

***Women's Participation in the Labour Force and its
Implications for Inter-Household Income Inequality:
Reinforcing versus Buffering Effects.***

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Abstract

Women's increasing participation in the labour market in all industrialised countries has changed not only the composition of the labour force, but also the processes at work within the households that might have influenced the patterns of inter-household income inequality. Increasing inequality in income inequalities has been reported for most countries in the last two decades, and increasing dispersion in male wages has been traditionally considered as one of the main driving forces of this result. The extent to what women's own earnings distribution can modify this picture –via reinforcing inter-household inequalities or rather offsetting them– is the causal link that this paper tries to address.

1. The Research Question in Context

In the last decades, both the economic and the sociological literature have consistently shown several empirical regularities that are relevant for this research question and that should be addressed in any attempt to answer it. Firstly, at the aggregate level (among households), an increase in inequalities over time seems to have taken place in many OECD countries. In other words, the distance between those households with lower income and those with higher income has widened in a substantive number of industrialised countries (Atkinson, Rainwater and Smeeding, 1995; updated results in Smeeding, 2000)¹. Secondly, the same trend towards a growing inequality has been depicted with regard to men's wages (Blau and Kahn, 1996). In the last decades, the distance between those workers with higher wages and those with lower ones seems to have sharpened in several countries. Thirdly, increasing participation of women in the labour force is nowadays a generalised phenomenon in all developed countries. Lastly, secondary and higher educational levels have experienced a substantive expansion in the last decades, whereas it seems sufficiently empirically demonstrated that a drastic decrease in the gender gap in education has also been at work (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993).

It could be argued that women's increase in educational levels has affected their chances of entering the labour force and, consequently, their relative *potential* contribution to the household's income through their own earnings. The extent to what –and the direction in what– the changing distribution of female earnings over time and, therefore, their changing contribution to intra-household income, has affected the allegedly increasing inter-household inequality is the causal link that I

¹ Technically, this increase in inter-household inequality has been measured through the Gini coefficient, the decile shares of income, the Atkinson coefficient or other of a similar nature. No major inconsistencies in the trends that they report are found between these different measurements.

would ultimately like to address. Obviously, the relationship between female labour supply and the pattern of inter-household inequality in each country takes place through the mediating effect of the household. Several relevant matters should be settled at this household level.

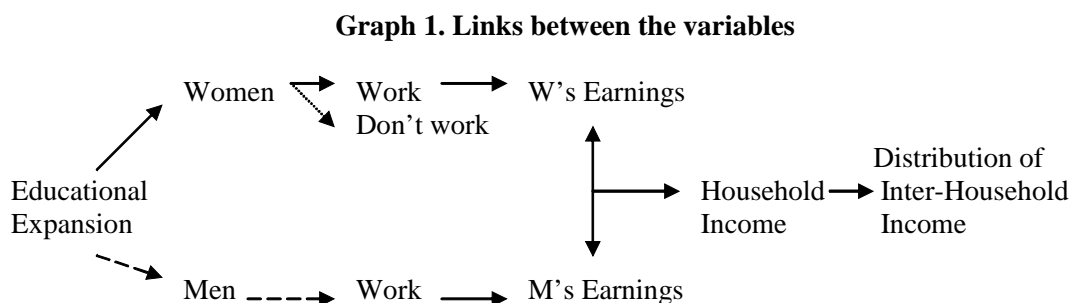
On the one hand, it seems undeniable the universality of couple homogamy, i.e. the fact that couples are shaped by members who are similar as regards their educational level or other characteristics as their (potential) returns in the labour market. If homogamy is almost universal, the direct implication of a higher involvement of women in the labour force would be an increase in the distance among households in terms of income. Women with higher (potential) earnings would be contributing to higher household total income through their match with higher earnings' men. If this were the case, the role of female increasing labour force participation, and of the earnings associated to it, should be considered as a reinforcement of inter-household income inequalities.

On the other hand, this is only one side of the possible mechanisms at stake; the mediating effect of the household is, in fact, much more complex. It has been argued, for example, that women's incentives to participate in the labour market have traditionally been contingent on the actual economic situation of the family. In those households in which the man's earnings guarantee a satisfactory economic level, women seem to have found more incentives to remain inactive. Alternatively, in the less privileged households, the economic contribution of women has been considered fundamental for the sustainability of the family economic welfare. If this is the pattern of participation that prevails, then the higher female labour force supply should have led to a relative decrease in inter-household inequalities.

The *research question*, thus, that drives this thesis could be posed in the following terms:

To what extent has the increasing labour force participation of women over time contributed to an increase or decrease in income inequality among households?

For a better understanding of how the variables relate to each other, let me summarise their links that I am considering through a very simple graph.



This relationships should be considered for different cohorts of women (to account for the changes over time) and for different countries, at least at an exploratory level (to disentangle possible differences in the effects of the independent variables).

In the following sections, I will try to develop a bit further on the different trends in education and labour market features (especially for women) that the research question considers.

2. Educational Expansion in Industrialised Countries: An Overview

Several reforms have been undertaken in the last decades in all industrialised countries aimed at expanding the educational levels of the population. The first and most obvious way of accomplishing it is the introduction of further compulsory years of formal education, but making successive non-compulsory levels more attractive –

or less costly– for students has also been attempted by these reforms. In this sense, the fact that a greater proportion of the younger cohorts remain more time at school over time increases the mean educational level of the population as a whole. This is a change in the marginal distribution of educational levels.

Despite this generalised change in the marginal distribution, the strength of several background variables on educational attainment might have or have not varied at all. There seems to be consensus among scholars concerned with education about the existence of differences in the educational attainment of individuals with different social background. Moreover, most of them agree that these inequalities in educational attainment have remained more or less persistent over time. Children from working-class origins, for example, show a consistently lower pattern of schooling than children from upper middle and service classes. In Shavit and Blossfeld's (1993) seminal work, thirteen countries from very diverging contexts were analysed. The principal aim of this work was to examine the eventual changes in the effects of social background (measured as parental socioeconomic characteristics) on educational opportunities of individuals (measured as stratification in educational attainment) across different age cohorts.

Two results appear particularly striking: on the one hand, the average level has risen across cohorts, as a consequence of the nearly universalization of primary and lower secondary levels in these countries. On the other hand, this average level does *not* mean that inequalities have decreased. Rather on the contrary, with the exceptions of Sweden and the Netherlands², this expansion has not lead to a greater equality of

² Jonsson et al. (1996) claim that a process of equalization of class inequality in educational attainment has also taken place in Germany, challenging Blossfeld's (1993) conclusion of no significant change.

educational opportunity among individuals with different socioeconomic backgrounds (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993: 14-15).

Educational reforms aiming at expanding educational attainment to all socioeconomic strata have succeeded then in making younger cohorts more 'educated', but have not reduced the impact of social origins on educational opportunities. Even if diverging national educational systems are considered regarding the degree to which students continue onto intermediate and higher levels, class stratification schemes do not show much variation in the impact on children's educational attainment (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996: 7).

Alternatively, when gender differences in educational levels are considered, the main finding that the literature points at is an overall reduction across cohorts in gender inequality. This means that women have caught up with men in the formal educational level attained, and in some cases seem to have benefited even more than men from educational expansion (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Obviously, the distribution of educational attainment levels among countries still varies substantively, not only for women but for the entire population. Nevertheless, the fact that successive cohorts in all industrialised countries have proceeded to higher levels of education seems hardly deniable. It is my personal conviction that increases in educational attainment (especially as regards non-compulsory levels) should not be considered as an immediate response to the blurring of the institutional barriers, i.e. costs associated to it, but also as the consequence of individual choices made in the light of the perceived benefits that it entails³. One of the main benefits that personal educational investment can lead to is of course its consequent means for succeeding in

³ Individual choices regarding educational investment should probably be better conceived as taken mainly by the parents at the most basic stages, and becoming more "personal" at successive levels.

the labour market⁴. This is precisely the topic that is addressed in the following section.

3. Returns to Education in the Labour Market

A further step in the proposed chain of reasoning is the assessment of the effect of increasing education on labour market results, namely the decision to participate or not, and the outcomes of participating –be it occupation, wage, earnings, or other relevant indicator.

Education in developed societies has been traditionally considered as the main shaper of the occupational attainment of individuals and/or other measures of “success” in the working life. If education shapes, even to a limited extent, success at work and education has been extended to broader sectors of the society, then more people should have benefited in labour terms from this fact. Of course, for this assertion to hold, education must remain a strong predictor of work once the successive increase in the average level is controlled for.

The empirical evidence in this respect seems to be far from straightforward. Depending on the labour market outcome that is considered to measure these “returns”, the picture differs substantively. Among all the possible indicators, two are particularly relevant for the interest pursued in my research question: on the one hand, labour market participation decisions (especially for women) and, on the other hand, earnings and/or wages. There is, unfortunately, not much evidence on this issue, but let me, nevertheless, present conclusions drawn by some studies that have focused mainly on occupational attainment.

⁴ Obviously other ways of understanding the rationality underlying increasing investment in education could be at work. Education as a status-attaining means, as a suitable context for the partner selection... has been considered in the literature.

Some research in returns to education has been conducted for the whole population (men and women) in the Netherlands (Wolbers et al., 2001), comparing Norway, the USA and West Germany (Allmendinger, 1989) or with a broader comparative aim (Shavit and Müller, 1998), although the only aspect of labour market inequality that is considered is occupation.

Wolbers et al. (2001) present interesting findings for Dutch women. Generally speaking, women tend to have lower chances of getting high-skilled occupations than men, independently of the educational qualifications attained. Like for men, regarding the marginal distributions, “the differences in occupational attainment [for women] between the higher and lower educational levels have increased over the past few decades” (Wolbers et al., 2001: 12). Concerning, alternatively, the relationship itself between education and occupation, their findings point to a stronger association for women than for men. Women seem to be more dependent on their (high) educational qualifications to get a better occupational position than men are.

Allmendinger’s approach is slightly different as far as it introduces variation in some institutional features of the educational systems (i.e. the degree of standardization of the standards, and the selection procedures of students). Two main findings are important, especially for further comparative research in this area: firstly, the relationship between education and occupational status is weaker in less stratified systems, and secondly, the number of job-changes increases in unstandardised systems (Allmendinger, 1989). Unluckily, Allmendinger does not provide specific results for women, though.

Lastly, one of the most comprehensive theoretical and empirical concerns is probably that provided by Shavit and Müller (1998). Their results offer common patterns for all the countries examined in the following aspects: educational qualifications increase the chance of obtaining more prestigious jobs, of not entering unemployment, and of entering the labour market in particular occupations for both men and women. These patterns vary, nevertheless, according to their organization of the educational and labour systems.

Educational expansion is then considered to have opened up for women new opportunities in the labour market, especially since investment in non-compulsory levels has dramatically increased in all industrialised countries. In my thesis I will have to address the extent to which this new scenario actually allows women to “improve” their labour market behaviour in terms of the two indicators that I am interested in –again, participation and wages. For that purpose, an increase in the expected returns to education over successive cohorts of women should be considered when accounting for the individual-level decisions of whether to participate or not in the labour force.

An important caveat should be reminded, though, regarding the *type* of education that is chosen. If women tend to be allocated, for example, in those tracks for which the labour market returns are weaker, or if they remain segregated in disciplines or fields of study with an average lower degree of “success” (in terms of returns), then an increase in educational attainment should not necessarily be linked to higher propensity to participate or to get more privileged positions than the previous less-educated cohorts.

4. Evolution of Wages Inequalities over Time

One of the facts that have been considered as the main contributor of increasing inter-household income inequalities between households is the parallel increase in men's wage dispersion. This seems to be sufficiently demonstrated at least for the U.S. case, where the gap in wages between the skilled and the unskilled has grown substantively in the last decades (Károly and Burtless, 1995). In the U.K., some authors have shown that wage dispersion increased significantly during the 1980s and more moderately during the last decade (Machin, 1996). Interestingly, others (Prasad, 2001) have found that wage inequality has increased more markedly for men than it has for women. When an international perspective is adopted, a higher level of wage inequality has been reported for the U.S. than for other industrialised countries (see, for example, Blau and Kahn, 1996 for a comparison of male wage inequality in ten OECD countries).

If a traditional "male-breadwinner" model of household is assumed, then the increase in the wage gap would obviously lead to an immediate increase, *ceteris paribus*, in inter-household income inequality. Nevertheless, this traditional model seems to have lost strength with the increasing incorporation of women to the labour force. A much more varied range of household arrangements appears, in which women can adopt different roles, namely: home-centred, secondary earners, members of double-career couples, single-head.

The evolution of women's wages inequalities over time has been less developed, but the available empirical evidence seems to show that the gap has not increased in the last twenty years as it has been the case for their male counterparts. Burtless (1999),

for example, has reported for the U.S. little trend in earnings inequality for those women holding jobs.

If, consequently, male wage inequality has increased over time but female pattern does not show the same behaviour, it should be addressed how the match between partners at the household level can contribute to changing this picture. The correlation between husband's and wife's wages over time, apart from being a good indicator of the level of homogamy –at least regarding their labour market traits–, can also contribute to a better understanding of why inter-household income inequality might have increased or decreased. If high-wage women tend to marry high-wage men, these women would, as some authors have argued, reinforce the effect exerted by the increasing gap in male wages, making the relative position of their households much stronger than that of less advantaged –wage wise– households. Obviously, a proper understanding of the changes in the proportion of high versus low-wages men and women, and of the household types distinguished above, is a crucial aspect that has not been sufficiently accomplished yet.

There is not much empirical evidence –even less with a comparative aim– on the evolution of spouses' wages correlation. This is an empirical matter that my thesis should be able to address in the context of other variables that shape the proposed model. It seems to be a commonplace, though, to consider that homogamy as regards labour market characteristics of individuals has increased over time, and that it is a phenomenon that is supposed to be at work in all societies⁵.

⁵ In my opinion, it is not sufficiently theorised why this should be the case, especially as regards changeable features of individuals. Whether individuals pair off as a consequence of similarities in tastes, values, educational traits, preferences regarding career aspirations... in a process of assortative mating, or rather they become more equal as a consequence of their day-to-day interaction is probably an empirical matter. Some research addressing this question has been conducted, for example, in

Nonetheless, even if the correlation between husbands' and wives' characteristics that would *potentially* serve as a means for participating and "succeeding" in the labour market were perfect and positive, i.e. the level of homogamy in potential labour market traits were complete, it is far from realistic to assume that all women tend to participate alike. In the following section I will address labour market decisions within the household from a perspective that considers interdependent choices and constraints between the household's members.

5. Interactions within the Household. Labour Market Decisions

Several interesting analyses of women's labour market decisions have been in the last years accused of a lack of concern with interactive processes that take place at the household level. Especially since the beginning of the questioning of the male-breadwinner family model and the increase in female (married and unmarried) labour force participation rates, women's labour-related decisions should be considered with reference to incentives and disincentives posed inside the household context. Obviously this does not preclude other variables at the macro level –such as specific social policies or labour market conditions– from promoting or inhibiting their participation.

Theoretically, the household as the unit of labour market decisions is justified in different ways, even if, of course, individual-level decisions should serve as the basis of the analysis. On the one hand, both consumption and production take place within the household, if not jointly, at least interdependently. Labour force participation can

electoral behaviour studies, but the evidence seems far from conclusive. Regarding the labour market context that I am referring to, and regardless of the homogeneity in their characteristics before couple formation, several processes that take place once it is established should be considered. They undoubtedly affect the type of choices and constraints that spouses face.

be therefore regarded as an especially relevant kind of production. Against this household-level decision context it could be argued that, even if members of the family and/or household share, to a certain extent, resources and constraints, the pooling is far from complete. In practice, earnings from different members, for example, should not necessarily be pooled, and constraints such as housework or child-rearing activities are still shown to entail greater responsibility for women than for men. Accepting the weakness of the pooling assumption does not mean that an individualistic approach to household processes is more accurate, since such an analytical perspective would imply that no interactive effects are at work. This appears to be rather unrealistic⁶. Individuals will be considered, then, as taking decisions in the “strategic” context posed by the household.

On the other hand, it seems plausible to consider that the effects of different macro-institutional variables such as labour market conditions (unemployment rate, sectorial composition of labour force, wage level...) or social policies (parental leave...), differs if we consider the individuals as isolated units or as embedded in particular household arrangements. In that sense, the family/household should be seen as a “filter” or “buffer” institution that modifies these macro social conditions as incentives and the extent to which individual members are benefited or constrained by them.

When considering the effects that certain personal characteristics of each of the partners exert on the other partner’s labour market behaviour, the question of whether or not these effects are symmetrical should be addressed: is the effect of men’s

⁶ For a recent detailed discussion on the suitability of the household as the unit of analysis in general stratification research, see Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001: 3-8.

characteristics similar to the one of women's on men –in terms of the sense and the strength of the relationship? Is it a mere statistical association or are there causal relationships at work? If so, through what mechanisms are they satisfactorily explained? In the particular context that I am referring to, usually men are considered to work regardless of the labour market behaviour of their partners. In this sense, even if men were matched with high labour-market-potential women, for example, women's resources should not exert a causal effect on their participation

Two theoretical approaches stand in explaining why husband's labour market traits can affect wife's ones. On the one hand, the new economics of the household has predicted that, if utility maximization through specialisation holds, then the better the position of the male in the labour market –i.e. the stronger his financial resources–, the fewer the incentives of the female to participate in the labour force (for example, Becker, 1993). On the other hand, positive effects are predicted by the proponents of the social capital approach: the stronger the husband's (informational) resources in the labour market, the better he can contribute to pushing his wife into better positions through solid networking channels (Coleman, 1990). Both propositions have been tested empirically. Bernasco (1994), for example, has tried to assess both seemingly contradictory propositions to analyse several indicators reflecting success in the labour market in the Netherlands. His findings point to general positive effect of husbands' informational resources on wives' employment entry and, alternatively, to negative effects of financial resources.

From a comparative perspective (several national contributions, edited in Blossfeld and Drobnic, 2001), the effect of partners' resources on women's work careers has been explored. An interesting picture emerges, roughly following Esping-Andersen

ideal-types of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Under the conservative welfare regime, even when the wives have own important resources, strong career resources of the husbands can cancel them and set them out of the labour force. Under the Mediterranean welfare regime, the pattern is very much the same, with higher husbands' resources associated with higher wives' exit rates and smaller re-entry into the labour market.

For those countries classified under the social democratic welfare regime that have been studied, husbands' resources show indeed the opposite effect, increasing wives' labour force attachment. A similar positive influence of husbands' resources has been found in the former socialist countries that were considered in the comparative study, with the exception of Poland, which displays a pattern comparable to that shown by the conservative and Mediterranean ideal types.

For the U.K., on the contrary, no effects were found. In the U.S., possibly the country where this topic has been most extensively addressed, other authors have reported that in the eighties, even though high resourced women tended to be married with high resourced men, they tended to participate less than their worse-off counterparts (Treas, 1987). In the late eighties, though, this trend seemed to reverse (Karoly and Burtless, 1995).

What are the reasons underlying these national differences? Diverging tax systems, parental leaves, women's attitudes towards home-work versus labour-market-work, different effects of educational attainment as a predictor of labour achievement in diverging educational systems, unequal constraints posed by labour market features in each country... are strong candidates in this respect. A comprehensive and at the same

time parsimonious model is far from having been achieved yet. Suggestions in this respect are especially welcome.

6. Homogamy Patterns and Implications for Inter-Household Income Inequality

In one of the few comparative studies that have addressed the incidence of marriage homogamy in very different institutional settings (Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001), high levels have been reported without exception for countries belonging to the so-called conservative, Mediterranean, liberal, and social democratic welfare regimes, plus some (former) state-socialist countries. Moreover, for those countries in which the appropriate data were available, marriage homogamy seems to be increasing. Part of this increase could be explained by the rising educational attainment of women, “which augments structural opportunities for homogamy” (Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001: 375). Nevertheless, as the authors themselves accurately point, an increase in these educational levels should not per se mean higher marital homogamy if the selection mechanisms were random.

The direct implication of high (and, to a certain extent, higher) homogamy is the increase in the number of couples with very similar potential in labour market traits (be it earnings or any other indicator). Of course a more or less direct consequence of this is the questioning of the neoclassical model of household time allocation, and of the traditional male breadwinner model that has been at work until relatively recent times. Blossfeld and Drobnič (2001) have described how partners’ careers follow highly diverging paths after the couple formation despite the homogamy in their resources before it. Thus, men still tend to follow the traditional career of continuous and highly stable attachment to the labour market and they seldom abandon it for family reasons. Women, alternatively, are involved in career patterns that are much

more contingent on national contexts, with one common feature, though. In all the countries under study, women's own higher resources in the labour market affect positively their participation, whereas the effect of husbands' resources affect very differently in a pattern broadly consistent with the expectations derived from the welfare regimes' characteristics, as it has been already described above.

What are the implications of all these individual and household level processes that have been briefly presented for the more general process of social inequality? Equalising effects of women's participation have been hypothesised for the conservative and Mediterranean welfare regimes, whereas the reverse outcome is considered to be happening in the social democratic welfare regime and in the former socialist countries (Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001). For the U.K. as the representative of the liberal ideal-type, in accordance with what was found by these authors regarding husbands' influence, no effects on income inequality were expected.

Unfortunately, an adequate decomposition of all the intervening processes is not accomplished in this study, and the explanation falls mainly on the effects of husbands' resources on the wives' participation; a more rigorous analysis of other individual and institutional variables is absent.

Whether the contribution of women to the household income through their increasing labour force participation should be seen as reinforcing or rather as buffering the trend in inter-household income inequality is eventually an empirical matter. Nonetheless, the *causal processes* underlying this relationship should be properly theorised, especially since national differences have been predicted (even though not specifically addressed, as far as I know) according to the results obtained regarding the effects of

husbands' resources on wives' labour behaviour. Differences should be found at the individual level, at the household level, and at the institutional level that, in combination, can account for the divergences in the effect of these women's indicators on the distribution of inter-household income inequality.

7. Proposed Contribution to the Theoretical Debates and Relevance of the Topic

In order to satisfactorily answer the research question, an adequate disentanglement of all the processes at work –that, to my knowledge, have not been thoroughly accounted for yet– should be made, namely:

- i) compositional effects of the households, i.e. an increasing trend towards new types of households (single-headed, with other dependent adults...)
- ii) compositional effects of the labour force, i.e. changes in the skilled/unskilled ratio, in the number of working hours...
- iii) demographic changes, i.e. decreasing fertility rate, increasing divorce incidence, delay in the timing of marriage... across cohorts
- iv) changes in the returns to educational investment in terms of participation and wages
- v) changes in the share of household income that is due to each partner
- vi) changes in homogamy patterns and in the correlation of partners' earnings
- vii) net effects of women's increasing participation and evolution of their wages/earnings on inter-household income inequality

According to some of the predictions that have been made, a trade-off would between gender and inter-household income inequality would be suggested to be at work, i.e. achievements in gender equality in terms of labour market participation and earnings would contribute to increase income inequality. My thesis should attempt to ascertain whether this alleged trade-off actually exists or if, rather, as has been shown for some countries, the opposite effect prevails. If so, what reasons underlie these divergences?

Causal mechanisms should be provided after a proper theorisation of the topic that, consistently with the available empirical evidence, would enable me to derive some testable hypotheses for the empirical analysis. Section 8 briefly discusses the kind of empirical analysis that is currently being considered and the most adequate data sources that are available for that purpose.

Recent changes in the conditions regarding household composition and women's labour market behaviour pose a fascinating scenario to analyse the actual consequences for how income inequality might have varied over time and under different institutional settings. My contribution to the field would provide with evidence relevant for several institutional interventions aimed at increasing equality of opportunities and/or of condition, in a varied array of areas such as education, fiscal policy, incentives for labour market participation...

8. Empirical Analysis and Data

Testable hypotheses will be derived from a theoretical model that formalise the links between the variables and that integrate individual-level labour market decisions in a broader strategic context posed by the household-level. Special emphasis on the search for causal mechanisms will be attempted at that stage.

The most suitable way of testing the hypotheses derived from the formal model is a quantitative analysis. To account for its dynamic nature (that refers to changes over time), a longitudinal approach with data in which the individual as the unit of analysis is required, but detailed information at the household level is crucial as well. The empirical part of the thesis would be composed by two fundamental phases.

Firstly, I would like to make a comparison as extensively as possible (in terms of the number of countries included) in which it be possible to identify similarities and divergences in the manner in which women's earnings contribute to inter-household general income inequality. Data collected by the LIS (*Luxembourg Income Study*) Project are especially suitable for this purpose, since it provides with comparable cross-sectional data at the individual and household levels since 1970 for most industrialised European countries. This departure date is considered to be able to capture several macro social changes extremely relevant for the research, such as the educational expansion that increased women's enrolment in further levels, the incorporation of women into the labour force, as well as changes in the trends in wage dispersion and in income inequality. A substantively relevant number of cross-sections since that date are available for six European countries, namely France, the U.K., Germany, Norway, Spain and Sweden.

Obviously, amongst these six potential candidates, remarkable differences appear not only in their labour market features (participation rates of women, full-time versus part-time jobs, continuities and discontinuities in female careers...) but also in broader institutional configurations, such as the type of welfare regime, that can heavily influence the causal link between female participation –and wages/earnings– and income inequality that I am considering.

Using cross-sectional analyses can, nevertheless, lead to ambiguous conclusions with regards to the consequences for individual labour market outcomes. Of course secular changes over time can be properly traced, but it might be still unresolved how changes in participation and earnings for the *same* individuals (embedded mostly in the *same* households) contribute to income inequality in the *same* household sample.

The second stage of the empirical analyses aims at solving this shortcoming. Once similar and diverging patterns are identified, I will use panel data –the same sample of individuals and households interviewed at different points in time– to disentangle specific changes over time in the mechanisms at work both at the individual and at the household levels, using ECHPS (*European Community Household Panel Survey*), various waves.

9. Preliminary Structure of the Thesis

1. Introductory Chapter

- 1.1. Research Question that drives the Thesis
- 1.2. Brief Contextualization of the Research Question:
 - Relevance
 - Theoretical debates in which it inserts
 - Different answers given to the question; discussion of their potentialities and flaws
- 1.3. How can I contribute to a better answering of the proposed question?
- 1.4. Structure of the thesis

2. Literature Review

- 2.1. Educational expansion (women)
- 2.2. LM returns to education (women)
- 2.3. Homogamy in educational and LM traits
- 2.4. Evolution of LM variables (women):
 - Participation
 - Wages/Earnings
 - Contribution (shares) to the household income

3. Presentation of my Theoretical Model

- 3.1. Assumptions
- 3.2. Development of a formal model. Search for causal mechanisms
- 3.3. Consistency with the available empirical evidence
- 3.4. Formulation of hypotheses derived from the formal model

4. Empirical Part: Testing the Hypotheses derived from the Model

- 4.1. Comparison of several countries with cross-sectional data since 1970. Luxembourg Income Study
- 4.2. In-depth analysis of some of the cases with panel data. ECHPS

5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Summary of the main findings
- 5.2. Discussion:
 - Do I provide with a satisfactory answer to the research question?

- How do I actually improve the theoretical models available until now?

5.3. Further research needed

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