

Poverty and Family Transitions into Adulthood in Rural Mexico

The transition to adulthood is a developmental process that reflects young people's social background and greatly determines their outcomes in adult life. The study of this problematic is particularly interesting in the poverty context because it clearly shows the lack of capacity and opportunities amongst young people and the difficulties they face in improving their living conditions in the subsequent stages of their lives.

Youth is the stage of the life course at which several changes in people's social roles take place. Leaving school, entering the labour force, leaving the family household, forming a conjugal union for the first time and giving birth to the first child are events or transitions that imply changes in young people's adscription in society. The first two transitions concern the public domain, school and work, whereas the latter three concern the family domain.

People's social roles are related to their age. Therefore, the desired or preferred ages for those transitions to take place are socially defined. The transition process into adulthood is delimited by the ages when these transitions take place as well as by the sequence with which the new roles are assumed.

Family transitions are crucial in people's adult lives. In the case of males, they reflect, amongst other things, the forms of family wealth transmission and the ways in which young people achieve residential autonomy from the family household. Amongst women, the traditional female role, related to the family domain, makes these transitions critical for their adoption of an adult role.

In Mexico as in other countries of Latin America, young people living in rural localities are a particularly excluded sector of the population. They share common constraints of poverty and lack of opportunities with other members of their communities. Moreover, peasant societies are hierarchical and patriarchal, thus young people have little or no influence in the family and community decision process. This situation is especially marked amongst females of ethnic groups.

Family transitions are strongly influenced by values and traditions. Within regions, communities share features of the social organization related to these values and traditions. Therefore, the regional dimension provides cultural elements that help to understand young people's paths to adulthood.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the process of transition into adulthood in the family domain amongst young people from rural and marginal localities in Mexico. The focus is on family transitions, but I also explore the way they are influenced by transitions in the public domain. I give particular emphasis to differentials by ethnicity and gender, as they are forms of exclusion amongst young people in these rural communities, and by region.

Hypothesis

- 1) A greater educational level delays entrance into a conjugal union for both males and females. However, female nuptiality behaviour is more sensible to increasing years of education than that of males.
- 2) Indigenous young people engage in their first conjugal union and give birth to their first child at younger ages because they have lower educational levels, mainly amongst females.

- 3) Labour force participation affects differently family transitions, depending on the type of activity and the gender. Amongst males, participating in the labour force in activities not directly linked to the family favours economic independence and allows forming a conjugal union in an independent household. Amongst females, on the contrary, the economic independence delays family transitions.
- 4) The first conjugal union formation and the birth of the first child are strongly linked and obey to the same determinants.
- 5) The local context has a direct effect on the timing of family transitions. The greater isolation and the lack of educational and work opportunities, favours the early transition into adulthood in the family domain. Male young people are more likely to remain in the family household because of the absence of non-family jobs, even after forming a conjugal union and having their first child.
- 6) The regional effect on the timing of family transitions prevails even after controlling for the economic features of the locality.

Data source and methodology

The Survey of Socio-economic Characteristics of Households (ENCASEH) was conducted by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Education in the framework of the Progresá Social Program. This survey was carried out from 1996 to 1999 and served as basis for the selection of the beneficiary families of the program. Information was collected using household and locality questionnaires. Around 2.8 million households were interviewed in almost 50 thousand localities. These were all localities with high degree of marginality, with more than 50 and less than 15 thousand inhabitants, and with education and health services within a distance of 10 kilometres or less. In each locality, all households were interviewed.

This data source contains period data which is not especially adequate for a life course perspective analysis. However, I contend that the analysis is valuable because of two reasons. The first is that there is no longitudinal data available for analysing the population under study. The second is that the ENCASEH provides or allows to deduct basic information on transitions to adulthood: age at leaving school, age at first work, as well as marital status and household composition (relationship with the household head, residence with parents and/or with conjugal partner and residence with own children) at the time of interview.

For those who do not live with their family of origin any more, the previous household characteristics are unknown. However, the individual socio-economic features (education, work income, type of work, position and ethnic origin), as well as those of the locality (size, agricultural and salaried work, land and/or animal ownership, households belonging to an ethnic group, migrant workers, wages, urban infrastructure, communications and others) provide a reasonable characterization of the young people' background and current living conditions.

In this paper, I analyse young people aged between 12 and 34 years old, as within this age range most of the family transitions occur. The population under study is almost 5 million young people, with a slightly higher number of women than men.

Assuming there are no important cohort changes, curves of ages at the three family transitions are analysed. Multivariate statistical models are applied to model the probability of being in a conjugal union and of living in an independent household. A

multinomial logistic regression is applied to a 1 percent sample of the male and female populations separately. The standard errors are adjusted for the lack of independence in the observations within localities.