



The formation of female-headed households in poor urban sectors in Colima, Mexico: a five-case analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the factors that led women from urban areas of medium-sized cities of western Mexico to become the head of the household. The paper aims to discuss the reasons that led women to break with their partners as well as the paths they followed to become the head of the household. The paper presents the results of research on this subject carried out throughout 2007 in Colima, Mexico. The study aims to show that the formation of alternative forms of domestic and family life is a consequence of external phenomena such as globalization, cultural, historical and political factors.

Keywords: Female-headed households; social change; women; stigma; social class.

Introduction

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO DISCUSS the evidence related to the conditions that stimulate and/or force women to become the head of their own household. The purpose is to show how demographic, cultural, economic and historical issues drive them to do so. In this sense, this paper pursues to show the profound effects of such phenomena on family structures causing family transitions that give rise to new forms of non-traditional family life. The results and findings discussed here are intended to show women's self-perception as head of households. The discussion is presented in two sections: the first one summarizes the achievements made by scholars who studied Latin American households from different disciplines and perspectives. This aims to understand how women see themselves as heads of the family after having broken up with their partners. The second section analyses the routes women followed to become head of households and how they dealt with the social stigma of having no partner in a contemporary, yet deeply conservative society.

The data presented are part of the first stage of the research titled "The role of oral narrative in the construction of female identity: a comparative study" sponsored by the Mexican National Council of Research

and Technology (Conacyt).¹ The purpose of this project was to understand the paths women followed to become head of households and the way such condition modified their self-perception, identity and conjugal relationship. The study was made from an oral history perspective through interviews with 30 women of two socioeconomic groups from popular sectors from the cities of Villa de Álvarez and Colima in the state of Colima, Mexico. The informants were selected on the basis of their low or incomplete schooling, having a paid job whether inside or outside the household, having children and having (or having had) a partner. These elements allowed me to observe the way and conditions under which women became the head of their own household and the way in which this affected their identity and their roles as mothers and as workers.

1. Latin American and Mexican studies on female-headed households

The pioneer studies on women, family and households carried out in Mexico and Latin America emerged as a result of the "First Conference on Women" celebrated by the United Nations Organization (UNO) in Mexico City in 1975. The interest on women's studies led to the reflection on the connection between poverty and women and therefore, to the family and domestic life. The work of Rodríguez, 1997; Brachet, 1998 and González de la Rocha, 1998 showed the precarious living and working conditions of women and families in Mexico and Latin America. The results unveiled unknown aspects of the demographic transition that our continent was facing, the level of poverty of the different types of households – particular those headed by women – the relevance of women's income for the family, women's dual employment², their demographic composition and their dynamics, amongst the most relevant issues.

Female-headed households (FFH henceforth) have

been the object of study in Mexico and Latin American since the mid-1970s. The studies that explain their presence and reproduction go from economic perspectives such as that of Cicerchia (1997), to standpoints such as that of Ariza and de Oliveira (2006), who, from a socio-demographic perspective, observe their changing composition and structure as a result of demographic transitions and transformations.

Regardless of the standing point, it is a fact that FHH –particularly Mexican ones– have been carefully studied by social sciences. Yet, the work done by NGOs, civil organizations and isolated public organisms has significantly helped to create policies and programs to regulate and help families.

The outcome of the interest of academicians and civil activists has translated into a large body of knowledge that, to a great extent, has influenced the way scholars from the region approach and understand the family and household phenomena (see, amongst others, Ariza and de Oliveira, 2006; García and de Oliveira, 2005; Kliksberg, 2005; Acosta, 2003; and García and Rojas, 2002).

In Latin America and in Mexico in particular, families and households have been approached mainly from a social science perspective, with history, demography, economics, sociology and anthropology being the most interested ones – and both from quantitative and qualitative frameworks (see the work of Ariza and de Oliveira, 2006; Cicerchia, 1997; García and Oliveira, 2005; Kliksberg, 2005; Acosta, 2003; Chant and Craske, 2003; Quilodrán, 2003; García and Rojas, 2002). Despite the fact that some findings made by these scholars vary as for the extent to which the structures, composition and dynamics of both families and households have changed, all of them agree that the transformations it has experienced has deepened since the 1970s as a result of rapid economic, cultural, historical and demographic processes (García and Oliveira, 2005; García and Rojas, 2002; Kliksberg, 2005).

The findings made by statistical studies and those made by scholars allow posing that there has never been, and might never be, a universal and unique form of family organization. The conformation of

¹ The research comprises two more stages. The second ran from March 2008 to February 2009 and focused on women's heads of household self-perception and household dynamics. It was financed by the fund "Ramón Álvarez-Buylla de Aldana" (Fraba) of the University of Colima. The third stage is planned to take place from June 2011 to May 2012 and will investigate female headed households from rural areas in western Mexico. Both stages will conform the basis for a comparative study that intends to shed light on the similarities and differences in women's self-perception as head of households in both areas as well as in the dynamics of the household.

² The research by Bogani, Grosso, Philipp, Salvia and Zelarayán (2005) in Argentina and Gomes (2001) in Brazil shows that the number of women with dual employment in these countries is smaller than in Mexico. This can be explained by looking both at the social policies and tax collection in both countries. In Argentina, in 2002 the State created the social program "Female and Male Unemployed Heads of Households" to combat the increasing poverty caused by the economic crisis. In Brazil, Gomes discussed that that nearly 80 per cent of the economic active population pays taxes and that two thirds of the GDP are spent on pensions, a fact which allows women to keep one job. Gomes also stated that in Mexico only one quarter of the GDP is spent on pensions and that 40 per cent of the economic active population pays taxes (Gomes, 2001: 636), which helps to explain Mexican women's dual employment.

alternative forms of family life is the result of every region's historic and cultural processes that tend to be measured and valued against an ideal model, usually the nuclear one. Within this logic, the conformation of female headed households are often associated to symptoms of social decay, violence, drug consumption and therefore, socially deviant behavior in the eyes of the State, the church and other conservative sectors of society. Nevertheless, the studies showed by institutions and scholars here quoted have clearly demonstrated that the levels of violence, drug consumption, alcoholism and poverty are not necessarily more pervasive in FHH.

The censuses at hand and the data from research carried out on female-headed household show a clear growth in the number of this type of households throughout Latin America and Mexico. According to García and Rojas (2002), in the Latin-American region there were an estimated 14 per cent of FHH in 1970. The figure rose to 17 per cent in 1990 and 21 per cent in 2000 (López and Izazola, 1994; García and Rojas, 2002). In Mexico alone, the figure was 23.1 per cent in 2005 (Inegi, 2008).

According to the research carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Buvinic and Gupta (1994), Cortés (1997), Cortés and Ruvalcaba (1994), Echarri (1995) and Gómez de León and Parker (2000), FHH were considered as transitory and the poorest. This argument was supported by demographic and statistic studies made by Celade³ and Cepal⁴ (1994). Although first taken as an unquestionable truth, a decade later the revision of such findings and the growing presence of FHH in Latin-American countries led researchers to reconsider this argument (see Ariza and de Oliveira, 2006; García and Oliveira, 2005; Kliksberg, 2005; Acosta, 2003; García and Rojas, 2002). New research shed light on the fact that FHH were neither the poorest nor transitory. Likewise, they also found that this type of households also multiplied in different social classes, which pointed out to the need of new research on the topic.

These studies also confirmed that the shrinking of the family, the migration process, the economic crises of Latin-American countries, the increasing levels of schooling, the use of contraceptive methods and the entrance of women into the labor market caused rapid and deep changes on family structures and women's identity. In 2000 the findings made by well known scholars stated that those were some of the reasons that explained why FHH were not transitory but rather a consistent characteristic of the Latin American and Caribbean societies.

It is a fact that the number of nuclear and heterosexual families with children is decreasing world-

wide as new family models, particularly that of FHH, emerge. However, for most Latin American countries, this phenomenon has been partially addressed as a direct result of the signing up of several Inter American and international agreements. In 1989, Mexico as well as most countries of the region (Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil, Chile and Argentina, amongst others), signed up both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in 1994 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the Inter-American Convention on the prevention, punishment and eradication of violence against women. By doing so, they all committed to making reforms and changes to their legal codes and constitutions in order to foster and assure democracy for all the individuals of the family.

In the particular case of Mexico, this translated into the reform of the article 4 of the Constitution by declaring that "women and men are equal before the law" (Ariza and de Oliveira, 2004, p. 171). This led to modifications in both public policies and social programs regarding women and children in particular. This change was echoed by academicians and civil organizations that since then have actively participated in the critique of the existent public family policies as well as in the proposal of alternative solutions in this respect. They all aim to create more balanced policies that may guarantee equity and social justice, the defense of human rights, the respect of cultural diversity and the democracy both at a family and individual level.

What are the implications of such change for female-headed households? They are hardly perceptible, since most public institutions and social programs that range from secretaries, undersecretaries and assigned counsels assumes a *family* to be the arrangement composed by the two heterosexual parents and their offspring. Arriagada (2001, p. 31) states in this respect that the relevance of *the family* for each institution varies depending on their chart. Add to this is the disproportion between the extent of the goals each of them aim to reach and the resources they count on to carry them out. Another important issue is the conception and definition of social development, family, gender and violence for the officials of these organisms. This in turn, separates discourse from practice and ends up impeding the application prevalent and new policies and programs. And such discourses and practices vary from the traditional and conservative approach to less traditional standpoints. As the above-mentioned author noticed, the less traditional institutions are the ones that usually deal with family and gender issues.

For most of the institutions in charge of the family in Latin American, the agenda of women and chil-

3 Latin American and Caribbean Demography Center

4 Economic Commission Latin America and the Caribbean

dren is inclusive. This reinforces the binomial mother-children and ignores the central role of the father for it. Nonetheless, the fact that nearly 25 per cent of the families are headed by women and that in most of them men are absent, the policies target men either as the head of it or as the fathers rather than women. This seriously affects both the social acceptance of FHH and their standard of living since they lack proper policies to support the family and event to be recognized as such. Arriagada (2001, p. 32) states in this respect that *the family* for these organisms is a group of members rather than an institution in itself and by doing so family-women are seen as synonyms.

What emerges from the above discussion is the need to reconsider the culturally overvalued and driven position of women in public speeches and policies, where they are considered mainly as caregivers of the family. This only perpetuates their absence from public policies as heads of households and from programs as beneficiaries.

Based on the former discussion and in the empirical findings made by this research we discuss how women from an urban city and from popular sectors became heads of households, the way they saw themselves as such and the way they dealt with the social stigma of having no partner.

2. Routes to female-headed households

The evidence gathered by our study found that women interviewed in the cities of Colima and Villa de Álvarez gained access to the headship of the household through five paths, namely widowhood, separation, divorce, single motherhood and income. Nevertheless, these are the routes we found rather than an exhaustive description of the routes women followed to become the head of household. Table 1 shows evidence from five cases from our study that allow us to discuss the aim of this paper. The table shows the age of the women, the number of children they have as well as the situation that converted them into the head of the household.

Table 1. Female routes to the headship of the household

Name	Age	Nº of children	Route to head of the household
Ana María	58	2	Widowhood
Rosalba	39	3	Separation
Isis	28	3	Divorce
Trini	43	1	Single motherhood
Delia	41	4	Income

The cases showed in the above table were chosen because they are representative of the most common points of tension between the couples. Likewise, through them we will aim to analyze the impact of globalization, industrialization and modernization on family structures, particularly on women's role within the family and household.

2.1 Female-headed household as a result of widowhood: Ana María

Nettel (1992) poses that the female-headed household as a result of widowhood was the most common reasons for which women became the head of the household in Mexico until mid 20th century. Likewise, García and de Oliveira (2005) found that women were less prone to get a second marriage than men. But, what are the economic, social and power implications for a woman when she becomes the head of the household? The immediate effect is to become the only breadwinner which is a particularly vulnerable stage of their life cycle when children are young. The second major disadvantage for widows is to become so at a mature age lacking formal schooling and working experience. When this is the case they are forced to take ill paid and irregular jobs or to take a second job with these characteristics. The third challenge for these women is to become the head of the household and fully assume and face the economic and social expectations it implies. Let us see an example.

Ana María: Ana María is a 58 year-old widow who lost her husband at the age of 50. She married him when she was 21 and had two boys. Ana María finished secondary school and after marriage devoted to her house and family although she always wished she had a paid job. Her husband's health was weak due to diabetes and as it worsened she foresaw a difficult situation for her and her two children due to her low schooling and lack of working experience. Against her husband's will and in secrecy, she did a hairstylist course with the economic support of her elder sister. When her husband died she inherited from him an old truck that she sold to build an extra bedroom at home where she opened a modest beauty salon. However, the income was low since the family lived in a popular area and this was the reason she asked one of her sisters who ran a cafeteria at a local university if she could sell shakes made of natural products. Her sister agreed and since 2006 she is making her bigger income out of this activity. As we can see, Ana María has received both emotional and economic support from her family.

What was her self-perception of the headship of the household? She said it was a very difficult time since she did not think she could make it because her eldest son was finishing his BA and the youngest one

was at high school. Nevertheless, the decision to sell shakes was fortunate since it provided them with a good income that allowed them to meet all their basic needs. She considered that widowhood had been the worst part of her life as a woman because of the loneliness, the drop in their living standard and the responsibility of raising two children on her own. Yet, it also granted her the opportunity to do things – as supporting her family and earning a living under very disadvantaged circumstances, which reinforced her self-esteem. As most women who become head of household due to different circumstances, Ana María had no choice but to appeal to their family networks to succeed since the Mexican State has no social and/or family policies to support women in these circumstances. Her only chance to receive economic support from the government was through her husband's social security, which he did not have.

As for the stigma of having no partner, this can be seen in the form of sexual harassment – mainly by married men from her own circle. She has reacted to that by reducing her social life to family and close family events. She considered that even when she sometimes felt lonely and old, she would rather continue this way because she also enjoyed the freedom of widowhood and the feeling of being self-independent. A condition that she considered she would lose if she entered in a permanent relationship.

2.2 Female-headed household as a result of separation

According to Gallego and Pérez (2001), only 3 per cent of Latin American households are male-headed while the rest of them correspond to female-headed households. Let us see the route and conditions that led a woman to become the head of her own household. Rendón (2004) found that female-headed households caused by the separation exceeded those caused by widowhood from 1980 onwards. Acosta (2003) also found that when marital relationships turned extremely problematic, the couple decided to end their relationship. Under these circumstances women tend often to keep the custody of the children without the support of the father, whilst frequently men move out of the household and eventually find a new partner and raise a new family. Although the law in most Latin American countries states that men

must support the children they procreate, what actually occurs is that, after men break up or abandon the relationship, women tend to be the only responsible for the support and well being of their children.

Acosta (2008, p. 205) discusses that most legal frameworks in Latin American countries do not consider the abandonment of the family to be a serious crime. Figures show that men are more prone to do so, which leaves women as the only provider of the family, and in the case of Mexican family policies and programs, no economic help is offered. This situation, combined with weak social policy for female-headed households in Mexico, partially explains why FHH women are forced to take second jobs and to make the most of social and family networks to support and look after their children.

Rosalba: Rosalba met her partner in the secondary school both were attending in Guadalajara⁵. After graduating they started living together and she moved to her partner's parents' place until they were in a better position to rent their own place. Soon after that they got married and had two children. After eight years of relationship, she abandoned him due to domestic violence and lack of financial support. She took her three children with her and moved to Colima where her mother and two brothers lived hoping for them to be supported. However, once in Colima her mother refused to receive them at her place because her partner, a man for whom she had abandoned them twenty years before, did not approve of it. In exchange, Rosalba's mother offered to look after the grandchildren while she was at work.

Days later Rosalba found a job as a domestic servant, a sector in which she has worked since then. As a head of household, Rosalba saw herself burdened by the economic bills and demands of her children. She wanted them to attend school and to achieve at least a technical degree in order to enhance their opportunities. They worked over the weekends to help her to cover their own leisure and school expenses. She also felt that the social policies that the government provided, which she knew to perfection, were insufficient and male-driven since they favored male-headed households over female ones.⁶

As a woman, she has felt lonely since her job and children hardly leave her time to socialize beyond her family circle. In a way, this has been a strategy to avoid problems with coupled women who tend to see her as a danger for their relationship. After she abandoned

⁵ Guadalajara is the second largest Mexican city and it is located 215 kilometers from Colima City.

⁶ The Convention of 1979 of the United Nations Organizations stated that women must be freed from "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." The convention forced countries of all over the world to make important changes in the legal frameworks and the recognition of women's rights that have impacted on key spheres of domestic and family life. Among these, in the Mexican case, is the possibility to keep children's custody.

her husband, she started a relationship with a mature single man, whom she did not love but respected as he provided them with company and social respect. However, as he showed a different position with regard to the administration of the money she earned and the way she raised the children, she decided to split up. She convincingly stated that she had no further intention to start a new relationship.

From the above mentioned we can clearly see how Rosalba's decision to abandon her partner automatically translated, in social terms, into the rejection of the little economic support he provided them. That fact that her husband did not support her children after the breaking up did not come to him as a problem but rather the opportunity for a fresh start with another woman. This translated for Rosalba, as for many other women, into years of poverty, vulnerability and hard work since she was poorly educated and did not have another choice but to work as much as she could to support her children. She did seek legal help to end her marriage and to oblige him to support the children but he argued abandonment, which was technically correct. Nevertheless, the Mexican law failed to protect Rosalba and her children from violence and mistreatment, situations that are clearly typified. However, she never made a legal complaint about it, since she thought it might be useless to ask for economic support, and so decided to end the divorce process.

2.3 Female-headed household as a result of divorce

Meler (2001) states that the social phenomenon of the divorce has modified the conception of marriage since what was once thought as something very solid, now can be broken by the disillusion of marital life. In Mexico alone and according to data gathered by Rendón (2004), the number of divorce triple between 1970 and 1990. García Castro (1998, p. 254) showed that in 1970 a total of 44,596 men divorced, but the number of women doubled that figure since 91,166 women did so. In 1990 the situation grew to 110,563 for men and 296,214 for women. In most of these cases, women tend to be granted the custody of the children although this not necessarily implies for men to support their offspring until they turn 18 as the law states. Our evidence showed that in all but one case, the divorced women did not receive the economic help from their ex-partners. This put a lot of pressure on them since they at once became the head of the household and the breadwinner. For some of them this meant, as Leal (2007) found, finding a job after years of inactivity, which forced them to take ill paid and part time jobs.

Our data show that most interviewed women quit their jobs right after marriage as a sign of respect for their partners. In some other cases, women quit

school after marriage to look after the children. Both are still common responses in Mexico among women of low and middle classes, whose partners' ideology seeks to protect their image as breadwinners as well as to keep their women out of men's gaze and therefore, assure that they are sexually controlled. Nevertheless, this cultural practice reverts to women since after divorce or separation they look after the children without the economic and legal support of the father of the children.

Brachet-Márquez (1998) states that the main advantage of divorce for women is the power they gain in decision-making, which allows them to decide when and how to spend the money. According to the evidence found by González de la Rocha (1998), García and Pacheco (2000), Amarís (2004) and Leal (2007), when women become the head of the household they tend to spend significant amounts of money on food and education. Let us see an example.

Isis: Isis is a 28 year-old woman who soon after finishing secondary school married a bricklayer with whom she lived ten years and had three daughters. She decided to end the relationship because her husband's jealousy made her feel she was living in a *golden cage* as he forbade her to go out even to do the weekly shopping. She decided to ask him for the divorce one day when she had gone to the corner shop for a soft drink and met him on the street on his way back home. There he accused her of infidelity and threatened to abandon her. As she had taken the first step towards divorce, he refused to sign it so she abandoned him. Months later Isis agreed to divorce under the condition that she would remain with the custody of the children. Her husband agreed and both signed the divorce, in which he accepted to hand in a monthly amount to Isis for the support of the children. Yet, in exchange he asked to be called for permission whenever they wanted to go out. This contravened both the legal conditions of their divorce and the Convention of 1979, but Isis' lack of information about the Mexican Family Code and the lack of resources to pay an attorney led her to refuse the economic support of the father of her daughters in an effort to keep her emotional stability.

Soon after her divorce, Isis' mother and her youngest brother who had Down's syndrome moved to her place from Guadalajara to Colima so she could go out to work as a cook during the morning. Her mother also worked as domestic servant three times a week during the evenings when Isis was at home but as the children had to stay on their own, she quit. This forced Isis to find a second job as domestic servant twice a week after finishing her work at the cafeteria. Yet, the family was struggling to make ends meet since her brother needed medical assistance and her own children had no access to medical service. This forced her to take a third job at the city council as a street cleaner

from 12pm to 6am from Monday to Saturday. This job in turn allowed them all to have access to medical services, housing benefits and bank credits.

For Isis and her children the divorce meant a sudden change in their lifestyle since they all experienced a dramatic change. Despite this, she convincingly stated that she preferred this situation to going back to a life where she had no rights and voice in decision-making. Because she heads her own household she has to make the most of her energy to keep the three jobs and to sacrifice the time she used to spend with her children. As for the stigma of having no partner, she – as the rest of the women with the exception of FHH by income – has faced sexual harassment mainly from married men and workmates who see her as an easy and available target for the very fact of having no man at home or around her.

2.4 Female-headed household as a result of single-motherhood

According to Ariza and de Oliveira (2001), becoming a head of household through single-motherhood can be thought as a sign of women's need to fulfill their desire to become a mother. These authors also found that many women decided to end either a conflictive or affectionless relationship when they had an economic position that allowed them to support their own household. This demonstrates that by deciding to become a mother they fulfilled both their need of company plus their professional and economic expectations, as Quilodrán (2003) found. Let us see how this woman managed to cope with her dual role as a lonely breadwinner and mother.

Trini: Trini is a 43 year-old woman, the youngest daughter of twelve children and the only one who managed to attend high school. She never saw herself as a housewife or mother but after her mother died and all her siblings moved to different cities and lost contact with each other, she found herself alone in the modest house they all lived in a poor suburb of Colima. At the age of 35 she decided to have a child so she asked a workmate, a divorced bus driver with whom she was close friend, if he was willing to help her to become a mother. He agreed but somehow was impressed by her request, the reason for which he offered to move in with her and support them. She refused and when the girl was born, she finally accepted that he moved into her place. However, Trini asked him to leave because he was a heavy drinker who drank for weeks, which affected both her health and precarious economy. After he moved out she took different part-time and ill-paid jobs in which she was allowed to take her daughter in during working hours. The father of her daughter continued supporting them until his death in 2005 due to cirrhosis. Trini deeply felt

both his death – because he was a loving father and good friend – and his financial support since after his death their economy weakened. At the time of the interview she had a regular job as washerwoman at a launderette in her suburb. Although she is happy with her job because she is allowed to do her own washing and to bring her daughter, she is ill paid, has no medical service, no housing benefits or legal protection and only two days off every fortnight.

In regard to how Trini saw herself as head of household, she expressed it as an enormous responsibility but also as the most rewarding experience in her life since “having a partner doesn't guarantee you company and affection but having a daughter gives you company and the strength to live”. As for stigma, it is very interesting to find that sexual harassment for single mothers is part of their daily life, a part they have learned to deal with. Yet, despite all the economic difficulties single mothers face, our evidence shows they considered that being so is a success rather than a moral and social failure even when at first their decision to raise children on their own caused deep conflicts with their parents and/or siblings. However, as time went by, families' resilience to accept this situation changed and was even reconsidered as a good decision. This was so even for the members of the family who first refused to accept the children and recriminated women for not having a partner.

2.5 Female-headed household as a result of women's higher income

The work done by López and Izazola (1994), García and de Oliveira (2005) and Chant (2003) allows one to consider at least three methodological-analytical models to approach the discussion of how to define the female headship of the household.

1. In López and Izazola's statistical study on Mexican households, the headship was defined as that person the respondents themselves identified as such (López and Izazola, 1994). Most people chose men as the head of the household even when they did not provide the largest income or did not hold the greatest authority at home.
2. García and de Oliveira (2005) carried out another study where the headship was defined in relation to the person who generated the largest income. This was identified by registering the monthly income contributed by every member of the household who had a remunerated activity.
3. Chant (1999) and González de la Rocha (1999) have identified the head of the household by not considering the partner-spouse

of the women as such. This model seeks to measure how much voice women have in decision-making regarding the administration of the income and its distribution.

In our own study we considered the methodological approach used by García and de Oliveira (2005), which allowed me to identify the person who generated the largest monthly income at home. As a result, we found that in 75 per cent of the cases women generated the largest income. This was by far the most important finding made by our research since in 80 per cent of the cases the interviewed women had partners who contributed to the support the household. Another important finding was that these women not only performed as heads of household but also, due to the largest number of children at home, had to carry out extra economic activities –most of them informal ones carried out during their *free* time – or even paid jobs that allowed them to satisfy their basic needs. Their men, on the contrary, had only one job. Let us see an example.

Delia: Delia is a 41 year-old woman from a small village of the state of Colima who married a house painter when she was 16. Both quit primary school due to their families' poverty and carried out paid jobs outside the home to help their parents to support the house. After marriage they moved to Delia's parents-in-law's place, where they lived for six years and had four children. At first her husband was the only provider but as children grew up, Delia started working as a domestic servant while her mother-in-law looked after the children. This allowed them to move out and rent their own place. However, because Delia's husband did not have a job on a daily basis, which led the family to poverty, he decided to migrate to the USA to work. By the time he left, Delia had 200 pesos (18 USD) to feed four children. This situation forced her to lock them up at home to go out to work and ask better-off acquaintances for any kind of domestic activity she could do. She found a job in which she washed and ironed clothes and this allowed her to feed her children during the three months her husband took to send them money. He asked her to save some so they could build a house after his return. Instead, she bought a small lot in a popular suburb and built a small room and a bathroom. Her husband returned to Colima after one year in the USA and to his surprise, he found that they had a lot and a one-bedroom house. Since then Delia has worked ironing clothes and her husband painting houses. However, she is the main provider since her spouse has an irregular job. Delia has bitterly complained about that ever since as she states herself

“for me there's no day in which I dare to come home with empty hands because my children's belly can't

understand that. And for him things are easier because he just shrugs his shoulders and says “there's no work today” and stays at home. He is very confident I will bring home some money and then I bitterly answer, but don't you know how to do something else besides painting houses? Shame on you”.

Delia saw herself, as the rest of the interviewed women, burdened by the house expenses and pressed by the irregularity of her husband's income and passivity before poverty. In this case, both were forced to abandon school at the time of marriage due to poverty and the arrival of children. It is important to notice here that the impact of the depressed Mexican labor market on both was differentiated. For her husband, the chances to get a formal job were very low since he had only attended secondary school. This was the reason for which he managed only to find temporary and ill-paid jobs. Yet, it was Delia, despite her also poor schooling, the one who decided to go out and find a job in order to make ends meet even when she was in charge of the children. She did so by exploiting her most basic skills although this obliged her to have a double working day. In turn, her income became the most important for the household while her husband stayed at home and waited for her to bring the money home when hardship showed. As in most cases, the fact that he stays at home when she goes out to work has not led to a new division of domestic work. Delia is still in charge of cleaning, cooking, doing the washing and helping the children with their homework. As we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the scarcity of social programs and specific projects for families of low income in Mexico, contrary to the cases of Argentina and Brazil, forces women rather than men to find formal or informal jobs and even to take dual jobs to make ends meet.

It is also very interesting to notice that although Delia recognizes herself as the main breadwinner, she considers her husband to be the head of the household. As in the cases we have discussed throughout the paper, the impossibility of men to perform the breadwinner role due to unemployment, low salaries or the break up of the couple, leaves women with most of the economic burden of the children and the home.

The above-mentioned sheds light on several key cultural aspects on women's role in the support of the family and in the family itself. One of them is, as we have discussed throughout this article, the urgent need to move from culturally driven policies centered on both-parent families and discourses to more sensitive policies and programs that assure the standard of living and welfare of all family members. This, ideally, should translate into better job opportunities, formal and better paid jobs. Another aspect is the need to consider the creation of social policies and specific projects for women of different social

classes who have no choice but to take a second job in order to support their families. Although president Calderon created in 2006 the communitarian day-care centers⁷, they are insufficient, crowded, and lack the conditions to properly take care of working women's children.

Conclusions

The reasons for which women became heads of household shed light on how external and internal factors affect families' structures. When we look at these changes from a global perspective, it is clear that globalization, modernization and urbanization have deeply affected such structures.

Such internal and external factors as globalization, modernization and urbanization that impact families' structures altogether with the internal dynamics that regulate them such as decision-making and individual behavior oblige them to reorganize themselves in order to survive and reproduce.

This complex combination of forces sheds light on the paradox families have to face, as Therborn (2008, p. 23) states, since it is the arena where both forces interact. On the one hand, it is the institution upon which all individuals draw when seeking shelter and support before the external conditions that jeopardize them. On the other hand, it is a highly conflictive space where frequently authoritarianism and violence arise, particularly against the elderly, women and children. All these factors were identified in the interviews carried out in this research.

The empirical data showed that although Mexico and many Latin American countries embrace the global task of discussing family, children and violence issues as a public concern, the policies and laws emerged from the signing up of these conventions have had a limited impact on the families. With regard to socioeconomic and cultural conditions of female headed households, their absence from the public agenda despite their growing importance is worrying.

It is unquestionable that the modernization Mexico has experienced in the last decades has allowed low and middle class women to access education and paid

employment. Yet, this has caused a change in the roles men and women play at home unbalancing the structures that sustain traditionalism and *machismo*. The lack of legal services, the reduced income men bring home and the growing needs of the family pushed women out to work. This resulted in tensions and many times unsolvable conflicts between the couple since having a paid job and formal education, the outcomes of modernity in urban areas, give women economic independence and power in decision-making.

It is clear too that for all the women interviewed, becoming the head of the household –regardless of the route they followed – implied a solitary life burdened by endless obligations that were met thanks to the support of social networks – particularly the family. This institution was the one that helped them to make ends meet after they broke up or their partner died before the lack of policies for female headed households.

For the women interviewed, the fact of being a female head of household implied high levels of stress, anxiety and vulnerability due to the economic and moral responsibilities they faced. As a result, most of them secluded themselves from social activities in an effort to provide themselves and their children with social respect.

Likewise, it was also meaningful to find that in the case of single mothers, they also felt incomplete and lonely. The difficulties they faced as such to find a partner who respected their children and considered the relationship as a formal one prevented them from seeking one and from having a satisfactory sexual life.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that even when all the interviewed women considered themselves to be in a better position than when in a relationship, they felt alone and in many cases, they wished they could share their lives with someone else. This is very meaningful since it sheds light on the fact that although socioeconomic and cultural factors forced the creation of female-headed households, the pervasiveness of the nuclear family model is one that most individuals aspire to form due to the social respect it grants and the financial benefits it provides to its members. Yet, it is a model which many people cannot form due to the external conditions that force them to organize and live an alternative family life.

⁷ Run by women of the neighborhood who most of the times lack formal training, work long hours and are in great need of extra income since many of them are heads of household. Most of these women perform all the tasks at the day-care center, which can vary from cleaning, cooking and care-giving, depending on their skills and the infrastructure of the center itself. Their weekly salary ranges from 50 to 70 dollars and they do not have legal services.

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A formação de lares governados por mulheres nos setores urbanos pobres de Colima, México: uma análise de cinco casos

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os fatores que levaram mulheres de duas cidades de porte médio do ocidente do México a se transformarem em “chefes de família”. A discussão tem como objetivo mostrar as razões pelas quais as mulheres romperam com seus maridos, assim como os caminhos que seguiram antes de se transformarem em “cabeças” de sua própria casa. O estudo busca mostrar os caminhos e as condições que levaram muitas mulheres a formar famílias não tradicionais como consequência de fenômenos externos tais como a globalização, a urbanização e a modernização, entre os principais fatores.

Palavras-chave: lares governados por mulheres; mudança social; mulheres; preconceito; classe social.

La formación de lares gobernados por mujeres en los sectores urbanos pobres en Colima, México: un análisis de cinco casos

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los factores que llevaron a mujeres de dos ciudades de porte mediano del occidente de México a transformarse en “jefes de familia”. La discusión tiene como objetivo mostrar las razones por las cuales las mujeres rompieron con sus maridos, así como los caminos que siguieron antes de que se transformasen en “cabezas” de su propia casa. El estudio busca mostrar los caminos y las condiciones que llevaron a muchas mujeres a formar familias no tradicionales como consecuencia de fenómenos externos, tales como la globalización, la urbanización y la modernización, que están entre los principales factores.

Palabras clave: lares gobernados por mujeres; cambio social; mujeres; prejuicio; clase social.

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