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RESEARCHING GENDER, FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS IN LATIN AMERICA: FROM THE 20TH INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Whichever definition of 'family' or 'household' one picks from the increasingly elaborate array of interpretations offered in the global literature[1], both continue to occupy a leading place in research on gender. In the Latin American context, scholarship on the interrelations among gender, families and households has expanded and diversified massively in the last three decades. Since major theoretical trajectories in the subject have recently been dealt with elsewhere (see for example, Melhuus and Stølen [eds], 1996; Tiano, 2001), my objective here is to pinpoint some of the key issues around which debates have centred at the start of the 21st century. These comprise the question of what recent changes in household livelihood strategies mean for gender roles, relations and identities, how a rapidly growing body of work on men and masculinities has contributed to household research, how views on the links between household headship, domestic power and poverty have evolved over time, and how family transitions are being accommodated (or not) in social policy. In addition to discussing some of the main perspectives in each of these areas at present, I suggest some potential lines of future enquiry.

BACKGROUND TO DEBATES

Contemporary analyses of gender, families and households in Latin America have been shaped to a large degree by changes in the organisation of domestic life in the

last few decades.   Some of the biggest shifts have been the growing proportions of households headed by women, the rise in single person (predominantly female) households, declining fertility rates, the mounting incidence of divorce and separation, increased tendencies for couples to opt for visiting or consensual unions over formal marriage, and, within households of all types, the expansion of women's participation in income-generating work (see Arriagada,1998; Benería, 1991; CEPAL, 2001; Cerrutti and Zenteno, 1999; Fauné, 1997; Folbre, 1991; González de la Rocha, 1995; Jelin, 1991; Kaztman, 1992).   Trends of this nature are noted not only across Latin America, but other regions of the world. While these are sometimes portrayed as marking greater discontinuity with the past than they might legitimately merit (not least on account of tenuous data -- see below), qualitatively, and quantitatively, it is widely argued that such shifts have been significant. In particular, the rise in female household headship combined with mounting rates of female labour force participation is often heralded as marking a demise in the 'traditional' patriarchal family conventionally associated with the subordination of women (see for example, González de la Rocha, 1999, 2002; McCallum, 1999; Safa, 1995a).   As Castells (1997:138) sums up more generally, this encompasses:

> '... the weakening of a model of family based on the stable
> exercise of authority/domination over the whole family by
> the adult male head of the family. It is possible, in the 1990s,
> to find indicators of such a crisis in most societies ...'.

While use of the term 'crisis' to describe current transitions is subject to contestation in feminist circles (see Chant, 2002; Moore, 1994a), the factors deemed to have given rise to contemporary trends in Latin America range from increased access to contraception, demographic ageing, the relaxation of social and legislative restrictions on divorce, the growth and consolidation of women's movements, and the influences of neoliberal economic restructuring.   With regard to the latter, for example, Radcliffe (1999:197) asserts that:

> '...the avocation of neoliberal development policies by most
> governments has significantly influenced the ways in which

the nexus of labour--household--economy is organised, with consequences in turn for the nature of gender relations'.

Contesting Transformations in Latin American Households

Before proceeding to flesh out some details of household and gender transitions, it is worth noting that as dedicated empirical research on households in Latin America has grown over the last few decades, it is increasingly recognised that baselines for change -- where they can be established from available data -- are themselves often highly complex and differentiated. Mounting historical investigation, for example, suggests that plurality in household composition and headship was as much a feature of many societies in Latin America prior to the 20th century as it is now (see for example, Cicerchia, 1997; Dore, 1997; Gudmundson, 1986; Kuznesof, 1980; Rodríguez, 1998, 2000). This, coupled with variegated contemporary patterns, has led Radcliffe (1999:200), amongst others, to conclude that: 'Household forms have not changed in any easily discernible or unitary direction'.

Despite some variation in respect of tendencies in household size and composition among and within countries in Latin America, one trend which seems to be fairly ubiquitous is a progressive 'feminisation' of household headship (CEPAL, 2001; Chant with Craske, 2002: Chapter 7). Although data on female household headship are often inaccurate and underestimated, not to mention occluded by vague definitions which vary across countries (Chant 1997a; Varley, 2001), gradual improvements in the gender-sensitivity of data collection over time indicate that in large cities and metropolitan areas in particular, female-headed households have been growing as a proportion of all households (Geldstein, 1994:55; see Table 1). Data also point to immense heterogeneity in the characteristics of these units. While some female heads are widows, others are unmarried, divorced or separated women. Their households are further differentiated by such factors as composition, stage in the life course, socio-economic and educational status (see Arriagada, 1998; Chant, 1997a; Feijoó, 1999; Geldstein, 1997; Wartenburg, 1999; also Box 1). This in turn, reflects a wide range of processes leading to female household headship including demographic ageing, labour migration, rising rates of non-marriage, and mounting cases of divorce and

separation (see for example, Chant, 1997a: Chapter 4; López and Izazola, 1995:56; PEN, 1998:44). Factors relating to changes in gender roles and relations however, are often cited among the key causes and consequences of the rise in this type of household, as discussed in greater detail later.

-- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES FOR GENDER

Accepting that the majority of households in Latin America are still headed by men, as conventionally defined[2], one of the most lively areas of debate within contemporary research in Latin America relates is what changes in household livelihood strategies, especially in the wake of post-1980 economic restructuring, have signalled for gender roles, relations and identities.

Stereotypical depictions of familial gender patterns in Latin America throughout most of the 20th century emphasised the dominance of a patriarchal model.   Men were the primary (if not sole) breadwinners, the arbiters of decision-making, and pillars of authority within household units. Women, alternatively, were portrayed as mothers and housewives, dependent on men financially and possessing limited autonomy. Gender divisions in labour, power and resources within the home were commonly linked with dichotomies in morality, sexuality and social conduct. In terms of dominant imagery, men's domain was the public realm of the street (*calle*), whereas women's sphere was the secluded, private world of the house (*casa)* (Melhuus and Stølen, 1996:5; see also Drogus, 1997; Fisher, 1993; Fuller, 2000; McCallum, 1999; Melhuus, 1996:232; Streicker, 1995).   While some argue that such patterns continue to obtain in many parts of Latin America today (see for example, Cubitt, 1995:107; Sánchez-Ayéndez, 1993:265; Varley, 2000), others argue that significant erosion is underway.   Two prominent signs of the latter are the rise in female-headed units, and, within conjugal households, a shift from authoritarian to more egalitarian

arrangements. Disparate views on the decline of patriarchy in the household sphere owe not only immense diversity in contemporary (and historical) household patterns in different parts of the continent, but to incohesive evidence, often stemming from the fact that research has revealed uneven changes in different aspects of gender both within and beyond the domestic domain.

The Contradictory Outcomes of Women's Labour Force Participation

One of the core elements in this general debate is the extent to which rising rates of female labour force participation from the second half of the 20th century have altered the roles and relations of women and men within the home.[3] At one end of the spectrum, research argues that women's increased labour force participation has destabilised traditional gender arrangements and led to gains for women within male-headed units. In the case of Mexico, for example, Cerrutti and Zenteno (1999:71) assert that rising female labour force participation 'has had profound repercussions in the breaking of the traditional model of male head as the sole economic breadwinner in the household' (my translation; see also Chant, 1996; Martin, 1996:197). With reference to Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Safa (1995a:58) further notes that although the cultural norm of the male breadwinner remains decidedly embedded in the workplace and the state, women's massive incorporation into the labour force and declining dependence on male incomes has increased their bargaining power in households.   Among some segments of the female population, it is also argued that employment has come to occupy an unprecedented aspect of their personal identity (García and de Oliveira, 1997: 381).   This is particularly the case with middle-class women, whose involvement in the workforce tends to be sustained rather than intermittent. This is partly due to the long-term career-based nature of professional employment (to which educated women increasingly have access), and partly because ability to pay for childcare and domestic helps circumvent the disruptions posed for most women by marriage or childbirth (ibid.; see also Cerrutti, 2000a; Willis, 2000).   Since so many contemporary studies treat their informants as subjects, rather than objects, and, epistemological caveats aside, aim to represent their views as 'authentically' as possible, it would clearly be unwise to dismiss these positive readings out of hand.   This is especially so in light of the widely acknowledged significance of 'microscale household-gender negotiations which have

been -- in various places and recent times -- so crucial in changing women's social position and sense of themselves' (Radcliffe,1999:199).

Yet despite the transformative potential of these changes, even the most optimistic of interpretations has seldom been unclouded by qualification. One set of qualifications holds that the emancipatory prospects of female labour force participation are constrained by the prejudicial terms under which women enter the workforce. Women continue on average to have lower levels of education and vocational training than men in Latin America. Coupled with gender discrimination in the labour market this generally means inferior occupational status, lower wages and less job security (see Benería and Roldán, 1987; Chant with Craske, 2002: Chapter 8; Moghadam, 1999; Standing, 1999; Ward and Pyle, 1995). Indeed, economic necessity, rather than alluring new opportunities for occupational fulfilment, has been the driving force behind the upsurge in labour force participation among most women during the last twenty years of neoliberal restructuring (Benería, 1991; Cerrutti, 2000b:889; Chant, 1996; Geldstein, 1994:55; González de la Rocha, 1988, 2000; Moser, 1989,1997; Nash,1995:155). For those in situations of poverty, the extent to which earnings confer any appreciable personal benefit, let alone economic independence, is questionable (McClenaghan, 1997:29). This proviso is particularly pertinent where women may not be in a position to control and/or dispose freely of their own income (González de la Rocha, 1994:141). Related to these considerations is the fact that women's scope to choose the type of employment they do, or even to work at all, may be subject to spousal approval (Townsend et al, 1999:38). In some cases, the latter may only be obtained if women provide assurance that child-care and domestic labour will continue to be performed as before (Bee and Vogel, 1997:93).

The fact that rises in women's labour force participation have usually occurred with little or no alleviation of their domestic responsibilities acts as a major brake on improvements in women's status and well-being. Even if women may be less dependent on their spouses through employment, the price paid is a greater burden of labour and responsibility than in the past. Women's double burdens of labour cut heavily into the time they have available for leisure and friendships, not to mention space for reflecting on how their expanding contributions to household survival might be a route to more egalitarian gender relations (Arce and Escamilla, 1996:22;

Chant,1996: 298; Fuwa, 2000:1517; Sandoval García, 1997:170; see also below).   As summed up by Tiano (2001:202):

> '... the contradictions between traditional gender norms and women's actual behaviour creates role conflicts that many women reconcile by privileging their domestic roles and by viewing wage work as a way to perform their roles as wives and mothers more effectively. As a result, partnered women often see themselves as merely supplemental wage earners even where they are the sole support of their households. Thus while wage work can facilitate women's empowerment within the domestic sphere and sometimes the public sector, traditional gender roles have resisted the potentially transformative effect of women's employment'.

The argument that changes in gender roles and responsibilities have been too one-sided to undermine basic male-female divisions is explored in greater detail below through the lens of reproductive labour.

Reproductive Labour

The lack of gender substitution in reproductive tasks, especially during an era in which these have been intensified by rising costs of basic goods and cut-backs in public services, has not only brought the unequal gendered costs and benefits of household membership into stark relief, but points to a situation where they are conceivably becoming more unequal over time (see Arriagada, 1998; González de la Rocha, 1988; Moser, 1992). As summed up by Pearson (1997:700) in relation to Cuba during the 1990s: '..the pressures to maintain household consumption levels in increasingly difficult circumstances tended to reinforce the traditional gender division of labour rather than resolve it' .

While some studies suggest that some men have increased their participation in reproductive tasks (see for example, Gutmann, 1999:167 on young husbands and fathers in Mexico; Alméras, 2000:149 on men with higher-earning wives in Chile), most research indicates that male contributions to housework and childcare remain

scant (Chant, 1996:298; Langer et al, 1991:197; Moser, 1997; UNICEF, 1997:19). In the case of Panama, for example, Rudolf (1999) argues that there was more gender complementarity in reproductive as well as productive labour in the past, at least in rural areas. For the Dominican Republic, Safa (1999:16) reports that even where men are unemployed, they tend not to switch their 'surplus' time to housework and childcare.   This is also the case in Cuba, regardless of the fact that the Family Code of 1975 prescribed that men should assume an equal share of work in the home.[4] As Pearson (1997:677) asserts:

> 'In spite of official desires to dissolve the social division of work by gender, the redistribution of reproductive work between men and women was in fact limited'.

One interpretation offered by Pearson is women's reluctance to let their spouses waste precious resources through lack of skill or experience in domestic labour. Other plausible reasons for women resisting male help are because it suggests they do not have a 'real man' for a partner, or because women have traditionally derived social legitimacy through taking charge of reproductive tasks. In communities such as Ocongate in the Peruvian Andes, for example, Harvey (1994:74) maintains that women gain respect from working hard in the home, and men are not expected to show 'aptitude or interest' in day-to-day household chores.   Thus although Cerrutti and Zenteno (1999:71) maintain for the Mexican context that : '... the increase and diversification of women's labour experience has implied an erosion of prescriptive norms and their roles, particularly in relation to the ideology of reproduction' (my translation), most argue that women's primary identification remains firmly rooted in home-based work. This is largely a function of the fact that mothering remains paramount in women's lives (see García and de Oliveira, 1997:368). Employment, in this sense, has not replaced the centrality of domesticity for women, but simply been incorporated into an ever-expanding portfolio of maternal obligations (González de la Rocha, 2000; Tiano, 2001:202).

On the other side of the fence, men's primary identification with the productive sphere arguably helps to explain why men themselves are holding back from housework and childcare. Men's apparent unwillingness to participate in reproductive labour may

well derive from attempts to protect the remaining vestiges of 'masculine identity' in a world in which women's activities are widening, not to mention encroaching upon 'male territory' (Chant, 1994:227). If men were to start sharing women's domestic and parenting work in any major way, their claims on paid labour as a 'male preserve' might conceivably weaken.

Gender Identities and Domestic Conflict

Although women's income-generating work has undoubtedly gone some way to cushioning the impact of crisis and restructuring on households in economic terms, symbolically and psychologically, the mounting dependence of households on women's earnings has threatened masculine identities (Gutmann, 1996). Additional factors depressing the actual, as well as perceived, economic status of men relative to women has been the increased informalisation of men's work (see Arias, 2000; Elson, 1999). This includes growing reliance on the home as a site of informal sector activity among both genders (see Bastos, 1999 on Guatemala; Miraftab, 1994 on Mexico; Pineda, 2000 on Colombia). Coupled with the fact that these processes have in some instances acted to reduce gendered income differentials, there has also been an upward trend in unpaid work among men. In Mexico, for example, the level of unpaid workers among the female economically active population stayed relatively constant between 1987 and 1996 (at around 11 per cent), whereas among men, there was an increase from 2.9 to 5.6 per cent (Escobar Latapí, 2000). Yet, as noted by Fuller (2000:111) in the context of Peru: 'work is ... represented as a masculine space par excellence because it is where the male accumulates the social, symbolic and productive capitals that are their contribution to their families'. Thus, even if men in Latin America continue to enjoy a larger than average share of employment and earnings, perceptions that they are losing ground as primary breadwinners seems to be the central issue in an increasingly widely noted 'crisis of masculinity' in the region (Chant, 2000; Escobar Latapí, 1998; Gomáriz, 1997; Kaztman, 1992).[5]

Loss of economic primacy certainly seems to have undermined low-income men's security about their position and privileges, about dependency and allegiance on the part of wives and children, and ultimately about their own power to determine the course of family unity and/or disunity (Chant, 2000). As Safa (1999:8) observes for

the Dominican Republic: 'Marital life still consists of a succession of consensual unions, but now the initiative for break up rests as much with women as with men'. Indeed, while men have often been rather peripatetic figures in many Latin American households, this was not really a source of concern so long as men themselves could rely on the family being there for them (Chant, 2002). Now that more women are earning and have greater bargaining power and independence, these guarantees have been eroded. The rise in women's labour force participation, for example, is frequently linked with the 'feminisation' of household headship in Latin America (see, for example, Bradshaw,1995; Chant, 1997a; Safa, 1995a,1999).[6] Although poorer women are still more likely to be abandoned than their wealthier counterparts, more seem to be taking the step to leave husbands on their own and/or their children's account. Men who fail to fulfill their obligations to household survival, for instance, or who take out their frustration on family members, are under greater threat of losing wives who are now better placed to fend for themselves economically (Benería, 1991; Chant, 1997a,b; Safa, 1995a,1999).

Despite the fact that some men may pre-empt these situations by accommodating to their wives' income-generating work (see for example Bastos, 1999 on Guatemala), others seem to have reacted in defensive and/or negative ways. Male 'backlash' to women's income-earning for example, has ranged from men withdrawing their financial support from households (Chant, 1997a; Safilios-Rothschild, 1990), to increased desertion of spouses and offspring, to rising levels of domestic and community violence (de Barbieri and de Oliveira, 1989; Engle, 1997:37; Gutmann, 1996,1997; Moser and McIlwaine, 2000; UNICEF, 1997). Indeed, in light of popular expressions such as the Mexican saying *'Pobre el hogar en que canta la gallina'* (basically, 'Poor is the household where women rule the roost'), it is perhaps no surprise to find numerous reports of an intensification of domestic strife during the crisis period (Benería, 1991; Geldstein, 1994:57; Gledhill, 1995: 137; González de la Rocha et al, 1990; Safa, 1999; Salas, 1998; Townsend et al, 1999:29). As Selby et al (1990: 176) sum-up:

> 'Male dignity has been so assaulted by unemployment and the
> necessity of relying on women for the subsistence that men
> formerly provided, that men have taken it out on their wives and

domestic violence has increased ... the families which have been riven by fighting and brutality can easily be said to be the true victims of economic crisis ...' .

In some contexts, such as Ciudad Júarez in northern Mexico, where women are an estimated 70 per cent of the economically active population, men's antipathy to the situation is reputedly such that mass killings of young women are reported to have taken place during recent years.[7]

Notwithstanding the fact that more women now seem disposed to extricate themselves from domestic conflict by forming their own households, or to demand more egalitarian relations with husbands as a condition for staying put , Fuller (2000:103) asserts that: '... current changes in gender relations ... have not meant a revision (as was the case for women) of the foundations of masculinity which rest upon the identification of maleness with economic responsibility and authority' (see also Escobar Latapí, 1998). Thus even where men are unemployed, they may continue to shape their identities around work, and through their traditional entitlements to land and property, persist in wielding authority regardless of whether they are actually employed. McClenaghan (1997: 29) notes for the Dominican Republic, for example, that in households where women are the primary providers, men are still usually acknowledged as '*el jefe*' (head of household) (see also Safa, 1999:6).

RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES IN FAMILIES

Some light on the above tensions and paradoxes has been shed by an explosion in research on men and masculinities from the early 1990s. This has not only been based on work <u>with</u> men, but frequently <u>by</u> men as well.   In many ways this has offered scope to redress something of a 'female bias' in gender and household studies to date.   This is important given the charge that analysing men <u>through</u> women writers and/or informants alone contributed to producing representations that were stereotypical, narrow and under-problematised (Gutmann,1996; Scott,1994:94). The common dismissal of poor urban men as 'violent and drunken' (Lehmann, 1994:6), for example, may well have led to something of a pathologisation of Latin American

men, and to tendencies for analyses of household dynamics to be 'side-tracked into a denunciation of the consequences of male misbehaviour' (ibid.).

A major contribution of research on men, masculinities and households in Latin America has been to highlight how men are no more a unitary category than their female counterparts (see Gomáriz, 1997; Gutmann, 1996; Lancaster, 1992; Pineda, 2000). As part and parcel of this process, stereotypical images of men as 'irresponsible husbands' and 'distant fathers' have been subject to scrutiny and problematisation. Dedicated research on men, for example, has revealed that domestic life and family attachments can be as important for men as they are for women and that fatherhood is a critically important element of masculine dentities (see Chant, 2000; Engle, 1997; Engle and Alatorre Rico, 1994; Engle and Breaux, 1994; Escobar Latapí et al, 1987:60; UNICEF, 1997). One indication of the significance of family life for men, for example, is that while women are often the most stable members of household units, and the 'notion of "family" is often strongly identified with female gender and focal female members' (McCallum, 1999:278), it is actually men who look more quickly to reconstitute family-based domestic environments following conjugal breakdown (Gomáriz, 1997:53; Pearson, 2000b:224; Varley and Blasco, 2000b:122).   On the issue of fatherhood, Gutmann's (1996) research on men in a low-income community in Mexico City reveals that in contrast to the image of the 'typical Mexican man' as a 'hard-drinking philandering *macho*' (ibid.:2), men hold their children, play with their children, have a particularly important role in raising sons, and view fatherhood as a lifetime commitment. Although there continue to be both normative and actual differences in parenting responsibilities between men and women, and men may find it hard to express their emotional investment in offspring, undifferentiated and essentialising concepts of motherhood and fatherhood are argued by Gutmann (1996:88) to be unfounded and misleading:

> 'We should revise our beliefs that all men in Mexico today and
> historically have little to do with children. Instead, more active and
> less active parenting by men seems to correspond more to other
> factors such as class, historical period, region, and generation. For
> numerous, though not all, men and women in Colonia Santo Domingo,

Mexico City, in the 1990s, active, consistent and long-term parenting is a central ingredient in what it means to be a man, and in what men do'.

While research on men has revealed a stronger significance of family in their lives and identities than was perhaps apparent in women-focused research, it has also emphasised how men, as gendered beings, have to earn as well as learn their 'masculinity'. In the process of so doing they are frequently torn between competing modes of male behaviour. In the Dominican Republic, for example, Krohn-Hansen (1996) observes that being a 'good father' is such an important criterion of masculinity that men often go on providing for children even after their marriages terminate. By the same token, being a 'real man' also entails womanising and extra-marital affairs. Men are accordingly caught in a'double-bind' which involves them in continuous attempts to 'strike a balance between these two sets of moral ideals' (ibid.:116; see also Chant, 2000 on Costa Rica; Escobar Latapí et al, 1987 on Mexico; Melhuus, 1996:242-3 on Argentina; Viveros, 1998a; Wade, 1994:117-21 on Colombia). Accepting not only that 'masculine identity is intersected by contradictions due to the fact that it is installed in spheres which imply different rationalities and demands' (Fuller, 2000:111), research in this field has also been concerned to stress that men's extra-domestic activities are not always at odds with their family obligations. For example, spending time outside the home and socialising with male peers can be vital to men's success in the labour market, which in turn impacts upon their role as family providers.

On a related tack, much of this rapidly expanding body of research on men and masculinities has highlighted how men too can suffer from gendered norms and expectations, albeit in different ways to women. Provided future work in this area does not lose sight of the strikingly widespread abuses against women and children in the home, including physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence, knowledge of men's concerns, and how they act to defend them, could signpost how gender scripts might be rewritten so as to benefit both women and men within households in future.

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS: 'ENABLING SPACES' OR 'INTER-GENERATIONAL POVERTY TRAPS'?

A critically important set of perspectives on the role of households as seedbeds for gender change has come about with a steadily growing body of work on female-headed households.   One body of thought stretching back to the early 1980s has emphasised how the rise in female headship in Latin America may reflect increased consciousness of gender subordination and act to make households 'enabling' spaces for women (Harris, 1981; see also Chant, 1985).   Notwithstanding that female-headed households do not necessarily equate with 'male absent' households since women may not only have sons, but a wide range of ties with other male relatives (see Fonseca, 1991), the absence of direct spousal control is often observed to have positive outcomes for women's personal autonomy and 'empowerment' in the home (Bradshaw, 1995; Chant, 1985, 1997a; Feijoó, 1999:162; Safa 1995a).   The extent to which this translates into power for women in a wider context, however, is more in question.   Most societies in Latin America prioritise the male-headed nuclear family as a normative ideal, which can subject 'alternative' family units such as female-headed households to a complex array of discriminatory practices which inhibit their viability (see Chant, 1999; Datta and McIlwaine, 2000).   Many of the latter relate to gender inequalities in such spheres as legislation, social policy and the labour market. While at one level, for example, the growth of female-headed households in Latin America is commonly associated with the expansion of economic opportunities for women, their labour market disadvantages and low earnings are seen to place them at high risk of poverty and vulnerability (see Buvinic and Gupta, 1997; Rico de Alonso and López Tellez, 1998).   Other factors held to account for the poverty of female-heads include the lack of child support from absent fathers (Budowski and Rosero Bixby, forthcoming), and minimal or no transfer payments from the state (Chant, 1997b).   Such observations have led to the notion that female household heads experience a higher incidence, and degree, of poverty than their male counterparts, and effectively render them the 'poorest of the poor' (see Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1995:25; Buvinic, 1995:3; Tinker, 1990:5).

While the association between poverty and female headship is persistent, not least on account of the fact that this stereotype seems to have become firmly grounded in

global discourses on the family, and on gender and development, (see Chant, 1997b,1999; Jackson, 1996; Varley, 2001), the issue has become ever more contested in recent years. Although some studies based on micro- as well as macro-level evidence point to disproportionate levels and extremes of poverty among female-headed households (see for example, Buvinic and Gupta, 1997; Paolisso and Gammage, 1996:23-5), the latest *Social Panorama* report from the Economic Commission for Latin America concludes that female household headship does not predict an above-average probability of poverty in the region (CEPAL, 2001:20). This echoes the findings of an increasing number of empirical studies of different Latin American countries which suggest that, in income terms, women-headed households are not necessarily the 'poorest of the poor', including in Costa Rica (Chant, 1997b,1999), Mexico (ibid., González de la Rocha, 1999), Panama (Fuwa, 2000), Guyana (Gafar, 1998:605), Colombia (Wartenburg, 1999), and Argentina (Geldstein, 1997). Moroever, research on Mexico (González de la Rocha, 1999; Willis, 2000) , Argentina (Geldstein, 1997), and Colombia (Wartenburg, 1999) reveals that women-headed households are just as likely to be present among middle- and upper-income groups as among the poor. At the very least, therefore, the relationships between female household headship and poverty are not systematic (Chant, 1997b; González de la Rocha and Grinspun, 2001:61).

Aside from the sparks entering discussion as a result of recent quantitative evidence, debates on the poverty of female-headed households have been deepened and nuanced by the broadening of poverty analyses beyond aggregate or per capita household incomes, to issues such as intra-household resource distribution, self-esteem, agency, and perceptions of well-being, power and vulnerability (see Chant, 1997a; Fukuda-Parr, 1999). Considerable feminist research, not only in Latin America, but elsewhere in the world, suggests that patterns of intra-household resource allocation are often more balanced in female-headed units, and that the income generated or controlled by women tends to go further than men's in benefiting other household members (see Chant, 1985, 1997b; Bruce and Dwyer, 1988; Moore, 1996; Varley, 2001). In turn, despite a tendency for female-headed households to be linked with an 'inter-generational transmission of disadvantage' to children (see for example, Buvinic et al, 1992), evidence suggests that levels of nutrition, health care and education are often comparable, if not better, particularly when comparing daughters in male- and female-

headed units (Blumberg, 1995:215 et seq; Chant, 1999; Engle, 1995).   Aside from the fact that conventional poverty analyses have neglected the often fairer distribution of resources within female-headed households, blanket poverty projections have also failed to capture how the heterogeneity of women-headed households (on account of their route into female headship, age, composition and so on) can have very different outcomes in respect of poverty and well-being (see Chant, 1997b; Varley, 2001; also earlier).   Moreover, an important role in underpinning subsistence in female-headed households is often played by networks of kin, even though these are usually smaller for female- than male-headed units (Fonseca, 1991; González de la Rocha, 1994; Rico de Alonso and López Tellez, 1998; Safa 1999; Willis, 1993).

Contesting the poverty of female-headed households has destabilised a range of assumptions that marginalise and stigmatise female headship.   This is important since while 'talking-up' the poverty of female heads can be a useful tool for drawing the attention of policymakers to some aspects of gender inequality (Jackson, 1996), there is also a danger, in Varley's (2001:332) words of 'prioritising impact over accuracy' (see also below).   When female-headed households are universally portrayed as poor, for example, this tends to divert attention from the fact that women in male-headed units (who are in fact in the majority) can also be poor (and in greater number) (ibid.). Another ramification of linking poverty with female headship is that it points the finger at household characteristics rather than structural aspects of gender inequality as responsible for disadvantage (Moore, 1994a).   In the process this not only suggests that women-headed households are unfit for purpose, but that male-headed units are a more appropriate, or even intrinsically unproblematic, arrangement (Chant, 1997b,1999).   Emphasising the poverty of female heads can also downplay the immense efforts made by many women to overcome obstacles to survival (ibid.).

Challenges to prevailing assumptions about poverty and female headship allow for households of women's own making to be conceptualised as emancipatory rather than oppressive spaces, as well as highlighting the value of subjective as well as quantitative criteria in poverty assessments. By the same token, this should not be construed as a call for counter-stereotypes, especially when categorical denial of the privation suffered by some women-headed households might be used to justify their omission from poverty alleviation and other social programmes. Indeed, there is

widespread evidence to suggest that much more could be done not only to better guarantee their economic well-being, but to raise their social and civil legitimacy. As summed-up by Feijoó (1999:161):

> 'The battle for legitimising female headship is not yet assured... Now
> that research has broken ground in respect of showing that these
> households are not necessarily living in the deepest penury in society,
> and that we can begin to recognise the potential of this form of domestic
> organisation, the battle is all the more pressing' (my translation).

HOUSEHOLDS AND SOCIAL POLICY

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have not only been an important time for policy discussions around female-headed units, but for families and households more generally. This is mainly on account of economic restructuring since the 'Lost Decade', and the 'rolling back' of the state from welfare responsibilities.   As societies in Latin America and elsewhere undergo an often painful process of redrawing the boundaries between citizens, the market and the state, families are turned to as repositories of resourcefulness, cohesion and social stability (see Bruce and Lloyd, 1992; Engle and Breaux, 1994; Molyneux,1998, forthcoming; Moore, 1996:73; World Bank, 2000: Chapter 7).   The twist in the tale is that this is occurring at a time of what Gónzalez de la Rocha (1997) terms 'the erosion of the survival model'. Herein, the stress, frustration and despair provoked by long-term financial scarcity and employment insecurity is observed to have weakened solidarity among household members, even when they are not forced physically apart through migration (see also González de la Rocha, 2001).   These tensions are summarised by Arriagada (1998:86) as follows:

> '... the family is increasingly considered as the main space for the
> action of public policies and the area in which they can have the
> biggest impact... There is a debate from various angles on the role of
> the family in building solid, integrated societies, but paradoxically
> no consideration is given to the fact that it is assigned functions and

faced with demands which are increasingly difficult to fulfil, both
because of the great changes which have taken place in its formation,
size and functions, the new roles that its members have to play in
society and the scanty internal resources available to families today,
and because of the changes in the State's role in providing certain
services'.

The question of how families can best be fortified to bolster social capital, self-reliance and survival in conditions of economic insecurity is one which, as indicated by Arriagada, is massively challenged by current dynamism in form and in internal relations. Which type of family or families should be granted dwindling public support, and how can security and stability best be achieved?

Despite the wealth of evidence that households have diversified over the years of crisis and restructuring in spontaneous and/or autonomous efforts to cope with new types of pressure, for the most part, the 'male-headed nuclear model' has remained the template for family legislation and social policies (see CEPAL, 2001). The pattern whereby *'familia completa'* ('complete family') is used only to denote male-headed family units comprising married couples and their children is common throughout Latin America, and seems to be as much subscribed to by people at the grassroots as by public bodies. Similarly, when reference is made to *'desintegracion familiar'* ('family breakdown') and/or the decline of *'valores familiares'* ('family values'), the generic term 'family' is conferred upon a very specific family arrangement. Initiatives to reinforce the patriarchal nuclear family can be found in bids to foment the formalisation of consensual unions, to encourage *'paternidad responsable'* ('responsible fatherhood), and to reduce the incidence of *'violencia familiar'* ('family violence') (see Chant with Craske, 2002: Chapter 7). While many of the programmes and policies operating under the aegis of such directives do much in the process, at least in theory, to enhance the rights of women and children, they also serve to reinforce the hegemony of the male-headed model.

Even if the male-headed household remains a normative ideal in popular and public arenas, some countries in the region have begun to acknowledge that male-headed units do not constitute the only, nor necessarily the best, arrangement for the well-

being of individuals. Costa Rica's 1998 *State of the Nation Report*, for example, stresses that conformity with a married nuclear model does not guarantee fulfilment of family functions, that household dissolution may be preferable to domestic violence, and that the rise in lone parent households does not automatically imply disadvantage for children (PEN, 1998:210). As a result, some policy attention has been turned here and elsewhere to households which deviate from the 'standard' model. At one level this can be seen as a bid to address the vulnerability of children, and to protect their rights, well-being and security. Another possibility is that this signals adoption of a more sympathetic stance to feminist calls for more plural concepts of family (see Chant, 2002; GAPMC, 1997; de Oliveira et al, 1995:27). From another angle, however, the channelling of resources to 'alternative', and particularly female-headed, households when expenditure on universal social programmes is being cut in the name of more 'efficient', and 'streamlined' approaches to poverty alleviation, can clearly serve the interests of broader neoliberal agendas (see Budowski and Guzmán, 1998; Chant, 2002). Whichever the crucial force might be, however, the effectiveness of such programmes is an issue in its own right.

Although, as noted by Buvinic and Gupta (1997:259), there is limited data on the outcomes of programmes which have targeted female household heads thus far, a series of problems have been identified. These include the creation of 'perverse incentives' for the formation of female-headed units, the practical difficulties of targetting in a dynamic household universe, the dangers of leakage to non-poor households resulting from the use of female headship as an indicator of poverty (ibid.:270; see also Grosh, 1994), the construction of female-headed households as a vulnerable and residualised group, and the political costs of excluding male-headed units, especially where resources are not perceived as female-specific, such as housing subsidies, food coupons and cash transfers (Buvinic and Gupta, 1997:271). Moreover, directing resources to lone mothers can have the more insidious effect of reinforcing the significance of women as primary parental figures and alienating men still further from assuming responsibilities for children's upkeep (Chant, 2002).   From the few countries in Latin America which have instituted specific programmes for female-headed households (Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Honduras, Puerto Rico, for example), it certainly seems that targeted schemes for female household heads (involving varied combinations of vocational training, priority for subsidised or free

childcare places, programmes to raise awareness and self-esteem and so on), are unlikely to make an appreciable difference given limited resources, limited coverage, and the lack of attention to broader structures of gender inequality (see for example, Arriagada, 1998:97; Budowski, 2000; Grosh, 1994; Marenco et al, 1998).

In Colombia, for instance, Rico de Alonso and López Tellez (1998:197) point out that the relationship of female heads to the State remains weak. Only one-third of this group has any affiliation to social security or use public services targetted specifically to them or otherwise. In Chile too, which piloted a Programme for Female Heads of Household in 1992-3, that was later extended nationally, the objective of increasing women's access to employment through labour training, access to childcare and so on, was tempered by the government's failure to address the social and cultural structures underlying gender segregation in the labour market and the perpetuation of poverty among women (Badia, 1999). Moreover, children born out of wedlock in Chile still do not have the same rights as their counterparts with married parents, with no recognition of the responsibilities of their own parents and extended kin (Arriagada, 1998:97).   Even if elsewhere in the region governments are more hesitant about promoting schemes that may increase numbers of female-headed households (Buvinic and Gupta, 1997), other forms of support for women can actually have greater effects.   In Cuba, for example, no special welfare benefits are given to female heads, but policies favouring greater gender equality, higher levels of female labour force participation, and the provision of daycare have all made it easier for women to raise children alone (Safa,1995a).   One of the big issues for 21st century policy will be to establish how far and in which ways legislative, economic and infrastructural interventions should be oriented to aid women within different types of family.   Should the main focus be on general issues such as closing gender gaps in wages, employment, skills, and/or to equalise the legislative and normative status of different types of family structure by means of universal interventions? Or, is it more appropriate to target specific groups of the population where indicators of social disadvantage, be this poverty, gender or family appear, albeit mistakenly in many instances, to have converged inextricably with one another? Such questions resonate with some of the unresolved dilemmas of 'catch-up' or 'transform' polarities in development, and gender and development discourses. Given historical experience, it is unlikely that more research alone will provide ready answers.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In this brief and inevitably partial review of research on gender, families and households in Latin America at the start of the 21st century, it is clear that many questions remain open, not to mention ripe, for further investigation in the coming decade. While the seemingly mounting variability of experiences of women, men and children in different domestic environments makes it difficult to imagine any significant consensus on change, our understanding of the complex interrelations among gender, families and households can be extended in a number of ways.

Methodologically, for example, more light might be shed on evolving patterns of gender relations by converging the frequently disparate tendencies for 'traditional' feminist research to be based only on women, and the growing body of work on masculinities to be rooted solely in work with men. Although it is not always possible or desirable for women and men to be interviewed conjointly, more fieldwork combining male and female respondents, on issues affecting both parties, might not only illuminate areas over which there is most tension, but create a context in which informants themselves engage in dialogue about change. Although the strategies that might be deployed here clearly need to grounded in the specificities of particular research projects and their locales, mixed focus group sessions have proved a useful tool in exploring issues around gender and the family in Costa Rica, and can provide fora for discussion that respondents claim not to have had previously (see Chant, 2002). The existence of such spaces is conceivably important given that one of the biggest challenges in the coming decades will be for men and women to negotiate ways of moving through the often difficult 'moments of transition' generated by current economic, political, demographic and social trends. In particular, it would seem to be important to find means of building on men's increasingly documented concern for children and other family attachments (Engle and Alatorre Rico, 1994; Gutmann, 1996), and therein to galvanise men's commitment to the struggle for more 'gender-fair' development in the region.

The importance of research for policy is paramount here. It is tempting for example, to suggest that one conceivable reason for the frequent convergence of women with family policy (see CEPAL, 2001), is because most work on households and families has focused on women. The more research that it is done on men and family, the greater the likelihood, perhaps, that interventions will begin to consider who and what they target in a different light. Certainly, one of the downsides of orienting family programmes to women is that they continue to be identified as the primary carers of children, and often end up bearing more responsibility as a result. The greater inclusion of men in such programmes could not only ease women's burdens, but lead to less isolation and marginalisation among men at a time when they appear to be suffering major dilemmas over their roles and identities. Notwithstanding the importance of work on men with marginal or minority status (such as in the context of prostitution or homosexuality, for example), it is vital to ensure that research on men and masculinities retains a strong focus on households and on male-female relations.

This said, it is important in a more general sense to extend increasing conceptual emphasis in the gender literature on the cross-cutting of gender identities by such factors as age, class, 'race' and sexuality, into research which pertains more squarely to the household domain. Already important strides have been made in this respect, with growing bodies of work on a range of sub-groups. This includes work on elderly women and men (Varley and Blasco, 2000a; Cheetham and Alba, 2000; Clarke and Laurie, 2000; Lloyd Sherlock, 1997), on gay men and lesbian women (Carrier, 1995; Fuskova-Kornreich and Argov, 1993; Kulick, 1998; Lancaster, 1997; Leiner, 1994; Madden Arias, 1996), on male and female youth (Amuchástegui Herrera, 1998; Barker and Lowenstein, 1997; Güendel and González, 1998; Krauskopf, 1998; McIlwaine, 2001; Moreno, 1997), on middle- and upper-income groups (Arias and Rodríguez, 1998; Falabella, 1997; González de la Rocha, 1995; Izazola et al, 1998; Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur, 1991; Willis, 2000), and on indigenous and Afro-American populations (Bastos, 1999; Coates, 2002; Hamilton, 1998; McIlwaine, 1997; Viveros, 1998; Trotz, 1996). Research is also increasingly tackling the analysis of multiple combinations of identity such as in the context of studies of 'race', class and gender (see for example, Stølen, 1996; Streicker, 1995; Wade, 1993). This said, the bulk of research on gender, households and families in Latin America to date has been with, and about, low-income *mestiza* mothers (Chant with Craske, 2002: Chapter 1).

More dedicated work with sons, daughters and other young people in households, for example, could play a major role in assessing the gendered impacts of different types of gender arrangements among adults, and of different types of household structure, including the rapidly growing constituency of 'blended' or 'reconstituted' households consisting of step-family relations. In turn, exploring the experiences and views of younger generations on such issues as marriage, monogamy, divorce, parenting, gender divisions of labour and gender relations, could provide a useful marker for how far current changes in gender are likely to be sustained in the longer term.

Similarly, more research on homosexuality in Latin America might direct itself to issues of households and livelihoods, rather than the more conventional emphases on identity, legal rights, and social mobilisation (Buffington, 1997; Lancaster 1997; Lumsden, 1996; Mirandé, 1997; Prieur, 1996; Quiroga, 1997; Szasz, 1998; Thayer, 1997). Lack of attention to household organisation in this body of literature to date is possibly because most gay people are forced to remain in conventional family households and to conduct their sexual relationships on a non-coresidential basis (see Jolly, 2000:86; Lumsden, 1996). Yet queer households do exist, and investigating how their constituent members organise their lives and livelihoods could tell us much about the mutability of gender roles and relations (Jolly, 2000).

Aside from more household-oriented fieldwork which includes both genders, and which encompasses a broader range of sub-groups, other factors which are arguably vital in increasing knowledge and societal responsiveness to gender and household transitions, include more dedicated analysis of the ways in which changes favouring greater gender equality in households may not only be underpinned by broader social processes, but supported and enhanced by specific policy interventions. While research has consistently confirmed the importance of households and families as mediating institutions between individuals and wider society, it is important to find ways in which advances towards gender equality in the so-called 'private' sphere can be matched -- and consolidated -- by shifts in the 'public' sphere (as well as vice versa).

Last but not least, while research on households and gender in Latin America increasingly stresses that generalisations are not only elusive, but potentially oppressive, the remarkable parallels in certain trends experienced beyond, as well as within the region, suggest that we should not be unduly cautious about engaging with research and policy pertinent to these transitions elsewhere the world. Indeed, cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences in the context of a seemingly unstoppable process of globalisation might well illuminate, rather than eclipse, the forces leading to what seems to be an increasing diversification of domestic life and gendered experience.

NOTES

1. The most widely accepted definitions seem to revolve around the 'family' as a set of normative (and frequently patriarchal) relations based around blood and marriage, and 'household' as a unit of co-residence (see Roberts, 1994:10; also Varley, 2001:330).

2. Although both 'household' and 'headship' are problematic, contested and far from universal constructs (Bruce and Lloyd 1992), most official and international statistical sources define households headed by heterosexual couples as male-headed. Households are only designated as female-headed where the senior woman in a dwelling and/or consumption unit lacks a co-resident legal or common-law husband. In some cases this also extends to include the physical presence of another adult male such as a father, brother or grown-up son (UN, 1991).

3. Notwithstanding the widely alleged inaccuracy of most statistics on women's work, women's economic activity rates rose from 31 to 39 per cent in Central America between 1990 and 1997, and from 29 per cent to 45 per cent in South America (UN, 2000:110, Chart 5.2).

4. The legal prescription that men and women should share responsibilities for housework and childcare is increasingly widespread in Latin America (see Chant with Craske, 2002: Chapters 3 and 7).

5. A 'crisis of masculinity' is also perceived to be brewing in other regions both in the South and North (see Barker, 1997; Foreman, 1999:21; Pearson, 2000a:222; Silberschmidt, 1999:173).

6.   While it is undoubtedly the case that access to employment enhances women's scope to head their own households, there is not necessarily a direct or consistent relationship, especially outside Latin America (see Chant, 1997a).

7. See *Independent on Sunday*, 9 February 2001, p.14. 'As Death Toll Climbs, Women Blame Macho Backlash for Horror of Mexico's Murder City', by Jan McGirk.

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BOX 1

Typology of Female-Headed Households in Latin America

Type	Brief description	Frequency among female-headed households in general
Lone Mother Household	Mother with co-resident children	High
Female-Headed Extended Household	Household comprising lone mother, children and other relatives.	High
Lone Female Household	Woman living alone (usually elderly)	Low but increasing
Single Sex/Female-Only Household	Woman living with other women (female relatives or friends)	Low
Lesbian Household	Woman living with female sexual partner	Low
Female-dominant/ predominant Household	Household headed by woman, where although males may be present, they are only junior males with less power and authority than adult females.	Low
Grandmother-headed Household	Grandmother and her grandchildren, but without intermediate generation.	Low
'Embedded' Female-headed Unit	Unit comprising a young mother and her children contained within larger household (usually that of parents). Sometimes referred to as 'female-headed sub-family'.	Moderate to high

Source: Chant (1997a:10-26)

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TABLE 1

Female-headed Households as a Proportion of All Households in Urban Areas, Selected Latin American Countries, 1987-1999

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Country	Years	% of households headed by women	Percentage point change
Argentina	1990	21	
	1999	27	+6
Bolivia	1989	17	
	1999	21	+4
Chile	1990	21	
	1998	24	+3
Colombia	1991	24	
	1999	29	+5
Costa Rica	1990	23	
	1999	28	+5
Ecuador	1990	17	
	1999	20	+3
El Salvador	1995	31	
	1997	31	0
Guatemala	1987	20	
	1998	24	+4
Honduras	1990	27	
	1999	30	+3
México	1989	16	
	1998	19	+3
Nicaragua	1993	35	
	1998	35	0
Panamá	1991	26	
	1999	27	+1
Paraguay	1990	20	
(Asunción)	1999	27	+7
Uruguay	1990	25	
	1999	31	+6
Venezuela	1990	22	
	1999	27	+5

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Source: CEPAL (2001: Cuadro V.3).