainly as a result of earnings losses for men, rather than gains in real wages for women, particularly between 1980 and 1997. For women with less than a high school education employment and annual earnings rose between 1971 and 1980. But their employment, annual earnings, and hourly earnings all declined between 1980 and 1997. Women with a high school education or more experienced real gains in employment and earnings from 1971 to 1980 and again from 1980 to 1997. However, women with just a high school education, like women with less than a high school education, gained mainly due to losses by men, rather than through their own real gains."

In Texas FLFPR has grown steadily in influence on median family income from 11 percent in 1950 to 52 percent association in 2000. The drop in 1970 may reflect the depressed oil industry, stagflation, and the abrupt change from wives as second wage earners to primary earners as their spouses lost jobs in the oil industry. A similar story emerges for the garment industry in El Paso County. Declines in the domestic apparel industry, as companies moved their production facilities to Mexico and other countries to reduce cost, displaced a largely female workforce. Lack of English fluency coupled with largely non-transferable skill sets created major re-employment obstacles for the predominately Hispanic workforce. In addition, many of the female former garment workers entered educational programs or re-training programs, which had varying degrees of success, meaning that they were not counted in the workforce.

The ability of low-skilled women to earn enough to be self-sufficient has declined since 1980, even as their wages have converged with men's. Wages for low-skilled workers have become more fairly distributed between men and women, but they have fallen in absolute terms. Since it is absolute income and not income relative to men that determines living standards, the living standard of low-skilled women and their children has declined. Moreover, there is some indication from the National Labor Study data that the presence of children now exert a larger negative influence on wages of low-skilled women than they did a few decades ago (Waldfogel and Mayer, 1999: 28).

Impact of Childbearing and Marital Status on Female Labor Force Participation

Felice Schwartz (1989) first raised the question of the "Mommy track" and its influence on female labor force participation. Schwartz proposed that corporate America offer women two tracks for career advancement, career primary for fast track, single-minded businesswomen and another for the career with family track. By opting for the "Mommy track," women would be slotted into lower paying positions in return for flexible schedules that allow them to accommodate their family's needs. Additionally, Young and Brenner (2000) find female entrepreneurs facing the challenge of balancing both business and family obligations will seek additional education or business assistance from colleges and universities but need access during non-traditional times and locations, including distance learning.

The presence of pre-school children is the main constraint on full-time employment for women (Desai and Waite, 1991; Lehrer and Nerlove, 1986; Moen, 1985). Some women drop out of paid employment when they have

babies or preschool children at home, while others maintain their attachment to the labor market by moving into part-time employment (Moen, 1985; Main, 1988). The use of extended family inter-generational childcare as well as more formal childcare arrangements assists young mothers who are balancing the demands of work and family (Stier, 1998).

The negative career impact of part-time employment impacts both men and women (Beechey and Perkins, 1987; Duffy and Pupo, 1992). This may include being "stuck" in dead-end jobs that require lower skill levels, constraints on promotion, and pay and benefits packages which offer much less than full-time positions (Ermisch and Wright, 1992; Long and Jones, 1981; Stier, 1998).

Table 3 indicates the national relationship between marital status and female labor force participation rates. Not surprisingly divorced women, 73.7 percent, who have either assumed the role of single head of household, or who are their own sole supports, record the highest participation rates.

[Table 3 about here]

Counties with the highest percentage of children under the age of 18 included in this study, El Paso, Hidalgo, Starr and Webb, are also the counties with the lowest female labor force participation rates, thus possibly another reason for lower incomes.

Race And Ethnicity: The Education And Earnings Gap

The National Perspective

Pursuit of the American dream of a better life for an individual and his or her family has been intricately linked to educational attainment. Anecdotal stories abound of parents working long hours often at two or more jobs to be able to provide post-secondary education for their children. Yet other anecdotal evidence supports the fact that minority youth in particular are sometimes faced with the hard economic reality of having to leave school to enter the workforce to help economically support their family.

Educational gaps translate into earnings gaps between non-Hispanic white and Hispanic youths and adults. In 1999 the median income for non-Hispanic Whites was $25,489 as compared to $20,135 for non-Hispanic Blacks and $16,728 for Hispanics, as shown in Table 4. *Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites who do not complete high school have virtually equivalent earnings; however once an individual obtains a high school diploma, or its*

equivalency, an earnings gap of almost $3,000 appears. This earnings gap increases at each additional education level.

[Table 4 about here]

The earnings gap is even more pronounced if gender is taken into account. In a recent study Carnevale (1999:23) notes that, "The best summary of evidence of our failure to close the opportunity gap is the continuing difference in earnings of all Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites. On average, non-Hispanic White men earn nearly $17,000 more a year than Hispanic men and on average, non-Hispanic White women earn $6,700 a year more than Hispanic women."

Figure 2 depicts the difference in median income calculated in 1999 dollars for non-Hispanic White and Hispanics by gender from 1972 to 1999. *While increases in female labor force participation had a positive impact on non-Hispanic White women's earnings, the startling revelation is that Hispanic female's income has essentially been flat at approximately $10,000 throughout the 27-year period.* Although non-Hispanic White women's earnings were also fairly flat from 1972 to 1980, beginning in 1980 their median income has shown a slow but steady upward trend.

[figure 2 about here]

The 27-year period from 1972 to 1999 saw a steady erosion of the manufacturing base in the United States. The loss of high pay-low skill jobs associated with factory work has impacted male earnings. Nationally, non-Hispanic White males' median income fell in the decade from 1972 through 1982 and except for the economic downturn of the early 1990s shows a slow upward trend in earnings; as seen in Figure 2. By 1998, non-Hispanic White males' earnings exceeded the 1973 level for the first time in 25 years. In contrast, Hispanic male earnings, in constant dollars, show a downward trend from $21,777 in 1972 to a low of $15,783 in 1993 when an increase in earnings begins to appear. By 1999 the median income for Hispanic males of $18,234 remains $3,477 behind the level of earnings enjoyed in 1972 in real or constant dollars.

The Texas Education Gap

Much of the racial/ethnic earnings gap can be explained by differences in educational attainment. Indeed numerous studies exists connecting income levels and education. Table 5 compares the educational attainment of Hispanic and not Hispanic white women in Texas and the eight counties included in this study. The significant

pooling of Hispanic women in the lowest educational levels, especially less than ninth, grade stands in stark contrast to that of not Hispanic white women. Undoubtedly immigration is an influence in this factor.

[Table 5 about here]

In the following section we move to a consideration of female labor force participation in Starr County, one of the poorest counties in Texas. In a community where nearly fifty percent of the women have less than a ninth grade education, we seek to understand the extent of low-income women's participation in the labor force and their subsequent contribution to family income.

Findings in Colonias

The majority of women interviewed or who participated in the focus groups was mostly immigrants and came to the United States with a spouse or with their families. Women tended to be between 18 and 65 years of age. All of them were married though one women was in the process of divorce and another was a widow. During the interview several of the interviewees confided that they were not legally married but presented themselves as married before neighbors and friends.

Perception of work

When asked if they were employed many women responded negatively. Many women stated that *"yo no se hacer nada"* (I do not know how to do anything), *"para que sirvo"* (what am I good for?) and *"yo ya no puedo aprender"* (I can no longer learn). They expressed less than positive responses about their ability to offer something to the work force. Several women lamented that they could not find employment and stated: *"quiero ayudar a mi esposo"* (I want to help my husband). This raises issues of self-worth and in some instances these negative perceptions can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies that preclude them from effectively joining the labor force. When asked if they worked, people expressed negative self-worth about their abilities and their possible contributions to the work force. Many women expressed the desire to find a "real job" that included a paycheck (actual physical document), health insurance, and other fringe benefits.

Further probing revealed that it was clear that they "worked" in other capacities. Respondents felt that because they did not go to work at a formal place of employment and receive a paycheck at the end of the week that they were not working, They felt that they did not need to report their income because they did not have a paycheck and

that cash payments that they received for babysitting, ironing, cleaning homes, selling tamales or empanadas did not count as employment or as work as defined by the U.S. census questionnaire. Since their employment was not reported "officially" either was their income on the official U.S. census form. In communities such as this, it is common to not accept payment for services rendered because in the future one may need to rely on others for assistance. There is great acceptance of generalized reciprocity, where people will exchange goods and services for in kind-payments or other non-cash arrangements in the future. Many people reported that frequently though they worked in a formal business the employer would pay them in cash, even though they expected a paycheck. This was most often reported for low skill service positions, such as dry cleaning attendant, bakery or restaurant service positions and often in mom and pop type businesses. As the interviews unfolded income and employment questions led us to understand the challenges and barriers that women face in obtaining full-time, permanent employment that would in turn provide much needed income to the family.

Within the same household people had varying degrees of legality in regards to their immigration status in the country (Coronado and Earle 2001). In one family, the husband was a legal resident, the wife was undocumented, and the children were all U.S. citizens. In other families the husband and wife lacked the necessary documents to reside in the U.S., but their children were all born here making them U.S. citizens. Therefore, the ability to work legally in this country also precluded people from reporting their income and employment status on the census forms, again skewing the official data results.

Only two families that we interviewed availed themselves of any type of public assistance in the form of the Women, Infant and Children (WIC), a federal program that supplies formula and other baby food products to low-income families. Several respondents indicated that they would like to take advantage of these programs and were fully aware that they were eligible, but were reluctant to apply because they had people in their household who were in the U.S. without the benefit of proper documents. They feared that the state agency would investigate and not only deny them benefits but would also turn them in to Immigration and Naturalization Service officials. Colonia residents indicated that in many instances their households included an elderly parent, or aunt, or a cousin or friend who they were helping out and could not risk applying for benefits because they did not want to lie to officials or have them visit their home for verification.

Self-Employment

In reviewing the census questionnaire form with household residents and inquiring about their employment and their income many women responded that they did not work and did not earn a salary as discussed above. When probed about their daily activities, we learned that they did engage in some activity or activities that entailed earning money or a good/service/favor for the family, such as a quid pro quo, car repair for babysitting or exchanging brick laying, frame building or wiring, for transportation. One woman stated, "Sometimes they pay me for babysitting. Sometimes they do not. Her husband fixed our car so I don't mind watching their children. They have also given me rides."

Women reported ironing, cleaning homes, baby-sitting, making decorations, sewing, car repairs, painting, making food, arts and crafts, selling merchandise from Mexico such as candies, jewelry, and medicine. We discovered however that colonia residents did not perceive these activities as work or employment

In an environment of chronic un/underemployment women find themselves employing multiple work strategies simultaneously. For example, one woman described her work in the previous week as follows: "I picked onions in the field for around 15 hours; baby sat for a neighbor, ironed clothes, and baked empanadas to sell." This kind of informal employment does not allow for them to easily document their wages in a systematic way. Additionally, social security taxes, unemployment insurance, health benefits, retirement, profit sharing, paid vacation, and sick leave are certainly not a part of their reality.

A good job was described by several respondents as working for the school district as a maid/janitor or working in the school cafeteria, working at a chain grocery store, working for the state of Texas or for a non-governmental organization performing colonia related work. Almost everyone felt that having health insurance was an excellent benefit, though some lamented that if offered the choice to insure their families they would not be able to afford it. Some expressed that they would feel guilty if they were medically insured and their children were not.

Income in a colonia setting is rather a sensitive issue because many people work informally, or both formally and informally, in order to compensate for the chronic unemployment situation. "I work 10 hours a day for six months and then there is no work," stated one informant. Many women who worked as farm workers stated that they were tempted to find other work, but that it was risky to take a day off from working the fields to apply for a job that may or may not materialize. Job hunting activities were perceived as lost wages or possible precipitators of job loss creating disincentives for job change.

One respondent indicated that she sold jewelry in installments to her neighbors and friends and had a difficult time determining her earnings because as she put it, "See when I sell a bracelet, I ask people for a down payment, which is exactly what I paid for the item myself. Then I take a risk on the profit. So I sell the bracelet for $60.00. I ask them to give me $25.00 down and to pay the rest later. Some people pay weekly. Others pay monthly. Others pay the rest a few months later. Some do not pay at all. So it is difficult for me to determine how much I earn."

Other women were involved in activities that can be construed to be as less than legal, but to them they think that they are providing a service and are only trying to make a living. Many sell food or pharmaceuticals without a license. Some make food in their homes for sale in public places, but do not have licenses or permits from the health department. Others sell Mexican candies and medications from their homes, which is clearly not legal. One woman in the colonia was known as the healer who also provided folk remedies, sold medicine and even gave injections. However, it is important to note that these, less then legal opportunities to earn a living give people social esteem in the community because women become identified with their service, *"la señora de los tamales,"* (lady who makes tamales) or *"la señora que sabe injector"* (the lady who knows how to give injections.)

Elderly women stated that they were too old to work. Additionally, many reported that money from their adult children was a source of income that they relied on for basic household expenses. Others indicated that their children helped when they got sick and needed to visit a doctor or purchase medicine.

Barriers to Employment

Women reported several barriers to finding employment, among them included transportation, educational and lingustic barriers and child care. While many of these obstacles do not seem insurmountable, combined with the isolation of the community, minimal outreach of educational institutions to the colonia, and poverty people can become more marginalized economically and socially. We detected that even though some women had availed themselves of job training or GED (high school equivalency) completion classes, they were still unable to find employment due to other circumstances that we will explain.

Transportation

Colonias are located in rural areas where there is limited public transportation. Maintaining a car is also expensive, especially for families who are poor. Residents reported that while they had two or three cars in the yard

only one was working, had an inspection sticker, was properly registered and insured. Arriving to work on time for multiple family members sharing one car in the household presented some challenges. Farm workers reported that if they arrived late to the field, they were denied the opportunity to work that day, seriously impacting their household income.

Several of the women that we interviewed were left without transportation and that precluded them from finding employment unless they made travel arrangements with others. Taking a bus was not an option for many simply because public transportation is non-existent in many rural areas of Texas. One respondent indicated that in her household the person who "had the ability to earn more money that day got the car."

Education and Linguistic Barriers

One of the astounding findings in this particular colonia was the low level of formal education including an uneven distribution of literacy and language ability in English and Spanish. Some women reported that the only formal education that they had received was in Mexico. Several women reported that they had finished *primaria* (elementary school) or *secundaria* (middle school) education which ends at what is equivalent to ninth grade in the U.S. Two respondents had finished *comercio*, (business school) and another had finished *normal* (teaching training school in Mexico). However, both these women indicated that their limited ability to speak and understand English meant they were unable to find work in their respective fields. Several respondents indicated that they had had completed the GED in Spanish. Other women reported that they had received training in lingerie cutting, carpentry and cake decorating; however, they were unable to find work in those fields because such work was unavailable in their community. The woman who had successfully completed the carpentry course reported that she could not start work in that field because she did not have the necessary tools. During the course of the interviews we detected that some of the respondents were not literate. A few said that they had cataracts, several stated that they could not find their glasses, or that they did not read English, although some of the documents shown to them were in Spanish. Women reported that they wanted to learn English and to learn a skill, especially related to computers, but that they first of all did not know where to go to seek those services and secondly, transportation was a problem.

Child Care

Colonia residents tend to share a lot of babysitting responsibilities. Women seldom reported that finding adequate child care was a problem. However, women reported that they wanted to be home when their children came home from school. They expressed a desire for classes to be held during the day when their children were at school. They did not view night school as a favorable option because they felt that it was important to be home with their families.

Providing child care was also a means of employment to many women who took care of their own grandchildren, god children, or nieces or nephews. They felt that their being able to take care of children provided a valuable service because it allowed other family members to work.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Women really work in a variety of ways though it is not documented and not reported in their family earnings. While, the official data indicates that Hispanic women have not fared well over time, and this is troubling indeed, the qualitative data indicates that women do work and make money. Trying to earn a living by multi-tasking is a difficult and tiring enterprise and burdens women in a physical sense that may have long -term health implications as well. However, given the limited income generated from these informal jobs, it remains unclear what substantive difference reporting this data would make to official figures.

As part of our research we asked women what kinds of things they would like to see change in their community that would enable them to get better paying jobs. One of the suggestions was that English classes be offered in schools alongside their children. Many women reported that they did not like going to night classes because of transportation issues and that they did not want to leave their families at night. Another recommendation was for basic educational instruction to be provided in Spanish so that people are able to read and write in their native language thus providing enough of a foundation to learn English.

Transportation is clearly a key issue, as rural and remote communities do not have adequate bus service and unpaved streets pose additional challenges for large, heavy vehicles. Public transportation must be made available to rural and isolated communities. *Combis*, a popular form of transportation used in Mexico and in the formerly black townships in South Africa, might offer a partial solution. Small 12 to 15 person capacity vans, or *Combis*, are either owned or leased by a township for local residents. From a central point, *Combi* drivers pick up riders for a fee and deliver them to and from their workplace, or health clinic, or shopping center. Public subsidy or provision of

such vans, employing a local resident, might be more cost effective than full scale public bus service. Additionally, government incentives, such as tax breaks, could be provided to induce private firms or foundations to support development of a *Combi* network.

Residents expressed an interest in small business loans that meet their needs without having to provide documentation such as income tax forms and bank statements. Many just wanted a bigger stove, larger refrigerator, a snow cone maker or in the case of the woman that had finished her carpentry training, she needed to buy tools. People only need small loans ranging from $600 to $1,000 for small purchases that would in turn enable them to establish or expand their businesses. Although micro loans are available in Texas through banks such as Acción, the need for official documentation of their business continues to be a barrier. Additionally, the pool of funds available for such micro loans may be insufficient for the demand. Assistance in negotiating such user friendly financing vehicles is also important for small female entrepreneurs.

Educational programs that take advantage of community member's talents and resources such as those residents, who are educated formally in Mexico providing basic adult literacy for residents, could be implemented in the colonia. This could be a win/win situation where a person who has something to offer feels productive and at the same time is providing a valuable service to the community.

Working from their home was a clear preference for many female colonia residents. Linking employers who have jobs with a potential labor force possessing a strong work ethic remains a local economic development challenge. Ideally, working at home like upper middle class America that telecommutes would allow for many women to contribute to their family’s income and receive training in the process.

Women in colonias exemplify the American work ethic. The rapidly changing knowledge based economy does not reward their hard work. In sum, the role of Hispanic women in the formal and informal workforce requires more research in order to better understand why despite all of their hard work; the wages remain so low over time?

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Table x.1 Association Between the Median Family Income and the Female Labor Force Participation Rate, 1950-1990[a]

Area of U.S.	**1950**	**1960**	**1970**	**1980**	**1990**
Interstate median	.15	.22	.32	.29	.40
All metropolitan areas	.00	.05	.21	.26	.37
West South Central	.42	.40	.54	.49	.70
Intrastate median	.28	.26	.39	.40	.52
Texas	.11	.16	-.02	.24	.37
New Mexico	.55	.50	.51	.27	.43
Arkansas	.35	.35	.53	.43	.53
Louisiana	.26	.26	.11	.40	.37
Oklahoma	**.55**	**.50**	**.51**	**.27**	**.43**

[a] Figures reported in the table are coefficient of determination (R^2). For example, in Texas in 1990 37 percent of median family income is determined by female labor force participation rate.
Source: Thompson, 1999. $p < .05$

Table x.2 Female Labor Force Participation Rate for Selected Counties in Texas, 1950-2000

Decade	County Bexar	El Paso	Harris	Hidalgo	Tarrant	Travis	Webb	Texas	U.S.
1950	28.6	28.5	32.0	22.8	32.9	33.3	23.4	26.8	28.9
1960	32.6	33.9	36.4	33.1	36.0	39.4	25.7	33.0	34.5
1970	39.4	37.8	44.8	34.1	44.7	46.7	31.2	38.7	39.6
1980	49.1	45.7	58.0	44.5	56.2	59.9	39.8	51.0	49.9
1990	56.4	50.0	61.0	44.8	63.3	66.0	46.2	56.4	56.8
2000	57.0	48.7	60.3	45.9	63.6	67.5	—[a]	58.1	58.9

[a]Data for Webb County unavailable for 2000.

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 1950-1990; U.S. Bureau of Census, Demographic Surveys Division, 2000.

Table x.3 Female Labor Force Participation by Martial Status, 1995

Martial Status	Participation Rate
All Women	58.9
Never Married	65.5
Married, spouse present	61.1
Married, spouse absent	62.0
Divorced	73.7
Widowed	**17.5**

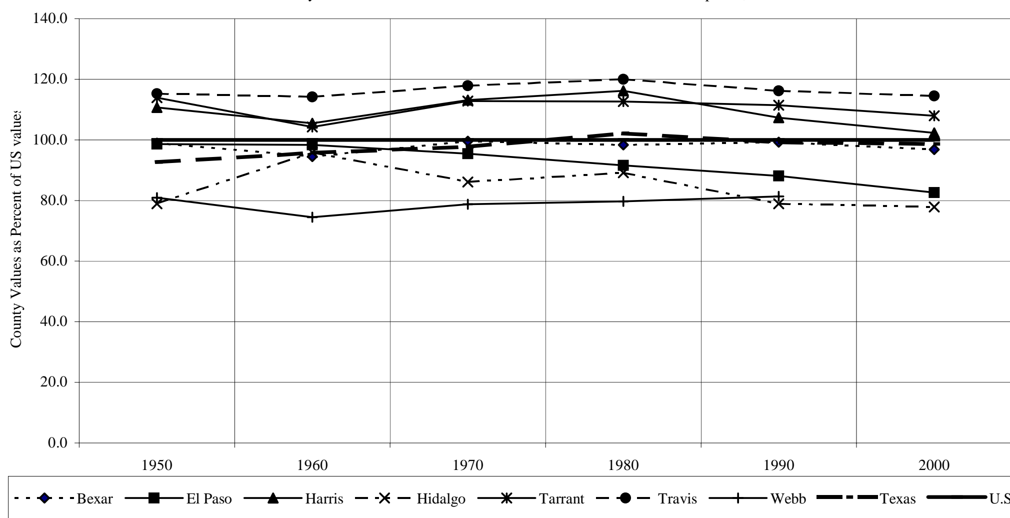
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unpublished Data, March 1995.

Table x.4 Income in 1999 by Educational Attainment for All Workers Age 25 Years Old and Over by Race and Hispanic Origin

	High School		College					
Race/ **Ethnicity**	NOT high school **graduate**	Graduate including **GED**	Some college **no degree**	Associate **degree**	Bachelor's **degree**	Master's **degree**	Professional **degree**	Doctorate **degree**
Hispanic	$11,978	$17,694	$23,350	$24,629	$31,394	$39,177	$46,895	$48,278
Non-Hispanic White	$11,942	$20,580	$26,072	$28,456	$37,464	$48,135	$71,841	$65,379
Non-Hispanic Black	$9,694	$17,585	$24,008	$25,913	$34,567	$42,446	$55,130	[a]
ALL RACES	**$11,606**	**$19,979**	**$25,498**	**$27,493**	**$36,715**	**$47,468**	**$67,462**	**$62,355**

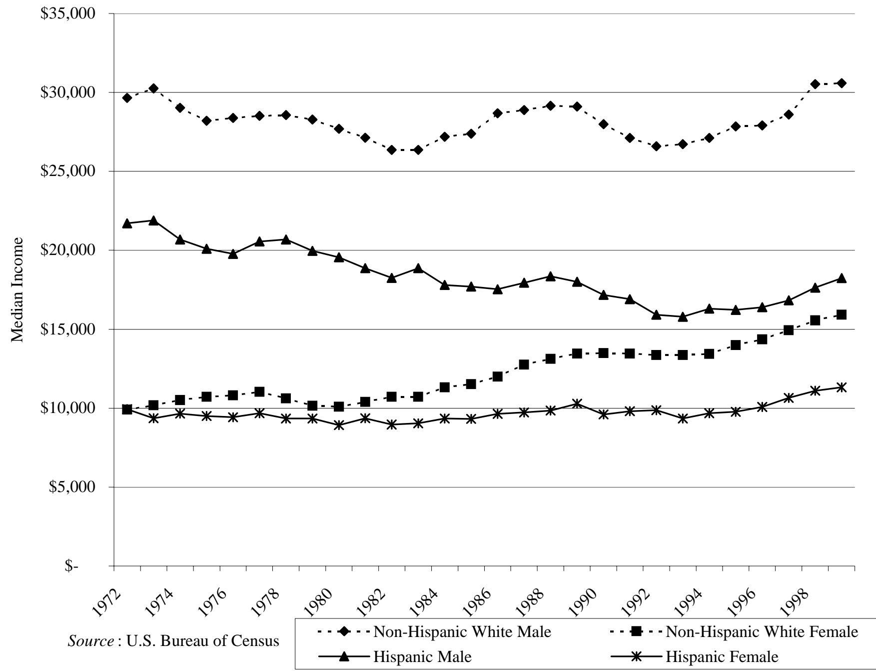
[a] Insufficient data to be statistically significant.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Figure x.1
County Values as Percent of U.S. Values for Female Labor Force Participation, 1950-2000



Source : U.S. Decennial Census 1950-1990 Census 2000 Supplementary Survey Profile Note: Data for Webb County unavailable for 2000.

Figure x.2
Median Income for Non-Hispanic White and Hispanic Persons by Gender
(1999 Dollars)



Source : U.S. Bureau of Census