

Is There a Feminization of Poverty in Latin America?

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

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1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

Therefore, despite the limitations we face in terms of data availability and the lack of a consensus on how to define "feminization," empirical research on the issue may help the policymaking process by giving information about the existence or not of an ongoing

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process of feminization of poverty in Latin American countries.

The objective of this paper is twofold, we want to contribute to the debate over the definition of the feminization of poverty, and we also want to examine if this feminization is occurring in Latin America. In order to do this we analyze the feminization of poverty literature and we establish two different definitions of "feminization of poverty," which are used at the country level to search for the empirical evidence of this phenomenon. The countries included in the study are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela.

2. THE CONCEPT OF THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

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

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

Although some studies accepted, at least partially, Pearce's original concepts (Goldberg & Kremen, 1990), part of the subsequent research used a modified version of Pearce's main definition and related "feminization" to "increases in poverty in female headed households in relation to the levels of male headed households" (Northrop, 1990; Peterson, 1987; Pressman, 1988). Other studies adopted a different

approach and defined "feminization" as "increases in poverty among women in relation to poverty among men" (Fuchs, 1986; Wright, 1992). Given the existence of multiple concepts, recent studies are assuming more than one definition. For instance, Dooley (1994) and Davies and Joshi (1998) test the hypothesis of the feminization of poverty simultaneously against the relative rise in poverty among "women," "adult women only," and "female headed households."

In spite of its multiple meanings, the feminization of poverty should not be confused with the existence of higher levels of poverty among women or female headed households. By "higher levels of poverty," we mean a higher incidence, intensity, or severity¹ of poverty at some point in time. The term "feminization" relates to the way poverty changes over time, whereas "higher levels of poverty" (which includes the so called "over-representation") focuses on a view of poverty at a given moment. Feminization is a process; "higher poverty" is a state. Being time-dependent, the first refers to a trend in the evolution of poverty measures while the second is related to the levels of those measures at a single point in time.

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

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

Of course, the definitions of feminization of poverty discussed so far are not exhaustive.

One could go further and define it as an increase of the role that gender discrimination has as a determinant of poverty, which would characterize a feminization of the causes of poverty. For example, a growth of wage discrimination that also intensifies poverty among women and men of all types of families can be understood as a feminization of poverty because it denotes the relation between the biases against women and a rise in poverty. In many cases,² such changes in the causes of poverty will result in one of the types of feminization of poverty discussed above, that is, in relative changes in the poverty levels of women and female headed households.

The two definitions of feminization are based on distinct indicators and what they indicate deserves a remark. Measures of poverty "among female headed households" and "among women" are not indicators of the same phenomena. Both want to capture a gender dimension of poverty but the way they do it is quite distinct. They differ by the unit of analysis and by the population included in each group, and obviously have different meanings.

Poverty among female headed household does not intend to be—and is not—a *proxy* for poverty among women but still is a gender-related problem. Its gender dimension refers to a bias that determines family composition, particularly to the fact that women tend to assume the responsibility for children in the case of dissolution of marital unions and the fact that mortality and age differentials in marriage result in female single-person households. The goal of headship-based indicators is to represent what happens to specific vulnerable groups of women and their families, therefore their unit of analysis is the household and the population considered includes both men and women (and children) living in these households, but excludes women and men living in other household formations.

Indicators of poverty among females, by their turn, have a distinct unit of analysis as they make a complete separation of men and women as individuals. Their goal is to establish a clear-cut division of sex-based categories and for that they may count or not children as a gendered group in their aggregations. However, as poverty is usually measured at the household level (weighted by size) and these individuals will still be living together in their households, interpreting the results is affected by the fact that female poverty is, by construction of the

indicator, intrinsically associated to male poverty and *vice versa*.

As any other indicators, these are tools and as such their appropriateness must be assessed instrumentally, that is, in terms of the purposes they will serve to. They both have weaknesses and of course their weaknesses are a guide to reject the use of one or another. Nevertheless, neither indicator is more or less a gender indicator until the exact meaning of "gender" be defined. The goal here is not to make the case for any of the possible choices but simply to state clearly that these indicators represent gender-related but different phenomena.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

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

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

There is no evidence of a systematic over-representation of women among the poor around the world. Several studies have found a higher incidence of poverty among women or female headed households in some countries, but in many others, this does not occur. Surprisingly, a higher incidence of poverty among female headed households in developing countries is not a common finding. In addition, the relationship between poverty and female headship of households seems not to be direct, as poverty

appears to have a stronger correlation with the presence of children in the family and other characteristics of family members than with the sex of the household head (Baden & Milward, 1997; Chant, 2003; Lipton & Ravallion, 1995; Moghadam, 1997).

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

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

Comparative analyses of several studies concluded that the over-representation of women or female headed households varies from country to country and that there is no clear pattern of relationship between poverty and the headship of the households. Buvinic and Gupta (1997) compared the results of 61 studies and pointed out that 38 of them concluded that there was an over-representation of female headed households among the poor, 15 found some kind of relationship between certain types of female headship and poverty, and eight did

not find any relation. Lampietti and Stalker (2000) analyzed more than a hundred reports and studies and found that only in certain countries the female headed households consistently present worse indicators of poverty, hence the idea that poverty has a "female face" cannot be generalized for the entire world.

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

In addition, most of these studies neglect intra-household inequalities, another important issue in gender studies which aims at measuring the over-representation of women among the poor. The difficulty in obtaining data is a main obstacle to showing intra-household inequalities, but some studies have tried to incorporate such inequalities. Findlay and Wright (1996) simulated an unequal division of income among family members to illustrate how much of the incidence and intensity of poverty in Italy and the United States could be underestimated by the conventional "perfect distribution" assumption. Case and Deaton (2003) describe household expenditures in India and South Africa, showing that in the latter, country differences in household expenditures on health clearly benefit adult men. Haddad and Kanbur (1990) found significantly higher levels of poverty among women in the Southern Philippines when intra-household inequalities were taken into account. Using data from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and South Africa, Quisumbing and Maluccio (2000) concluded that the hypothesis that family members aggregate their income to redistribute it equally does not hold: the personal attributes of the individuals (sex, age, assets, human capital, and others) determine the final allocation among family members, which usually favors men.

As in the case of over-representation, there is no clear evidence in the literature about the occurrence of a feminization of poverty in the world. The pioneer study conducted by Pearce

(1978) found an increase of both women and female headed household members among the American poor between the 1950s and the mid-1970s. Subsequent research (Fuchs, 1986; Goldberg & Kremen, 1990; Northrop, 1990; Peterson, 1987; Pressman, 1988) reached the same conclusions for the 1960s in the United States, but Fuchs (1986) rejects the hypothesis for the years after 1970 and Northrop (1990) and Pressman (1988) also reject it for the 1980s. Peterson (1987) and Goldberg and Kremen (1990) maintain that there was a feminization of poverty in the United States after the 1970s.

Wright (1992) and Davies and Joshi (1998) examined data from the United Kingdom from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s and did not find any feminization of poverty. In Canada, Doo-ley (1994) found a feminization of poverty during 1973–90 when “feminization” was understood as an “increase among female headed households,” but not when the ‘increase among women’ definition was used. Goldberg and Kremen (1990) analyze gender inequalities in Canada, Japan, France, Sweden, the Soviet Union, Poland, and the United States, but show empirical evidence of the feminization of poverty only in the United States. To the best of our knowledge, no analogous research was conducted in other parts of the world; therefore, determining the existence or not of a feminization of poverty in Latin America is a matter of empirical analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

(a) Data

The study was conducted using unit record data (microdata) available from household surveys of Argentina (*Encuesta Permanente de Hogares*, 1992 and 2001), Bolivia (*Encuesta de Hogares-Programa MECOVI*, 1999 and 2002), Brazil (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios*, 1983 and 2003), Chile (*Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional*, 1990 and 2000), Colombia (*Encuesta Nacional de Hogares—Fuerza de Trabajo-Programa MECOVI*, 1995 and 1999), Costa-Rica (*Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples*, 1990 and 2001), Mexico (*Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares*, 1992 and 2002), and Venezuela (*Encuesta de Hogares por Muestreo-Programa MECOVI*, 1995 and 2000). All these surveys were conducted by

national statistical institutes and present national coverage, except for the Argentine one, which is representative only of urban areas.

These countries represent the majority of the population in Latin America. To a certain extent, what happened in terms of the feminization of poverty in the countries studied is representative of other countries in the region, although this would be less valid for Central America, which is under-represented in the study. In spite of this, one must bear in mind that more detailed results, such as poverty levels or growth rates, are country-specific, and therefore, cannot be generalized.

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

The feminization of poverty depends this only on what is “feminization” but also on the definition of “poverty.” In this regard our study is quite limited: although there are several different ways to define poverty (Spicker, 1998), we only look at poverty as income deprivation. This limitation can be of particular importance in the case of gender studies; for instance, a multidimensional approach could indicate that less relative income deprivation of women is being achieved at the cost of more relative time deprivation, that is, two dimensions of poverty with opposite trends. We believe that it is important to highlight this limitation and mention that the data we have do not allow us to proceed differently. At any rate, it should be noted that, if data are available, the methodology used to test the hypothesis of feminization can be applied both to more than one dimension of poverty and to synthetic indexes of multidimensional poverty.

A great effort was made to use the same type of data in each country. Firstly, we could not use consumption expenditure data since this kind of data is not available for all countries, so our measurement of poverty is based on income data. Secondly, to have similar variables for all countries, we decided to use income from all sources and from all household members (including children). This includes income from

any type of paid work, self-employment, pensions, transfers, rents, capital gains, in kind payments (their monetary value as imputed in the survey), and any other sources, for the population aged 10 or more years. All the values refer to gross income (before taxes, deductions, and bonuses) but discounting production expenses, when they apply. We used the total income data exactly as provided in the survey files, with no transformations or adjustments. Although there are methodological differences in the way each survey was conducted in the respective country, no cross-country analyses were conducted in the study; therefore, the lack of full comparability among countries should not be seen as a major problem.

(b) *The measurement of the feminization of poverty*

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

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

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

$$P_{\alpha t'(fp)} - P_{\alpha t'(mp)} < P_{\alpha t'(fp)} - P_{\alpha t'(mp)} \quad (1)$$

(b) an increase in the differential poverty between female and male headed households ("male" headed households includes couple headed households).

$$P_{\alpha t'(fh)} - P_{\alpha t'(mh)} < P_{\alpha t'(fh)} - P_{\alpha t'(mh)}, \quad (2)$$

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

(c) *The poverty line*

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

We proceeded by determining a rather arbitrary value for z in the latest survey available for each country and deflating its nominal value to obtain the line for the initial period. We set the poverty line z as the value of the 40th percentile of the family *per capita* income distribution in the latest survey available (z_t), as in many of the countries studied, the poverty incidence calculated with local absolute poverty lines in the 1990s was a little lower than 40% (UNDP, 1995). Then we used a consumer price index in each country to transform z_t and estimate the absolute value of the poverty line in the initial period (z_t).

The sensitivity analysis was performed using poverty lines that varied from the real values of the cutting points of the 30th to the 50th percentiles of each population in the latest surveys available. Given the stability of results after the sensitivity analysis, we chose to present our conclusions using, for the most part, the intermediate 40th percentile poverty line.

(d) *Intra-household inequalities and equivalence scales*

Although the concept of poverty is frequently related to individual well-being, its measurement often occurs at the household (family)³ level. Poverty is usually measured using household *per capita* income, that is, under the assumption that the income in the household is equally distributed. This assumption can be disputed. There is no reason to believe that the factors that determine gender inequalities in the public sphere will not act within the families. On the contrary, despite the scarcity of data to support such research, there is some evidence that intra-household inequalities in consumption occur at relevant levels (Haddad &

Kanbur, 1990; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2000; Sen, 1997a, 1997b). These differences in consumption can be taken as an indicator of an unequal distribution of the total family income among family members.

Still, the mere existence of intra-household inequalities between men and women does not affect feminization as defined here. This would occur only if these inequalities change during the period of analysis or in case of changes in the demographic composition of the households. A similar rationale would apply if adults and children (or any age groups) or men and women were weighted differently to reflect a differentiation in consumption needs or if economies of scale were considered. Adjusting data with constant equivalence scales would affect the estimates only if relevant demographic changes in the households occur.

There is no data available to determine the actual trends of intra-household inequalities in the eight countries studied. Neither it is possible to establish empirically if any type of equivalence scales in these countries should be changing over time. Any arbitrary assumption about the behavior of either intra-household inequalities in the distribution of incomes or the way different family members should be weighted could bring an undesired bias to the results. For the sake of parsimony and prudence, we assumed both to be constant during the period of our analysis.

Yet, certain changes in household composition would still be a reason for adjusting data with equivalence scales and assumptions about inequalities in the distribution of income within the families. There is, however, little reason to believe that these changes would be enough to alter the patterns of the feminization of poverty. Despite the impressive fall in fertility levels in some Latin American countries during the 1980s, changes in the composition of the households were of smaller proportions during the 1990s (Eclac, 2002).

We tested the hypothesis of the feminization of poverty using a square root equivalence scale (Atkinson, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 1995, p. 18) as well as assuming inequalities in the intra-household distribution by simulating that individuals distribute within their families only a fraction (from 0% to 100%) of the income they receive, this second approach being similar to the one used by Findlay and Wright (1996).

The income adjusted by the equivalence scale is determined by

$$\tilde{y}_{ij} = \frac{1}{n_j^\varepsilon} \sum_{i=1}^{n_j} y_{ij}, \quad (3)$$

where \tilde{y}_{ij} is the adjusted income of the individual i in the household j , y_{ij} is the observed income of each individual of the household, n is the size of the household, and ε is the parameter that represents economies of scale. We set $\varepsilon = 0.5$ (square root) following Atkinson *et al.* (1995, p. 21); $\varepsilon = 1$ corresponds to *per capita* income.

The assumption of different levels of inequality in the distribution of income within the households can be expressed as

$$\hat{y}_{ij} = (1 - \lambda)y_{ij} + \frac{\lambda}{n_j} \sum_{i=1}^{n_j} y_{ij} \quad (4)$$

for $\lambda = (0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, 1)$, where \hat{y}_{ij} is the simulated income an individual i is entitled to, in the household j , y_{ij} is the observed personal income of this individual, λ is the parameter for the proportion of personal income of this individual distributed within the household (varying from zero to one) and n is the size of the household.

Using data from the household surveys, we tested the two feminization hypotheses with three different FGT poverty measures, P0, P1, and P2 (incidence, intensity, and severity of poverty). The outcomes were quite robust with regard to variations in the values of the lines, use of equivalence scales, and assumptions about intra-household inequalities, so we decided to present the main findings in summarized tables, showing the values of the poverty measures in the countries only for the “40th percentile in latest survey” poverty line and using household *per capita* income.

5. RESULTS

There is no relevant difference in the incidence, intensity, or severity of poverty among men and women in the Latin American countries studied (Table A-1, Appendix).⁴ We find differences in the levels of poverty according to the types of families, but not necessarily showing a disadvantage in female headed households. These differences are much more related to the existence of children in the families than to the type of family headship.

The absence of higher levels of poverty does not exclude, however, the possibility of a feminization of poverty in these countries. Table 1

Table 1. *Trends of the feminization of poverty—summary based on Table A-1 (appendix)*

Country (period)	Total poverty trends	Feminization of poverty, according to hypothesis	
		Women–Men	Female–Male headed HH
Argentina (92/01)	Increased	No (except for P2) ^a	Yes
Bolivia (99/02)	Stable	No	No (except for females without children) ^b
Brazil (83/03)	Decreased	No	No
Chile (90/00)	Decreased	No	No
Colombia (95/99)	increased	No	No
Costa Rica (90/01)	Decreased	No	No (except for females with children) ^c
Mexico (92/02)	Decreased	No	Yes
Venezuela (95/00)	Increased	No	No

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

Note: "No" stands for a rejection of the feminization of poverty hypothesis and "Yes" for the opposite. Differences in $P(z)$ disparities lower than 0.01 were rounded to zero.

^a The difference in P2 disparities is 0.01.

^b The exception occurs when comparing female headed HH without children to couple headed HH without children; the difference in P0 disparities reaches 0.10 and the differences in P1 and P2 disparities are less than 0.05.

^c The exception occurs when comparing female headed households with children to male headed households with children; the difference in P0, P1 and P2 disparities reaches at most 0.05.

below presents a summary of the results of the tests of hypothesis about the feminization of poverty for each country using the three measures of poverty calculated for the 40th percentile poverty line using *per capita* income. For the two definitions of the feminization of poverty we examined, most of the results were negative. Nonetheless, a number of these negatives were not completely conclusive, as some measures of poverty seemed to indicate very low levels of the feminization of poverty. Similar

exceptions to the general trends were found in some of the countries where the results were positive.

There is no explicit evidence of a feminization of poverty in the Latin American countries studied. If we ignore minor exceptions, differences below 0.01 and consider the entire set of definitions tested, an increase in the differential poverty between women and men did not occur in any of the countries studied. An increase in the differential poverty among female and male

Table 2. *Changes in the trends of the feminization of poverty (Table 1) after changes in poverty lines, intra-household distribution, and equivalence scale*

Countries	Sensitivity to different poverty lines		Sensitivity to Intra-household inequality	Sensitivity to equivalence scale	
	Women–Men	Female–Male headed HH		Women–Men	Female–Male headed HH
Argentina (92/01)	No	No	No	No	No
Bolivia (99/02)	No	No	No	No	No
Brazil (83/03)	No	No	No	No	No
Chile (90/00)	No	No	No	No	No
Colombia (95/99)	No	No	No	No	No ^a
Costa Rica (90/01)	No	No	No	No	No
Mexico (92/02)	No	No	No	No	No
Venezuela (95/00)	No	No	No	No	No

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

Note: This table refers to results of Table 1; "No" means there was no relevant change in the trends presented in Table 1 and "Yes" stands for the opposite. Differences in $P(z)$ disparities lower than 0.01 were rounded to zero. Sensitivity to intra-household inequalities does not apply to the comparison between types of households.

^a The exceptions are P2 of female with children and P1 and P2 of female without children. But the differences in P1 and P2 disparities are lower or equal to 0.01.

headed households occurred only in Argentina and Mexico. Except for very small differences in few poverty indicators, no feminization of poverty occurred in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, or Venezuela.

The sensitivity analysis points out that the values of the poverty lines, assumptions about intra-household inequalities, and the use of equivalence scales are of secondary importance for the study. As Table 2 shows, these modifications did not result in any substantial alteration in the trends presented in Table 1. Changes occur only in a few of the estimates, and then at an irrelevant level.

Table 1 refers to poverty among women and men of all ages and in all positions in the family. To evaluate the extent to which the results were dependent on the age and position in the family of the persons, we also carried out the analysis using the *per capita* income of the 40th percentile poverty line for a group composed only of heads of the families and their partners. Except for minor variations in Argentina, no relevant differences were found in the results when the analysis was restricted to this more specific population (not shown in tables).

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

6. CONCLUSIONS

It must be recognized that there are definitions of the feminization of poverty coexisting. Indeed, both "feminization" and "poverty" can themselves be concepts with various meanings, which allows many different phenomena to be seen as feminization of poverty. This study departed from the idea that the concept of the feminization of poverty is related to a gender bias in the evolution of poverty over the years. We related the increase in the differences between women and men and between female and male headed households to the feminization of poverty to avoid confusion with the idea

of the so-called over-representation of women or female headed households among the poor. To conduct the study we used two different definitions of feminization, based on inequalities between women and men and between male and female headed households.

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

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

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

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

in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, or Venezuela.

Broadly speaking, these findings are insensitive to variations in the values of the poverty lines, the use of equivalence scales, or assumptions about inequality in the distribution of household income. If we ignore variations of minor importance, we may conclude that there is no clear evidence of a recent and widespread feminization of poverty in the Latin American countries studied. This conclusion is in line with the existing studies carried out in developed countries, but we do not believe it could be straightforwardly generalized to other countries and regions.

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

shows that female poverty is not increasing. Therefore, from a political perspective, the concerns about a feminization of poverty should not overshadow the debate on gender inequality.

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

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

NOTES

1. The incidence of poverty is usually measured by the proportion of the poor in a population, the intensity of poverty, income poverty, the aggregated difference between the observed income of the poor and the poverty line, and the severity of poverty for some combination of the incidence and intensity of poverty and inequality among the poor.

2. If wage discrimination grows, but other determinants of poverty (such as low education) decrease, then it is possible that the measures of poverty do not change

over time, although there is a feminization of the causes of poverty.

3. We use *family* and *household* interchangeably since the large majority of households in Latin America are occupied by a single group of relatives (family).

4. Of course, this picture would change and women would be over-represented among the poor if we assumed that there is no perfect distribution within the households and the individuals retain part of the income they earn.

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APPENDIX 1

See [Table A-1](#).

(See Overleaf)

Table A-1. *Poverty measures for the “40th percentile of per capita income in latest survey” poverty line*

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

Source: Authors' calculations based on national household surveys.

Note: Values rounded.