

Name: Bila Sorj and Adriana Fontes

Session: 166

Title of presentation: **Children in female household headship in Brazil: are they more vulnerable?**

Time of presentation: Oct. 01 – 1:30pm-3:00pm

Room: Karam 4 Ouzoud Area

Today in Brazil it is almost taken for granted that female-headed households are poorer than any other family arrangements. My paper will question this assumption which is based solely on the criterion of monetary income available to the family. I propose to enlarge the definition of well being to include, not only income, but other indicators of living conditions such as household conditions, education and child work. I will try to show that the well being of the female headed households is, in general, higher than in families formed by couples headed by a man with the same income level.

This misconception about the female-headed household, as “the poorer of the poor” increased in the last two decades as the range of family arrangements has become more and more diversified in Brazil. The public discourse started to establish causal links among family structure, poverty and the vulnerability of children. In this context, female-headed families have become viewed as responsible for the “intergenerational transmission of poverty” that affects children’s opportunities in life.

Above all, in the media, declarations proliferate with a strong moralizing and stigmatizing content. Families headed by a sole mother are regarded as “broken”, exploit child labor, remove children from school and expose them to situations of violence and other risks. In contrast, families of the nuclear type, composed of a couple with children living in the same household, represent the model family, healthy and capable of transmitting skills that facilitate social inclusion for new generations.

Much of the public policies are shaped by the assumption that children belonging to these families were those at most severe risk, as compared to children in other family configurations. Families headed by women became a priority targets for policies designed to alleviate poverty.

The aim of this paper is to discuss this common assumptions, that is, we intend to examine if the non-conventional family indeed promotes a situation of greater vulnerability for the coming generation. This debate is quite critical for two reasons:

First, because the female-headed families have been presenting rapid growth over the last few decades. Although the majority of families are still composed of couples with children (50%), this type of structure has undergone major decline (in 1981 it represented 65%). On the other hand, the number of households composed of female heads and children without the presence of the partner has grown a great deal, having risen from 12% in the 80s to 18% in 2006.

Second, this discussion is important due to the fact the anti-poverty policies, which have intensified since the 90s, favour families headed by women, assuming that

the respective children run greater social risks. Thus, for example, in Programa Bolsa Familia [Family Allowance Program] – which is the main Brazilian government strategy to tackle poverty via income transfer –, almost 46% of all the household involved in the program are female-headed. In establishing an association among family structure, poverty and child welfare, it is supposed that poor children belonging to other family configurations are in a position of lower social vulnerability.

In order to challenge this idea we need to review the usual definition of poverty as insufficiency of monetary income. Although the level of monetary income is an important indicator to evaluate living conditions, the household condition, access to consumer goods, level of schooling of the children, and the existence of child labor, may vary in groups with close income levels. Thus, in analysis of poverty, it is necessary to integrate other indicators that allow evaluation of the vulnerability status experienced by the children.

Apparently, there are good reasons to think there is a correlation between poverty and female-headed household.

Table 1: Income and Poverty Rates per Family Type in Brazil

	Family Income per capita	Poverty Rates*	Extreme Poverty Rates
Families with dependent children			
Families with woman head of family, without the man	231	55,7	33,5
Families with man head of family, without the woman	331	39,6	19,5
Families with the couple	374	37,8	13,9
Families with woman head of family and the man	443	34,2	13,3
Families with man head of family and the woman	369	38,0	13,9

Source: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílio (PNAD) 2005.

* The value of Poverty Line is 163 reais of 2005.

In fact, when poverty is measured by family income, we see that the female-headed monoparental families are disproportionately affected by poverty¹. It is possible also to see that poverty is concentrated in the monoparental families, above all those with female heads. Over half (55,7%) of the persons in families composed by a woman without the presence of a husband, along with at least one dependent child, are poor, and 33.5% are considered extremely poor.

The tendency of the families headed by sole mother to present such high percentages of monetary poverty is strongly related with gender inequalities in the labor market and in family responsibilities. As women earn less, due to sexual discrimination and occupational segregation, the income of households that depend on one female provider will be far less than that of a home with dual adult earners, or even one sole male breadwinner.

Besides this, the difficulties in dealing with the conflicting demands between work and family care, affecting, above all, female headship with children, resonate on the quality of employment they enter. In fact, they are integrated in the employment market in occupations of lower status, when compared with men in any position in the family, and with women who have no children. Therefore, the pressures suffered by the mothers who live without an adult partner and provide for and take care of their families alone, contribute to the income poverty.

However, and this is the point I want to make: the fact that women-headed families are less capable of mobilizing monetary resources does not necessarily mean that this disadvantage is transmitted to the new generation. And likewise, families composed by a male head that enjoy a high income level do not ensure better life opportunities for the new generations.

Therefore, it is a matter of verifying whether the difference in income observed in the previous Table 1 in favor of conventional families is reflected in other family welfare indicators, such as household condition, children's schooling level and existence of child labor.

Table 2 shows that differences in terms of income are not reflected in household conditions, or in terms of basic services. This is a very relevant variable as far as it

¹ Poverty was defined as persons living in families on incomes *per capita* below the poverty line. The poverty line is double that of abject poverty, defined as the cost of the basic basket of food that provides the minimum calorie needs of an individual. The poverty line was estimated, in September 2005, at 163 reais.

represent the environment which people live and spend, mainly children, most of the time.

Table 2: Household conditions per family type –
Poor families - Brazil

	Percentage of housing units with						
	adequate access to sanitary sewer	adequate access to canalized water	adequate garbage collection	electric energy	telephone	More than 2 people for dormitory	constructed with durable material
Families with dependent children							
Families with woman head of family, without the man	56,9	83,0	84,3	96,6	27,7	34,2	94,4
Families with man head of family, without the woman	45,5	71,5	72,0	90,1	24,3	28,0	90,5
Families with the couple	43,5	72,9	67,6	92,2	15,9	34,4	92,5
Families with woman head of family and the man	56,2	85,7	88,1	97,6	25,3	41,8	94,4
Families with man head of family and the woman	42,7	72,1	66,3	91,8	15,3	34,0	92,4

Source: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilio (PNAD) 2005.

As can be observed in Table 2, the percentage of households with adequate access to utilities, such as, sanitation, mains water, refuse collection, is systematically greater in households headed by women without the presence of a partner than in those with a couple, headed by a male.

Table 3: Percentage of housing units with durable goods per type of family – Poor families - Brazil

	TV	Refrigerator	Stove
Families with dependent children			
Families with woman head of family, without the man	88,7	77,2	98,6
Families with man head of family, without the woman	78,1	69,7	96,4
Families with the couple	82,8	71,0	98,1
Families with woman head of family and the man	90,5	78,8	98,2
Families with man head of family and the woman	82,3	70,5	98,1
	Radio	Freezer	wash machine
Families with dependent children			
Families with woman head of family, without the man	79,5	7,7	16,2
Families with man head of family, without the woman	78,9	9,5	14,2
Families with the couple	80,9	6,0	10,9
Families with woman head of family and the man	79,3	6,2	15,7
Families with man head of family and the woman	80,9	6,0	10,6

Source: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilio (PNAD) 2005.

Table 3 show that where women are in charge of the family the household is better equipped with durable consumer goods than in the couple/male head type, except for radio. These findings may suggest that when women are in command of the family she has more power to impose preferences and the priority seems to be investments in household condition to a greater extend than men. It is interesting to note how low is the penetration of freezer and washing machine in lower classes in Brazil.

Table 4: Percentage of housing units with new technologies per type of family – Poor families - Brazil

	Computer	Internet	Mobile fone
Families with dependent children			
Families with woman head of family, without the man	4,5	2,4	47,8
Families with man head of family, without the woman	5,1	3,5	43,3
Families with the couple	2,0	0,7	36,8
Families with woman head of family and the man	2,4	0,7	50,2
Families with man head of family and the woman	1,9	0,7	35,9

Source: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilio (PNAD) 2005.

In Table 4 we can see that, although the consumption of new information technologies is still very rare amongst poor families, the female-headed households are running faster than the conventional household headed by man. I can suggest that the high percentage of cell phones in household where a women is in charge can be explained by 1- the ability of cell phones to enhance peoples opportunities in the informal, eventual or flexible labor market where women head of household are over represented and 2- the use of cell phones as a tool that enable poor mothers to control their children that stay alone at home while she is working.

As we have seen, monoparental families tend to be monetary poorer, mainly those headed by women. However, the same tendency has not been verified by most of the indicators measuring household conditions.

And for the child, what difference does it make in terms of education and work?

Table 5: Education and work conditions for children between 7 and 14 years old per type of family – Poor families - Brazil

	Illiterate rate (%)	Frequency school (%)	% of children more than 1 year of school delay	% of children under 15 years old working
Families with dependent children				
Families with woman head of family, without the man	12,9	95,6	10,6	5,8
Families with man head of family, without the woman	20,1	94,2	20,6	7,1
Families with the couple	14,9	96,8	12,0	9,4
Families with woman head of family and the man	12,2	97,0	11,3	5,3
Families with man head of family and the woman	15,1	96,8	12,0	9,7

Source: Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílio (PNAD) 2005.

Table 5 shows that the child education indicators are better and child work is less in female-headed household. The exception to this pattern is with regard to school attendance (frequency) among children from families where only the mother is present. Probably, when the woman is the head of the household and there is no partner, there is a need for elder children to take care of their younger siblings in their mother's absence.

Conclusion:

The data has shown good ground to challenge the traditional proposition that female household headship are responsible for an inter-generational transmission of disadvantages. The data presented indicate that children in female-headed household may actually be better off than their counter part in male headed units in terms of household conditions, educational attainment and levels of children labor participation.