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**Gender, Work, and Family Economies: Wet Nurses in Rural  
Galicia, 1850-1900**

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**SESSION 2: Women and Economy**

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**Abstract:** In this article we study the distinct formative stages of the labour market for external wet nurses employed by Galician foundling hospitals in the second half of the 19th century. We focus on changes in the nature of wet nurses' work due to the benevolence laws (1822, 1836, 1849) that were driven by Spain's liberal state. We also examine wet nurses' sociodemographic profile and the geographic distribution of their labour markets. Finally, we explore the economic impact that Galician foundling hospitals had on rural districts, looking closely at the importance of external wet-nurse wages for family budgets.

**Keywords:** wet nurse, foundling hospital, work, wage, family budget

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## **Gender, Work, and Family Economies: Wet Nurses in Rural Galicia, 1850-1900**

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The literature on wages and family budgets in contemporary rural Europe has not yet analyzed real wages when taking into account the wages of men, women, and children in the long term. Not much is known of the wage differential between men and women, and even less of the contribution that women's wages made to family income. Recent studies have advanced the literature about unskilled rural women's wages from the middle-ages to the 19th century (Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015). Some studies have considered not only wages but also life cycles. For instance, using family reconstruction of 26 English parishes, Schneider shows how the changing size and composition of individual families affected their welfare over the family cycle (Schneider, 2013). In the Netherlands, a recent life-cycle study demonstrates that annual wages of men in agriculture and textiles were high enough to sustain their families at the subsistence level (Boter, 2020). A recent study evaluates real household incomes of predominantly rural working families of various sizes and structures in England in the years 1260–1850. The article includes women and children's contributions to family incomes, providing a novel framework within which to evaluate real household incomes.

In Spain, agricultural wage series rarely include women. We have some local series for Palencia (Moreno, 2002); Navarra (Lana, 2007); Barcelona and Lerida (Garrahou, Pujol and Colomé, 1992). For the service sector, the research of Llopis and García Moreno (2011) and (Drelichman and González Agudo (2020) have provided some wage series. Spanish rural families had different sources of income because men's wages alone were insufficient to cover families' economic needs (Borderías and Muñoz-Abeledo, 2018; Borderías, Muñoz-Abeledo and Cussó, 2022). Recent research reconstructs the wages of wet nurses over the long term (18th and 19th centuries) for all regions of Spain, showing the importance of the wet-nursing wages for family economies (Sarasúa, 2021).

This article focuses on changes in the labour markets of Galicia's service sector during the 19th century, emphasizing the importance of wet nurses' income for rural family economies. Taking our previous research (Dubert and Muñoz-Abeledo, 2021) as its starting point, it considers the spatial distribution of women employed in a key service-sector occupation—wet nurses who worked for Galician founding hospitals.

### **Work Options for Women in Rural Galicia**

Galicia is a region in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula that encompasses approximately 6 percent of Spain's territory. Between 1787 and 1887, it was characterized by weak urbanization, with only about twenty cities and small towns, a settlement pattern that was most dense in coastal districts, and a population that was 12–13 percent of Spain's total. About 80 percent of Galicians practiced subsistence agriculture on small farms (1.3 to 2.7 hectares, on average), which, in

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addition, required exploitation of surrounding scrubland, maintenance of small livestock holdings, and complementary seasonal or short-term migration to Castile or Portugal—or long-term or definitive migration to America. This was a world in which peasant families played an unquestionably important historical role, and from whose lowest strata would emerge, as in the rest of Europe, the greatest number of women who worked as wet nurses (Bardet and Faron, 1996: 144; Fuchs, 1984: 188; Fonte, 1996: 370; Cavallo, 1983: 402-405).

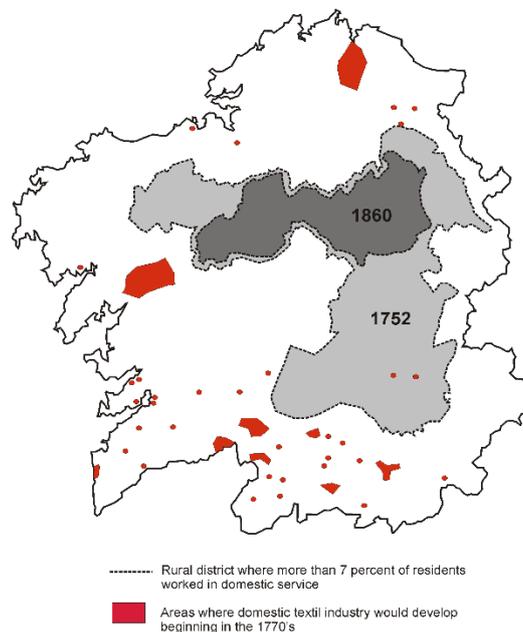
In earlier work, we showed how a labour market for these wet nurses gradually developed between 1777 and 1822 (Dubert and Muñoz-Abeledo, 2021). This was possible due to three factors. First, between 1777 and 1816, a system of six foundling hospitals was established in the region's periphery. The aim was to complement the reception and attention given to foundlings by the Royal Hospital of Santiago de Compostela since 1524. Second, wages paid to external wet nurses of the new foundling hospitals were improved relative to the wages paid by the old Royal Hospital to its wet nurses. Third, the benevolence laws (1822, 1836, 1849) of the nascent liberal state, which helped professionalize the occupation, were implemented.

Still, the wages paid by Galician foundling hospitals were the lowest in Spain (Sarasúa, 2021: 470-482). This was because most of the hospitals established between 1777 and 1816 were small and experienced continual funding difficulties. Also, domestic production played an important role in peasant households, which allowed hospitals to offer lower wages than otherwise would have been acceptable. Finally, women in the countryside had few work alternatives. This was especially true after 1820–1830, when domestic service and the rural textile industry offered few job opportunities.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, an important labour market for domestic service existed in certain areas of rural Galicia. For example, in the bishopric of Lugo, located in Galicia's interior, men and women servants worked in 23 percent of households throughout the second half of the 18th century. Indeed, the job occupied 7–8 percent of the bishopric's residents. Fifty-five percent of these servants were women from the lower strata of peasantry. Forty-six percent of rural servants found work in the homes of small local nobility and parish clergy, which together comprised 10 percent of the households of Galicia's interior, while 48 percent were contracted by peasant families, which made up 76 percent of rural households (Dubert, 2005: 20-21).

Nevertheless, in the first decades of the 19th century, the supply of rural domestic service work experienced a strong contraction, particularly in Lugo (Map 1). This was due to a chain of circumstances that negatively affected the traditional sources of income of the main employers of servants—small nobility, parish clergy, and elite peasantry. These circumstances included the abolition of feudalism (1811) and peasants' subsequent resistance to paying feudal rents to lords and the church; falling agricultural prices at the beginning of the 19th century and, more generally, the end of the era of agricultural prosperity (1770–1840); loss of income caused by the war against the French (1808–1814); disentanglement of ecclesiastic assets (1836, 1841); and the implementation of a new fiscal system (1845) (Dubert, 2015: 79-82).

**Map 1: Contraction of Rural Domestic-Service Labour Markets and Expansion of Rural Domestic Industry**



Source: Dubert, 2015: 80; Carmona, 1990: 80. Prepared by the authors.

A similar process took place over the same period in areas where a rural textile industry (linens) had developed and where, curiously, domestic service lacked importance in the labour market. This is what happened in the old province of Ourense and in territories near the Atlantic and Cantabrian coast that were part of other Galician provinces (Map 1). After the port of A Coruña was opened to colonial trade in 1765, the linen industry in these territories expanded greatly. Most were rural districts that had experienced strong demographic growth in past decades and thus were characterized by high population densities—from 60 to more than 100 residents per square kilometre—and a noted predominance of small farms. In this context, the intensive nature of linen work, its reduced opportunity cost, and the easy and quick sale of its product both within and outside of Galicia would turn the industry into an activity that allowed women to gain an income they could contribute to their families' subsistence (Carmona Badía, 1990: 76-81).

But, as with domestic service, the rural domestic industry began to decline after the war against the French in the mid-1810s. Essentially, this was due to the loss of the Spanish colonial market, where a substantial part of Galicia's linen production had been sold. Another factor was the systematic competition from cotton fabrics that reached the Iberian Peninsula thanks to intense coastal smuggling. Nor should it be forgotten that the linen industry, whose market continued to shrink, was unable to introduce technical advances in the production process that would have improved the quality and reduced the price of its final products, thus making them less competitive than cotton textiles. (Alonso Álvarez, 2011: 47; Carmona, 1990: 190-199).

The growing difficulties of rural Galician women to find work in domestic service or the linen industry coincided with the gradual formation of a labour market linked to the care and rearing of foundlings. Although it is impossible to know whether the wet nurses contracted by Galician foundling hospitals after 1822 were at some point in their earlier lives servants or workers in rural

industry, what is known is that the new labour market was located near—or in—those areas where, until the beginning of the 19th century, women could find remunerated work in domestic service or the linen industry (Maps 1 and 2). Now, scarcity of jobs led some of these women to contract out as external wet nurses for the new foundling hospitals. In most cases, as we shall see, they did not become wet nurses because the wages were high (they were not) but rather because the wages constituted income that was complementary with their domestic economies in a geographic area that lacked wage alternatives. We will explore this phenomenon, which has been observed in other places in Europe (Florenty, 1991: 623-625; Fonte, 1996: 391; Cavallo, 1983: 402), in the following pages.

Information from sources involved in the operation of five of the eight foundling hospitals (that existed in Galicia after the implementation of the benevolence laws) will help us describe the social-labour profile of wet nurses. The same information will also help us locate and describe the institutions' labour markets, determine their economic impact on the surrounding rural world, and begin to understand the importance of wet-nurse wages for family economies.

To address all of these questions, we have used information contained in a varied body of documents composed of annual payment books, receipts for the surrender of children, credentials provided by wet nurses when they received children, and notebooks that followed the upbringing of foundlings, all from the hospitals of Santiago (1860),<sup>i</sup> A Coruña (1858-1860),<sup>ii</sup> Ferrol (1854-1893),<sup>iii</sup> Ourense (1858-1860),<sup>iv</sup> and Pontevedra (1875-1879).<sup>v</sup> By recording distinct mentions of external wet nurses in these sources (civil status, age, geographic origin, husband's name, children in care, wages, length of work, etc.) and then cross-referencing them, we have been able to create a nominal dataset that summarizes the essential parts of the work histories of 3,743 women from 1854 to 1893.<sup>vi</sup>

### **External Wet Nurses: Profile and Labour Markets**

During the 19th century, many of those responsible for foundling hospitals in southern Europe championed the idea that the bulk of wet nurses should be married women of rural origin. They believed that such women combined morality, health, and sturdiness—values that, they hoped, would be transmitted to the foundlings they raised.<sup>vii</sup> Likewise, and especially in the case of Italy, hospital authorities wanted wet nurses to belong to peasant families that were removed from poverty. They asserted that this would be to the benefit of the health and diet of foundlings, who furthermore, in these conditions, would learn useful trades with which they could make a future living (Kertzer, Koball, White, 1997: 214-215).

However, in practice, the continual arrival of children to the foundling wheel as well as the economic problems suffered by foundling hospitals, forced administrators to accept young women from poor strata of peasantry as wet nurses. This is what happened in the foundling hospitals of northern Portugal. There, the majority of wet nurses belonged to families of day labourers or small peasants whose lands were insufficient to support a family, and so the women's wages helped with the needs of their domestic economies. Similarly, in Spain (as in Italy), the bulk of these women usually resided in rural areas that were relatively distant from the foundling hospitals and whose agrarian economies were, moreover, very poor and based on self-subsistence. The administrators of French foundling hospitals, however, were always aware that poverty was an intrinsic characteristic of the families of the women that worked as external wet nurses (Fonte,

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1996: 384-385; Sarasúa, 2021; Mazzoni and Manfredini, 2007: 87; Brunet, 2008: 161-162; Bardet and Faron, 1996: 144).

The sources used for this research do not allow us to systematically and precisely establish the social origin of the wet nurses employed by Galician foundling hospitals. However, the available evidence indicates that—as in neighboring Portugal—these women came from families of day labourers or small peasants with little land (whether owned or leased), which forced family members to develop intensive pluri-activity in order to survive. For example, between 1855 and 1859, marriage certificates in the municipality of Saviñao (in Galicia’s interior) show that wet nurses who appeared on the roster of the Royal Hospital of Santiago were married to day labourers. Regarding this point, we have located up to ten cases in San Martiño da Cova, one of the parishes with the greatest number of wet nurses in the municipality during those years.<sup>viii</sup> Similarly, the significant presence of small peasants and day labourers in mountain and “high country” districts that were especially tied to the operation of foundling hospitals in Ourense, Santiago de Compostela, and Pontevedra tells the same story, as we shall see. In these districts, some women specialized in the occupation of wet nurse after the possibility of making a wage from domestic service had disappeared.

Between 1787 and 1896, 92–98 percent of the external wet nurses in Santiago were married women of rural origin. For its part, mentions of the systematic appearance of these women as wet nurses in the scant sources preserved for A Coruña’s hospital—which was financed by the church, private donations, royal authorities, and the municipal council—are recorded only three months after its establishment, in July 1793. At the time, its administrators showed a firm desire to keep and care for children until they reached legal age, thus saving the children a trip to Santiago de Compostela, which the administrators considered to be arduous and harmful to their lives. Their idea was to operate autonomously, emulating the model of the Compostela hospital (López Picher, 2017: 603-609 y 612).

**Table 1: Civil Status of Wet Nurses Who Worked in Galician Foundling Hospitals (%)**

Civil Status	Ourense 1858–60	Pontevedra 1875–79	Ferrol 1854–93	Santiago 1860	A Coruña 1858–60
Married	no data	45	63	96	no data
Single	no data	44	28	1	no data
Widowed	no data	11	9	3	no data
Total		100	100	100	
Number of cases		227	552	916	

Source: ADP, *Inclusa provincial*, Registro general de entrada de expósitos, legajos 14.721-3 y 14.722-1; ADC, *Hogar Infantil de Ferrol*, legajos M. 4169; M. 4170; M. 4171; AHUS, *Sección Expósitos*, legajo 233. Prepared by the authors.

But the presence of married women working as wet nurses in small foundling hospitals that appeared between 1777 and 1816 (which lacked economic resources and firm institutional support for their operations, whether from the church, the crown, or the municipal councils of the cities in which they were located) was much lower.

This was the case, for example, of Ferrol's foundling hospital (established in 1786). The same would occur with foundling hospitals that were founded with very few means during the second half of the 19th century, such as the one in Pontevedra (established in 1872). Even so, for both cases, the rural provenance of wet nurses, as a whole, remained about 86–87 percent of the total. In this circumstance, the lesser role of married women could be explained by a combination of welfare constraints and material shortages, which initially led many of the foundling hospitals that opened between 1777 and 1816 to function as dependent branches of Santiago's hospital, where they periodically sent children that had been abandoned in their own foundling wheels.<sup>ix</sup> This economic and human precariousness, together with the need to attend to the children at the first moments of their lives, must have contributed to the relaxation of the moral conditions required of wet nurses until then, thus allowing a greater number of single women to enter the profession.

The presence of single women in the occupation likewise had the virtue of changing somewhat the traditional form of recruitment that had prevailed since at least 1822. As in other countries in southern Europe, such as Italy, rural parish priests played an important role (Kertzer, Koball, White, 1997: 214). These priests exacerbated the vigilance exercised over the labour performance of wet nurses, particularly if they were single.

### **The Economic Impact of Foundling Hospitals: Wages and the Family Economies of Wet Nurses**

The demand for external wet nurses in the foundling hospitals of rural districts in the foothills of Sierra do Faro leads us to ask about the economic impact that their operation must have had on the districts. To address this question, we have reconstructed the capital injected by the two principal foundling hospitals of Galicia (those of Ourense and Santiago) into the places of origin of the wet nurses who worked for them.

The balance sheet of income and expenses for the Ourense foundling hospital's fiscal year 1864–1865 reveals that it had a budget of 184,514 *reales*, of which 68 percent (125,728 *reales*) went to the payment of wet-nurse wages.<sup>x</sup> This figure is not far from that obtained by reconstructing the amounts delivered to each wet nurse each quarter during the triennium 1858–1860: 107,000 *reales* on average per year.<sup>xi</sup> Assuming that the foundling hospital's budget was about 180,000 *reales* per year, then 60 percent of the budget would have been spent on the cost of external wet nurses. Therefore, during the decade of 1851–1860, Ourense's foundling hospital would have put 1,070,000 *reales* into the family economies of wet nurses; and in 1861–1870 the figure would have been 1,250,000 *reales*. These amounts, translated into domestic income, would have helped these households, most of which belonged to the lowest strata of peasantry, mitigate the effects of the agricultural-livestock crisis of 1852–1858.

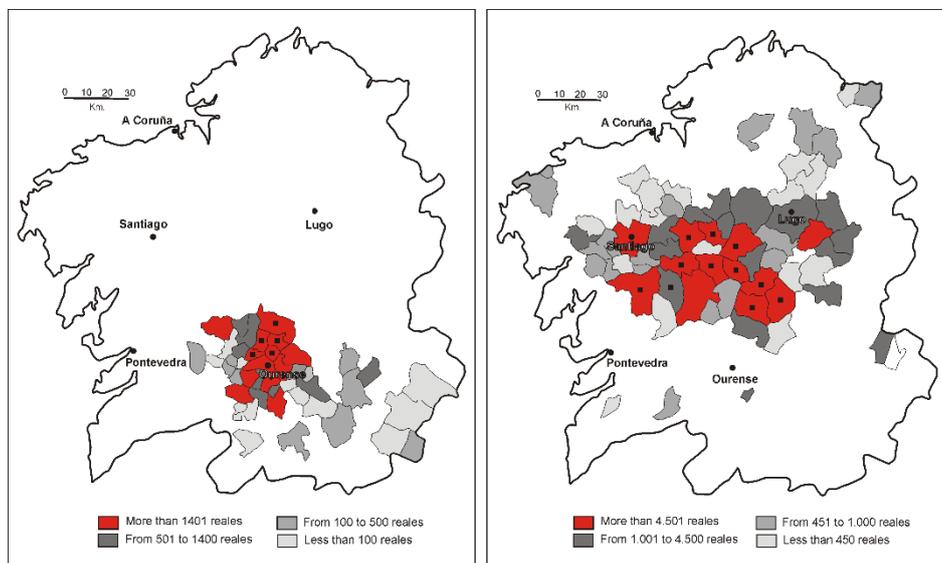
This money generally reached the rural districts that formed the foundling hospital's welfare hinterland, but in particular it went to those in the aforementioned foothills of Sierra do Faro, located to the north of Ourense. Here, according to the 1860 census, 46 percent of the men who were active in the agrarian sector—composed of proprietors, renters, and day labourers—are classified under the heading “field day labourers” (Map 2). In these districts, especially in those located in the present-day municipalities (and neighboring municipalities) of Coles, Carballedo, Vilamarín, A Peroxa, and Amoeiro (shown in Map 2 with a square), a true labour market for wet

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nurses existed and functioned. This is indicated by the fact that the 68 percent of the budget that the foundling hospital spent on wages during the triennium 1858–1860—and, according to the data, also during the decade of 1861–1871—would end up in the hands of women in this region. Here is unambiguous evidence that at this point some of the women had specialized in the profession; concretely, 18 percent of the total—that is, 1 in 6—of those in age range of 20–40 years. Moreover, if we include in this limited territorial nucleus the wet nurses who lived in the municipalities of Nogueira de Ramuín and Pereiro de Aguiar, situated in the foothills of Sierra da Queixa, to the east and northeast of the city, we would then see that 76 percent of the capital earmarked for wet nurse wages was concentrated in only 7 of the 43 municipalities that formed part of Ourense’s welfare hinterlands.

**Map 2: Annual Cash Transfers from the Foundling Hospitals of Ourense (1858–1860) and Santiago de Compostela (1860) to the Rural World**



Source: AHUS, *Sección Expósitos*, legajo 233; AHPO, Fondo Deputación Provincial, *Inclusa*, legajos 5904, 5905, 6416, 6417. Prepared by the authors.

At this level, the conduct of the foundling hospital at the Royal Hospital of Santiago, which we must remember was the largest and oldest welfare institution in Galicia for foundlings, was very similar to that of Ourense’s foundling hospital. Its ability to search for wet nurses for the children in its care extended over a wide territory. At its core, the territory included the rural districts on both sides of the foothills of the Dorsal Gallega, as well as the districts of the plateau north of the center of today’s province of Lugo, the so-called Terra Cha (Map 2). The first group of districts ran southward along the length of the mountain chain, until just reaching the municipalities of Dozón, Rodeiro, and Carballedo, which acted as a frontier border with the municipalities that formed part of the welfare hinterland generated by Ourense’s foundling hospital.

Across this vast geographic area, Compostela’s institution injected—according to data from the sum of individual wages that its administrators paid quarterly to external wet nurses in 1860—205,440 *reales*.<sup>xii</sup> This means that over the decade of the 1860s the foundling hospital would have transferred to the rural world a minimum of 2,054,000 *reales*, almost double the amount disbursed by Ourense’s foundling hospital during the same period, although over a significantly much larger territory (Map 2). The extent of this territory is related not only to the economic power of the

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institution that housed Compostela's foundling hospital, the Royal Hospital of Santiago (in 1845 it would become the Central Hospital of Galicia, financed by the four Galician Provincial Councils; García Guerra, 2001: 224, 288), but also to its recruitment strategy for wet nurses, inherited from the old regime.

Otherwise, the relationship between the foundling hospital in Santiago, as issuer of cash, and the surrounding rural districts, as recipients of the cash, was similar to that found in Ourense. Seventy-one percent of the capital used by administrators to pay wet nurses tended to be concentrated in a limited number of municipalities—12 of the total 69—situated in the foothills of the Dorsal Gallega and in the highlands leading to them (shown in Map 2 with a square). However, and in contrast to what happened in Ourense, the number of women between the ages of 20 and 40 who worked as wet nurses in this small territorial nucleus was limited to just 2.5 percent of the total. In other words, the operation of Santiago's foundling hospital did not give rise to, or encourage, the specialization of women in this profession, even though in municipalities such as Vila de Cruces their numbers made up about 6 percent of the total, or in Palas de Rei, O Saviñao, and Antas de Ulla, where they were about 4 percent of the total. Consequently, the income that wet nurses' family economies obtained by this means would only have helped a tiny part of the region's peasantry mitigate the negative effects of the agricultural-livestock crisis of 1852–1858.

Nonetheless, whether in Santiago, Ourense, or any of the other cities with a foundling hospital, the money that these institutions regularly injected into more or less nearby rural districts always ended up in the hands of wet nurses in the form of low wages, the lowest of Spain. To give us an idea how low, we can take as a reference point what was paid to the external wet nurses of Santiago during the 1850s and 1860s: 20 reales per month (Dubert and Muñoz-Abeledo, 2021: 55–62). This amount was 33–50 percent lower than the wages offered during the same period in Navarra, Euskadi, Aragón, and Andalucía; 20–50 percent lower than the wages paid in Castile; 17–33 percent lower than those delivered in Valencia; and 50–60 percent lower than those disbursed in the foundling hospitals of big cities like Barcelona, Madrid, and Seville (Sarasúa, 2021: 470–482).

**Table 2: Number of Children Cared for by External Wet Nurses (%), 1858–1893**

Number of Children Cared for by Wet Nurse	Ferrol 1848–1893	A Coruña 1858–1860	Santiago 1860	Pontevedra 1875–1879	Ourense 1858–1860
1	87,2	65,9	93,0	83,8	81,5
2	9,5	25,4	6,4	14,0	13,9
3 or more	3,3	8,7	0,5	2,2	4,6
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	546	693	916	229	1359

Source: ADP, *Inclusa provincial*, Registro general de entrada de expósitos, legajos 14.721-3 y 14.722-1; ADC, *Hogar Infantil de Ferrol*, legajos M. 4169; M. 4170; M. 4171; AHUS, *Sección Expósitos*, legajo 233; AHPO, Fondo Deputación Provincial, *Inclusa*, legajos 5904, 5905, 6416, 6417; ADC, *Hogar Infantil da Coruña*, legajo M. 4127. Prepared by the authors.

In spite of this, Galician wet nurses could count on various resources to compensate for the lowness of their wages. One of these was domestic production, which saved more than a few expenditures in families' basket of purchases (Borderías Modejar and Muñoz-Abeledo, 2018). Another, and perhaps more important in this field, was combining the care of a nursing child with that of one or two children who were already weaned (see Table 2). At different points of the second half of the 19th century, this “dry nursing” was carried out by approximately 13–19 percent of the women employed by Galician foundling hospitals, although, in the case of A Coruña's foundling hospital, the average was about 34 percent for the years 1858–1860.

The reconstruction of a family budget for households headed by men day labourers will give us a much better picture of the possibilities that wet nurses' incomes offered to domestic economies, which will illustrate what happened at this level in the poor strata of peasantry. These households were much more common in Galicia than generally believed. In 1860 the percentage of men day labourers with respect to the total number of men who were active in the agricultural sector—composed of proprietors, renters, and day labourers—was, at 65 percent in the province of A Coruña and 57 percent in the province of Pontevedra, greater than the Spanish average. Given their numerical importance in the population of Galicia's active agricultural men, it is worthwhile to reconstruct their families' main incomes and expenses to evaluate what the wage contribution of external wet nurses would mean within this framework.

We will consider a typical family composed of two adults and one or two small children. The head of the house declared himself a day labourer, and the wife worked for one of Galicia's foundling hospitals. We will pay attention to what happened to this typical family in the middle of the 19th century in the Lugo municipalities of the Dorsal Gallega, where women worked as wet nurses for the foundling hospital of the Royal Hospital, and in the rural districts close to the cities of A Coruña and Ourense, where women worked for those foundling hospitals. In these three cases, we will assume, furthermore, that the wives of these typical families would have had two foundlings in their care, a nursing child and a child who was already weaned, for which she earned a lower wage.

**Table 3: Annual Family Expense Among Men Day Labourers, A Coruña, 1850**

Expense Items	Reales
Food	700
Clothing and Shoes	240
Housing Rent	80
Total Annual Expense	1,020

Source: *Encuesta Agraria de 1849–52*, Archivo del Ministerio de Agricultura (AMA), legajo 123. Prepared by the authors.

The annual current expenditures of families of agricultural day labourers that we have considered were obtained from the answers to questions 4 and 5 of the questionnaire in the Agrarian Survey of 1849–52, sent from the Ministry of Agriculture to local agricultural boards and economic societies on December 15, 1849.<sup>xiii</sup> Unfortunately, this documentary source only gives us the expenditure budget of one family of day labourers in the province of A Coruña (see Table 3).<sup>xiv</sup> We will start with the assumption that, in its main components (food, housing rent, clothing and shoes), this would have been the average expenditure for families of Galician day labourers in the middle of the 19th century. We point out that this budget does not include medical expenses, debt,

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taxes, or small leisure expenses (for men, the tavern); nor does it take into account the costs associated with domestic production, which certainly had to be important, since day labourers in the countryside had access to small pieces of land, owned or rented, from which were obtained basic foods such as potatoes, cereals (corn and rye), vegetables, and legumes.

Taking this into account, Table 3 shows the annual expenses that a day-labourer family in Galicia would have had: 1,020 *reales*. To meet these expenses, the family would count on, to begin with, the daily wage received by the head of the household who worked as agrarian day laborer a total of 165 days per year, as recorded in the Agrarian Survey, if the individual belonged to the provinces of Lugo or A Coruña, or fewer days, about 120, if he was from Ourense.

**Table 4: Income and Expenses of a Family Composed of an Agricultural Day Labourer, a Wet Nurse, Two Children, and One or Two Foundlings in 1850 (reales per year)**

12

Foundling Hospital that Employs Wife	Daily Wage of Day Labourer	Annual Work Days	Annual Income of Day Labourer	Annual Income of Wet Nurse with 1 Foundling (nursing)	Annual Income of Wet Nurse with 2 Foundlings (nursing and dry)	Total Annual Family Expense	Portion of Family Expense Covered by Day Labourer (%)	Percentage of Expenses Covered by Wet Nurse with 2 Foundlings (%)
Lugo	3.5	165	577.5	240	432	1,020	56.6	42
Ourense	4.0	120	480.0	219	360	1,020	47.0	35
A Coruña	3.5	165	577.5	360	576	1,020	56.6	56

Source: Libro de Tarjas [wage payments] of Hospital Real de Santiago de Compostela, Payment Books of foundling hospitals in Ourense and Coruña, and Encuesta Agraria de 1849–52 (AMA), legajo 123. Prepared by the authors.

Looking at this construction of a budget of income and expenses, it turns out that a husband's day wage covered 47–57 percent of family expenses in the middle of the 19th century (Table 4). In the case of a wife with a nursing foundling in her care, families in A Coruña and Lugo would be better off. (The hospital of A Coruña paid the highest wages in the region.) In Coruña, the annual domestic budget deficit would be 8 percent, while in Lugo it would be 19 percent. These shortfalls would have to be covered through pluri-activity; for example, men's work in Castile's harvests, Andalucía's mines, or the transport and sales of various products in local markets. The earnings of the wife, who worked as a wet nurse with two foundlings in her charge, covered 42 percent of total expenses in Lugo; a little less in the case of Ourense (35 percent) and a bit more than half if the wife was employed by the foundling hospital of A Coruña (56 percent), which traditionally paid higher wages than that of Santiago (Dubert y Muñoz-Abeledo, 2021: 55-62).

Everything shows that the domestic economies of the families studied within each territorial range were practically in budgetary equilibrium, with those of day labourers in A Coruña even showing a tiny capacity for saving. This means that the occupation of wet nurse played an important role in the heart of the limited, fragile family economies of Galicia's lowest strata of peasantry, since their income, however meagre, was at times greater than that of an agricultural day labourer, who generally worked from a third to half of the year. In this regard, the reconstruction of work histories of some of the wet nurses who resided in the Lugo municipality of O Saviñao reveals that many of them, besides having more than one foundling in their care, were employed a good part of their reproductive lives—between 12 and 15 years—by the foundling hospital of Santiago,

so the income they earned was, as well as continual and regular, an essential component for the survival of their households.

On the other hand, the wage charged by external wet nurses of the founding hospitals in Santiago, Pontevedra, and Orense hardly varied throughout the last third of the 19th century and was, furthermore, the same for Santiago and Orense after 1885: 30 *reales* per month for breastfeeding. We know from reports by the Commission of Social Reforms in the 1880s that this wage was similar to the wages received by women working in weaving mills of A Coruña and by women sardine packers in the salting plants of the seaboard (Muñoz-Abeledo, 2010). For their part, wet nurses married to day labourers in Galicia's interior made a similar contribution to their family economies as that made by women in salting who were married to fishermen in coastal Galicia—covering between 20 and 30 percent of the family budget.

### Final Thoughts

The expansion of Galicia's assistance system in the years 1777–1816 lay the foundation for what would become, after 1822, a regulated and structured labour market for wet nurses. This expansion coincided with a period in which it became increasingly difficult for women to find work in domestic service or the rural textile industry (Muñoz-Abeledo, Taboada and Verdugo 2015; Dubert, 2006). This encouraged the gradual development of the occupation of wet-nursing for women in rural districts, until, by the middle of the 19th century, it had become a specialized job and, as such, was recorded in the official bulletins of the different Galician provinces.<sup>xv</sup>

For the care they offered children, wet nurses received a monthly wage that was delivered in several payments during the year. In this sense, they formed part of quasi-fixed labour force during an important part of their life cycles. The wage was low, especially if we compare it with what was paid by founding hospitals in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula (Catalonia, Navarre, Euskadi...). Even so, it has been shown to be key for the successful operation of family economies, independently of whether or not the wet nurses who received it worked in a geographic area that specialized in the occupation. Nursing or caring for a single foundling provided limited income, but women who cared for two or more foundlings earned significantly more. Provided that they were married to day labourers, as was likely, these women (with more than one foundling) could make a wage contribution that would cover between 35 and 56 percent of total family expenses (see Table 4). These percentages are greater than those known for other places in northern Spain for the same period (Le Play, 1990).

Another source of income cannot be forgotten—what the families of wet nurses received by hiring out their foundlings for fieldwork. Many foundlings remained in the rural districts where external wet nurses had raised them. Upon reaching the age of six, they were adopted by their wet nurses. Thus, for example, in 10 percent of the households in the 1900 municipal enumerator book for O Saviñao, whose wet nurses mostly worked for the foundling hospital of Santiago, it is possible to find individuals with the name or surname “Foundling,” who are recorded as heads of household or as family members.<sup>xvi</sup> This evidence would warrant greater research to deepen and widen what is known about child labour in rural Galicia (Muñoz-Abeledo, 2017).

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<sup>i</sup> Arquivo Histórico da Universidade de Santiago (AHUS), *Sección Expósitos*, legajo 233 (1857-1861).

<sup>ii</sup> Arquivo da Deputación da Coruña (ADC), *Hogar Infantil da Coruña*, legajo M. 4127.

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<sup>iii</sup> ADC, *Hogar Infantil de Ferrol*, legajos M. 4169, M. 4170 y M. 4171. In this case, we have gathered and used credentials for 652 wet nurses for the years 1854–1893, which were then refined following the logic detailed in the main text. Information from these credentials has been managed after carrying out a random sample of 20 percent of the total number of credentials issued by the foundling hospital between 1854 and 1893.

<sup>iv</sup> Archivo Histórico Provincial de Ourense (AHPO), Fondo Deputación Provincial, *Inclusa*, legajos 5904, 5905, 6416, 6417.

<sup>v</sup> Arquivo da Deputación de Pontevedra (ADP), *Inclusa provincial*, Registro general de entrada de expósitos, legajos 14.721-3 y 14.722-1.

<sup>vi</sup> Of these women, 1,359 worked for the foundling hospital in Ourense, 916 for the hospital in Santiago, 693 for the hospital in A Coruña, 546 for the hospital in Ferrol, and 229 for the hospital in Pontevedra.

<sup>vii</sup> “... En igualdad de circunstancias, serán estas preferidas: porque comúnmente el campo es el albergue de la salud...”, *Cartilla o método que se observará en la Inclusa del Gran Hospital Nacional de Santiago para con sus expósitos, dispuesta por la junta interina del mismo*. Santiago, Oficina de Juan Francisco Montero, 1821.

<sup>viii</sup> Arquivo Municipal de Saviñao, Rexistros de Matrimonios, 1850-1860.

<sup>ix</sup> As we shall see, this is what happened in Ferrol. A similar operation has also been recorded in the foundling hospital of Lugo, from which, throughout the 1830s, foundling remittances were sent to Santiago with some regularity. See Sobrado Correa, 2001: 227–230.

<sup>x</sup> AHPO, Fondo Deputación Provincial, *Inclusa*, legajos 6416 y 6417.

<sup>xi</sup> AHPO, Fondo Deputación Provincial, *Inclusa*, legajo 5904 y 5905.

<sup>xii</sup> AHUS, *Sección Expósitos*, legajo 233 (1857–1861).

<sup>xiii</sup> Archivo de Ministerio de Agricultura, *Encuesta de 1849*, Ministerio de Agricultura, sección de Fondos del siglo XIX, legajo 123.

<sup>xiv</sup> Question 4 asks, “What is the mid point of the wage of the agricultural worker? Does he have work all year round? How many days does he find himself without work, on average?” Question 5 states, “Make a prudent calculation of what each agricultural worker needs to feed himself and his entire family, including in the calculation: 1. Rent of the house, 2. Food for him and his family, 3. Clothing and shoes, 4. Education, if that of his children costs something.” *Encuesta Agraria de 1849–52* legajo 123 (AMA).

<sup>xv</sup> *Boletín Oficial de la Provincia de A Coruña* (1858).

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