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A gender story of institutional disengagement of young adults in Latin America

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Abstract

Latin America is home to many young adults who are neither engaged in formal education nor work, controversially dubbed as "nini" (*"ni" trabajan "ni" estudian*, denoting neither working nor studying). At the same time, early union formation and parenthood are pervasive in the region. Theories pertaining to the linkage between parenthood and female labor force participation are heavily based on evidence found in the Global North, with limited research on the topic in settings with less stable family structures, such as Latin American countries. This study tests the role household structure and family formation play on institutional disengagement of young adults in 12 Latin American countries. We explore the gender dynamic of human capital stagnation by focusing on early parenthood and conjugal partnership for women and men aged 20–25. We use censuses from the Integrated Public-Use Microdata Series and country-specific linear regression models. Our results reveal that the intersection of class and gender is a major determinant of institutional disengagement in the region. Women from lower social origins who leave parental home to enter conjugal union and parenthood at younger ages are particularly at risk. This study highlights the urgency of contextualizing the interplay between work and family within the framework of regional family norms, prompting further dialogues concerning the social implications of perceived inactivity.

KEYWORDS
early parenthood, family, gender, inactivity, Latin America, nini

1 | INTRODUCTION

A high proportion of young adults in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are neither in work (*"ni" trabajan*) nor in school (*"ni" estudian*), opening a line of research aimed at identifying the root causes of early human capital disengagement (Navarrete Lopez & Padron Innamorato, 2021). Nearly one out of five youths between the ages of 15–24 in LAC are estimated to be what has been dubbed "nini" (De Hoyos et al., 2016). The nini population is a cause for concern over several issues. On the individual level, educational and economic disengagement at young ages adversely affect lifetime earnings and occupational opportunities (Amarante et al., 2017), leading to a heightened risk of economic vulnerability and social marginalization. On the societal level, untapped human resources and failure to harness productivity stifle regional economic growth, which further limits the development of structural opportunities. Limited upward mobility and unmet basic needs fuel social unrest, which has extensively plagued the region in recent years (Sánchez-Ancochea, 2021).

One alarming aspect of the nini phenomenon is its gender imbalance, or the high propensity for women to disengage in education and work at young ages. Although family and labor force participation are often highly interrelated for young women everywhere, including societies with comprehensive social safety nets and egalitarian policies (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009), it is of particular interest in LAC. The region holds several attributes that in combination sets it apart from the rest of the world: single motherhood and union instability are common (Esteve, Lesthaeghe, et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2017; Socolow, 2015), social mobility remains limited (Azevedo & Bouillon, 2010; Behrman et al., 2001; Blanden, 2009; Torche, 2014), and public welfare systems are less refined compared to wealthier regions (Gough, 2010). These characteristics of LAC in combination with female early labor market detachment place women and their offspring on a path of disadvantage which carries long-term repercussions for both generations (Rodríguez Vignoli & Cobos, 2014).

Extensive work has addressed gender economic inequality in LAC, through investigating gender wage gap (Angel-Urdinola & Wodon, 2006; Ben Yahmed, 2018; Ñopo & Hoyos, 2010), occupational barriers (Klasen, 2019), early school drop-out (Marteleto & Villanueva, 2018), and female labor force participation (FLFP) (Busso & Fonseca, 2015). These studies often pinpoint the primary factor that stalls women's labor market activities: starting her own conjugal family. Once having formed a partnership, women invest more time to care work and household chores than men, particularly following childbirth, decreasing their availability for labor market work (Amarante & Rossel, 2018; Busso & Fonseca, 2015; Urdinola & Tovar, 2019), although highly educated women are more likely to remain in the labor market (Chioda, 2011; Gasparini et al., 2015). Overall, early entrance into motherhood entails foregone human capital accumulation, which is deleterious toward lifetime earnings, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Chioda, 2011; Miller, 2009).

A wealth of literature highlight gender specialization of market and household work among couples in Western, higher-income societies, under the context of marriage and stable unions (Becker, 1993; Oppenheimer, 1997; Özcan & Breen, 2012). We argue that the processes associated with women's human capital accumulation and employment upon entering adulthood in LAC require a different lens due to the region's remarkably high union instability, and as a result, pervasive single motherhood (Esteve, García-Román, et al., 2012). Under the context of universal marriage and union stability, gender specialization in market and household work starts from a baseline of shared resources among the conjugal partners, particularly in child rearing. Without such context, early departure from school or labor market inactivity due to partnership formation and/or childbearing place women and their children in severe economic insecurity should the union dissolve.

Quantifying the level of labor market engagement comes with unique challenges for LAC due to its extensive underground economy, upheld by individuals who work informally. Many studies point to the gender inequality of labor market informality, with women's informality rate 20% higher than men's (Tornarolli et al., 2014), and motherhood being a significant factor in women's participation in the shadow economy (Berniell et al., 2019). Although

working informally differs substantially from not working, we focus on the concept of disengagement from formal institutions and consider informal work to be an albeit different, but also severe, form of vulnerability.

Beyond labor market visibility, in recent years, the notion of nini sparked controversy among scholars, with opponents citing the inaccuracy of referring to women who are rearing children as inactive (Assusa, 2019; Santillan Pizarro & Pereyra, 2020). In fact, when one excludes young mothers from such definition, the number of nini's plummets from eight to just over one million, most of whom are men (Assusa, 2019; Leyva & Negrete, 2014). Some studies propose to exclude women in the nini universe, or simply consider them as being "temporary nini" while they are under care work obligations (e.g (Paz, 2021). We argue against this framework of traditional gender division of work, particularly in the context of LAC where union instability is high, and household-level well-being does not necessarily translate into individual benefit in the long term. The perspective of institutional disengagement therefore requires the consideration of socioeconomic inequality and family situations as individuals transition to adulthood, that is, form conjugal unions, have children, or experience separation.

Our study focuses on life course disadvantage in the LAC region by addressing those aged between 20 and 25 who do not participate in formal education nor labor market across 12 countries in LAC using censuses from the Integrated Public-Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-I). We propose a comprehensive view of disengagement in both the labor market and education in young adulthood, by exploring how it is related to young adults' family situations and how it differs by gender and social origin.

This work contributes to the literature on gender disparity in human capital accumulation in early life stages, which leads to further bifurcation of men and women's opportunity structures over the life course (Deere & Leon, 2003). Not only can gender contribute to diverging family and work pathways, the lack of engagement in the public sphere in general exposes men and women to different sets of risks. For women, a gender wage gap leads to a gender pension gap (CEPAL, 2019), due to women's lower labor force participation with more extended interruptions in working life, which can result in later life precarity (Amarante et al., 2017). Additionally, for single mothers who are not working nor studying, the double load of economic strain and child rearing responsibilities expose both mother and child(ren) to economic uncertainty. For men, in some places, such as Mexico-US border, early drop-out of school and failure to enter gainful employment often puts young adults at an elevated risk of involvement in gangs and criminal activities (De Hoyos & Gutiérrez Fierros, 2017) lowering life expectancy for men (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019) on the individual level, while introducing crime and insecurity on the regional level.

It is important to note that we define inactivity as non-participation in the formal institutions of education and work (simply noted as "inactivity" hereon for simplicity). This also implies that, the observed prevalence of nini-hood among socioeconomically vulnerable households, is likely to signal a double burden: lack of social protection and long-term financial vulnerability, on the one hand, and low-paid, unstable, sometimes exploitative working conditions in the informal economy, on the other (Portes & Hoffman, 2003). Apart from paying particular attention to these conceptual and measurement challenges when describing and discussing our results, our approach carries several strengths. First, the harmonized census datasets across LAC countries allow us to make cross-national comparisons to provide a broad regional overview. Second, extensive family information can be inferred from household level census data, such as family composition and early parenthood. Lastly, the data allows us to examine both the conjugal structure and the timing of parenthood. To our knowledge, no study has tested the relationship between both work and educational inactivity by household structure, particularly early partnership and parenthood, from a cross-national perspective in LAC.

2 | INACTIVITY: NINI (A.K.A. NEET)

Young adults in LAC who do not work nor study are commonly referred to as "nini" ("*ni estudian ni trabajan*", or "neither work nor study") (De Hoyos et al., 2016; De Hoyos & Gutiérrez Fierros, 2017) or sometimes NEET ("not in education, employment or training"). Globally, higher income countries, such as Sweden and Luxembourg, tend to have lower percentage of ninis, hovering between 4 and 5% of all young adults, while Iraq, Guyana, and Nigeria have the highest incidence of ninis at a striking 43–51% (De Hoyos et al., 2016). Although LAC shows a similar percentage of ninis as

the global average, around 22.4%, the percentage of ninis is particularly high in Central America. Due to population sizes, the largest numbers of ninis in the region can be found in Brazil and Colombia (De Hoyos et al., 2016). The vast majority (76%) of ninis are women, which juxtaposed against overall higher female representation in secondary school enrollment and completion in the region (PAHO, 2018).

Overall, the gender gap in labor force participation in LAC has slightly converged from 1990 to 2010, with 40.7% women and 82.5% men working in 1990 and 52.6% women and 79.6% men in 2010. The participation gap between women and men in the recent years is notably larger in Central American countries such as Mexico (43.4% vs. 80.6% for women and men respectively) and Honduras (43.3% and 81.6%), compared to Bolivia (61.6% and 82%) and Peru (66.8% and 83.4%) (ILO, 2013).

Latin America and the Caribbean saw an impressive rise in FLFP from the 90–2010s, but has since experienced a deceleration in the recent years, with a growth of 0.2% between the 2005–2012, down from 0.81% between 1992 and 2005 (Gasparini et al., 2015). Gasparini and colleagues find that several conditions are positively associated with women's market work, such as living in urban areas, being highly educated, and being single. Some situations, such as being married to a high earner, stipulate multiple opposing influences on women's participation such as that wives of high earners have lower economic needs to work but tend to be highly educated herself.

Among working individuals, previous studies have revealed gender disparity in the labor market in LAC, such as in the form of gender wage gap (Ben Yahmed, 2018; Ñopo & Hoyos, 2010). Paradoxically, disparity increased with factors that were expected to level the playing field for women, such as the introduction of new labor regulations aimed to protect women inadvertently led to some companies' reluctance to hire women (Angel-Urdinola & Wodon, 2006). As years of schooling for women increase, tighter gender gate-keeping in decision-making positions (Camou & Maubrigades, 2017) and occupational barriers (Klasen, 2019) are speculated to have led to only a modest comparative wage improvement for women. Other aspects of gender disparity in the labor market, such as inactivity in young adulthood, are far less studied.

Measuring labor market inactivity in LAC is complex, due to a large number of individuals, mostly women, working in informal sectors (Berniell et al., 2019; ILO, 2013). However, previous work which target a selected number of LAC countries, namely, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Mexico, point to the fact that informal jobs are often taken on by mothers who are unable to juggle inflexible formal work alongside household and childcare responsibilities, and these jobs offer little social protection and may expose women to abuse and exploitation (Casanova, 2019; Chaney & Garcia Castro, 1989; Villanueva & Lin, 2020). Informality of work is often associated with unskilled labor, lower wages, and a diminishing probability of ever moving into the formal labor market (Gong & van Soest, 2002). The severe penalty of invisibility in the labor market, carries repercussions that are akin to being entirely absent from the labor market. This work does not test the impact of informal work. We focus our attention on individuals not engaging in formal education nor the formal labor market.

Overall, women's engagement in the labor market fluctuates across the life course by both macroeconomic conditions, such as labor supply demand in female-dominant industries, and microeconomic or individual-level situations, exemplified by early parenthood. For those who are absent from the formal labor market at critical work ages due to family care, playing catch up can be difficult later on even if individuals were able to return to work after a prolonged disengagement spell. Despite having experienced substantial educational expansion in the recent years, LAC has seen limited changes in early partnership and childbearing, a linkage found in other parts of the world (Caffe et al., 2017; Esteve & Florez-Paredes, 2018; Esteve, Lesthaeghe, et al., 2012). In studying youth potential in LAC, it is crucial to examine the competing risks and opportunities of labor market entry, continuing education, and institutional disengagement, with a central focus on family patterns.

3 | FAMILY IN LATIN AMERICA

A key contributor to gender inequality in labor market outcomes is the high levels of adolescent birth rate in LAC (Conde-Agudelo et al., 2005; Dongarwar & Salihu, 2019), especially in poorer and rural communities (Neal et al., 2018).

Central America and the Caribbean see the highest numbers of single-mother and female-headed households (Caffe et al., 2017; Gindling & Oviedo, 2008; Liu et al., 2017). Women not only tend to be the primary caretaker of their own children (and sometimes of other family members), but they also leave parental home and/or form union at younger ages, all of which require them to weather more uncertainties, particularly in the event of union dissolution, than young adults who remain in their parental home. Other than significant obstetric risks associated with teen pregnancy (Perry et al., 1996), long term social disadvantage for young mothers, such as limited educational, occupational opportunities and lifetime earnings, are well-documented (Bissell, 2000; Hoffman et al., 1993). The latter risks disproportionately affect women and children due to the unequal gender division of the child rearing process, particularly upon union dissolution.

At the same time, the pervasiveness of intergenerational coresidence is also a salient characteristic of Latin American families (Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008). Nearly 70% of single mothers in LAC coreside with their own parents (Esteve & Florez-Paredes, 2018), showing that interfamilial exchanges serve as a vital safety net for those in vulnerable positions. Delayed nest leaving, or prompt nest returning, can be the result of young adults' need for housing or (grand)parental care in times of hardship such as job loss, housing shortage, or early childbearing (Aragao & Villanueva, 2021; Galambos & Martínez, 2007; Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008). In the case of young mothers, living with other kin, who presumably provide some childcare, increases their probability to engage in the labor market (Aragao & Villanueva, 2021). In other words, intergenerational coresidence can serve as a remedy for early nest leaver who encounter challenges (Rodríguez Vignoli & Cobos, 2014).

Under a different context, among the more privileged, intergenerational coresidence can facilitate prolonged education of the younger generation, often under the context of delayed union formation and parenthood (Galambos & Martínez, 2007). This period of "emerging adulthood" allows the young to accumulate human capital geared toward future higher earnings (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). The pervasiveness of intergenerational households in the region also offers researchers a unique opportunity to observe intergenerational occupational mobility using cross-sectional data such as the censuses.

4 | RESEARCH AIMS

This study sheds light on the extent to which early family formation is associated with institutional disengagement, by both gender and socioeconomic background. Disengagement from formal labor force participation and education do not include (re)productive activities and learning processes occurring outside of the formal economy and the national educational systems, but we emphasize the risk of marginalization when one becomes invisible in institutions. We take a holistic view of the family and young adults' conditions by including those who are potentially providers or dependents, by looking at multiple generations and the presence of one's own conjugal family, considering that not all those who live with parents do so under the same circumstances, and by looking at three outcomes: (i) institutional disengagement (i.e., nini-hood), (ii) formal work, and (iii) educational enrollment. We stratify individuals by social class, operationalized as the education level of the household head, to detect whether the disadvantage associated with early parenthood is moderated by one's social class. We also investigate country-level differences to highlight regional heterogeneity.

5 | DATA

We use the harmonized samples of the population and housing censuses from the IPUMS-I (IPUMS-International). The main advantage of IPUMS-I data is large samples (10% of the population of each country) and wide geographical coverage. We rely on the most recent census for each of the 12 countries: Brazil (2010), Costa Rica (2011), Dominican Republic (2010), Ecuador (2010), El Salvador (2007), Guatemala (2002), Honduras (2001), Mexico (2010), Nicaragua (2005), Panama (2010), Paraguay (2002), and Peru (2007). Integrated Public-Use Microdata Series data provide a wide range of variables necessary for our analysis such as educational and work status, partnership status, household structure, place of residence, homeownership and, for young adults living with parents, parental characteristics. Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti, and Chile are excluded from the analyses due to data incompatibility in the work status

variables in Colombia and Haiti (i.e., large proportion of missing information), and school attendance in Chile (i.e., this question was not asked in the 2002 Census).

We focus on young adults, or women and men aged 20–25 at the time of the census (n = 4.4 million). Using information on the educational and employment status of young adults, we identify whether they engage in unpaid work, paid work, combine work and school, attend school only, search for a job, or none of the above (nini). Those who are unemployed but are actively searching for a job are not part of the nini universe. Thus, our measure of ninihood captures individuals that are disengaged from the educational system and the labor market at the time of the census. We create two more non-mutually exclusive outcome status, namely, "At work" and "Attending school." These two categories comprise of individuals who combine work and school.

One of the most remarkable attributes of the IPUMS-I is that individuals are organized into their households. The Constructed Family Interrelationships variable allows us to define three out of the four key variables that we use to explore the determinants of young adults' educational-work status. First, we define the structure of the household that young adults live in, using the following grouping: (i) nuclear (young adult living with both parents), (ii) single-parent (young adult living with one parent), (iii) nuclear-own (young adult living with their partner with or without children), (iv) single-parent own (young adult living without a partner and with their child), (v) extended (young adult living with parent(s) and more relatives), (vi) composite (more than one nuclear unit of people who are not necessarily related). All other household types that we could not classify as one of the above mentioned categories are grouped into (vii) other.

Second, having identified whether there are any children of young adults living in a household and using the information about the age of these children, we classify individuals according to their parenthood status and the age at which they became parents. We group young adults into those who have no children, who became parents as teenagers (19 or younger, referred to as "teenage parents") and those who became parents between age 20 and 24 (referred to as "young parents"). Third, we identify the level of education of the household head—less than primary education, primary education completed, and some secondary education or more—and use it as a proxy for the young adult's social class. Although educational attainment may not be a good proxy for social class in all contexts (e.g., high income countries), it is a good and comparable measure of individuals' social position for this study given the historical lack of universal coverage of LAC educational systems and modest enrollment rates at higher levels. This is particularly true for the household heads in our sample, generally born before 1980, who did not fully benefit from the educational expansion as reflected in their educational attainment profiles. Finally, utilizing the information on union status, we group young adults into those who are unpartnered, in a union, or married.

Beyond these key characteristics as well as individual's sex and age, we use the information on young adults' place of residence (urban or rural) and their homeownership status (renting, owning, or neither). These two latter variables account for macro- and micro-level socioeconomic disparities that may affect individuals' institutional disengagement, respectively. Opportunities of formal employment and high-quality education are scarcer in rural than urban areas. Well-paid jobs, secondary, and higher education institutions are concentrated in urban areas (Montgomery et al., 2003). Homeowners and renters are typically better off socioeconomically compared to families that neither own nor rent a home. These families typically occupy housing in exchange for work or surveillance of a larger property. This type of informal arrangement is characteristic of rural areas and exposes occupiers to vulnerability due to its informal nature and the lack of institutional regulations. In urban areas, poor families simply occupy territories, forming slums (*barrios de invasion*, *invasions*, *barrios ilegales*), and are permanently at risk of being evacuated by the authorities (Ward et al., 2015).

In order to account for differences in labor market conditions at the subnational level, and to partially alleviate the lack of direct information on informal work, we supplement our individual-level data with subnational estimates of the proportion of the working age population (n = 25, 620, 902) that are (i) outside of the labor force (i.e., neither working nor searching for a job): and (ii) working for a wage (i.e., salary workers). These two measures proxy the level of informality and formality, respectively, in local economies (first subnational geographical level in IPUMS-I). Given poverty and deprivation levels, especially in rural areas, being outside of the labor market typically implies informal income-generating activities as a self-employed worker (e.g., street vending) or working for others (e.g., fruit picking). On the other hand, among the four harmonized categories of class workers recorded by the censuses (i.e.,

self-employed, wage/salary worker, unpaid worker, and other), individuals working as "wage/salary worker" are the most likely to have a formal contract. Due to a large sample size, we are able to compute these proportions for 4826 subnational units (GEOLEV1) by area of residence (urban and rural).

6 | METHODS

We rely on country-specific linear models to predict our three outcomes of interest: 'Nini', 'In work,' and 'Attending school'. We chose the natural logarithm as the link function between outcome and predictors so that regression coefficients correspond to relative gaps between target and reference categories. Because our dependent variable is discrete (i.e., counts of individuals), we use the Poisson distribution. Due to the very large sample size and convergence properties, logistic regression models yield virtually identical results. The model is represented in Equation (1).

$$E(Y_i) = \mu_i = n_i e^{X_i \beta}; Y_i \sim Poisson(\mu_i) \quad (1)$$

In this equation, Y_i is the number of individuals in the ith variation pattern across independent variables for each outcome category, separately ('Nini', 'In work,' and 'Attending school'), X_i is a vector with the ith variation pattern across explanatory and control variables, β a vector of coefficients, and n_i is the total number of individuals in the ith variation pattern.

The three main explanatory variables are related to young adults' familial context: (i) household type, (ii) the timing of parenthood including being childless, and (iii) partnership status. Further we use the household head's education level as a proxy for young adults' social class and use this variable for assessing heterogeneity across socioeconomic status groups. In all models, we control for young adult's age, place of residence, homeownership, and subnational proxies for the levels of informality (i.e., the proportion of the working-age population that is not in the labor force) and formality (i.e., the proportion of salary/wage workers among individuals in the labor force). Controlling for these two subnational measures of labor market conditions, allows us to estimate more accurately the associations between familial context and individuals' working and schooling profiles.

In the first step, we run separate models for women and men to explore gender dynamics of young adults' formal social (dis)engagement and familial contexts (household structure, partnership, and parenthood). We plot all country-specific coefficients using colors to distinguish subregions (The Caribbean, Central and South America) and markers' size according to the country-level prevalence of informality among young adults taken from the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013). These two features (color and markers' sizes) allow us to assess geographical patterns (or lack thereof) and potential patterns due to national economic conditions.

We subsequently stratify the analyses by our measure of social class to further explore the intersection between social position, gender, and family circumstances. Because this stratification involves 36 fitted models (country-educational attainment combinations), we illustrate results using predicted proportions. We include the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of predicted proportion distributions to discern overarching regional patterns (full tables with model estimates are available upon request).

7 | RESULTS

The prevalence of informal economic activities and institutional disengagement among young adults vary substantially across Latin American countries, including those in our sample (Figure 1). Although the literature often characterizes the entire region as one of high informality with relatively large nini populations (De Hoyos et al., 2016), cross-national differences in these two dimensions are neither negligible nor perfectly correlated. Figure 1 displays the time trends in the proportion of teen and young adults' working informally in LAC countries. These time trends suggest that the prevalence of informal employment and cross-national differences in informality have been stable over the past decades. Some exceptions are Panama, which shows an increase for both sexes; El Salvador, which shows an increase for women; and Dominican Republic, which is marked by decline in informality for women.

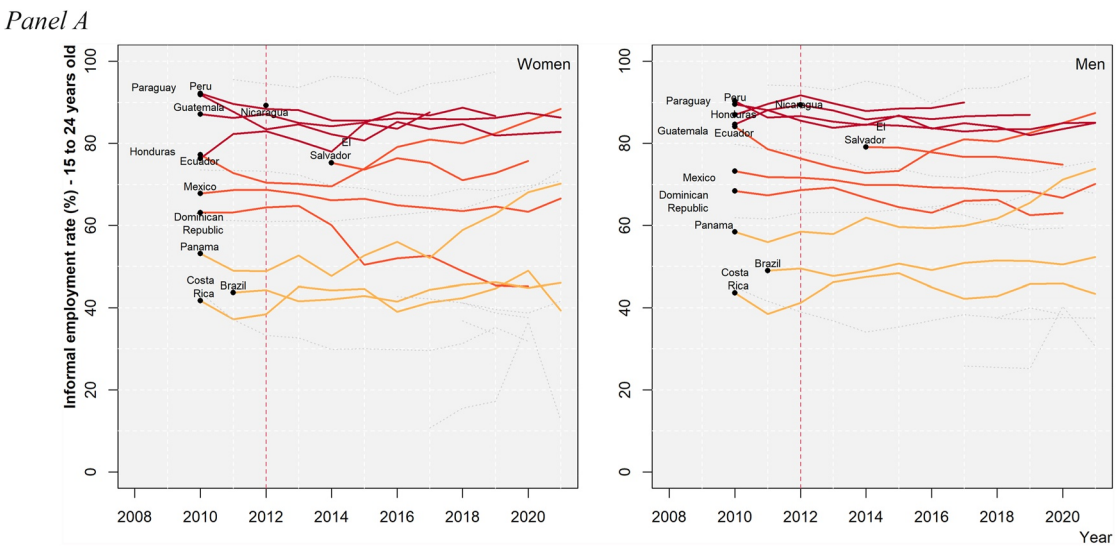

FIGURE 1 Time trends of employment informality among 15–24 years old individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by sex, 2010–2022. The colors indicate the grouping of countries in the sample according to young employment informality around 2012: Low (yellow), Medium (orange), High (red). Other Latin American and Caribbean countries are plotted in light gray.

FIGURE 2 Employment status and school attendance profiles of 20–25 years old individuals 2002–2012 in 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries by sex. The analytical sample includes all men and women aged 20–25 in the most recent sample census (2002–2010) available in the Integrated Public-Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-I) platform.

Differences between men and women have been stable and narrow from the 2010s to the present. In addition, there is no apparent geographical pattern, meaning that low (yellow), medium (orange), and high (red) informality levels appear in Caribbean, Central, and South American nations.

Figure 2 displays the distribution of young adults according to their employment and school attendance profiles, with dashed vertical lines dividing proportion into quarters to ease interpretation. Central American nations (Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) stand out by their high proportion of women that are not attending school nor working (nini-hood >50%). Mexico and South American nations display intermediate levels of nini-hood among women, and the lowest levels are observed in the two Caribbean nations (Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic) and Brazil. A small proportion of individuals, identified as "unpaid worker", work in uncompensated but non-family related tasks, such as farm or domestic help.

Contrary to the lack of sex differences in employment informality, three gender-related patterns in work and school attendance profiles are common among these 12 countries (Figure 2). First, joint disengagement from formal education and work is more prevalent among women than men. The percentage of nini women is more than twice that of men. Even in the Dominican Republic, the country with the lowest proportion of women in the nini category, women are 2.5 times more likely to be nini than men (i.e., 25.6% vs. 10.0%). Second, men are substantially more likely to be 'In work' compared to women. Third, women are more likely than men to be exclusively attending school or working and attending school simultaneously.

The two panels shown above suggest that labor market conditions, including the pervasiveness of informal work, and educational and employment opportunities, differ substantially within the region. Our study aims to uncover the extent to which family status contributes to these differences beyond macroeconomic conditions. In particular, the large gender differences in activities, particularly in Central America, calls for an urgent examination of potential factors linked to women's relative inactivity in the public sphere.

7.1 | Institutional disengagement

Figures 3, 5, and 7 show the family-context coefficients of regression models predicting the proportion of individuals in the "Not at school/in work (nini)", "In work", and "In School" categories, respectively. The coefficients are log-scaled

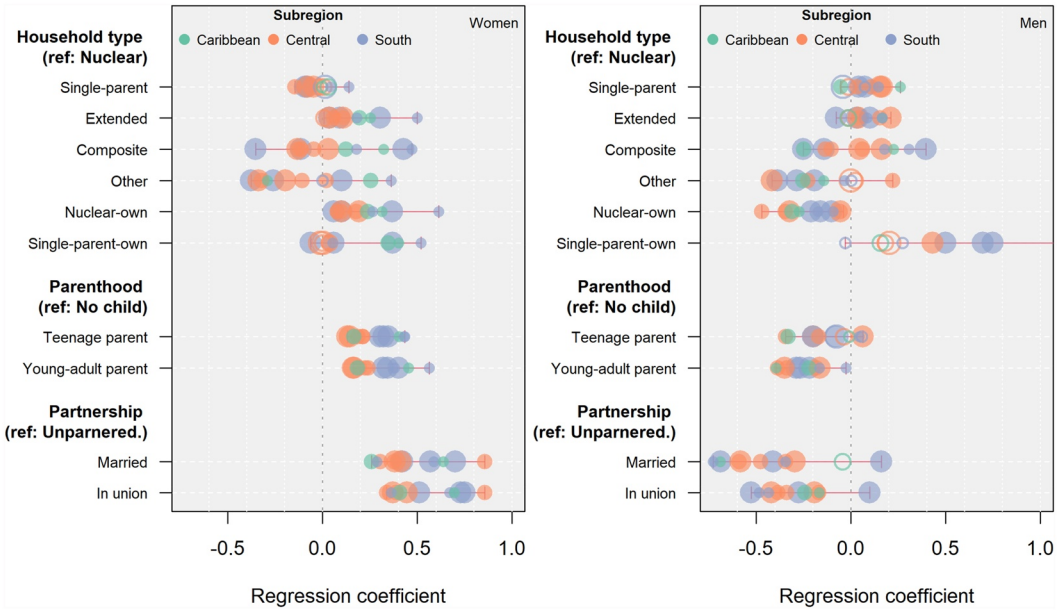

FIGURE 3 Country-specific coefficients for models predicting the proportion of individuals in the "Not at school/in work (nini)" category. Filled markers indicate statistically significant differences with respect to the reference category in parenthesis. Marker color and size indicate countries' region and level of informality. Models control for respondents' age group (20–21, 22–23, 24–25), place of residence (Rural, Urban), homeownership (Renting, Owner, Other), educational attainment of the household head (less than primary, primary, secondary or higher), and the subnational level proportion of the working age population that are out of the labor force (proxy for informality) and working for a wage (proxy for formality). We restrict the *x*-axis to 1.0 to favor visibility.

relative gaps between nuclear family contexts (i.e., where the young adults co-reside with their parents and siblings) compared to other family arrangements (e.g., extended households or households headed by the young adults themselves without their parents). The horizontal lines indicate coefficients' range as a measure of the country level heterogeneity in the relationship between family contexts and labor market and educational outcomes. Markers' colors and sizes represent geographical regions and level of informality as in Figure 1 (Low, Medium, and High), respectively. According to Figure 3, the observed relationships between familial context and nini-hood occur across a wide range of informality levels and geographic locations. There are no visual patterns by markers' size or color.

These regression coefficients show mixed relationship between household type and nini-hood, except for "Extended" households among women (i.e., all coefficients are positive), and "Nuclear-own" for both sexes. Notably, more than one-third of the young adult population resides in "Extended" households. There are stark gender differences in the relationship between "Nuclear-own" households and nini-hood. For women, living in a "Nuclear-own" household is associated positively with nini-hood, whereas the reverse is true for men. This association is negative for men in all countries. This divergence is relevant demographically because almost one-fifth of young adults reside in "Nuclear-own" households (Table 1).

"Single-parent" households (i.e., where the young adult co-resides with one parent) display less consistent, yet diverging associations by sex; with some exceptions, this household configuration is negatively and positively associated with nini-hood for women and men, respectively. Other household types display more mixed associations with nini-hood with no apparent gender pattern. For men, the coefficients that are greater than 1.0 for the "Single-parent-own" own corresponds to Costa Rica (1.7), Honduras (1.7), and Mexico (1.4), and they are all statistically significant. This category is demographically unimportant because less than 2% of young adults live in this household configuration.

Gender differences are apparent in terms of parenthood and partnership status. Regardless of the timing of the transition to parenthood (teenage vs. young adulthood), in all 12 countries, motherhood is positively associated while

TABLE 1 Percentage distribution of explanatory and control variables by country.

	Country											
Explanatory variable	**BRA**	**COS**	**DOM**	**ECU**	**EL**	**GUA**	**HON**	**MEX**	**NIC**	**PAN**	**PAR**	**PER**
Household type												
Nuclear	24.7	27.8	15.3	16.4	17.8	18.3	12.7	25.1	11.5	15.5	18.2	16.5
Single parent	8.2	11.2	8.0	7.1	8.5	5.6	4.9	7.0	5.1	7.2	5.3	6.9
Extended	32.6	30.0	38.5	40.1	42.7	38.1	40.7	38.9	47.1	38.2	40.0	42.7
Composite	3.0	4.7	4.3	6.3	4.3	5.1	7.8	1.7	8.9	11.1	11.9	8.5
Other	4.6	3.5	12.9	4.1	2.4	2.2	4.8	5.4	1.6	7.2	4.6	6.3
Nuclear-own	26.0	21.5	19.4	24.3	22.8	29.7	28.0	21.3	24.8	19.5	19.1	17.9
Single-parent-own	0.8	1.2	1.8	1.8	1.6	1.0	1.1	0.6	1.0	1.3	0.8	1.2
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Parenthood												
Not a parent	71.9	72.2	69.5	63.2	63.5	55.8	58.0	64.5	56.5	69.7	69.5	70.2
Teenage parent	14.5	13.8	15.6	18.8	20.0	25.0	23.3	17.4	25.1	14.9	15.3	14.0
Young-adult parent	13.7	14.0	14.9	18.0	16.5	19.3	18.8	18.1	18.4	15.3	15.2	15.8
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Partnership												
Unpartnered	63.1	67.6	62.2	55.1	60.2	48.2	50.2	58.0	49.9	57.5	65.2	61.2
Married	13.1	10.8	4.7	17.4	12.1	28.8	16.5	20.1	16.2	5.8	16.6	6.6
In union	23.8	21.6	33.1	27.5	27.7	23.0	33.2	21.9	33.8	36.7	18.2	32.2
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Age group												
22–23	33.5	32.8	32.6	33.8	32.8	35.2	34.0	33.8	34.6	32.7	34.6	33.6
20–21	33.0	34.1	35.7	33.5	34.8	34.0	35.8	34.2	33.5	34.0	36.4	33.4
24–25	33.6	33.2	31.7	32.7	32.4	30.8	30.1	32.1	31.8	33.3	29.0	33.0
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Place of residence												
Urban	85.4	73.0	75.6	65.1	63.9	50.3	51.6	78.0	56.3	68.4	62.7	78.9
Rural	14.6	27.0	24.4	34.9	36.1	49.7	48.4	22.0	43.7	31.6	37.3	21.1
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Homeownership												
Renting	21.4	22.6	36.3	23.5	14.3	11.8	17.1	15.5	4.4	15.2	12.1	15.8
Owned	69.9	68.5	53.4	61.4	73.9	80.6	74.9	75.5	86.2	78.2	78.6	71.2
Other	8.7	8.9	10.2	15.1	11.9	7.6	8.1	9.1	9.3	6.5	9.3	13.0
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Educ. Attainment												
Less than primary	38.1	18.3	34.7	22.9	49.8	64.9	55.7	26.5	56.4	16.6	42.2	28.7
Primary completed	28.2	51.3	35.4	43.1	32.3	25.6	32.6	48.4	28.1	44.5	39.4	21.1
Secondary or more	33.7	30.4	29.9	34.0	17.8	9.5	11.6	25.2	15.6	38.8	18.4	50.2
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Most recent census samples from IPUMS-I, 2002–2010. ssProportions are weighted for representativeness.

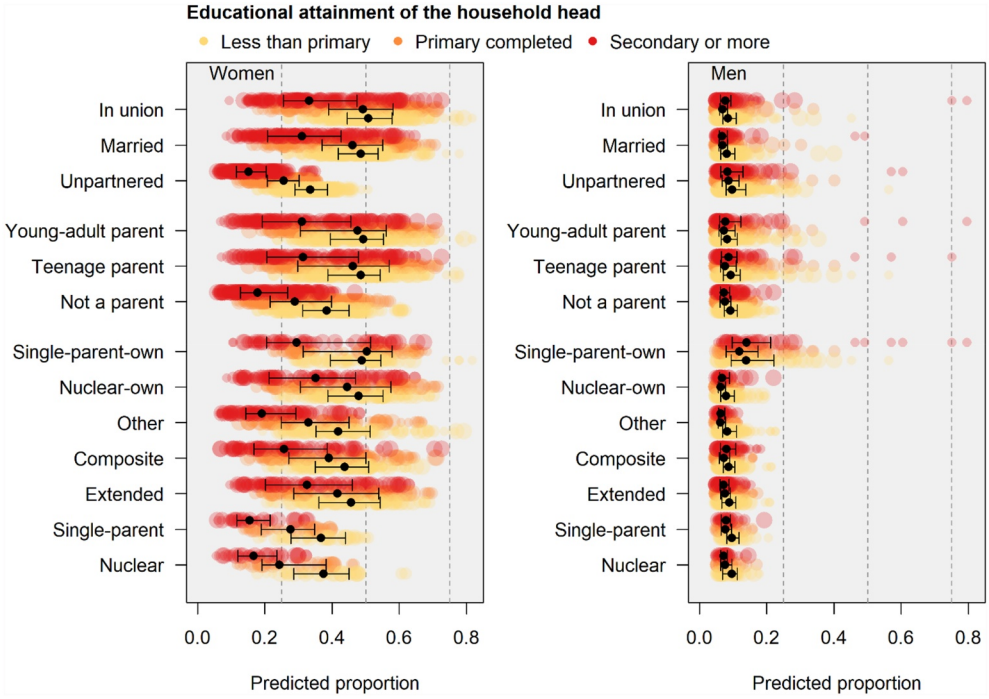

FIGURE 4 Predicted proportion of individuals in the 'Not at school/in work (nini)' category by educational attainment of the household head. Models were fitted separately for three educational attainment levels of the household head: Less than primary, Primary education completed, Some secondary education or more.

fatherhood is negatively associated with nini-hood. The association for motherhood is particularly strong and consistent in the South American countries. The absolute values of the parenthood coefficients for both sexes are comparable to, and for some countries larger than, those of the household head's educational attainment (see Figure A1 in the Online-Only Supplemental Appendix, attached in the separate file). The similarity in the magnitude of these coefficients implies that parenthood and social origin—proxied by the household head's education level—have equally strong and significant associations with nini-hood. These divergent coefficients by sex, althought expected, signal a strong social cleavage regarding the consequences of entering parenthood for institutional engagement.

Similarly, in comparison to unpartnered women, those who are married or cohabiting at the time of the census are more likely to be ninis. This suggests that the aforementioned gap caused by childbirth might have begun as soon as women entered partnerships. The coefficients for both married individuals and cohabitors are similar, and in some countries are greater than 0.5, which implies nini-hood gaps above the relative risk of 1.6 (i.e., compared to unpartnered women, women in unions are 1.6 time more likely to be ninis). For men, however, parenthood and partnership status tend to show a negative correlation with nini-hood. In combination, these findings support a male breadwinner model upon union formation and parenthood in LAC.

Figure 4 displays predicted proportions of individuals in the 'Not at school/in work (nini)' group for all explanatory categories of the family-related variables by educational attainment of the household head. The relative overlap of the quartiles of the predicted proportions—marked with intervals in black-shows that social origin matters more for nini-hood among women than men. The relatively few nini men are a mix of young individuals from mixed social backgrounds. In contrast, the majority of nini women come from households where the household head completed, at most, primary education, that is, low social class origin. For example, the proportion of ninis among 'Unpartnered' women–a category considered protective against ninihood– is less than 20% among those living with a household head with secondary or more education. However, the proportion increases to almost 30% when the household head did not

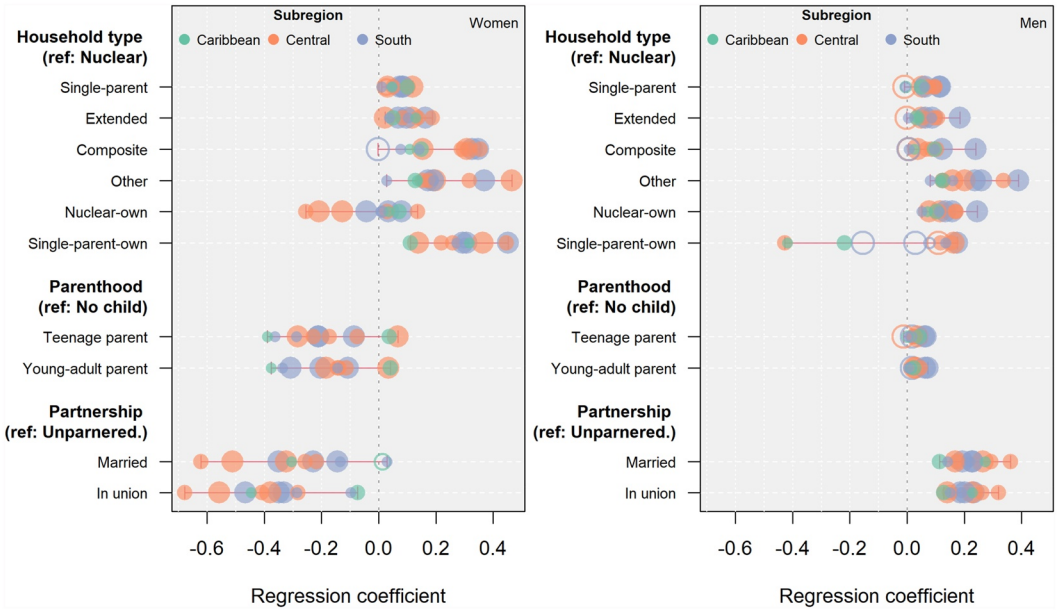

FIGURE 5 Country-specific coefficients for models predicting the proportion of individuals in the *"In work"* category. Filled markers indicate statistically significant differences with respect to the reference category in parenthesis. Markers' color and size indicate countries' regions and level of informality. Models control for respondents' age group (20–21, 22–23, 24–25), place of residence (Rural, Urban), homeownership (Renting, Owner, Other), educational attainment of the household head (less than primary, primary, secondary or higher), and the subnational level proportion of the working age population that are out of the labor force (proxy for informality) and working for a wage (proxy for formality).

finish primary school indicating a correlation between social class and ninihood. Similar patterns emerge for categories associated with a higher likelihood of ninihood such as 'Young-adult parent', 'Teenage parent', and 'Nuclear-own'. For all these categories, the predicted proportions of ninihood are very close to 50%. Notably, such patterns do not emerge among men.

These patterns speak to the structural nature of the influences of gender and social class origin on youth education and employment opportunities. The erratic pattern of the predicted proportions for men in "Single-parent-own", and other categories among households where the household head has relatively high education is likely due to the small number of men in those categories. Whereas a sizable proportion of women live with their children and no partner (potentially due to separation, divorce, or the informality of union), few men are single parents. The combination of single parenthood and low social origin exacerbates women's likelihood of being 'nini.'

Together, Figures 3 and 4 indicate that institutional disengagement affects primarily socially disadvantaged women. It is likely that these women are involved in both reproductive and economically productive activities, albeit in informal settings. Their contributions to the national economies and the reproduction of the population are not accounted for nor recognized, and their early detachment from the educational systems and the labor force, and consequently form the pension systems, suggests they may suffer from economic deprivation later in their lives.

7.2 | Formal work

Figure 5 shows the coefficients from models predicting the proportion of individuals in the "In work" category. Similar to the nini results, we do not see any geographical or informality-level pattern. In contrast to the proportions of nini, these results suggest that labor force participation is more prevalent among non-nuclear households

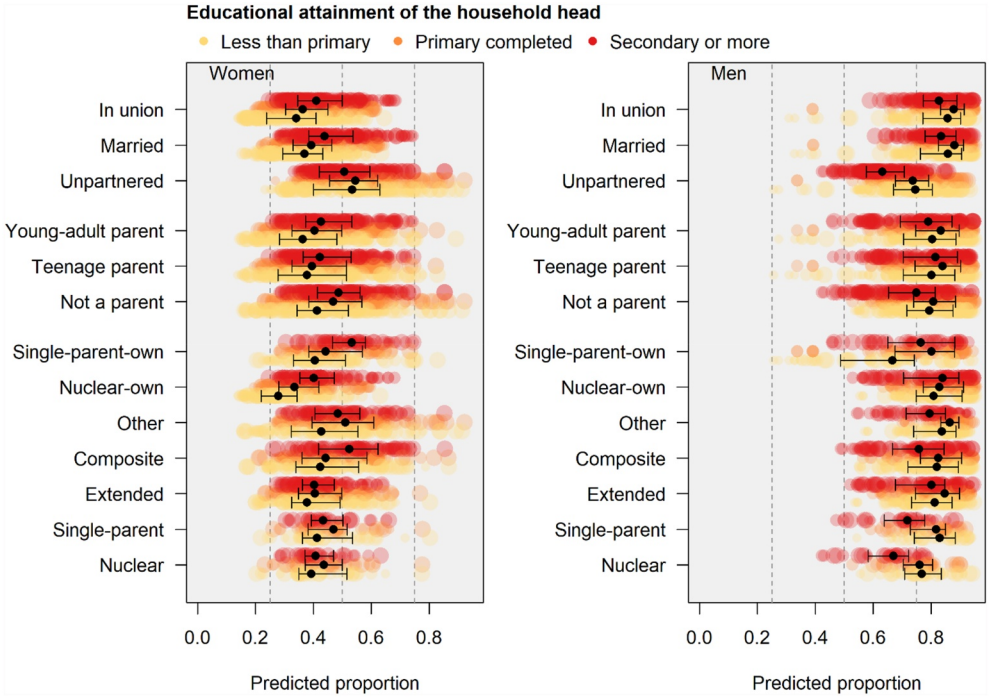

FIGURE 6 Predicted proportion of individuals in the 'In work' category by educational attainment of the household head. Models were fitted separately for each of the three educational attainment level of the household head: Less than primary, Primary education completed, Some secondary education or more.

for both women and men, and positively associated with partnership formation and parenthood for men. For women, instead, the most consistent association across countries is the one related to 'Single-parent-own' households, meaning that single mothers who live by themselves are more likely to be working than women in nuclear households.

The results up to this point (Figures 3 and 5) are indicative of a potential protective role of nuclear families. Young adults in nuclear configurations are less likely to be ninis or working, and therefore more likely to be attending school than those in non-nuclear family contexts. Gender differences in the coefficients for parenthood and partnership align with our interpretation of the formal labor market as a male realm. Regardless of the timing, having children and forming a union (cohabiting or marriage) are associated with a higher proportion of working young men. These associations are mostly negative for women, and the coefficients display more considerable heterogeneity than those for men given the lower prevalence of the "In work" category among women (Figure 2).

Figure 6 uncovers the differences in the relationship between family and work by social background. A comparison between panels shows that gender differences in opportunities to work exist in all social background groups, although some may be diminished among households where the head is relatively highly educated. A comparison within panels reveals that some differences by social background apply to both men and women, particularly among family arrangements (e.g., "Nuclear-own" households or teenage motherhood), although they are generally less marked than social class differences in nini-hood.

There is an intriguing and subtle gender difference in Figure 6 pertaining to the presumably protective household arrangements and family configurations, namely, "Nuclear", "Unpartnered", and "Not a parent" categories. Whereas young adult women from privileged class origin are more or equally likely to be working compared to young women from other class origins (almost fully overlapping quartile ranges), young adult men from privileged class are less likely to be working than men from less privileged class.

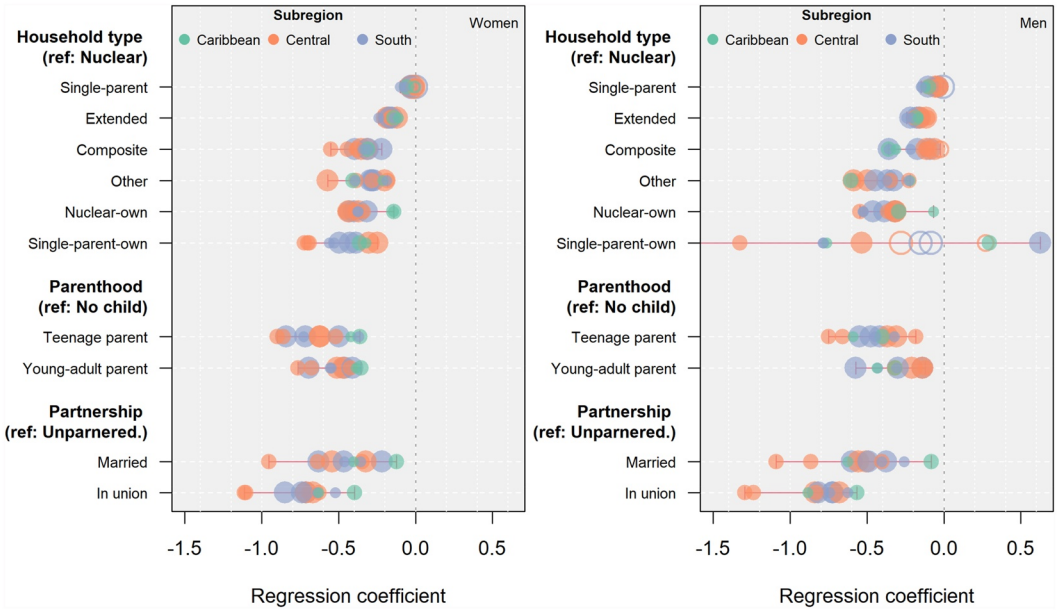

FIGURE 7 Country-specific coefficients for models predicting the proportion of individuals in the "In School" category. Filled markers indicate statistically significant differences with respect to the reference category in parenthesis. Markers' color and size indicate countries' regions and level of informality. Models control for respondents' age group (20–21, 22–23, 24–25), place of residence (Rural, Urban), homeownership (Renting, Owner, Other), educational attainment of the household head (less than primary, primary, secondary or higher), and the subnational level proportion of the working age population that are out of the labor force (proxy for informality) and working for a wage (proxy for formality). We restrict the *x*-axis to −1.5 to favor visibility. The coefficient for Mexico is −1.7 and it is statistically significant.

Finally, Figures 7 and 8 summarize the relationship between schooling opportunities and family context. According to Figure 7, there is a clear protective role of living in a "Nuclear" household in terms of attending school. All other household configurations display negative coefficients with the least negative ones pertaining to "Single-parent". The protective role of living in a nuclear household is potentially reinforced by having no children and no partner; these two characteristics are positively associated with school attendance. As in Figures 3 and 5, there are no geographical or informality-related patterns. Gender differences in country-specific coefficients seem also non-existent, however, given the higher prevalence of school attendance among women than men, coefficients of equal magnitude imply larger percentage point differences among women than men. For example, a regression coefficient of 0.5 implies a 18 and 9% point difference when the prevalence of school attendance in the reference category are 30% (exp(0.5) * 0.3 = 0.48) and 15% (exp(0.5) * 0.15 = 0.24), respectively.

The social-background divide reported in Figure 8 is very clear, to the point that gender differences in the proportion of young adults that attend school across social background groups are minimal. Across all household types and family configurations, young adults from privileged social backgrounds display greater predicted probabilities of attending school compared to other social class origin groups.

7.3 | Correlations between outcomes and control variables

Figures A1-A3 in the Online-Only Supplemental Appendix (see attached separate file) report all coefficients for country-specific regression models for the proportion of individuals in the "Not at school/in work (nini)", "In work",

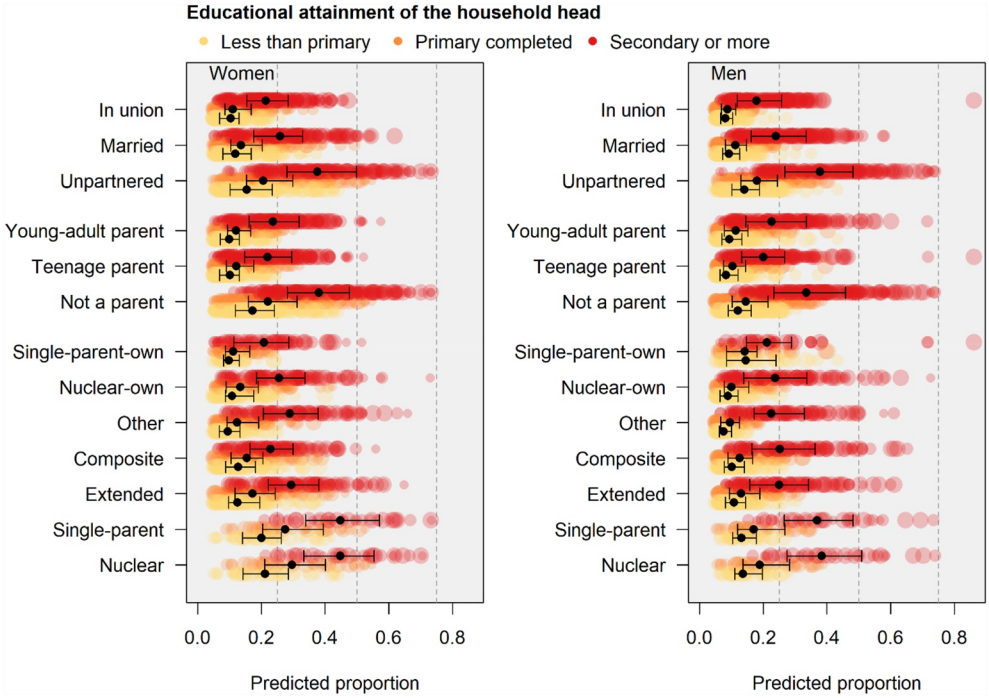

FIGURE 8 Predicted proportion of individuals in the 'In School' category by educational attainment of the household head. Models were fitted separately for each of the three educational attainment level of the household head: Less than primary, Primary education completed, Some secondary education or more.

and "In school" categories. Some patterns are worth mentioning as they support our measurement approach, including the decision to control for subnational characteristics of the labor market, as well as our interpretations.

First, individuals' age and place of residence display expected associations with young adults' labor and educational opportunities. The prevalence of nini-hood does not vary substantially by age which means that the economic and human capital lost due to institutional disengagement affects young adults from age 20 to 25 equally (Figure A1). On the contrary, the probability of being in work increases with age, and the reverse is true for school attendance (Figure A2). Also, expectedly, urban/rural differences are more marked for working and schooling than nini-hood given the lower economic development and fewer educational opportunities of rural areas compared to urban (Figures A2 and A3).

Second, compared to households that pay rent, homeownership is associated with a higher chance of nini-hood and school attendance, but with a lower probability of working. These mixed results suggest that homeowners are a mix of low and high socioeconomic status families. Instead, families that neither own nor rent the places they live in display positive associations with nini-hood and negative associations with work and school attendance particularly among women, meaning that they are the most disadvantaged household, socioeconomically speaking. The direction of these coefficients is in accord with those of the household head's educational attainment. Lower educational attainment is associated with higher chances of nini-hood, and lower chances of work and school attendance. Notably, the magnitude and significance of household and family-transition-related coefficients is comparable to that of household heads' educational attainment, meaning that household type and family formation transition are as important (if not more) than social background differences for young adults' educational and labor opportunities.

Third, the associations between our three outcomes and the subnational labor market indicators suggest these latter measures are adequately accounting for the heterogeneous labor market opportunities at the subnational level. For example, the proportion of working age individuals that are outside of the labor market (i.e., our proxy for the

level of economic informality) is positively associated with the probability of being in the "Not at school/in work (nini)" category, and negatively associated with the probability of being in the "In work" group. As for the "In school" category, the two labor market proxies display relatively weak correlations of mixed signs, which is consistent with the relative independence between the schooling systems and labor market opportunities. Although these controls do not warrant a causal interpretation of the family-related coefficients, they do allow for a more accurate representation of the role of household type and family formation pattern on young adults' opportunities.

8 | DISCUSSION

Understanding gender inequality in labor market engagement and educational opportunities is essential to monitoring social progress in Latin America. The number of individuals who are neither working nor studying, commonly known as nini, is alarmingly high in the region. While delayed entry into the workforce can be beneficial if individuals use that time to acquire human capital through education, evidence suggests that many individuals, especially women, tend to leave the formal labor market and education altogether during their early adulthood. From a macroeconomic viewpoint, having a large proportion of the population disengaged from formal institutions hinders the region's full potential for economic growth at a time of having a relatively large working force population (Saad, 2011). The failure to harness the productivity of the youth often culminates in social insecurity and unrest. Along with other factors that contributed to fractured societies, these inequalities manifested in massive demonstrations in several LAC countries in recent years (Busso & Messina, 2020).

In our study, we identified clear gender and social class gradients in the relationship between early partnership and parenthood, and human capital accumulation for young adults in Latin America. We considered a wide range of household and socioeconomic variables such as living with dual or single parent(s), extended or composite households, urban or rural residence, home ownership, and the education level of the household head. Consistent with findings from prior studies, we found that women have a far higher tendency to be invisible in the formal public sphere, especially in Central America. Our study highlights that being in a partnership has a positive association for women and a negative association for men with institutional disengagement, supporting the pervasiveness of a male breadwinner model in conjugal households. Women's delayed departure from their parental home serves as a protection against her disengagement from the public sphere. Educational level, a proxy for social class, additionally acts as a barrier against the risk of becoming inactive in the formal spheres, particularly for women.

One of the key issues that hinder educational and occupational engagement of young adults stems from early family formation, especially for women. We stress that most young women, simply defined as nini here, are not necessarily idle. Rather, they are likely to be performing unpaid care work and household chores, and/or working in the informal economy. Previous research has shown the heterogeneity in the activities of this group (Santillan Pizarro & Pereyra, 2020). Surveys that focus on detailed time-use, such as *Encuesta sobre Trabajo No Remunerado y Uso del Tiempo* of Argentina, facilitate the understanding of invisible work done by those that can only be broadly defined as nini under other data sources, such as the census.

Those who appear inactive in the formal spheres (i.e., not engaged in any visible economic activity, including job search) may be working in the informal sector, performing unstable or temporary jobs, taking care of children or older generations, or permanently disabled (Assusa, 2019; Villanueva & Lin, 2020). However, to our knowledge, no data exists to comprehensively illuminate the relationship between early family formation and human capital engagement that is inclusive of informal work across a large number of LAC countries. Excluding this population from the nini universe, as some studies suggest, in our view would artificially diminish the severity of gender inequality in the labor market.

Many studies examined the effects public policies play on retaining women in the labor force. The availability of childcare, length of maternity leave, and flexibility of work have been thoroughly scrutinized for their roles in women's employment (Gottschall & Bird, 2003; Kim & Liu, 2021). The underlying aim is that with the right combination of policies, gender equality in the workplace is achievable. In other studies, women's work within the household

is highlighted. The underappreciated and unpaid nature of household chores, own-childcare, and mental load (Sharma & Vaish, 2020) is pointed out as the culprit to a flawed narrative that mandates women's presence in paid employment.

Our work identifies the association between early family formation and exclusion from formal institutions, and as a result, inaccessibility to social safety nets such as unemployment insurance, health care systems and pension schemes. The transition to adulthood for a nini, or who appears to be a nini, is marked by disadvantages vis-a-vis those working or studying formally. Our findings affirm the notion that invisibility leads to vulnerability, especially in the context of single and young parenthood. Therefore, we argue that our inability to disentangle inactivity from informality among those who appear to be in the nini group does not diminish its relevance and relationship to social disadvantage.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of adjusting the gendered lens in viewing women's engagement with public life from a Global South perspective, which may significantly deviate from the narratives mainly conceptualized from northern perspectives (Chant, 1997). Women leaving or reducing their engagement in the (formal) labor market upon partnership or parenthood is a global phenomenon. Specifically, our study revealed distinct social class and subregional gradients, indicating that women from lower social classes and South America, upon the establishment of their own nuclear family, appear less engaged in the formal labor market compared to other groups. Most importantly, we argue that in the Latin American context of high prevalence of single motherhood under regimes of limited social protection (ECLAC, 2020), women's involvement in the formal labor market becomes a vital predictor for the economic security of themselves and of their offspring. Extended periods of formal labor market absence expose female-headed families to a lifetime of vulnerability.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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