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***CHANGES IN ECONOMIC POLICY REGIMES IN URUGUAY  
FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE (1930- 2000)***

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Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

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## Introduction

This study aims to provide an overview of the impact of economic policy regimes in Uruguay over the last fifty years on women's well-being and gender relations. To undertake this task, two analytical sections were defined. The first one corresponds to the Import Substitution Strategy which goes from 1930 to 1955. It is characterised by the core importance of the domestic market and the thrust of social legislation akin to welfare state practices. The second goes from 1973 to the present and it is featured by the economic openness, the predominance of foreign markets and a reduction in the regulatory role of the State.

This article is divided into five sections. The first contains a description of the categories applied in carrying out the gender analysis under different economic policy regimens. In the second section arguments justifying the definition of periods are put forward, and the hypotheses that guided our research are set out. The third and fourth sections contain details of the macroeconomic and social policies prevailing in each stage, and explore their impact on women's well-being and gender relations. The final section is a synthesis of the main findings.

### I. Relevant conceptual issues

The concept of gender refers to the social, historical and cultural construct of 'the feminine' and 'the masculine' as the attributes of individuals, based on their biological differences according to sex. Gender relations are determined by a set of formal rules (in law and in organisations) and informal ones (derived from repetition and custom) which condition social interaction among men and women and mould what they expect from each other.

All throughout history and across different societies, gender relations have expressed an asymmetry in power relations between men and women, both in domestic as well as in public realms. Such asymmetries are rooted in the sexual division of social work between the productive activities – in the market sphere – and the unpaid reproductive work –related to household maintenance tasks and community work. Women have predominated in social reproduction and this has played as a first form of exclusion from labour opportunities and public affairs. In households, gender inequity in the distribution of resources and decision-making processes has been the rule rather than the exception. Women constitute a group that is subordinated to men in the division of resources (economic, financial, political, educational), in responsibility (hierarchy positions), in power and in privilege (Guzmán 2003).

Conventional economic theory assumes that reproductive economics is not linked to market economics. Therefore, the cost of social reproduction (including the maintenance of the labour force) remains *invisible* and out of the market-based economic system. This invisibility not only leads to considerable inequality, but also reinforces it<sup>1</sup> (Cagatay, Elson and Grown 1993; Elson and Cagatay 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> Mainstream economics assumes that harmony reigns in the household and that there are equitable rules for consumption. The idea is that specialization based on gender in the home is an efficient agreed arrangement and is in line with the theory of comparative advantage.

Most macroeconomic analysis in the mainstream of the discipline assume that economic policies and their objectives are “gender-neutral”. However, gender relations interact with market processes and resource allocation both at the micro level (households) and at macro level, leading to considerable differences between men and women.

The present study emphasizes that economics is not an abstract notion: it is a social institution belonging to culture and reflecting its power relations (Barker and Kuiper 2003). In due course, it will argue that changes in economic policy regimes may affect the system of gender relations in different ways and to different extents<sup>2</sup>.

However, it is necessary to point out two observations. First, the chosen analytical approach does not imply claiming that economic regimes are the only ones explaining advances or losses in gender equity. In fact, we recognize that people’s capabilities to enjoy the freedom to do and to be what they choose (Sen 1995) relies also on other institutional orders (culture, politics, religion).

Secondly, the correlation between the system of gender relations and the economic regimes is far from being mechanical. Relatively similar policies may have different gender impacts when applied in different contexts. Besides, the interaction between the system of gender relations and other institutions is not obvious from the perspective of current economic thought.

Furthermore, when we consider the interaction between the system of gender relations and the economic policy regimes in isolation, there are not only theoretical but also empirical difficulties which stem basically from insufficient information indexed by gender, and a lack of appropriate indicators.

For the purpose of the present analysis, the gender impacts of the economic policy regimes will be assessed through two sets of indicators. One refers to opportunities and access to resources (female share of the labor force and employment, gender gap in unemployment and employment, gender wage gaps). The other relies on measures of basic human abilities as an approximation to capabilities (e.g., education, health measures, fertility, marital status and responsibilities in the reproductive sphere). Both types of indicators are used to assess changes in women’s well-being and consequently on the system of gender relations associated to changes in the economic policy regimes.

Progress detected from the standpoint of the mentioned indicators could favour the situation of women and gender equity if they contributed to giving them higher degrees of personal autonomy and independence, so long as they indicated greater participation in the transformation of basic rules, hierarchies and social practices. We attempted to evaluate these questions in the light of the information available about women’s participation in politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Gender relations taken at the micro level can affect macroeconomic results as well as, at the same time, macroeconomic policies can uphold and pass on a “gender bias”. (Darity 1995, Elson 1995, Cagatay 1998).

Whenever the availability of data made it possible, we analysed the characteristics of the economic policy regimes, their changes and the evolution of the above mentioned indicators trying to point out that policies without specific gender content have gendered effects.

The analysis gives emphasis to labour market indicators by gender. The reasons for this are firstly that there has been a wide theoretical development about the gender impact of economic policies on labour markets, and secondly, that there is a large amount of information available that is disaggregated by gender.

Regarding the socio-demographic information, as there was no Population Census between 1908 and 1963, the available data for the period are limited and fragmentary. However, from 1986 onwards there is available information taken mainly from the Continuous Household's Survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute.

## II. Background

### *The country, the economy, the State*

Uruguay is a small country that lies between Brazil and Argentina in the Southern Cone of Latin America. It is small not only in geographical extent – approximately 176,000 square kilometres, but also demographically – 3 million inhabitants – and in economic terms – the gross national product (GNP) in 1998 was slightly more than 23 billion dollars. Its territory is an undulating plain with vast prairies and abundant water resources, and this has favoured extensive livestock rearing.

The population is mostly urban (90%) with a heavy concentration (43%) in Montevideo, the capital. The people are mostly of European descent (Spanish and Italian), with a small proportion of Afro-Uruguayans. There are no Amerindians. The country's birth rate is the lowest in South America, and life expectancy is high, 72 years for men and 74 for women.

Uruguay has traditionally enjoyed the lowest infant mortality rates in South America and the highest rates of life expectancy at birth. The country began the process of demographic transition early, and it has the highest levels of satisfaction of basic needs and the lowest percentage of people with insufficient income.

Uruguayan society enjoys high social integration and low levels of inequality in the context of Latin-American countries. In a great extent, these characteristics are related to the lasting influence of the “Batllist period” (1900-1930). Its importance on the political and ideological fields (and of course as regards to economic results), and its long-term effect on the subsequent economic policy regimens, justify its brief description.

The two administrations of President José Batlle y Ordóñez (1903-1907 and 1911-1915) produced a ‘Batllism’<sup>3</sup> model that was oriented towards ‘...*overcoming social injustice on the basis of solidarity, worker-management agreements and the development of labour legislation and social security; the improvement in the population's living-conditions, the nationalisation of industrial and commercial activities with the aim of limiting the impact of British capital, and the lowering of the costs and the increase in the coverage of certain services considered to be a priority for the country's progress...*’. [It also sought] ‘...*the transformation of the livestock raising sector so as to increase, improve and diversify production and redistribute wealth... and the industrialization of the country so as to substitute imports, limit economic dependence and create jobs*’ (Jacob 1988:9)<sup>4</sup>.

As of 1903 a vast plan of economic and social reforms was implemented. Its explicit purpose was to modernise, diversify and nationalise the economy while

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<sup>3</sup> ‘...Krausism, solidarity, Georgism, propped up the pretensions and sleepless nights of those who, looking at themselves in a European mirror because territorial smallness would not allow the country to look at itself in a North American one, dreamed between 1903 and 1933 of transforming Uruguay first into a South American France and later into a South American Denmark’. (Jacob, 1988-9)

<sup>4</sup> Free translation into English of the original Spanish quote.

simultaneously expanding social welfare. State intervention in the economic sphere took the form of a strong policy of nationalization. This so-called ‘Batllista Uruguay’ had a major and lasting impact on all aspects of life, and it transformed the country into the first welfare state in the continent (Pendle 1952).<sup>5</sup>

The first thirty years of the 20th century are also of special interest when it comes to women’s well-being and gender relations. The first divorce law was passed in 1907; the 1917 Constitution included a stipulation about the possibility of granting voting rights to women, and in 1932 universal women’s suffrage was passed.<sup>6</sup> Prior to this, women had started receiving formal education on a massive scale in the late 19th century,<sup>7</sup> and, in order to overcome social resistance to further education for women, the so-called Women’s University<sup>8</sup> was set up in 1912 as a female institution for secondary studies.

Social legislation was passed to do away with what ‘Batllistas’ called ‘irritating injustice’ against women. The feminist and socialist Paulina Luisi, writing in 1920, summed up the gains that had been made, “ ... *the penal code does not allow exceptions to punishment or mitigating circumstances for a husband who attacks his adulterous wife; the divorce law; procuring is suppressed as a crime; education must be the same; women are admitted to higher professorial positions; equality in the treatment of civil servants; salary depends on the position and not on the person. Women spend their salaries freely. Women have access to all professions.*” (Rodríguez Villamil and Sapriza 1984:80).

The State played a crucial role in these gains, but they were originally based on growing restlessness among different women’s groups and movements about their living conditions, which started to emerge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***The keys of the analysis***

The present study considers two main periods in Uruguayan history during the 20th century. They are differentiated by the role played by the State, public policies, macroeconomic objectives and instruments and their results.

In the social and economic environment created by ‘Batllism’, the first period under analysis opens with the worldwide crisis of 1929. During this phase (1930-1955), the State intervened in the economic and social fields in a way that was akin to a Welfare State system. It was the time of the industrialization led growth or the Import

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