

# *Increasing inequality, rising uncertainty and the polarization of the transition to adulthood in Mexico*

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## *Introduction*

The passage from youth to adulthood in Mexico occurs relatively early in the life course. Judging by the median age at occurrence of the traditional five markers in the transition to adulthood (leaving school, getting a job, leaving the parental home, getting married, and becoming a parent for the first time), young urban women growing up around the beginning of the present millennium were completing the transition to adulthood by age 23. In comparison to recent trends in developed and developing countries, Mexicans are indeed becoming adults at a relatively young age; and at these early ages young individuals are undoubtedly make decisions that shape later life. Unfortunately, the timing and the pathways taken into adulthood often reflect uneven opportunities and inequalities associated with gender bias and socioeconomic status. In general, recent diversification and qualitative stratification of educational tracks in Mexican society, along with economic uncertainty is believed to be polarizing, rather than standardizing, the transition to adulthood.

This paper has two main objectives. First to examine trends in the demographic markers of transition to adulthood across cohorts born during second half of the twentieth century, emphasizing their connection to structural changes in educational and labor market systems, and highlighting gender differences as well. Second, to investigate the extent to which the effects of educational and labor market characteristics on the risk of entering the first cohabitation, marriage and parenthood have remained constant over time. This is particularly important given the fact that successive cohorts of young people in Mexico are supposed to increasingly benefit from the economic and social development achieved over the previous century; paradoxically, however, they seem to be growing up in a scenario of increasing inequality and uncertainty.

## *Context & previous research*

Research on the transition to adulthood in Mexico has highlighted visible disparities in the timing and trajectories chosen by youngsters of different social groups. For instance, young men and women of lower socioeconomic status

(SES) make earlier transitions out of school and into the labor market than their better-off peers (Conapo 2000, Echarri & Perez Amador 2000, 2007; Oliveira & Mora 2008). They are also more likely to combine school and work (Giorguli, 2011); that is to say, they start their labor market careers before completing high school or college, which has been related to higher probabilities of dropping out from school (Hobart 2004). Similarly, family transitions occur earlier among youngster of lower SES; they are also more likely to choose cohabitation over marriage when making the transition into first union (Solis 2004, Perez Amador 2008, 2013). Those findings are consistent across different measures of socioeconomic status, which suggest the existence of divergent pathways in the transition to adulthood among Mexican youth.

Socioeconomic differences are also evident regarding the sequencing of the transitions, i.e., the path or trajectory towards adulthood. For instance, while the first event experienced by the majority of men and women is the first job (Echarri & Perez Amador 2000, 2007), young women in the lowest SES group experience first the transition out of school (Oliveira & Mora 2008). In fact, they have lower rates of having the first job, which translates into a lower probability of ever entering the job market. The authors therefore suggest that the double inequality of gender and SES manifests itself by giving these women the least opportunity for social mobility. An earlier study by CONAPO (2000) also highlighted that gender differences in the transition to adulthood are sharper among low-SES groups, not only regarding the transitions out of school or into the labor market, but also those in the family sphere.

The simultaneity and distance between events in the transition to adulthood is another aspect that highlights gender and SES differences. For instance, the transition out of school and the first job coincide the most among low-SES men; men more than women are more likely to leave the parental home at the time of union; while entering the first union occurs simultaneously with entering to motherhood among low-SES women. Finally, although not necessarily conceptualized as a transition to adulthood, the transition out of the labor market coincides with the transition into union mostly among women with lower education, occupation or position in the labor market (Ariza & Oliveira, 2005).

In summary, the transition to adulthood in Mexico is diverse among young people of different socioeconomic groups and between men and women. In fact, some scholars argue that the standardization of the life course of young Mexicans has never been achieved. Instead, the variability and even the

divergence in the timing and paths to adulthood reflects the increasing inequality, which paradoxically occurs in times of educational expansion.

### *Data & Methods*

We use of data from the Mexican Retrospective Demographic Survey (hereafter referred to by its Spanish acronym EDER). The EDER is a nationally representative survey of urban population containing retrospective marital, fertility, migration, education, and job histories for cohorts of adults born in 1951-1953, 1966-1968 and 1978-1980. The survey was conducted in 2011 by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) as a sub-sample of the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE). The EDER contains full interviews of 1,387 men and 1,453 women for a total sample size of 2,840. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face using an Event History Calendar methodology, which gathered retrospective information for every year in the respondent's life. This retrospective information is ideal for studying the timing of life course transitions, making it possible to estimate hazard models for markers in the transition to adulthood.

In order to assess the effects of education and labor force participation on the timing of family transitions during early adulthood, we estimate a set of nested discrete-time hazard models (Allison, 1982) to evaluate the effects of educational attainment and labor force participation on the risk of occurrence of cohabitation, marriage and parenthood. The data contain a record for each age of the respondent, but we retained only the person-years at which the respondent is exposed to the risk of union formation or parenthood. We assumed the beginning of exposure to be at age 12 (the earliest reported age at the events in the sample), and censored individuals not experiencing the transitions at age 29. We estimate separate models for men and women.

We estimate three models for union formation that differ in their conceptualization of cohabiting unions. In the first, we consider cohabitation and marriage indistinguishable forms of union formation. In the second, we consider the two as competing risks assuming they are different forms of entering marital life. In the last one, we consider cohabitation indistinguishable from singlehood, thus treating marriage as sole alternative for family formation. With these conceptualizations we aim to explore the extent to which the recent increase of cohabitation responds to rising inequality and uncertainty in the transition to adulthood. Finally, we estimate a model for the transition to parenthood. The dependent variable in each model is a dummy indicator of

whether the event occurred within a specific time-interval; that is to say, each model estimates the log-odds of the event occurring in a given time-interval conditional on surviving the event in the previous interval. In order to control for the duration dependency, we specified the duration of exposure as a quadratic function, which proved to be a parsimonious specification.

### ***Preliminary results***

Our preliminary results suggest that college educated youngsters are less likely to cohabit and more likely to delay parenthood than their less educated peers. Although we observe similar differences when comparing high-school with lower-secondary educated, the differences are weaker suggesting that the few who have the opportunity to attend college and access to better jobs have a very different path and timing in transition to adulthood. We find continuity in the effects of labor market status on the timing of family transitions, namely gender disparities, suggesting the enduring familistic orientation of Mexican society.

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