

URUGUAY

New scenario to achieve equity



The first left-wing government in Uruguayan history has generated great expectations. The new authorities have defined an emergency plan to counter poverty, which in the last five years registered a significant increase. Public programmes should also give greater prominence to gender equity policies with the purpose of modifying the roles traditionally assigned to women and men while ensuring equal opportunities for both.

Comisión Nacional de Seguimiento (CNS) - Mujeres por Democracia, Equidad y Ciudadanía¹

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In terms of its poverty indicators Uruguay has been considered an exceptional case in Latin America. However, in the last few years processes of exclusion and social alienation have rapidly shaped a new reality. Currently, almost a third of the population and more than half its children live in poverty.

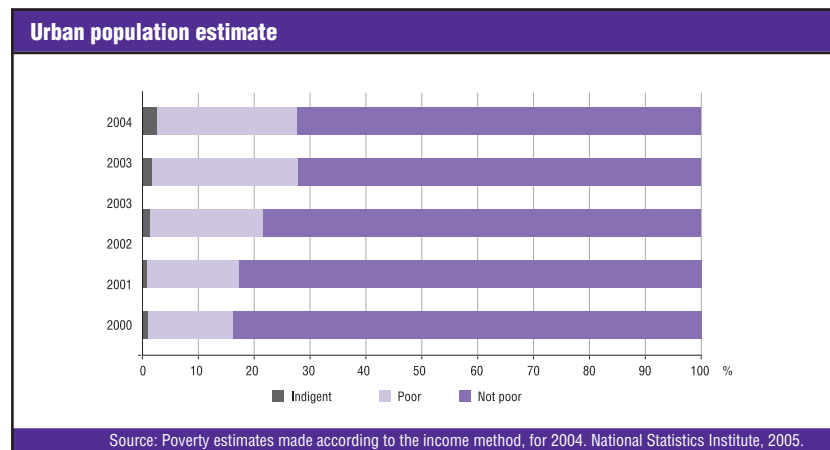
In March 2005, when the elected left coalition took office³ and in May when they won almost half the local governments of the country, they generated much expectation in the majority of the population. The new authorities have defined as top priority for the first years of their administration the Plan for Nationwide Attention to Social Emergency (PANES) aiming at articulating services and state activities and services to people in conditions of social and economic exclusion.

Organized civil society is trying to visualize participative state mechanisms for channelling proposals that widen the concepts of inequity and exclusion. These types of proposals did not figure prominently in the electoral platform of the new authorities and might not even be included or prioritized by the current Government.

Poverty on the rise

The 1999⁴ Report on Human Development in Uruguay emphasized that the country stood out among its Latin American counterparts for taking a development path that protected its social dimensions. But the economic crisis in 2001-2002 generated unemployment and work instability further weakened the health and education systems, deteriorated public finances, worsened the country risk assess-

CHART 1



ment, caused capital flight that drained up to 46% of bank deposits in dollars and tripled the public sector's gross debt.

The National Statistics Institute⁵ estimates that in 2004 income poverty affected 32.1% of the population rising from 30.9% in 2003. Extreme poverty rose by more than 100% in relation to 2000 and tripled in Montevideo, the capital city. Likewise, there was an increase in the number of members of indigent households, which reverses the downward tendency of the previous few years.

The income of poor households is about a third less than is necessary to cover their needs. In 2004, 32% of inhabitants were poor. Fifty seven per cent of children aged up to six, 54% of children aged between six and twelve, 45% of minors aged between thirteen and seventeen, 29% of adults and 11% of elderly people are poor.⁶ (Chart 1)

The most exposed

Poverty in Uruguay affects children mostly: more than 50% of the population aged between 0 and 5 are poor.⁷ The feminization of poverty is not men-

tioned and little is known about the impact of discrimination in questions of gender.⁸

One of every two female heads of household of working age with children aged 0 to 5 is poor.⁹ Fifty-five per cent of the women in Montevideo and the metropolitan area who were in the labour market had stop working at least once during a period of over six months for reasons related to childcare or family life. Housekeeping tasks still fall on the shoulders of adult women and so far no substantial changes are noted in the distribution of housekeeping tasks between the sexes.

In the case of marital separation, the links with the father of the vast majority of children are restricted to weekend visits. After separation, around 25% of children aged between 0 and 12 lose contact completely with their father and barely a third receives child support regularly from their father.¹⁰

The situation of young women is polarized in terms of their possibilities of empowerment. At one end of the spectrum are the young women who are

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3 For the first time the left-wing forces of the "Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoría" won the national elections and in March 2005 they took office with Dr Tabaré Vázquez as president.

4 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Human Development Report in Uruguay, 1999*.

5 National Statistics Institute, *Estimaciones de pobreza realizadas de acuerdo al método de ingreso, para 2004*. Montevideo, 2005.

6 *Ibid.*

7 UNDP. *Human Development Report in Uruguay*, UNDP/CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin America), 2001.

8 Bucheli, Marisa, Wanda Cabella, Andrés Peri, Georgina Piani and Andrea Vigorito. *Encuesta sobre situaciones familiares y desempeños sociales de las mujeres en Montevideo y el área metropolitana. Sistematización de resultados*. Montevideo: University of the Republic and UNICEF, 2001.

9 Operti, Renato. Report presented to the Human Rights Commission of the House of Representatives. Montevideo, 2003.

10 Bucheli *et al* (2001), *op cit.*



at university (enrolment at the State University of the Republic has reached 68% of total matriculation). These young women will have high chances of diversifying their plans for the future by prioritizing education and training over the traditional roles assigned to women. They will aspire to better employment conditions, greater economic independence and will be able to decide on how many children they have and when to have them. At the other extreme are the young women in the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society. They become mothers at an early age and have a high probability of being economically dependant, totally or partially, for the rest of their lives. It is unlikely that they will achieve any kind of empowerment.¹¹

Adolescent fertility is the outstanding change registered in the reproductive behaviour of Uruguayan women. While in 1963 the contribution of women aged between 10 and 19 to the global fertility rate was 9.67%, by 1996 that rate had increased to 14.76%.¹² In 1999, 82.7% of adolescent women's childbirths took place in the public health sector and 17.3% in the private sector.¹³

Limited exercise of citizenship

Education is the variable with the greatest bearing on the formation of opinions about gender equity. Less educated women are more likely to adhere to a traditional gender role models, while those with university education depart from this model.¹⁴ In the group of young mothers, 80% have not completed secondary education and 78.98% are not involved in economic activities.¹⁵

Women are particularly affected by labour market flexibility, loss of clear work standards, fear of unemployment, labour segmentation between the sexes, unequal remuneration for the same work, exclusion from decision-making positions due to gender stereotypes and sexual harassment. To this can be added a social security system that does not respond to the needs of an aging population or to the realities of the informal labour market.

Life expectancy is 75 years and women, on average, live 8 years longer than men. Mortality among men is higher at all ages. Nevertheless, morbidity is higher in women and is not adequately registered.¹⁶

Discriminatory cultural patterns

Gender violence, as much in public as in the private, is supported by cultural patterns and structurally embedded practices of abusive power relations between

men and women. Violence is exercised against any person whose gender option transgresses or does not fit neatly into culturally defined patterns of what it is to be a man or a woman. In Uruguay a woman dies every nine days due to domestic violence, and unsafe abortions are the principal cause of maternal mortality.¹⁷ Among poor women in particular, to break away from traditional models of woman and woman-as-mother is a high risk practice.

If to this situation we add the dimensions of inequity generated by ethnic background, age, race, sexual orientation and geography, we will get a wider and more complex picture of the characteristics that poverty adopts in the country. Inequalities caused by the intensification of the economic crisis are combined with structural inequalities caused by gender inequity. Therefore changes in the models of development that do not include the gender dimension and do not seek to overcome gender inequity simultaneously with poverty eradication policies, will not bring about the conditions needed to attain equal opportunities between men and women.

Two decades with little equity

Gender policies developed by the different national governments and the left local government of Montevideo between 1995 and 2005 aimed to overcome some of the situations of discrimination that affect women. But their policies and actions were not specifically directed towards gender equity. Also, they were discontinuous, fragmented, temporary and unstable when faced with a change of government or the authorities of the moment.¹⁸ Many did not respond to clearly identifiable goals and were not evaluated for their impact and the majority were directed only towards the most vulnerable sectors of the population. This occurred with the inclusion of contraceptive methods in public health services, the income generation programme for women in the rural sector and the policies for the eradication of domestic violence.

These state programmes did not include the male population and did not have as their target the modification of inequitable power relationships or the empowerment of women. On occasion, these actions tended to solidify the traditionally assigned gender roles.

Since the beginning of democratic reconstruction in 1985,¹⁹ it has not been possible to achieve a system with the capacity, strength and adequate resources to make progress in the design of public policies that promote gender equity throughout the country. To this day, the National Institute for Women and the Family within the Ministry of Education and Culture, is a weak state mechanism low in the insti-

tutional hierarchy, which lacks the funds and resources needed to become a leading organism of policies for women and gender equity.²⁰

The development of the National Plan for Equality in Employment (2004) and the approval of the National Plan for the Fight against Domestic Violence (2003), as well as the Plan for Equal Opportunities and Rights (2002) drawn up by the Municipal Government of Montevideo, are encouraging measures adopted by past governments that should be strengthened by the new administration.

New policies, new roles?

In the first months of the new Government's administration the authorities have not given signs that they will bring about positive changes in the problems affecting women's quality of life. PANES, identified as the Government's "flagship" of social policies, will be implemented by the new Ministry of Social Development and the National Institute for Women and the Family was changed into a National Bureau and made part of the new ministry with the explicit objective of incorporating gender equity into public policy. This could have positive repercussions in PANES if it incorporates measures contained in the National Plan for Equal Opportunities, announced as a mechanism that will guarantee women their status as subjects of law.

President Tabaré Vázquez recently announced that he will veto the bill for the Defence of Reproductive Health if it is passed by the legislature.²¹ This bill enables and regulates the practice of voluntary abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy, among other measures that will guarantee the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights. The President's decision could well be an obstacle to the legislative treatment of the issue and the search for solutions to unsafe and clandestine abortion practices, the principal cause of maternal death, mainly among the poorest women.

The organized participation of civil society was a novelty introduced by the series of international conferences held by the United Nations in the 1990s and it allowed civil society to influence action platforms and recommendations made by international conventions and conferences. Likewise, it promoted active participation of social organizations in the monitoring and control of commitments assumed by national governments. The recommendations made and the consensus reached at the Millennium Summit to eradicate poverty by 2015, could become reality if there is synergy between the actions developed by policy makers, organized civil society and the people. The ethical framework of these interventions must be one of unconditional respect for human rights without discrimination of any kind. Under this premise, it will be worthwhile to join forces to strengthen democracies, transcending and overcoming all interventions wishing to impose themselves in a hegemonic manner. ■

11 UNDP (1999), *op cit.*, pp. 23 and 55.

12 Varela, Carmen. "La fecundidad adolescente: una expresión de cambio del comportamiento reproductivo en el Uruguay". *Revista Salud Problema - Nueva Época*. Year 4, No 6. Autonomous University of Mexico, 1999.

13 Perinatal Computing System, Latin American Centre of Perinatal Care, Panamerican Health Organization.

14 Bucheli et al (2001), *op cit.*

15 Varela, *op cit.*

16 Brioso, Leonel et al. "Unsafe abortion in Uruguay". *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, September 2003.

17 Ministry of the Interior data, National Bureau of Crime Prevention. Also see: Abracinskas, Lilián and Alejandra López Gómez. *Mortalidad materna, aborto y salud en Uruguay. Un escenario cambiante.* Mujer y Salud en Uruguay. Montevideo, 2004.

18 CNS - Women. "El Estado uruguayo y las mujeres. Monitoreo de políticas públicas", *Cotidiano Mujer*, Montevideo, 1999; CNS - Women. "Agenda de las mujeres, una propuesta política", Montevideo, 2004.

19 Uruguay was governed by a military dictatorship between 1973 and 1985.

20 CNS (1999), *op cit*; CNS (2004), *op cit.*

21 Declarations made by President Vázquez in a press interview in May 2005.

