

Cohabitation and human development in Latin America

This study investigates the macro-level association between socioeconomic development and the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation by social class in Latin America. To this end, recently released harmonized microdata from 15 Latin American countries, spanning from 1980 to 2010 is used. First, we examine the prevalence of cohabitation by social class, using educational attainment as a proxy. Second, we study the correlation between the level of cohabitation and a selection of indicators on human development and social and gender inequalities. We expect and show that the level of cohabitation in each social class does not correlate in the same manner with the macro socioeconomic indicators. Countries with the highest rates of cohabitation among the lowest educated women are characterized by low levels of socioeconomic development and high levels of gender inequality. By contrast, the highest rates of cohabitation among the most educated women are typically found in countries with high levels of socioeconomic development and low levels of gender inequality.

Diffusion of cohabitation in Latin America

Unmarried cohabitation is not a new or isolated phenomenon in the developed West. Until the 1970s cohabitating unions were less common, but an option for separated people who were unable to obtain a divorce due to legal constraints. It was also the preferred arrangement for some intellectuals who saw marriage as a bourgeois institution or protested against the fact that only religious marriages were acceptable (Kiernan, 2001). Since the 1960s, the incidence of cohabitation has been increasing in all parts of the population. In several Western countries, many marriages and remarriages now begin as cohabiting unions (Smock, 2000) and its social acceptance is on the rise everywhere.

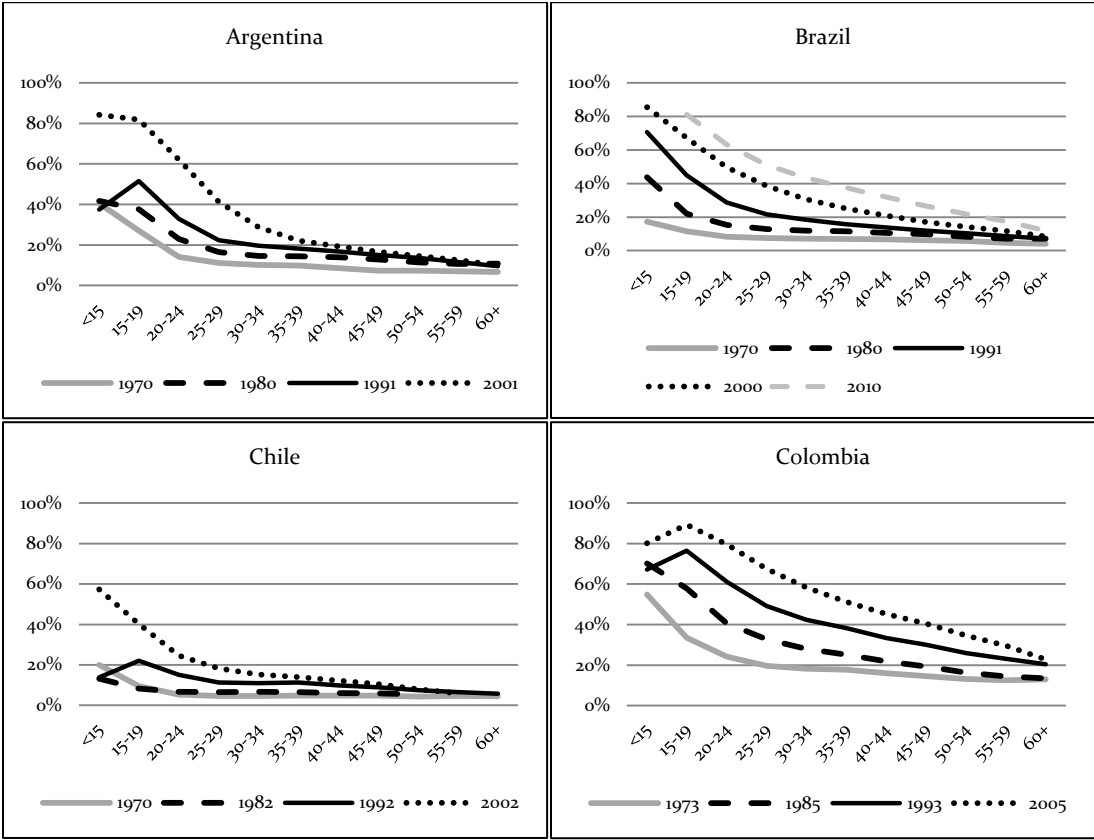
This increasing popularity of cohabitation in the West is assumed to be result of socioeconomic development and changing gender roles through greater gender symmetry. It reflects a social transition, from traditional marriage to modern partnership (Prinz, 1995, p. 101). At the end of this transition, marriage and cohabitation do not differ in form and meaning and are both based on equal rights and obligations between partners. Men and women are free to choose whether to marry or to cohabit (Kiernan, 2001; Prinz, 1995). Northern European countries, especially Sweden, are often used as examples of countries where this transition is complete, and where the social meaning of marriage and cohabitation has become indistinguishable (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Prinz, 1995; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008).

A peculiar attribute of Latin American family formation pattern is the historical incidence and, in some countries, prevalence of out of wedlock cohabitation as a socially accepted form of conjugal union. Nowadays, this historical and traditional form of cohabitation is still common among the lower social classes. It is established as a strategy to overcome poverty and single or teenage motherhood, and they commonly end up either separated or married (Castro-Martin, 2002; Parrado & Tienda, 1997), even when children are grown up (De Vos, 2000).

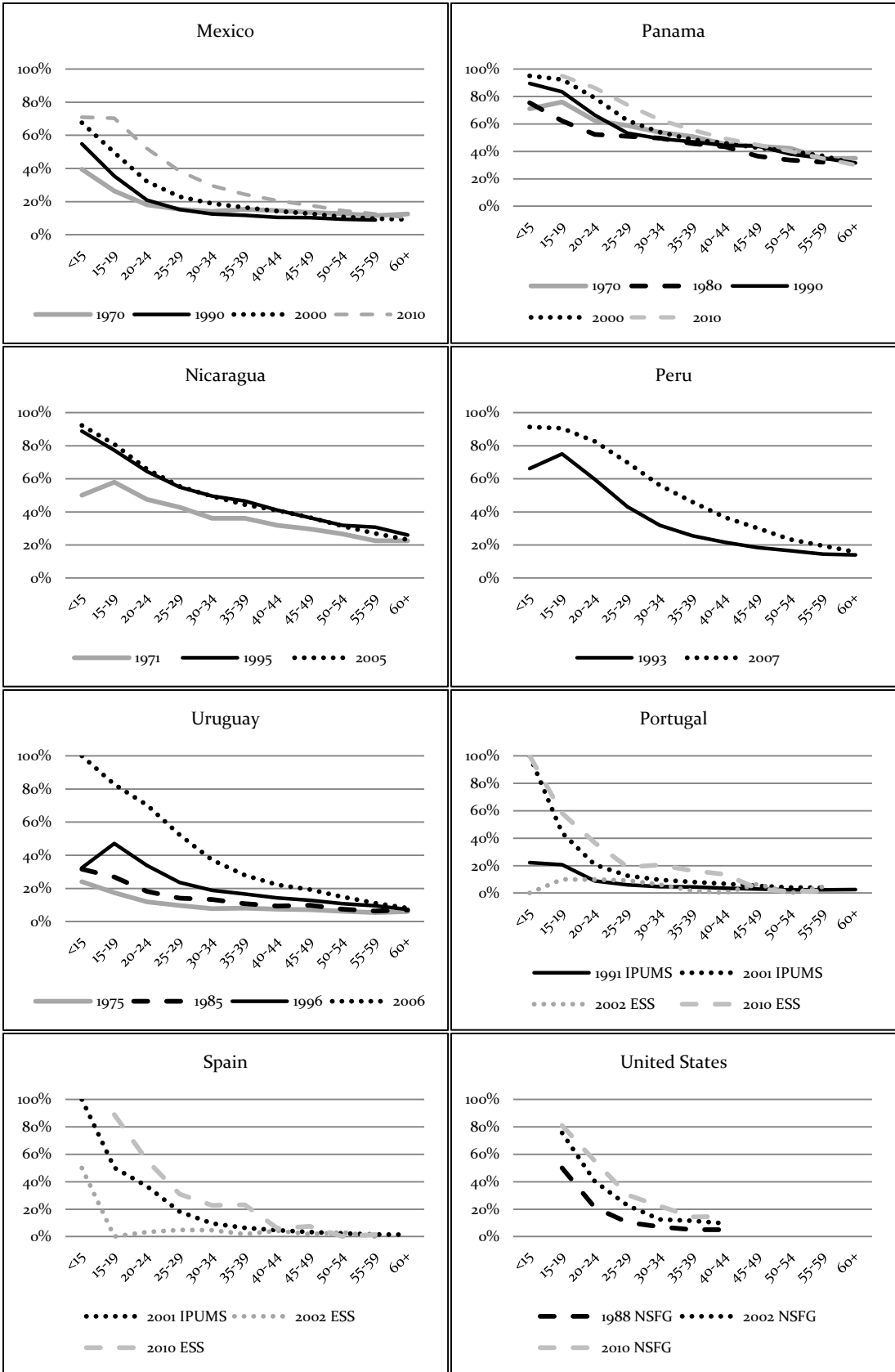
Contemporary evidence has shown that this trend has been modified over the course of preceding decades. Although the consensual union persists as a common form of union among lower social classes, from the second half of the 20th century on, its popularity is increasing among higher educated social groups and in countries where it was never considered as traditional (i.e. Esteve et al., 2012a; Esteve et al., 2012b; Quilodrán-Salgado, 2011; Vignoli-Rodríguez, 2005). Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of cohabitation among partnered women in different age-groups for

some selected Latin American countries. Similar figures for Portugal, Spain and the United States are included for comparison¹.

Figure 1 Share of cohabitation among all unions of women by age-group and time: Latin America and selected developed countries



¹ These countries were chosen due to their cultural influence and historical similarity with the region. Portugal and Spain were the main settlers in Latin America and many cultural features in the region are inherited from them. Meanwhile, the United States shares with Latin America similar history (colonization, slavery, population composed by different ethnicities), but with different socioeconomic outcomes.



Source: Esteve, Lesthaeghe, et al. (2012), Esteve et al., (2013) and own computations based on IPUMS, ESS and NSFG data.

Figure 1 shows an overall increase in the proportion of Latin American women from all age-groups living in cohabitation, rather than married. While in some countries, i.e. Colombia, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru, there was a prominence of already high proportions of cohabitation, in others these proportions rise in different rhythms from the 1970s. Brazil and Uruguay are examples of countries where cohabitation was not visible before the 1980s, but rapidly increased in the following years, for women in all age groups. These countries presented the lower proportions of cohabitation in the 1970s and are in the group of countries with the higher incidence of cohabitation among younger cohorts by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In addition, Argentina, Chile and Mexico presented medium levels of cohabitation by the 1970s with a gradual increase of consensual unions over time, mainly among younger women. One can also see an overall increase for women in almost all age-groups, on the figures for cohabitation for the developed countries included in Figure 1. Portugal, Spain² and the United States present similar trends to some Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Chile and Mexico. Therefore, in these countries the increase in cohabitation is more visible among younger cohorts.

The evidence that the new generations in Latin America and developed countries present higher propensity of living in cohabitating unions is unambiguous. However, it is not clear from Figure 1 whether the increase in cohabitation in Latin American countries is related to an expansion of the so-called traditional type of

² The question about cohabitation is only available for recent census rounds for Portugal and Spain, and it is not available for the United States. As a result the proportions of cohabiting women for developed countries are calculated on the basis of survey's data, i.e. ESS and NSFG, which are known for underestimating results if compared to censuses data. It can clearly be seen by comparing the graphs for Portugal and Spain in Figure 1, in which we include both censuses and ESS information. For Portugal, the information from the ESS of 2002 follows the distribution of the census round of 1991. This limitation must be kept in mind when comparing Latin American countries with developed ones through the text.

cohabitation in the region or the rise of a modern type of consensual union, similar to the cohabitation found in developed countries. The next section focuses on this question.

The rise of modern consensual unions in Latin America?

The literature on family formation and changes in Latin America shows that the correlates of cohabitation differ between countries and social classes. While for the lower social strata cohabitation is traditionally a substitute for marriage and is related to economic constraints, ethnical and gender inequality, for the upper social classes it may be a product of modernization and improved socioeconomic status of women (Binstock & Cabella, 2011; Cabella, Peri, & Street, 2004; Quilodrán-Salgado, 2011; Vignoli-Rodríguez, 2005). Research by Jorge Vignoli-Rodríguez finds that among the lower educated and very young cohorts, cohabitation is related to adolescent motherhood in Chile and Panama, while for all groups of Mexican women and for college educated women in Chile and Panama, cohabitation is even less related to childbearing than formal marriages (Vignoli-Rodríguez, 2005).

Wanda Cabella and colleagues (2004) examined the factors related to family change in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay). They found that changes in family formations happened in all segments of society and are related to the indicators of the Second Demographic Transition (Cabella et al., 2004). Georgina Binstock (2010) estimated trends in cohabitation, marriage and motherhood in urban areas of Argentina and found that for cohorts born in 1960 and before, cohabitation was an exception; for those born between 1960 and 1970 it was an option; and for the younger cohorts cohabitation has become the rule, with children being born and raised in it (Binstock, 2010). The increase of cohabitation among higher educated groups was also observed by Julieta Quilodrán-Salgado (2011). The author analyzed trends in the proportion of cohabitation among partnered women from several countries and census rounds and found that, in Argentina, Chile and

Colombia, the increase in cohabitation occurred sharper and faster among those with higher levels of education, while in Brazil, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Mexico, the increase in cohabitating unions is more visible among the lower educated groups (Quilodrán-Salgado, 2011).

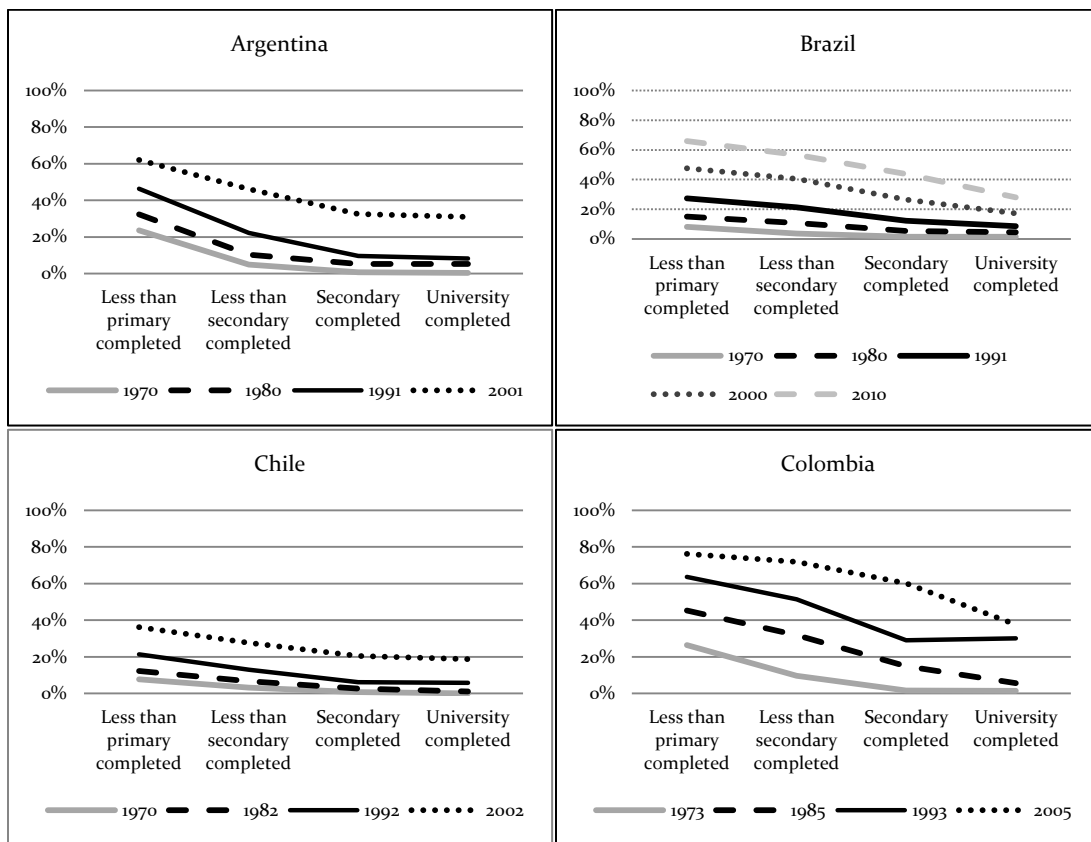
Laplante and Street (2009) analyzed the socioeconomic and demographic correlates of living in cohabitation instead of being married, as well as the chances of cohabitants to get married during the period of 1995-2003. To this end the authors used one of the few sources of longitudinal information about nuptiality in Latin America, which is the Argentinean 'Encuesta Permanente de Hogares (EPH)'. Two conceptual ideal types of cohabitation could be identified: one traditional, among the lower educated groups and with higher fertility; and another modern, among the higher educated ones. The modern type of cohabitation was found to be a trial period before marriage, since young and higher educated cohabiting couples tend to formalize the relationship by getting married with time (Laplante & Street, 2009).

Parrado and Tienda (1997) point to the role played by women's increasing education and labor force participation on the increasing incidence of the modern type of cohabitation in Venezuela. Their results show the coexistence of both, the traditional and the modern type of cohabitation. While traditional cohabitants were common in rural areas, among unskilled or domestic workers and with high fertility, the modern type of cohabitation was similar to those observed in developed countries. These women had higher education attainment, worked in skilled jobs and had fewer or no children at all.

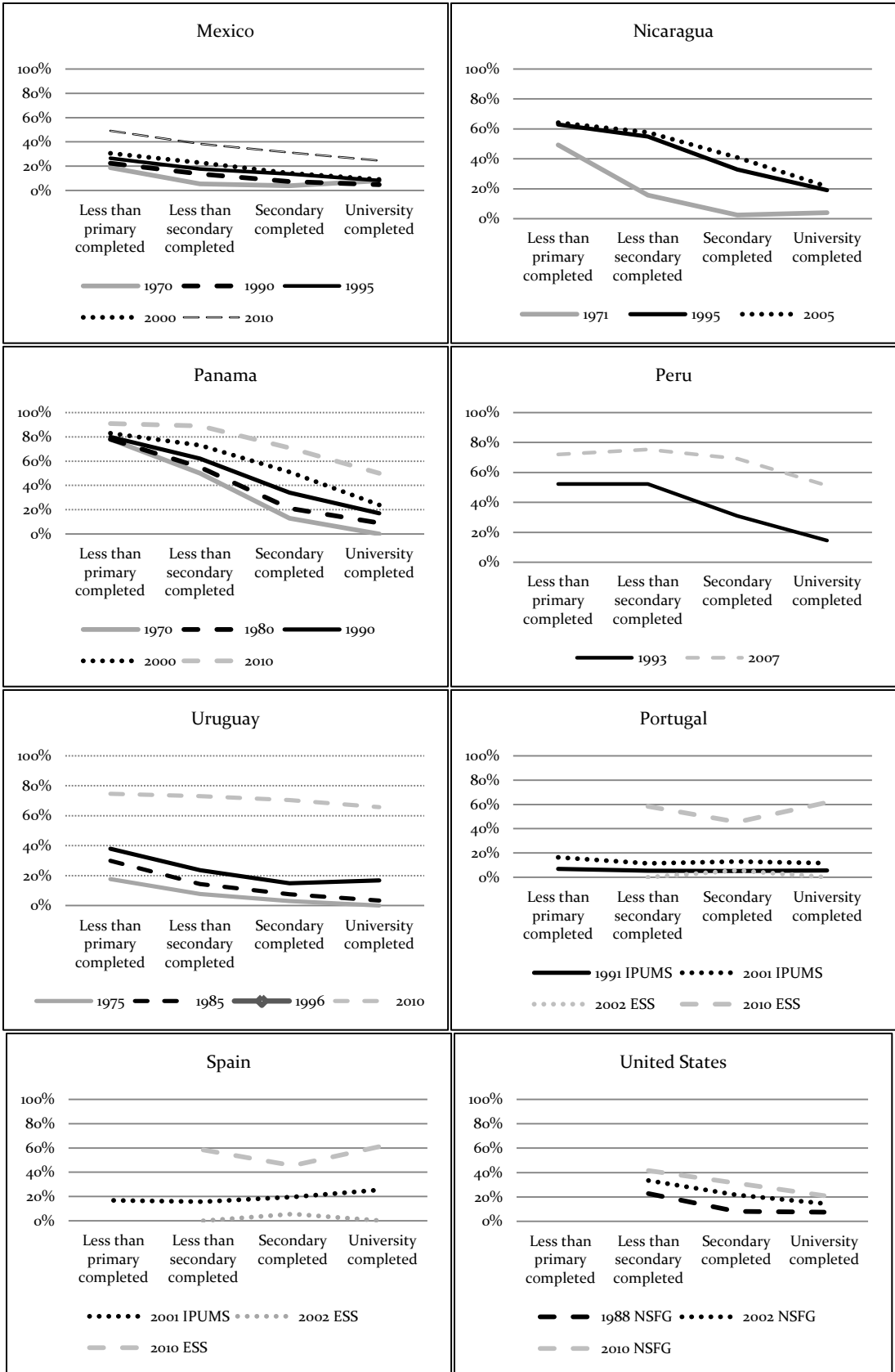
The studies presented above demonstrate that the relationship between social class (often measured by attained education) and different types of cohabitation is straightforward. While the traditional cohabitation is practiced by lower educated Latin Americans, the modern one is common among those who attained higher levels of schooling. Actually, it is possible that this last type of cohabitation is driven by the educational expansion in the region.

Esteve and colleagues (2013) explored this idea by comparing the most recent Latin American census rounds which showed a clear increase in the proportion of higher educated 25-29³ years old partnered women living in cohabitation (Esteve et al., 2013a; Esteve et al., 2012a). Their results are included in Figure 2, which shows the share of cohabitation among all unions of women aged 25-29 by education, country and census round for Latin American countries. For comparison, we included similar information for Portugal, Spain and the United States.

Figure 2 Share of cohabitation among all unions of women 25-29 by education, country and time.



³ The choice of the age group 25-29 is commonly made in demographic studies because in this age group education is completed for most of women, as well as the important choices referent to type of partnership and progression to parenthood are made. When data from different points in time are used, such as here, the selection of a specific age group allows for the verification of changes in demographic behavior of successive incoming cohorts (Esteve et al., 2012a; Rosero-Bixby et al., 2009).



Source: Esteve, Lesthaeghe, et al. (2012), Esteve et. al. (2013) and own computations based on IPUMS, ESS and NSFG data.

Figure 2 clearly shows that the increase in cohabitation by young women is evident in all countries and educational groups, meaning that the traditional consensual unions are increasing along with the modern one. However, as noticed by Esteve and colleagues (2013), there are different types of evolution. In the most recent censuses in most of the countries, i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Nicaragua, the traditional cohabitation started to increase first, then modern cohabitation caught up to the level of traditional. Panama and Peru show opposite trends. In these countries the traditional cohabitation represented more than 50 percent of unions formed by lower educated women already in the 1970s. There is an increase in this type of cohabitation, but the substantial growth is observed among higher educated women. The last form of evolution is presented by Mexico and Uruguay. These countries presented very low incidence of cohabitation in the 1970s, and these proportions are increasing similarly for all educational groups. Uruguay is really an extreme case in this group, showing that “a major jump occurred during the last 10 years and this affected absolutely everybody, to the point that the current education profile is almost flat at an astonishing 70 percent level” (Esteve et al., 2013a).

Trends for Portugal, Spain and the United States are similar to the last group of Latin American countries, with very low levels of cohabitation at the beginning of the observation period followed by an overall increase in cohabitating unions for women from all levels of education. Different from Portugal and Spain, the incidence of cohabitation among lower educated women in the United States is higher than among higher educated ones. This trend has been the case for a long time, as showed by Bumpass and colleagues already in the beginning of the 1990s (Bumpass et al., 1991). Comparing the graphs shown in Figures 1 and 2, the United States trends in cohabitation are closer to those of some Latin American countries (i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico) than to these European ones.

Higher levels of cohabitating unions practiced by different social groups confirm prior evidence that two types of cohabitation coexist in Latin America, depending on the social group under analysis (Castro-Martin, 2002). We can expect that higher socioeconomic development in terms of education, health and income, as well as egalitarian opportunities for most of the population, would favor the partnership transition, from traditional marriage to modern partnership. Nations with positive socioeconomic development are expected to show greater proportions of higher educated couples living in cohabitation instead of in marriage. An opposite social context, marked by lower levels of education, lack of health care and high social inequality would favor the existence of the traditional cohabitation among the lower social strata in Latin America.

Preliminary results derived from macro level associations show that positive socioeconomic contexts, in terms of socioeconomic development and social and gender inequality, all relate to the incidence of cohabitation among higher educated women; and the opposite to the incidence of this type of union among lower educated ones. Added to the modern type of cohabitation, related to modernity and socioeconomic advantage, there is also a type of cohabitation related to poverty.

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