



# Female-Headed Households and Living Conditions in Latin America

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**Summary.** — This study investigates the rise in female headship in Latin America and its relationship with changing living arrangements and household living conditions. Understanding the family situation of the household head is essential in assessing living conditions in the region of Latin America. We answer two main questions: first, how have the increase of union instability influenced trends in female headship? Second, are female-headed households in poorer living conditions than male-headed households? We use Integrated Public Use Microdata Series-International (IPUMS-I) census microdata for 14 Latin American countries, focusing on women aged 35 and 44 from 1970 to the present day. Our study finds that in most countries, women are increasingly likely to head households regardless of union status. The union status, more so than the sex of the household head, is more telling of the living conditions of the household. Female householders are, in fact, less likely to reside in materially poor households after controlling for union status (e.g., single parenthood, divorce, cohabitation) in many countries. Our results highlight the nuance of family situations and female empowerment leading to headship. Policy makers should review differences in rights and entitlement between marital and non-marital couples, upward mobility and opportunities for women, and develop strategies that alleviate single earner households.  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The number of households headed by women in Latin America has increased dramatically over the last four decades. Historically, these households consisted of lone women raising children without the support of their absent fathers due to high instability of unions, (De Vos, 1987; Lavrin, 1989; Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007; Villarreal & Shin, 2008) and, as a result, were associated with the feminization of poverty (Arias & Palloni, 1999; Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Chant, 2007; Gimenez, 1987; Kimenyi & Mbaku, 1995; Marcoux, 1998; Pearce, 1978). In this paper we investigate, first, how family changes—including the rise in cohabitation, divorce and separation, non-marital childbearing, and lone motherhood—have affected recent trends in female headship and, second, whether the living conditions of female-headed households differ significantly from those of male-headed households, and the family circumstances in which female-headed households are more likely to experience worse or better living conditions than male-headed households.

Recent research has theoretically and empirically challenged the linkage between female headship and poverty as well as widening public debate on the subject by questioning both the concept of “feminization” (Chant, 1997, 2003; Medeiros & Costa, 2008) and measurement of poverty (Chant, 2003, 2007; Medeiros & Costa, 2008; Moser, 2010; Quisumbing, Haddad, & Peña, 2001). We aim to contribute to the literature by examining differences in material living conditions between male- and female-headed households. We have taken a large-scale, quantitative perspective and used census microdata samples from 14 Latin American countries, focusing on the family circumstances of the household head.

The paper is organized into five sections. Second, we provide a summary overview of salient characteristics of Latin American family systems and general changes over the last four decades in order to provide a basis for our account of the relationship between female-headed households and the feminization of poverty in Latin America. Third, we present the data and methodology and, in particular, our measurement of living conditions. Fourth, we show the results divided into

two subsections: (i) trends in female headship and changes in the union and motherhood status of women, and (ii) the results of logistic regression models in which we examine the link between poor living conditions and female headship. We conclude the paper with a discussion of our findings.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### (a) Female headship and changing patterns in union formation

The presence of female-headed households is an increasingly significant feature of Latin American family systems (Chant, 2003; De Vos, 1987; Lavrin, 1989; Moser, 1993; Villarreal & Shin, 2008). In colonial societies, female headship appeared as a result of the gender power imbalance between male colonizers and female members of indigenous populations. The social norms prohibiting interracial and interethnic marriage and the existence of cohabiting and “visiting unions” contributed to the high levels of female headship (García & Rojas, 2002; Socolow, 2000). These levels varied from country to country due to socio-ethnic diversity and the processes of acculturation in each case. Historically speaking, female headship was predominantly a Caribbean and Central American phenomenon (Massiah, 1983) and was far less prevalent in countries with large inflows of European migration (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) and in those where the Catholic marriage was more strongly institutionalized (Quilodrán, 1999).

Several researchers have suggested that the instability of unions, especially in the form of cohabitation, is one of the main historical causes for female headship in Latin America. Marriage and cohabitation have long coexisted in the history of Latin America (Castro & Juárez, 1995; Stromquist, 1998). Cohabitation was regarded as the “marriage” of the most disadvantaged social groups, whereas marriage was prevalent among the social elite (Castro & Juárez, 1995; Socolow,

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2000; Stromquist, 1998). Latin American societies have witnessed a dramatic expansion of cohabitation and rapid deinstitutionalization of marriage over the last three decades. Cohabitation has become the norm among young women in unions in such countries as Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, and has extended into all layers of society, including the most educated populations (Esteve, García-Román, & Lesthaeghe, 2012). Together with the expansion of cohabitation, the percentage of children born out of wedlock and the number of single mothers have increased in the three decades from 1970 to 2000 (Esteve *et al.*, 2012; Laplante, Castro-Martín, Cortina, & Martín-García, 2015). Some authors have connected the overall family changes described here to the onset of the Second Demographic Transition in Latin America (Covre-Sussai, Meuleman, Botterman, & Matthijs, 2015; Esteve *et al.*, 2012; Lesthaeghe, 2014), which may have implications for changes in the context and nature of female headship, as we shall discuss in this paper.

Bearing in mind the above, and given the historical link between female headship, cohabitation and union instability in Latin America, we raise the question of *whether there is a positive relationship between the rise in female headship and recent demographic changes with regard to union formation and dissolution, namely the rise in cohabitation, divorce and separation, non-marital childbearing, and lone motherhood*. If cohabitating women are more likely to have children at young ages and more likely to abandon their unions than married women, the cohabitation boom may have laid the foundations for the increase of female headship.

It is important to note that not all female household heads in Latin America are single mothers in unstable unions, and neither do all single mothers necessarily become the household head. Research has shown that extended households provide shelter to lone mothers. The percentage of young single mothers living in extended households in the early 2000s ranged from 56.8% in Bolivia in 2001 to 81.8% in Chile in 2002 (Esteve *et al.*, 2012), signaling that female headship is not exclusively the result of union instability. It may have transpired from other life events. For example, widowhood is one of the most important causes of female headship among older women. Since we are specifically interested in the effects on female headship of union formation, instability, and dissolution, we have limited the analysis to adult women aged between 35 and 44. At these ages, the percentage of female widows is small, typically below 5%.

Female headship can also be the consequence of separation between wife and husband due to internal or international migration. This situation yielded a non-negligible number of married women heading their households in the absence of the spouse, a category which we identify as *married spouse absent*. In Mexico, for instance, the male-dominated migration to the United States has a direct impact on household structures in the sending communities, as seen by the large presence of married women with the spouse absent. Fortunately, our data allow us to distinguish between married women with and without an absent spouse and to test the importance of this category for the recent increase in female headship. The importance of remittances, family structure, and ties between migrants and relatives living in their countries of origin will have direct consequences on the living conditions of such households (Sana & Massey, 2005).

Selective female internal migration from rural to urban zones in Latin America has also contributed to the increase of female headship in the region (Chant, 2015; Chant & McIlwaine, 2016). Female headship is higher in urban areas

due to women's access to independent housing and higher salaries compared to rural areas, where it even happens that women workers are often unpaid (ECLAC, 2014, p. 179). Moreover, women in urban areas may be less exposed to patriarchal control and live more anonymous lives, which allows them to manage their living arrangements with greater autonomy, although segmentation by sex in the informal economy and access to different urban spaces continue to complicate the relationship between urban prosperity and gender (Chant, 2013). Our analysis therefore accounts for the urban-rural dimension of household headship.

To this point, the discussion pertaining to female headship mostly revolves around women who have lived in union but whose male partners are no longer in the household either due to death, migration or separation. Although this situation accounts for the majority of cases, we cannot ignore the fact that a growing number of partnered women may report that they head the household even in the presence of their male partner and that, increasingly, women who have never lived in union also head households. From the standpoint of female empowerment, women who are unsatisfied with their relationship may have actively sought household headship as a means of taking control over their lives (Chant, 2008, 2009, 2015). The presence of such trends might be a powerful indicator of a more equal gender outlook on family headship.

In this regard, recent family changes in Latin America, such as the delay of union formation, childbearing, the decline of marriage and the rise of solo living echo the demographic experience of western nations in the past few decades. These phenomena have been connected to the arrival of the Second Demographic Transition in Latin America, driven to a large extent by the process of female emancipation (Lesthaeghe, 2014). The increase of female headship may be seen as a trend that is interdependent with shifts in demographic changes and related with the propensity of a woman to marry, have children, divorce, or stay single. Hence the likelihood of a woman being the head of her household and the relationship of this with poverty cannot be discussed without further investigation into her relationship status.

#### (b) Female headship and living conditions

The literature on poverty in Latin America, particularly earlier work, stressed the relationship between female-headed households and the feminization of poverty (Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Pearce, 1978). The paradigm of the feminization of poverty took hold in Latin America during the so-called "lost decade" following the financial crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. This decade, marked by significant social and economic downturns in the region, resulted in declining wages and lower female labor force participation which was a significant factor in heightened familial instability and a surge in internal and external male migration (Loza Torres, Vizcarra Bordi, Lutz Bachère, & Quintanar Guadarrama, 2007; Sana & Massey, 2005). At that time, women had three main disadvantages compared to men: less education and fewer entitlements; lower return for a heavier work load; and more obstacles in socioeconomic mobility (Moghadam, 2005). Additionally, intergenerational transmission of poverty is of particular concern to researchers and policy makers (Alvarado Merino & Lara, 2016; Chant, 2008). Bearing in mind the above, female-headed households became a focal point for social intervention and research, but lack of precision and a paucity of empirical evidence in statements supporting the feminization of poverty gave rise to fervent debate (Alvarado Merino

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