

Battling job barriers with a tube of lipstick

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Generations of American women have turned to door-to-door sales when a male-dominated workforce and lack of education prevented them from entering the workforce. They were known as the Tupperware Lady or the Avon Lady as they showed off their newest products to the "Lady of the House."

New research out of the University of Cincinnati finds it's a strategy that is now bringing success to some [women](#) in third world countries facing discrimination in the formal job market. Erynn Masi de Casanova, a UC assistant professor of sociology, will present her research on Aug. 21 at the 106th annual meeting of the [American Sociological Association](#) in Las Vegas.

Casanova's research into women turning to direct sales in urban Ecuador resulted in her first book, "Making Up the Difference: Women, Beauty and Direct Selling in Ecuador," which was published by the University of Texas Press in June. Her field work included face-to-face interviews with 40 women that she conducted between 2007 and 2008, as well as general contacts with more than 100 women in urban Ecuador.

She explains that [gender discrimination](#) was not really a big complaint among the women because the labor market is so segregated by gender. "However, they said they felt that if they were over the age of 25, or if they were considered unattractive or had darker skin, they felt those factors kept them out of the formal labor market," says Casanova.

For women who had earned a college degree, professional jobs were

hard to get once they became mothers, due to the time demands. All of them were looking for an alternative to the low-paying, exploitative jobs like cleaning houses or watching children, says Casanova.

Not working was not an option, says Casanova, who adds that some of the women held other side jobs in addition to direct selling, such as running a little restaurant or store in their home. The women are also the primary [caretaker](#) of the home and family.

In addition to adjustable hours outside the 9 to 5 [workday](#), direct selling was also appealing because of the demand for the product, even in a developing country dominated by low-income families. "Everybody wants to look good. Everybody wants to smell good. Everybody wants to have nice skin. Those are demands that cut across all income levels," says Casanova. Plus, clients could pay for their products in installments, which was ideal for customers who could not afford to pay full price at a department store cosmetics counter.

"In a time of heightened unemployment in both rich and poor countries, and the expansion of informal work such as direct selling, the work strategies and experiences of these Ecuadorian women offer valuable insight into the challenges faced by women who want and need to work," says Casanova.

"I was also surprised that men took a very active role in direct selling, either alongside their wife or a female relative, or on their own. They saw opportunities in direct selling as well, either to purchase a product that they could not otherwise afford or to make a little extra money," says Casanova.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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