

Working Women and the Dynamics of Maintaining and Heading Households

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The recent concern over women heads of households has three central aspects: (i) it is a growing phenomenon in Latin America¹; (ii) it is growing primarily among more

impoverished groups²; and (iii) it has displayed a particular vulnerability to situations of economic recession and implementation of economic adjustment programs³. A significant body of literature has emerged, including a focus on the defense of selective policies targeting these households to ameliorate or prevent an increase in the social and economic distance between segments of a single population⁴.

¹ Buvinic and Gupta report that female headship represents from 10% to 40% of households in Third World countries. (Buvinic, M. and Gupta, G. R. Responding to Insecurity in the 1990's: Targeting Women-maintained Families in Developing Countries, Workshop on Insecurity in the 1990's: Gender and Social Policy in an International Perspective, London School of Economics and European Association of Development Institute, London, April 5-6, 1993, p. 1. On this issue see also Castro, M.G. Family, Gender and Work: the Case of Female Heads of Household in Brazil (States of São Paulo and Bahia, 1950-1980) Doctoral thesis, University of Florida, 1989; Carvalho, L. Female-Maintained Household: A Case Study in Brasília, Brazil. Doctoral thesis at Essex University, England, 1996; Chant, S. *Women and Survival in Mexican Cities: Perspectives on Gender, Labour Markets and Low-income Households*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991; Goldani, A. M. How Brazilian Families are Changing and Consequent Demand for Public Policy 1989, mimeo, and Goldani, A.M. As Famílias Brasileiras: Mudanças e Perspectivas. *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 91, 1994, 7-21; Morris, L. Women Without Men, *The British Journal of Sociology*, XXX, (3), 1979, 322-40; Safa, H. I. *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995; SEADE - Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados - Famílias Chefiadas por Mulheres, *Análises Especiais*, PCV, 2, São Paulo, 1994; Varley, A. Housing the Household: Holding the House in G. Johns and P. Ward (eds) *Methodology for Land and Housing Market Analysis*, London: UCL Press, in press, among others.

² Barros, R., Fox, L. and Mendonça, R. Poverty Amongst Female-Headed Households in Brazil, *Texto para Discussão*, n.310, Ipea, 1993; Buvinic, M. The Vulnerability of Households Headed by Women: Policy Questions and Options for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLA, *Serie Mujer y Desarrollo*, n.8, 1991; Gonzales de la Rocha, M. *The Resources of Poverty, Women and Survival in a Mexican City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994; Merrick T. and Schmink M. Households headed by women and poverty in Brazil, in M. Buvinic, M. Lyncette, and W. McGreevey (ed.) op. cit. *Women and Poverty in the Third World*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, 1983, 244-71; Safa (op cit.); Seade (op. cit.).

³ Baden, S. and Milward, K. *Gender and Poverty* IDS, Sussex, Report n.30, 1995; Beneria L., Feldman S. *Unequal Burden: Economic Crisis, Persistent Poverty and Women's Work*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992. Buvinic and Gupta (op. cit.); Lloyd, C. B. and Cage-Brandon, A. Women's Role in Maintaining Households: Family Welfare and Sexual Inequality in Ghana, *Population Studies*, 47, 1993, 115-51; Safa, op. cit.; UNICEF *The Invisible Adjustment*, Vol.2, New York: Americas and Caribbean Regional Office, 1988.

⁴ Buvinic and Gupta op. cit.; Carvalho, L. *Chefia Domiciliar, Mulher e Trabalho*, in *Boletín de Antropología Americana*, Nueva Época/Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, n. 31 (in press); Folbre, *Women on Their Own: Global Patterns of Female Headship*, ICRW/The Population Council, Family Structure, Female Headship and Poverty Project, 1991a, mimeo; Moser, C. *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*, London: Routledge, 1993; Young, K. 'Household Resource Management: the Final Distribution of Benefits', mimeo, 1990.

However, the concept of female headship referred to by the majority of these studies is still expressed as the negation of the prevailing pattern, i.e., that of male headship⁵. Recent significant contributions have succeeded in calling attention to a variety of cases deriving from this concept⁶. However, they should be read with caution. There is a need for a permanent critique of concepts and analytical categories emerging in the international academic debate. In the specific case of the phenomenon of women heads of households, such a critique is crucial, due to the growing

risk of such concepts not being constructed in light of Latin American realities. This article is intended as a contribution to the debate on the definition of female headship. The first part reflects on the concept's conditioning factors and argues that it should be viewed as a historical and social configuration, and that in Brazil this can imply a direct change of perspective from that of marital status to that of responsibility for maintaining the household. The next section, based on empirical data, investigates the internal dynamics of households in relation to the generation, control of, and access to resources and revenues. The last part examines the correlation between female labor as the household's main resource and the configuration of the female provider's authority and independence.

1. Just what is "female headship"?

The concept of female headship has traditionally been applied to situations where families and/or households are headed by women alone, where the male partner is absent, as in the case of widows, single mothers, and divorced or separated women with dependents. It emerges as a non-autonomous category, built on the basis of the negation of what is considered a dominant pattern, that of male headship. Despite the numerous advantages it has brought in enriching debate over the issue of the contemporary family, this concept suffers from several limitations. The initial one refers to the very issue of delineating the unit of analysis: does headship in general refer to the family or the household?⁷.

⁷ The structures and functions of a household can vary significantly from one place to another. Micro-studies tend to take advantage of the opportunity to empirically investigate and therefore "construct" the borders of the household based on the specific material context in which the study is conducted (see Jelin, E. *Family, Household and Gender Relations in Latin America*, London: Unesco/Kegan Paul Ltd, 1991; Schmink, M. *Household Economic Strategies: A Review and a Research Agenda*, *Latin American Research Review*, 19, (3), 87-101, 1984; Yanagisako, S. *Family and Households: The Analysis of Domestic Groups*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 8, 1979. In the current study, households are defined as

⁵ The term 'family headship' has its origins in the laws governing the family in ancient societies and designates a single member, normally the oldest man, with power over other members. Judaic, Islamic, and Roman traditions showed similarities with regard to male prerogatives and the role and place of the woman in relation to the male head. This concept was spread into the civil codes of European nations and later imposed on their colonies through laws, norms and social practices. The two main premises of the concept are (i) that wives, daughters, and mothers are the economic dependents of the male provider and (ii) the existence of a conjugal nucleus as the base of the household. Such ideas proved inadequate, mainly for non-European societies where power and responsibility over the family nucleus or household unit and economic maintenance were not male prerogatives and where family experience and household cohabitation did not necessarily coincide, extrapolating (or simply not happening) through the nuclear conjugal standard. See Chandler, J. *Women Without Husbands*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991; Folbre 1991a op. cit.; Folbre, N. *Mothers on their Own: Policy Issue in Developing Countries*, ICRW/The Population Council, Family Structure, Female Headship and Poverty Project, 1991b, mimeo; Gittins, D. *The Family in Question*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985; and Neder, G. *Ajustando o Foco das Lentes: Um Novo Olhar sobre a Organização das Famílias no Brasil*, in S. M. Kaluostian (org.), *Família Brasileira, a Base de Tudo*, Brasília: Unicef/Cortez Editora, 1994.

⁶ Blumberg, R. L. and Garcia, M. P. *The Political Economy of the Mother-Child Family: A Cross Societal View*, in L. Leñero-Otero (ed.) *Beyond the Nuclear Family Model*, London: Sage Publications, 1977; Folbre, 1991a op. cit.; Moser op. cit.; Varley op. cit.; Young op. cit.; Youssef, N. and Hettler, H. (1983) *Establishing the Economic Condition of Women-headed Households in the Third World: A New Approach*, in M. Buvunic, M. Lyncette and W. McGreevey (ed.) op. cit..

The problem linked immediately to this is that of the defining criterion for headship: headship as authority over the family (or household) nucleus? as economic power deriving from its maintenance? or as both combined? How does one justify the cases of families that fail to fit into this model of conjugality, like mother-children nucleiviving in extended households headed by men? Among such challenges, suffice it to highlight that studies, censuses, and official statistics tend to prefer criteria favoring notions of authority and male dominance. Consequently, in a society with strong patriarchal values, responses by members of households can be affected by suppositions resulting in the identification of the man as the head of the household. The tradition of census surveys, government programs, and everyday social practices has imposed this form, a standard of authority and family economic responsibility that does not always correspond to reality. Even in households where the partner is absent, older sons or another adult member of the family can be considered heads of the household. By opting for such criteria, one produces a category that is both all-encompassing (i.e., covering a variety of situations of households or families under this one condition) and exclusive (since it omits other situations that fail to display this structure). Such a concept ignores that household headship and household itself tend to embody different meanings in different societies⁸.

residential units organized on the basis of kinship and to a lesser degree affinity, where individuals reside and share in all or the main daily survival activities. The concept of household is not opposed to that of family, but it would be a mistake to use them interchangeably. Family is a much broader issue and transcends the physical borders of the residential unit.

⁸ Definitions of household headship and household can vary. Household headship is used in Brazil and Honduras to designate the financial provider of the household. In Venezuela, Chile, and Bolivia, the head of the household is the person recognized as such by the members of the household. The concept of household in turn, in Chile, Paraguay, and Peru, involves the concept of sharing and provision of

In addition, the vision of nuclear conjugal families headed by the male provider is a doubly problematic construct for many societies. Neither families nor households are necessarily conjugal or nuclear, nor are they exclusively headed by male members. Households can be headed by one or more person, men or women, and house one or more families, in addition to relatives and non-relatives. Imposition of the male figure as the main economic member of the household also contributes to a break in or depreciation of economic roles and power traditionally held by women within their family groups in certain societies, often breaking with a pattern of family organization for production, where the woman, not the man, was traditionally the main economic element⁹.

Maintenance of household by the woman is rarely considered reason enough to identify her as the head in cases where the man is present. When the concept is based on male maintenance and not merely his presence, there is also a tendency to assume that the household subsists on one income, while in reality the income of the woman and other household members increasingly constitutes an important survival strategy. Another problem with the concept, still within the borders between family and household, is that the typical

domestic work associated with a residential unit, while in countries like Brazil and Honduras it only recognizes the residential unit. See Buvinic, M. (op. cit.) Folbre (1991a op. cit.) and Varley (op. cit.).

⁹ Similar situations are identified in Latin America by Scott in relations to incentives for the labor market in Lima (see Scott, A. M. *Divisions and Solidarity, Gender Class and Employment in Latin America*, London: Routledge, 1994), by Vance (see Vance, I. *More than bricks and mortar: women's participation in self-help housing in Managua, Nicaragua* in C. Moser e L. Peake (ed.) *Women, Human Settlements and Housing*, London: Tavistock Publication p.139-165, 1987) and Machado, L. *The Problems for Women-headed Households in a Low-income Housing Programme in Brazil*, in C. Moser and L. Peake, op.cit, identifying in Nicaragua and Brazil, respectively, mechanisms of housing policies that excluded women and families headed by women from public housing construction programs and access to housing, among other cases.

definitions of headship tend to underestimate the existence of other forms of family within one single household. The incidence of this type of family organization, where various nuclei and different generations cohabit one household, and more recently the increase in single-parent families, where the mother is present predominantly, and early adolescent pregnancy, when the family expands through the inclusion of new generations, also contribute to the growth of multinuclear families. Urban living conditions, including scarce urban housing, increased migration, and aggravated economic conditions themselves also tend to foster a greater diversity of cohabitation among family groups.

Besides, the very concept of household as an individual residential unit is questionable. While due to its concrete physical characteristics the household is relatively easy to identify and thus becomes the prime unit of study, one cannot overlook other possible approaches, like intra-family connects, ties, or networks and flows of external resources and recurrent and long-term economic connections¹⁰. In dealing with low-income households, multiple, temporary, and combined income and support arrangements often tend to contribute more to subsistence than merely shared housing arrangements, which presuppose, but do always guarantee, equal access to resources by all members of the household.

Despite all these difficulties, the definition of female household headship continues to focus on the absence of a male partner and is considered a variant of the standard Western family type. Some have thus pointed to an "absence of symmetry" in the concept of headship, since households are identified as headed by women when the partner is absent and no other adult

male is present, while households headed by men are all those where there is a man or couple.

Based on these criticisms, numerous typologies have emerged. The most commonly adopted reference for identifying different forms of female household headship is "de jure" or "de facto" headship. Youssef and Hetler (1983) developed the following classification encompassing five categories that can be grouped into three: "de jure" headship, as that defined by the absence of a male partner/spouse, not necessarily implying female maintenance, and "de facto" headship as that defined by female maintenance, not necessarily implying male absence. The third situation is that combining male absence with female maintenance.

Other attempts at breaking down this concept have led to the view of female household headship only among women without partners and who may or may not have responsibility for maintaining the household (Folbre, 1991b op. cit.; Lloyd and Gage-Brandon op. cit.). It is believed that penetration of capitalist development in societies contributes to a growing responsibility by women over maintenance of the household and dependents, due to the transition from a family-based economy to an individually-based one (Blumberg and Garcia op. cit.; Folbre, 1991b op. cit.; Safa op. cit.). Folbre advances in this direction, arguing that the decreasing importance of the productive function centered on the household undermines established patriarchal relations. The economic autonomy of other household members helps decrease the importance of the father as central economic figure. A simultaneous cultural modernization process contributes to a redefinition of responsibilities among household members and results in new changes, particularly in relation to the flow of money in the household¹¹.

¹⁰ See Bruce, J. and Lloyd, C. B., *Finding the Ties that Bind: Beyond Headship and Households*, International Centre for Research on Women, Washington D.C. 1992 and Fonseca, C. *Spouses, Siblings and Sex-linked Bonding: A Look at Kinship Organisation in a Brazilian Slum*, in E. Jelin (ed.), op.cit..

¹¹ It is believed that households maintained by women represent 20% to 30% of households in the

The focus on households maintained by women has also pointed to greater economic vulnerability. It is believed that households maintained by women are more common among poorer segments of society, due to the juxtaposition of such factors as household composition and discrimination against women in the labor market. Household composition tends to affect households maintained by women due to the absence of male income and due to a great number of dependents. As workers, women's presence in the labor market worldwide has been under-represented in better-paid and higher-status activities. In addition, in many societies, there is a narrow range of activities available to women. Women generally suffer discrimination in selection and recruiting in the labor market, since they are seen as complementary or secondary workers, based on the myth of the male provider¹².

Their domestic responsibilities and child care can also force them to seek jobs with greater flexibility, as in the informal or home work sectors, where pay tends to be low

and intermittent. When they are in the formal sector or in industrial environments, empirical evidence demonstrates that work performed by women suffers the influence of gender, resulting in lower remuneration for women as compared to men in similar jobs¹³. Factors like these explain the increased differences in gains and opportunities between women and men from the same social class. However, the challenge in breaking down the classification of female headship should avoid another conceptual trap. It is a matter of delineating the group of women providers, understanding it as a sub-group of women without partners, of "de jure" headship. It is important to expand the concept of women providers and the group of households maintained by women, incorporating married women or those living with partners. Women providers can live alone, or they can maintain a relationship where the husband/partner is present.

Varley (op. cit.), in a recent study, notes that the emphasis on the issue of female headship, whether for studies or anti-poverty intervention, has displayed four basic flaws. First is the phenomenon's growth rate, where the author questions the validity of the statistics presented and contends that the international mean of 30% of households is heavily influenced by the methodology used, ascribing proportional weight to regions with high rates of female headship, as in the case of the Antilles, as with countries with lower rates. The second flaw is that of inadvertently running the risk (upon delineating characteristics) of excluding certain groups of women, particularly older women without children. Third, by opting for women with dependents, it reinforces the notion that woman's natural role is motherhood. Finally, she contends that the emphasis on economic headship

Caribbean and Central America, 27% in Africa, 16% in North America, 15% in South America, and 11.7% in India (Mosses J. C. *Half the World, Half a Chance: An introduction to Gender and Development*, Oxford: Oxfam, 1993). However, Mosses suggests other work dynamics for Latin America and that the increase in households headed by women could be interpreted as an indication that women are begin to free themselves from the repressive and restrictive aspects of male chauvinist culture (p. 46). See also Brydon L. and Chant S. *Women in the Third World: Gender Issues in Rural and Urban Areas*, Adershot: Edward Elgar, 1993; Castro, M. G. *Mujeres Pobres como Jefes de Hogar y como Esposas en el Proceso de Reproducción en Bogotá*. Identidades y Heterogeneidades, Working Paper n° 156, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1987; and Chant, S. *Single-parent Families: Choice or Constraint? The Formation of Female-headed Households in Mexican Shanty Towns*, *Development and Change*, 16, 635-56, London: Sage Publications, 1985.

¹² Humphrey, J. *Gender and Work in the Third World: Sexual Division in Brazilian Industry*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1987; Moore, H. *Feminism and Anthropology*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988; Safa, op. cit., among others.

¹³ Humphrey op. cit.; McIlwaine, C. *Fringes or Frontiers? Export-Oriented Development and the Implications for Gender: The Case of the Philippines*, Conference on Uneven Development in Contemporary Southeast Asia, Leiden, Netherlands, 1995 mimeo; Rubery J. (org.) *Women and Recession*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.

ends up excluding older women who are heads of families, but not necessarily the providers.

After countless considerations and deconstructions of the concept, principally rejecting the criterion of household provision, the author reconstructs it for the purposes of her empirical work, based on criteria of conjugality, once again on male absence. The valid exercise of identifying possible flaws in the economic criterion is not accompanied by a similar exercise for the criterion of "conjugality", which once again becomes the concept's epicenter. The importance of the categories developed by Youssef and Hetler (op. cit.), through empirical work in Africa, called attention to the growing phenomenon of economic sustenance provided by women in their households. Nevertheless, they also failed to make a definitive break with the notion of conjugality in defining household headship. What is thus left is a situation where the phenomenon, whether based on the principle of household authority and power or on economic maintenance, or both, still fails to make an effective break with the Western standard from which it derives: the conjugal, nuclear, male-headed family.

1.1-Female Economic Participation and Household Reproduction

The spread of the debate on families in Brazil, sparked by the resumption of the issue in the late 1970s, has repeatedly pointed to the multiplicity of forms, a correlation between social classes and variety in family structure, different characteristics in rural and urban surroundings, demographic changes, and the transformation or maintenance of gender roles and relations. The debate over the Brazilian family has also diversified through vertical studies that examine and correlate the study of low-income families and household groups with recent changes caused by worsening socioeconomic situation and trends in Brazilian development following the economic restructuring beginning in the 1980s.

Demographic studies suggest that among the more visible changes in the Brazilian family since the 1980s, one notes the growth of the single-parent family. Families headed by women of childbearing age doubled from 5% to 10% from 1960 to 1984, according to Goldani (1989:43, op. cit.). The authors stressed that during the 1970s, widows represented 55.2% of female heads of families, while in 1984 they were only 20.7% of same, while the share of single and separated mothers has grown to 74.5%. The direct consequence of this prevalence of separated women and single mothers is the reduction in the mean age for female heads of families. Although there are no statistical studies on their levels of economic participation, such women are most likely the household providers or have active participation in its maintenance¹⁴. Regardless of the variations between regions and the relevance of specific factors in determining the incidence of female headship, evidence suggests that the recent increase is associated with urbanization and increased poverty¹⁵. In Brazil, the recent growth has been associated with growing poverty levels, since it is occurring

¹⁴ Female headship in Brazil is not a new phenomenon, however. Studies by Kuznesof (1980) showed that in 1802, 44.7% of the urban households were headed by women. This pattern persisted until the 19th century, when it dropped to 39.3% (Kuznesof, E. A. The Role of Female-Headed Households in Brazilian Modernization: São Paulo 1765-1836. *Journal of Social History*, 13, 1980, 589-613). The majority of these households were in the low-income population and made up of single mothers who supported their children and themselves (see Faria, S.C. *História da Família e Demografia Histórica*, in C.F. Cardoso and Vainfas, R. (org.) *Dominios da História*, Rio de Janeiro: EDUF (p243-258). The same is suggested by Besse (in Bruschini, C., *Mulher, Casa e Família: Cotidiano nas Camadas Médias Paulistas*, São Paulo: Fundação Carlos Chagas/Vértice, 1991) for the early 20th century when low-income mothers provided for their households and legally sanctioned marriages were rare.

¹⁵ For Brazil, see Barros, Fox and Mendonça op. cit.; Castro 1989 op. cit.; Merrick and Schmink op. cit.; Seade op. cit. and Telles, V.S. *Cidadania Inexistente: Incivildade e Pobreza. Um Estudo Sobre Trabalho e Família na Grande São Paulo*, Doctoral thesis, Universidade de São Paulo, 1992.

predominantly among low-income groups and in poorer urban regions, such as in the Northeast and metropolitan areas. Goldani (1989, op. cit.) reports that in 1980 one out of two households headed by women was at or below the poverty line, defined as a monthly income of up to one minimum wage, while in 1960, using the same poverty line, only one in four households headed by women were living in this bracket. The same trend is confirmed by the study by Barros, Fox, and Mendonça (op. cit.), comparing three different metropolitan areas, Recife, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre, and demonstrating that households headed by women are not only situated in the poorest groups, but they are also the poorest households within these groups. The same trend is identified by other studies conducted in Brazil (Merrick and Schmink op. cit.; Seade op. cit.) and Latin America¹⁶. Regardless of regional factors, the main reasons for the higher poverty rates in households headed by women are the following: (1) a greater number of dependents, resulting by the low participation of fathers in supporting the children and even their absence from the household and (2) the lower mean wages for the main paid worker in the household, in this case the mother. This difference in mean wages is considerable, due to the relatively higher salaries made by male workers in households headed by men (Barros, Fox, and Mendonça op. cit., and Arriagada, 1990 op. cit., 1994 op. cit.). In addition to the effects of gender discrimination against women in the labor market, specific factors related to female headship, such as constraints in time and mobility imposed on women who head their own households, produce an unfavorable context.

However, the links between poverty and female headship are complex. First, because female headship does not necessarily result from circumstances of

impoverishment. Studies have shown that female headship can increase as the result of social pressures that improve the relative position of women in society (Safa op. cit.; Morris op. cit.), as a result of the woman's decision to live alone after weighing the advantages of living with a companion (Chant, 1985 op. cit.; Castro, 1987 op. cit.), or as the result of a strategy of temporary family migration aimed at optimizing work opportunities (Baden and Milward, 1995 op. cit.). Incidence of female headship can also be affected by traditional kinship network support practices or government aid. Certainly, specific factors from different regions and countries contribute to the emergence of different patterns of female headship, and the association of female headship with lower or higher poverty levels is likely to vary according to such factors. Second, it is debatable whether households headed by men or households with multiple workers really ensure a better living standard for all their members. This aspect is crucial, because despite the opportunities for gains being low for both men and women from a social class with less buying power, there is evidence that a better distribution of resources among members of households headed by women tends to offset the worst effects of poverty and thus reduce the vulnerability of the household group (Chant, 1985 op. cit.; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1994 op. cit.). In fact, expenditures and investments by men and women have been shown to be differentiated and linked to different priorities within the household (Dwyer and Bruce op. cit.), with a better distribution and more democratic access to resources by all members in households maintained by women.

Chant (1985, op. cit.), in a study in Mexico, showed that resources in these households were more democratically distributed, as compared to households headed by men, one of the reasons that many women opt to become heads of their own households and families. In addition, women may also not establish conjugal relations and prefer to raise their children alone. They may opt to set up the households autonomously, as

¹⁶ Arriagada, I. Unequal Participation by Women in the Working World, *Cepal Review*, 40, 83-98, 1990 and Changes in the Urban Female Labour Market, *Cepal Review*, 53, 91-110, 1994; Beneria, 1992, op. cit.; Chant, 1991 op. cit.; Safa op. cit., among others.

a matter of choice. It is thus important to consider the conditions for the emergence of female headship as socially and historically based, and not necessarily as the direct result of an increase in poverty. The discussion by Blumberg and Garcia (op. cit.) on conditions for the emergence and persistence of mother-child units in various societies indicates that these households can face structural limitations, making their existence more difficult, when conditions and access to work and resources in general are not available to women and their dependents. The authors identified four conditions for the emergence of households headed by women and a fifth condition for their persistence. The first is that the unit of work, payment, and property should be the individual (rather than the kinship group), regardless of gender. The second is that women have independent access to subsistence opportunities, i.e., if women do not have access to work, then they must have access to other means of survival, such as their children's earnings. A third condition is that subsistence opportunities available to women should in some way be reconcilable with the responsibilities of caring for the children.

The fourth condition is that subsistence opportunities for women, in the absence of a male head, should not be drastically less than those existing for men. The fifth condition is that society's economic policy produce and benefit from a labor surplus and that society's economic policy not prohibit, underestimate, or threaten the existence of households headed by women. According to this explanation, the emergence of households headed by women is not linked only to poverty, but also to development patterns, structuring of the local economy, and the extent to which women can participate in this process. Thus, high female headship rates may not occur in regions where women face greater difficulties in independent access to subsistence opportunities and tend to increase in regions where women have independent access to their provision. Although high female headship rates in

some regions may be explained by the fact that some of the above conditions are met, they do not explain why the increase in female headship is also occurring among groups with fewer opportunities for independent survival. For example, the recent increase in female headship in India has occurred among widows, a group previously cared for by broader kinship networks. A non-productive member appears to exert unbearable economic pressure on poor households, and widows are forced to set up households alone and provide for their children.

The conditions described by Blumberg and Garcia also fail to explain why the incidence of female headship can be low in situations where there is a certain equality of earnings for women and men. In a community studied by Fonseca (1991, op. cit.) in Brazil, women were not involved more frequently in work, despite wage opportunities being similar for men and women. The reason identified by the study was that the authority of the husband or partner demanded that he retain control over the life and resources of the woman, and that domestic violence tended to increase in cases where women did not remain strictly within the domestic confines or had contact with other men due to work demands. Fonseca concludes that the low levels of female headship detected by the study were due to women's willingness to conform to male expectations and to maintain traditional patriarchal relations in a context where low remuneration meant a limited alternative for women's power.

In addition, women can also be abandoned by their partners and have to deal with their new situation. In some regions, certain categories of women, like widows and single or abandoned women, tend to be poorer and more vulnerable than other female groups that head households. As more empirical evidence on survival conditions in households headed by women has been brought into the debate, it has become clear that regardless of how they subsist, this increase is occurring predominantly among poorer groups.

In fact, despite the increase in women's participation in economic activities in most countries, this has not been translated into qualitative inclusion in the labor market, nor has it guaranteed an expected family subsistence. Regardless of the reasons for expansion or the advantages of households maintained by women and despite the cultural variations among regions and the resources of households headed by women being oriented primarily towards basic needs and being divided more equally among household members, some evidence indicates that growing poverty and economic difficulties are factors that tend to wipe out the fragile advantage and protection that such households confer on their members as compared to households headed by men.

One final remark should be made regarding the issue of women's growing participation in providing for the household in the Brazilian context. It is the fact that this participation has grown in all categories, diminishing the specificity of the type of women incorporated into the labor market. While in the 1970s they were primarily single, the greatest increase occurred among married women during the 1980s, showing that growth was relatively independent of marital status. Such facts have thus shown that the Brazilian economic context has mobilized all categories of women to contribute to household maintenance, thus diminishing the relevance of social and family factors in the female labor supply.

This growth may be even greater than the statistics indicate, since women's incorporation into the labor market also entails numerous issues that tend to underestimate the true economic role of women in reproduction of the household: the difficulty in identifying the various ways by which this occurs; the predominance of women in the informal sector and the difficulty in tabulating these activities; the combination of paid and unpaid activities; and the intermittence of what are considered women's activities¹⁷.

With the increase in male unemployment in urban areas, households maintained by women but headed by men are becoming a significant trend in societies such as Brazil. Humphrey and Hirata¹⁸, investigating industrial unemployment in São Paulo, point to the different strategies adopted by unemployed men and women vis-à-vis the need to maintain the family. While women take temporary and casual jobs until linking definitively into the labor market (and then normally into the services sector), men remain unemployed for longer periods of time, prioritizing their return to industrial work, which frequently fails to happen.

The option for working with a broader reference, based on female provision, does not mean underrating the importance of the male figure. On the contrary, male absence, as demonstrated by Barros, Fox, and Mendonça (op. cit.), implies lower mean income for households depending on female income. However, what is argued is that male presence and income may not necessarily be associated with household well-being. As mentioned above, men and women have different budget structures and priorities. Empirical evidence shows that when women work, households survive better, demonstrating that while good female income levels reflect directly on family well-being, male income may not be directly associated with this process.

In addition, while households headed exclusively by women may result in less oppression and greater female autonomy

S. Martins e J. R. Ramalho (org.) *Terceirização, Diversidade e Negociação no Mundo do Trabalho*. São Paulo: Huicitec Cedi-Nets, 1994, pp. 61-74; Aguiar, N. (ed.) *Mulheres na Força de Trabalho na América Latina: Análises Qualitativas*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984; Benería, L. 'Conceptualizing the Labour Force: the Underestimation of Women's Economic Activities' in R. E. Pahl (ed.) *On Work*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, pp. 372-391; Sedlacek, G. L. and Santos, E. C. *A Mulher Cônjuge no Mercado de Trabalho como Estratégia de Geração de Renda Familiar*. *Texto para Discussão*, 209, Ipea, 1991.

¹⁸ Hirata, H. and Humphrey, J. *Workers' Response to Job Loss: Female and Male Industrial Workers in Brazil*. mimeo, 1989.

¹⁷ Abreu, A. R. P. and Sorj, B. *Subcontratação e Trabalho a Domicílio - a influência de gênero in H.*

due to the absence of a partner, households maintained by women but headed by men can mean double oppression, since the women are in charge of generating income, maintain their domestic role, and have little authority over the household budget and decisions. In societies where the man enjoys greater prestige than the woman and where little prestige or approval is ascribed to women's work, there are obstacles to egalitarian domestic relations. If we adopt the criterion of female household maintenance, we expand our reference beyond the conjugal concept, more specifically beyond male absence or presence in the household. It is thus a matter of working much less with a frame of reference that constrains given meanings and much more with a process: female economic participation and the direct relationship to household survival and reproduction. This broader frame of reference allows for identification, at the micro level, of different processes leading women to simultaneously take on remunerated activities and domestic responsibilities and comprehend the nature of men's decreased participation in sustaining and maintaining their dependents and/or households.

2. Female income, control, and autonomy

The research on which this article is based involved 53 households, with 280 individuals, in the city of Samambaia¹⁹. The group of women providers²⁰ ranged in age from 18 to 59 years. They included female workers

¹⁹ The research was conducted from 1991 to 1994 in the city of Samambaia as part of a doctoral program under Essex University, England, funded by CNPq. Samambaia is located 30 kilometers from the 'Plano Piloto', the central area of Brasília. It is the result of a population settlement strategy carried out during the 1988-1994 period by a nominated administration, with a view towards the first direct election for governor in 1990. This policy reached some 300 thousand low-income individuals. It included a physical and spatial layout of streets, blocks, and lots, distribution of lots without housing modules or infrastructure. Families were supposed to building temporary housing the day they moved in. See Carvalho, L., 1996 op.cit..

²⁰ Household maintenance was also considered to include cases in which the woman was involved in

with formal employment (14) and in the informal sector (39); without partners (32) and with partners (21); with net incomes varying from less than 1 minimum wage (approximately US\$110/month - translator's note) up to 4 times the minimum wage, clustering around 1.5 times the minimum wage; households with a mean of 5 members, but ranging from 2 to 14 members. The households had varied structures and compositions, with a slight predominance of nuclear ones, consisting of the female providers and their dependents, the result of a recent settlement that had fragmented households into distinct household housing units. The study also showed the presence of young male relatives recently arriving in Brasília in search of employment, households with the presence of younger sisters to perform domestic chores, and others where the providers were grandmothers, with grandchildren and/or great-grandchildren, with the biological mother absent.

Involvement in the labor market followed characteristic patterns for the low-income population of the Federal District, with women predominantly involved in the services sector and domestic work and men in the construction industry and self-employed work, with proportionally higher wages than women. However, within the sample, the disparities between male and female wages were not as pronounced as in the Federal District as a whole, confirming the differentiated situation of women providers in the labor market: better as compared to working women as a whole and closer to that of male workers²¹.

To identify the main income-generating sources, forms of control, and forms of access to the household resources and income fostered an understanding of the budget dynamics and flow, as well as the

unpaid activities, like relations of exchange and "gathering", whethering government programs or NGOs.

²¹ The work by Castro (1989, op. cit.) and Seade (1994, op.cit.) point to this reality. In the current study, women's higher incomes were the result of a combination of incomes and multiple sources of work, with an intensification of hours devoted to paid activities.

female provider's autonomy in establishing levels of access to the main resources and decisions in the household. The internal dynamics of households in relation to these areas showed definite patterns. Initially, for households with more than one worker in addition to the female provider, a clear distinction emerged between household budget and domestic budget, which (using the distinction proposed by Morris²²) correspond respectively to the sum total of individual incomes for all workers in the household and the amount employed in the household's collective expenses.

In these cases, the mean total income of all workers in the households, i.e., the household budget, was 60% higher than the domestic budget, but in many individual cases it was as much as 80-120% higher than the domestic budget. Furthermore, the amount of the domestic budget was generally quite close to the total income of the female provider, revealing that contributions by other workers were scarcely significant and that consumption and satisfaction of the household's basic needs were basically determined by the income level of the female provider. What stands out is that most of the households had more than one worker. In two-thirds of the households, the female provider was not the only worker. The household budget breakdown suggested four different forms of domestic budget organization and management: the *common fund*, management by *separate expenses*, the informant as the *sole female provider* of the household, and households where the informant received *small or irregular contributions* from other members.

One of the most evident aspects was the female provider's autonomy in accessing and availing of her own income and the limited power to decide on and utilize income from other members of the households. Of the forms presented above, only the *Common Fund* showed a more egalitarian form of participation, with

Table 1 - Budget Management

Household Budget Type	Total	With 1 Worker	With Unemployed	Couple With Paid Work	Partner Unemployed	Several Workers
Common fund	11	-	-	03	-	08
Separate expenses	05	-	-	05	-	-
Sole female provider	33	21	03	01	06	02
Irregular small contributions	04	-	-	01	-	03
Total	53	21	03	10	06	13

significant or total contributions (in the case of husbands) to the budget. Normally, households with this type of management were also the ones with a more conventional structure (nuclear families) and where the female provider had the highest income among the occupants, which in turn provided for less dependence on other contributions and a higher threshold of well-being. The *Separate Expenses* type included cases in which the female provider and her partner kept separate budgets, applied to different expenses. It was detected for only a few couples where both worked. The partner did not provide

²² Morris, L. *The Workings of the Household*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

an allowance, but took direct charge of certain fixed expenses like light or gas bills, thus having no commitment to ensuring the household an amount related to his income or to the household's minimum budget, nor did he collaborate with extra expenses when they arose. Unlike the *Common Fund*, where remuneration of the female provider was significantly greater than that of her partner, here partners or husbands received the highest incomes of the entire sample.

The vast majority of the households fit into the third category, *Sole Female Provider*. As we have already mentioned, due to the nature of the housing policy, several households had resulted from dismembering extended households. Of the 33 cases, 21 were women living with their children. Here, investments were devoted directly to housing construction and food consumption. The level of household well-being was significantly higher than all the others, and these female informants showed great efforts at remaining independent, controlling access of persons to the household. The 12 other households from this category that involved extended families or women with partners included the most impoverished households, due amongst other things to the high unemployment rate, predominantly male. The last form of budget management, *Small or Irregular Contributions*, also involved female providers investing all their remuneration and receiving minor investments from other members of the household.

The relatively stable living conditions of households where the informants were the only members available for work and where female income produced greater well-being raises some doubts about the vulnerability of the female provider, as well as about the greater efficiency of households with multiple workers facing the recent loss in buying power of wages. What is evident in this case is the capacity of women to autonomously define priorities and investments on the one hand, and the loss of this autonomy in households where the composition involved an extended family, husbands, or partners, on the other.

The data showed that the informant had total control over her income and over other incomes making up the domestic budget. However a significant portion of household income was not spent on the household, but on personal expenses and remittances to other domestic groups. We observed that in fact it was women's incomes that subsidized the survival of a significant number of individuals, mainly male relatives like brothers, cousins, and nephews, both during periods of unemployment or when they came to Brasília as members of other households, remitting funds elsewhere from their newfound living arrangement in the Federal District. The data showed that to analyze the decision-making and control level of the female provider over her household, the presence of other workers and their incomes was as important as the presence of unemployed workers and those not contributing to the budget.

Such data also question the efficacy of the strategy of aggregating several workers to maintain income levels and deal with more critical moments in the economic crisis, as detected in other areas of Latin America (Chant, 1991 op. cit.; Gonzales de la Rocha, op. cit.). Obviously, such a strategy is only possible when the cost of maintaining more workers is actually covered by their incomes. This would appear not to have been the case in Brasília. Workers were facing longer periods of unemployment, and the pay was not self-supporting. A worker responsible for the survival of another household had an increased reliance on the resources of the female provider for his own personal support.

It is thus not the female provider's access to her own income that tells about her degree of autonomy, rather to what extent she controls and defines the use and expenditure of the resources in her household. If the female provider's access to her entire income were actually the criterion defining her autonomy, in this study the women could be classified as such²³. Yet the

²³ Studies in Africa (Dwyer, D. and Bruce, J. *A Home Divided: Women and Income in the Third World*,

definition of the use of her income and the household resources occurs more within the sphere of the extended family (and to a lesser extent within the conjugal sphere) than at the individual level. The study showed that there is a difference between the woman having the "right" to channel an extra expense towards the physical expansion of her house to accommodate a growing number of relatives and having the right, based on a personal decision, to not lodge relatives in search of housing when she does not feel like it. To what extent generating and having access to income produces autonomy in the latter sense of the example? To what extent were the women in the survey prevented from making decisions that contradicted the expectations and normalcy of customs? The next section will discuss these issues, based on the areas identified by the informants as crucial to the challenge or conforming to the established expectation.

3. Power and female autonomy

The concept of female headship, whether through male absence or economic provision, does not necessarily mean a cultural, structural, or affective centrality of the mother or wife as proposed by studies based on matrifocality. Although both concepts are linked to male absence, matrifocality has its central component in the woman's power over the domestic group, which is not a necessary condition in cases of female headship. That is why the

concept of households maintained by women was adopted here. Thus, to work with the latter reference allows for an investigation of the concrete conditions in which it occurs, whether or not associated with female power.

3.1 - *Income, Resources, and Control of Fertility: what changes in households maintained by women?*

The struggle for independence and autonomy involved spheres where female providers made efforts to win or keep changes. This consisted mainly of increasing their share in economic activities and keeping control over their fertility.

Personal characteristics like age and schooling differentiated access by female providers to the local labor market, which because of constant pressure from migratory waves favored the younger and those with more schooling. Another important factor for entering the labor market was the female provider's capacity to establish and participate in a more differentiated network, with male presence and more complex stratification, involving other social strata. Such networks functioned as veritable mechanisms for recruiting, selecting, hiring, and controlling labor for jobs in the formal market, like other predominantly female networks linking women to domestic jobs, mediating among the private spheres of different social classes in Brasília.

From this perspective, the central aspect defining women's capacity for work and income generation was her conjugal situation. The data showed that the best situations in the labor market and the best incomes were achieved by women without spouses or in more flexible conjugal relationships. The opposite was true for women in traditional conjugal relations. In such cases, two factors conditioned their relationship to the labor market: limited participation in diversified networks and less possibility of geographic mobility. Geographic mobility and access to an older, vertical network bears a crucial weight in Brasília, since the best formal

California: Stanford University Press, 1988; and Mencher, J. *Women's Work and Poverty: Women's Contribution to Household Maintenance in South India*, in D. Dwyer and J. Bruce, op. cit.) and Mexico (Benería, L. and Roldán, M. *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework, Subcontracting and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987; Chant, S., 1991 op. cit.; González de la Rocha, M. op. cit.), have focused on the criterion of access to resources and budget as indicative of female autonomy, perceiving the direct relationship between generation of resources and their utilization. In the current study, on the contrary, generation of resources and access to and utilization of same proved to be mediated by numerous aspects.

incomes are concentrated in the *Plano Piloto*. Due to pressure from their spouses, these informants organized their lives more within the confines of the household and relations predominantly with other women. For female providers in more flexible relationships, market factors carried greater weight than those restricting the supply of female labor. Faced with the concrete possibility of a better placement in the labor market, domestic life suffered adjustments to market demands, rather than vice versa. In these cases, too, the presence or absence of the spouse is the determining factor in female providers' participation in the labor market. Life histories frequently showed two clear moments in the informant's establishing herself as female provider: prior to the spouse's departure and subsequent to it, with a gradual increase in the household's prosperity.

However, in many cases, women's growing centrality in contributing to and managing the household budget did not mean an improvement in social status. In general, the economic activities by which women provided for their households were poorly paid and required a combination of different sources of income and a search for complementary strategies, like participating in NGO programs and developing closer vertical and horizontal relations of reciprocity and patronage.

A crucial sphere for women's autonomy was the control of their fertility, which for Brazilian women as a whole was an individual response, without government support. Older women (40 years and older) had both more children (a mean of 6.4) and a longer period of childbearing (in some cases over 30 years). Younger women (18-39 years) showed opposite trends, with a mean of 3 children and 10 years of childbearing, and although many were still able to bear children, among those who had undergone tubal ligations, the period elapsed between the first child and the ligation had been 8 years (with cases of less than 4 years). With the instability and diversity of partners, contrary to other Latin

American studies, the mean number of children among Brazilian women tended to decrease. The following table shows the correlation between types of conjugal relationships and fecundity for the women surveyed, illustrating the correlation between greater longevity in the conjugal relationship, fewer relationships, and more children, and vice versa.

Table 2 - Number of Children and Type of Conjugal Relationship

Nº Children	Long-Term Relations	Unstable, Short-Term Relationships
1	-	7
2	5	10
3	5	5
4	7	1
≥ 5	12	1

Another factor contributing to a lower probability of childbearing was the absence of alternatives in the conjugal lives of women over 30 years. The early physical wear and tear of working women, along with the early erotization and sexual initiation of adolescents, produces very limited possibilities for the sex lives of mature women. At any rate, the most decisive factors in controlling fecundity were the effectiveness and preference of methods adopted. Varying according to the number of children, type of relationship, and the stigma involved with the respective contraceptive method, the mostly widely used were the pill, tubal ligation, and monthly hormonal sterilization, while the rhythm method was only used rarely. Among the abortive methods, which are becoming considerably more widespread in Brazil, there was the use of Cytotec, a drug used for gastric disorders. What was most striking in the reproductive behavior of the women surveyed was the effectiveness of the methods adopted, the early termination of childbearing, and their

growing decision-making autonomy and independence vis-à-vis their partners.

3.2 - Division of and Responsibilities over Domestic Labor: what changes in households maintained by women?

Female provision had little impact on the division of labor between genders. The informants' intense involvement in income generation and the decrease in time spent by men in economic activities, due to unemployment among other reasons, did not result in men's increased participation in domestic chores. The men did not replace or compensate the women with domestic work or care for the children. Not only did they refuse to take on domestic responsibilities or child care; the women did not expect them to do so. In this context, exercising authority over the children was the only responsibility clearly expected of the fathers. The low expectation of help from the men extended to other males living in the household.

Children in general were trained to perform some chores when there were no women available to do them, although these tasks were few and rarely involved caring for other children. Paid work, on the other hand, could be done by anyone, regardless of gender. Cases in which adolescent daughters were not involved in paid activities were due to the division of domestic labor in the households and to the informants' commitment to keep their daughters in school (generally because they did better than the boys). Nevertheless, there were some important breaks in these patterns in inter-gender relations. The practical experience of building a house, for example, provided the informants with fundamental skills, expanding and exercising their autonomy both inside and outside the house. Building alone, the women were publicizing the issue of unequal division of household responsibilities with their partners. House-building was the most apparent sign of this unequal distribution of responsibilities. As with the struggle for ownership of an urban lot (Carvalho, 1996, op. cit.), the home-building struggle increased women's self-confidence and challenged traditional

forms of gender subordination and power structure in an essentially male area of Brazilian society.

Another area indicating change was the daughters' attitudes in confronting the brothers' low participation in domestic chores. However, there were structural limitations, linked to the concrete daily needs of reproducing the household and which hampered such changes. When the households depended structurally on the daughters' help to free the female provider for work, there was a great probability that the informants would reinforce a traditional division of domestic labor. This was further aggravated by the decreased support from the support network. The unequal division of domestic labor between men and women and the lack of provision of basic services by the government were probably two of the main difficulties in the reproduction of households maintained by women. In this context, the daughters were recruited extensively for long daily or weekly shifts when their mothers were domestic servants living on the job. Some young girls gave their opinions on the subject, like G., 11 years old, daughter of a participant in the study: "The other day I was thinking...I don't understand why P. (her 13-year-old brother) never helps me. Why do I have to do everything myself?... I don't know... I don't think it's fair...but I think it's the way a woman lives her life."

3.3 - Access to and Control over Financial Resources: what changes in households maintained by women?

In the introduction to this article, we argue that households maintained by women are an important *locus* of investigation focusing on the extent to which male control over work and female sexuality has changed, fostering the building of new conjugal and family relations. The point of departure for this reflection was the fact that as the main female provider, the woman is not a secondary or complementary worker in relation to the man. However, with regard to budget management, these points of departure need to be expanded.

The usual conceptual approach to women's power, principally through the male-female polarity (Chandler, *op. cit.*, Morris, 1991, *op. cit.*), hinders investigation of other fundamental aspects that once again might be more preponderant than conjugality. The issue is the role of kinship and extended family in shaping women's power, through an intersection between gender and kinship experiences and ideologies. Thus, in this case, autonomy and the guaranteed control over the household budget simultaneously implied that the female provider had control over her conjugal status and the autonomy to define her role and participation in the kinship group.

Two views of the relationship between female headship and extended family have been common: (i) that female heads of family, due their own peculiarities, had a structural dependence on their extended families in terms of support in the provision of domestic services, financial resources, and provisions in general; (ii) that extended families are available for unconditional support, and further, that they are capable of providing it. The study showed that, contrary to these views, the female provider was actually one of the extended family's greatest resources and played a fundamental role in sharing the resources generated by her throughout the kinship group, due to her female condition of submitting to greater decisions in the sphere of kinship. The very condition of the female provider having ownership of the home reformulated the housing conditions and resources, making them collective.

Within this context, women's power and autonomy become a broader and more complex issue, both because it involves a larger group of persons with many factors at play (like gender, seniority, reciprocity, and affectivity) and even the possibility of accumulating more power because of being in a position to participate in a context of exchange as a donor rather than a recipient. Further, contrary to relationships of conjugality, those of kinship cannot be easily broken, replaced, or transformed.

Thus, the female provider appears to have more autonomy in dealing with her conjugality, fundamentally because to break with a partner is relatively easier than to change relationships within a kinship group. In addition, a conjugal break can be a positive step for a woman, and in many cases is socially approved, since in a context of growing economic need an "unproductive" partner or spouse ends up competing for resources that are crucial to the extended family.

With this thought, we are not ascribing a secondary role to the spouse in the context of female power relations. In numerous situations where there was a partner, the informant's situation was one of intense subordination. However, what is obvious is that very rarely was woman's subordination to man "overcome" within one same conjugal relationship or were relations transformed, establishing greater equality between spouses over resources and household decisions. In many cases, the woman changed the basis for subsequent relationships, establishing very clear "spheres" of participation for the male partner in such a way as not to threaten her role as the center of decision-making and household control. Various cases were identified where a man's financial contribution was either rejected by the woman or accepted and channeled towards spheres over which she had absolute control, like building the house on her lot.

There was thus a clear differentiation between the nature of conjugal relationships, defining different experiences for men and women. The more unstable, brief, non-legalized, and without children, the greater the female independence and the possibility of a rupture. In addition, the more traditional and legalized, the greater the woman's difficulty in establishing her autonomy and authority vis-à-vis the partner. Ruptures were long and conflicting processes, with the woman acquiring a greater sense of self-esteem and with her economic independence increasing over the course of the break.

"He was not working regularly, but the worst

part was that he wouldn't go two days without drinking. When he finally left the house, he took everything, but the kids started improving with each passing day. I could sleep all night long... that was the best of all... the next day I was rested up for work..." (N.) "Today I look at my poverty and laugh, like I'm playing house... I left everything behind, my beauty salon, the house with the closets, but I don't wake up with a black eye anymore, I don't have to hide... not even my parents understand my way of life, but I'm happy now." (A.)

It is important to stress that separation is a difficult option for women in Brazil. Women talked about their misgivings in breaking with an institution which, in Brazil, confers and is the safeguard for standard female morality²⁴. However, the challenge to male authority did not necessarily result from the man's inability to provide for the house. There is no mutual determination between the principle of authority and economic provision. If there were, all the women studied would have them both, as female providers. The challenge to the man's authority results from his loss of moral authority in the house. This does not mean to say that women's increased participation in household maintenance does not give them the power to break off a relationship, but that it can (but not necessarily does) result in this and, on the other hand, that the break can occur even when the woman's income is insufficient or non-existent. Despite difficulty in identifying one specific reason for breaking off a relationship (since various factors can be operating simultaneously), male violence was, in the women's words, "the last straw".

The majority of the participants reported having suffered physical violence at the hands of their partners or spouses, with different degrees of severity and frequency. Maintenance of the male presence is thus not related only to the resources he brings home, but among other things to his

imposed presence in the household and mainly to the issue of morality and safety that male presence confers on the household and its members. Safety was in fact a necessity, and female vulnerability was greater when there was no adult male in the household. The circumstances in which women were subject to types of violence were so numerous that they explain why some of them submitted to and maintained their conjugal relationships. "I am certain that the kids will say that I threw him out of the house, because he never quarrels or acts violently... he earns well, but don't help with anything. Keeping a hold on the older boys is the only thing he does... I get home so tired I can't handle that by myself." (G.)

"I have five daughters to raise and marry off. People don't take a divorced woman seriously... He's harmless, but he's expensive to support... the only thing he's good for is that the girls have him around." (J.)

"Bad with him, worse without him. At least there's no wise guys sniffing around the place, cause I have to sleep on the job every week (as a domestic), and he's here with the kids... I know what it means to raise a daughter around here..." (C.)

As mentioned above, autonomy also means achieving independence in the kinship group. We are not saying that the absence of a spouse or partner automatically gives the woman greater control over her personal sphere and her household. Woman's position in the kinship group provides little opportunity for change. For the majority of the informants, this meant being submerged in and subordinated to the group's needs and choices, due to the very pervasive nature of the kinship ideology related to mutual dependence and sharing of resources. Kinship ideologies, despite creating common interests among individuals, leave many submerged conflicts. For example, women's position in their kinship group is determined by the status and roles normally ascribed to them in society.

Mutual support ideologies, coupled with an egalitarian view of access to resources such as those prevailing in kinship groups,

²⁴ Sarti, C. A. A. *Ambigüidade Como Regra: o Divórcio à Brasileira*, Seminar on Family and Society, ANPOCS, mimeo, 1992.

can operate to the detriment of women, favoring male members, precisely as in conjugal relations. To democratize kinship relations can be a difficult process. In addition, the prevailing economic crisis appears to be changing relationships among relatives. For poorer informants, reciprocity systems are turning into patronage. In addition, for the better-off informants, reciprocity systems are gradually moving away from the kinship criterion to that of friendship, or are getting smaller and more homogeneous to guarantee the element of reciprocity.

We have thus reached a point where both conjugality and kinship relations constitute barriers to the autonomy and independence of women. Of the women maintaining their households, it was expected that they could conform to either a "typically" female pattern of submission, altruism, and provision or an assertive, aggressive, working woman's personality. It became clear that the woman's capacity to "have" her own income and other resources depended on the extent to which she was seen legally and de facto as separate from the other household members²⁵ and not as a "natural" extension of a larger group. The process of women's autonomy is greatly influenced by her possibility of generating economic resources, but it is not the direct result of this. This process emerges from the combination of personal struggles in the conjugal, familial, public, and job spheres. The message women receive concerning their value in the conjugal relationship, kinship group, work, and society as a whole is becoming increasingly contradictory in Brazil today, favoring an interrelationship between changes and expectations in the public and private domains. Nevertheless, data from the study suggest that it is not only the spread of a modern ideology of individual rights and equalities that leads women to pursue change and allows them

to affirm their rights as individuals and in relation to men. It is also the break with traditional paradigms pertaining to the value and meaning of family and conjugality for the low-income population, which is now organizing itself with quite different material foundations and objective conditions. It is the break in complementarity of roles, the break in women's subordinate position, and the search for a more egalitarian domestic life that has led women to seek and defend changes. Still, changes have been achieved only in contexts of rupture (and not transformation) in gender relations. Partners and husbands, brothers, nephews, and sons have shown little capacity to evolve in their gender relations and concepts.

Indeed, it is the break in certain paradigms within which low-income families in Brazil operate and the existence of complementary roles in the couple, when the man has lost his role as moral authority in the household and the woman has realized that she is exploited, that have led to the struggle, the emergence of women's awareness, a gain in power, and autonomy in relationships²⁶. A woman's authority and resistance to male domination increase in proportion to her ability to ensure her own survival. The quest for autonomy has also proven to be a subjective experience, beginning with the informants' perception of their own disadvantaged position. Although we support the discoveries of Stolcke (op. cit.) that Brazilian women are totally aware of their exploitation as compared to men, not all of the informants were capable (or willing) to challenge norms or finally create new concepts, spaces, and possibilities for

²⁵ Sarti, C. A., *Família Patriarcal Entre os Pobres Urbanos?*, *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 82, São Paulo: Fundação Carlos Chagas, 37-41 (1992). Suarez, M., *Papéis Sexuais em Foco*, *Anuário Antropológico*, Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 311-15, 1985; Stolcke, V., *The Exploitation of Family Morality: Labour System and Family Structure on São Paulo Coffee Plantations, 1850-1979*, in Jelin, E. (op. cit.); Woortmann, E. F., *Da Complementaridade à Dependência: a Mulher e o Ambiente em Comunidades Pesqueiras do Nordeste*, *Série Antropológica*, 111, Universidade de Brasília, 1991.

²⁶ Moore op. cit.; Okely, J., *Defiant Moments: Gender, Resistance and Individuals*, *Man*, 26, (1), 1991, 3-22; Whitehead, A., *Men and Women, Kinship and Property*, in Hirschon, R. (ed.) *Women and Property, Women as Property*, London: Croom Helm, 1984.

themselves and their households. Women have limited possibilities and chances in Brazilian society, and the informants were aware of this.

Conclusion

In the three sections above, we have attempted to examine the complexity of the debate on female headship. We explored the concept's operational difficulties and argue that more research is needed to reveal the heterogeneity of situations of household headship beyond a concept based merely on conjugality. Female household maintenance has become an important situation due to women's growing incorporation into the labor market and the rise in male unemployment. The concept, based on responsibility over household maintenance, should include both single women and those with partners. It would thus be possible to research the different processes leading to women's increased participation in household maintenance and which lead to men's

decreased responsibilities in supporting their dependents, far beyond merely the absence of a male in the household. The critical debate on the definition of household headship, as transposed from other realities (alien to, and too limited for, an understanding of Brazilian reality) should be encouraged. The argument is not for abandoning the definition of household headship based on conjugality, but rather in favor of investigating the role it plays in each society. The argument here is that we should focus not only on numerical manifestations, since statistics are created and the criteria for "creating" the phenomenon vary from one society to another. Families or households with apparently similar structures can have different underlying processes. Understanding of the manifest phenomena should converge on the processes. The most challenging of these processes may not be the growing number of households without men, but women's growing participation in family survival as compared to men.