

The Working Woman in the Argentine Economy

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In this article, the author, drawing on experience in the National Directorate of Safety and Social Welfare, which forms part of the Argentine Ministry of Labour, describes the increasing importance of the part being played by women in the Argentine economy and briefly examines the situation of women workers in Argentina, particularly with regard to equality of remuneration, employment opportunities, standards of skill and maternity protection.

ARGENTINA is one of the Latin American countries which in recent years has drawn up a development programme covering fields ranging from various aspects of its economy to all aspects of the cultural life of its people. By tapping new sources of wealth such as oil, coal, iron and electricity it hopes to stimulate production in agriculture and industry and open the way to economic prosperity. The plan, which implies an increase in employment, is the first step towards higher wages for the workers and a promise of better living standards and social progress.

At the present time, according to estimates made by various social security agencies and the Directorate of Census and Statistics, Argentina has some 20 million inhabitants, nearly 8 million of them in the active population, of whom women make up 23 per cent. These figures should be compared with those of the 1947 census, which showed a gainfully employed population of 6,267,313 persons, of whom 19.7 per cent. were women.

The distribution by occupations varies in accordance with the nature of the employment. Some occupations are almost exclusively staffed by women, while others have only recently begun to open their doors to them, as the economy becomes more diversified and standards of skill among women workers continue to rise.

Taking the country as a whole the approximate proportion of women workers in the different branches of the economy is as follows: clothing, 95 per cent.; pottery, 90 per cent.; tobacco, 80 per cent.; health services, 80 per cent.; textiles, 70 per cent.; vine

growing, 70 per cent.; perfumery, 70 per cent.; dyeing and cleaning, 70 per cent.; foodstuffs, 60 per cent.; rubber, 50 per cent.; chemicals, 50 per cent.; commerce, 45 per cent.; plastics, 40 per cent.; meat packing, 30 per cent.; pasta products, 30 per cent.; metallurgy, 25 per cent.

These figures give an idea of the size of the female labour force. However, in some ways it differs in character from the male labour force.

The first difference concerns payment for work of the same value as that performed by men. When a questionnaire on the subject was sent out in 1959 by the International Labour Organisation, the National Directorate of Social Security and Welfare for Women had to analyse a number of collective agreements to find out what wage differentials existed in occupations where equal pay had not yet been introduced. It was found that these differentials varied from 7 to 15 per cent.

At that date there were 26 occupations with a high percentage of female labour—in pottery, health services, vine growing, telephones, chemicals, metallurgy, banking and insurance—in which equal pay was already a fact. Other industries with only a small percentage of women workers—printing, light and power, watch-making and jewellery—have had equal pay for some time, while others with a high percentage of women workers—textiles, tobacco, dyeing and cleaning, hat making, meat packing and the food trades—have not yet introduced it.

Taking a long-term view of the subject and bearing in mind the relevant standards, problems and possibilities, one can say that in Argentina the principle of equal pay for equal work is slowly gaining ground and that (as in the other countries which have reached a high pitch of economic and social development) the process is quickening as the economy's demand for labour rises.

There can be no doubt that the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951, adopted by the International Labour Conference, which was ratified by the Argentine Government in July 1956, has helped to encourage the introduction of equal pay. Article 2 of the Convention states that the principle of equal pay for men and women workers for work of equal value can be applied in a number of different ways, viz. (a) national legislation; (b) any other wage-fixing machinery established or recognised by law; (c) collective agreements between employers and workers; or (d) a combination of these methods. Since Argentina joined the ratifying countries, two different approaches have been adopted. In February 1956 the Revolutionary Government in a Legislative Decree (No. 2739 of 17 February of that year) laid down the principle that "equal wages shall be paid to male and female workers for work of equal

value whenever the differential is less than 10 per cent.; whenever the differential is greater, the wages of female workers shall be increased by 50 per cent. of the existing differential ”.

After December 1958, following repeal of this decree, Argentina, like the majority of countries, opted to leave the question of equal pay to be settled by collective agreements freely negotiated between employers and workers.

At the national level there is no precedent for measures of the kind advocated by the I.L.O.—such as job evaluation and analysis for fixing workers' wages, irrespective of sex—as there is in other countries. In 1959, when the General Directorate of Labour Relations of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security was consulted on the subject, it stated that there was no procedure in existence for this purpose. Collective agreements lay down flat-rate scales of pay, and only in exceptional circumstances do they specify skills required, or rates of pay for such skills, higher than the average for the occupation. The fixing of wages only takes place in relation to current wage rates and is based on budgetary studies showing minimum needs.

Nor has anybody thought of forming joint associations of professional organisations, trade unions, non-governmental women's bodies and political organisations like the Equal Pay Campaign Committee set up in Great Britain in 1954. There has been even less success in forming committees of inquiry to suggest ways whereby the country can avoid the irreparable harm that would be caused to both the employers and the working class by over-hasty action.

In 1959 a number of unions which were consulted in connection with the I.L.O. questionnaire stated that the Government's decree instituting equal pay had been used many times as a pretext for dismissing women workers. The employers' associations, for their part, dwelt on the importance of proceeding selectively and by stages so that working-class gains could be consolidated as the economy expanded.

To sum up, there is every likelihood that further progress towards equal pay for Argentine working women will be made when the collective agreements next come up for renewal, as they shortly will. There is only one argument in favour of delaying the process, viz. that the value of the differentials should be used to give greater assistance to working mothers with family responsibilities, as is done in some other countries.

But Argentina is lacking in adequate legislation for this purpose. Nurseries, kindergartens and facilities for looking after children outside school hours only exist in a few isolated cases and in most instances they are not official.

Section 15 of the Employment of Women and Young Persons Act, 1924 (No. 11317), was not an ideal instrument for this purpose. The provision stating that, in establishments in which the number of women employed was not less than a minimum number to be specified by the regulations (50) suitable nurseries were to be provided where children under the age of 2 years could be cared for while their mothers were at work, remained a dead letter in most cases because it failed to take account of the real needs of working women and of the country's resources. As regards this latter point there were not many establishments employing more than 50 women in 1924, nor, in the country as a whole, are there many today. The unbalanced development caused by the concentration of industry in the neighbourhood of the port and capital city of Buenos Aires caused legislation to be passed which was supposed to be nation-wide in scope but could not in fact be applied to the whole country. This is perhaps true of the majority of Latin American countries.

In the immediate future a more practical approach must be adopted towards the question of social services for women workers with family responsibilities, in order to bring them into line with women's true needs. In Argentina the law will have to be brought up to date after due investigation by the Government, the employers and the unions, all of which will undoubtedly be given a part to play in the financial, administrative and technical aspects of the new scheme.

In what ways can the development programme encourage the increased participation of women in the basic occupations and an improvement in working conditions ?

Unquestionably, an expanding economy does encourage the absorption of women into the labour force in that it creates additional employment opportunities. This is in fact accepted as axiomatic by the international organisations which are specially concerned with women's rights, such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Pan-American Union.

However, if women are to be absorbed on the same terms as men it is essential to be aware of the obstacles most often encountered and the best ways and means of overcoming them.

Fortunately, in Argentina these obstacles are not of a legal character. Since the Constitution of 1853 no discrimination between men and women has been allowed. The Civil Rights Act of 1926 (No. 11957) reaffirms that "every adult woman, whether single, married, widowed or divorced, shall be entitled to exercise all the civil rights and functions that are granted by law to an adult male".

This determination to enforce equal rights was also implicit in a number of other enactments, such as Act No. 12383 of 1938, which "forbids employers, concessionaries of public services and civil or commercial associations of any kind to introduce internal regulations or to conclude agreements whereby their employees can be dismissed on marriage".

Collective agreements also embody this principle. Moreover, there have been no convictions by the courts for breaches of this legislation.

The only distinctions which are allowed are those arising out of the statutory instruments regulating the employment of women, for example Act No. 11317 of 1924, which fixes the minimum age of admission of women to employment at 18 years and forbids their employment for more than eight hours per day, at night or in unhealthy and dangerous occupations.

But the factors that may hamper women in taking advantage of their new employment opportunities in the future will not be of a legal character, and some further investigation is called for.

In the first place, women must achieve a higher standard of vocational and technical training in order to eliminate differences in skill between men and women. This will give them access to skilled occupations, entry into which will take place smoothly without the difficulties which have been encountered in the past because—as has often been pointed out—the training given to women was years out of date.

The schools run by the National Technical Education Council are designed to achieve this purpose. The factory schools, which cater for both sexes, also cover the whole of the country. They combine training with production in modern, well-equipped workshops. The factory schools for women give apprenticeship courses in machine embroidery, industrial embroidery, dressmaking, shirt-making, garment-making, industrial chemistry, weaving, etc. The apprenticeship schools are designed to provide industry with skilled women workers who have taken theoretical and practical courses lasting from one to three years.

Vocational and technical training is at present being reorganised along more realistic lines to take account of the requirements of the employment market and the differences between rural and urban areas. In the urban areas instruction will be given in a number of specialised occupations such as electricity, advertising, commercial art, garment-making, etc. In the countryside the Ministry of Education runs its rural and domestic cultural missions and the National Mechanised Farming Institute has its network of rural family clubs.

In rural areas the instruction has one primary purpose, namely to strengthen family life on farms and improve marketing through production and consumer co-operatives. As farm work becomes more mechanised, these missions will endeavour to teach women to make use of the greater opportunities of well-being which the country's progress will provide.

The second obstacle that women will have to overcome in the stage of development which lies ahead is the existence of protective legislation which is not based on sound welfare or social security principles ; these require that the cost of such protective legislation should not be borne entirely by the women themselves. Maternity protection is an outstanding case of discrimination between men and women in the distribution of burdens, and it is absolutely essential to overhaul the obsolete scheme in existence in Argentina so as to bring it into line with the social security standards advocated by the international organisations. The benefits payable to women workers in industry and commerce under Act No. 11933, which is at present in force in Argentina and which dates back to 1934, consist of a lump-sum payment which has no relation to their wages or to the contributions which are paid by themselves (but not by the other workers), by their employers and by the State. Thus, there is a need for paid maternity leave to be provided under collective agreements.

A Bill to make the necessary changes in the scheme was drafted by the National Directorate of Social Security and Welfare for Women and submitted to the Ministry of Labour in September 1960.

The official view on the subject is perfectly clear and was expressed by the Argentine delegate to the 15th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in Geneva from 13 to 30 March 1961, on whose proposal the following paragraph was included in one of the resolutions :

Invites the International Labour Organisation to consider in this connexion to what extent discrimination against women in respect of employment and occupation in the different countries is attributable to the fact that the cost of all or some social welfare benefits, particularly maternity benefits, is defrayed solely by employers and not out of public funds or other collective arrangements, in particular the existing systems of social security and social services.¹

Lastly, in Argentina, if women are not to waste their new opportunities for obtaining employment they must participate increasingly in the trade unions, professional organisations, non-governmental women's bodies and politics.

¹ United Nations : *Commission on the Status of Women : Report of the Fifteenth Session*, Economic and Social Council, *Official Records*, Thirty-second Session, document E/3464, Supplement No. 7 (Geneva, 1961), p. 33.

In this way they will learn to appreciate their true importance, and with the increased confidence that this will undoubtedly give them they can contribute to framing and carrying out national programmes which take due account of their own interests and the country's resources.

At the first National Seminar on the Participation of Women in Public Life, held in 1960, the delegates from the three sections of the community which were represented—officials of the provincial governments, women's organisations and trade unions from all over the country—answered a number of inquiries which showed the extent of women's participation in organisations protecting the interests of their occupation or social class.

The proportion of women in trade unions oscillated between 10 and 30 per cent. of the total membership except, of course, in those occupations (such as textiles, clothing, health services, tobacco, matches, foodstuffs, etc.) where nearly all the workers are women, where membership is between 60 and 90 per cent. of the total.

As regards women's participation in the running of private associations of various kinds, the same inquiries revealed that there were 519 institutions with 224,199 active women members throughout the country. There are approximately 10 million women in Argentina.

Such, in broad outline, is the position of the Argentine woman worker today. From it one can see the next steps to be taken to consolidate her economic and social rights still further.
