

LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN AT THE END OF THE CENTURY: FAMILY AND WORK

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This brief text aims to highlight some basic tendencies in the situation of women in relation to the family, work and poverty as they move into the new century. The ambivalence in the situation of women are very noticeable, especially in the spheres of employment and the family; central elements which define their opportunities for participation. In all areas, the permanent paradox between the economic and family contributions of women, their great lack of participation and the poor representation of their interests can be seen. This contradiction is even more clearly seen in relation to the serious obstacles in the way of translating women's demands into effective State policies which aim to improve their condition and tend towards modifying the gender system on the cultural plane.

It is obvious that as the condition of women improves, the space they occupy becomes devalued. For instance, with women's participation in the work market: as some occupations become «feminised» –that is with a higher proportion of women than men going into them– the income they generate becomes reduced along with the prestige associated with holding such a job. The differences in income have been maintained in a way similar to the situation of five years ago, along with the range of occupations carried out by men. That is to say, that discrimination has been reconstructed at a different point in the scale at the same rate as the improvement in the position of women has upset the balance between the sexes. The point at which inequality is established has changed and new openings for inequality appear in social and political participation, in employment and social security and in the family ambit.

The work market offers advantages and opportunities of freedom to women, who fought their way in here and are now fighting to broaden this space, diminishing the effects of discrimination and segmentation, while labour flexibility recreates new forms of exclusion and segregation. The family structure and organisation, meanwhile, are not so well covered by research, but it is feasible there would be strong negotiations given the great changes in the

lives of women and the tensions which their double lives as worker and housekeeper impose on their time, their physical capacities and their quality of life. The impacts the changes in the work sphere throw onto the family and their internal hierarchies must not be forgotten either. There are changes in the «knowledge» and the «power» within the family, which have been little studied. Although it is credible to suppose the role of women in the family is still of crucial importance as a bridge to the new roles and rupture with the old norms of submission.

The significance of the forms of participation and exclusion depend on the ambits where they are produced and the meaning attributed by the actors, hence the discriminations are also perceived subjectively. How do women experience the situation of inequality and the changes in terms of negotiation, resistance, confrontation and also «resignation» in the fora of employment and family?

On this front, it is important to differentiate the situation between the old and new generations. So the younger ones begin their negotiations from a higher starting point? The negation of the new and subtle forms of discrimination by the youngest generations, allied with the growing individualism and the exaltation of an apparent equality in the most modern systems, stand in the way of changing the gender structures by making the new aspects of subordination invisible in the subjective consciousness. However, as a generation, they also have better educational and professional opportunities and a new outlook on the family.

THE PRESENT CONTEXT

Adjustment policies were applied from the outbreak of the debt crisis, and these tended to prepare the Latin American economies for their insertion into the new globalised international model which was held up as the only development alternative. As a result, the

¹ The opinions in this article are entirely the responsibility of the author and do not involve the institution she works for. She would like to thank Rosa Bravo for her substantial contribution to this document and Lorena Godoy for her pertinent criticism, on the understanding that any deficiencies which exist can be attributed to the author.

most defining characteristics of the current situation include increasing integration into the international, regional and subregional market, movements of capital, information and technological innovation.

The role of the State as defined by the new model meant a reduction in social spending, with the consequent repercussions for the poorer strata of the population. Furthermore, the State was expected to have greater intervention in the markets and develop new regulatory functions. Thus the current Latin American State has been gradually modifying having to face several challenges, including assuring governability through the clear regulation of conflicts, redefining its own functions according to the great changes of the new international economic order and finally, assuring the long term stability of the economic transformations and their acceptance on a social level.

In the field of the most recent plans and policies, we need to stress that plans were designed for equal opportunities and other instruments to bring in gender policies in several Latin American nations. This process has been largely due to the development of the women's movements and the pressure they have exerted with their demands in several countries. These instruments have been the combined product of a process of consultation with specialists and analysis of the social experience of the women's movements (Guzmán and Ríos, 1995), both regional and European, especially the experience accumulated in Spain.

However, although we contributed to the creation of a special situation to redefine functions of public management, there are great difficulties in getting gender policies accepted and put into action, related to resistance to change, with a multiplicity of social and political agents implied, depending on conflicts of interest and the institutional diversity of each country. The ideological resistance which has developed against the issue from religious and political fundamentalists, amongst other factors, are especially strong.

The recent economic trends do not offer much hope. Even though some productive sectors have been modernised, allowing for comparative advantages to be obtained in the export of new goods, the generation of productive employment has not been sufficiently dynamic to incorporate all the population of working age. The work markets have become increasingly segmented, the unemployment and subemployment rates are especially high amongst women and young people. The average regional growth of the Gross Domestic Product for 1995 was of barely 0.3 % and represents a fall of 1.5% of the per capita product, in relation to the previous year. An important achievement for the region was the reduction of inflation in nearly all the countries, whereby the regional rate fell from 340% in 1994 to 25% in 1995 (ECLAC, 1996a). In 1996 growth reached 3.4%, half of the aim proposed by ECLAC (ECLAC, 1996b) as necessary to be able to tackle poverty adequately.

Without doubt these overall results have also had repercussions on the social budgets of the countries – those which have not yet recovered the levels of before the debt crisis. In the majority of countries the levels of social spending increased in relation to 1990, especially on education and social security, however, two thirds of the countries show very low levels of per capita spend-

ing in dollars: less than 100 dollars per person per year are spent on health and education (ECLAC, 1996).

IS POVERTY CONCENTRATED AMONGST WOMEN?

The new role of the State, the debt crisis, the effects of the adjustment programmes and the reduction in social spending have had long term consequences which have been expressed in the social and gender planes, in increasing poverty, unemployment both structural and born of the situation, concentrated on women and young people, and in an increase of precarious and unusual employment, where women are found in the less well paid areas of the productive and sub-contracted occupations. There has also been a reduction in civil service posts which has affected women in a discriminatory manner, as the main users and employees of the public sector.

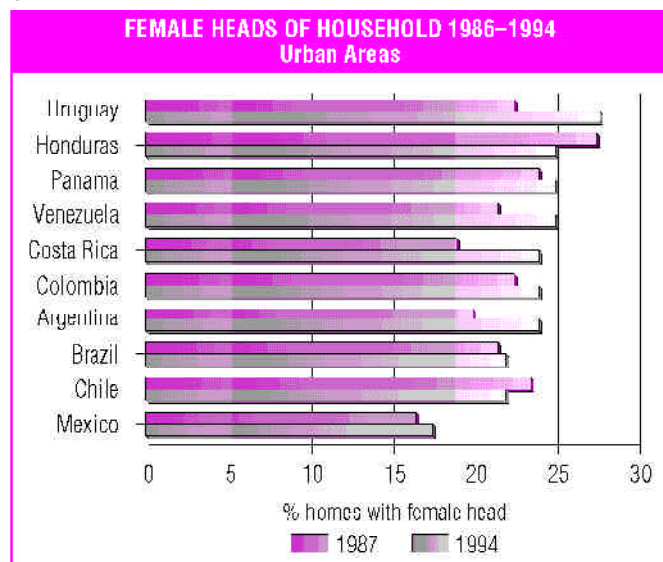
Poverty, with its low income and inability to satisfy basic needs, constitutes the extreme form of the exclusion of individuals and families from the productive processes, social integration and access to opportunities. It is thus one of the most perverse consequences of a development model, whose fruits are distributed in an inequitable manner.

From the social exclusion perspective, women in Latin America continued to be poor for gender related reasons, independent of the social strata they belonged to because of their families. Their role in society robs them of the possibility of acceding to ownership and control of the economic, social and political resources. Their fundamental economic resource is paid work, which they have access to only in highly unequal conditions.

Women who live in poor homes tend to be even poorer than their male counterparts, especially when they are also heads of household. They must carry out domestic labour, raise children, and care for the sick alongside holding a paid job. All this work is carried out in poor conditions meaning extensive working hours and therefore a poor quality of life which results in physical and mental exhaustion.

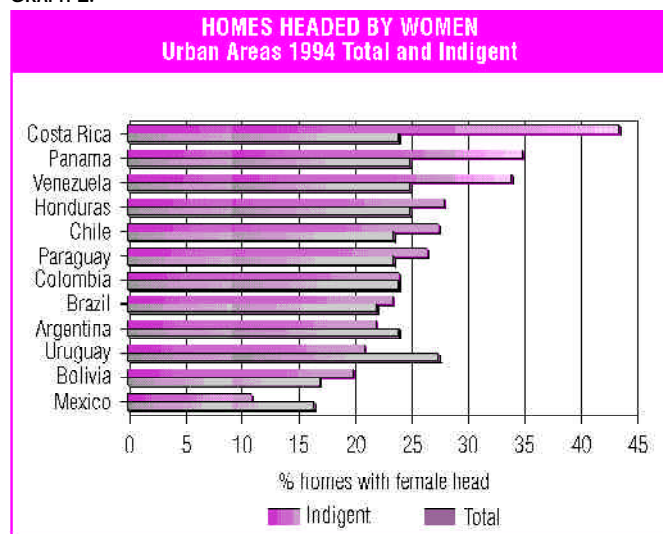
At present, woman-maintained households are becoming more common due to the economic tendencies which force women to seek their own income, like increasing poverty and demographic and social tendencies, like migrations, widowship, marital breakdown and teenage pregnancy (Buvinic, 1991). Even though these data are not totally reliable –given the definition of what constitutes a female head of household in the censuses and surveys, and as the statistical information is incomplete– in Latin America at least one in five urban homes is maintained by a woman (between 20% and 30% of the homes, and in the Caribbean region this reaches up to 40% and beyond), which means, in real terms, the absence of stable partnerships. This growth was very marked in the last decade and it is probable that the trend will be maintained and/or increased, as long as the phenomena that caused it are maintained (ECLAC, 1994, 1995 and 1996) (See Graphs 1 and 2).

GRAPH 1.



Source: ECLAC, Social Outlook, 1996 edition.

GRAPH 2.



Fuente: CEPAL, Panorama Social, edición 1996.

A large amount of these homes are headed by unmarried or separated women, most of whom are young. They are one of the most vulnerable groups of women in the region because they experience the greatest difficulties with maternity. Again, within this section there is the increasing group of adolescent mothers, who add extreme youth and poverty to the fragility of the leadership of the home (Buvinic and Rao Gupta, 1995). In nations with advanced demographic transition, homes headed by widows, especially in the urban areas, are an increasing phenomenon which must also be adequately considered in the design of social policies.

The traditional model of the family which is habitually used

for planning, is made up of a head of household who is the provider, a housewife who does the domestic work and children who –according to their ages– are either in the educational system or the work market until they make up new family nucleus. However, current studies show this family model is far from predominant. For example, in Chile, less than half of all families are like this: 33% (Bravo and Torado, 1995), as an increasing proportion of families have more than one person acting as provider (ECLAC, 1995), in others, the only provider is the woman (Valenzuela, 1995), while in extreme cases of indigent families the children are participating in the work market at an increasing rate (Arriagada, 1996).

Amongst the indigent sectors, there are a greater number of female heads of household. This sector of women has only recently been «discovered» by the public policies and several countries have programmes especially directed towards them, which seek to reduce the depth of the indigence without modifying their gender condition and the consequences of overburdening with work and subordination which their condition implies.

POVERTY AND GENDER BIASES

Although the measuring of poverty by the family income method does not allow us to determine whether there is greater poverty amongst women than men, it is feasible there are gender biases in poverty if we analyse the factors which determine it. In this way, the main factors include: the number of contributors to the home, the number of hours worked, unemployment, the jobs and incomes of the members of the home. In the case of indigent female heads of household the number of contributors is smaller.

For 1994, it was confirmed that between 17% and 27% of urban homes were led by women and the indigent homes maintained an overrepresentation of women heads of household (ECLAC, 1996) (See Graphs 1 and 2). It can also be confirmed that there were gender biases especially in pay per hour received by men and women, the amount of working people per home, in the unemployment rates and in the average number of hours worked (ECLAC, 1995). However, for all the countries in general it cannot be clearly proven that the situation is developing towards an increasing feminisation of poverty, for while female leadership of homes increased between 1980 and 1994, there was a greater increase in the number of these amongst the non-poor than the poor homes. Independently of the methodological criticisms of the way of measuring female home leadership in the surveys, the heterogeneity of the women maintained homes this data reflects, must be kept in view if we wish to understand the diverse living conditions of the women along with wishing to modify situations of extreme need and gender inequalities.

The increase in female led homes in the non-poor sectors is due to several situations like the increasing number of divorces and separations, where women do not form new partnerships, and there are more unmarried women and widows now living independently. All these situations show new cultural patterns which increase the diversity of family situations.

CHANGES IN THE FAMILY AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The processes of the modernisation of the family have not only changed its structure but also its functions. Thus, the family concentrates on the affective functions of caring for and socialising children, while other functions of a more instrumental type, like education for work, and economic production for the market, were redirected towards other social instances. Historically, the economic productive family functions have been losing importance given the modifications in the productive structure, such that there is increasing distance between the home and production for the market.

In the present day, the market tendencies in employment available could turn this situation round as the new forms of subcontracting and outworking in certain sectors of the economy (in Chile, for example, in the clothes making trade), have once more placed the woman in the home, linking productive and reproductive tasks. This strategy has a distinct character, as the production is directed towards the market, both national and transnational, and the result in an economic model which tends to reduce the cost of the workforce to a minimum.

In Latin America the family appears to have evolved from a «Victorian» situation to a situation where the public ambit is expanding and the private reducing, which is in line with the modern societies, which are more secularised and where there is greater exaltation of equality and individualism. In this way, the dividing lines between the public and private worlds have become more flexible and the permanent change has tended, in all referring to the family, towards broadening the public space.

The more definitive functions of the family, like reproduction and the regulation of sexuality have diminished as families are having increasingly fewer children (and there are an increasing number of children born outside of marriage where their parents do not form a family) and sexual activity is increasingly occurring outside of marriage.

Thus many of the functions of the family which were previously carried out within the home began to occur outside this ambit, producing an inversion of the amount of time people spent in their homes, and a modification of the ways in which the family and its functions are seen.

At the moment we are living through a process of change in the gender system: the family roles are tending to become more flexible – from a highly segregated model, like the traditional one, to shared roles, where the participation of both men and women in the work market is no longer argued over, but the different arrangements for caring for the children and the housework are negotiated.

The most visible point, and the main factor which began the breakdown of the traditional model, was the massive incorporation of women into the work market (which will continue into the future), most of whom, up until now, have not broken with

the traditional system and carry out a double work–day. In other groups a slow and difficult process of negotiation has started within the couple to develop a new model of shared responsibilities in the home. Some studies indicate that the tasks which present least resistance to sharing include caring for the children, but not housework (Sharin, 1995). Without doubt this will be one of the aspects which differentiates the old from the new generations.

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

The situation in relation to the access to knowledge differs widely across Latin America and it is possible to find nations where there are high levels of education throughout the population alongside others which have only a minimal educational coverage and where 47% of the women are illiterate – as is the case in Guatemala². At the beginning of the nineties there was a great improvement in women's access to the various levels of education and approximately 48% of those enrolled in secondary education were women. This improvement will later be reflected in the labour markets, given the high levels of participation of women with university level education. Advances are also being made –although on a lesser scale– in reducing the segmentation according to educational areas, with a marked increase in women enrolling in habitually male lines of study in higher education.

In this, as in other issues, a generational overview is always useful. We are seeing a tendency in the educational plane whereby young women are gaining a strong foothold in the basic and medium levels of education, where, in some countries, they are surpassing the level achieved by males, while the adult generations show levels of illiteracy and lower educational levels. In several regional countries in the nineties, women form a majority university students (Panama, Cuba, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela).

INCREASING FEMALE ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

For Latin America as a whole the vast majority of the jobs generated in recent years have been in the less productive sectors: small and micro businesses and non–professional self–employment.

The increase in female employment is found in these groups and resoundingly outdid the growth in male employment. Thus, between the early eighties and the mid nineties male urban activity has been maintained at around 78%, while female activity increased from 37% to 45%. This increase has mainly occurred amongst women aged between 25 and 49 years–old, that is, those

² Cuba, Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia, Panama and others have a female population with high levels of education, while Haiti, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua show high levels of female illiteracy according to data from FLACSO (1995).

who are also undertaking the reproductive tasks to a greater degree (See Arriagada, 1994).

Economic growth has promoted the demand for female employment in the structured areas of commerce and services. This depends on their educational levels, and the younger professionals have especially been inserting themselves into the more modern areas of these sectors with relatively high incomes, but always lower than those offered to males with similar qualifications. The professional work market continues to be segregated according to gender, partly as a consequence of segregation in education and training, and also because of the still present cultural norms on the role of women in society. For the majority of countries there is greater discrimination of earnings against women the higher they go up the educational levels. Discriminatory practices in contracting persist (both open and hidden) long with difficulties in access to training, promotion and both horizontal and vertical mobility.

Despite this, an elevated proportion of women with high educational levels participate in the labour market, contributing with their work to the generation of goods and services; and providing an indispensable income for their family group, both in order to satisfy the increasing consumer needs imposed by the economic model and to pay for the increasingly expensive health and education services resulting from the privatisation of these services in the region.

WOMEN'S INCOME IN THE HOME

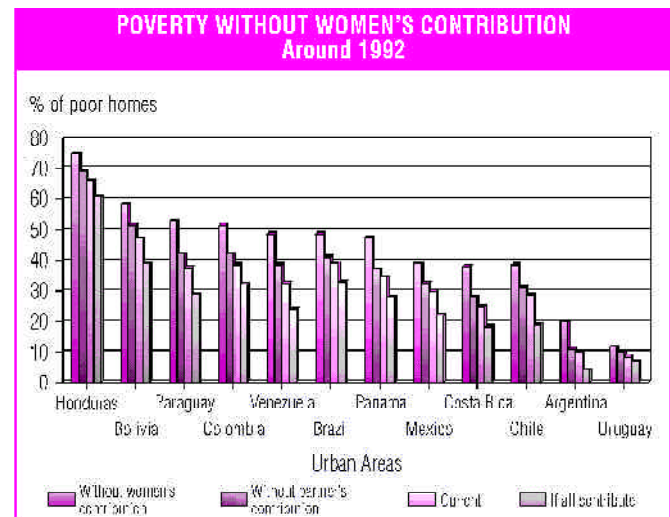
As a greater number of women live alone or are heads of household with dependants, their responsibility for the survival of their families has increased in the last 20 years. Often, pregnant teenage girls do not get the support of their partner, and older adults are not supported by their male children – tendencies which increase the burden on women. Although women live with a partner, the male income obtained is sometimes so insufficient that the women and children must take on the double burden of domestic work and work outside the home in order to supplement the family budget. A study in Mexico found 17.1% of homes, independent of the sex of the head of household, had an exclusively or predominantly female income (Rubalcava, 1996).

In the ECLAC «Social Outlook», 1995 a simulation exercise established how much poverty would increase if women did not contribute to the household. The results were clearly decisive: without the female income of married women, the poverty in the home would increase by between 10% to 20% (See Graph 3). For the group of homes in general, married women contribute around 30% of the income with variations according to the country. Women in 1992 contributed between 23 and 36% of the household income, and in the indigent homes, women's economic contributions to the budget was even higher (See Graph 4).

Case studies show the economic income of the women of poorer sectors –in contrast with that of the men– was distributed in a more equitable manner between the members of the house-

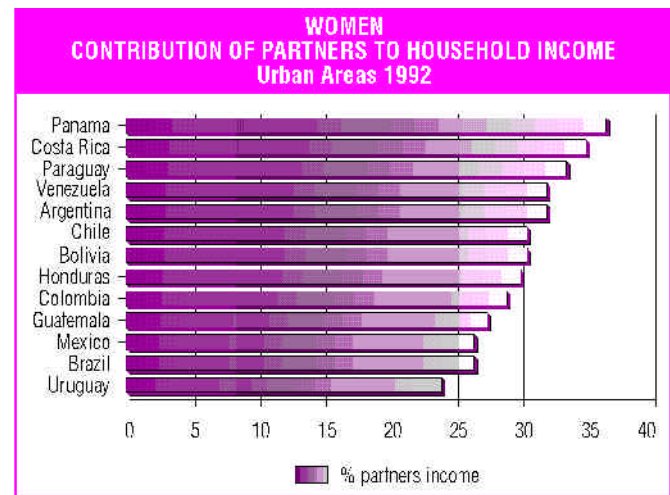
hold and was totally destined to the consumption needs of the family (Buvinic, 1991), which confirms the importance of women's income to their homes.

GRAPH 3.



Source: ECLAC, Social Outlook, 1995 edition.

GRAPH 4.



Source: ECLAC, Social Outlook, 1995 edition.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF DOMESTIC LABOUR

All societies assign women the daily reproduction they carry out through housework. This is done in an isolated parcelled-off manner inside each home, its economic value is not recognised and it is distributed unequally according to the level of development of each nation, social class, cycle of family life, geographical area. The UNDP calculated that in the developing nations

66% of women's work is outside the system of national accounts (SNA) whereby it is not accounted for, recognised or evaluated (UNDP, 1995). This greater effort by women is expressed in a greater number of hours taken up by their market and domestic work.

The institutional support systems to care for children and old people are practically non-existent. The nurseries and pre-school services have a low coverage, especially for those who most need them: the poorest women who work outside their homes. In the same way, caring for old people and invalids also falls back on the families, that is, on women, as there are very few support mechanisms, and these are very costly because they are private. In Latin America, pre-school coverage for children aged 0 to 5 years-old reached 7.8% in 1980 and doubled to 16.8% in 1991. In the majority of cases it was concentrated in the private sector and in urban areas. In some cases the amount of coverage has been increased and in others there have been legislative attempts to make pre-school education obligatory. However, in the majority of regional nations there is still a lot to be achieved on these fronts. The concern for the older population is still less explicit, despite the fact that in several regional nations the older population is becoming an increasingly important proportion of the population.

We need not only to broaden the support social institutions can offer to the family but must also modify the participation of the other members of the home within this, so as to better balance the gender roles in social reproduction.

In conclusion, the cultural changes related to modifying perceptions of the functions and structures of the family and their interrelations with the economy, along with modifications to the gender structures are still a pending task for the 21st century. It is to be hoped the contributions and needs of men and women will be better balanced in the new century, modifying their roles in the social and political ambits as well as in the employment and family areas in a positive manner. The organisational and planning capacity of women could be the keystone of accelerating this process.

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