

# INTERNATIONAL Poverty Centre



United Nations Development Programme

Working Paper number 20

May, 2006

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Working Paper

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ISSN: 1812-108X

# **POVERTY AMONG WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA: FEMINIZATION OR OVER-REPRESENTATION?\***

Marcelo Medeiros *and* Joana Costa<sup>\*\*</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

We propose two different concepts of feminization of poverty and analyze household survey data to verify if there is an ongoing feminization of poverty in eight Latin American countries, according to each of these concepts. We also verify if our results respond to changes in values of poverty lines and to different scenarios of intra-household inequalities, concluding that poverty may be higher among women, but there is no clear evidence of a recent and widespread feminization of poverty in the countries studied.

Key words: Feminization of Poverty, Gender Inequalities, Poverty, Female Headed Households, Latin America.

JEL Classification: J16

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\* The authors would like to thank Rafael Osorio, Cristina Queiroz and Luis F. Oliveira for data processing and Eduardo Zepeda, Nanak Kakwani and Alejandro Grinspun for comments.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the idea that there is an ongoing feminization of poverty in the world was widely accepted among women's advocates. For instance, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) postulated that the number of women living in poverty was increasing disproportionately to the number of men, particularly in the developing countries. The same idea was restated in at least two United Nations resolutions, in 1996 and 2000, and again in a report by the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2003 (United Nations, 1996, 2000, 2003).

From the equity point of view, the feminization of poverty should be fought against because it is related to two negative phenomena, poverty and gender inequality. There is little doubt about the importance of precise information about this issue for policy design and implementation. The occurrence of a feminization of poverty has several implications for this process. One of them is that an increase in the levels of poverty among women or female headed households leads to the conclusion that existing anti-poverty measures may be not only ineffective but actually have negative effects for women. On the other hand, if this feminization is not occurring, research and egalitarian policies would gain from focusing on related but different issues, such as determinants of the economic autonomy of women.

The existence of poverty in any group is morally unacceptable and its increase in any group sets priorities for public policies. Thus, the occurrence of a feminization of poverty would require that actions to promote gender equality focus primarily on anti-poverty measures. However, if feminization is not occurring, focusing on poverty will immobilize resources that could be otherwise used in other strategies of gender equality promotion.

Given that political, human and financial resources are scarce, to a certain extent anti-poverty measures can conflict with a broader pro-equity strategy. As Baden and Milward (1997:4) put it, "Collapsing gender concerns into a poverty agenda narrows the scope for a gender analysis which can fully address how and why gender inequalities are reproduced, not just among the 'poor', but in society as a whole".

Therefore, despite the limitations we face in terms of data availability and the lack of a consensus on how to define 'feminization', empirical research on the issue may help the policymaking process by giving information about the existence or not of an ongoing process of feminization of poverty in Latin American countries. The objective of this paper is to examine if this feminization is occurring. In order to do this we analyze different definitions of 'feminization of poverty' at the country level using recent survey data. The countries studied are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico and Venezuela.

## 2 THE CONCEPT OF FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

The term 'feminization of poverty' became widely used as a result of a study by Diane Pearce which focused in the gender patterns in the evolution of poverty rates in the United States between the beginning of the 1950s and the mid-1970s (Pearce, 1978). In her research she used two concepts of feminization of poverty, the first being "an increase of women among the poor" and the second "an increase of female headed households among the poor households", the latter becoming the core definition in Pearce's work.

It seems that Pearce was trying to examine the role that women or female households had in the composition of the poor population and how this composition was changing over time. In almost all societies in the world, women are a majority in the population and female headed households are a minority among the types of family. As a consequence, a higher number of women and a lower number of female headed households are found among the poor. However, this is not enough to conclude that poverty is a problem that affects women more than men or, as is sometimes claimed, that women are over-represented<sup>1</sup> among the poor. Over-representation in poverty is a notion that relates the size of a subgroup of the poor – say women or female headed households – to the size of this subgroup in the general population. In practical terms, it is the same as comparing the incidence of poverty in different groups.

Nevertheless, using both definitions, Pearce chose to look at a group among the poor and not at poverty inside a group, which, from the methodological point of view, makes a good difference. For instance, a measurement based on her approach would not change if the impoverishment of female headed households were neutralized by a reduction of the numbers of female headed households in the population. For that reason, subsequent studies adopted the 'poverty inside a group' approach, as does most of the research in the field nowadays. This approach is a better way to analyze issues such as differentials in the incidence, intensity and severity of poverty.

Part of the subsequent research used a modified version of Pearce's main definition and related 'feminization' to "increases in poverty in female headed households in relation to the levels of male headed households" (Peterson, 1987, Pressman, 1988, and Northrop, 1990). Other studies adopted a different approach and defined 'feminization' as "increases in poverty among women in relation to poverty among men" (Fuchs, 1986, Wright, 1992). Given the existence of multiple concepts, recent studies are assuming more than one definition. For instance, Dooley (1994) and Davies & Joshi (1998) test the hypothesis of feminization of poverty simultaneously against the relative rise in poverty among "women", "adult women only" and "female headed households".

The idea behind the concept of feminization of poverty is that there is a gender bias in the evolution of poverty over time. Hence, from a gender perspective it makes sense to relate either the relative growth in poverty among women, among all persons in female headed households and some variations of these groups (e.g. among adult women), to the feminization of poverty.

In spite of its multiple meanings, the feminization of poverty should not be confused with the existence of higher levels of poverty among women or female headed households. By 'higher levels of poverty' we mean a higher incidence, intensity or severity<sup>2</sup> of poverty at some point in time. The term 'feminization' relates to the way poverty changes over time, whereas 'higher levels of poverty' (which includes the so called 'over-representation') focuses on a view of poverty at a given moment. Feminization is a process, 'higher poverty' is a state. Being time-dependent, the first refers to a trend observed in the behavior of poverty measures while the second is related to the levels of those measures at a single point in time.

The idea of feminization does not imply necessarily an absolute worsening in poverty among women. An absolute worsening of poverty is a women-women comparison taken over time, that is, a comparison of the levels of poverty among women at a certain moment with the respective levels at a previous moment. Although a sustained feminization of poverty may lead to higher levels of poverty among women (or female headed households), that does not

make the two concepts synonymous. It follows that, during a certain period, feminization can occur without an increase in the levels of poverty among women, and vice-versa.

One may easily argue that such an absolute worsening does not constitute a feminization of poverty since by such a definition a feminization can occur simultaneously to a 'masculinization' of poverty. If poverty increases for all, it will always imply a 'feminization' by that definition. The feminization of poverty should rather be understood as a relative concept based on a women-men comparison, where what matters are the differences (or ratios, depending on the way it is measured) between women and men at each moment. Consequently, if poverty in a society is sharply reduced among men and is only slightly reduced among women, there would be a feminization of poverty.

Therefore, two definitions of feminization of poverty arise. The feminization of poverty may be defined as: a. an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among women and among men; b. an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among female headed households and among male and couple headed households.

Of course, the definitions of feminization of poverty discussed so far are not exhaustive. One could go further and define it as an increase of the role that gender discrimination has as a determinant of poverty, which would characterize a feminization of the causes of poverty. For example, a growth of wage discrimination that also intensifies poverty among women and men of all types of families can be understood as a feminization of poverty because it denotes the relation between the biases against women and a rise in poverty. In many cases<sup>3</sup> such changes in the causes of poverty will result in one of the types of feminization of poverty discussed above, that is, in relative changes in the poverty levels of women and female headed households.

The content of the term 'feminization of poverty' depends not only on what we understand by feminization but also on the definition of *poverty*. The latter is a concept that may have multiple meanings as well. Spicker (1998), for example, lists eleven different clusters of meanings for poverty, each of these clusters having its internal variations. When it comes to measuring poverty the issue becomes even more complex, as often different measurement approaches apply to a single definition.

In empirical work, poverty is usually assessed by household consumption or availability of resources. The most common approach is to define poverty as income (or consumption) deprivation in the household, but efforts have been made to implement multidimensional indicators of poverty. The basic needs strategy and, more recently, the capability approach, are probably the best known approaches to multidimensional poverty. There is little doubt that it is harder for many women to transform their resources into capabilities, thus it seems logical to try to measure capabilities, not resources, in a study about the feminization of poverty. However, there is little – if any – information on surveys that could allow the use of the capability approach in studies that have to compare distinct moments in time, as it is the case here.

Cross-country studies usually face limitations in comparability and the availability of data; hence the lack of income is the prevalent indicator of poverty used in these studies. Given the existing restrictions, income is a reasonable alternative if the results are interpreted with appropriate attention. Indeed, lack of income is at the core of almost all definitions of poverty and it is this dimension that many policy makers have in mind when talking about the feminization of poverty.

Perhaps even more important than the indicator is the unit of analysis utilized. Although poverty is frequently related to individual wellbeing, its measurement often occurs at the household (family)<sup>4</sup> level. This happens as a consequence of the reasonable idea that people share their resources with their nuclear family members. When it comes to measuring poverty, this idea is often translated in the assumption that family resources are equally distributed among all members. When income is the indicator of wellbeing and the household is the unit of analysis, it is common to use *per capita* income as a measure of resources available to an individual, that is, to assume a perfect distribution of income in the household.

From a gender perspective, the assumption of perfect distribution can be disputed. There is no reason to believe that the factors that determine gender inequalities in the public sphere will not act within the families. On the contrary, despite the scarcity of data to support such research, there is some evidence that intra-household inequalities occur at relevant levels (Sen, 1997a, 1997b, Haddad & Kanbur, 1990, Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2000).

But how should intra-household inequalities be taken into account in a multi-country study on the feminization of poverty? Bearing in mind the data availability problem, the use of simulations could be an alternative. Given some parameters of what the intra-household distribution should be, one could create scenarios of different levels of inequality to test the hypothesis of feminization of poverty. The disadvantage of these simulations is that they do not tell us what has happened but only what could happen under certain assumptions. Yet, they are useful because they contribute to establish the extent to which intra-household inequalities affect the process of feminization of poverty.

As feminization is a concept related to the dynamics of the poverty population profile, an increase over time of intra-household inequalities should lead to a feminization of poverty if these inequalities imply disadvantages for women. Making inferences from the existing research that points out improvements on education, labor earnings and economic autonomy of women, it is most likely that these inequalities are either stable or decreasing in many countries in the world, but that is not enough to make any detailed assumption about the way those inequalities behave over time. Thus, in the absence of further information, there is no way to estimate the real impact intra-household inequalities have on a possible feminization of poverty.

The results of using multidimensional indicators of poverty tend to follow a similar pattern. For example, they could differ from the conventional ones obtained by the use of family *per capita* income measures if their intra-household distribution is changing significantly over time. Therefore, the claim that in the case of gender studies multiple dimensions of poverty should be considered is legitimate, but if the assumption of equal distribution of resources in the household is maintained, not much should change.

The assumption of differentiation of needs among household members and the use of equivalence scales can also influence our conclusions about a feminization of poverty. Obviously, its effects depend entirely on the type of scale used and its stability over time. In practice, the use of an equivalence scale is comparable to assuming intra-household inequalities; therefore, the use of such scales will have the same effects as the latter. Apart from effects related to the density of the poor around a certain value of income, the process of feminization of poverty tends not to be affected if these scales do not change over time. For instance, gender-blind adult-equivalent scales will probably produce no change in the differences between men and women and may reduce the levels of poverty among all households with children, but will probably not promote or reduce a feminization of poverty.

Neither will equivalence scales that, by assuming that women consume less (i.e., have lower food requirements), tend to reduce poverty among women and female headed households, but have a negligible effect on the process of feminization of poverty.

Given the limitations of data and the complexity of doing research taking into account both multidimensional indicators, intra-household inequalities and equivalence, a first step should be to test the hypothesis of feminization of poverty departing from a more conventional approach and then move to a more complex one if the results and methods seem to be promising.

### 3 PREVIOUS STUDIES

The previous studies relating gender and poverty can be grouped in two broad categories. The first is composed of studies about the over-representation of women among the poor at a given moment; the second, by studies on the process of feminization of poverty. The studies about over-representation comprise the great majority and have been carried out in many regions of the world. The studies about feminization of poverty – in the sense we use the term here – are less common and almost all are limited to developed countries. As far as we know, there is no study about the feminization of poverty in Latin America similar to this.

Despite the fact they do not follow poverty rates over time, the studies of the first group frequently define ‘feminization of poverty’ as the higher incidence of poverty among women or female headed households, which causes some terminological confusion. As discussed before, this is not compatible with the original definitions of feminization of poverty, neither is part of the other definitions we proposed. Therefore, we will classify those studies as research on over-representation, even if their authors call them studies on feminization of poverty.

There is no evidence of a systematic over-representation of women among the poor around the world. Several studies have found a higher incidence of poverty among women or female headed households in some countries, but in many others this does not occur. Surprisingly, the studies usually find a higher probability of being poor among women in developed countries, but a higher incidence of poverty among female headed households in developing countries is not a common finding. In addition, the relationship between poverty and female headship of households seems not to be direct and univocal, as poverty appears to have a stronger correlation with the presence of children in the family and other characteristics of family members than with the type of head of household (Chant, 2003b, Baden & Milward, 1997, Lipton & Ravallion, 1995).

In studies in developed countries and transition economies in the 1980s and 1990s that focus on the gender of the poor, Pressman (2002, 2003), Bradshaw, Kemp, Mayhew & Williams (2003), Lockhead and Scott (2000) and Casper, McLanahan & Garfinkel (1994) identify a significantly higher vulnerability and/or incidence of poverty among women in the USA, Canada, Australia, Russia, Germany and the UK. An exception to that in more than one study was Spain, as Pressman (2002) and Fernando-Morales & Haro-García (1998) demonstrate. Focusing on the headship of the households Pressman (2002) concluded that from 24 developed countries in the Luxembourg Income Study, eight show very small or insignificant gender poverty gaps and eleven have only slightly higher poverty rates and that those results were not affected by different poverty lines or the assumption of economies of scale in the households.



The research in non-developed countries tends to focus more on the headship of the households. Fuwa (2000), Marcoux (1998) and Quisumbing, Haddad & Peña (1995) found weak evidence, if any, of higher incidence of poverty among female headed households in Sub-Saharan Africa (Botswana, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nepal) and 13 countries of Latin America. Indeed, in some countries there are better off than male headed households. On the other hand, in Brazil and in the urban areas of India, the probability of being poor is higher among these households (Barros, Fox & Mendonça, 1994, Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa, 2003).

Comparative analyses of several studies concluded that over-representation of women or female headed households varies from country to country and that there is no clear pattern of relationship between poverty and the headship of the households. Buvinic & Gupta (1997) compared the results of 61 studies and pointed out that 38 of them concluded that there was an over-representation of female headed households among the poor, 15 found some kind of relationship between certain types of female headship and poverty and eight did not find any relation. Lampietti & Stalker (2000) analyzed more than a hundred reports and studies and found that only in certain countries the female headed households consistently present worse indicators of poverty, hence the idea that poverty has a 'female face' cannot be generalized for the entire world.

It is worth mentioning that the majority of the studies above measure poverty by consumption or income, a procedure that has raised some warnings. According to Baden & Millward (1997), a moneymetric approach to poverty has some limitations for gender studies as this approach is insensitive to the specific forms of deprivation suffered by women, such as domestic violence and lack of autonomy. Therefore, it should be noted that the results cited above make reference to only one aspect of poverty. If these other aspects were considered, the over-representation of women among the poor could increase, but the same may not be said about a feminization of poverty.

In addition, most of these studies neglect intra-household inequalities, another important issue in gender studies which aim at measuring over-representation of women among the poor. The difficulty in obtaining data is a main obstacle to that, but some studies have tried to incorporate those inequalities. Findlay & Wright (1996) simulated an unequal division of income among family members to illustrate how much of the incidence and intensity of poverty in Italy and the USA could be underestimated by the conventional 'perfect distribution' assumption. Case & Deaton (2002) describe household expenditures in India and South Africa showing that in the latter country differences in household expenditures on health clearly benefit adult men. Haddad & Kanbur (1993) found significantly higher levels of poverty among women in the Southern Philippines when intra-household inequalities were taken into account. Using data from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ethiopia and South Africa, Quisumbing and Maluccio (2000) concluded that the hypothesis that family members aggregate their income to redistribute it equally does not hold: the personal attributes of the individuals (sex, age, assets, human capital and others) determine the final allocation among family members, which usually favors men.

As in the case of over-representation, there is no clear evidence in the literature about the occurrence of a feminization of poverty in the world. The pioneer study conducted by Pearce (1978) found an increase of both women and female headed household members among the American poor between the 1950s and the mid-1970s. Subsequent research (Northrop, 1990,

Pressman, 1988, Peterson, 1987 and Fuchs, 1986) reached the same conclusions for the 1960s in the USA, but Fuchs (1986) reject the hypothesis for the years after 1970 and Northrop (1990) and Pressman (1988) also reject it for the 1980s. Only Peterson (1987) maintains that there was a feminization of poverty in the USA after the 1970s.

Wright (1992) and Davies & Joshi (1998) examined data from the United Kingdom from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s and did not find any feminization of poverty. In Canada Dooley (1994) found a feminization of poverty between 1973 and 1990 when 'feminization' was understood as 'increase among female headed households', but not when the 'increase among women' definition was used. To the best of our knowledge, no analogous research was conducted in other parts of the world, therefore determining the existence or not of a feminization of poverty in Latin America is a matter of empirical analysis.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using unit record data (microdata) available from household surveys of Argentina (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares, 1992 and 2001), Bolivia (Encuesta de Hogares- Programa MECOVI, 1999 and 2002), Brazil (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios, 1983 and 2003), Chile (Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional, 1990 and 2000), Colombia (Encuesta Nacional de Hogares – Fuerza de Trabajo – Programa MECOVI, 1995 and 1999), Costa-Rica (Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples, 1990 and 2001), Mexico (Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares, 1992 and 2002) and Venezuela (Encuesta de Hogares por Muestreo- Programa MECOVI, 1995 and 2000). All of these surveys present national coverage except for the Argentine one, which is representative only of urban areas.

These countries represent the majority of the population of Latin America. The criterion for choosing them was the availability of a survey after the year 2000 and comparability of data with previous surveys to allow the testing of hypotheses. To a certain extent, what happened in terms of feminization of poverty in the countries studied is representative of others countries in the region, although this would be less valid for Central America, which is under-represented in the study. In spite of that, one must bear in mind that more detailed results, such as poverty levels or growth rates, are country-specific and therefore cannot be generalized.

If seen as a structural problem related to stable gender inequalities, the feminization of poverty would be best analyzed by looking at trends of poverty over long periods. For some countries in our study, such as Bolivia, we are looking at relatively short periods. In such cases the results should be treated with caution, despite the fact that trends observed over longer periods for other countries are reproduced in short period analysis. We believe our study indicates fairly well the changes in the levels and composition of poverty in the 1990s-2000s.

A great effort was made to apply the same methodology in each country. In this sense, to have similar variables for all countries we decided to use only monetary income. However, it was not possible to avoid using some specific characteristics in the surveys. For instance, some surveys had imputed values for the missing ones or corrected income values *vis-à-vis* the National Accounts. In cases where the original variables were not available in the surveys, the only option was to use these adjusted data. It is also important to note that there are differences in the ways the surveys capture the income data, but this discussion is beyond the

scope of this work. Nevertheless, as there are no cross-country analyses in the study, the lack of total comparability among countries should not be seen as a major problem.

Even though many of the official studies on poverty in the countries analyzed consider total income as not only monetary but also non-monetary inputs (such as in-kind payments, self-production or imputed rent), the poverty trends found here were very similar to the official ones.

The feminization of poverty is defined as an increase in the levels of poverty among women or female headed households relative to the levels of men or male headed households. This could be measured either as ratios or as differences. We believe that differences are more appropriate than ratios for this purpose. In this study we use Foster, Greer and Thorbecke's (1984)  $P_\alpha$  measures of poverty, which are already ratios themselves. The use of ratios can mislead some interpretations since small percentage point differences can lead to large ratio differences, which is not an adequate result in a study such as this.

To examine the feminization or not of poverty, two tests can be applied, one for each type of definition of feminization of poverty.

a) an increase in the differential of poverty between women and men.

$$P_{\alpha}^{(fp)} - P_{\alpha}^{(mp)} < P_{\alpha'}^{(fp)} - P_{\alpha'}^{(mp)} \quad (1)$$

b) an increase in the differential poverty between female and male headed households.

$$P_{\alpha}^{(fh)} - P_{\alpha}^{(mh)} < P_{\alpha'}^{(fh)} - P_{\alpha'}^{(mh)} \quad (2)$$

Where  $P_\alpha$  stands for the Foster, Greer and Thorbecke (1984) measures of poverty (FGT),  $t$  and  $t'$  for the initial and final points in time (that is,  $t < t'$ ),  $(f)$  for female subgroup,  $(m)$  for male,  $(p)$  for persons and  $(h)$  for headed households. Therefore,  $P_{\alpha}^{(fp)}$  represents the poverty among female persons at the initial moment, and so on.

Poverty is usually measured using per capita income, that is, under the assumption that the income in the household is equally distributed. Such an assumption may not be adequate for a study concerned with gender inequalities, as they also exist within the household. However, measuring that inequality requires data that are not currently available in any of the countries of our study. We opted to analyze the effects intra-household inequalities have on poverty using simulations of income retention where we simulate what would happen to the poverty measures if individuals retained different proportions of their personal earnings in the labor market or other sources.

To make the simulations we assume that each individual distributes within the family a fraction (from 0% to 100%) of the income he or she receives. The simulation varies the fraction distributed and recalculates poverty measures for each level of individual income distribution. Then, the hypothesis of feminization of poverty can be tested for different simulated levels of income distribution within the household.

We begin with five levels of distribution of individual incomes within the family: i. 0%, when individual retains all the income he or she receives to him or herself; ii. 25%, retention of 75% of the received income with distribution of the remaining 25%; iii. 50%, retention of half of the received income, distribution of the other half; iv. 75%, distribution of 75% of received

income; iv. 100%, distribution of all received income, corresponding to what is usually done in poverty studies to calculate per capita income.

The simulation for each individual can be expressed as:

$$\hat{y}_{ij} = (1 - \lambda)y_{ij} + \frac{\lambda}{n_j} \sum_{i=1}^{n_j} y_{ij} \quad (s1)$$

for  $\lambda = (0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, 1)$

Where  $\hat{y}_{ij}$  is the simulated income an individual  $i$  is entitled to, in the household  $j$ ,  $y_{ij}$  is the observed personal income of this individual,  $\lambda$  is the parameter for the proportion of personal income of this individual distributed within the household (varying from zero to one) and  $n$  is the size of the household.

The simulations modify the distribution of income within the households but do not alter the distribution among households. The result does not have any effect on the composition of poverty according to types of household, thus it was applied only to verify the feminization of poverty in terms of hypothesis  $a$ , that is, defining feminization as increases in the differential of poverty between women and men.

The  $P_a$  measures, and therefore the test of the hypotheses, depend on the value of a poverty line  $z$ . According to the shape of the distribution of income of a population, changes in the value of  $z$  can affect the results of any poverty study. To avoid this 'poverty line effect' we initially performed a sensibility analysis, testing all the hypotheses for different values of poverty lines. As the results were fairly robust, we concluded that the exact value of the poverty line was of secondary importance for the study of the process of feminization of poverty and decided to adopt a poverty line based on a simple methodology.

We proceeded by determining a rather arbitrary value for  $z$  in the latest survey available for each country and deflating its nominal value to obtain the line for the initial period. We defined the poverty line  $z$  as the value of the 40th percentile of the family *per capita* income distribution in the latest survey available ( $z_t$ ), as in many of the countries studied, the poverty incidence calculated with local poverty lines is near 40% (usually a little lower). Then we used a consumer price index in each country to transform  $z_t$  and estimate the absolute value of the poverty line in the initial period ( $z_i$ ). The sensibility analysis was performed using poverty lines that varied from the real values of the cutting point of the 30th to the 50th percentiles of each population in the latest surveys available. Given the stability of results after the sensibility analysis we chose to present our conclusions using for the most part the intermediate 40th percentile poverty line.

Using data from the household surveys, we tested the two hypotheses with three different FGT poverty measures, P0, P1 and P2 (incidence, intensity and severity of poverty). For the hypothesis  $a$  (increase in differences between women and men) we also simulated what would happen with the feminization of poverty under different scenarios of intra-household distribution. Applying the simulations to hypothesis  $b$  (increase in differences between female and male headed households) was not necessary as the simulations do not affect the distribution of income among households. To evaluate the effect of changes in the

poverty lines, we also carried out all the tests for three different poverty levels, which in practice resulted in the test of 54 possibilities for each country.

The outcomes were quite robust with regard to variations in the values of the lines and to the simulations of changes in intra-household distribution (the conclusions of only 12 out of 432 tests depended on the lines or the distribution), so it was decided to present the findings in summarized tables, showing the values of the poverty measures in the countries only for the '40th percentile in latest survey' poverty line under the conventional assumption about the intra-household distribution of income. In addition, summarized tables are presented with the results of the simulations and the poverty line sensibility analysis.

## 5 RESULTS

If we use the conventional methods of poverty measurement, i.e., if intra-household inequalities are not considered and poverty is measured in *per capita* income terms, there is no relevant difference in the incidence, intensity or severity of poverty among men and women in the Latin American countries studied (Table A-1, Appendix).<sup>5</sup> We also find differences in the levels of poverty according to types of families, but not necessarily showing a disadvantage in female headed households. These differences are much more related to the existence of children in the families than to the type of family headship.

The absence of higher levels of poverty does not exclude, however, the possibility of a feminization of poverty in these countries. Table 1 below presents a summary of the results of the tests of hypothesis about the feminization of poverty for each country using the three measures of poverty calculated for the 40th percentile poverty line under the conventional assumption of perfect distribution of income within the households. For the two definitions of feminization of poverty we examined, most of the results were negative. Nonetheless, a number of these negatives were not completely conclusive, as some measures of poverty seemed to indicate very low levels of feminization of poverty. Similar exceptions to the general trends were found in some of the countries where the results were positive.

There is no explicit evidence of a feminization of poverty in the Latin American countries studied. If we ignore minor exceptions and consider the entire set of definitions tested, an increase in the differential poverty between women and men did not occur in any of the countries studied. An increase in the differential poverty among female and male headed households occurred only in Argentina and Mexico. Except for very small variations in some of the poverty indicators, no feminization of poverty occurred in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela.

The sensibility analyses points out that the values of the poverty the lines are of secondary importance for the study, as Table 2 shows. Changes in the values of the poverty line affect only a few of the results and then at a residual level. Mexico is the only country where the results are affected in more evident way when lines are modified. The simulation of intra-household inequalities also does not seem to affect the results in a relevant manner, as Table 2 demonstrates. In general terms, computing intra-household inequalities would not lead to a feminization of poverty.

TABLE 1

**Trends of the feminization of poverty – summary based on table A-1 (appendix)**

Countries	Total poverty trends	Feminization of poverty, according to hypothesis	
		Men - Women	Male - Female headed HH
Argentina (92/01)	increased	no (except for P2)*	yes
Bolivia (99/02)	stable	no	no (except for females without children)***
Brazil (83/03)	decreased	no	no
Chile (90/00)	decreased	no	no (except for P0 of females with children)*
Colombia (95/99)	increased	no	no
Costa Rica (90/01)	decreased	no	no (except for female with children)**
Mexico (92/02)	decreased	no (except for P1)*	yes
Venezuela (95/00)	increased	no	no

Source: Authors' calculations based on the respective national household surveys.

\* The difference between variations in  $P(\alpha)$  is less than 0.01.

\*\* The difference between variations in  $P(\alpha)$  reaches at most 0.05.

\*\*\* The difference between variations in  $P(\alpha)$  reaches at most 0.10.

Note: 'no' stands for a rejection of the feminization of poverty hypothesis and 'yes' for the opposite.

TABLE 2

**Changes in the trends of the feminization of poverty (Table 1) after changes in poverty lines and intra-household distribution**

Countries	Sensitivity to different poverty lines		Simulation of Intra-household inequality (25% to 100%)
	Men - Women	Male - Female headed HH	Men - Women
Argentina (92/01)	no <sup>a</sup>	no	no <sup>b</sup>
Bolivia (99/02)	no	no	no
Brazil (83/03)	no	no	no
Chile (90/00)	no	no <sup>c</sup>	no
Colombia (95/99)	no	no <sup>d</sup>	no
Costa Rica (90/01)	no <sup>e</sup>	no	no
Mexico (92/02)	yes <sup>f</sup>	no	no
Venezuela (95/00)	no	no	no

Source: Authors' calculations based on the respective national household surveys.

a. Except P1 and P2 for the '30th percentile in latest survey' poverty line, but the difference between male and female variations was less than 0.01;

b. Except P2 at income retentions of 25%, 50% and 75% (fractions of personal income distributed in household in each simulation) but the differences between male and female were less than 0.01;

c. Note that now even the P0 of females with children decreased more than the P0 for couples with children;

d. Except of female without children's P2 for the for the '30th percentile in latest survey' poverty line, but the difference between females without children and couples without children variations was less than 0.01;

e. Except P1 for the '30th percentile in latest survey' poverty line, but the difference between male and female variations was less than 0.01;

f. It changes for P0 and P2 under both poverty lines, but the difference between male and female variations was less than 0.01.

Note: This table refers to results of Table 1; 'no' means the results stay the same after changing the poverty lines or the simulating different levels of intra-household inequality and 'yes' stands for a relevant change in the results.

Table 2 refers to poverty among women and men of all ages and in all positions in the family. To evaluate the extent to which the results were dependent on the age and position in the family of the persons we also carried out the same simulations for a group composed only of heads of the families and their partners. Except for minor variations in Argentina, no relevant differences were found in the results when the analysis was restricted to a more specific population of men and women (not shown in tables). The simulation of intra-household inequalities does not seem to affect the feminization of poverty even if only heads of family and their partners are considered.

Intra-household inequalities would affect the results only if they were growing over the years. Yet, it is most likely that they are not increasing since all other income inequalities (labor market earnings, pensions) and also other inequalities (education) are either stable or being reduced in Latin America. If it is correct to say that all gender inequalities have the same basic root in gender relations, there is a fair probability that intra-household distribution has in fact been improved during the last years. Indeed, our assumption that these inequalities were the same in the initial and final periods of analysis may even be overestimating the importance of intra-household inequalities for the feminization of poverty.

Therefore, if we do not take into account small variations and minor ambiguities resulting from the use of different concepts of feminization, measures of poverty, poverty lines or assumptions about the intra-household distribution of income, we may conclude that there is no solid evidence of a process of feminization of poverty in the Latin American region. On the contrary, it seems that Argentina and Mexico are the only countries among the eight studied where we can speak of a certain type of feminization of poverty.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

It must be recognized that there are definitions of feminization of poverty coexisting. Indeed, both 'feminization' and 'poverty' can themselves be concepts with various meanings, allows many different phenomena to be seen as feminization of poverty. This study departed from the idea that the concept of feminization of poverty is related to a gender bias in the evolution of poverty over the years. We related the increase in the levels of poverty among women or female household, as well as the increase in the differences between men and women and between male and female headed households, to the feminization of poverty to avoid confusion with the idea of the so-called over-representation of women or female headed households among the poor. To conduct the study we used two different definitions of feminization, based on inequalities between women and men and between male and female headed households.

The concept of feminization of poverty also depends on the way poverty is defined and, to some extent, measured. *Poverty* is a term that has multiple meanings and each meaning usually allows more than one measurement methodology. Given the limitations we faced in data availability, we adopted a conventional approach and based the study on income poverty. Our conclusions refer mainly to that type of poverty, but it may be inferred that other types of poverty that depend directly on the consumption of market goods (such as deprivation in food intake) or depend on goods and services that are consumed collectively by the family (such as potable water and sanitation) will follow patterns similar to the ones we found here.

Our analysis is restricted to eight countries in Latin America. These countries, however, represent the majority of the population of the region. Obviously some results are country specific and cannot be generalized, but there is no reason to believe that these countries are not a reference for understanding what has happened in the entire region, especially in relation to South America, since Mexico and Costa Rica are the only countries in the study that do not belong to this subcontinent.

Previous studies have identified a higher vulnerability and/or incidence of poverty among women in some developed countries and transition economies. On the other hand, research on developing countries has found weak evidence of a higher incidence of poverty among female headed households. Recent comparative analyses of several studies have concluded that the relationship between family headship or the gender of the individual, and poverty varies from country to country. A similar conclusion was reached concerning the feminization of poverty in developed countries. Depending on the way it is defined, feminization has occurred in some countries and in some periods, but no systematic feminization of poverty has been observed in Europe or North America.

Our study leads to conclusions similar to those obtained for other developing countries. We found that in the Latin American countries we examined there is no relevant difference in the incidence, intensity or severity of poverty among men and women when intra-household inequalities are not taken into account and poverty is measured in *per capita* family income terms, irrespectively of the value of the poverty line used. This partially reflects the dominant forms of compositions of poorer families in Latin America, which are relatively balanced in terms of the sex of its members, couples with or without children and female headed families with children.

The only type of female headed family we found over-represented among the poor were those families with children. However, similar levels of over-representation were found among couples with children, indicating that the presence of children and not the type of family headship is what differentiates families in poverty. There is no reason to suppose that these results could be affected by any type of intra-household distribution other than the ones analyzed here.

Nonetheless, if intra-household inequalities are considered, then women would probably be over-represented among the poor. If intra-household inequalities are gender determined, the same factors that result in inequalities in, say, occupational status could be the source of disadvantages for women in family income distribution. The scarce evidence we have seems to confirm this idea, thus it is reasonable to assume that by neglecting intra-household inequalities one underestimates the real levels of poverty among women. Nevertheless, we are not able to measure to what extent this situation exists, and are not aware of any reference study in Latin America from which could enable us to estimate these inequalities.

In the countries studied we found no increase in the differential poverty between women and men. Only in Argentina and Mexico was an increase observed in differential poverty among female and male headed households during the periods analyzed. Excluding some very small variations in a few of the poverty indicators, no feminization of poverty occurred in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela.

These findings are insensitive to variations in the values of the poverty lines or in the levels of intra-household inequalities. Apparently the value of the poverty lines is of secondary



importance for the conclusions: only in Mexico is there a change in trends and a feminization becomes more evident when the lines are modified. The simulation of intra-household inequalities does not seem affect any of the results in a relevant manner.

If we ignore variations of minor importance, we may conclude that there is no clear evidence of a recent and widespread feminization of poverty in the Latin American countries studied. This conclusion is in line with the existing studies carried out in developed countries but we do not believe it could be straightforwardly generalized to other countries and regions.

Our conclusions are not enough to allow us to prescribe any anti-poverty policy, but some implications for public policies could be mentioned. First we must differentiate over-representation (and higher intensity and severity) of poverty from feminization of poverty, as these are not just conceptual details but phenomena that are moving in different directions. Over-representation informs us about the size of the problem that has to be solved; the latter provides information about the progress of status of women over time that allows us to evaluate how changes in society are reducing or increasing gender-biased poverty. Our study shows that female poverty is not increasing. Therefore, from a political perspective, feminization should be seen as an important issue, but should not overshadow the debate on gender inequality.

In general terms we found a probable over-representation of women among the poor – depending on the way resources are distributed within the households – and no relevance of the gender of the family head in determining poverty and no evidence of a feminization of poverty in the region. In terms of formulating anti-poverty policies, these results should be interpreted with caution. They do not allow the conclusion that the composition of families can be ignored by policies, as they are not saying that the determinants of poverty are the same for all family types. What they do suggest is that intra-household inequalities are an important issue for the debate on gender and poverty.

What is clear is that if intra-household inequalities are large, then the conventional methods used to measure poverty are not completely adequate to identify a gender bias in poverty. We are aware of the difficulties involved in the measurement of such inequalities, thus we believe that the best way to approach the subject for policymaking is to focus on the determinants of the economic autonomy of women, particularly those related to labor market participation and earnings differentials.

The definitions of feminization of poverty we analyzed are not exhaustive, but they cover a large portion of the definitions used in the literature in this field and in the public debate about the issue. Yet, we did not examine directly one important aspect of the feminization of poverty, the increase in the direct role that gender inequalities in education or labor market may have as a determinant of poverty. We believe that future studies could pay attention to that, although our evidence does not give any indication that this kind of feminization of poverty is occurring in Latin America.

We are not sure if our conclusions would hold true for dimensions of poverty other than income or family-consumed goods and services. Poverty understood as deprivation of health, for example, does not share the same determinants as income deprivation, and therefore may exhibit a different behavior from that we found in this study. It would be interesting if future research could analyze other dimensions of poverty not directly related to the ones examined here.

## APPENDIX

TABLE A-1

### Poverty Measures for the "40th percentile in latest survey" poverty line

	Argentina		Bolivia		Brazil		Chile		Colombia		Costa Rica		Mexico		Venezuela	
	1992	2001	1999	2002	1983	2003	1990	2000	1995	1999	1990	2001	1992	2002	1995	2000
<b>Incidence (P0)</b>																
Male	0.26	0.41	0.40	0.40	0.54	0.40	0.53	0.40	0.34	0.40	0.51	0.39	0.45	0.40	0.37	0.39
Female	0.25	0.39	0.41	0.40	0.54	0.40	0.55	0.40	0.34	0.40	0.52	0.41	0.45	0.40	0.39	0.41
Couple with children	0.27	0.43	0.41	0.42	0.56	0.44	0.56	0.42	0.36	0.42	0.52	0.40	0.47	0.42	0.38	0.41
Couple without children	0.18	0.19	0.48	0.35	0.33	0.17	0.34	0.21	0.27	0.33	0.41	0.33	0.33	0.29	0.21	0.24
Female with children	0.29	0.48	0.35	0.34	0.59	0.45	0.60	0.46	0.32	0.38	0.54	0.47	0.37	0.41	0.42	0.43
Female without children	0.11	0.17	0.33	0.30	0.39	0.19	0.40	0.25	0.31	0.33	0.55	0.41	0.29	0.33	0.40	0.27
Other types of family	0.23	0.31	0.28	0.32	0.37	0.25	0.41	0.29	0.28	0.33	0.40	0.29	0.35	0.26	0.29	0.32
<b>Intensity (P1)</b>																
Male	0.14	0.22	0.23	0.23	0.27	0.19	0.24	0.16	0.17	0.22	0.23	0.17	0.20	0.16	0.16	0.18
Female	0.13	0.21	0.24	0.22	0.27	0.19	0.25	0.17	0.17	0.22	0.24	0.18	0.20	0.17	0.17	0.18
Couple with children	0.15	0.23	0.25	0.24	0.28	0.21	0.26	0.17	0.17	0.23	0.24	0.17	0.21	0.17	0.16	0.18
Couple without children	0.09	0.11	0.29	0.21	0.13	0.06	0.12	0.08	0.16	0.22	0.20	0.15	0.15	0.12	0.11	0.13
Female with children	0.14	0.27	0.20	0.16	0.29	0.21	0.29	0.20	0.16	0.21	0.26	0.23	0.15	0.16	0.19	0.19
Female without children	0.07	0.12	0.21	0.17	0.16	0.07	0.18	0.11	0.17	0.21	0.33	0.24	0.14	0.15	0.20	0.13
Other types of family	0.13	0.17	0.18	0.21	0.15	0.12	0.17	0.12	0.15	0.20	0.20	0.16	0.14	0.11	0.12	0.16
<b>Severity (P2)</b>																
Male	0.11	0.15	0.18	0.17	0.17	0.12	0.14	0.09	0.12	0.17	0.15	0.11	0.12	0.09	0.09	0.11
Female	0.10	0.16	0.18	0.16	0.17	0.11	0.15	0.10	0.12	0.17	0.15	0.11	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.11
Couple with children	0.12	0.16	0.19	0.18	0.18	0.13	0.15	0.10	0.12	0.17	0.14	0.10	0.13	0.10	0.09	0.11
Couple without children	0.07	0.09	0.21	0.16	0.07	0.03	0.07	0.05	0.13	0.18	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.07	0.08	0.10
Female with children	0.10	0.19	0.15	0.11	0.18	0.13	0.18	0.12	0.11	0.16	0.17	0.15	0.08	0.09	0.12	0.12
Female without children	0.06	0.11	0.15	0.12	0.09	0.04	0.12	0.07	0.13	0.18	0.26	0.18	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.09
Other types of family	0.11	0.12	0.15	0.16	0.09	0.07	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.16	0.13	0.12	0.08	0.06	0.08	0.11

Source: Authors' calculations based on the respective national household surveys.

Note: Values rounded.

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## NOTES

1. There are several different indicators of poverty. The best known ones are measures of incidence, intensity and severity of poverty. Strictly speaking, over-representation refers to a higher incidence of poverty, but sometimes it is also used in a less specific way to indicate higher levels of poverty among a certain group, no matter what the poverty indicator used to measure those levels.
2. The incidence of poverty is usually measured by the proportion of the poor in a population, the intensity of poverty, for income poverty, by the aggregated difference between the observed income of the poor and the poverty line and the severity of poverty by some combination of the incidence and intensity of poverty and inequality among the poor.
3. If wage discrimination grows but other determinants of poverty (such as low education) decrease, then it is possible that the measures of poverty do not change over time, although there is a feminization of the causes of poverty.
4. We use *family* and *household* interchangeably since the large majority of households in Latin America are occupied by a single group of relatives (family).
5. Of course this picture would change and women would be over-represented among the poor if we assumed that there is no perfect distribution within the households and the individuals retain part of the income they earn.



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