

Family formation in Uruguay: pre-marriage cohabitation, cohabiting unions and marriage

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During the last two decades, union formation in Uruguay has undergone radical changes. Until the 1980s only a small number of couples opted for starting their conjugal lives outside of marriage. In 2010, 80 percent of young couples were cohabiting, and an increasing number of couples never formalize their unions.

The fall in the marriage rates and the increase of cohabiting unions happen in a wider context of deep changes in the families in Uruguay. Several studies have documented the evolution of recent trends in several family life indicators (increase of separations and divorces, increase of out-of-wedlock births, fall of fertility rates below replacement levels). However, there is still little research on the factors underlying the preference of new generations for informal unions.

On the other hand, there is an ongoing debate on the growth of cohabiting unions in the country. In the last few years, two distinct positions have emphasized different factors to explain the increasing share of cohabitation. Some authors understand that the increase is associated to the growing levels of economic and social exclusion, and in particular to changes in the labor market (higher instability and deterioration of the quality of jobs and men's salaries). The authors that support this position (see Kaztman, 2002; Filgueira, 1996) argue that the deterioration of social and labor conditions have affected the possibilities of the young for initiating stable relationships and have discouraged men from entering long-term, committed unions such as marriage. This position is based on the assumption that for a small part of the new generations (the better educated portion) cohabitation is the expression of a modern behavior, whereas for most, cohabiting unions may be explained by the growth of traditional consensual unions, namely their increase among social groups that do not access marriage for reasons of economic exclusion. It should be noted that in Uruguay, although consensual unions have historically coexisted with marriage, it is not possible to talk about "dual systems", since its portion has always been negligible in relation to marriage when compared to other regions in Latin America (Castro Martín, 2002; Quilodrán, 2001).

On a different line, another group of researchers has emphasized the importance of the spread of new values and attitudes towards family life. The growth in informal

unions and its spread to all social sectors is interpreted as the introduction of a new marital agreement, which increasingly drifts away from the institution of marriage. While recognizing the heterogeneous quality of the significance of cohabiting unions and the diversity of social effects in the various social strata, this position emphasizes the importance of the generational shift in terms of entry into unions (see Peri, 2003; Cabella, 2008; Cabella and Vigorito, 2002). Moreover, this perspective considers that women do not necessarily play a passive role in the choice of union type. This contrasts with the former position that prioritizes the importance of the “uncertainty of the role” among men as a determinant motive to avoid the commitment of marriage.

This work investigates the factors affecting the decision of whether to cohabit or get married among Uruguayan women. Considering the debate described above, this study aims at contributing to a better understanding of the factors underlying the choice of one or the other type of union among women entering into first unions. Fortunately, there are sources available that make it possible to include various dimensions of analysis and to contrast their importance in terms of decisions about first unions. In 2001 and 2007 the survey *Situaciones familiares y desempeños sociales de las mujeres* (Family Situation and Social Performance of Women) was conducted among 1800 and 1300 women respectively, both from Montevideo and the metropolitan area. It should be noted that this geographical region gathers around 60% of the total population of the country. This retrospective survey includes detailed information about the marriage histories of women between 25 and 61 years old, and a set of questions that allow for the characterization of the social and economic position of women and their attitudes and values towards marital life, their ideology concerning gender and their values in general.

This work will analyze the factors associated to the choice of type of first union, considering three possible forms of entry into unions: a) direct marriage, b) pre-marriage cohabitation and c) cohabiting union.

Following Thornton and Philipov (2009), the paper seeks to understand the particular interaction of structural and ideational factors in the context of a strong growth of consensual unions in Uruguay. The factors determining the form of entry into a union have been extensively investigated in other countries and international literature covers a wide array of factors associated to this decision (see, for example, Hoem *et al.*, 2009; Frejka 2008).

The analysis is conducted using proportional risk models. Three groups are preliminarily considered for the study of the determining factors in the decision to opt for any of these alternatives:

- 1) Structural variables (fixed and time-varying covariates): as fixed attributes we have included the educational attainment level of the interviewees and their first partners and as time-varying covariates the entry into the first employment and motherhood.
- 2) Variables linked to the interviewees' background: we chose the religious beliefs of parents in their childhood, whether the parents were together or separated during their childhood and the educational attainment level of both parents.
- 3) Variables linked to values and attitudes: we have included political party affiliation, religion and a set of variables indicating preference for values related to progressive or conservative positions and other variables that allow creating an indicator for gender ideology.

We expect to find differences in the choice of the type of union and, in particular, in the timing of marriage (if at all), according to social strata and values. An aspect that is often highlighted refers to the differences found in the sequence of events and the timing among the different educational level groups. Based on household surveys, it may be observed that among highly educated young people, cohabiting unions decrease more rapidly as age increases. This fall may be interpreted as a higher rate of transition into marriage among young people with higher formal educational levels, but to date no study has shown evidence to support this interpretation. The use of retrospective information will allow us to contribute further evidence in this area.

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