

Beyond Wages

What Matters Most in Job Choice for Women in El Salvador

Ivette Contreras

Lelys Dinarte-Diaz

Amparo Palacios-Lopez

Valentina Costa

Steffanny Romero



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Abstract

This paper studies job preferences among women in rural and peri-urban areas in El Salvador using a discrete choice experiment. Drawing on focus group insights, the analysis varies wages and five non-wage job attributes—contract status, experience requirements, commute safety, residential address disclosure, and childcare availability—and estimates preferences using a mixed logit model. Women are willing to forgo substantial earnings for jobs that offer a safe commute, accessible childcare, and lower barriers to entry. Formal contracts play a limited role in job choice

in this high informality context. Preferences are heterogeneous: risk averse and rural women place a particularly high premium on safety and childcare, while younger and less risk averse women are more sensitive to entry barriers and address related stigma. The results highlight the importance of labor market frictions that prevent wages from compensating for job disamenities and suggest that policies targeting safety, childcare, and access may be more effective than contract formalization in expanding women's employment opportunities.

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¹ Corresponding author: Ivette Contreras at icontreras@worldbank.org. Contreras: The World Bank; Dinarte-Diaz: The World Bank, IZA, CESifo, HiCN; Palacios-Lopez: The World Bank; Costa: The World Bank; Romero: The World Bank. We are grateful for the support of the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Bank Research Support Budget. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of *Universidad Francisco Gavidia* in El Salvador reviewed and approved this research project's protocol, which is registered under ID #011-2021. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this report are entirely the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank, its affiliated organizations, Executive Directors, or the governments that they represent.

1. Introduction

Despite notable progress in expanding labor force participation in developing countries, women continue to face persistent barriers to accessing decent employment. Traditional economic models, such as Rosen's theory of compensating wage differentials, posit that wage differences should fully offset job disamenities, thereby equalizing total job advantages (Rosen, 1986). In practice, however, labor market frictions such as search costs, geographic limitations, skill mismatches or imperfect information, that are common in high-informality contexts, prevent wages from reflecting workers' true preferences for non-wage job attributes (Bonhomme & Jolivet, 2009; Hwang et al., 1998). These frictions are particularly acute for women, who often must accept any available job, regardless of working conditions (Bromley & Wilson, 2018; Portes & Haller, 2010; Perry et al., 2007; Rosenzweig, 1988).

A growing body of research demonstrates that workers value a range of job aspects beyond wages (Mas & Pallais, 2017; Wiswall & Zafar, 2018; Le Barbanchon et al., 2021; Becerra & Guerra, 2023; Van Landeghem et al., 2024). Importantly, preferences over these attributes are heterogeneous and shaped by gender, age, and life-cycle constraints rather than by wages alone. For example, Wiswall and Zafar (2018) find that women are often willing to accept lower wages in exchange for greater job flexibility and security, while men prioritize earnings growth. Experimental evidence further shows that women's greater risk aversion and caregiving responsibilities influence their job preferences and occupational sorting (Gneezy et al., 2003; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Dohmen & Falk, 2011). Access to childcare is a particularly salient factor: studies from Canada, Norway, and Chile demonstrate that affordable and accessible childcare significantly increases maternal labor supply, while its absence constrains women's employment choices (Baker et al., 2008; Kornstad & Thoresen, 2007; Latura, 2020; Compton & Pollak, 2014; Laun & Wallenius, 2021).

Observed employment choices, however, often conflate preferences with constraints (Hwang et al., 1998; Bonhomme & Jolivet, 2009). Evidence from Latin America suggests that observed job choices, particularly women's concentration in part-time or informal employment, often reflect binding constraints rather than intrinsic preferences. Using an experiment in Colombia, Bustelo et al. (2023) show that while women exhibit a high willingness to pay for schedule flexibility within full-time jobs, they are generally unwilling to accept the large hourly wage penalties implied by part-time work. This mismatch indicates that part-time employment is frequently taken not because it is preferred, but because better-paid, flexible full-time options are scarce. As a result, employment patterns that appear to signal "preferences" for informality or reduced hours instead reveal structural barriers shaping job choices in the region.

This paper examines which job attributes women in rural and peri-urban El Salvador value most and quantifies how much earnings they are willing to forgo in exchange for better non-wage job conditions such as safety, childcare, and lower barriers to job entry. To ensure that the attributes analyzed reflect local realities, we adopt a mixed-methods approach. We first conducted a series of focus group discussions to identify the most salient barriers and job attributes faced by women in the local labor market. Based on these insights, we designed and implemented a Discrete Choice Experiment (DCE) covering 951 women across two regions of El Salvador. Drawing on these insights, we identified six key job attributes that matter most for women's job preferences and choices: wage, availability of a written contract, work experience requirements, safe commuting to work, area of residency disclosure, and availability of childcare. This participatory approach grounds our research in the lived experiences of the respondents and ensures that the estimated preferences and willingness to pay values are directly relevant to their employment decisions.

Second, building on the attributes identified through the focus groups, we designed and implemented a Discrete Choice Experiment (DCE), covering 951 women across two regions in El Salvador. DCEs offer a powerful approach to uncovering these preferences by presenting respondents with hypothetical job options that systematically vary in attributes such as salary, flexibility, benefits, and security (Train & Weeks, 2005; Kessler et al., 2019). DCEs allow researchers to estimate the willingness to pay for specific job features, providing insights that are often missing from observational data. For this experiment, each participant was presented with a series of hypothetical job scenarios systematically varying the six selected attributes. We estimate preferences using a mixed logit model, which allows for heterogeneity in preferences and provides willingness-to-pay estimates for each attribute. This empirical strategy enables us to rigorously quantify the relative importance of each job characteristic and to capture the nuanced trade-offs women make when evaluating employment opportunities.

Our results show that women are willing to forgo substantial earnings for job opportunities that are safely accessible, provide childcare, and have lower barriers to entry, while the value they placed on formal contracts seems to be limited in this context. Commute safety emerges as the most highly valued non-wage attribute, followed by the absence of experience requirements and the availability of childcare. This finding is consistent with Becerra and Guerra (2023), who show that women are willing to pay a premium to avoid unsafe shifts, and with Velásquez (2020), who documents declines in female labor force participation in response to violence.

Jobs that offer childcare are also highly valued, with women willing to forgo more than \$66 per fortnight for jobs that provide this benefit. This finding echoes evidence from Baker et al. (2008), who show that access to universal childcare significantly increases maternal labor supply, and Latura (2020), who finds that women are more likely to apply for jobs offering on-site childcare. Importantly, the strong valuation of jobs that do not require prior work experience may reflect the fact that many women face discontinuous employment

trajectories linked to childbearing and caregiving responsibilities. Work experience may therefore vary substantially over the course of women's reproductive years, making formal experience requirements a binding barrier to entry even for women with relevant skills. In this context, our results highlight how labor market frictions—such as rigid experience requirements—can disproportionately constrain women's job opportunities, consistent with Bonhomme and Jolivet's (2009) emphasis on the role of frictions in shaping observed employment outcomes.

Despite these general patterns, job preferences are heterogeneous by age and risk aversion: risk-averse women and those in rural areas place an even higher premium on safety and childcare, while younger women and those with less risk aversion are more sensitive to entry barriers and stigma associated with residential address. For example, women with higher risk aversion are willing to pay more for a safe commute and for childcare, and rural women value these attributes more than their peri-urban counterparts. Conversely, the value placed on formal contracts is negligible, reflecting the realities of high informality and constrained labor market options (Perry et al., 2007).

These findings are particularly relevant in light of El Salvador's recent improvements in public security. A concerted national security effort since 2022 has led to a sharp reduction in crime, which the World Bank identifies as removing a key constraint on job creation and economic prosperity (World Bank, 2025). As safety conditions improve, understanding how women value secure mobility and how remaining frictions, such as childcare constraints and entry barriers, continue to shape employment decisions becomes critical for translating security gains into inclusive labor market outcomes. Our results suggest that improvements in public security alone may not be enough to expand women's employment opportunities unless complemented by policies that address caregiving constraints and access to jobs.

This paper contributes to the literature on labor market frictions and gendered job preferences by providing experimental evidence from a high-informality setting. By quantifying willingness-to-pay for specific job attributes, the analysis offers policy-relevant insights into which dimensions of job quality matter most for women's labor supply decisions. The findings point to the importance of integrated employment policies that combine investments in safety, childcare, and access with broader job creation efforts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 explains the study design; Section 3 describes the data; Section 4 outlines the empirical strategy; Section 5 presents the main results; and Section 6 concludes with policy implications.

2. Study Design

We conducted the experiment in different stages as described below.

2.1. Stage 1: Identification of Preferences Regarding Employment Attributes

We selected two regions to capture heterogeneity in local labor markets and job preferences. Region 1, which includes the districts of Aguilares, El Paisnal, Nejapa, and Guazapa and is located near the capital, is characterized by economic activities such as commerce, construction, manufacturing, and sugar cane cultivation. Region 2, comprising the districts of Jiquilisco, Puerto El Triunfo, San Dionisio, and California in the department of Usulután, is predominantly associated with coffee production, fishing, and commerce.

We conducted eight focus groups discussions (FGD) with individuals who live in rural and peri-urban residents of both regions selected for the study in July 2022.² The discussions had two main objectives, (i) identifying the most common activities performed by community members as presented in Contreras et al. (2024); and (ii) understanding the preferences (and barriers) regarding the employment attributes that individuals value the most.³

Through these discussions, we obtained information on participants' preferences over job attributes. We then selected the top six attributes discussed by the participants (using a frequentist approach) and included them in the choice experiment. The six job attributes are wage (w), availability of a written contract (a), requirements of work experience (e), safe commuting to work (s), area of residency disclosure (r), and availability of childcare (d). Table 1 presents each job attribute and the various values which each attribute can take.

2.2. Stage 2: Selection of Regions, Households, and Respondents

Drawing on the 2007 Salvadoran Population Census (the latest available at the time of the experiment), we identified 276 enumeration areas (EAs): 114 in Region 1 and 162 in Region 2. All selected EAs contained at least 30 households and were classified as rural or peri-urban. We randomly picked 48 EAs and conducted a comprehensive household listing in each. From these, we randomly selected 21 households per EA, resulting in a total sample of 1,008 households. Each household provided information about at least two members of

² The different enumeration areas from the Salvadoran Population Census 2007 can be classified into three groups: (1) Urban areas include the census segments where the municipal mayor's office is located, and that have more than 500 dwellings that are continuously grouped. (2) Peri-urban areas that include those census segments that surround the origin segment of the urban core. (3) Rural areas will be comprised of the set of segments remaining after those classified as urban areas have been excluded.

³ See Appendix B for more details about the qualitative study including the facilitator's guidelines.

working age (15-64 years of age). At least one of the respondents provided information about him/herself while the information of the second member could be obtained using proxy responses.⁴

2.3. Stage 3: Implementation of the Discrete Choice Experiment

We implemented a Discrete Choice Experiment (DCE) as part of the Randomized Survey Experiment presented in Contreras et al. (2024) for the female household members that were 15-64 years of age. A DCE allows us to observe revealed preferences regarding work attributes as opposed to declared preferences. In addition, the experimental design allows us to measure the willingness to pay (or to give up) for certain job attributes in terms of wage expectations.

Based on the attributes identified in the focus groups, we designed 300 different scenarios of hypothetical jobs, with specific values for each of the attributes. In each scenario we have two fixed attributes, and we varied the other four, this structure yields 15 possible combinations of fixed and varying attributes for women. We first defined the levels for each attribute and generated the full-factorial dataset. Because no prior information on parameter values was available, we adopted a conservative design by setting all coefficient priors equal to zero. For each of the 15 attribute combinations, we then generated 10 choice sets, each consisting of two job alternatives. The choice of 10 sets per combination was guided by the requirement that the number of choice sets exceed the maximum number of parameters to be estimated (eight), ensuring model identification. To increase variation, the values of the attributes held fixed within each choice set were randomly assigned. This procedure resulted in a total of 150 choice sets for women (10 sets for each of the 15 combinations), corresponding to 300 job scenarios.⁵ For survey implementation, each participant was exposed to 10 choice sets including two scenarios each where the participant chose which job scenario was preferred. To alleviate the cognitive load from the experiment, we also highlighted the attributes that were different across the two scenarios (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). The selection of the choice sets shown to each participant was completely random.

3. Data

We collected data for this experiment from 1,008 households (comprising 2,480 household members) between August and October 2022. Interviews were conducted using a Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) system as part of the Randomized Survey Experiment reported in Contreras et al. (2024).

⁴ Proxy reporting occurs when one household member provides information on behalf of another member.

⁵ Each choice set includes two job scenarios.

The survey instrument consisted of up to 18 modules (see Table A1 for a complete list of the survey modules). The first module gathered household roster information to identify all household members. Once the roster was completed, the CAPI system randomly selected working-age individuals (aged 15 to 64) to participate in the interview, stratifying by age and sex. In order to participate in the DCE, women in the selected households should fulfill three criteria: (i) they should have been one of the participants in the survey experiment (15-64 years of age), (ii) they should have been present at the dwelling at the time of the interview (only self-responses were allowed), and (iii) they reported to being able to read and write. In total, we collected information on 951 women who fulfilled the inclusion criteria.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the household- and individual-level characteristics of women included in the discrete choice experiment. Panel A summarizes household conditions, showing that half of respondents reside in rural areas and that 36 percent of them report moderate to severe food insecurity. Engagement in agriculture and non-farm enterprises is common, reflecting diversified livelihood strategies in the study regions. Panel B reports individual characteristics for the 951 women in the analytic sample. The average respondent is 35 years old, with one quarter classified as youth aged 15–24. Regarding educational attainment, one-third of them have completed at least secondary education, though all respondents are literate by design. Most women have access to a mobile phone (91%), while internet access remains low (20%). Finally, a majority of women have at least one child (57%).

A parameter that might be correlated with job preferences is risk aversion. For this reason, we designed a game similar to Dohmen et al. (2011). The risk aversion module consisted of presenting 10 rounds per respondent. In each round, the respondent must choose only one of the two options presented. In the first option, the respondent will earn a fixed amount of money. This amount changes between the different rounds. In the second option, the interviewee will play a lottery in which with 50% probability he wins an amount of money USD \$4 or with 50% probability he wins \$0 (he wins nothing). This is equivalent to flipping a coin and if it comes up heads you win USD \$4 and if it comes up tails you win \$0. The final instrument is reported in Appendix C.

Risk aversion. We characterize individual risk preferences using a simple lottery choice framework. An individual is defined as risk-averse if she prefers a certain payoff to a lottery with an expected payoff of zero (Eeckhoudt et al., 2005). Under risk neutrality, individuals should choose the lottery whenever the fixed amount offered is below the lottery's expected value. Deviations from this behavior—specifically, choosing the certain payoff instead of the lottery—reveal aversion to risk. The foregone expected value in such cases can therefore be interpreted as an expected loss that captures the strength of preferences for certainty. Based on this intuition, we construct a normalized risk-aversion index ρ_i , defined as the share of total potential expected losses that an

individual is willing to incur by choosing the safe option across all lottery rounds. Formally, the index is given by:

$$\rho_i \equiv \frac{\sum_{r=1}^k (\gamma_r * D_{ir})}{\sum_{r=1}^k \gamma_r} \quad (1)$$

where γ_r denotes the expected loss associated with choosing the fixed amount in round r , and D_{ir} is an indicator equal to one if individual i chooses the fixed payoff in that round. The index is bounded between zero and one, with higher values indicating greater risk aversion.

4. Empirical Strategy

Our dataset includes the job scenarios that each woman i was exposed to, in total each woman was exposed to 20 job scenarios that belong to 10 choice sets. For each of the choice sets, the dataset also includes which scenario was chosen when the two options were presented. Given that 951 women participated in the experiment, the dataset has 19,020 observations (20 observations per woman). Each job scenario j includes a vector of attributes X_j such as $X_j = [x_{jw}, x_{ja}, x_{je}, x_{js}, x_{jd}]$.⁶

More specifically, our model assumes that woman i derives a level of utility from the job scenario j that was presented to her in the choice set c which follows Equation 2.

$$U_{ijc} = u_i(X_j) + \varepsilon_{ijc} \quad (2)$$

Where $u_i(\cdot)$ represents the individual i utility over the different job attributes, and ε_{ijc} is an error term. Given the randomization protocol of the scenarios, we assume that the ε_{ijc} is independent and identically distributed random variable. Individual i chooses job j from the choice set c if that scenario maximizes her utility compared to the other scenario presented. Assuming a linear utility function, we can rewrite Equation 1 as follows:

$$U_{ijc} = \alpha_0 + X_j' \beta + \varepsilon_{ijc} \quad (3)$$

Let M_{ijc} be a dummy indicator of whether individual i selected the job scenario j in the choice set c . In that sense, the probability that individual i chooses job scenario j in the choice set c can be modeled as in Equation 4.

$$\Pr(M_{ijc} = 1) = \Pr(\text{Max}(U_{ijc}, U_{ij'c}) \forall j' \neq j) \quad (4)$$

⁶ The vector of attributes includes the following: wage (w), availability of a contract (a), requirements of work experience (e), safe commute (s), requirement of reporting area of residency (r), and availability of daycare (d).

Following Datta (2019), we use a mixed logit estimation approach and estimate Equation 5 to investigate which job attributes increase the likelihood of an individual i to select a job scenario. The advantage of using a mixed logit model, relative to the conditional logit model, is that it allows for a distribution of preferences not related to observable characteristics. Moreover, it allows agents' utility to be driven by other non-pecuniary benefits which are often important in job choice. These other non-pecuniary benefits include job attributes and demographic characteristics, which would allow us to estimate heterogeneous preferences on attributes by sex and age.

$$\Pr(M_{ijc} = 1) = \int \frac{\exp(X_j' \beta)}{\sum_{j \in c} \exp(X_j' \beta)} f(\beta) d\beta \quad (5)$$

To facilitate the interpretation of the coefficients β estimated in Equation 5 and give them greater economic meaning, we transform them into willingness to pay (WTP) for each attribute following Datta (2019). In that sense, the WTP for the availability of childcare services offered at the job place, the willingness to pay individual i for the attribute d in terms of wage (w) is measured through the following expression:

$$WTP(x_{jd}) = -\frac{\beta_d}{\beta_w} \quad (6)$$

That is, the value of WTP measures how much the wage must be changed for a change in attribute d to ensure that utility remains constant. In other words, it indicates the monetary value of each job attribute under analysis. WTP assumes that the coefficient to the wage variable is fixed. An issue with this assumption is that we indirectly set that the preferences over wages do not vary in the population. To address this, we follow Train and Weeks (2005) and redefine the model into a WTP space (instead of a preference space).

Addressing hypothetical bias. Since the DCE is based on a hypothetical setting, a potential concern of using this approach is the “hypothetical bias” as noted by Loomis (2011). However, as discussed in Datta (2019), this bias is less relevant when analyzing labor markets, as agents will have taken previous consideration to their employment choices and have real life reference points. Moreover, evidence shows that a well-designed survey-based choice experiment can elicit responses close to actual market choices.⁷ Following Datta (2019), we implemented two measures to mitigate this potential bias. First, we informed the respondents that the two jobs in each choice set were identical in every possible way except for those characteristics highlighted in the vignette. Second, the question was designed to affect respondents' future utility to ensure incentive compatibility (Carson and Groves, 2007); i.e., it was framed in a way that participants may have their say and that the results may inform policy making in the future.

⁷ See Eriksson and Kristensen (2014) and Mas and Pallais (2017).

5. Results

This section presents the main findings from the DCE, which was designed to elicit women's preferences for job attributes in rural and peri-urban El Salvador. The results are discussed in light of the literature on compensating wage differentials, labor market frictions, and gendered job preferences, as well as the empirical strategy outlined above.

5.1. Main Effects: Preferences for Job Attributes

Table 3 summarizes the estimated coefficients from the mixed logit model and the corresponding willingness-to-pay (WTP) values for each job attribute. The results reveal that women's job choices are shaped by a combination of wage and non-wage factors, echoing findings from Mas and Pallais (2017), Wiswall and Zafar (2018), and Datta (2019). The results reveal that higher wages predictably increase the likelihood of a job being chosen, confirming the central role of earnings in employment decisions. In general, the results indicate that women are willing to forgo substantial earnings for jobs that can be reached safely, accessible childcare, and lower barriers to entry, while the value placed on formal contracts is limited in this context.

Interestingly, the presence of a formal contract does not significantly affect job choice, suggesting that in contexts of high informality, contracts may be less salient than other job features. In a similar way, Perry et al. (2007) described how informal employment dominates labor markets in Latin America, with workers often prioritizing immediate needs and safety over formal benefits. Our results support this view, as women appear to value practical job attributes more than contractual arrangements.

One of the most striking findings is the strong preference for jobs that do not require prior work experience. Women are willing to forgo nearly \$95 per fortnight for such opportunities, highlighting the importance of reducing barriers to entry. This result resonates with Bonhomme and Jolivet (2009), who found that labor market frictions often prevent wages from fully compensating for job disamenities, meaning that workers with limited experience may be forced to accept less favorable jobs. This finding underscores the importance of reducing barriers to entry for women, especially those with limited labor market histories.

Safety during the commute emerges as the most valued non-wage attribute, with women expressing a willingness to pay \$183 per fortnight for jobs that guarantee a safe commute to work. This aligns with Becerra and Guerra (2023), who showed that workers, especially women, are willing to pay a premium to avoid unsafe shifts and locations. Their study found that perceived risk leads to substantial wage sacrifices, and our results confirm that safety is a top priority for women in high-risk environments. Similarly, Velásquez (2020) documented that increased violence in Mexico led to declines in female labor force participation, as fear of victimization drove women out of the workforce.

Jobs that require disclosure of home address are less preferred, possibly reflecting the stigma or discrimination associated with certain neighborhoods. This finding is in line with Bunel et al. (2016) that found that employers in France discriminated against job applicants based on their place of residence, with those from disadvantaged neighborhoods facing lower callback rates. The result is also supported by Melnikov et al. (2020) that showed that gang-controlled neighborhoods in El Salvador restrict residents' mobility and access to jobs, leading to lower wages and limited opportunities.

Additionally, the availability of workplace childcare is also highly valued, with a willingness to pay exceeding \$66 per fortnight, reflecting the critical role of childcare in enabling women's labor force participation, in line with the literature (Baker et al., 2008; Latura, 2020; Kornstad & Thoresen, 2007). Goldin (2014) argued that gender convergence in education and workforce participation has reduced gaps in human capital, but disparities in job preferences persist due to caregiving roles. Our findings support this, showing that women prioritize childcare support in their job choices.

5.2. Heterogeneity of the Preferences

Disaggregating the results by age group in Table 4 reveals some important heterogeneity in preferences. Both young women (15–24) and adult women (25–64) show that higher wages significantly increase the likelihood of a job being chosen. As in the overall results, having a contract in place does not have a significant role in the selection process of a job scenario.

The preference for jobs not requiring experience is strong across both age groups, with slightly higher willingness to pay among adults. Both groups value a safe commute, but young women exhibit an even higher willingness to pay, reflecting heightened vulnerability among youth (\$209.5 versus \$170.6). Chakraborty et al. (2018) found that rising incidents of sexual violence in India deterred women from commuting to work, with younger women being particularly affected. Our results mirror this pattern, suggesting that interventions to improve safety could have a disproportionate impact on youth employment.

Furthermore, both groups show negative willingness to pay for jobs that do not require address disclosure, with adults penalizing this attribute more. Finally, adult women also value workplace childcare more, consistent with greater caregiving responsibilities at older ages.

Table 5 compares preferences between women in peri-urban and rural areas, highlighting the importance of local context. Rural women have a higher willingness to pay for safe commutes and childcare services, reflecting greater exposure to insecurity and limited access to childcare infrastructure. The willingness to pay for jobs not requiring experience is also higher among rural women. Even though both groups penalize jobs that require address disclosure, only rural women shows a statistically negative willingness to pay.

Table 6 examines how risk aversion influences job preferences. The sample is divided into two groups: those with a risk aversion index above the median (more risk-averse) and those below the median (less risk-averse). This approach allows us to explore whether risk attitudes amplify or dampen the value placed on job features such as safety, childcare, and barriers to entry.

The most pronounced difference between the two groups is in the valuation of a safe commute. Women with higher risk aversion are willing to pay \$192.5 per fortnight for a secure journey to work, compared to \$172.8 among less risk-averse women. Workplace childcare is highly valued by both groups, but the WTP is higher among risk-averse women (\$73.2 versus \$63.9). This suggests that risk aversion not only heightens concerns about personal safety but also increases the perceived importance of reliable childcare.

Interestingly, less risk-averse women place a higher value on jobs that do not require prior experience (\$101.5 versus \$87.5). This may reflect greater willingness among less risk-averse individuals to pursue new opportunities or enter unfamiliar environments, whereas risk-averse women may prefer jobs with more predictable requirements or may be deterred by the uncertainty associated with new roles. The penalty for jobs not requiring address disclosure is much larger among risk-averse women (-\$27.4 versus -\$7.8). This finding may be linked to heightened sensitivity to stigma or discrimination associated with certain neighborhoods. Risk-averse women may be particularly concerned about the reputational risks or social exclusion that can arise from disclosing their address, leading them to avoid jobs that require this information. Finally, the WTP for contracts remains negligible in both groups, reinforcing the broader finding that formalization is less salient than other job features in high-informality contexts.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides novel evidence on women's job preferences in rural and peri-urban El Salvador using a Discrete Choice Experiment grounded in local qualitative insights. By jointly varying wage and non-wage job attributes, the analysis quantifies the extent to which women are willing to trade off earnings for improvements in job quality, including safer commuting conditions, access to childcare, and lower barriers to entry. The results show that non-wage job characteristics play a central role in shaping women's employment decisions in high-informality contexts.

The results reveal that women are willing to forgo substantial earnings for jobs that are accessible via a safe commute, provide accessible childcare, and have lower barriers to entry, while the value placed on formal contracts is limited in this context. These preferences are not uniform: risk-averse women and those in rural areas place an even higher premium on safety and childcare, while younger women and those with less risk aversion are more sensitive to entry barriers and stigma associated with residential address. These findings

reinforce and extend the literature showing that labor market frictions, safety concerns, and caregiving responsibilities are central to women's employment decisions in developing countries.

The findings have direct policy relevance for the design of employment and labor-market programs in El Salvador and similar settings. Interventions that improve commute safety, expand access to affordable childcare, and reduce unnecessary entry requirements are likely to have larger effects on women's employment outcomes than policies focused exclusively on employment formalization. Improving job access along these dimensions may also enhance the effectiveness of job-creation efforts by enabling women to take advantage of new employment opportunities as security and economic conditions evolve.

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Tables

Table 1. Attributes and Values

Attribute	Possible values
Fortnight wage	1 = \$75/fortnight
	2 = \$100/fortnight
	3 = \$150/fortnight
	4 = \$200/fortnight
	5 = \$250/fortnight
	6 = \$300/fortnight
Contract	1 = It offers a contract for at least 1 year
	0 = It does not offer a contract
Work experience not required	1 = It does NOT require work experience
	0 = It requires work experience
Commute is safe	1 = Commute to the workplace is secure
	0 = Commute to the workplace is NOT secure
Address of residency not required	1 = Information about her address is NOT required
	0 = Information about her address is required
Childcare services available	1 = The workplace offers childcare services
	0 = The workplace does not offer childcare services

Notes: This table shows the attributes and possible values for the vignettes shown in the DCE module. Each respondent evaluated 10 choice sets, each containing two hypothetical job scenarios. The experiment randomly varied four of the six attributes per scenario while holding the other two fixed to reduce cognitive burden. The final analytic sample includes 951 women and 19,020 scenario-level observations (20 scenarios per woman).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	(1) Mean	(2) SD	(3) Min	(4) Max
<i>PANEL A. Household Characteristics</i>				
Household size (N)	3.82	1.47	1	14
Dependency ratio (%)	0.28	0.20	0	0.8
Households in rural area (%)	0.49	0.50	0	1
Households with assets index above the median (%)	0.49	0.50	0	1
Moderate to severe food insecurity (%)	0.36	0.48	0	1
Remittances received (%)	0.36	0.48	0	1
Household has a non-farm enterprise (%)	0.34	0.47	0	1
Household engages in agricultural activities (%)	0.55	0.50	0	1
Observations	798			
<i>PANEL B. Individual Characteristics</i>				
Age (years)	34.89	12.60	15	64
Young women (15-24, %)	0.25	0.44	0	1
High school or higher education (%)	0.32	0.46	0	1
Read and write (%)	1.00	0.00	1	1
Never married (%)	0.29	0.46	0	1
Access to mobile phone (%)	0.91	0.29	0	1
Access to internet (Wi-Fi) (%)	0.20	0.40	0	1
Risk aversion index above the median (%)	0.47	0.50	0	1
Has at least one child (%)	0.57	0.49	0	1
Observations	951			

Notes: This table shows the average characteristics of the household- and individual-level variables—Panels A and B, respectively. The variables presented in this table were collected using the following modules: sociodemographic characteristics, education, food security, household characteristics, and assets. All indices are estimated using. All variables are dummies except when the unit of measurement is indicated in parentheses.

Table 3. DCE results

	(1)	(2)
	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)
Wage	0.005*** (0.000)	
Contract	-0.004 (0.033)	-0.715 (6.080)
Experience	0.506*** (0.043)	94.589*** (9.724)
Safe commute	0.978*** (0.048)	182.625*** (13.489)
Address	-0.089** (0.035)	-16.690** (6.657)
Childcare	0.355*** (0.038)	66.239*** (8.570)
Observations	19,020	19,020
Number of choice sets	10	10
Number of individuals	951	951
Average wage	--	177.6
Model	Mixed Logit	WTP

Notes: This table shows the results of Equation 4 and 5 described in the text. Column (1) reports coefficients from a mixed logit model in preference space; the wage coefficient is treated as fixed to enable WTP conversion. Column (2) reports the corresponding willingness-to-pay (WTP) values in US dollars per fortnight. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Statistical significance is denoted as: *** p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.10.

Table 4. DCE Results by Age Groups

	(1)	(2)	(4)	(5)
	Young Women (15-24)		Adult Women (25-64)	
	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)
Wage	0.005*** (0.001)		0.005*** (0.000)	
Contract	-0.064 (0.069)	-11.717 (12.630)	0.006 (0.037)	1.130 (7.013)
Experience	0.491*** (0.095)	89.377*** (21.042)	0.521*** (0.048)	97.953*** (10.934)
Safe commute	1.152*** (0.107)	209.471*** (28.659)	0.907*** (0.055)	170.598*** (14.885)
Address	-0.070 (0.071)	-12.771 (12.941)	-0.095** (0.041)	-17.809** (7.778)
Childcare	0.315*** (0.077)	57.275*** (16.424)	0.388*** (0.045)	72.912*** (10.199)
Observations	4,820	4,820	14,200	14,200
Number of choice sets	10	10	10	10
Number of individuals	241	241	710	710
Average wage	--	177.16	--	177.71
Model	Mixed Logit	WTP	Mixed Logit	WTP

Notes: This table shows the DCE results for women by age group. This table shows the results of Equations 4 and 5 described in the text, estimated separately for young women (ages 15–24) and adult women (ages 25–64). Column (1) reports coefficients from a mixed logit model in preference space; the wage coefficient is treated as fixed to enable WTP conversion. Column (2) reports the corresponding willingness-to-pay (WTP) values in US dollars per fortnight. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Statistical significance is denoted as: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Table 5. DCE Results by Area

	(1)	(2)	(4)	(5)
	Women in peri-urban areas		Women in rural areas	
	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)
Wage	0.006*** (0.000)		0.005*** (0.000)	
Contract	0.048 (0.046)	8.134 (7.852)	-0.053 (0.046)	-10.921 (9.675)
Experience	0.491*** (0.060)	83.870*** (12.053)	0.513*** (0.061)	106.327*** (16.054)
Safe commute	0.914*** (0.067)	156.094*** (15.981)	1.038*** (0.070)	215.309*** (22.976)
Address	-0.073 (0.050)	-12.477 (8.551)	-0.094* (0.049)	-19.406* (10.473)
Childcare	0.335*** (0.052)	57.197*** (10.218)	0.395*** (0.058)	81.959*** (15.007)
Observations	9,660	9,660	9,360	9,360
Number of choice sets	10	10	10	10
Number of individuals	483	483	468	468
Average wage	--	178.05	--	177.08
Model	Mixed Logit	WTP	Mixed Logit	WTP

Notes: This table shows the DCE results for women by residential area. This table shows the results of Equations 4 and 5 described in the text, estimated separately for women in peri-urban and rural areas. Column (1) reports coefficients from a mixed logit model in preference space; the wage coefficient is treated as fixed to enable WTP conversion. Column (2) reports the corresponding willingness-to-pay (WTP) values in US dollars per fortnight. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Statistical significance is denoted as: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Table 6. DCE Results by Risk Aversion for Women

	(1)	(2)	(4)	(5)
	Risk aversion index above the median		Risk aversion index below the median	
	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)	Preference space	Preference space (WTP)
Wage	0.005*** (0.000)		0.006*** (0.000)	
Contract	-0.000 (0.048)	-0.041 (9.354)	0.001 (0.044)	0.203 (7.891)
Experience	0.447*** (0.064)	87.531*** (14.983)	0.569*** (0.059)	101.489*** (12.854)
Safe commute	0.982*** (0.072)	192.531*** (20.806)	0.968*** (0.065)	172.779*** (17.198)
Address	-0.140*** (0.049)	-27.413*** (9.846)	-0.044 (0.051)	-7.849 (9.149)
Childcare	0.373*** (0.056)	73.157*** (13.455)	0.358*** (0.054)	63.910*** (11.214)
Observations	8,900	8,900	10,080	10,080
Number of choice sets	10	10	10	10
Number of individuals	445	445	504	504
Average wage	--	176.8	--	178.2
Model	Mixed Logit	WTP	Mixed Logit	WTP

Notes: This table shows the DCE results for women by the level of risk aversion reported by women. This table shows the results of Equations 4 and 5 described in the text, estimated separately for women with risk aversion index above and below the median. Column (1) reports coefficients from a mixed logit model in preference space; the wage coefficient is treated as fixed to enable WTP conversion. Column (2) reports the corresponding willingness-to-pay (WTP) values in US dollars per fortnight. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Statistical significance is denoted as: *** p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.10.

Appendix A. Table and Figure

Table A1. List of modules included in the survey

#	Section	Level	Respondent
1	Cover	HH	Main respondent
1	HH Roster	Individual	Main respondent
2	Education	Individual	Main respondent for HH members with less than 15 years old HH members 15 years and older
3	Activities list	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
4	Labor model	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
4b	Skills and readiness to work	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
5	Youth aspirations	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
6	Time use	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
7	Social norms	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
8	Social desirability	Individual	HH members 15 years and older (up to 4)
9	Discrete Choice Experiment	Individual	HH members 18 years and older (up to 2)
10	Risk aversion	Individual	HH members 18 years and older (up to 2)
11	Housing	HH	Main respondent
12a	HH Enterprises flap	HH	Main respondent
12b	HH Enterprises	Enterprise	Main respondent
12c	Agriculture	HH	Main respondent
13	Food security	HH	Main respondent
14	Assets	HH	Main respondent
15	Other income	HH	Main respondent
16	Contact	HH	Main respondent

Figure A1. Vignettes Example

F1		Opción A	Opción B
Salario Quincenal	\$	\$300/quincena	\$300/quincena
Contrato		No ofrece contrato	No ofrece contrato
Experiencia laboral		No pide la dirección de la casa	Pide tener experiencia
Seguridad		La ruta para llegar al trabajo no es segura	La ruta para llegar al trabajo es segura
Dirección		Pide la dirección de la casa	No pide la dirección de la casa
Guardería		La empresa no ofrece servicio de guardería	La empresa ofrece servicio de guardería

Notes: This figure shows examples of the vignettes shown to participants in the DCE module of the survey.

Appendix B. Qualitative Study

This appendix provides further information on the methods used in the qualitative component of this study and their main results.

B1.1. Focus Group Discussions

The main goal of this qualitative study is twofold: (1) to create a list of activities considered work in rural and peri-urban communities in El Salvador, and (2) to understand the barriers that women face in entering the labor market and obtaining formal employment.

We conducted eight focus groups between June 13 and July 8, 2022, in six Salvadoran municipalities located in the Department of San Salvador (Nejapa and Guazapa) and the Department of Usulután (Jiquilisco, Puerto El Triunfo, San Dionisio, and California). The focus groups were stratified by age and gender. Four of the focus groups included youth between the ages of 18 and 29 years (two with men and two with women), and the four other focus groups included adults aged 29 years and older (two with women and two mixed). A total of 58 people attended the focus groups: 40 women and 18 men within their respective municipalities.

Table AP_A1. Focus Group Participants by Gender and Municipality

Municipality	Men	Women	Total
Nejapa (young men)	7	0	7
Nejapa (adults)	2	7	9
Guazapa (young women)	0	8	8
Guazapa (adult women)	0	8	8
Jiquilisco (young men)	6	0	6
Puerto El Triunfo (young women)	0	8	8
San Dionisio (mixed adults)	3	4	7
California (adult women)	0	5	5
Total	18	40	58

B1.2. Approach

The focus groups' facilitators were local qualitative experts and trained by the research team using a technical guide that included all the focus group questions. During the semi-structured focus group meetings, the facilitator asked the participants open-ended questions that could lead to additional questions and responses.

Special care was taken to preserve participant anonymity and freedom to consent. Before starting each of the focus group sessions, a team member talked with the potential participant and read a consent statement that included the objective of the focus group, how participation was voluntary, and how the information shared

would be used based on the IRB's approval of the experiment design. A facilitator conducted each of the discussions with the support of two team members who were responsible for listing the main work activities that the participants identified during the discussion on a whiteboard. The discussions lasted up to one and a half hours.

B1.3. Facilitator Guide

Objective: Create a list of activities that are identified as work in rural and peri-urban communities in El Salvador, even if these activities are not recognized as work by some groups. Understand the barriers that women and young people face in entering the labor market and having formal employment.

Materials:

- Sheets of paper
- Markers
- Recorders (have two in case one stops working during the focus group)

Some considerations before starting the meeting:

- Wait long enough for participants to be seated.
- The ideal number of people to participate in the conversation is 6 to 8 people.
- If there is noise, a ringing phone, or disturbances that may affect the recordings, know how to wait, and resume the conversation.
- Italicized examples have been marked to break the ice in case participants do not speak.
- Only those who confirm they want to participate can participate.

Structure of the focus groups:

- Welcome participants and complete questionnaire
- Welcome and presentation of facilitator
- Introduction by the facilitator
- Suggested duration: 1 hour

Before starting:

- Each participant must complete a questionnaire with the help of an interviewer. The questionnaire will last approximately 5 minutes.
- This questionnaire should be completed before starting the focus group.

Facilitator's introduction:

It's a pleasure to be with you. My name is _____ and I will be leading this meeting. They are _____ and will be supporting me by taking some notes.

I want to thank you for being here and explain the reason for this meeting. We belong to FUSADES and we are conducting a study on the work situation in the area, and we would like to hear your perceptions and opinions on the matter. This is not an exam or a questionnaire where we will have a good or bad answer, so we need you to speak to us sincerely. The answer we are looking for is the one that reflects your life reality. Your participation is voluntary, that is, you are not obliged to answer, and you can withdraw at any time. However, we would appreciate your active participation during this hour. We will record the conversation to listen to it when we are writing the research, but your contributions will be anonymous. Are you all willing to participate and allow us to record the conversation? [Facilitator: Wait for everyone to say "Yes" or nod their heads.]

I would like to start by asking how long you have been living in this area. Please tell me two good or bad characteristics of the area. [Facilitator: Wait for everyone or the majority to respond].

Continue with a brief description of each person: age, marital status, and family composition.

A. List of activities

Objective: Develop a list of general activities in the community and then identify which ones are considered work or employment.

- Thinking about a typical day, what activities do you perform?
 - *Facilitator: If nobody says anything, ask: Let's create a clock of our daily routine. Let's see, what's the first thing we do when we wake up? And when we are "half awake," what do we do?*
- Now, I would like us to talk about the activities that members of the community generally do. Could you describe to us what the most common activities are? Let's write them down on these sheets of paper. [Facilitator: Use the structure proposed in this guide. You can add the following columns: (i) Does it generate income? (ii) Do men perform the activity? (iii) Do women perform the activity? (iv) Do young people perform the activity?]
- Do both men and women perform these activities? Or do they carry out different activities?
- Do young people also perform these activities?
- What of these activities are considered as work or employment? [Facilitator: use a different color marker or adhesive dots and place it next to the activity that they say is considered as work or employment.]

Team: Follow the following structure on the sheets of paper:

Activity	Does it generate income?	Do men perform this activity?	Do women perform this activity?	Do young people perform this activity?	Do young women perform this activity?

B. Characteristics of activities

Objective: Identify the characteristics of activities classified as work or employment.

For you, what characteristics should an activity have to be considered as work or employment?

[Facilitator: Let the participants give their point of view. Try to ensure that all people participate.]

[Facilitator: After the discussion, ask the following questions if the topics have not been covered in the previous discussion]

- For example, would you consider an activity as work or employment if it is performed inside the house?
 - *If no one speaks, ask about:*
 - *Selling food that was made at home*
 - *Selling things to neighbors*
 - *Washing other people's clothes at home*
 - *Working as a tailor/ seamstress at home*
- Would you consider an activity as work or employment if you do not receive payment or salary?
- Would you consider an activity as work or employment if it pays less than the minimum wage?
- Would you consider an activity as work or employment if it is only developed for a very short time per week? For example, during one hour per week.
- Would you consider an activity as work or employment if you do not have a contract?
- Would you consider an activity as work if you do it alone (without other people)?
- Would you consider that growing corn to make tortillas for the household is work? And helping in the milpa, would that be work? That is, is someone who helps in the milpa considered to be working?
 - *If no one speaks, give an example: Maria and José are married, José has land that he cultivates, and at the same time, he is a watchman in a store. Maria helps with the milpa. Would you consider that Maria works?*
- Would you consider grinding the corn to make tortillas at home as work? And helping to make these tortillas, for example, by grinding the corn, is that work? If someone volunteers to prepare food at their children's school, is that considered work?

C. Final list of activities

Objective: Review if the list of activities changes after the discussion about work characteristics.

Now, after this discussion, let's review the list we have developed. Which activities do you consider as work or employment?

- *[Facilitator: use a different color marker or sticky dots and place them next to the activity they say is considered work or employment.]*

Which of these activities are most common for women or youth? Let's select at least 3 for each group.

D. Restrictions and Job Preferences

Objective: Identify the main barriers to finding employment in the formal sector in your community.

Now, we would like to discuss the difficulties that people face when trying to find work. What are the main barriers to developing these activities in your community?

If no one says anything, try the following:

- *The land is not suitable for cultivation*
- *There are no job opportunities in the activities that interest me*
- *I have no experience*
- *I don't know where to look for work*
- *There is no guidance on how to find work*
- *They don't pay enough*
- *Irregular work: they only give me a few days*
- *There are no economic resources*

In the case of women, do they face different barriers? What characteristics should jobs have for women to decide/be able to work? What characteristics should jobs have for women to move from informal to formal employment?

If no one says anything, try the following:

- *They have to take care of children*
- *They do not have support from their family to do the work*

In the case of young people, do they face different barriers? What characteristics should jobs have for young people to decide/be able to work? What characteristics should jobs have for young women to move from informal to formal employment? What needs to happen for young people to move to a more stable job and be more comfortable?

If no one says anything, try the following:

- *They have no experience*
- *They believe they do not have the skills to do the job*
- *They have no references*
- *They are paid very little*
- *They do not have the level of education required to do the job*
- *They do not have support from their family to do the job*

E. Social norms

Objective: To understand a little about social norms in the community, specifically about decision-making in the household.

Now, we would like to understand a little more about decision-making in households in your community (not in your own household, we want you to tell us what happens in general in your community).

- In your community, can women work outside the home and contribute to the family's income?
 - What is necessary for them to work outside the home?
 - Can they do it even if the husband works?
- And in households in your community, who do you think decides on the household finances (use of money)? Men? Women?
 - Take an example (add remittances).
 - And if there is some money left?
 - Suddenly everything is more expensive, who decides where we are going to scrounge from?
 - What if there is an unforeseen event?
 - Does this change if women work outside the home?
 - What happens if women earn more than men?

Who among you answered that last week they were working in some kind of business, agriculture, or other activity to generate income?

- Do you still think the same?

Closing of the discussion

Thank you very much to all of you for your time and ideas. This discussion has been very useful and interesting. As I mentioned at the beginning, the objective of this discussion was to listen to your opinions and points of view about work in your community.

- Do you have any questions for me/us?

Thank you again for all your help.

Appendix C. Risk Aversion Module

Instructions

Consider a situation where you may receive a certain amount of money for your personal use. To do this, you have to play the following simple game: Choose between two options that are presented in each round. In the first option, you could receive a safe amount. In the second option, you could win \$4 with probability 50% or win USD \$0 with probability 50%. For example, the second option is equivalent to tossing a coin: if it comes up heads you would receive USD \$4 and if it comes up tails you will receive \$0. Please answer all questions honestly, as at the end of 10 rounds, a roulette wheel will randomly choose one of the rounds and you will receive the amount of the option you have chosen in that round.

Table C1. Risk aversion preferences

Round	Option 1: Receive a fixed amount of:	Option 2: Play the following lottery:
1	0.00	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
2	0.50	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
3	0.75	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
4	1.00	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
5	1.25	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
6	1.50	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
7	2.00	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
8	2.50	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
9	3.00	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%
10	3.50	Win \$4 with probability 50% or win \$0 with probability 50%