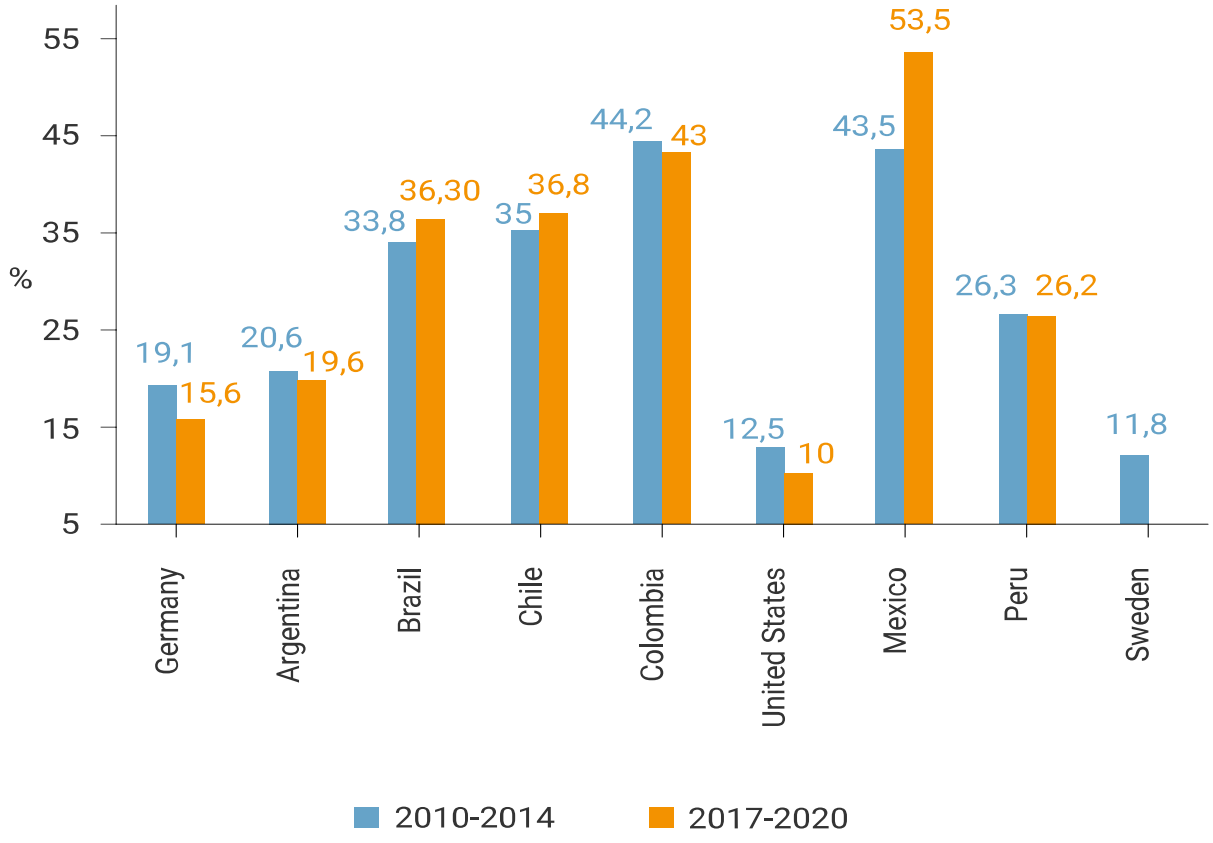
BanRep Blog: Income and Unpaid Work Gaps within Households

Although the existence of wage gaps that favor men over women is well known and is explained by multiple factors, there is little discussion of what happens in the opposite case when the women in the households earn more money than the men. In particular, international studies suggest that heterosexual couples tend to avoid situations in which the woman earns more money than her spouse because under traditional gender roles the man earns more money than the woman. For example, women have been found to reduce their hours in order to not exceed men's earnings and thus avoid gender role reversal.

The effect of social conventions and gender roles on income and relative use of time between men and women in Colombian households is studied in a recent research paper written by Andrea Salazar Díaz and published in the *Borradores de Economía* series. The Colombian case is particularly relevant, as surveys reveal that a very high percentage of people agree that if a woman earns more money than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems (Graph 1). Salazar's study finds that in households where a woman earns more money than her husband, her share of unpaid housework increases as a way of reinforcing her traditional role. These results are consistent with the notion that couples perceive costs – or disadvantages in terms of social conventions – in women having higher incomes than their husbands.

Graph 1: Percentage of people who agree with the statement: "If a woman earns more money than her husband, this is almost certain to cause problems."



Source: Data from the World Values Survey rounds 2010-2014 and 2017-2020. Non-responders or "don't knows" were excluded from the analysis. The percentage reported on the graph corresponds to the sum between "strongly agree" and "agree".

This analysis uses data from the 2016-2017 National Time Use Survey and considers only heterosexual couples who both report positive labor income. On average, women in this sample spend 7 hours and 32 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work, which is 70% more than the average time spent by men. To study what happens to this gap in the allocation of time to domestic work when women earn more money than men, households where this happens are compared to households where men are the higher income earners. In the econometric analysis, controls are added to compare households that are similar in terms of individual female and male income, total household income, relative female income, race, education, and ages of household members.

Table 1 presents the estimated differences in the domestic work gap between households in which women earn higher incomes than their spouses and households in which women earn lower incomes than men. Results with different controls and sampling restrictions are shown in the different columns. The difference in the base specification (Column 1) is 62.19 minutes per day. This indicates that for couples where the woman earns more money than the man, the gap in unpaid housework increases by approximately one hour per day compared to couples where the man is the higher income earner within the household. This estimate is robust and similar when: the number of dependents is considered (Column 2), variables controlling for the presence of help or a hired domestic worker (Column 3) are included, and the sample is restricted to couples in the core labor force and the most productive ages: 25-54 years old (Column 4). Some of the mechanisms behind this result are explored in the paper which finds that the increase in this gap is explained solely by women's greater share of this unpaid domestic work, which, in turn, results in a reduction of their free time as they take on this extra burden within the household.

Table 1: Estimated differences in time spent on unpaid domestic work in households with different relative incomes for men and women.Dependent variable: time gap in unpaid work (minutes per day) (1)(2)(3)(4)Woman earns more (D=1, woman’s > men’s income)62,190**
(24,655)55,812**
(24,302)56,425**
(24,212)67,453***
(30,312)Weighted observations1.490.0041.490.0041.490.0041.110.353R squared0,0750,0950,0970,090
Additional controls DependentsNoYesYesYesHelp / Hired domestic workerNoNoYesYesSample restrictionsNoneNoneNoneCouples between 25 and 54 years of age

Fuente: Data weighted by population expansion factors from the 2016-2017 National Time Use Survey. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0,01, ** p<0,05, * p<0,1.

The results suggest that women increase their share of unpaid domestic work to reduce tensions within the household that are generated, given gender roles, when they earn more money than their spouse. This result is consistent with the literature that asserts that the fulfillment of gender roles within society could explain why women disproportionately assume these unpaid domestic tasks despite having increased their participation in the labor market. Finally, the research highlights the importance of policies focused on cultural change that adjust social conventions and gender stereotypes that generate disparities in the use of time between men and women and that do not seem to have any economic justification.

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