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SITUATION AND PROSPECTS OF THE FAMILY IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Summary	v
I. URBANIZATION, MODERNIZATION AND THE FAMILY	1
II. SOME DETERMINING FACTORS OF WOMEN'S GREATER INDEPENDENCE	3
III. SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN	5
1. Demographic transition	5
2. Poverty and income distribution	5
3. The speed of change	7
4. Changes in the State's role	7
5. Cultural factors	8
IV. THE SOCIALIZATION CAPACITY OF DIFFERENT FAMILY STRUCTURES	9
V. NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR THE FORMATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF A FAMILY	15
1. Minimal material conditions for family consolidation	15
2. Access to support services	16
3. Opportunities for social mobility	16
4. Democratization of intra-family relations	17
VI. SOME THOUGHTS ON FAMILY POLICY	19
Notes	20

Summary

The evolution of the family in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean reflects a number of world-wide trends: smaller family size; growing family instability, as shown by higher divorce and separation rates; an increase in premarital sexual relations; a decline in the sexual double standard; and the proliferation of families in which both spouses have jobs, of single-parent families, of families where the partners have not formalized their union and of cases of successive unions that translate into a variety of child-rearing arrangements.

This document examines how these trends, also seen in countries that have long been industrialized, take on a different meaning in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, in light of five specific characteristics of the region: the current stage of demographic transition; the influence of poverty and uneven income distribution; the speed of socio-cultural changes; the shifting role of the State; and the importance of national idiosyncracies, which are largely a product of the mixture of aboriginal, European and African cultures and institutions such as slavery.

Lastly, the paper offers some general guidelines for strengthening the family's capacity to link and implement life plans or agendas, which are considered indispensable for enabling families to act as effective agents of development.

I. URBANIZATION, MODERNIZATION AND THE FAMILY

The evolution of the family in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean reflects a number of world-wide trends: smaller family size; growing family instability, as shown by higher divorce and separation rates; an increase in premarital sexual relations; the decline of the sexual double standard; and the proliferation of families in which both spouses have jobs, of single-parent families, of families where the partners have not formalized their union and of cases of successive unions that translate into a variety of legal, economic and child-rearing arrangements.

Although the intensity and features of these phenomena vary from one country to another, they show similar tendencies in all the countries, implying that they reflect the overall process of development in Western societies. The multiple facets of this process are inextricably intertwined with changes in the structure and functions of the family. One of the most important of these is the change in the degree of autonomy of the union vis-à-vis their social environment, and of one partner in relation to the other. This autonomy has increased along with the urbanization and modernization of societies. Urbanization has enhanced the family's autonomy with respect to its social surroundings in two principal ways. On the one hand, it has widened the gap between the public and private spheres, thus undermining social control mechanisms and reducing the pressure on individuals to adjust their behaviour to social norms. On the other, social expectations concerning the formation and organization of the family have become more flexible. The various issues that have arisen with regard to the family's diversity need only be mentioned to illustrate their significance: the secularization of marriage, the family's dissociation from marriage, the dissociation between the roles of husband and father, the reversal of the sequence of marriage and childbearing, etc. In fact, in some countries the idea of progress tends to be linked to greater tolerance of the diversity of family structures, which is perceived as reflecting greater pluralism and broader opportunities for choice, freedom and personal fulfilment. The combination of these processes has reinforced the trend towards family privacy and autonomy and the feeling that the stability of unions should depend more on the quality of the relationship than on factors external to the couple.

Modernization is characterized by a growing differentiation and specialization of institutions. In the case of the family, it has translated into a progressive concentration on affective functions, with traditional instrumental functions being absorbed by other institutions. As a result of this process, ties of mutual dependence among family members have weakened, and their interpersonal relations have changed.¹

The growing economic independence of women has widened their margin of negotiation with regard to domestic rights and responsibilities. Couples have had to adapt to a more symmetrical relationship than was common in the past. The stability of these relationships has come to depend more on compatibility between life plans and the similarity of expectations concerning each partner's role than on adherence to traditional family models. The relative emotional cost of a split between the partners is higher in the new models of family organization.

In sum, the formation and dynamics of relationships between partners have come to depend less on social norms; women have gained independence from men; and the meaning of male-female relationships has changed.

II. SOME DETERMINING FACTORS OF WOMEN'S GREATER INDEPENDENCE

Undoubtedly, the current changes in family life revolve around the evolution of the status of women. Regardless of what type of union is formed, its viability and stability hinge on the progressive broadening of women's opportunities for participation in public life and the spread of values that question the traditional division of labour within the family. A brief look at some of the most important structural roots of these processes is therefore in order.

Demographic and technological factors and changes in occupational, educational and service structures helped to broaden women's opportunities for participation in public life. In the demographic sphere, lower fertility, longer life expectancy and the concentration of reproduction in the initial phases of conjugal union enabled women to prolong the period during which they had no reproductive responsibilities. Consequently, women began to have more time for work outside the home. This increase in women's free time was boosted, on the one hand, by rapid advances in domestic technology that cut down considerably on the time required for household chores, and, on the other, by the expansion of social services related to the care or education of children.

At the same time, the notable increase in women's levels of education enabled them to take advantage of the new employment opportunities in the service and information sectors which opened up with the expansion of "post-industrial" economies. This situation facilitated women's entry into the labour market and raised the opportunity costs of early marriage, pregnancy and limitation to purely domestic labour. Likewise, the gradual consolidation of family consumption patterns which many one-income households could not afford encouraged more women to participate in the economy.

In the area of values, there arose two possible motives for questioning traditional standards. First, it became evident that the requirements of traditional family organization contradicted the opportunities and independence which the new situation offered women, so that the idea of a more equitable definition of men's and women's roles within the family became more attractive. Second, a new system of values, closely linked to the dominant trends in the development of Western capitalism, began to emphasize personal fulfilment, authenticity and individualism, in clear opposition to the requirements of female dependence implicit in patriarchal models.

Lastly, women's personal expectations and plans underwent a profound change owing to technological progress and the dissemination of knowledge about contraception, which gave them control over their fertility and, ultimately, the ability to dissociate sexual activity from reproduction.

III. SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In most Western countries, the aforementioned trends went hand in hand with the processes of urbanization and modernization. However, in Latin America and the Caribbean, they took on certain specific features owing to the factors analysed below.

1. Demographic transition

The Latin American and Caribbean region has a very young population. Around 1990, an estimated 19.6% of Europeans and 21.4% of North Americans were under the age of 14, while that proportion was as high as 35.8% in Latin America and the Caribbean.² In fact, children make up the region's largest age group. This means that families in the process of expansion are more numerically significant than in other regions; their composition, needs and functions must therefore be taken into account.

Whereas in Europe, the population age structure and the decline in fertility to less than replacement levels in many countries have led to an emphasis on the family functions of emotional support for adults and reproduction, the demographic features of Latin America and the Caribbean have shifted priority to functions relating to the socialization of new generations. Indeed, the great challenge of training human resources posed by the modernization of the region's economies makes the family's socialization capacity, and particularly its effectiveness in complementing the role of the schools, a necessity for development. This need is accentuated by the poor quality of the instruction provided by educational systems and their scant capacity to compensate for inadequate family socialization.

In recognizing the importance of these functions, the fact that the countries of the region are in different stages of demographic transition should not be ignored. In some countries, the greatest demographic pressure is exerted by young people seeking to enter the labour market, while in a few others, a trend towards population ageing is becoming a significant factor. Countries whose demographic transition is well advanced are taking a growing interest in seeking social mechanisms to ensure the elderly population's access to services and material resources, considering that during the 1980s, many national social security systems lost much of their capacity to provide the elderly with their own autonomous means of subsistence.

2. Poverty and income distribution

Today, in the early 1990s, about 44% of Latin America's population is living in poverty, mostly in urban areas. Since poor households have more children than other households, over half of the population under 14 is in this situation. At the same time, the region has the world's highest indexes of household income concentration. Although there are no solid grounds for predicting how the restructuring and adjustment

policies being implemented in the region will affect poverty and income distribution, the situation in most of the countries still shows no signs of improving in the near future.

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of poverty in contemporary society is its occurrence in the midst of widely-disseminated images of opulence and conspicuous consumption, which set up a dramatic contrast between poverty and increasingly high expectations and, moreover, sharpen the impression that available material resources are insufficient for forming a family.³

Poverty affects the formation, structure and functions of families. Young people in poor sectors, especially males, are more reluctant than other young people to formalize a union and take on long-term responsibilities, since they have only to look at their immediate surroundings to realize that making this type of commitment can drastically reduce their chances of fulfilling their ambitions and overcoming poverty. In many countries, the proportion of families headed by teenage mothers is growing,⁴ apparently as a result of the combination of weaker social control of young women's sexual behaviour, lack of information on pregnancy prevention and the attraction of romantic love as a source of gratification and an escape route from a basically frustrating environment.

With respect to family structure, the stability of family relations is subject to more tensions in poor sectors than in other socio-economic strata, owing to a number of factors. First, the roles of the various family members often undergo changes that do not conform to the family's aspirations, but rather to social forces, especially those of the market, over which the poor have little control. For example, the father's unemployment and migration in search of work usually place greater economic responsibility on the wife and mother, and in some cases on children and young people. Second, consensual unions are more common among the poor. They are less stable than legal unions and generally are not based on a consolidated life plan or agenda for the family, judging *inter alia* from the results of studies showing that in low-income populations, women in consensual unions often wish to formalize the relationship, while men resist taking this step. Third, the stability of family structures is affected by models of patriarchal domination that clash with the growing trend towards more egalitarian participation by men and women in social, economic and political life.

The socialization capacity of families is also directly and indirectly affected by their socio-economic situation. The scarcity of means, the inevitable concentration on problems of daily subsistence, inadequate housing and overcrowding have a direct impact on children's nutrition, health and emotional and cognitive maturity, and on the family's capacity to complement the education imparted in the school system or even to keep children in the home, as shown by the phenomenon of street children in many cities of the region. With respect to the indirect effects of these factors, the instability of poor families and, particularly, the absence or replacement of the father figure, limit their socialization capacity still further.

Paradoxically, the smooth functioning and stability of the family are more important for the poor than for other sectors, since their more limited access to health services, care of the elderly, education and other services makes it incumbent on the family to fulfil these functions. Moreover, it is through the family that individuals are integrated into networks of mutual assistance based on links such as kinship, proximity and geographical or ethnic origin; these networks can play a very important role in the subsistence strategies of the poor.

3. The speed of change

In countries where industrialization began early, family structure evolved gradually over the course of a century, whereas in most Latin American and Caribbean countries this process was compressed into only a few decades. In 1950, the region's population was still predominantly rural and the most common family model combined production, consumption and reproduction activities. Between 1950 and 1970, the cities of the region grew rapidly as a result of mass migration from rural to urban areas. Encouraged by the State and the church, the mass communications media idealized the breadwinner system (the father as provider, the mother as home-maker). The fact that most families believed in this ideal did not prevent, in practice, a progressive increase in married women's participation in the labour market. That trend gathered momentum in the 1980s, undoubtedly in response to the economic crisis and the consequent deterioration of living conditions. An ECLAC study in Uruguay in 1984 and 1986 showed that the percentage of urban families living below the poverty line might have risen considerably in that period had women not contributed to household income.

These rapid social changes had destabilizing effects at both the personal and institutional levels. For individuals, the gradual loss of validity of the traditional frame of reference as a guide to the behaviour required for family members to adapt to the new circumstances became a major source of normative conflict and psychological tension. At the institutional level, the family's growing inability to fulfil its traditional functions was not sufficiently offset by the establishment of services designed to lighten the burden of family obligations.

These processes shifted the balance of power within families and, particularly, called into question the legitimacy of the model that vested authority in the role of the husband/father. Traditionally, this authority had been grounded primarily in men's fulfilment of obligations as the family's main provider (or sole provider, as in the breadwinner system), as leader of a collective enterprise, as possessor and transmitter of the abilities and skills required for male children to enter the labour market, and as mediator with the outside world, especially the State bureaucracy. Men are reluctantly retreating from the position which all of these aspects of their traditional role had given them, and the legitimacy of their demand for power within the family is being undermined in the process.⁵ Moreover, the redefinition of family members' roles is a slow and difficult process, especially since clearly defined alternative models with strong collective support have yet to emerge.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that very few studies have been conducted on the change in men's role within the family and its influence on their attitudes towards the formation of families, domestic conflicts and other aspects of social life. The wealth of research on women carried out in recent decades is of course a valuable source of information on men. However, to understand the family's process of change, it is necessary to redress this imbalance, especially since many male attitudes are acknowledged to play an important role in generating the tensions that trigger changes in family structure.

4. Changes in the State's role

In response to the economic crisis, the region's Governments implemented public spending cuts that seriously curtailed the provision of education, health, social security and housing services. Some analysts see this process as a drastic change in the relationship between the State and society and as a reversal of the trend observed in previous decades, when an embryonic "welfare state" seemed to be emerging. Consequently, large sectors of the population had to set out to procure services to which they had begun

to consider themselves entitled as citizens, especially in the Southern Cone countries. Families began to take on more responsibility so as to compensate in part for the reduction in public services, and eventually played a crucial role. This represented an additional burden, especially for families that were mobilizing and pooling their resources in an effort to protect their members who were facing a slow job market, and to counteract the consequent decrease in family income.⁶

5. Cultural factors

Undoubtedly, the family's reaction to external circumstances also depends on cultural factors and the norms shared by family members. These norms may originate in the history of the subsystem and reflect traditional values, and inhibit, or at least delay, the effects of changes in the conditioning environment. But the cultural sphere has a dynamic of its own, in which changes may speed up or shift direction in response to new opinions or new points of view.⁷

The population of Latin America and the Caribbean comprises a wide variety of ethnic groups, including descendants of the indigenous peoples that populated extensive areas of the territory before the conquest and the groups transported from other parts of the world as slaves. Some elements of these groups' traditional value systems weakened and others became consolidated in the course of their history of discrimination and prejudice, economic exploitation and social and political exclusion. To understand the high rates of illegitimacy and fatherless families in countries where much of the labour force once consisted of slaves, it must be remembered that slaves usually were not allowed to marry and that children were the responsibility of the slaveholder and the mother.⁸ In general, it is difficult to comprehend the various forms of unions, the nature of family conflicts and alternatives for solving them without taking into account the complex identity problems affecting those who have been marginalized and whose options have been severely limited for long periods of time, as well as the norms and the world view that shape the attitudes of communities and kinship networks in this regard towards their members.

In sum, as noted at the beginning of this paper, an initial analysis of indicators of change, models of family formation and levels of stability does not reveal great differences between trends in Latin American countries and those in the most highly developed Western societies. However, a closer examination shows that although the same indicators may be found in both contexts, they reflect phenomena that stem from different causes and have different effects. A brief description has therefore been given of the region's characteristic features and their influence on the family. In a region where over half of all children live in poverty, where most families are still growing, where public services began to shrink long before reaching universal coverage, where there is a marked discrepancy between the requirements of internalized family models and those imposed by the environment, the family's structural weakness has much more serious effects on its members and on the functioning of society than in developed countries. In the latter, the level of well-being and solid institutional support enjoyed by families have placed society in a better position to absorb the effects of debilitated family structure.

IV. THE SOCIALIZATION CAPACITY OF DIFFERENT FAMILY STRUCTURES

Except in parts of the English-speaking Caribbean, the voices of alarm that have been raised in the region to warn against the possible impact of diversified family structures on family members and on the functioning of society still have no adequate empirical basis. The information collected in censuses and household surveys is insufficient for an analysis of this process. In particular, these tools do not investigate second and third marriages and unions, children who do not live with their parents and mothers who live with their children in their parents' home. In more highly developed countries, especially the United States, complex methodologies have been devised for observing the evolution of families over many years. This has made it possible to identify linkages between the different family models and variables such as infant mortality, nutrition levels, performance in school, anti-social conduct among young people, the stability of couples and the probability that families will bear the responsibility of caring for the elderly. To orient the actions of public and private agents interested in creating the conditions families need to carry out functions essential to their members and to society, it is indispensable to clarify the relationship between family structures and functions by carrying out an integrated research programme in the region and by modifying national systems for gathering statistical data.

Meanwhile, information available for some countries of the region after 1980 indicates that the family structures that have spread fastest are those that seem to have weaker socialization capacity, at least with respect to children's performance in school. The socialization capacities of female-headed households, consensual unions and legal marriages can be compared on the basis of research carried out by ECLAC.⁹ Although these categories reflect only one aspect —perhaps not the most important one— of the process of diversification of family structure, their analysis can reveal significant correlations.

Table 1 illustrates changes in the structure of households with children under age 15 between 1980 and 1990 in urban areas of Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela. It appears that throughout this period, consensual unions and female-headed households were concentrated in lower-income strata. The proportion of households in these categories rose from 14% to 19% of all households with children under 15, and from 21% to 26% of all low-income households.

Table 2 shows similar trends in the case of children who reside in these types of households. As a result of this trend, by the end of the past decade about 20% of all children under 15 lived in female-headed nuclear families or households based on consensual unions, while in low-income sectors this proportion reached 25%.

Table 3 presents information on changes in the proportion of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 living in a consensual union, compared to the total number of young people living with a partner. These changes anticipate possible trends in family structure, and in the proportion of children who will be affected by these variations, in the coming decades. The table shows an increase of about

Table 1

URBAN HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN UNDER 15^a

(Percentages)

Household type	1980s			1990s		
	Total	Q1 ^b	Q4 ^c	Total	Q1	Q4
Nuclear family	65.7	67.7	70.1	69.1	68.2	78.2
Female-headed	5.3	8.3	2.5	6.2	8.2	3.7
Consensual union	8.5	12.8	4	12.6	17.7	5.8
Legally constituted union	51.9	46.6	63.6	50.3	42.3	68.7
Other	34.3	32.3	29.9	30.9	31.8	21.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

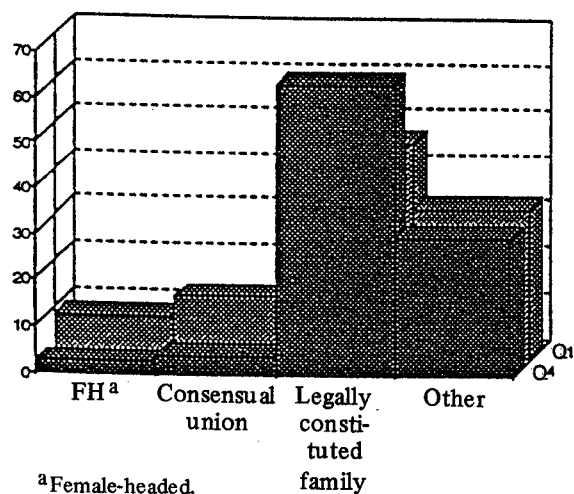
Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division, on the basis of household surveys conducted in Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela.

^a Unweighted averages.

^b Lowest income quartile.

^c Highest income quartile.

SITUATION IN THE 1980s



SITUATION IN THE 1990s

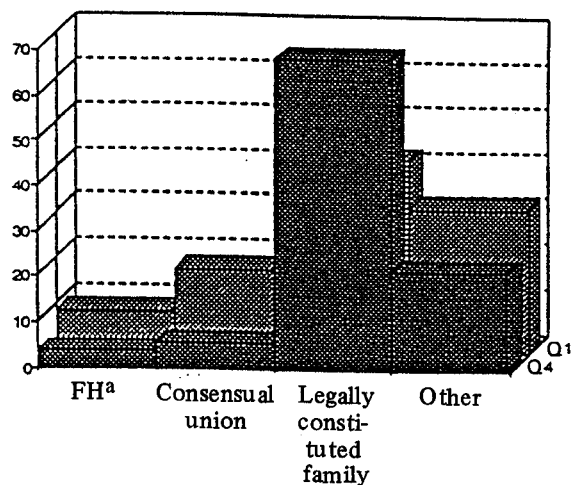


Table 2

CHILDREN UNDER 15 IN URBAN AREAS^a*(Percentages)*

Household type	1980s			1990s		
	Total	Q1 ^b	Q4 ^c	Total	Q1	Q4
Nuclear family	65.0	67.0	69.7	68.3	67.9	78.4
Female-headed	4.7	7	1.9	5.8	7.6	3
Consensual union	9.3	13.5	3.2	13.7	18.3	5.7
Legally constituted union	51.0	56.8	64.6	48.8	42	69.7
Other	35.0	33	30.3	31.7	32.1	21.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division, on the basis of household surveys conducted in Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela.

^a Unweighted averages.

^b Lowest income quartile.

^c Highest income quartile.

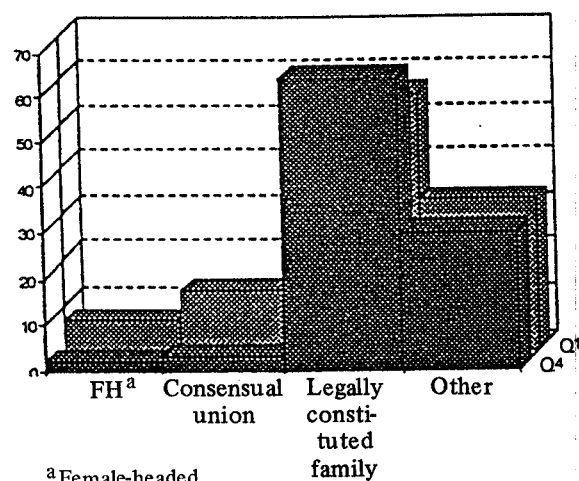
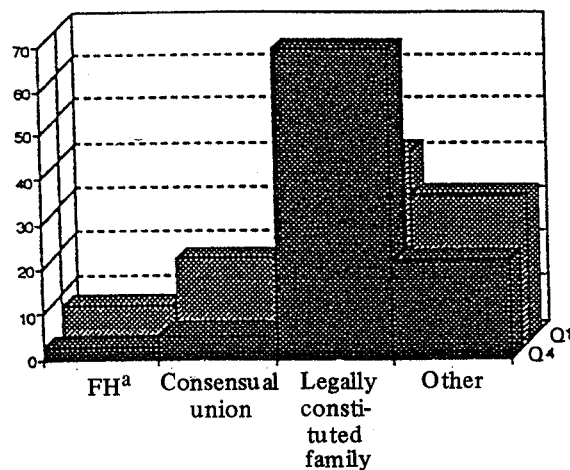
SITUATION IN THE 1980s**SITUATION IN THE 1990s**

Table 3

YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 15-24 IN CONSENSUAL UNIONS IN URBAN AREAS^a*(Percentages)*

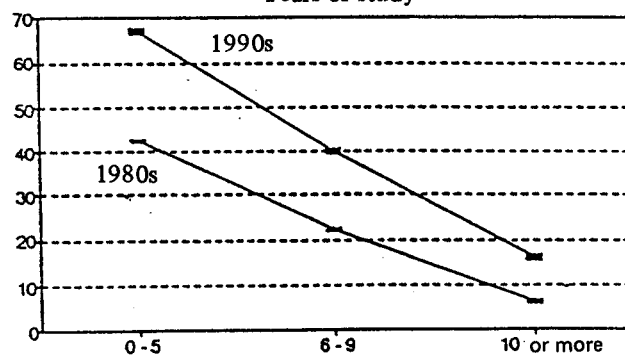
	Years of study			
	Percentage of all unions aged 15 - 24			
	0 - 5	6 - 9	10 or more	Total
1980s	42.5	22	6.2	22.7
1990s	67	40.3	16.1	37.1

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division, on the basis of household surveys conducted in Argentina, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela.

^a Unweighted averages.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONSENSUAL UNIONS

Years of study



63% in the proportion of households made up of young people in a consensual union. This increase is higher than that observed among all nuclear families with children (48%), and foreshadows changes in household structure as increases in the number of consensual unions among the young are reflected in households consisting of older adults.

Moreover, consensual unions are more common among young people with lower levels of education. In the early 1990s, approximately two of every three young people who had not completed primary school were cohabiting in consensual unions, but this occurred only in one of every six young people with 10 or more years of education. Also noteworthy is the marked increase (25 percentage points) in consensual unions among less educated youth. In Europe and the United States these unions are more common among better-educated young people and appear to represent an attempt to test the relationship, which might contribute to a more stable marriage and more responsible parenthood. In the case of Latin American countries, however, most consensual unions seem to respond to a set of circumstances associated with poverty, its reproduction and the lack of mobility horizons, and therefore seem to indicate a reluctance, especially on the part of young men, to make commitments that would involve long-term economic responsibility in a context of ostensible lack of control over the forces that will determine their personal destinies.

Lastly, table 4 shows that, independently of variations in the level of household income, children do better or worse in school depending on the type of relationship that exists between their parents. Children born of parents who live together without having legalized the union have twice as much chance of being left behind in school as children of legally constituted unions, and those who reside in female-headed households are also at an educational disadvantage.

It is worth noting, however, that while the negative association of consensual unions with a child's school performance is present in all countries and income strata, it has been observed that when female heads of household have sufficient income, their children may perform better in school than children of legally constituted marriages.

As indicated above, consensual unions are increasingly common. The few existing studies on the subject indicate that these unions are concentrated among persons at lower socio-economic levels; that they are significantly more unstable than formal marriages;¹⁰ that they reflect the fact that women, who are likely to prefer a legal union, have less bargaining power than men;¹¹ and that households where the parents are living in a consensual union and those headed by women with low incomes have less socialization capacity than legally constituted marriages, and this is reflected in the school performance of the children (see table 4).¹²

Table 4

URBAN CHILDREN AGED 7-14 LEFT BEHIND IN SCHOOL ^a*(Percentages)*

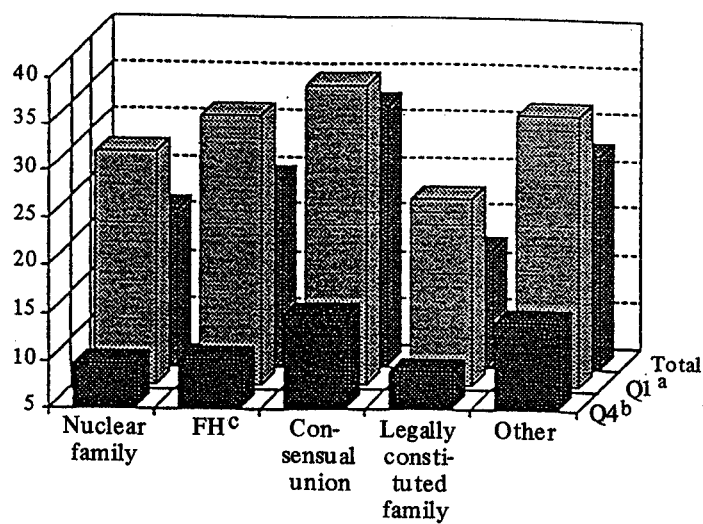
Household type	Total	Q 1 ^b	Q 4 ^c
Nuclear family	21.4	29.6	9.3
Female-headed	24.5	33.5	9.9
Consensual union	32.6	36.9	14.5
Legally constituted union	17.2	24.8	8.8
Other	27.3	33.9	13.8

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division, on the basis of household surveys conducted in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela.

^a Unweighted averages.

^b Lowest income quartile.

^c Highest income quartile.

CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN SCHOOL

^a Lowest income quartile.

^b Highest income quartile.

^c Female-headed.

V. NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR THE FORMATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF A FAMILY

No analytical effort has yet been made to identify the necessary conditions for forming and consolidating family structures which are able to protect the well-being of their members and, in turn, contribute to equitable and democratic development. These functions may be performed by various types of families, independently of their organization, as long as there exists some form of family "agenda".

A family agenda is a plan for a shared life, which sets forth goals and orders priorities for achieving them. The comparative advantage of the family as an institution lies in its primary solidarity. A family agenda potentiates this resource and channels it towards the attainment of collective goals. In addition, solidarity and collective achievements have a synergistic effect; the shared efforts and goal orientation strengthen the familial social fabric. When this fabric is strong, the economic, social and cultural opportunities of each member of the family are maximized; when it is weak, the family lacks the capacity to stimulate its members to make use of existing opportunities or to find and adequately utilize the resources offered by the State or public welfare organizations.

In order for the familial fabric to resist and respond to changes in the socio-cultural and economic environment, family relations must be democratic; otherwise, there can be no dynamic adjustment to the external or internal demands on its members.

The question that must be asked is: what are the main factors that must be taken into account in formulating policies to create favourable conditions for elaborating family agendas with the above-mentioned characteristics? These policies should be built around four pivotal factors: access by families to material resources, availability of basic services, opportunities for social mobility and a democratic family structure.

1. Minimal material conditions for family consolidation

Poverty limits the possibilities of forming a strong, stable family. It is very difficult to formulate and sustain a collective plan and cope with destructive forces when family members are hardly able to determine their own destinies and when the day-to-day struggle for survival absorbs all their energies, especially when poverty occurs in the middle of images of opulence, as in the case of the cities of the region. Such images, which invade most homes through the television screen, mould the aspirations of children and youth, and make it a much more arduous and complex task to adapt their desires to the family's income. The discrepancy between the aspirations fomented by these messages and the nuclear family's material means to satisfy them is a constant source of frustration, and weakens the familial fabric.

In addition, the lack of a shared agenda reduces the possibilities of overcoming poverty, since family disintegration and poverty go hand in hand in a downward spiral. Constantly having to cope with difficulties in an attempt to meet basic needs causes family's ability to assemble its own forces and gain some control over external influences. Policies designed to reduce poverty, therefore, must offer access to resources and services and, at the same time, create conditions to allow passive families to become more active thus enabling them to make better use of existing opportunities. It is not realistic to regard poor families as agents of development if measures are not designed to activate their social capacity.

2. Access to support services

The family's ability to develop and put into practice a collective agenda also depends on the type of external support services to which its members have access. These resources include, for example, knowledge to help promote more responsible sexual behaviour—which would allow for better control over the number and spacing of children—or child care facilities, which represent crucially important services for working parents and, in particular, for mothers who are the sole source of support for their households.¹³

3. Opportunities for social mobility

Opportunities for social mobility are another factor in determining whether family agendas are feasible. Open societies create the necessary conditions so that their members can participate in the achievement of concrete objectives, and this generates a positive synergy that stimulates new efforts and the establishment of new goals. Social mobility and the perception that goals are achievable are important incentives in collective efforts to reach them. On the other hand, the lack of incentives can provoke reactions of despair, fatalism and "existential gloom".¹⁴

The perception of opportunities for social mobility is based on a comparison between the permeability of the social structure and the type of goals which individuals and families set for themselves. The experience of the 1980s was especially dramatic in the region, since while avenues of social mobility were being closed, the mass media kept sending out messages that stimulated the desire for consumption in all social classes. At the same time, the unevenness in the quality of education available to children and youth of different social strata became more marked. In view of the growing recognition of the contribution of human resources to development, the degree of permeability of a society is increasingly defined by the fact that all its members have access to the codes of modernity, independently of their social or ethnic origin. Thus, the existence of an equitable education system, i.e., one that is based on the recognition of the different socialization capacities of the various social strata and that concentrates its resources where these capacities are weakest, can be of considerable help in stimulating or reinforcing family agendas. Even in the poorest strata of society, the expectation that their offspring may be able to achieve a better standard of living encourages parent to try harder to make that future possible.

4. Democratization of intra-family relations

One of the grounds for the consolidation of family agendas is the democratization of domestic relations. This is because the stability of the ties of solidarity among family members largely depends on the congruence between rights and obligations, and on the degree of consideration and respect which family members receive. The relationship between family and society has been markedly affected in recent decades by the incongruences stemming from the persistence of the traditional family model and the gradual incorporation of married women or women living in other types of union into the labour market, a process which accelerated with the economic crisis. These incongruences require a deep-seated modification of gender relations, which should be established on the basis of a more equitable distribution of domestic rights and responsibilities.

Intergenerational relations within families are also being affected by the speed of the changes taking place and, in particular, by the transformation of young people's outlook on life. On the one hand, the growing requirements of the labour market force young people to prolong their studies, and this postpones their entry into the workplace and extends their economic dependence on their parents. On the other hand, the rapidity of change, the prolongation of studies and exposure to the mass media (which compete with families as agents of socialization) help to create youth subcultures which institutionalize the "generation gap". This combination of greater economic dependence and more cultural autonomy is the core of the domestic friction that exists between youth and adults. A democratic family atmosphere, in which mutual rights and obligations are recognized, can keep these tensions from turning into open conflicts.

These considerations suggest the more general topic of the influence of cultural factors on family integration. Although this topic has aroused a great deal of interest, little is known about the relative influence of these factors and the characteristics of the social support mechanisms (legislation, mass media, education system, community or kinship networks) which promote respect for values and norms and punish deviations from them. Any progress made in this field will require more thoroughgoing studies on at least two value-related subjects. First, the values underlying the predominant images of the domestic division of labour, which affect attitudes about relations between the sexes, need to be examined. It seems obvious that the flexibility needed to maintain family cohesion in a constantly changing world, and where opportunities for men and women are increasingly similar, cannot be based on criteria of solidarity whose underlying premise is the gender-based division of labour as an organizing principle of the family. Secondly, more research must be done on how the contradictions between the requirements of family solidarity and the primacy of individualism and personal fulfilment stressed by the consumer society can be resolved.

VI. SOME THOUGHTS ON FAMILY POLICY

In conclusion, some considerations will be presented here on the desirable characteristics of public actions targeted at families. These comments deal with the limits between the private and public domains; whether such measures would contribute to greater family autonomy; and the concrete meaning of "family policy".

Public and private initiatives related to the family will have to move carefully, according to Jelin, along the uncertain, unstable path of tension¹⁵ between respect for privacy and the responsibilities of public agencies. Actually, even more than in other areas of social policy, it would seem preferable in this field to limit direct intervention to extreme cases in which the general well-being of the members of the nuclear family or their human rights are being seriously jeopardized. It is rather a question of creating favourable conditions for families to potentiate and combine their resources and channel them towards the formulation of a collective agenda in which the rights of all those involved are respected.

In this context, family policy makers are interested in clarifying under what conditions social benefits may inhibit, rather than stimulate, the emergence and consolidation of family agendas. There are those who feel that this inhibiting effect may result from policies which channel benefits mainly towards families in danger of falling apart, but which do not incentivate them to overcome their difficulties through joint efforts that would enable each member to associate such efforts with the achievement of better collective well-being.

Strictly speaking, family policy —beyond family-related legislation, which defines the rights of family members and regulates the formation, organization and dissolution of families— could be regarded, on the one hand, as an aspect of overall social policy and a necessary factor in the effectiveness of the latter,¹⁶ and, on the other, as an element of normative orientation that should always be present in designing policies to strengthen the family.

For example, a nutrition policy that takes into account the findings of recent research on the differential allocation of resources within families should recognize that women devote a higher proportion of their income —or the money available to them— to buying food. Thus, in order to maximize the benefits of a nutritional subsidy, it would seem more reasonable to give it to the mother, not the father. This would tend to indicate that a sectoral policy will be more effective if it takes into account family dynamics. A distinction should be drawn, however, between short- and long-term effects. Providing a child with a family environment which is appropriate to his development by strengthening the socialization capacity of the family would be considered a long-term effect. This consideration is important because, where there are no other measures to help correct this situation, a public policy that grants nutritional subsidies to mothers may have the undesirable effect of reinforcing the pattern of differential income allocation by men and women, and may weaken the family structure in the long run. On the other hand, a policy which recognizes the need to strengthen the social capacity of the family may

promote a better nutritional level in the children and, at the same time, help the parents to negotiate in a more democratic way how family income will be spent.

Policies to raise the productivity of family micro-businesses meet the dual objective of augmenting the effectiveness of sectoral policies and strengthening family structures, to the extent that, as a result of the functioning of such enterprises, family members learn to associate the attainment of economic goals with the joining together of individual efforts in solidarity, these enterprises may be a mechanism for bolstering family agendas, through the achievement of collective economic goals which largely depend on the effective combination of individual efforts. Social policies linked to employment (child-care centres, parental leave, family allowances, etc.) should take into account the potential effect on the division of domestic tasks between men and women as an organizing principle of the family. The same would be true of educational, housing, health and social security policies and those dealing with the mass media. In any case, what is important is to recognize that all measures designed to raise the quality of life should be channelled through the family, and that their effectiveness depends on whether they contribute to a workable family agenda that is compatible with the demands which society places on each of its members.

Notes

¹ To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to compare the relative cost of breaking family ties in different systems of family organization. For example, ties between the members of families who own enterprises, such as small farms, workshops or urban trades, are usually very strong, since a rupture would entail the destruction of not only the living arrangements, but also the sole or main source of subsistence, of all the members of the family. This instrumental dependence is also very strong in the breadwinner system, in which the husband/father works outside the home while the wife/mother takes care of the children and the household chores. Each partner's role is defined on the basis of obligations in the public and private spheres, which differ according to sex and are mutually related and complementary.

² See United Nations, The Sex and Age Distribution of Population. The 1990 Revision of the United Nations Global Population Estimates and Projections, Population Studies series, No. 122 (ST/ESA/SER.A/122), New York, 1991. United Nations publication, Sales No. E.90.XIII.33.

³ In countries where personal income is highly concentrated, images of opulence usually come from the highest economic strata of those countries; in contrast, as international communications networks expand to countries with middle- and low-income strata, the latter's aspirations are increasingly moulded by lifestyles in the developed countries.

⁴ See Mayra Buvinić and others, "La suerte de las madres adolescentes y sus hijos: un estudio de caso sobre la transmisión de la pobreza en Santiago de Chile" (LC/R.1038), Santiago, Chile, ECLAC, 1991.

⁵ Rubén Kaztman, "Why are men so irresponsible?", CEPAL Review, No. 46 (LC/G.1717-P), Santiago, Chile, April 1992.

⁶ Bryan Roberts, "Household coping strategies and urban poverty in a comparative perspective", Urban Life in Transition, M. Gottdiener and C. Pickvance (eds.), Newbury Park, California, Sage, 1991.

⁷ See Laszlo Cseh-Szombathy, "Modelling the interrelation between macro-society and the family", International Social Science Journal, vol. 42, No. 4, Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1990, p. 447.

⁸ Some authors do not consider this family structure an unhappy legacy of a history of slavery and colonialism; in their view, these circumstances of the past helped to consolidate this model, but were not determining factors. See Errol Miller, Men at Risk, Kingston, Jamaica Publishing House Ltd., 1991, pp. 97-98.

⁹ See ECLAC, Panorama social de América Latina (LC/G.1688), Santiago, Chile, October 1991.

¹⁰ Sonalde Desai, "Family structure and child nutrition in Latin America and West Africa", Population and Development Review, vol. 18, No. 4, December 1992. See also Norsen Goldman, "Dissolution of first unions in Colombia, Panama and Peru", Demography, vol. 18, No. 4, November 1981. Goldman finds that, in Colombia, Panama and Peru, consensual unions are several times more likely to break up than legal marriages (p. 659).

¹¹ Rao Vijayendra and Margaret E. Green, Marital Instability, Inter-spouse Bargaining and their Implication for Fertility in Brazil, 1991, cited in Sonalde Desai, op. cit.

¹² A recent study shows that, independently of their socio-economic level, children living in households where the family head has a consensual union show lower nutritional indicators than children of married parents (Desai, p. 710). The author of the research states that, since men feel that consensual unions are less stable, their commitment to this type of relationship is weaker, and hence they devote less time and money to maintaining the home and caring for the children.

¹³ Several examples of this type of situation are presented in studies done in Brazil and included in A. Fausto and R. Cervini (eds.), O trabalho e a rua: crianças e adolescentes no Brasil urbano dos anos 80, São Paulo, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 1991.

¹⁴ In view of this situation, comparative research should be conducted on the various forms of family integration in environments that offer a number of opportunities for social mobility.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Jelin, "Intrafamily relations in Latin America" (DDR/1), document prepared for the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Meeting Preparatory to the International Year of the Family, Cartagena, Colombia, 9-14 August 1993.

¹⁶ Carlos Eroles, Cuestiones actuales de familia, Buenos Aires, National Commission on Family-related and Population Policies, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, 1989, p. 82.