

# DULCINEA IN THE FACTORY



Myths, Morals, Men, and Women  
in Colombia's Industrial Experiment,  
1905–1960

ANN FARNSWORTH-ALVEAR

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DURHAM AND LONDON, 2000

## DULCINEA IN THE FACTORY

A BOOK IN THE SERIES

COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL

WORKING-CLASS HISTORY

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*“¡Ta, ta!” dijo Sancho. “¿Que la hija de Lorenzo Corchuelo es la Señora Dulcinea del Toboso, llamada por otro nombre Aldonza Lorenzo?” “Esa es,” dijo Don Quijote, “y es la que merece ser señora de todo el universo.” “Bien la conozco,” dijo Sancho, “y sé decir que tira tan bien una barra como el más forzudo zagal de todo el pueblo. ¡Vive el Dador, que es moza de chapa, hecha y derecha, y de pelo en pecho! . . . Pero, bien considerado, ¿qué se le ha de dar a la Señora Aldonza Lorenzo, digo, a la señora Dulcinea del Toboso, de que se le vayan a hincar de rodillas delante de ella los vencidos que vuestra merced le envía y ha de enviar! Porque podría ser que al tiempo que ellos llegasen estuviese ella rastrillando lino, o trillando en las eras, y ellos se corriesen de verla, y ella se riese y enfadase del presente.”*

*“Ah, ha!” cried Sancho, “is the daughter of Lorenzo Corchuelo, whose other name is Aldonza Lorenzo, the same with the lady Dulcinea?” “Yes,” answered the knight, “and she deserves to be lady of the whole universe.” “I know her perfectly well,” said Sancho; “and this will venture to say, in her behalf, that she will pitch the bar, as well as e’er a lusty young fellow in the village. Bless the sender! She is a strapper, tall and hale [of] wind and limb. . . . But, when one considers the affair, what benefits can my lady Aldonza Lorenzo—I mean, my lady Dulcinea del Toboso, reap from your worship’s sending, or having sent those, whom you overcome in battle, to fall upon their knees before her! Especially, as they might chance to come, at a time, when she is busy, carding flax or threshing corn; in which case, they would be ashamed to see her, and she laugh or be out of humor at their arrival.”*

Miguel de Cervantes, DON QUIJOTE, 1605,  
trans. Tobias Smollett, 1755



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## PREFACE

THIS BOOK EXPLORES two intertwined historical processes closely associated with worldwide modernity: the geographic expansion of factory production and the transformation of gender roles, whether real or potential, that is implied by women's waged labor. As a history of the social relationships and cultural understandings that shaped industrial work in a prosperous Latin American city, it is meant as a corrective to overly simple generalizations about "import-substitution industrialization" or "third world women workers." Wherever foreign or native entrepreneurs imported factory machines from Europe and the United States, they also imported ideas and practices associated with that machinery. Such ideas and practices were intermingled with entrepreneurs' more or less self-conscious plans for remaking local economic relationships. In Colombia, for example, many early industrialists saw themselves as social engineers. Yet factory owners nowhere controlled the social and cultural activity by which industrialism was made local. I begin by asking how people on the ground (and in the workrooms built to house newly arrived machines) experienced, understood, and changed the meaning of factory labor in the first half-century of Colombia's industrial experiment.

Although its name is now synonymous with drug trafficking and urban violence, Medellín, capital of the Colombian province of Antioquia, once enjoyed a very different reputation. If Bogotá, the country's capital, claimed to be the "Athens" of South America, Medellín presented itself as the region's "Manchester," where local capital had transformed a mountain town into the birthplace of an urbanized, industrial Colombia. Between 1905, when the city's first cotton mill began production, and the early 1960s, when

Antioqueño industry was widely recognized as a pacesetter for Latin American manufacturing more generally, a compressed process of textile-led industrialization transformed the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Medellín's mills became known for an intensely Catholic paternalism, by which the largest employers presented themselves as the moral guardians of female workers. Medellinense industrialists developed this disciplinary form only gradually, adopting it both in response to the direct possibility of labor activism and as a solution to what had become a vexed local dilemma: that the everyday reality of factories where women and men worked side by side contradicted deeply held beliefs about the immorality of sexual mixing.

This study traces the role of gender in shaping the way Colombian mill-owners solved a general problem of capitalist exploitation: how to ensure an element of consent in the relationship between those who labor for a wage and those who profit from the difference between labor's price and the price of labor's product. Nevertheless, my interest is in the idiosyncrasies of Antioquia's industrial history. Why did the chastity of female workers become the focal point of industrial discipline? Why, over time, were women then excluded from textile production? In the 1940s, when the workforce was evenly split between male and female workers, being seen dancing in the wrong part of town or wearing skirts considered "too short" would get a woman in trouble at work; getting pregnant would get her fired. By the 1950s, however, textile jobs were being redefined as "men's jobs," and the focus of work rules shifted. A disciplinary system that had centered on workers' gendered bodies gave way to one that revolved around the stopwatch of the industrial engineer. In the timing and shape of changing forms of factory control, the Medellín case has relevance for historians interested in the varied ways that gender has shaped industrial paternalism, Fordism, and neo-Taylorist management in different national contexts.

Beyond its comparative value, the story this book tells for Colombia provides evidence of the need to continue rethinking gender as an analytical category. In Medellín's mills, especially during the 1930s and 1940s, the difference between "good" and "bad" women was culturally as important as that between men and women. It underlay a moral code that shaped workingwomen's self-perceptions, as well as the self-perceptions of men who labored in mixed-sex workplaces, and it organized the local labor market almost as thoroughly as did the male/female distinction *per se*. Conceptually, the difference between the proper and improper behaviors of gendered subjects is generally understood as being dependent upon the cultural dichotomy of female versus male. I have instead attempted to understand the normative work of sexuality, by which a range of stereotypes are attached to gendered bodies, as being part of the process of gender differentiation itself. Although the reference in the title is to Don Quijote's fantasy that the village

girl Aldonza is the chaste queen of his dreams, Dulcinea, one might point to more “modern” and less light-hearted examples: the “pure” white woman of racist fantasies, European reformers’ images of the tubercular factory girl, or the hypersexualized images of *la mulata* in the Hispanic Caribbean and of African American men in the United States. This book is an examination of women’s and men’s experiences in a particular, and limited, set of workplaces. Nevertheless, the richness of the sources available for Medellín has the potential to contribute to a range of discussions within feminist scholarship: about the instability of the term “women”; about the role of sexuality in shaping social hierarchies, such as class and race; and about the usefulness of historical approaches that focus on human subjectivity.

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MY FIRST DEBT IS to the many retired women and men who sat with me for long hours, sharing their memories of working lives spent in Medellín's textile mills. Whether they agreed to let another take their turn at the domino tables of the Asociación de Jubilados to answer questions for twenty or thirty minutes, or they invited me into their homes for hours of taped conversation, sometimes over various days, their willingness to talk to me provided me not only with "material" but also with inspiration. Special thanks are due those who immediately took an interest in my research, introducing me to friends and family members who might also agree to record their memories of mill-work. I am no less indebted to the retirees who simply made me think, even if by sending me away brusquely, as did a woman who pronounced: "I worked for thirty years, working is no fun. There's nothing else to say." Whether I have succeeded or failed to understand what retirees tried to communicate in our cross-generational conversations, I am grateful that I had an opportunity to listen.

My family in Medellín adopted my research as it adopted me, a long-lost *gringa* cousin. María Ester Sanín and Juan Guillermo Múnera contributed in a thousand ways, providing moral and material support from beginning to end. Not even they know how much their example has taught me about giving, about comradeship, and about how to do the seemingly impossible: be optimistic about Colombia's future. I owe a special debt to Jaime Sanín Echeverri and to the late José Sanín Echeverri, who explained Antioqueño expressions, laughed over my tapes, lent me the car, and vouched for me to factory archivists; I'm sorry to have known so jovial a grand-uncle for so short a time. My time in Medellín has also been made special by the kindness

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Whatever errors remain, of course, are my responsibility alone—a caveat that is doubly necessary in acknowledging the work of those who read the manuscript in its entirety: Barbara Hirshkowitz, Lynn Hunt, Marco Palacios, Michael Jiménez, Rebecca Karl, and the anonymous readers at Duke University Press. Their intelligence and gentle criticism, together with the professionalism of my editor at Duke, Valerie Millholland, greatly improved every aspect of the following chapters.

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## INTRODUCTION

*You don't do wrong to the person who feeds you . . . it makes me mad whenever anyone does anything against Coltejer. I want all the best for Coltejer, all the best, because if it fails, I fail.—Ana Palacios de Montoya*

*I pray for Fabricato every day, because one was so poor and now one has this little house, because of the factory. Fabricato was very good and I pray to God every day for Fabricato, that it will succeed more and more and more.  
—Celina Báez Amado*

COLOMBIA'S FIRST INDUSTRIAL experiment is over. As retired textile worker Enrique López put it, commenting on a rumor that Rosellón, the mill where he worked for forty years, might be gutted and converted into middle-class apartments: "That's the end of that." The end of protective tariffs and governmental intervention to guarantee the profitability of nationally owned firms likely will not prove the end of Latin America's industrial dream, but the region has definitively abandoned import substitution as a model.<sup>1</sup> For the women and men who spent their working lives in the factories of Colombia's Aburrá Valley, located in central Antioquia and dominated by the city of Medellín, it is the end of an era.

In 1990–91, when I conducted the bulk of the research for this book, an illusory sense of permanence still clung to Medellín's big textile firms. Their company names—Fabricato, Tejicondor, and especially Coltejer, which owned Rosellón—had been household words throughout Colombia for more than seventy-five years. Retired workers pointed to the firms' expansion, and managerial personnel easily discussed plans to continue upgrading plant machinery. From a historian's perspective, the companies' sense of their own past was especially impressive. I found well-maintained collections of historical records, some of which had been transferred to microfilm, as well as carefully preserved antique looms, lists of "founding workers," and photographic displays documenting each company's early years.

By 1998 the illusion had been stripped away. At Fabricato, at the opposite end of the Aburrá Valley from Rosellón, I had spent months working with company records housed at the Patronato, which had been built as the "golden dream" of the firm's founder, Jorge Echavarría. Designed as a company-run



Map 1 Colombia and Latin America



Map 2 Antioquia and Colombia

recreation center and subsidized cafeteria, with an attached dormitory for women workers, it boasted welcoming gardens and a monument to Don Jorge. Even in 1991, with its sleeping rooms converted to offices, the Patronato stood as a reminder of a paternalistic company ethos. Workers still observed a moment of prayer, amplified by speakers mounted near their lunch tables. The addition of a carefully organized *sala histórica*, a one-room company museum, only cemented the role of the Patronato as the symbolic heart of a firm that was nearing the seventy-fifth anniversary of its founding in 1923. As that anniversary arrived, however, Fabricato was reeling from the impact of the Colombian *apertura*, or “opening,” of 1990–94. Under President Cesar Gaviria, a corps of young, technically trained neoliberal reformers did away with protectionism and other import-substitution policies, and the textile companies lost their privileged position.<sup>2</sup> What had been long-running concerns, including high labor costs, indebtedness, and decades of inefficient practices at the managerial level, became acute problems.<sup>3</sup> Fabricato found itself insolvent, and the Patronato was transferred to one of the company’s largest creditors: the state-run pension fund. Retired workers will still receive medical care in the spacious rooms of Don Jorge’s “golden dream,” now formally designated a historic building, but the company’s current employees cannot be as confident about their own retirement years. Along with its one-time competitors Rosellón, Coltejer, and Tejicondor, Fabricato may soon need Celina’s prayers.

From the perspective of elderly workers’ memories, the neoliberal reforms that threaten “their” mills add insult to the ongoing injury of having watched Medellín almost self-destruct. When retirees sat down with me to tape-record their stories, they did so in a city in crisis. Bombings, drug-related assassinations, and gang warfare had become the stuff of everyday life in Medellín. In this context, the nostalgia that shapes retirees’ memories has particular poignancy. Eighty-two-year-old María Elisa Alvarez, for example, lived in a neighborhood with enough of a reputation for violence that taxi drivers often refused to take me to her address. Aware that a young interviewer might not believe her, she raised her voice to insist that, “back then, Medellín was beautiful! beautiful!”<sup>4</sup> Another retired man of her generation, responding to a friend’s comment that “people used to die of old age . . . but now, can you imagine, they die at seventeen or at twenty-two,” said simply: “now, they don’t die, they get killed.”<sup>5</sup>

Many used the paternalistic management style of the Echavarría family as a symbol of everything that made “then” a better time than “now.” “The industrialists of that time,” emphasized Susana Osorio, “were not only very intelligent, very advanced, but also very human . . . think on it and you’ll see: this was an *earthly paradise*!”<sup>6</sup> She and others of her generation know, how-

ever, that young Antioqueños will inherit a regional capital that has become an international watchword for homicide and drug-related crime.

Nostalgia is itself “historical.” As a style of remembering, it is associated with modern secular culture and with rapid change in everyday technologies.<sup>7</sup> In the context of Medellín, the fact that retired textile workers idealize the industrial paternalism of the 1940s and 1950s is not simply a given—to be dismissed as an inherent part of their being old people telling stories about their youth. Rather, their nostalgia provides a starting point for questions about change over time.<sup>8</sup> It points to the way in which an imported form of organizing labor power, the factory, was transformed into an accepted, commonplace aspect of life in Medellín. In the early decades of this century, the cotton mills symbolized everything modern; they were visited, photographed, and talked about as manifestations of an industrial future—one that provoked as much anxiety as it did hope and pride. At the end of the century, their meaning has radically changed. Now the city’s big factories represent a past, one that can sustain a nostalgic vision. Scholars tend to discuss Latin American import substitution in terms of its political-economic impact, asking whether it was right or wrong as a policy. This book instead asks how students of twentieth-century Latin America can begin to understand the uneven but still significant spread of industrialism in the region’s urban centers. How can we grasp the meaning of factory work in the lives and memories of men and women like Ana, Celina, Enrique, and María Elisa?<sup>9</sup>

In answering these questions, the following chapters focus on the role of gender in structuring Antioqueños’ engagement with industrialism. By using this term rather than the more common “industrialization,” I mean to emphasize diffuse changes in attitudes and self-conceptions. Despite a rich historiographical literature that attends to cultural change in the broadest sense, policy makers, investors, and authors of survey texts tend to attach a narrowly technical meaning to industrialization, especially in third world contexts. In Colombia, the rhythms and hierarchies of factory work became culturally familiar (and familiar enough to be both consented to and pointedly resisted, at different historical conjunctures) in a complex process of interaction among capitalist entrepreneurs, social reformers, managers, and working-class women and men. I make two arguments about this process: first, that changing understandings of femininity and masculinity shaped the way all of these social actors understood the industrial workplace; second, that workingwomen in Medellín lived gender not as an opposition between female and male but rather as a normative field—marked by “proper” and “improper” ways of being female. The distance between chaste and unchaste behavior underlay a moral code that shaped workingwomen’s self-perceptions, as well as the self-perceptions of men who labored in mixed-sex workplaces. Moreover, at least during the most intensely paternalistic pe-

riod, the distinction between virgins and nonvirgins organized the industrial labor market almost as thoroughly as did the sexual division of labor.

### Masculinization

Given the growth of women's labor history in the 1980s, and the dynamism of the field in the 1990s (as scholars have turned toward studying gender rather than "women"), the particularities of Medellín's textile industry will be of interest to readers familiar with other national contexts. During the twentieth century, Antioquia was transformed in precisely the way that local elites in many parts of the world hoped to transform their own regions. As wealthy entrepreneurs began importing looms rather than finished cloth, a bustling modern city replaced what had been an isolated mountain town. Wage workers began to be able to afford consumer goods undreamed of by a previous generation, and factories to meet their new needs sprang up alongside the textile mills and food-processing plants that had started the industrial boom. What makes the Medellín case unusual, from a comparative perspective, is the visibility of gender dynamics in the process of industrialization. The cloth factories employed a majority-female workforce in their early years but males almost exclusively by 1960. Gender relations in the city's industrial workplaces can be tracked through three distinct periods. Through about 1935, the mills were largely, although not exclusively, female spaces; in the late 1930s and through the 1940s they were mixed-sex, with women and men working side by side; but by the late 1950s men far outnumbered women.

Neither "gender" nor "factory work" remains a stable category over the course of the period 1900–1960; indeed it is a central contention of this study that each affected the social meaning of the other. In 1900–1935, when Medellín's mills were largely (although not exclusively) female workplaces, they were also relatively small enterprises, in which discipline required the presence of the owner or his direct representative. During this initial period, workers entered and left the mills relatively easily—to the frustration of owner-managers who found them "ungrateful" and difficult to control. By the early 1930s, weaving and spinning began to be seen less specifically as "women's work," and factory managers hired men in large numbers. Patterns of authority also began to change, as the mills became larger and owners delegated the task of keeping order. A series of politicized strikes in 1935–36 mark a turning point. After the strikes, Medellín's largest industrialists moved to consolidate a more bureaucratic paternalistic order, marked by extra-wage benefits and by a moralistic Catholicism. Virginity became almost a prerequisite for a woman's employment, as both married women and unmarried mothers were excluded from jobs at the big textile mills. At Col-

Table 1. Women and men employed in Colombian textiles, 1916–75

Year	Men	Women	Children	Total	% of Women
1916 <sup>a</sup>	(166)	(623)		1,983	79
1923 <sup>b</sup>	248	740		988	75
1926 <sup>c</sup>	969	1,906	179	3,054	62
1929	986	1,943	189	3,118	62
1932	1,254	2,061	387	3,702	56
1938 <sup>d</sup>	4,005	6,170		10,175	61
1940	7,104	8,041		15,145	53
1945	12,896	13,331		26,227	51
1951	7,528	6,788		14,316	47
—	—	—	—	—	—
1967 <sup>e</sup>	25,014	14,133		39,147	36
—	—	—	—	—	—
1975	39,650	21,414		61,064	35

(a) This total includes those mills for which there are not separate figures for women and men; the percentage of women is calculated from the mills for which there are separate figures for women and men. *Informe de Hacienda, 1916*, as cited by Santiago Montenegro, "Breve historia de las principales empresas textiles," *Revista de extensión cultural (de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Seccional de Medellín)* 12 (July 1982), p. 62.

(b) This includes only those factories located in the Aburrá Valley. To the figures available in the *Anuario estadístico de Medellín, 1923*, I have added the available figures for Fabricato and for Montoya Hermanos y Cia. Luz Gabriela Arango, *Mujer, religión e industria: Fabricato 1923–1982* (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 1991), p. 301; for Montoya, Inspector de Fábricas, Acta 1362, 10 April 1922, Archivo Histórica de Antioquia. See also Fernando Botero Herrera, *La industrialización de Antioquia: Génesis y consolidación, 1900–1930* (Medellín: CIE, 1985), p. 174.

(c) For 1926–33, see Santiago Montenegro, "La industria textil en Colombia, 1900–1945," *Desarrollo y sociedad* 8 (May 1982), p. 133. His figures are from the *Boletín de comercio e industria* for 1933.

(d) For 1938–65 (Census and Contraloría figures). See Dawn Keremitsis, "Latin American Women Workers in Transition: Sexual Division of the Labor Force in Mexico and Colombia in the Textile Industry," *The Americas* 40 (1984), p. 497.

(e) For 1967–75 (DANE figures). See Arango, p. 338.

tejer, Fabricato, and Rosellón, supervisory personnel (including the priests assigned to factory chapels) scrutinized workingwomen's dress and behavior—a woman who had either a lover or an illegitimate child had to conceal the fact. This period of rigid moral discipline was also a period of growth for the industry, and the absolute numbers of both women and men employed increased dramatically. The years 1936–53 thus mark a "golden era" for a particularly Antioqueño brand of welfare capitalism. By the mid-1950s, the mutually constituted meanings of gender and workplace discipline had shifted again. Men took over women's jobs, and the mills' labor control strategies shifted away from workers' "moral" comportment and toward a neo-Taylorist model of the work process, as explained in chapter 7.

Table 1 and figures 1 and 2 trace the transition from a female to a male

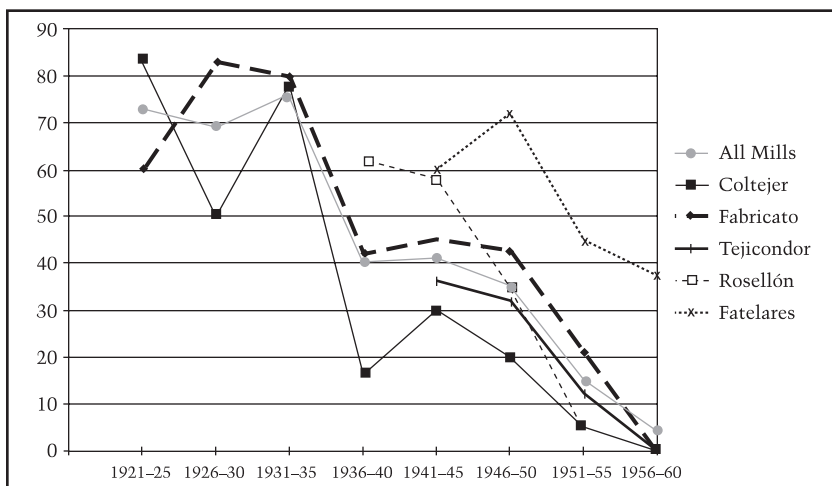


Figure 1 Percentage of new hires that were female, 1920-60. On sampling method, see Introduction, note 10.

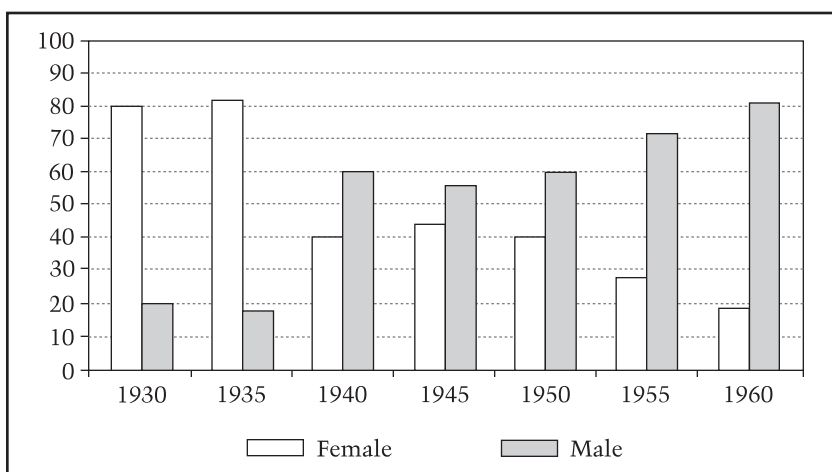


Figure 2 Relative percentages of female and male workers, measured by those present in the mills in a given year. On sampling method, see Introduction, note 10.

workforce, using both government statistics (table 1) and percentages calculated from a simple random sample of personnel files held by Medellín's large textile firms (figures 1 and 2).<sup>10</sup> In table 1, the masculinization of production jobs in the big Antioqueño mills is somewhat obscured, given that national statistics for the later period include smaller companies that produced ready-made clothing as well as woven cloth—and garment work remained women's work. Nevertheless, the decline in women's employment is visible even at



the level of such national statistics. The data from the personnel departments of the five leading Antioqueño textile producers (figure 1) is clearer, although there are significant differences among firms. Midsized mills, for example, retained women longer and in higher numbers than larger mills. Fatelares, which appears as the anomalous case in figure 1, employed fewer than four hundred workers in 1960, when Coltejer and Fabricato each employed more than five thousand. By the early 1990s, however, Fatelares's shop floor had become an almost all-male workplace, as were the weaving and spinning sheds of the other mills I visited. In sharp contrast to the mixed-sex world of textile work as I encountered it in retirees' memories and dusty personnel files, the production sheds and company-sponsored cafeterias of all of Antioquia's big, now almost obsolete, textile plants were masculine spaces.

At the older and larger firms, the transition from female to male operatives took place in two discrete stages. Coltejer and Fabricato began hiring large numbers of men in the mid-1930s, especially in weaving. Where tending looms had been "women's work," it now became a job for both women and men—in part because of the introduction of automatic looms. The second and more definitive shift occurred in the 1950s. By 1960, mill managers had all but stopped hiring women; machine-tending in the textile mills, in spinning as much as in weaving, was redefined as "men's work." Figure 1 shows the shifts in firms' recruitment strategies, indicating both the initial switch from a majority-female to a mixed-sex workforce and the change in 1955–60, when the percentage of women among newly hired operatives dropped to almost zero. Figure 2, by contrast, traces the transition from female to male workers from the perspective of the shop floor. At no point did mill managers announce mass firings of female workers. Rather, a combination of normal labor turnover and overall growth allowed for a smooth transition. By 1960, most of the women remaining in the mills were older workers approaching retirement. As María Elisa remembered of a friend, who, she said, had been the last woman to weave at Tejicondor: "She [was] all by herself, by then it was only men."<sup>11</sup>

A range of other jobs within the mills were more durably sex-typed than weaving and spinning. Women never worked unloading and opening cotton bales, nor do they seem to have been employed on the dangerous carding machines known as "devils." Men predominated in the sizing section (*engomadoras*) and in loom-fixing. Dyeing, similarly, was a male preserve from the first installation of (imported) machinery for bleaching, coloring, and printing fabric. Drawing-in (*pasa-lizos*), on the other hand, remained largely female through the 1970s, and both managers and workers perceived it as a job that required "womanly" traits: deft hands and careful patience. Throughout 1936–70, in addition, the ranks of nonproduction workers ex-



Female workers in the drawing-in section (*pasa-lizos*), Fabricato, 1955. Drawing-in remained largely female through the 1960s and 1970s. Photograph by Gabriel Carvajal. Courtesy of Fotos Carvajal.



Male worker in the dyeing and printing section (*tintorería y estampación*), Fabricato, 1955. Throughout Medellín's textile industry, from the initial decades, bleaching, dyeing, printing, "Sanfordization" and similar processes were the province of male workers exclusively. Photograph by Gabriel Carvajal. Courtesy of Fotos Carvajal.



Female worker in the finishing section (*acabados*), checking folded cloth, Fabricato, 1973. Photograph by J. Maillard. Courtesy of the International Labour Office. ILO Photograph V-Colombia-VT/ILO-72.

panded steadily, with ancillary positions tending to be sex segregated. Males were hired as plant watchmen, electricians, and groundskeepers, while females became office workers, cafeteria servers, and cleaners.<sup>12</sup>

Local explanations of the transition from female to male labor assume a strict economic rationality. The most commonly accepted argument involves state decision-making rather than decision-making at the level of the firm: that mill-owners stopped employing women when Colombian legislators required them to pay maternity leave. Yet protective legislation cannot be proven to have had any effect on factory owners' hiring policies. Such legislation dated from laws 53 and 197 of 1938, which granted eight weeks' paid leave, required employers to treat married and unmarried women equally, and expressly prohibited the widespread practice of simply firing any woman who became pregnant. Through the 1940s and early 1950s, however, mill managers routinely violated the 1938 legislation.<sup>13</sup> They also continued to employ large numbers of young women, despite laws 53 and 197. Nor is there any evidence that government officials suddenly began enforcing protective legislation in the 1950s, causing mill-owners to switch to employing males. Rather, the definitive shift toward an all-male workforce in the textile mills (1955–65) occurred without any change in the legal condition of women workers.

An argument based on protective legislation is also radically inconsistent

with the social policies for which Antioqueño industrialists became famous. The large textile companies not only proclaimed a paternalistic philosophy but also led Colombian industry in the provision of extra-wage benefits. These were not firms that attempted to minimize total labor costs. Indeed, the transition to an all-male workforce happened as part of a shift toward employing heads of households. If industrialists' refusal to pay maternity benefits were based on an economic bottom-line, why would they have at the same time begun extending special benefits to married male workers, including prenatal benefits for workers' wives and free schooling for their children?<sup>14</sup>

Empirical problems bedevil a second widely accepted local explanation, that women evinced high levels of absenteeism and labor turnover. When pressed to explain why the factories had switched to male workers, retired women and men repeated an explanation that had circulated among managers and workers alike: "Women would get married and leave, but a man would be even more tied down [i.e., more tied to the job]."<sup>15</sup> Academic observers have tended to link this commonsensical explanation to changes on the shop floor. Both in 1935–40, when the large firms began importing automatic looms and again in 1955–65, with the adoption of the neo-Taylorist engineering, the shift toward male operatives happened with the introduction of new technologies of production. Where scholars have accepted the premise of female instability, the connection between masculinization and modernization has seemed to explain itself: more sophisticated production techniques required textile companies to invest more in training each operative, making men a better economic risk.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of time spent on the job, however, the statistical evidence is that men were as likely as women to leave after only a few years in the mills (figure 3). Women did leave their jobs at marriage (generally because mill managers required it), but this did not outweigh the fact that both women and men quit the mills for a wide range of reasons. Nor did women miss work more often than men, but rather the reverse (see figure 4). If labor turnover is measured from the perspective of long-term employees, who remained in their jobs while others came and went, the inadequacy of an argument based on female turnover rates is especially clear. Gradually, the textile firms succeeded in attracting and retaining a core of stable employees, but this was not a gender-specific group. Just as some men were willing to remain with one firm for much of their working life, so too were some women willing to do so (see table 2). Mill-owners' interest in reducing turnover cannot explain, by itself, the link between masculinization and increasing technical sophistication.

The argument that technological change in the industry required textile manufacturers to switch to male labor has a number of other weaknesses, as well. If higher levels of turnover made women more difficult to train, why

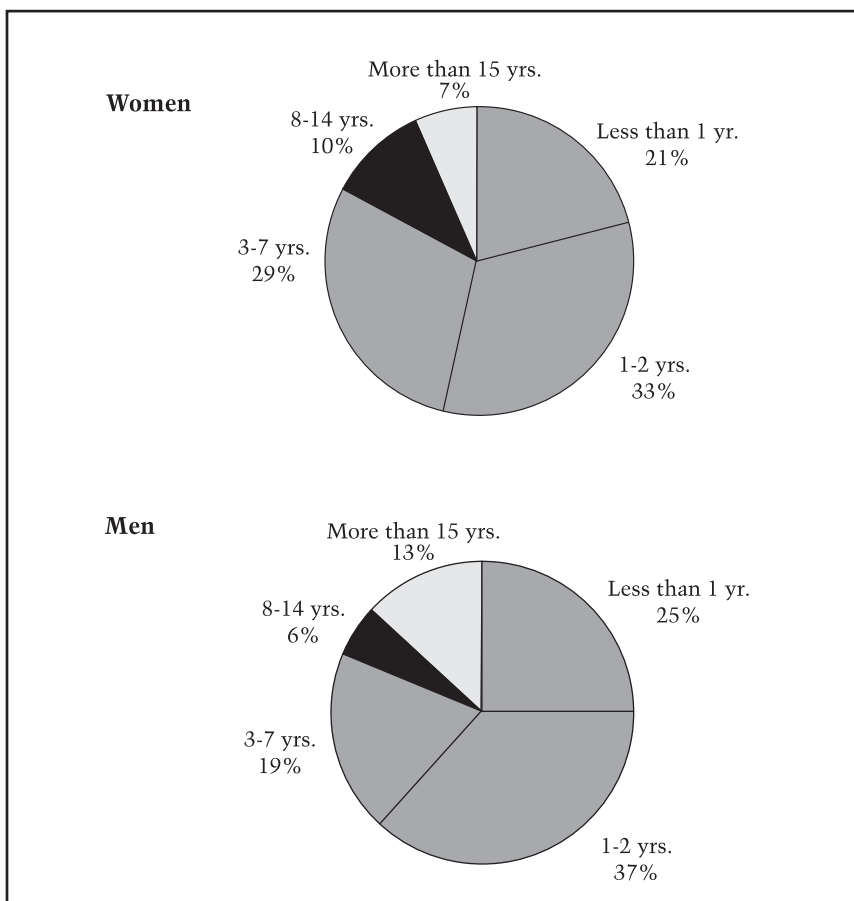


Figure 3 Women and men, by years spent on the job. On sampling method, see Introduction, note 10.

did Medellín's big employers not begin accepting married women? In a thorough study of Fabricato, the sociologist Luz Gabriela Arango argues that the mill's owners applied ideological rather than technical criteria to the question of women's work. Arango signals the difficulties that accompany any attempt to measure the relative "skill" required for different kinds of manual work, and she suggests that jobs at Fabricato became defined as "skilled work" because they were now jobs that men did, rather than vice versa. For Arango, the transition to a male workforce occurred as a diffuse effect of sexual discrimination: as textile jobs became more highly paid, they became jobs for heads-of-households, defined as male.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on Arango's research, and on Anglo-American work on sex-

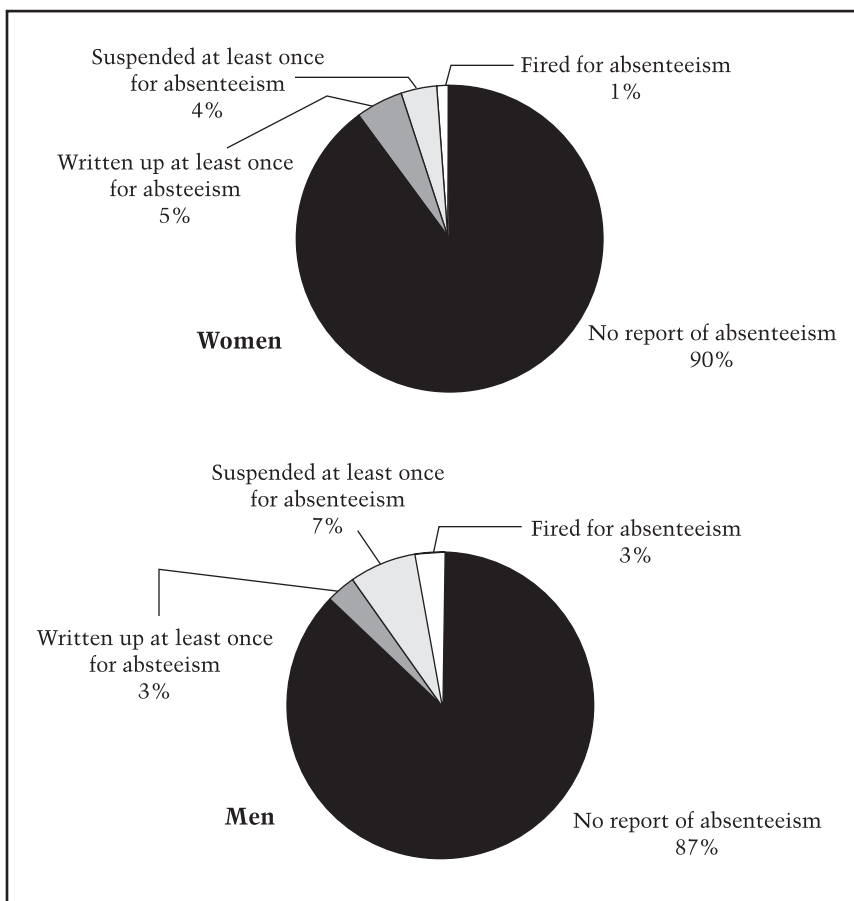


Figure 4 Women and men, by percentage noted as absent, whether that absence resulted in a written reprimand, suspension, or dismissal. On sampling method, see Introduction, note 10.

typing in industry, this book is premised on the idea that the changing gender pattern in Medellín’s mills is a topic in cultural history—rather than simply an epiphenomenon of economic and technological change. A cultural approach need not subsume economics, technology, politics, or capitalist rationality to gender dynamics and representation. Nor does the notion of “cultural history” imply a divorce from “social history.” As used by scholars today, “society” refers more to relations among sets of persons, and “culture” to relations among ideas, symbols, and linguistic signs, as these are used by groups of people, but neither concept has meaning without the other. The goal here is to examine change over time in Antioquia’s industrial work-

Table 2. Percentage working in given year, who had been employed less than three years, or three, five, or ten or more years. On sampling method, see Introduction, note 10.

	1930		1935		1940	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Women</b>						
Employed less than 3 years	7	87	12	71	13	59
Employed 3 or more years	1	13	5	29	9	41
Employed 5 or more years	1	13	3	18	4	18
Employed 10 or more years	1	0	0	0	2	9
Number in sample, for year given	8		17		22	
<b>Men</b>						
Employed less than 3 years	2	100	6	100	28	85
Employed 3 or more years	0	0	0	0	5	15
Employed 5 or more years	0	0	0	0	3	9
Employed 10 or more years	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number in sample, for year given	2		6		33	

places, with this change being understood as an interplay among economy, culture, and society at the local level.<sup>18</sup>

In Medellín, “women’s work” became “men’s work” as a result of four distinct, although interrelated, processes, each of which is explored in some detail in the following chapters. First, Medellín’s textile industry was no marginal endeavor but rather the crowning achievement of Colombian policy makers’ decision to use import substitution as a path to becoming an industrial nation. Medellín’s textile capitalists found it in their interest to raise wages, thus strengthening their political claim on protectionist tariffs. In a subtler but no less powerful way, the self-image of Antioquia’s emerging industrial elite—who saw themselves as modernizers of their country—pre-disposed them to raise real wages and to extend extra-wage benefits. Especially in the case of the different branches of the Echavarría family, owners of Coltejer and Fabricato, mill-owners’ understanding of social-Catholic teachings led them to view the factory as a mechanism for preventing the spread of communist agitation in Colombia. Thus the slow transition to a family-wage system, premised on the employment of a specific type of male worker (sober, industrious, married, and culturally adapted to a modern consumer economy) was compatible with the political and economic position occupied by Medellínense industrialists.

Second, Antioquia’s manufacturers were always part of an international textile industry. Like industrialists in a variety of other world regions, mill-owners in Medellín hired women or men to perform specific tasks in part because they imported ideas about what kind of operative “went with” the

1945		1950		1955		1960	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
42	55	40	53	8	22	2	10
35	45	36	47	28	78	19	90
15	19	17	22	27	75	19	90
3	4	5	7	8	22	19	90
77		76		36		21	
65	70	65	58	44	48	25	29
28	30	47	42	48	52	62	71
13	14	27	24	41	45	49	56
2	2	7	6	10	11	31	36
93		112		92		87	

machines they bought abroad. The Fábrica de Bello, Antioquia's first cotton mill, was established with machinery purchased in Britain, and buying agent Pedro Nel Ospina visited mills with a majority-female workforce.<sup>19</sup> With others of their contemporaries who imported looms and spinning machines, Pedro Nel and his partner, Emilio Restrepo, seem to have simply assumed that they too would hire female operatives.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1950s, however, Colombian manufacturers were importing different notions. Throughout the twentieth century, technological changes in Medellín's textile industry were changes that came from abroad, accompanied by a preformed gender ideology (whether or not local managers wholly adopted that ideology). As discussed in chapter 7, for example, textile engineers from the United States advised mill-owners in Antioquia to put men on spinning machines that had previously been operated by women.<sup>21</sup>

Third, a range of powerful local groups acted to influence gender relations in Medellín's textile mills. Antioquia's Catholic hierarchy and, more specifically, the Jesuits who worked to build a Catholic Social Action movement in Medellín, involved themselves in every aspect of the city's industrialization. Guided by the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, churchmen worked to convince industrialists to adopt a paternalistic style of management as a guard against communism, and they created Catholic unions to guide the labor movement away from left-wing organizing efforts. From the beginning, Catholic activists also shaped the way Medellínenses discussed "the woman question." Priests and lay people established charitable institutions to tend to workingwomen's spiritual needs, promoted legislation to protect female



industrial workers, and pushed Antioqueño industrialists to make proper moral conduct a condition of women's employment. Rather than pushing for women's exclusion from manufacturing jobs, Catholic reformers in Medellín helped establish disciplinary practices that defined some women as fit for well-paid jobs and others as unfit.

Fourth, the women who took jobs in Antioquia's early textile mills redefined the meaning of femaleness for themselves and for those who watched them enter and leave the new workplaces. If upper-class observers understood the mills to pose a danger to the proper relationship of males and females, it was in part because wage-earning women, in practice, were re-making the meaning of gender difference. In the end, I am less interested in gender as a set of rules and symbolic distinctions (between and *among* females and males) than in workingwomen and workingmen's subjective experience of the dichotomous norms of gender. My heart is with Aldonza Lorenzo and Sancho Panza, not with the unreal Dulcinea. My goal is to understand the way gender entered Medellín's mills by reconstructing not only the local discourse of "women's work" but also the shifts, instabilities, and contradictions of a cultural system in motion. What did sexual difference mean at the quotidian level of workplace relationships?

Freezing the frame at either the beginning or the end of the period 1905–1960 would underscore the contrast between the female world of Medellín's first industrial workshops and the largely male world that these same workshops became, but it would limit an observer's ability to understand *how* factory labor changed. Weaving and spinning did not simply go from being something done by women (and children of both sexes) to being something done by adult males. Along the way, textile work itself was transformed—as a result of the complex, interrelated processes summarized above. What had been a labor-intensive industry became capital-intensive. Factory workrooms went from being crowded places, in which co-workers were close enough to converse easily above the noise of manually operated machines, to being sparsely populated, with long rows of automated looms or spinning frames being tended by a single operative. One of the objectives of this book is to comprehend shifting gender patterns in Medellín's mills as a product of the connections and contradictions among the diverse factors structuring industrial work. Whether one were a woman or a man, doing factory work in Medellín meant occupying a constantly changing social location, one shaped by transactions that were at once international, national, regional, and local.

### The Wages of Protectionism

Recent academic interest in the role of gender in shaping industrial development has focused on the growth of low-wage *maquiladora* plants, where