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Labour, employment and social policy: the case of
Argentina

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The assistance policies of conditional cash transfers represent the latest wave in public interventions addressed to the population with insufficient income in Latin America. In the case of Argentina, the maximum expression of this new wave was reached with the implementation of the Unemployed Family Heads Plan (Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados, PJJHD), in mid 2002.

This type of programs, within the 'workfare' paradigm, is characterized by requiring some type of labour activity in exchange for the benefit received. In the case of the PJJHD, it is either a work activity or a job-related training activity.

One of the issues being discussed about these programs is: to what extent does this type of assistance provide their beneficiaries with an actual improvement in the access conditions to the labour market? Or to what extent does transit through this type of programs modify the job careers of this population group?

The objective of this work is to provide elements to discern this issue, from the empirical evidence of the PJJHD case. This article aims to demonstrate that: i) the transit through this program modifies people's job opportunities and careers weakly; ii) this transit is different for men and women; iii) the type of abilities re-created by the labour activity required in exchange, strengthen the gender segregation already available in the labour market; iv) the PJJHD does not operate on the main gender restrictions available in the labour market.

The present work is organized in four sections. The first section presents the implementation context for the assistance program under study, particularly, the current conditions in the labour market. The second section briefly describes the core characteristics of the PJJHD, its coverage and evolution. The third section provides empirical evidence (quantitative and qualitative) allowing the evaluation of the PJJHD according to the proposed hypothesis. The fourth and last section will highlight the principal findings.

1. The context: the Argentine labour market at the end of convertibility

The characteristics that the capital accumulation model adopted during the 90s in Argentina, was determinant in the evolution of the labour market. In 1991 and after the hyperinflationary events of the previous years, the law of strict convertibility between local currency and United States dollar was enacted. The stabilizing effects of this mechanism of exchange rate fixation, in addition to a favorable international financial context and the support of multilateral credit institutions, facilitated a series of economic structural reforms¹.

After the stabilizing initial take-off generated by this program, it became evident that in order to sustain the competitiveness of an economy with a fixed exchange rate (with an overvalued local currency) and extreme market opening, a significant reduction of labour costs and a strong indebtedness increase were necessary. Even when production of tradable goods was increased, mainly by organizational technologies and by the possibility of incorporating imported capital goods at low prices, this increase was not enough to excel foreign competitors. All this pressed even more to adjust production costs, not only those of the hard core of tradable goods but also those of the economy as a whole. It was no longer an issue of expelling pockets of inefficient manpower towards the technological unemployment zone, but it was also needed to adjust the cost of those who remained “inside” the system.

The expansive cycle of the Convertibility Plan lost intensity progressively until the 1995 crisis of the international financial markets, initiated in Mexico, changed the existing scenario by one of recession. Subsequently, growth was recovered but at rates lower than those observed at the beginning of the decade. This expansive wave was shorter and the economy slowed down again by mid 1998, to enter into a terminal crisis of the convertibility model by the end of 2001.

With the ups and downs of the macroeconomic evolution typical of that period, the labour market behaved with oscillations, but with a general and strong trend towards the worsening of its conditions². One of the principal characteristics of the economy of those years was its reduced capacity of employment generation, even with product and investment growth.

In fact, the evolution of the main labour market indicators during that period (see table 1), present the following aspects:

- i) Growth of activity rate, mainly driven by the increasing participation of women in the labour market.
- ii) Relative stagnation of employment rate, with a slight increase in the case of women and a strong decrease in the case of men.
- iii) Accelerated and very important increase in open unemployment. During the 90s, this indicator grew by more than 100% in the economically active population as a whole. Even when male unemployment rate grew more acceleratedly, female unemployment rate was higher than that of men along the whole period³.

¹ For a critical Macroeconomics study of this period, see Lo Vuolo (2001).

² Beccaria (2005) identifies five phases during this period: i) expansion phase (1991-1994); ii) recessive phase (1994-1995); iii) recovery (1996-1998); iv) new recessive phase (1998-2001); v) crisis by late 2001.

³ The year 2002 shows male unemployment rate over female rate for the first time during the period. But the evidence of subsequent years shows that it was only a circumstantial variation.

- iv) Time-related underemployment also increased significantly in the economically active population as a whole, and female underemployment rate almost doubled that of men.

Table 1
Labour Market Indicators
Rates – Average by period - In %

	1991-1993	1994-1995	1996-1998	1999-2001	2002
Activity rate	40.3	41.9	41.7	42.7	41.8
Women	28.9	31.1	31.3	33.0	32.4
Men	52.9	53.6	52.9	52.9	51.9
Employment rate	37.1	35.8	35.3	36.1	32.8
Women	26.3	25.8	25.8	27.7	25.9
Men	49.1	46.7	45.2	45.1	40.4
Unemployment rate	7.9	14.6	15.5	15.4	21.5
Women	9.1	17.2	17.6	16.2	20.2
Men	7.2	12.9	14.1	14.8	22.3
Underemployment rate	8.7	10.8	13.0	14.4	18.6
Women	13.5	15.9	18.8	19.7	24.3
Men	5.6	7.3	9.4	10.7	14.6

Source: Author's calculation based on Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MTESS) data, on the basis of Permanent Household Survey (EPH) data.

There is no doubt that the most evident aspect of this phase is the increase in workforce underutilization. Unemployment became the most relevant and concerning aspect in the population's economic situation during this phase. Being as it was so extended a phenomenon, unemployment affected all population groups, but resulted more critical among young people, lower-qualified workers, and family heads⁴.

Another core characteristic during that period was the progressive stagnation in the relative participation of the informal sector, and at the same time, an increase in the informalization of the formal sector. This refers to the spread of labour precariousness within formal sector companies, including a variety of new contract forms and labour conditions that appeared after the changes to the labour regulation.

Finally, the Argentine labour market dynamics was intensified during the 90s, causing the widening of the employment gap, defined by Monza (2002) as the degree of workforce aggregate underutilization, that is, the several forms of occupational distortion. According to Monza's evaluation, while in 1991 almost 40% of the EAP suffered some sort of underutilization, ten years later and in contrast with Argentina's economic regime during that period, underutilization increased by 14 percentage points, reaching 54.1% of the EAP in October 2001, which corresponds to an annual average increase of 5.3% for the total urban country. In addition to this quantitative change in the employment gap, a change in its composition is also verified: unemployment absorbed 35% of the gap in October 1991 and reached 55% in October 2001.

Regarding the particular experience of women in the Argentine labour market during this period, the most outstanding feature is the increase in the activity rate. The

⁴ Cortés (2003) analyzes the sociodemographic and occupational features of the employed and unemployed during this period. Monza (2002) also further elaborates on the occupational and sociodemographic features of the unemployed and their households.

majority of the studies agree to indicate that this evolution is a fundamental consequence of three facts: the search for additional incomes by the households who suffered a significant decrease in their real income, the increase in the incidence of male family heads unemployment (men are the main income recipients in many families), and a general deterioration of the employment conditions of the employed household members.

It is no coincidence that women have increased their participation in the labour market only when the labour market's conditions have deteriorated. That is the reason why the higher level of female activity does not achieve to reverse the principal gender inequity features that have been verified in the labour market through history, which adopts distinctive features during this period. Synthetically, the following is verified: i) higher underutilization of female workforce than that of male; ii) persistence of horizontal and vertical gender segregation; iii) higher labour vulnerability for women than for men; iv) persistence of the income gap.

Although this pattern of female participation seems quite homogeneous in the central ages, the evidence also shows significant differences according to the presence and number of dependent children. To sum up, the persistence of traditional gender patterns in the division of domestic responsibilities, and the little availability of child care services for the majority of the population, seem to have been fundamental determiners for the female experience in the labour market in the 90s.

The year 2003 marks the beginning of a sustained process of economic activity recovery, with growth in product, investment, consumption and employment as well. This macroeconomic context sets up a new scenario for the improvement of labour market conditions.

Product accumulated a growth of 27%, and employment one of 10% between 2003 and 2005. Together with this, open unemployment is getting systematically reduced, changing from 16.3% in the third quarter 2003 to 10.2% in the third quarter 2006. In 2005, the estimates indicate 15% more jobs for the urban employed as a whole and product higher than in 1998 by 5%. This means that the pre-devaluation period and the highest levels reached during the 90s have been overcome.

During the first moments in economic recovery, employment grew at rates that averaged 7% inter-annual (Giosa Zuazúa, 2006); this expansion was sustained mainly due to the growth of precarious salaried employment. During 2005, the employment generation rate decreased to 3% yearly average, and the proportion of precarious employment within the salaried employees decreased, though still at high levels. An annual economic growth rhythm of 9% during three consecutive years produced an unregistered employment rate from 49% to 47%.

In this context, and particularly in the culminating moment of the crisis following the end of convertibility, the government implemented an assistance plan addressed to the unemployed population: the PJJHD.

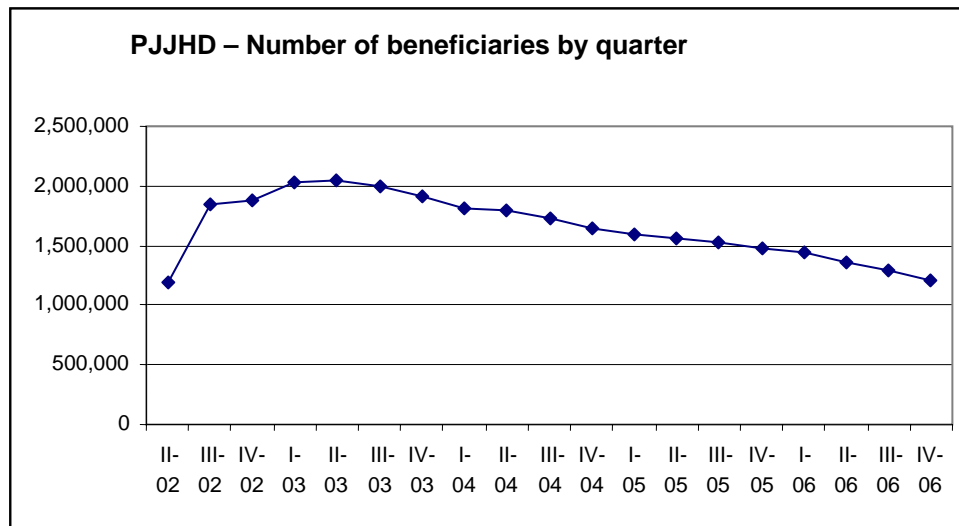
2. The unemployed family heads plan: a welfare response to unemployment issues.

The Unemployed Family Heads Plan (PJJHD) was established at the beginning of 2002 under the name of “Family Right to Social Inclusion”⁵. The principal features of the program, as regards the benefits it grants and the conditions for entering into it are the following:

- **It is a cash remittance for unemployed people** [\$150 (Argentine pesos) monthly].
- **Access is conditional:** in order to be granted the benefit, the applicant must demonstrate: a) the condition of unemployed family head; b) the presence of dependent minor children; c) regular school attendance of children younger than 18 years; d) compliance with vaccination plans for the younger children, when applicable. Access is not granted to unemployed family heads who are participating in any other employment program at the same time, or who receive social security benefits or non-contributing pensions⁶.
- **It requires a compensation activity in exchange:** beneficiaries must commit to participate in training or work activities in community sites, with a daily full dedication of four to six hours. Performance of the required compensation activity is mandatory in order to receive the benefit.
- **Specified applicability period:** its application was planned originally to end on 31st December 2002, nationwide and in the context of the declaration of a food, labour and health emergency. Subsequently, this deadline was extended on a yearly basis, along with the emergency regulations that sustain this declaration.

Ever since its launch, the PJJHD had a significant extent, which exceeded the expectations of their designers. In fact, the program’s scope exceeds one million beneficiaries, reaching its highest point in the second quarter 2003.

Chart 1



Source: Author’s calculation based on MTESS data.

⁵ The PJJHD was created through decree No. 565/02 and regulated by resolution No. 312/02 of the Ministry of Labour.

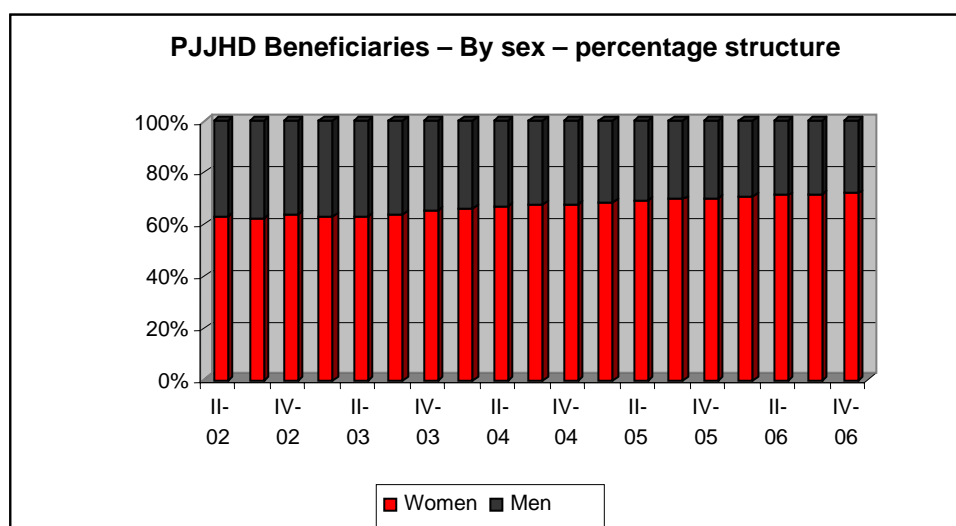
⁶ A condition not established by the decree but which operated in fact was that of having applied for the program before 17th May 2002.

Since then, the number of beneficiaries has been decreasing each quarter, reaching by the end of 2006, values similar to those at the beginning of the program⁷. The reasons for the dropout in the number of beneficiaries include: i) census depuration and elimination of irregular cases, due to non-compliance with the program requirements; ii) dependent children reaching 18 years of age; iii) voluntary withdrawal from the program; iv) access to a registered employment.

Even when in the context of its design, it was believed that the benefit would be claimed mainly by unemployed male family heads, facts show that the requirements caused a large number of inactive female spouses to apply for the program⁸.

This process of female activation caused by the PJJHD explains why many of the beneficiaries are women, see chart 2. Not only were women a majority from the very beginning, but also their relative participation in the program grew progressively. In fact, while during the second quarter 2002, 63% of the beneficiaries were women; this participation grew to 72% during the fourth quarter 2006. As we will see later on, this growing feminization of the program is also explained by the reasons that motivated the withdrawal of beneficiaries from the program.

Chart 2



Source: Author's calculation based on MTESS data.

The MTESS (2005) presents additional information on the characteristics of the PJJHD beneficiaries, collected in a survey performed among the beneficiaries⁹:

- The beneficiaries present low education levels: 20% have completed primary school and 37% have not even completed that level.

⁷ The budget goal for 2007 estimates that the total beneficiaries to be assisted equals 950 thousands.

⁸ This has also been early indicated by Monza and Giacometti (2003).

⁹ The survey was performed in June 2004 on a probabilistic sample of more than 3,500 cases, representing one million beneficiaries in Great Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Formosa, Tucumán, Santa Fe, and the province of Buenos Aires.

- The number of dependent members in these families is significant: 60% have one or two young children and 16% have three; about 20% of the beneficiaries have large families.
- The majority of the beneficiaries have previous work experience, 98% of men and 83% of women. However, qualification associated to that work experience is generally low: 49.5% of men and 75.5% of women did not have any type of qualification; 44% of men and 20% of women had operative qualification and only 6.4% of men and 4.5% of women had technical qualification¹⁰.
- The employment profile of men was mainly related to the construction industry and with industrial production employments. In the case of women, by contrast, it was related to domestic service, industrial production and administrative tasks.
- The beneficiaries' households are characterized by low income. At the moment the survey was performed, 90% of the beneficiaries were in a situation of poverty with the amount of \$150 (Argentine pesos) granted by the Program. At the same time, more than half of the households were in a situation of extreme poverty, because they could not access the basic food basket with the income received.

Compliance with the compensation activity was high during the first years of the program. According to the General Direction for Labour Studies and Statistics (DGEyEL), more than 80% of the beneficiaries were actually complying with the compensation activity in early 2003. This percentage was reduced to 62% during the first quarter of 2006.

Roca et al. (2005b) summarize the information regarding the features of the compensation activity performed, available from the survey to beneficiaries. The following is indicated:

- Due to the particular characteristics of the program, the majority of the beneficiaries perform the compensation activity in the context of community projects and in state bodies (administration work in town council or province bodies). The activities chosen by men within these projects are: cleaning and maintenance in public buildings (37%), social and community activities (32%), construction industry, home repair and social infrastructure (14%), and work in public or school dining halls (10%). In the case of women, the principal activities are: social and community activities (53%), work in public or school dining halls (16%), cleaning and maintenance in public facilities (13%), education activities (6%), construction industry, home repair and social infrastructure (3%), health activities (3%) and child care (2%).
- As regards those who choose to comply with the compensation by performing some training activity, the specialties of the courses chosen vary widely according to sex. Men focus on: carpentry (46%), electricity (27%) and car electricity (26%). Women have a wider range of activities, those most important are: administrative auxiliary (20%), ill and elderly caregiving (14%), sewing (13%), computer (12%), cloth

¹⁰ Technical qualification tasks require theoretical and practical knowledge obtained through formal education (for instance, electricity technician, manufacturing plant quality supervisor, foreman, engineer, etc.). Operative qualification tasks require previous knowledge acquired through experience and/or formal or non formal education; non qualification tasks do not require any type of specific training (for instance, cleaning in domestic and non-domestic service, bricklayer assistant, collection of cardboard and packages, etc.).

painting (9%), desserts and pastries (7%), teaching (6%), hairdressing (6%), knitting (4%), dressmaking (3.5%), domestic violence (3.4%).

Despite this high compliance with the compensation activity and probably as a consequence of the low level of monetary benefit and the need to complement it with additional incomes, 70% of the beneficiaries is active, beyond the compensation activity (89.5% of men and 62.4% of women).

As indicated by the MTESS (2005), a part of these active recipients are employed. That is, 63% of recipient men and 36% of recipient women have an occupation, beyond the compensation activity imposed by the program. Naturally, these are unregistered occupations, because the program regulation itself establishes that the right to the benefit is lost if a paid job is obtained¹¹.

Those beneficiaries not having another occupation nor looking for it (10.5% of men and 37.6% of women) indicate varied reasons justifying this situation. “Women alleged mainly lack of time because of being in charge of their dependent children or ill family members. A group of inactive women who did not search a job because of being pregnant was also identified. Men alleged particularly health problems (including beneficiaries physically disabled to work) and age (beneficiaries older than 50 years).” (MTESS, 2005: 57)

In addition, almost 70% of the beneficiaries state that they wished they could continue with their formal education and almost 80% would accept to receive a training course for work. The majority does not do it because they need to work in a paid activity, while they express their need for a grant and day-care centers where to leave the children while they get trained.

2.1. Leaving the PJJHD due to entry into a registered employment

The wish to be admitted in an employment is a relevant concern or desire among the PJJHD beneficiary population. So is indicated by the DGEyEL, from information retrieved by the beneficiaries survey carried out in 2004. At that moment, 51% of the PJJHD beneficiaries were actively searching for a job. Of these, 56% preferred to be hired in a job, appreciating its stability, social benefits and fixed wage. By contrast, 25% preferred to be self-employed and 14% preferred to have a production microenterprise.

Entry to a registered job is, in fact, one of the main causes of withdrawal from the program. According to the information provided by the Employment Secretary of the MTESS, between the second quarter 2003 –moment of highest coverage by the PJJHD- and the fourth quarter 2006, 839 thousand beneficiaries were dropped from the program. The main reasons for these dropouts were: 38.6%, entry to a registered job; 34.7%, no longer complying with inclusion requirements; 10.9%, change to other programs; 8.9%, not claiming the benefit during three consecutive months; and 6.9%, other reasons.

The DGEyEL analyzed particularly the population emigrating from the PJJHD into registered jobs. One of the striking facts is the short period spent at the new employment after withdrawing the plan, as well as the significant rotation experienced in different occupations, and across different situations of employment, unemployment

¹¹ Beneficiaries devote 18 hours on average to the “extra-PJJHD” occupation.

and inactivity. According to the information available, 50% of the beneficiaries that entered a new registered job, remain in it for less than 4 months.

In addition, the information reveals that workers enter into very low-paid jobs. 67.2% were in wage levels lower than \$350 (Argentine pesos) monthly¹². As regards the activity areas of registered jobs where beneficiaries enter after withdrawing the program, almost one quarter belong to the construction industry, 17% to state agency and enterprise services, 13.7% to commerce, hotels and restaurants, 12.6% to manufacturing industry, 8.3% to agriculture and livestock, 6.5% to public administration and 17% to other sectors.

Age and sex appear clearly as important determinant factors when passing from an employment program to a registered employment. This is shown on table 2.

Table 2

PJJH beneficiaries who entered into a registered employment
July 2003 - November 2006
Percentage composition

Age	Women	Men	Total
Up to 25 years	4.1	4.7	8.8
Between 26 and 35	16.5	24.8	41.3
Between 36 and 45	11.3	17.8	29.1
Between 46 and 55	5.5	10.1	15.6
Older than 55	1.6	3.6	5.2
Total	39.0	61.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculation based on MTESS data.

As we can see, although more than 70% of the PJJHD beneficiaries are women, these represent less than 40% of the people entering into a job. As regards age, half of the people who entered into a registered employment were 35 years old. It is clear that the chances of entering into a formal employment are higher for men than for women, and for younger people than for older people. Having a previous work experience is also a valued advantage. To sum up, the group presenting higher employment access rates among the beneficiaries was that of men with formal work experience, women up to 30 years with formal work experience, and men up to 30 years, with or without formal work experience.

Or as has been well summarized by the DGEyEL according to the variables retrieved, those variables explaining a higher probability of entering into a registered employment are, in order of importance: i) sex and age; ii) work experience in registered employments; iii) education level and active job search. However, the beneficiaries' positions at household and activity conditions seem not to add any relative contribution.

¹² U\$S 100, that is, 2.3 times the level of PJJHD benefit.

The weak mediation of the PJJHD in people's access to employment, particularly for women, is evidenced when observing the job careers during the economic recovery period subsequent to the post-convertibility crisis.

3. Occupational trajectories and employment assistance programs

Records on occupational trajectory investigations in Argentina -mainly focused on what occurred during the 90s- account for a process of increasing instability, both across activity conditions and across occupational categories. This instability became more profound during the recession stages of the economic cycle, affecting relatively and to a larger extent certain population groups: young people, women, low-income workers, poorly-qualified and low educational level workers, even in the context of an important heterogeneity of situations¹³.

It may be asked: why does this situation change since the sustained economic recovery from 2003? And particularly: what is the direction and intensity of the transit across different activity conditions during this period? Are differences in male and female trajectories smoothed? Have the employment assistance programs any facilitating impact in the transit to employment?

In order to answer these questions, a longitudinal study was performed based on data provided by the Continued Permanent Household Survey (EPHC), which offers information since the second quarter 2003. The objective was to follow up on the occupational trajectory of people as longer as possible during the economic recovery period subsequent to the end of the convertibility regime. And also to observe the transit across the three categories of activity conditions: employment, unemployment, and inactivity. In order to observe the impact of employment assistance programs particularly, occupations belonging to the program were separated from the rest of the occupations. The period under analysis covers the first half 2006, and an aggregate sample (pooling) of 25 thousand people was used.

In order to summarize the events, transition matrices were constructed for original and end situations, see table 3. As the issue being evaluated here is whether there are differences between these trajectories for men and women, the information is presented for the total and discriminated by sex.

As shown on the table, 43% of the unemployed people at the beginning of the period changed to an employment position by the end of the period, while 27% remained in unemployment and the other 27% changed to inactivity. A much lower percentage (2.4%) changed to an occupation within an employment plan.

Longer is the time remained in employment plans, and lower the transit to employment. In fact, 55.8% of those who were in activity within an employment assistance program, remained in that situation for a year and a half later. 19.1% had obtained a job outside the plan, while 19.8% had changed to inactivity and 5.3% to unemployment. This last case may belong to people who had been withdrawn from the program for some reason, or even to people who had dropped out from the program due to entry into an employment that they could no longer maintain, situation that prevented them from re-entering the program.

¹³ This evidence can be verified in Cortés et al. (2004), Groisman (2006), Gutierrez (2004), Cortés and Hoszowski (2005), Cerrutti (2000), Cortés (2006), Beccaria y Maurizio (2003), Paz (2003), Castillo et al. (2005).

It is clear that both people employed in jobs outside employment plans, and inactive people remained in the same situation for the majority of the cases. Among the employed, 4.6% became unemployed and 8.8% changed to inactivity. On the other hand, 10.3% of the people who were inactive at the beginning changed to an employment outside the assistance programs a year and a half later, while 4% entered into unemployment.

Table 3

Transition Matrices I-2004 through I-2006 By sex (%)						
Men						
		End situation				
		Working within Employment Plan	Working not within Employment Plan	Unemployed	Inactive	Total
Original Situation	Working within Employment Plan	53.9	38.4	3.2	4.5	100.0
	Working not within Employment Plan	0.7	88.9	4.9	5.6	100.0
	Unemployed	1.0	53.8	27.8	17.3	100.0
	Inactive	0.0	11.6	4.3	84.1	100.0
	Total	1.4	57.9	6.5	34.2	100.0
Women						
		End situation				
		Working within Employment Plan	Working not within Employment Plan	Unemployed	Inactive	Total
Original Situation	Working within Employment Plan	56.4	12.4	6.1	25.1	100.0
	Working not within Employment Plan	0.6	81.6	4.3	13.4	100.0
	Unemployed	2.3	33.6	26.3	37.8	100.0
	Inactive	0.7	9.5	3.8	86.0	100.0
	Total	3.2	35.2	5.6	55.9	100.0
Total						
		End situation				
		Working within Employment Plan	Working not within Employment Plan	Unemployed	Inactive	Total
Original Situation	Working within Employment Plan	55.8	19.1	5.3	19.8	100.0
	Working not within	0.7	85.9	4.6	8.8	100.0

	Employment Plan					
	Unemployed	1.7	43.9	27.1	27.3	100.0
	Inactive	0.5	10.3	4.0	85.3	100.0
	Total	2.4	45.8	6.1	45.8	100.0

Note: Aggregate sample (pooling) was used in all cases. Estimation for the 10 years population and more.

Source: Author's calculation based on EPH data.

It is interesting to see how all these people's trajectory presents differences when evaluated for men and women separately. In fact, women remain relatively longer in employment plans and inactive, than men do. And less time employed in jobs not belonging to employment plans.

Transit from unemployment situations, and from occupation in employment plans towards other status, shows also a significant difference by sex. As observed, while 38.4% of men leaving an employment plan do so in order to enter a job outside the plan, this percentage is reduced to 12.4% in the case of women. By contrast, while only 4.5% of men change from an employment plan towards inactivity, this occurs in a quarter of the women who leave a job in an employment plan.

Another data to be highlighted in the same sense is that while only 5.6% of the men employed outside employment plans change to inactivity, this percentage are doubled in the case of women, because 13.4% of the women employed outside employment plans at the beginning of the period, became inactive by the end of it.

In other words, the information presented here results in evidence aligned with the hypothesis under analysis: i) people remain significantly both in employment as in inactivity; ii) permanence in employment plans occupations still exceed 50% of the people in that situation; iii) in the case of men, leaving unemployment is more markedly towards employment, while transit to inactivity prevails in the case of women; iv) exit from an employment plan occupation operates in the same sense, and even more intensified in relative terms: men get employed outside the plan while women become inactive.

This longitudinal exercise was complemented with the construction of transition matrices, considering three sociodemographic variables: i) age, ii) educational level, and iii) presence of dependent family members (using the indicator for presence of children younger than 10 years old in the household)¹⁴.

From this information it is concluded that: i) younger people (both men and women) and women in central ages present the greatest difficulties to move into occupation, or to remain in it. Women's higher relative transit towards inactivity, compared with that of men, or women's permanence in that status, is important both among younger women and women in central ages; ii) different educational levels do not seem to be relevant when analyzing the transit across different status during the period under study. In the context of a certain homogeneity, people with lower educational level, and particularly women, outstand with a higher transit to inactivity; iii) the higher relative transit from occupation to inactivity of people with more than two children younger

¹⁴ Due to the statistical difficulties caused by disaggregation for this analysis by particular characteristics, the category "working" was added, involving both an occupation within an employment plan and an occupation outside employment plans.

than 10 years old in the household, as compared with those who live with two children of that age. Additionally, it is evident that women with more than two children younger than 10 years old in the household show lower relative permanence in occupation.

In short, from the quantitative information it is observed that transit through the PJJHD does not alter people's occupational trajectories. In a context of economic recovery, with more job opportunities, these are basically taken by men in central ages. However, the type of employments where the assistance program beneficiaries move into continues to have high instability and precarious conditions. In the case of women, the better economic context inhibits their permanence in activity. The presence of young children in the household continues to be one of the determinant reasons for the return to inactivity of the female beneficiaries.

This quantitative exercise was complemented with profound interviews to male and female beneficiaries of the employment assistance programs. The sample included 14 women and 8 men, between 25 and 60 years old. Geographically, three districts from South and West Great Buenos Aires (Claypole, Florencio Varela and Avellaneda).

This qualitative inquiry strengthened the hypothesis presented in this work. The principal conclusions of this evidence may be summarized as follows:

- Occupational trajectories previous to the plan were related to odd jobs and informal employments in the case of men, and with inactivity in the case of women.
- The most frequent occupational trajectories in the case of women indicate: early school dropout; precarious work experiences (informal employments in commerce or domestic service jobs) until marriage or the birth of the first child; complete dropout from any activity in the labour market due to parenting and domestic responsibilities; entry into the PJJHD from inactivity.
- None of the beneficiaries consider that the plan is granting a right (to social inclusion, to an employment, to an income in the absence of an employment). The majority of the opinions refer to the benefit as an aid which complements other job incomes from the family group, thus allowing a precarious level of consumption. In fact, insufficiency of the benefit's monetary value is widely indicated. And it is generally stated that the benefit is not used for food consumption, but to other household maintenance fixed costs (rent payment, public services payment, purchase of non-food goods for the children).
- The majority of the beneficiaries consider the existence of the compensation activity positively. However, this is regarded as a matter of reciprocity ("you must do something in exchange for what the state is giving you"), and not as a mechanism of training or practice for employment, or as individual skills improvement for a future job.
- Not appreciating the compensation activity as useful from a labour point of view is mainly related to the type of compensation activity performed. On one end, there are cases where the compensation activity consists of some sort of political activity (meetings, marches, electoral acts, activities in neighbourhood centers related to political parties). In these cases, relation with the labour market is not even present.
- In another category, there are other cases where the compensation consists of performance of some type of social service for the community. It is the case of cleaning and maintenance activities at public facilities, or participation in community dining halls or community vegetable gardens. The majority of the

beneficiaries interviewed were in this category (and the majority of the beneficiaries in general, as shown by the quantitative information). It is clear that the beneficiaries do not see this as a labour activity, nor as a practice that may improve their possibilities in future jobs. They do not recognize this as a job. They do not talk about working for the plan, but rather about “complying with the four hours”.

- These are also the cases with the greatest difficulties to be carried out, in the opinion of the beneficiaries themselves. Generally, they are performed only some days in the week, and many of the projects have ceased work. For that reason, the beneficiaries have stopped performing the compensation activity, due to the program’s own impossibility to offer the conditions for performance, rather than to the beneficiaries’ personal decision.
- There are two situations where the compensation activity is better appreciated. The first is when the compensation activity is performed in the context of productive cooperative organizations or undertakings originating in the plan, generally organized by social movements (cooperative for the installation of sewage system and sanitary services; textile cooperative). The work performed there and the conditions in which it is carried out are very positively appreciated. So is the experience acquired, enabling for similar activities in the context of private companies in the future; which is, after all, the beneficiaries’ highest aspiration.
- Another case where the compensation activity is regarded as useful for the purpose of a future job is that of people attending job training courses. Here they speak clearly about the acquisition of new skills, in most of the cases valued as useful skills.
- The beneficiaries’ perception of the compensation activity shows how some traditional values are deeply rooted: i) regard of the paid job as the legitimate way to obtain the income needed, and as “the” way to contribute to society and community; ii) invisibilization and depreciation of other type of works such as unpaid caregiving: staying at home even looking after the children is regarded as ‘becoming lazy’.
- These values are sustained even when the majority of the beneficiaries are women who find domestic responsibilities as the principal obstacle to exercise the compensation activity and to possible future job in the labour market.
- Finally, it is important to highlight the coincidence between the values expressed by the beneficiaries and those identified as promoted by the political interventions: i) that employment is the legitimate way to earn one’s living; ii) that lack of employment is an individual responsibility; iii) that this may be expiated through the social reciprocity required to the beneficiaries; iv) that looking after the children is also an individual responsibility that must be settled within the privacy of households.

4. Conclusions

The historical composition of Argentina’s labour market and particularly the transformations suffered during the 90s, spread unstable occupational trajectories across most of the Argentine people.

Adding to the traditional precarious and informal conditions, different forms of workforce underutilization appeared during this phase. Even when workforce underutilization spread across all population sectors, this was more severely evidenced in some groups: women, young people, family heads.

The PJJHD as the public policy main tool to assist the population with lack of income due to unemployment, marked a historical milestone in Argentina's employment assistance policy. Its major extension and coverage, as well as the resources involved were a completely new experience for this type of actions.

Without going into deep details on the program's limitations from its very conception, this work tried to demonstrate the program's weakness to serve as a useful tool for increasing the job opportunities for its beneficiary population¹⁵. In fact, the quantitative information shows that the majority of the people who declare to be working within an employment plan, remain in this situation during the analyzed period -one of strong economic recovery.

The vast majority of people leaving the plan for a new employment are men. Moreover, it is found that personal characteristics themselves (to be a man, young, and with a previous work experience possibly) are what explain the higher probabilities of transiting from an employment plan towards employment, more than any other element related to the plan itself. On the contrary, the most frequent trajectory for women seems to be that from inactivity towards the plan, and then back to inactivity. In this sense, domestic responsibilities continue to be a key determinant in these trajectories.

And this is so, among other reasons, because not only does the program itself not help to remove the gender principal obstacles to female full employment, but it also consolidates the already existing inequities. In a way, the program's compensation activity reproduces the segregation typical of the labour market, and does not offer a solution to the main cause of restriction in job opportunities for women: sexual division of labour.

In this sense, the PJJHD ends up being a new missed opportunity. The program consolidates the segmentation of the society and that of the labour market particularly. Quite the opposite, the program should be used to challenge the traditional gender roles in varied forms. For instance, using the compensation activity as a mechanism to develop certain caregiving responsibilities in men, and certain labour skills in women, skills which are today more exclusively of men.

As long as public policies themselves do not become tools for the promotion of new and diverse values, challenging the root of social and gender inequities, empirical evidence will continue to offer disappointing results, as the ones presented here.

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¹⁵ For a more profound critique of the PJJHD's conception, see Barbeito et al. (2003) and Rodríguez Enríquez (2005).

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