

# CEPAL

## Review

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WORLD BANK

## Why are men so irresponsible?

*Rubén Kaztman\**

This article seeks to answer the question posed in the title, which refers in particular to men in the lower-class urban sectors. The statistics reflect a type of behaviour marked by an avoidance of the obligations connected with the formation and maintenance of a family, leading to an increase in rates of illegitimacy, in the proportion of adolescent pregnancies, and in the rates of abandonment of families with children.

In order to seek an answer to these questions, various structural changes in Latin America which may have influenced this type of behaviour are analysed. The main changes which have taken place in family systems have undoubtedly played a role in this; in particular, these changes have affected the position of men in lower-class urban families. Among the factors analysed are the changes which have taken place in the man's role as breadwinner and model for the new generations, and male supremacy as a value.

The article concludes that a substantial proportion of the population in question are simply not fitted to play the roles of husband and father. This anomic situation gives rise to a vicious circle in which the failure to comply with the obligations associated with these roles weakens the man's authority within the family, and this in turn helps to speed up his abandonment of those obligations.

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## Introduction

At an informal meeting attended by ECLAC professionals, a high official of the United Nations Population Fund described the main problems encountered in her field of work and concluded her statement with the question which serves as the title of this article. This question, which refers in particular to men in the lower-class urban sectors, arises from the information built up on a type of behaviour which involves avoidance of the obligations associated with the formation and maintenance of a family and is reflected in an increase in rates of illegitimacy, in the proportion of adolescent pregnancies, and in rates of abandonment of families with children.

### I

## Biases in family studies

The question posed in the title of this article is very useful, because it stimulates a search for information on recent changes in the situation of men and the impact of such changes on the formation and organization of the family. It seems to me that this question has been partly overshadowed in recent decades because academics and those responsible for social policies have shifted their attention mainly to the situation of women. Naturally, there have been ample reasons justifying this shift. One of them was the increasingly visible contrast between the equalitarian ideologies which have prevailed in the Western world and the real-life discrimination suffered by women in important sectors of social life. Another was the increased responsibilities which women had to assume in the biological and social reproduction of their families because of the desertion of the man of the house or the need to contribute to family income affected by serious economic crises. Yet another reason was the growing evidence that where women were the heads of families, this was associated with the inter-generational transmission of poverty and hence with the establishment of still more inequitable social structures.

The concern with the situation of women has had significant consequences with regard to the lines followed by research and the design of policies concerning the family. At the academic level, there has been a proliferation of studies on this subject

based on the story of women's lives, analysis of the evolution of the relative number and living conditions of unmarried adolescent mothers and lone women heads of households, and descriptions of their situation as compared with that of married women. Indeed, in recent years there has been a kind of identification between studies of women and those of the family. An example of this may be seen from a review of the literature on the family in Latin America carried out for UNESCO by Ana Jusid (1988). Of the 204 titles in the review, 52 contained references to the situation of women or motherhood, while only two refer to men or fatherhood.<sup>1</sup>

Studies aimed at understanding the objective conditions and subjective content of the lives of wives and mothers have undoubtedly helped to gain a better understanding of the evolution of the structure and functioning of the family. The bias which is implicit in this approach enjoys historical legitimacy, and economic and social change has indeed caused women to be increasingly the "apex of family organization" (Raczynski and Serrano, 1985, p. 108). I nevertheless believe, however, that all this does not in itself justify the present concentration of family studies on the situation of women, and I feel that

research and the compilation of data for policy formulation should be oriented rather towards gaining a fuller knowledge of the processes of family disorganization which lead to such results. In this respect, it is maintained in the present article that the most important immediate cause of family disorganization is the situation of social anomy which particularly affects men in lower-class urban sectors and which is characterized by a marked imbalance between the objectives defined by the prevailing culture for adult male roles in the family, on the one hand, and the access to legitimate means for fulfilling them, on the other. Recent publications on the family in the region only reflect this problem very inadequately. Indeed, anyone who has gone through the above-mentioned bibliography can confirm how difficult it is to find studies which deal with the male point of view on problems connected with the formation and consolidation of a family. Consequently, very little is known of the conditions under which men accept or reject the obligations connected with stable fulfilment of their roles of husband and father.

Let us now take a quick look at some of the structural changes which may have influenced this situation of social anomy in Latin America.

## II

### Changes in family systems

A distinctive feature of Latin American societies is the relative rapidity with which they undergo economic and social changes that have important effects on family organization. A brief comparison with what happened in the countries of early industrialization may help to make this statement clearer. The

<sup>1</sup>A similar symbiosis seems to exist at the level of social policies. Many of those aimed at relieving or eradicating poverty centre on the mother/child aspect. Strong encouragement has been given to the establishment of mothers' centres in local communities for taking care of programmes for communal kitchens, child care, training and the promotion of household micro enterprises, health control, community organization of purchases of consumer goods, etc. It is quite true that these programmes do have the virtue of correcting the traditional male bias of social policies and tacitly or explicitly recognizing that women are tending, either because of abandonment by men or because of serious shortcomings in the man's role as main breadwinner of the household, to assume a growing burden of responsibilities for the everyday maintenance of the family and the biological and social development of the children.

system of family production which predominated in the latter countries for many centuries was characterized by the coexistence of activities of consumption and production in the household and by a pattern of high-density interaction based on a form of mutual dependence which was favoured by the relative geographical isolation. The head of the household combined the roles of main breadwinner, manager of the collective enterprise, and transmitter of techniques and skills which ensured that his children would be able to reproduce the family form of life in conditions of extremely slow social and technical change.

The decline of this system coincided with the appearance and spread of the Industrial Revolution. The agricultural labour force was the biggest social group up to 1830 in England and up to 1907 in the United States (Davis, 1984, p. 402), but both before and after these dates there were movements from

quasi-subsistence work in agriculture and from handicraft-type domestic production workshops to wage-earning jobs in industry. Compared with the rate at which similar changes took place in the countries which are currently underdeveloped, those changes were slow and gradual, thus permitting the emergence of some intermediate organizational forms which reduced the impact on the family of the fact of separating the household from the workplace. This was so, for example, in the cotton textile factories in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In these enterprises, according to Smelser (1968), whole families were hired, thus making it possible to preserve for some time the fathers' faculty of training their children and supervising their work in industry.<sup>2</sup> Data on changes in the composition of the economically active population in France since the beginning of the century also show a slow and gradual reduction in the "family labour system" (Przeworsky, Barnett and Underhill, 1980). The relative slowness with which production technologies and new forms of organization of economic

activities were introduced provided a breathing space of several generations during which people were able to adjust their patterns of family behaviour to the new conditions. This made it possible to consolidate the assignment of specifically working roles outside the home to the men, and specifically domestic roles to the women (the *breadwinner system*).

Something similar happened in the case of the transition to what K. Davis calls the "equality system", characterized by the fact that both spouses work. At a recent seminar of the International Social Security Association (Hoskins, 1990), many of the participants from industrialized countries concurred that the 1960s marked a turning point in the history of the family, in that the breadwinner system ceased to be the prevailing rule. The rates of participation of married women indicated that in most families both spouses had entered the labour force. In the United States, for example, these rates rose by an average of approximately one percentage point per year since the end of the Second World War, and in 1990 only 5% of families continued to follow the old pattern.

### III

#### General features of the changes in Latin American family structures

In Latin America the rate of change was much slower. Even in the middle of the present century, 55% of the population of 19 Latin American countries still lived in rural areas, and their main source of income was agricultural activities. By 1990, however, the figure had gone down to 18% for the same group of countries (United Nations, 1985). In order to understand the effects of this rapid process of urbanization on family structures it is necessary to take into account some features of the particular moment in history when these great transfers of population took place. I refer in particular to the type of organization which predominates in urban production activities and the degree of expansion of the mass media.

With regard to the first of these points, it may be said that with very few exceptions, the industrial,

commercial and services enterprises whose establishment coincided with the stages of rapid urbanization mostly adopted non-family forms of organization, in line with the technology and organization of the production of inputs for the various economic activities which predominated at that time. The result was a transfer of workers from family enterprises to non-family enterprises, and the faster and more recent the process of urbanization, the more intensive this transfer was. With regard to the second point, in most of the countries the great movements to the cities also coincided with notable changes in the coverage and content of the messages of the mass media. This gave rise to a "demonstration effect" of the forms and styles of life of the industrialized societies, which profoundly changed the aspirations and expectations of the masses. In this context, the adjustment of family structures to the new circumstances was subject to contradictory pressures, particularly in migrant families. On the one hand, the inertia of traditional cultural patterns

<sup>2</sup> Smelser examines the relationship between workers' protests of the time and the process whereby the family was losing some of its traditional functions in the socialization of children.

and the transfer of rural patterns of fertility to the cities favoured the maintenance of women in the home and the type of family division of labour described earlier. On the other hand, the difficulties in satisfying the rising aspirations of access to various elements of well-being by the family members made it necessary that women should contribute in some

way to the insufficient household income. Thus, in a complex combination of cause and effect, in which advances in education played a central role, fertility went down very rapidly in recent years, increasing the availability of married women for work outside the home and hence also the possibility that both spouses in a family would be in the labour market.

## IV

### Weakening of the authority of husbands and fathers in lower-class urban sectors

The distribution of power within lower-class urban families is of a macho and authoritarian nature, justified by "natural" privileges of the male sex and the very limited opportunities for discussing decisions. The legitimacy of this power is based on the force of traditional values and the fulfilment of the roles laid down by them. This concept of the intra-family distribution of power was simultaneously under attack from three angles, however: i) through the inability of men to fulfil their role of acting as the sole or main breadwinner to satisfy their families' needs; ii) through the weakening of the father image as a model for the new generations, and iii) through the action of ideological currents advocating greater equality of the sexes and thus questioning macho-authoritarian values.

#### 1. *The role of breadwinner*

In a study carried out in Chile on a sample of women from lower-class urban strata, it is noted that the fulfilment of the economic obligations of the husband is of fundamental importance in determining the women's assessment of his performance in the family (Raczynski and Serrano, 1985). This fulfilment is assessed as a function of the degree to which the consumption needs and aspirations of the family members have been satisfied. These needs and aspirations have undergone significant changes through the rapid expansion of the mass media, and they have also increased through the longer schooling of the children and their later incorporation into the labour market, which prolongs their dependent status.

The crisis of the 1980s reduced wages, increased unemployment and drove substantial sections of the

population into activities which were less productive, less stable and less covered by social benefits, thus helping to undermine the capacity of men in lower-class urban strata to satisfy the basic needs and growing consumption expectations of their families. One indicator of this is the increase in the proportion of households with incomes below the poverty line. This increase, however, conceals the fact that many households are able to escape from poverty through the work of other household members and especially the wife.

An analysis of information on six cities (Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Bogotá, San José, Montevideo and Caracas) shows that during the 1980s there was a considerable increase in the participation of married women and common-law wives in the labour force (in the second half of the decade this rate varied between 40% and 60% in these cities),<sup>3</sup> and this was particularly marked in the case of mothers between 25 and 39 years of age with children under five years of age in nuclear families (at the end of the period, their participation rate was between 33% and 57%). We do not know how far this tendency reflects what happened in the lower-class urban strata, but a study carried out in Montevideo confirms that if it had not been for the participation of wives in the labour force, the percentage of poor households in 1981, 1984 and 1987 would have been between two and three times greater (Katzman, 1988). Everything seems to indicate that many men in lower-class urban sectors were under heavy pressure to give up

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted that these rates are similar to those registered by married women in a number of industrialized countries in the 1970s (United Nations, 1979).

their role of sole breadwinner. The fact that in most cases they did so against their will is reflected in the repeated comments registered in interviews of wives on the resistance they had to overcome in order to go out to work (Raczynski and Serrano, 1985; Cortázar, 1977; De Oliveira and García, 1991, p. 11, and Mattelart and Mattelart, 1968, p. 120). A contributory factor in this resistance was undoubtedly the importance attached by men to economic dependence as a guarantee of fidelity and a safeguard of their pretensions to authority in marital relations.

### *2. A model for the new generations*

The intra-family power distribution model most deeply rooted in lower-class urban sectors was built up over many generations through the daily interaction of the members of rural families, which, as we have already seen, accounted for the bulk of the lower-class strata in the region up to the middle of the present century. The most favourable environment for the development of this model was the small agricultural enterprise. In it, the father not only acts as main supplier of the household income but also organizes productive tasks in a cooperative effort with a high degree of mutual dependence and trains his children in the basic skills needed to carry out their economic activities. In this context, which was reproduced in craft workshops and small urban commercial enterprises in the countries of the region where urbanization took place at a earlier date, the adoption of the paternal model smooths the way for the incorporation of the children into the labour market, strengthens the father-child relationship and helps to legitimize the power exerted by the father within the family. Various processes have helped to break down this relationship.

The great majority of heads of household in the lower-class urban strata are wage earners in the lowest positions. They have little contact with their children. The exposure of the latter to the mass media, however, has allowed them to get to know more gratifying forms of consumption and lifestyles than those which they see around them. Young people have rapidly been turned into a subculture which is recognized as such by publicity and is the object of specific messages involving material and non-material symbols of belonging to that culture which change very rapidly. This subculture, which is backed up every day by the mass

media, captures the imagination of young people and is a powerful element in determining their expectations and aspirations.

The result is a further widening of the generation gap. Although this takes place in all households, the rift seems to be particularly deep in the lower strata. The first reason for this is because the period of youth (of "role moratorium") enjoyed by the parents of these households was generally shorter than for parents in other strata, so that there is less superimposition of their frames of reference with those of their children, and because rural migrants are concentrated in the lower strata, so that the burden of urban socialization is much greater for the children than for their parents. The second reason is because their achievements are far from satisfying the juvenile expectations contained in the subculture's values. The boys, who are better educated and have a better knowledge of the world than in the past, have their eyes fixed on the status symbols of modern society and are perfectly familiar with what the middle strata of society consider to be desirable goods. From this point of view, what their parents have achieved compares very poorly with the elements contained in the widely disseminated model lifestyles.

This disparity between efforts and achievements reduces the possibility that the children can consider the father's behaviour or standards as valid and effective models on which to base their own conduct. Finally, either because of the need to contribute to the family budget, or the desire to acquire goods which show that they belong to the category of modern young people but which the family cannot give them, or simply because of a desire to gain greater freedom and independence, many of them enter the labour market at an early age.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the causes, the precocious feeling of independence produced by having their own income may also heighten the children's resistance to paternal authority. Some studies on intra-family violence indicate that the erosion of the bases for the father's authority leads him to try to impose his will on the rest of the family in an authoritarian manner (De Oliveira and García, 1991), thus generating a kind of negative synergy whose final result is the progressive deterioration of the legitimacy of a form of power which is gradually losing its moral backing (Heintz, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Madeira (1986, p.78) refers to studies made in Brazil which highlight the sense of "freedom" involved in young people's decisions to start work.

### 3. *Male supremacy as a value*

The concept of male domination formed part of the basic prescriptive nucleus of traditional Latin American society, and as such it remained for centuries beyond all doubt or possibility of question (Germani, n/d). Male pretensions to monopolize power in the home were backed up by institutions such as the church, schools and national and community organizations, whose simple, repetitive and unanimous messages implicitly assumed the supremacy of men in the power dimension.

Both urbanization and the modernization of the structures of production, as parallel processes of secularization which brought with them greater emphasis on individualism and personal realization and extended rational examination to areas traditionally considered as sacred, helped to undermine the cultural and institutional foundations of the concept of power centered on the male. The notable expansion of the mass media and the consequent opening up to multiple, divergent messages helped in this task. The fissures opened up by these processes were widened through the action of movements holding that, both for ethical reasons and for instrumental reasons connected with better adaptation of society to technological, social and demographic changes, it was necessary to progress towards greater equality of the sexes.

Various factors are facilitating the penetration of these ideas into the lower-class urban strata (or, at

least, those parts of these ideas which have to do with the questioning of the concentration of family power in the male). First of all, there are the factors already referred to concerning the gulf between the ideal patterns of behaviour defined by traditional family models and the real behaviour of fathers and husbands. Secondly, there are the degrees of freedom and independence which women are winning as they increase their participation in the labour force (generally through the force of economic circumstances), their educational levels, their knowledge of birth control procedures, access to domestic technology, and the availability of institutional options for looking after the children. And finally, there is the decline in the social control exercised by traditional institutions—especially the Church—, whose fields of action and messages are increasingly restricted, while more and more areas of human activity are subjected to rational analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Although no results of specific studies in this respect are available, the very limited available information gives grounds for assuming that the combined effect of these factors goes a long way towards explaining the inferior image that children have of their fathers compared with that of their mothers, and the similar image that women have of their husbands, as may be judged from some studies made in the region (Cassá, 1989; Gissi, 1978; Raczynski and Serrano, 1985).

## V

### **The weakening of the authority of fathers and husbands and its consequences**

Caught as they are between crushing material constraints, changes in patterns of values which threaten their traditional role, and scanty possibilities—further reduced by the crisis—of finding any legitimate ways of satisfying the needs and aspirations of their family members, a substantial proportion of men in the lower-class urban strata find themselves unable to play their roles of husband and father. This anomic situation gives rise to a vicious circle in which their failure to fulfil their obligations weakens their authority within the family, and this in turn helps to hasten their abandonment of those obligations.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed analysis of the content of the encyclicals, declarations, speeches and messages of ecclesiastical leaders and of Argentine publications connected with the Church led Wainerman (1981, p. 92) to reach the following conclusion: "on the basis of an image that the two sexes are essentially different and that, since their physical and psychological differences are of a biological origin, governed by divine will, and therefore cannot be changed in any way, it is asserted that women are the depositaries of all that is affective and of the heart: weak vessels whose area of action is naturally and obligatorily the domestic and private sphere, while men are the depositaries of authority and judgement: strong beings who can and should rule over public matters; the man is the lord and master of the home and the sole provider of its economic needs, while the woman is his meek and obedient helpmate".



In order to understand what this erosion of their authority means for fathers and husbands in the lower-class urban strata, it must be appreciated how important it is for them to enjoy the respect and recognition of their family members as a way of making up for their general situation of subordination and marginality in the economy and in society. In view of the lack of other sources of self-esteem, the loss of family authority deeply affects a man's appraisal of his own worth. The hypothesis I am putting forward is that the supposedly irresponsible behaviour of men in the lower strata with regard to their function in the process of social reproduction is essentially a response to the structurally conditioned devaluation of their own image.

What are the most significant consequences of these processes for the family and society? The first and most obvious of them is the disorganization of the family. Either because the family is never set up properly at all, because it is set up but not consolidated, or because the conjugal nucleus is dissolved, the failure of a man to fulfil his obligations as husband and father breaks the pattern of social roles which defines the family as an institution.<sup>6</sup> This first consequence gives rise to a second one: the strengthening of the mechanisms of reproduction of poverty and social inequality. Studies on the impact of forms of formation of the family on the biological and intellectual development of the children in

lower-class strata show that the disorganization of families is a major factor in the transmission of situations of high social vulnerability from one generation to the next; consequently, its effects help to determine the more or less equitable character of social structures (ECLAC, 1991; Buvinic, Valenzuela, Molina and González, 1991; Astone and McLanahan, 1991, pp. 309-320). A third consequence, which has been very little explored but which applies in particular to cases where the father is present, is connected with at least two contents of the socialization of the children. On the one hand, the children learn to live and adjust their behaviour to the impositions of a form of power which has no legitimacy and is divorced from morality, and they lack family models which would enable them to internalize a concept of power linked with responsibilities and duties. On the other hand, for the reasons set forth earlier, their environment offers them few examples in which effort is associated with achievement. As they internalize a notion of power which is divorced from morality and a notion of achievement which is not linked to effort, the children become carriers of expectations and patterns of conduct which favour the reproduction in the future of the situations which prevailed in their families of origin. Finally, the weakening or abandonment of the father's role makes society less capable of regulating important areas of the behaviour of the new generations.

## VI

### Conclusions

Both because of the consequences of family disorganization on the well-being of the persons involved and its effects on the social structure, one of the main problems that must be tackled by family policies is to find a way of furthering the formation and consolidation of units which can fulfil socialization functions

<sup>6</sup>The failure to set up a family, linked with the existence of unmarried mothers, is seen as a form of disorganization not only because the potential father and husband does not meet social expectations, but also because it reflects the weakness of the socialization and social control mechanisms of the respective families of origin (see Goode, 1961). I am not aware of any studies in the region which have explored the characteristics of the parents of unmarried mothers, other than the scanty information that may be provided by the mothers themselves (see Buvinic, Valenzuela, Molina and González, 1991).

in keeping with the demands of present-day societies. The most serious shortcomings in this respect are undoubtedly concentrated in the lower-class urban strata.

The foregoing considerations highlight the need to study in greater depth the values, attitudes and expectations of men in those strata and the conditions which cause them to be reluctant to assume the obligations of husband and father. Both academics and those responsible for the relevant policies must be alert to the bias observed in the region, where there is a tendency to view the problems of the family on the basis of information collected in studies centered specifically on the situation of women.

The policies which have been most highly developed in this field are those aimed at solving situations of intra-family breakup or conflict or at making up for the absence of the father. I wish to stress here the need to go to the root of the problem rather than merely dealing with its consequences. In order to deal successfully with the formation and consolidation of families it is necessary not only to create conditions which facilitate access to material resources, but also, in view of the magnitude of the generation gap, to give children and young people solid guidelines with regard to the roles of husband and father which are in keeping with the real conditions in which the family must live. These guidelines should foster the transmission of images that support

a more equitable distribution of intra-family decision-making power and less differentiation of tasks on the basis of sex, promoting more flexible attitudes among men with regard to their role in the household. In this way it would be possible to stimulate the presence of the man, strengthening his role in the family and at the same time correcting his expectations with regard to the distribution of power and division of labour in the home. Two of the most noteworthy advances made in this direction in recent decades are perhaps the progress made in eliminating segmentation by sex in enrolment in educational establishments and the equalization of the educational achievements of men and women on a level markedly higher than that of previous generations.

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