

# Women and Work in the Colonization Process of Benito Juárez (1869–1895)

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**Abstract.** The district of Benito Juárez, located approximately 400 km from Buenos Aires, Argentina, experienced a rapid colonization process driven by a combination of favorable conditions and the arrival of European migrants. Beyond the region's economic and productive dynamics—such as land occupation and use—historical research has traditionally focused on the most visible participants in this process: the male population, for whom documentation is more abundant. This study seeks to reconstruct the role of women in this colonization process and examine their place within local society. For this purpose, we draw on data from the first two national population censuses conducted in 1869 and 1895, as well as on the records from the 1895 economic census.

**Keywords:** female labour, rural history, censuses, Buenos Aires, migrations, colonization, nineteenth century

## ***1. Introduction***

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rapid transformation of Argentina, as the country established itself as a major producer and exporter of agricultural goods. This era also coincided with the consolidation of the national state and the expansion into territories inhabited by Indigenous peoples, whose colonization was secured.

These years of significant economic growth, which, backed by official policies, encouraged a massive influx of immigrants, most of whom arrived from Europe. A large proportion of these newcomers settled in the province of Buenos Aires. While many preferred urban centers, others chose to establish themselves in more remote areas that were still undergoing colonization.

Although the broad outlines of this colonization process are well known<sup>1</sup>, we propose here to examine a specific aspect: the role of women in this newly established society, as reflected in their professional activities.

From the outset, it is important to clarify that the data currently available for studying women's work in rural areas come primarily from population censuses. In this case, we will draw on the first two national censuses (1869 and 1895) and supplement them with information from the 1895 economic census. As with any list, census data are laconic, and when combined with the well-known scarcity of documentation concerning women, as well as the intense geographical mobility characteristic of a territory undergoing colonization, they make it very difficult—if not impossible—to reconstruct in detail the activities and working conditions of women at that time. Nevertheless, these sources do allow us to trace their presence across different occupations, identify their pathways into the labor force, and gain a clearer understanding of their place within the emerging colonial society.

Benito Juárez, the area under focus in the present study, is a town located about 400 kilometers south of the city of Buenos Aires (see map in Figure 1).

The lands of what is now the district of Benito Juárez were originally part of the district of Necochea. In 1827, land distribution began under the *emphyteusis* regime.

At the time, these territories lay along the frontier with Indigenous peoples, in a particularly unstable region. The Argentine State encouraged settlement in these areas but could not ensure the safety of the residents.

Although some “Christian” families were known to inhabit the region, it is impossible to determine their number or living conditions. Over time, settlers gradually moved along the frontier, occupying land without recognized ownership. They lived mainly by raising livestock and faced the constant danger of *malones* (sudden, violent attacks by Indigenous groups that often involved the destruction of property, theft of livestock, and kidnapping of settlers). Distance from Buenos Aires and the harshness of frontier life further discouraged permanent settlement in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the colonization process and the frontier condition is particularly abundant. See, for example: Djenderedjian *et. al.* 2010; Djenderedjian 2013; Mateo 2013; de Cristóforis 2016; Ratto 2015; Literas 2017; Reguera, Canciani 2017; Canciani 2013; Cordero 2019; Pedrotta *et. al.* 2012; Cortés Conde 1979; Barba *et. al.* 1974; Banzato, Lanteri, 2007.

Figure 1. Map of Buenos Aires



Source: Censo General de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1881

Although the town of Benito Juárez was founded in 1867 at the initiative of Mariano Roldán—one of its residents, who later became the first justice of the peace and military commander—the colonization of the surrounding territory advanced only later. This only commenced once the problem of indigenous attacks had been “solved” through violence during the so-called *Campaña del Desierto* (Desert Campaign). The last recorded raid in Juárez occurred in 1878, precisely during the years when military operations sought to eliminate the native population and integrate these territories into the national state (Canciani, 2013; Cordero, 2019; Literas, 2017).

Between the first two national censuses (1869 and 1895), the population of the Benito Juárez district increased from 1,598 to 9,132 residents. In other words, the colonizing drive led to a nearly sixfold demographic growth within an area of 8,802 km<sup>2</sup>—equivalent to a population density of 1.1 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. It is well known that geographical mobility was significant (Miguez 1993), and Juárez was no exception: of the settlers recorded in 1869, only nine were still present in Juárez by 1895.

The colonization process that began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was driven by several factors. Chief among them were the political stability achieved in the 1860s following the civil wars, the abundance of available land, the growing demand for labor, and the decline in maritime transport costs. Together, these conditions reinforced the previously modest flow of European migrants to Argentina, spurred the nation's economic takeoff, and cemented its role in the international market as a supplier of raw materials.

Benito Juárez also benefited from this favorable context, which encouraged rapid transformation and made it a promising destination for settlers. After the establishment of the jurisdiction in 1867, the government authorized the layout and construction of the village that would host local authorities and businesses. The village was officially founded in 1878 (Levene 1941: 341–343; Pesoa 2014); that same period saw the construction of the chapel—whose parish records date from May 1879—and the creation of the administrative center. A few years later, in 1885, the arrival of the train connected Juárez to Buenos Aires and the port of Quequén in Necochea. This new link greatly facilitated the transport of both people and agricultural products, which could then be shipped more efficiently by sea.

In other words, the conditions were favorable for attracting new residents, and families began settling in Benito Juárez in search of better prospects and opportunities for advancement. During the early years, most newcomers were Argentinians—some from the province of Buenos Aires itself, others from more distant parts of the republic. Before long, residents from overseas also began to arrive. Although most European migrants preferred to settle in urban areas (Devoto 2002, 2006; Moya 1998; Otero 2012), many chose to try their luck in rural zones that were still undergoing colonization (Contente, Santilli 2024).

These were regions where everything remained to be built—full of promise but lacking in comfort—as was the case in the Benito Juárez district at that time (Contente and Bringé 2023; Sánchez Alonso 2007). Consequently, the proportion of European-born residents rose from 9% of the population in 1869 to 25.5% in 1895. As elsewhere in Buenos Aires Province, most newcomers were men of Spanish, Italian, or French nationality. While the population also included smaller groups from countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Denmark, as well as from Asia and other parts of the Americas, these three nationalities together accounted for 90.4% of the migrants recorded in 1895.

Our main source—the census records from the first two national censuses (1869 and 1895)—is particularly rich (Otero 2006). However, as mentioned earlier, it also has limitations, many of which stem from how census takers interpreted their instructions. These interpretations are revealing, as they provide insight into how individuals of that period understood social reality, but they also introduce biases that are difficult to correct.

For example, Census takers were instructed to record the occupation of all residents over the age of 14 and to indicate whether those under that age attended school. This method offered the invaluable advantage of documenting women's professional activities. The drawback is that in 1895 some census takers treated the head of household's occupation as representative of the entire family, recording all members—wives and children alike—under the husband's profession. As a result, children aged six to nine sometimes appear as “administrators,” “landowners,” or “civil servants.” This detail indirectly reveals how the family was viewed as an economic unit in which all members shared productive roles, but it also poses a major limitation for tracing cases where women worked outside the domestic sphere. Conversely, we also find examples of census takers who omitted women's occupations altogether, rendering their work invisible.

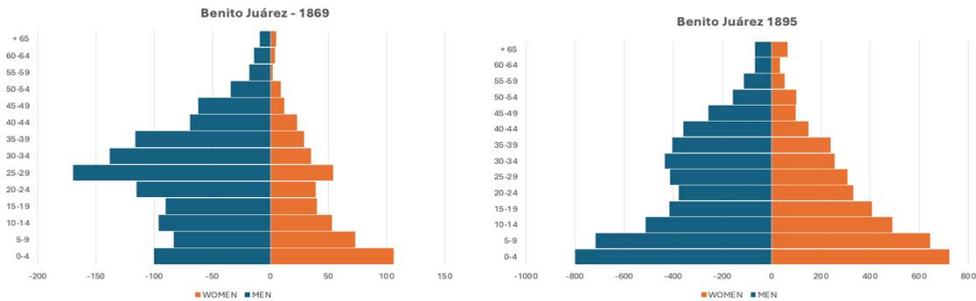
On the other hand, since these censuses do not indicate the division between residential units, it is very risky (if not impossible) to determine the composition of family groups. To remedy this drawback, each case would need to be analyzed individually. These drawbacks do not invalidate the value of the source, but they do require us to be cautious in our quantitative analysis. For this reason, we will analyze the activities recorded in 1869 and observe those same activities in 1895. We will also include those occupations for which we know there is no possible error, that is, those traditionally more frequent among women—namely, those related to domestic activities and teaching. In addition, we will supplement our analysis with data from the 1895 economic census. This source includes various records containing lists of the names of owners of different businesses or properties, with details of the assets they own in the sections “agricultural,” “livestock,” “fences,” and “buildings,” as well as individual files in the sections “industrial” and “economic,” with brief descriptions of the number and nationality of workers and the profitability of each business.

We will begin by establishing a general profile of the residents of Juárez on both dates, and then focus our attention on the female population to observe the employment opportunities available to them, as well as any changes in these professions over time.

## 2. Juárez, the demographic context between 1869 and 1895

Population pyramids will give us the first indications about the inhabitants of Juárez:

Figure 2. Juárez, Population pyramids 1869–1895



Source: Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

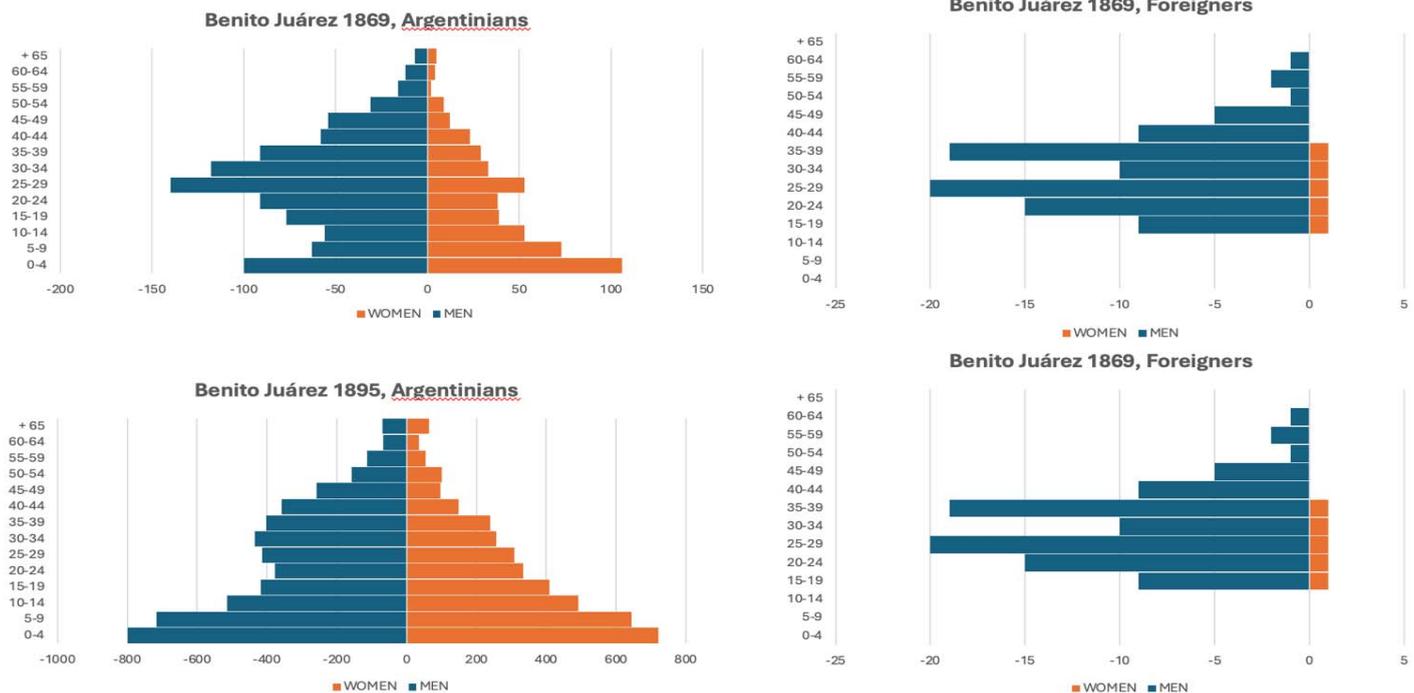
In 1869, when the first “snapshot” of the jurisdiction in question was taken, the population was distinctly male (Figure 2; Table 1), with a male-to-female ratio (MR) of more than two men for every woman. This imbalance was even greater among individuals over 14 years of age, where there were more than three men for every woman, with a pronounced peak between the ages of 20 and 35 (Table 2).

At that time, living conditions in the area meant that the population was largely composed of men, drawn by the demand for labor generated by extensive cattle breeding and by the opportunities offered within a colonizing context. The registration of 157 married men compared with only 100 married women clearly suggests that many were temporary residents, some perhaps intending to settle and later bring their families.

By 1895, men still outnumbered women in the most active age groups, but this demographic imbalance was diminishing and had disappeared by 1914, when the next national census was conducted (Otero 2006).

Let us now examine how the resident population evolved in terms of origin:

Figure 3. Juárez, population pyramids according to the origin of residents<sup>2</sup>



Source: Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

<sup>2</sup> Please note that the scale is not the same: it has been increased for foreigners in order to make the differences more visible.

In 1869, the district showed a clear surplus of males in the most active age groups, both among natives and migrants. Foreign children were notably absent: all the children living there had been born in Argentina, as had 99% of the women residing in the area. The five foreign-born women were all over 15 years old, and three of them came from the *Banda Oriental del Uruguay* (Republic of Uruguay), a neighboring territory closely linked to Buenos Aires through shared cultural and geographical traits. Since the idea of a distinct national identity was not yet consolidated in 1869, these women were not necessarily perceived as foreigners. By 1895, none of the five foreign women recorded in 1869 were still living in Juárez. By the end of the century, the native population pyramid displays a typical structure, with a broad base that reflects a young and expanding demographic. Among European migrants, working-age males make up the largest group; nevertheless, the presence of children suggests that many families have settled in the area. The fact that a significant number of these children had been born abroad further indicates the relatively recent arrival of these families in the country.

Table 1. Juárez, population 1869-1895

	1869				1895			
	Men	Women	Total	MR	Men	Women	Total	MR
Argentiniens	975	479	1454	203	3579	3188	6767	112
Foreigners	139	5	144	278	1561	762	2323	204
Unknown	-				19	23	42	
Total	1114	484	1598	230	5159	3973	9132	129

(percentages)

	1869		1895	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Argentiniens	87,5	98,9	69,4	80,2
Foreigners	12,5	1,1	30,3	19,2
Unknown	-	-	0,4	0,6
Total	100%	100%	100	100

Source: Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

Table 2. Juárez, population over 14 years old, 1869-1895

	1869				1895			
	Men	Women	Total	MR	Men	Women	Total	MR
Argentiniens	720	259	1018	277	1687	1438	3125	117
Foreigners	139	5	144	278	1471	686	2157	214
Unknown	-	-			6	5	11	
Total	859	264	1162	325	3164	2129	5293	148

(percentages)

	1869			1895	
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Argentiniens	83,8	98,1	87,6	53,3	59
Foreigners	16,2	1,9	12,4	46,5	40,7
Unknown	-			0,2	0,2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

While European families had long been established in areas near the city of Buenos Aires by 1869 (Contente 2017), they had not yet ventured to settle in more distant regions such as the one under discussion here. In these territories, European presence largely consisted of male migrants who met the labor demands of a land still undergoing colonization. This group was particularly concentrated among men over the age of 20 (Figure 3 and Table 2).

In other words, between the two censuses, there was a growing migratory flow of native families—already established elsewhere—who sought new opportunities in these recently incorporated national territories. They were gradually followed by families of European origin. By 1895, the sex ratio among natives had begun to balance, whereas among foreigners it still surpassed two men for every woman, with significant implications for the marriage market.<sup>3</sup>

During the 26 years between the two censuses, the male population grew nearly fourfold, while the number of women and children (aged 0 to 13) increased about eightfold. This evolution highlights, from a different perspective, the district's new vitality and the promising opportunities it offered, having become secure enough by the century's end to attract families.

<sup>3</sup> On the issue of the marriage “market” and its constitution in the Argentine context, see, among others, Otero 2006: 142-149; 1990 and 1991; Míguez *et al.* 1991; Szuchman 1977. This gender imbalance particularly affected native men, as native women often preferred to marry foreigners (Contente 2014).

### 3. *The women of Juárez*

The census instructions required individuals over the age of 14 to report their professional activity and marital status. This group therefore represents the potentially active sector of the population, which will be the focus of our analysis.

Regarding the activities of those over 14, the 1869 census attributes productive activity to 94% of men, while the 1895 census records 90%. In contrast, very few women are listed as having an occupation—less than 16% in 1869 and 28% in 1895.<sup>4</sup> Although this increase is predictable, given population growth and the resulting intensification of productive activity, the latter figure is not entirely reliable. As previously noted, some census takers recorded the husband's occupation for many married women and children (one record even lists a “commander,” an obviously implausible entry), introducing a significant bias that limits our analysis. For this reason, we will restrict our study to 377 women whose occupational data are unequivocal, representing 63% of all women who declared an occupation.

*Table 3. Juárez, women's professional activities, 1869 and 1895*

<b>Professional activities</b>	<b>1869</b>	<b>1895</b>
Cook	4	25
Merchant		17
Seamstress	18	40
Washerwoman	11	119
Teacher		11
Dressmaker, embroiderer, shirtmaker		13
Ironer		28
Prostitution		18
Servants		106
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>377</b>

*Source:* Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895).

<sup>4</sup> Professional activity is recorded for 601 women. It should be noted that we have excluded those for whom sources of income were indicated that do not represent productive activity in the strict sense, such as “owner,” “rentier,” and “religious,” as well as “*sus labores*” (housework).

However, it is important to note that the absence of a recorded occupation in the census does not imply that these women did not work. Many of them carried out tasks within their families or households, making their labor largely invisible. It is also likely that they were documented this way because, from the census taker's perspective, they did not earn their own wages or income.

A quick look at the available occupations reveals a clear contrast between the opportunities open to men and women for earning a living. While men had always enjoyed a broader and more diverse range of employment options, the context of urban and administrative expansion—combined with the technological advances of the time—further strengthened their position in the labor market (Contente, Santilli, 2024). In 1895, beyond traditional agricultural work, men also took up emerging trades such as wire fencing (reflecting the organization and delimitation of farms with fences) and crafts that were almost absent in 1869, including tailoring, shoemaking, baking, blacksmithing, bricklaying, and carpentry. Some occupations were even more “sophisticated” for the area, such as photography, silversmithing, marble work, mattress making, music, and journalism—illustrating both the region's evolution and its economic boom.

Meanwhile, women also experienced a modest expansion of job opportunities, though within far narrower limits. Among these, teaching stood out as the most socially esteemed profession—and likely the only one that afforded a small number of women public recognition and influence—within a context where both state and private initiatives were promoting literacy.

### 3.1. Marital status and occupations

It is worth noting that neither census lists any married 14-year-old girls, and married 15-year-olds were an almost negligible group<sup>5</sup>. In 1869, just over half of women aged 14 and older were unmarried, but this proportion had fallen to 33.6%, likely due—as previously mentioned—to the arrival of already established families, particularly among European migrants. Meanwhile, the percentage of widowed women remained relatively stable.

As observed in the municipality of San Vicente (Contente 2017), marital status has a significant relationship with women's employment opportunities. Single and widowed women were more likely to report having a job than their married counterparts. A similar trend is evident in Juárez, where, although 34.5% of women were single, they made up 46% of all female workers.

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<sup>5</sup> Of the 97 16-year-old girls present in 1895, only three are recorded as being married.

Table 4. Benito Juárez, Marital status of residents (14 years old and over)

	1869					1895			
<b>Men</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.	<b>Total</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.
Argentines	545	141	29	5	<b>720</b>	1066	484	60	74
Migrants	116	16	6	1	<b>139</b>	668	717	48	35
Undet.						2	4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>661</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>859</b>	<b>1736</b>	<b>1205</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Women</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.	<b>Total</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.
Argentines	135	98	26		<b>259</b>	642	612	147	37
Migrants	3	2			<b>5</b>	92	534	52	9
Undet.							4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26</b>		<b>264</b>	<b>734</b>	<b>1150</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>46</b>

(percentages)

	1869					1895			
<b>Men</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.	<b>Total</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.
Argentines	75,7	19,6	4	0,7	<b>100</b>	63,3	28,7	3,6	4,4
Migrants	83,5	11,5	4,3	0,7	<b>100</b>	45,5	48,8	3,3	2,4
<b>Women</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.	<b>Total</b>	Single	Married	Widowed	Undet.
Argentines	52,1	37,8	10		100	44,6	42,6	10,2	2,6
Migrants	*	*	*			13,4	77,7	7,6	1,3
<b>Total</b>						34,5	54	9.3	2,2

Source: Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895).

Note: \* Not representative

This pattern helps explain why, even though foreign women comprised 40.7% of the female population over the age of 14, they accounted for only 29.7% of working women. In other words, since the vast majority of newly arrived European women were married (77.7%), they appeared less frequently in the employment records than native women.

With the exception of merchants—a category discussed later—analysis by place of origin has not produced conclusive results. Overall, despite slight variations, Argentine and migrant women were represented in similar proportions across the range of occupations studied. This suggests that, unlike in Buenos Aires, in rural areas origin does not appear to have been a determining factor in women’s choice of paid work.<sup>6</sup>

We assume that in 1869, given the aforementioned context of incipient colonization with an essentially male population engaged in activities related to cattle breeding, most of the women present would have been involved in household tasks. Hence, if they eventually earned a living outside the home, they most often did so as seamstresses or laundresses: these were the professions that occupied three-quarters of female workers and offered the advantage of allowing them to reconcile household tasks with an activity that contributed to the family economy. On the other hand, although the female presence in Juárez was limited and the small number of activities recorded among women makes it impossible to establish serious and representative percentages and statistics, we can detect trends and make some general observations.

We will see that although in 1895 the main sources of work for women continued to be related to domestic service (Table 3), we can glimpse that there was a certain evolution for them throughout those years. The following section examines in further detail how the most relevant activities performed by women evolved.

### 3.2. Domestic activities

Needleworkers represent an instructive case. By the end of the century, alongside forty “seamstresses,” there were also eleven “dressmakers,” one “embroiderer,” and one “shirtmaker.” To avoid distorting the analysis, these professions have been grouped into a single category. It should be noted,

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<sup>6</sup> Mitidieri (2021, 2023) show a clear correlation in this regard. For example, while most of the dressmakers in the capital would have been French, in Juárez only one of the thirteen present claims this origin. This is related to the higher proportion of migrants present there and the tendency of single women to settle in cities due to greater job opportunities and a more protected environment (Fauve-Chamoux 2009; 2002).

however, that the latter three trades involved a higher degree of specialization and likely offered better income.

Whether these women worked independently or were employed by urban artisans remains unknown. What is clear from comparing the two censuses is that women earning their living through needlework faced increasing male competition. While the number of laundresses grew tenfold between 1869 and 1895, and cooks became six times more numerous, the number of women engaged in sewing increased only by a factor of 2.9. In contrast, the number of tailors in Juárez rose from one in 1869 to fifteen in 1895—fourteen of them foreigners—indicating a clear preference for male labor in this trade.

The distribution by nationality reflected the overall composition of the female workforce: 70% of seamstresses and 68% of those who declared a professional activity were Argentine.

Almost half of these women were single, a fact seemingly explained more by age and the gradual loss of eyesight than by marital status as a determining factor. Although it is unclear when the use of eyeglasses became common in rural Buenos Aires, it is evident that, at that time, they were a rare and costly luxury.

Another major occupational group was domestic service. In 1855, Buenos Aires already had numerous registered maids, but by 1869, in smaller localities such as Juárez, this type of employment was still absent, as limited domestic needs were met by laundresses and, occasionally, a cook.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the situation had changed markedly: maids comprised a significant share of the female workforce, becoming the second most common occupation after laundresses.

Foreign women formed a slight majority in this group. While foreigners represented 32% of the female population overall, almost 36% of maids were foreign-born. The average age of maids was 24.7 years, though there was a marked difference between Argentine women (22.7 years) and foreign women (28.4 years), likely reflecting the more recent arrival of the latter. Roughly half of them were literate (52.8%).

Washerwomen represent another emblematic sector of society. Many of them earned their living—or supplemented their income—by washing clothes, an accessible activity that required no special training or skills. This work was one of the few options available to women from the most

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<sup>7</sup>About domestic service in the city of Buenos Aires, see Allemandi (2017). In a previous study on three areas of the Buenos Aires countryside, we detected some cases of “servants” who were often men (Contente, Barcos 2015, 2016).

disadvantaged sectors. They had the highest illiteracy rate: only 17% could read and write, while, on average, half of the residents of Juárez had this knowledge.

The census also shows the presence of two midwives, some cooks, and ironers, the latter activity being carried out by older women, with a clear majority of widows, although their small number, like that of the cooks, prevents generalizations from being made.

### 3.3. Breeders, farmers, traders, and subjective views

The population census records livestock breeding and agriculture as occupations for some women. However, when compared to data from the economic census, clear underreporting becomes evident, revealing that reality was far more complex than the quantitative figures suggest. Let's consider a few examples:

Maria Bonnefan de Carrere, a 28-year-old French widow, was listed in the population census as having no occupation. Living with her were her children, aged two to six, all born in Argentina, and Enrique Carrere, a 27-year-old French merchant who was likely her brother-in-law. Although Maria did not declare any professional activity, the economic census identifies her as the owner of 700 hectares of fenced land, 300 forest trees, 2,300 sheep, as well as ducks and chickens. She also possessed five houses—in short, a considerable enterprise.

In 1869, Pilar Montes de Díaz lived in Tandil, a village about 90 km from Juárez. She was married at the time and lived with her three children, aged one to six, though her husband was absent and not listed. Twenty-six years later, we find her again, now widowed and residing in Juárez. Her older children had left home, but two younger ones, born after the previous census, lived with her. Although the population census did not record any occupation for Pilar, the economic census paints a different picture: she owned two houses, 4,000 sheep, 50 horses, 1,000 cows, and 20 chickens: an impressive agricultural enterprise by any standard.

Celina Dossé de Dossé, a 55-year-old French woman, is a similar case to the previous ones. According to the population census, her husband, Pedro (66), was a miller, while she was occupied with performing *sus labores* (domestic tasks). In practice, she owned 15 horses and 1,900 sheep in the livestock survey, as well as 15 chickens and 10 ducks or geese, while her husband was not listed as the owner of any business.

We could continue to cite similar cases that show the existence of a few women for whom the population census does not declare an activity or notes *sus labores* indicating that they are limited to domestic tasks, or “typical of their

sex,” while in the economic census those same women were listed as owners of land, significant numbers of livestock, agricultural equipment such as plows, etc. Clearly, when the census taker gathered information for the population count, the women’s work seemed either too obvious to mention or not important enough to note. But later, in the economic census—the one listing the community’s assets—their contributions appeared, fewer in number than the men’s, but undeniably present.<sup>8</sup>

Female merchants represent another category worth examining more closely. The 1895 population census indicates that 17 women were engaged in commerce, most of them of European origin (only three were Argentine). Except for two individuals who were widowed, the rest were married. This marked presence of European migrants in the commercial sphere is linked to the activities of their respective husbands. Commerce is a sector in which it was difficult for women to venture independently, on their own account and at their own risk, although it is clear that they did participate effectively in the creation or administration of the family business.

The predominance of Europeans among the *comerciantes* (merchants) can be explained by a clear link between occupation and nationality among men in rural areas—unlike what we observed for women. While many native-born men tended to work in low-skilled, rural jobs, numerous European immigrants pursued commercial, craft, and industrial occupations.<sup>9</sup> This pattern accounts for the strong presence of European migrants in the commercial sector.

The registration of *comerciantes* also reveals a noteworthy phenomenon that offers indirect insight into women’s position in society. Although a few women appear as merchants in the population census, the economic census records contain no women listed as business owners, except for one: Elisa Iriart, a 33-year-old Frenchwoman engaged in prostitution. Her file, labeled “public café (brothel),” shows that someone other than the original recorder attempted to give the establishment a more respectable appearance by crossing out part of the description, leaving only “café.” Besides Elisa herself, seven women and two men worked there, and according to the population census, there was at least one other establishment devoted to similar activities that we could not locate in the commercial register.

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the role of women, often seen as belonging exclusively to the domestic sphere, see, among others, Moring (2014); Humphries (1998); Higgs (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Several studies have confirmed the identification between nationality, ethnic group, or shared language and professional activity among migrants; see, for instance, Falcón (2000), Arroyo Abad, Sánchez Alonso (2017), Contente 2017.

What is particularly noteworthy is that even as widows, these women were not granted ownership of the establishments they managed.<sup>10</sup> Such is the case of Angela Bolonte, a 54-year-old Italian widow listed as a merchant in the population census, where she appears as head of household before her two children, Nicanor and Carmen Aliverti. Angela owned two properties: one housed her business—a brick building that contained both the store and a three-bedroom residence with a basement—while she rented out the other, which also included a store and a living space.

Despite being the property owner and possessing the experience to run the business, the economic census records list her 24-year-old son, Nicanor Aliverti, as the person responsible for its operation.

A similar situation is found in the case of Ramona Uici, a 34-year-old Spanish merchant who was married, though her husband was not recorded as residing in Juárez. Ramona lived with nine minors, yet neither she nor her husband appeared in the economic census as business owners. However, records from the section on buildings indicate that Ramona—and not her absent husband—owned the house where she lived. It was one of the few homes on a paved street, suggesting a central urban location in Juárez. The house was built of brick, consisted of four rooms, and included the store itself. In summary, the economic activity records from 1895 reveal not only discrepancies between sources but also the diversity that characterized the understanding of women's work. According to census instructions, the occupation of all residents over the age of 14 was to be recorded. However, although many women played an active role in the economy, many census takers did not perceive it as such and therefore failed to record it, providing an indirect reflection of their worldview. The economic census presents a broader perspective in some respects and introduces additional nuances: although the population census indicates that women participated in commercial activities—even when widowed, their husbands were absent, or they owned the property where the business operated—they were generally not listed as the owners of the economic enterprise, except in the aforementioned case of prostitution. This discrepancy highlights not only an issue of administrative classification but also the socially defined boundaries of what forms of female economic participation were considered legitimate by society.

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<sup>10</sup> We had noted in a previous study that in San Vicente, an area near the city of Buenos Aires with a long history of colonization, women were also not included in the 1895 economic census records (Contente 2017).

The issue of property ownership is also thought-provoking. We have already mentioned the case of Ramona Uici, an Italian woman whose properties are registered in her own name rather than her husband's, but hers is not the only example. Another notable case is that of Rosa Cabrera, a 42-year-old Argentine woman married to José Beloso, a 57-year-old Spaniard. According to the population census, both were listed as *estancieros* (breeders), and six young people and children lived with them.

What is particularly interesting is that, although José appeared in the economic census as responsible for 4 hectares of land planted with trees, vegetables, and alfalfa, as well as 1,300 sheep and other animals, Rosa was recorded as the owner of the fences enclosing more than 1,000 hectares. In other words, José is registered as the operator of the agricultural enterprise, while Rosa is recognized as the landowner—most likely through inheritance. The fact that, after 25 years of marriage, Rosa alone is still listed as the owner of these thousand hectares (and of the surrounding wire fence valued at \$1,840—more than many houses in Juárez) highlights the clear recognition of women's ability to own and perhaps manage their own real estate. This is an issue that deserves further investigation through additional sources, as it adds an intriguing dimension to our understanding of power, property, and authority within the family.

#### **4. Final considerations**

The quantitative analysis conducted has allowed us to clearly outline the main trends in the evolution of women's activities between 1869 and 1895. It revealed that their participation in the labor market increased in step with the arrival of new settlers and the sustained expansion of productive enterprises. Meanwhile, some women from more affluent families—or those fortunate enough to receive an education—found in teaching a profession that brought them visible social recognition. Others advanced within their trade as seamstresses, becoming dressmakers or embroiderers. For the vast majority, however, when it became necessary to earn a living outside the home, domestic service remained the principal means of employment and subsistence. The growing demand for servants—such as laundresses and maids—enabled many women, often with limited literacy and driven by economic need, to join the paid workforce.

The 1895 population census also records a number of women identified as *estancieras* or *comerciantes*. Yet, the data from the economic census of that same year do not always correspond with those from the population records. Comparing the two sources has not only enriched the information

from the nominal lists but has also provided valuable insight—albeit indirectly—into the position that society assigned to women within the productive and symbolic structures of the period.

In practice, these women could lead large farms or businesses whose work went unnoticed by those conducting population censuses. At the same time, they might appear in other administrative records as owners of livestock, land, or homes, even without male mediation.

This discrepancy reveals not only the limitations of statistical records but also the gender biases embedded in contemporary conceptions of economic activity. It also exposes a paradox: although women did not always appear as heads of family production units devoted to agriculture or commerce, when they did, the records clearly indicated that the land or property belonged to the woman herself, rather than to her husband.

Thus, both omissions and explicit mentions in the censuses provide valuable clues as to how that society understood women's roles. They stand as evidence of unwritten rules, diverse mentalities, and the coexistence of multiple perspectives on women and their contribution to regional development.

We also identified several households headed by married women—sometimes with children but without their husbands—such as Pilar Montes de Díaz, Ramona Uici, Joaquina Torres, Clara Ferrario, and Dominga G. de Morales, among others. In the context of colonization, we suspect these absent husbands had moved elsewhere in search of better opportunities. Their absence likely increased the burden on these women, forcing them to assume duties and responsibilities typically shared within a couple. In any case, these were women who played an active and significant role in the society of Juárez.

This tension between visibility and documentary silence reveals a complex yet illuminating picture: women who, despite the constraints of the social structure, actively participated in the colonization process, contributing their labor, knowledge, and daily presence to the formation of the community. Though often overlooked or undervalued in official sources and discourse, their involvement was neither marginal nor incidental. The quantitative and qualitative evidence analyzed supports the view that women did not merely accompany the transformation of the territory but played an essential role in it, leaving a tangible mark on the region's social and economic development.

### ***Acknowledgements***

This work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades – Agencia Estatal de Investigación through the following projects: PID2023-148088NB-I00, ColMiScie: Colonialism, Migrations, Science, Trade and the Making of the Nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries) PID2023-149350NB-I00, FORESCLAV (Más allá de la esclavitud: sistemas de trabajo forzado y sociedades post-esclavistas en el mundo hispánico)

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*Appendix**Table 1. Women's professional activities according to marital status, Juárez, 1869 and 1895*

Activities	1869				1895			
	single (138)	married (100)	widow (26)	total (264)	single (739)	married (1150)	widow (199)	unknown (110)
Cooks	3		1	4	10	12	3	
Seamstresses	12	4	2	18	22	11	7	
Laundry workers	5	5	1	11	38	58	21	2
Teachers					4	6	1	
Dressmakers					3	7	1	
Ironers					7	11	9	1
Prostitution					16	2		
Maids					73	29	4	
Total	24	9	6	39	173	136	46	3
% <sup>11</sup>	62	23	15	100	49	38	13	1

*Source:* Primer Censo de la República Argentina (1869); Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

*Table 2. Women's professional activities according to origin, Juárez, 1895*

Activities	Argentine	French, Italian, and Spanish	Other nationalities	Total
Cooks	16	8	1	25
Seamstresses	3	14		17
Laundry workers	34	6		40
Teachers	98	18	3	119
Dressmakers	7	3	1	11
Ironers	5	6	2	13
Prostitution	21	6	1	28
Maids	14	3	1	18
Total	68	33	5	106
Activities	266	97	14	377
%	70,6	25,7	3,7	100

*Source:* Segundo Censo de la República Argentina (1895)

*Note:* The dressmakers include a shirtmaker and an embroiderer.

<sup>11</sup> Given the number of people, particularly in 1869, the percentages should be treated with extreme caution and viewed as a simple indication of trends.