

# Latin American families: changing, diverse and unequal\*

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## *Resumen*

Este texto se refiere a las grandes transformaciones estructurales que han afectado a las familias como efecto de la modernización y de la globalización. Consta de dos partes: en la primera se da cuenta de las grandes transformaciones observadas en las familias y del grado de diversidad entre ellas; en la segunda se pone de manifiesto cómo hasta hoy este grado de diversidad no se considera en el diseño de las políticas públicas y cómo las áreas de cuidado de las personas —no cubiertas por las políticas— sobrecargan especialmente a las mujeres. Estos temas surgen como los grandes desafíos para las políticas públicas en la región latinoamericana.

*Palabras clave:* América Latina, economía del cuidado, familia, modernidad, políticas públicas.

## *Abstract*

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This text examines the major structural changes which have affected families as a consequence of modernization and globalization. It consists of two parts: the first one considers the significant changes observed in families and the degree of diversity among them; the second part demonstrates how, to date, public policy design has failed to take into account these diverse structures and how the areas of caregiving, not covered by public policies, constitute an additional burden, especially for women. These issues appear as the major challenges for public policies in the Latin American region.

*Key words:* care economy, family, Latin America, modernity, public policies.

## Introduction

In recent decades, different processes have generated changes in the structure and behavior of the families in Latin America. From an economic point of view, Latin America's incorporation to global economy has modified the ways of working and employment. The loss of work as the basic axis for social integration to economic, social and political life are processes that have

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impacted the organization and distribution of responsibilities and rights between men and women, particularly in the families. Women's access to labor market unchains cultural and subjective transformations which have been called, because of their reach, 'the silent revolution'. Likewise, demographic changes relative to fertility reduction, increment of life expectancy and migrations influence families' size and structure. The main transformations can be summarized in the following structural changes and the families' behaviors:<sup>1</sup>

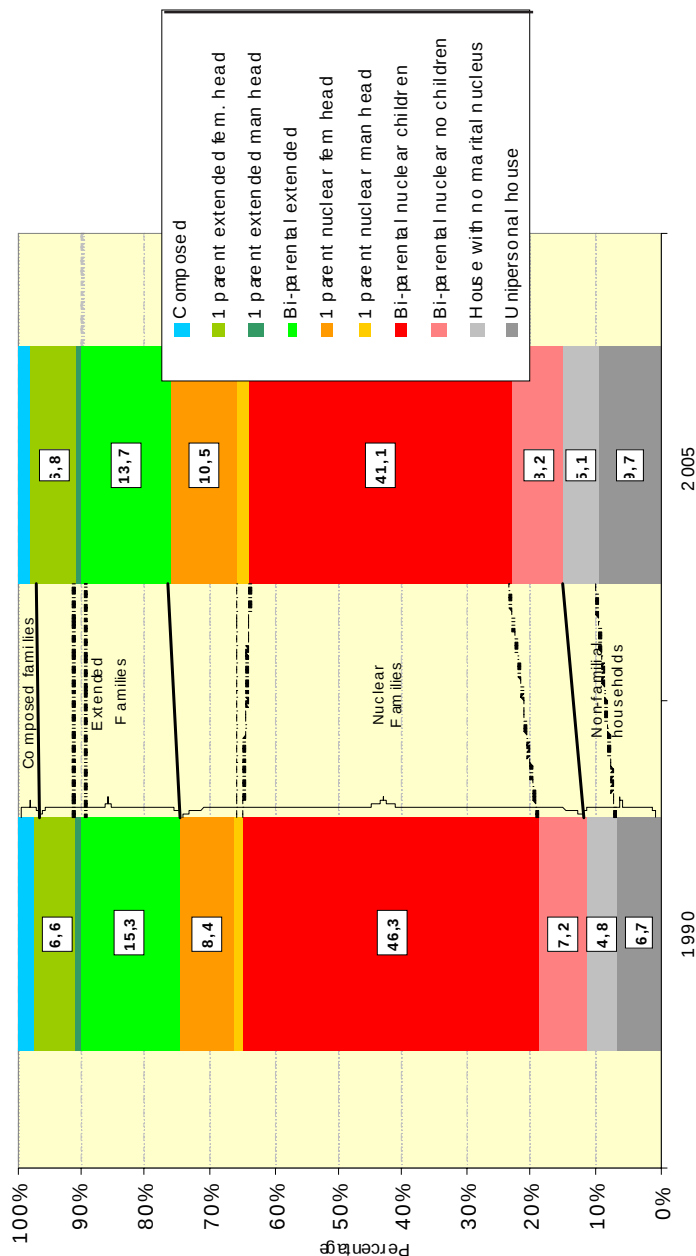
## **The diversification of familial forms**

During the studied period, between 1990 and 2005, urban families have diversified; the most important nuclear familial model, the bi-parental with children, was reduced (from 46.3 percent in 1990 to 41.1 percent in 2005). This model coexists with the three-generation extended family (in 2005 slightly more than a fifth of all the urban Latin American families, 21.7 percent), mono-parental nuclear families, mainly in charge of women (12.2 percent in 2005), unipersonal households (9.7 percent in 2005), nuclear families with no children, households with no marital nucleus, and the compound families (graph 1).

It is, there is a wide variety of familial arrays: people can decide to live alone, as couple with no children, in mono-parental households, in consensual unions, in homo-parental unions. There is a growing number of recomposed families (new couples with children from previous unions and different parents), as well as distanced families, product of migrations of some of their members, however, the size is not known since it is not possible to infer their magnitude from the information of the population census and household surveys. Nevertheless, study cases show the most important changes in the perception of who the members of those families are, their member's greater individualization and the acceptance of different familial bonds and affective logics inside the very family. Another of the most notable consequences is the family model with man as supplier. This model corresponds to the traditional conception of nuclear family, where both parents are present altogether with their children, the mother is a fulltime housewife and the father the single economic supplier. The increment in the educational levels and the growing incorporation of women to labor markets, leads to the change from the model of «families with supplier man» to that of «double income families».

<sup>1</sup> The information comes from special tabulations of the Urban Households Surveys in 18 Latin American countries in 2005 and in 16 countries in 1990.

GRAPH1  
LATIN AMERICA (16 COUNTRIES): HOUSEHOLDS AND URBAN FAMILIES' CHANGES  
1990-2005 (PERCENTAGES)



Source: ECLAC, based on special tabulations of the households surveys in each country.

For Latin America, between 1990 and 2005, feminine participation rate in urban zones in 18 countries increased from 45.9 percent to 58.1 percent (ECLAC, 2006). This is to say, currently in most of the urban Latin American families, women is no longer a housewife exclusively to enter labor market and become a new supplier of familial support. The most traditional model of nuclear family with both parents, children and where wife carries out domestic labor only takes place in one out of five urban Latin American households (graph 2).

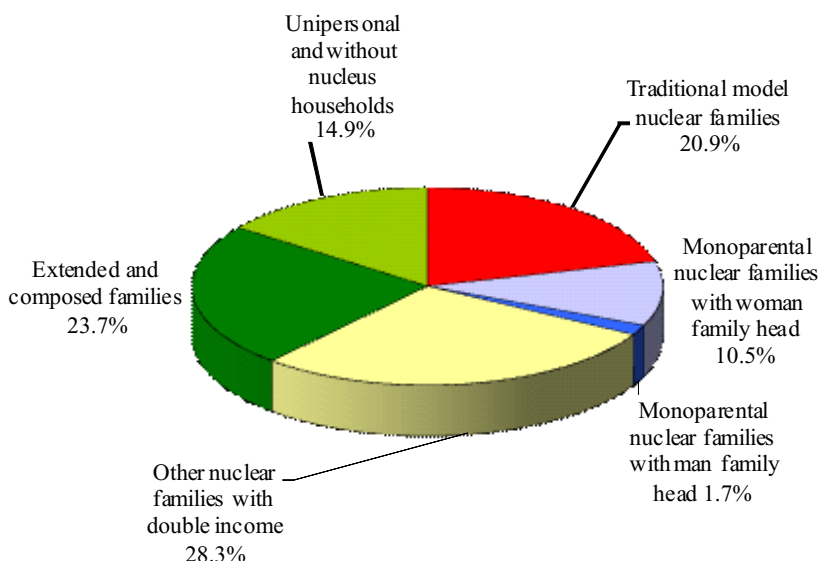
This change means that currently a high proportion of the family members in Latin America search for equilibrium between labor responsibilities and those related to household care. Women are especially affected by this transition, for the cultural expectation that mothers (real or potential, i.e., every woman) still take on the main responsibility of the household cares and, on the other side, take part into labor market. Nonetheless, while women's access to remunerated labor has been broadened, which takes time destined to cover familial responsibilities, there has not been an equivalent change in the redistribution of time men devote to household and labor, so work overload has fallen upon female workers, especially mothers with young children and women in charge of elderly people.

The surveys on time use carried out in some countries of the Latin American region (Cuba 2001, Ecuador 2005 and Uruguay 2003) give an account of the unequal distribution of time devoted to domestic chores and child, elderly and sick people care among men and women.

Another persistent tendency is the increment of households with a feminine head of family, which becomes more visible and has been deeply analyzed in the Latin American region, especially in Mexico and Central America (ECLAC, 2004; Chant, 2003; López and Salles, 2000). From a demographic perspective, it is related to the increment of singleness, separations and divorces, migrations and life expectancy; from a socio-economic and cultural approach, it responds to the increment in education and the growing feminine participation of women, which grants them economic independence and social autonomy to construct or continue in households without a spouse. Currently, almost a third of the Latin American families have women as family heads (29.1 percent in 2005). Among the indigent households, those with female heads of family are over-represented.

There has also been an increment in the non-familial households. Among them, those with the most growth are the uni-personal households (6.7 to 9.7 percent). The processes of individualization proper to modernity are seen in the increment of uni-personal households, it is, the people which opt not to live with a family—more common in young population which delays the decision to join

GRAPH2  
LATIN AMERICA (18 COUNTRIES): TRADITIONAL NUCLEAR FAMILIES'  
SIGNIFICATION IN THE TOTAL OF HOUSEHOLDS, URBAN ZONES, 2005  
(PERCENTAGES)



Source: ECLAC, based in special tabulations from the households surveys in each country.

or in elder population, with enough economic resources, where women's greater longevity causes the existence of a larger group of widows than widowers.

Another ongoing process is the reduction of the average size of families and households. This tendency is registered in all Latin American countries, although with significant variations; Uruguay is the one with the lesser average size per household (three people in 2005) whereas Nicaragua is in the opposite situation (5.1 people per household). This situation is associated to interrelated phenomena, such as the fall of fertility rate, socio-economic level and the increment of schooling level and the women's participation in labor market. Also factors such as late unions, maternity postponement and children distancing influence this situation.

Migration as family economic strategy leads to the fragmentation of the families rather permanently, this states the creation of new forms of familial relations in the countries of origin as well as the destination ones (Jelin, 2005). A new sort of family is generated: those called families at distance.

Similarly, the increment of the consensual unions is accompanied by a shorter duration of the unions; this demands an analysis of the quality of the affective bonds generated inside them, as well as their relation to the family's wellbeing levels.

## Inequalities

The linkage of the family to the processes of social inequality is of long dating. It is estimated that the reproduction of social inequalities has its origin in the families' kinship system and the conditions of origin, which condition their members' access to social, economic and symbolic actives.

It is worth remembering that the Latin American region is the most unequal in the world (measured by means of Gini's coefficient).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the great tendencies observed in the families are produced with a wide diversity between groups and social strata. For instance: family's households which belong to the superior income quintile have two of three people less than the families of the quintile with the lesser income, given by the largest number of children of the poorest families. Likewise, the extended households are concentrated among the poorest, while the uni-personal, among the wealthiest. Poor families with feminine family heads are extremely poor.

Inequality inside families is also notorious in terms of time, resources and labor distribution. One of the key factors in the analysis of the interrelations between labor and family has been the notion of labor's sexual division. This concept allows analytically linking both spheres and distinguishing their mechanisms of relation and interdependence with social reproduction, which refers to everyday, generational and social care of the population. In numerous studies the unequal participation of men and women in both activities has been made evident. Differential insertion in labor market contributes to the fact that the participation of familial workforce has a different effect in the households' homogeneity or occupational heterogeneity as well as their quality of life. To the extent to which

<sup>2</sup> It is calculated that Gini's coefficient for Europe is 0.34, 0.41 for the United States and 0.54 for Latin America (ECLAC *et al.*, 2006).

the growing incursion of women in remunerated labor has not been accompanied by an equivalent participation of men in domestic reproduction, the workload upon them has been multiplied. (Ariza and de Oliveira, 2004).

The production of goods and services in the familial sphere, or by means of non-remunerated labor, lacks public visibility and is not statistically registered in labor surveys, so it has been considered as no-labor, according to the classical association between labor and remunerated employment. Similarly, labor division by gender, consolidated since industrialization, relates (more in the imaginary collective than in reality) masculine activity to mercantile production, and feminine to familial domestic chores (Carrasco *et al.*, 2001). This rigid distribution of tasks has led to hide women's contribution to social and familial welfare.

Another great source of diversity and inequality is to be found in families with native and afro-descendant ethnic groups, whose values and behaviors on family differ from both the non-indigenous and other ethnic groups (e.g., Aymaras and Quechuas are differenced in the beginning of their reproductive cycle, which takes place later than in the non-indigenous groups from Bolivia and the Guaraníes in Paraguay). As the existence of ethnic groups has been disavowed in the Latin American region, their familial structures have been ignored in most of the researches on families and, what is more, in the design of policies.

## Great challenges for public policies

To the extent that family is a historic social institution, thus moldable, it is affected by public policies, for any sort of policy is supported on a representation of what a 'normal' family is, on the sort of quality of the established familial links (spousal, filial and fraternal). There are also visions (generally statistical) in relation to their members' rights, among them, rights to physical integrity and sexual and reproductive rights.

It is worth distinguishing once again the synchronies between cultural dimension, the imaginary on the family of institutions and people and the structures and the functioning of real families. Hence, the discourse of public policies faces several challenges. A first challenge is referred to the consideration of the families' dynamism in relation to the economic, social situation and the stage in their life cycle. A careful analysis of the demographic and epidemiologic projections that give account of the population's care necessities is needed. The design of policies so that household and care work will be shared and redistributed

has not fully entered in the political agendas, not to mention in the Latin American culture and practices.

Policies and programs toward families whose members have heterogeneous interests, and in some cases opposing, states a new question: do policies have to be directed to families or members? It is possible that policies directed to the family as a whole benefit more some members than others, due to the existence of unequal distribution of power inside the families, inequality supported and reproduced by several factors: economic contributions, social valuing, gender and age.

The permanence of certain myths impedes an adequate design of policies toward families: the myth of the nuclear family as ideal model, with the presence of both parents tied by marriage, with the perspective of a lengthy relationship, own children and a rigid distribution of roles; the existence of the harmonic family and based on the idea of man as the only economic supporter of the household and the women developing house chores. Despite many of the Latin American women work in the labor market—as well as numerous youths and children—it is kept in mind among the designers of policies the image of the traditional family and the mother as the children's only protector and socializing agent.

In Latin America, the enormous social differences are closely linked to the unequal provision of familial and social care, which makes it a real vicious cycle. Those with the most resources have better access to quality cares in the situation of having someone to be looked after. Those who have lesser resources to access mercantile cares and who have more care loads accumulate disadvantages because of the greater weight of familial domestic labor, difficulties in the access to the scarce public services and the need to draw to 'informal' caretakers (Aguirre, 2007).

Even though the public welfare systems and social and family policies have been modified to a different extent, according to the countries and circumstances, to be suitable to the deep familial and demographic changes registered in the recent past, a central challenge is the organization of the welfare public provision, which still lies upon very concrete suppositions on the characteristics and dynamics of family life. In other words, family is still a basic criterion for the organization of social protection and social services' providence.

It has been argued that the arrangement by means of which families take up their member's social protection had reached at the time a functional and normative limit; functional, since the demand of time and care necessary to meet theses new demands would impede, for instance, the women's adequate

incorporation to labor market, the necessary provision of the basic intra-familial cares and the creation of the basic conditions for coexistence, needed for the completion of the current familial functions. Normative, for this situation would impede the complete fulfillment of the right of the members of the family, such as women's equality or the children and aged people to be cared. It would not be enough, then, to 'strengthen the family' so that it better fulfills the anomalous function of foundation of social protection which a society undergoing deregulation puts forward to (Güell, 2007). Welfare systems should consider the current scenario characterized by a growing complexity and homogeneity of households and families and because of the change in the relations between their members, caused by modernization and democratization processes.

An important challenge for the State is the design of new public policies of care with integral and inter-sectorial character supported on the articulation and regulation of a network of public, private and mixed instances that provide an infrastructure of services so that a solution to the society care demand is guaranteed (Arriagada, 2005). An infrastructure that, similarly to a network of roads and bridges which supports the economic development, would be a set of policies of services which support those who cannot provide themselves with those cares: children, aged and disabled people (Durán, 2005, and Martínez and Camacho, 2005). The adequate regulation for social protection of the depending people is a pending task in Latin America. No Latin American country considers that design for social security policies. In most of the cases the care of people falls upon the so called 'familial solidarity' lacking the adequate coverage for the attention of children in pre-school age, of aged and disabled people. The diversity of demographic transitions in the region makes diverse emphases in the cares of the dependent advisable: children (countries in full demographic transition) aged people (countries in advanced demographic transition) and disabled people (countries which have undergone armed conflicts).

The growing diversification of the family structures —where the increment of feminine family heads and the increment of women's participation in the labor market are distinguished— reinforces the consideration of policies and programs tending to adequately articulate family and labor as central axis, under the light of gender equality, so as to manage a more equilibrated agreement in respect to the bases which supply welfare: the state-market-family-community. It is about searching conciliatory civic policies in the framework of the different sorts of State and welfare regimes and evaluate the incentives for the women's labor insertion in conditions of equality as well as their permanence in activities of

domestic cares, especially in their maternal functions (Draibe and Riesco, 2006). Some authoresses have qualified women as equilibrists or jugglers in their efforts to conciliate work and family (Martínez and Camacho, 2007).

In this line of reflection the design of State policies, of the enterprises' social responsibility is inscribed as well as the proposals of legislative changes in the productive sphere and labor organization. Creating public policies that favor conciliation between work and family, which eliminate gender and sectorial inequities and that enable the functions' fulfillment for the family's welfare. These policies should approach the existing difficulties to make professional and family life compatible, in this new globalized economic model, with the new schemas of transitory labor and extended schedules. These changes are causing a delay in the age of marriage and a decrease in birthrate, which besides is produced by the increment of schooling years and the delay in labor market access. For the poorest women, and specially women heads of family, a great overload of work takes place and the combination both tasks makes it worse.

The proposals for the Latin American region have the great challenge of the lack of adequate resources and social protection for vast population sectors that do not access formal, quality employment; hence, these sectors are not covered by social security, especially, unemployed youths, adolescent mothers and people in advanced ages, they face greater health difficulties and uncovered basic necessities.

As a conclusion, I would like to underscore the fact that cultural changes in families are clearly seen in the people's quotidian practices in relation to the forms of constitution of the family and familial lifestyles; these changes do not permeate sufficiently the discourses yet, not even the designs of public policies oriented to their welfare (for instance, in Chile in 2005 the Law of Divorce is approved, and abortion is currently unaccepted disregarding the circumstances).

Several opinion and worldwide values' surveys (Inglehart, 2004; Sunkel, 2004) systematically show the valuing of the family and the traditional role of women in the family, both in men and women, situation that varies according to strata and age groups (values in relation to parents respect; working mothers' relation with their children, between the role of landlady and worker, among other). Therefore, surveyed populations support that the fundamental role of women is taking care of their families and children, which contradicts women's rate of economic participation. The tension between the women's role of women-mother-landlady and worker and the guilt generated by the unfulfillment of the socially assigned role would be consistent with the findings of some

surveys in Chile that indicate women are more unsatisfied with their private life than men (surveys of the Universidad Diego Portales and Humanas).

It is possible to wonder on this cultural resistance which prevent the changes in families and in familial relations from being incorporated in the discourse and in the family policies' design and which refer to the persistence of an extremely traditional feminine and masculine identity in Latin American culture.

Family should also be a space of exercise of democratic rights supported on the respect for the growing autonomy of its members and on better equilibrium in workload (domestic and social), of opportunities, of time, of resources and familial decision-making. Thus, a new relation will be built based on the fact that asymmetries will be regulated by democratic patterns (Salles and Tuirán, 1996).

To sum up, from an approach of rights it is necessary to advance to new systems of public policies which incorporate the major changes in the familial and gender order. This challenge is complex and it is not exempt of a severe confrontation between diverse visions and, occasionally, opposed, on the role of family, the ways the gender relations are organized and the State's task in welfare providence. Considering caring, labor and commuting time of men and women, as well as organizing production reproduction in a more equitable manner would be basic premises in a new welfare system that provides better life opportunities for the population. This sort of policies requires a redesign of the State and, therefore, a new social, political and economic pact.

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