

## Expert Group Meeting

### on Parenting/Care, Family-Work Balance and Family Policies

#### 24-25 January 2024, Mexico City

### Report & Recommendations

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As part of the activities of the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family (IYF+30), the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) in Mexico City, in collaboration with the Focal Point on the Family of the United Nations, Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD), Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), held an Expert Group Meeting on "**Parenting/Care, Family-Work Balance and Family Policies**". The meeting took place on January 24 and 25, 2024 in Mexico City.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, the main objective of the meeting was to convene specialists to discuss, based on available evidence, the progress and challenges related to the exercise of parenting in child and adolescent development; care services for family members; the relationship between extra domestic work and the distribution of care and domestic work burdens in the family; and family policies aimed at them, mainly in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Participants addressed global and specific issues related to the themes of the meeting. The discussion started with the topic of parenting/nurturing. In her paper "Parents and Children in New Family Forms: Findings and Reflections on 45 Years of Research" [Susan Golombok](#) (United Kingdom) described several of the new forms of family diversity that are increasingly present in our societies. For her, its importance lies not so much in the variety of residential family arrangements, but above all in quality of family relationships. Golombok summarized the work she has been doing for more than 40 years on the features of parenting as deployed in new family forms and their effects on the development of children and youth. Her analysis focuses on those families formed by assisted reproductive technologies (e.g., in vitro fertilization, egg or sperm donation and surrogacy), as well as families that differ in terms of the sexual orientation and gender identity of the parents (e.g., lesbian, gay, transgender), and single-parent families by choice, among others. Her research has been very influential at the international level and has overturned many prejudices and preconceptions



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about parents and children in such families, such as that lesbian mothers would be less loving or capable than parents in heterosexual families; that children would have more psychological problems; and that parents would be overprotective of their children. The variety and scope of her studies have confirmed that from birth to young adulthood, the children in new family forms generally do as well as those in conventional families, and sometimes better, and that the mothers and fathers in these new family forms are as capable and loving as those in traditional families. A crucial factor contributing positively to this process is for parents to inform their children about their origins. The earlier they do so, the better the children handle it. Keeping this information secret can have adverse effects on the psychological wellbeing of both children and their mothers.

The work of [María Cristina Richaud](#) (Argentina), "Bases for the establishment of policies aimed at the comprehensive development of children", investigates the effects of the growing context of social vulnerability on child development in Argentina. Forty percent of children and adolescents live in poverty and 9% in extreme poverty, which affects their emotional and cognitive development, and for this reason, they have special needs as they face many challenges that often generate cognitive developmental problems, emotional disturbance, difficulties in the development of learning skills, greater behavioral problems, difficulties in facing and solving problems, and insufficient development of social skills. This is expressed, among other things, in lower levels of attachment to their parents or caregivers, greater cognitive impulsivity, greater aggressiveness, less ability to calm down, low assertiveness and dysfunctional conflict coping styles, with low logical analysis of the problem, low ability to cognitively restructure the problem, as well as high avoidance and lack of emotional control. There is more evidence of this in urban settings, while it is less known how this problem is expressed in children from rural areas. Evidence suggests that intervention measures can be developed before the age of 10 to counteract or attenuate these negative effects. Richaud has implemented, together with other colleagues, the program "Without affection, there is no growth nor learning", which has yielded promising results. It was also found that the earlier the intervention, the better the results.

Based on her project on children's mobility, [Fernanda Müller](#) (Brazil) delineated in "Postcards from Brasilia: Children's spatial and symbolic mobility", the perceptions of children aged 6 to 8 years, living in the urban periphery, about their territorial journeys to the public school they attend, located in a middle or upper-middle class area in downtown Brasilia. Using the children's photographs, drawings, postcards, maps and texts, the importance of the family as the main key to understanding the children's perspective on the school and the school neighborhood was appreciated. The postcards and messages were addressed to parents or relatives and the children showed a need to share their experiences with them.



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A second group of colleagues delved into the discussion about the distribution of family responsibilities and some of its implications. [Ana Maria Tepichin's](#) (Mexico) paper, "Gender, family and work in Mexico", showed some of the features of the distribution of domestic and care work before the COVID-19 pandemic, during confinement, and upon return to presentiality, in dual-income families with children under 15 years of age and high educational levels. Through the narratives of the working mothers, Tepichin found that gender inequality was persistent in all three moments because domestic and care work fell mostly on the working mothers, but this depended on different factors such as the type of household and cycle in which they were, the ages of its members, the urban-rural context and the sex of the main income earner. For example, in families where the mother had a full-time job, the distribution of family burdens between the couple was more equitable than in those with a part-time job. A crucial factor contributing to the reduction of this inequality was the degree of flexibility deployed by the couple in this distribution.

[Olga Rojas](#) (Mexico), for her part, addressed a topic that has been insufficiently studied in the region. Her presentation, "Advances and resistance of Mexican men with respect to gender equity", shows that the increase in women's participation in the labor market, rising levels of schooling, the deterioration of the role of men as economic heads of their households, and the consequent increase in dual-earner families, among other things, have had repercussions on family life. Although this may indicate a decrease in women's subordination, gender differences in families continue to persist, generating conflicts, tensions, and resistance on the part of men. The violence that often results from the above is expressed through different forms of men's control, such as segregation of women from their environment, control of their mobility and economic resources, and physical violence. These forms of control are exercised more frequently in more disadvantaged social groups, especially when women have a full-time job and face more difficulties in combining their work outside the home with domestic and care work.

Care work refers not only to the care and support of children's needs by parents or other caregivers. In fact, studies have focused more on the care of children and less on the care of older adults, persons with disabilities or with different needs. [Martha Liliana Giraldo](#) (Mexico), in her presentation "Experience of informal caregivers of elderly people with dependency", shows that the aging of the population and the increase of chronic diseases in Mexico pose a challenge for the long-term care and attention that these people increasingly require. She delves into the experience of informal caregivers of dependent elderly people in the framework of the public program of home medical visits of the Mexico City Ministry of Health. Like the work of caring for children and young people, the work of caring for dependent older adults falls mainly on women, given the insufficient public health and social services, which leads to an overload of work for women, as well as great physical and



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emotional strain. In addition, many of them face very sensitive care difficulties because they lack specialized knowledge.

At the meeting, some experts also discussed spending on child policies and childcare programs. [Dominic Richardson](#) (United Kingdom) and [David Harris](#) (United States of America), in their extensive and detailed research “Too little, too late”, analyzed how much governments of 84 countries spent on public policies for children, especially during the first years of life. The available data indicate a chronic underinvestment in children, particularly in the first year, and a relative underinvestment in both cash transfers and care services. In low-income countries only 6.7% of all public spending on children is spent on children under 6 years of age; in low-middle and upper-middle income countries this proportion is 8.2% and 11.5%.

In analyzing spending on children at different ages, the researchers illustrate country examples and compare these to the ideal of public spending on children. In low-income, lower-middle-income, and to a lesser extent upper-middle-income and high-income countries, most spending is on education and health, and social protection spending is extremely low. Not only is spending unbalanced, but it is also incoherent and unequal. However, from the experience of some high-income countries, Richardson and Harris show that spending on children is a wise investment, and that how and when it is spent is crucial. For instance, investment in the first three years translates into less social spending later; and positive results are obtained both individually in children, and socially, because they contribute to poverty reduction, among other things. They show that universal child benefit is a foundational instrument in the portfolio of child and family policies, especially when welfare systems are weak. In Mexico, for example, universal child cash benefits (UCCB) have the potential to significantly reduce relative child income poverty by 36%, which would result in a rate of poverty for below the average level of OECD countries, and equivalent to rates in countries such as Switzerland, Portugal or South Korea. The researchers show the enormous advantages of UCBs, and how together with other policies aimed at children, such a policy is crucial for improving all children’s living standards.

[Ana Bernal-Stuart](#) discussed the “Partnerships between the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) to improve the interactions between women teachers and children in childcare centers”. These centers are part of the Social Security System, are financed by the employer and are free of charge for the children of entitled workers. The centers are managed by private stakeholders. Bernal pointed out that the coverage of childcare centers in Mexico is low and regressive. On the other hand, it is surprising that 60% of families using the centers, whether offered by IMSS or by public agencies, belong to the richest quintile of the country's wealth distribution; and only 2.3% of children of mothers with primary schooling or less have access to them, compared to 10.5%

of children of mothers with higher secondary schooling. In order to improve the quality of service, IMSS is about to implement the “Fireflies” program as a direct benefit.

Another group of papers addressed the issue of family policies in relation to gender inequalities, family-work reconciliation, and care services. This issue is addressed in global terms by [Bahira Trask](#) in her paper “Work-family reconciliation post-COVID-19: Gender issues, remote work, and caring labor”. She points out that this pandemic highlighted that work-family issues are global, complex and interrelated. Globally, there have been changes at many levels that have weakened families' abilities to control their economic and social well-being. United Nations conferences have favored government attention to women's rights (SDG 5), but the role of families has received less attention. Gender inequalities are persistent in the world. In Western countries, research and policies have concentrated on dual-income families, stress resulting from the work-family relationship, and the division of labor in the home. They focus on the middle classes, workplace flexibility, quality of care facility service, and maternity and paternity leave. In non-Western countries, there are also differences by social class and educational level. Some governments have lax laws regarding employment practices; low wages; safety and environmental problems; outsourcing and home-based work; and cultural gender factors often make roles more rigid than in the West. Trask emphasizes that flexibility at work along with other government policies that promote gender equality, such as the involvement of men in caregiving, has many advantages. Sweden represents a notable example as it has the highest employment rates, 90% of working women report no role conflict, it has the lowest level of single mothers in poverty.

With information available from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), [Rosario Esteinou](#) analyzed, in "Family - work, gender equality and family policies in Latin America and the Caribbean", gender inequalities in terms of women's economic autonomy and the distribution of family burdens (SDG 5). She contrasts these inequalities with some family policies implemented in the region to determine whether they have favored defamilization and/or familization processes. Policies that favor women's economic autonomy to support their households through their insertion in the labor market and reduce intergenerational care dependencies (i.e., through financing services and direct subsidies) are defamilizing and can promote more significant gender equity. In contrast, policies that explicitly sustain and reinforce intergenerational dependencies are familizing by promoting that child and elder care falls mainly on women. Despite progress in legal frameworks, a process of defamilization that favors familization has prevailed in the region, characterized by large proportions of mothers in the labor market and driven by the pressures of poverty and the increase in the dependent population. Despite the relative economic autonomy acquired by women, inequities in care burdens and domestic work have persisted, and the family policies and programs implemented have been weak. Public care services and direct subsidies have been insufficient, and the structure of parental leave, consisting of

longer leave for women and a few days for men (which they rarely use), favors gender inequality within households. In recent years, however, a new route has emerged that emphasizes gender equality within the household and is represented by the formation of care systems.

In her presentation “The challenges of work-family balance policies and their financing in Latin America”, [Veronica Serafini](#) confirms several trends pointed out in the previous papers regarding the increase in the dependent population, and the economic inequality of women versus men, both in the labor market and in the household in Latin American and Caribbean countries. These are the result of the economic model of development (extractivist), the return of austerity and the increase in debt. Her work on government funding for work-family reconciliation highlights these inequities across women’s life course, and notes that it has been insufficient. Funding during women's life course is important because of intra- and inter-household transfers that benefit family members, among others. However, many of the reconciliation policies in the region have significant limitations: social security systems are fragmented and segmented; they are based on contributions from formal work, which puts women at a disadvantage because they participate mostly in the informal sector, and those who do not earn income are excluded from benefits; childcare centers have low coverage and are accessed more by the favored socioeconomic sectors; among others. Serafini points out several of the challenges faced by policies to reduce gender equality in different countries, such as the difficulty of promoting a vision based on women's rights; biases and lack of timely information on programs and policies and their follow-up; lack of precise indicators, among others.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In addition to those presented in the papers, we can add the following:

Concerning research:

1. It is necessary to hold more meetings where different disciplines' views dealing with family issues as well as those of designers, and implementers of family policies and programs converge to seek greater integration and coordination between research, policy decision-making, and professionals who work with families or their members implementing the programs.
2. In LAC, there appears to be greater knowledge about family issues in relation to the topics discussed, but the study of the relationship between the challenges faced



by families and their members and the policies and programs implemented to address them is weak. Consequently, more research is needed on this topic. Not only do we know little, but the contributions in the field of family research and policy are disjointed and fragmented. A family perspective is needed to advance knowledge of individual, relational and situational challenges, and to assess which policies and programs can address them.

3. An example of the above is families in which couples have different sexual orientation or gender identity, such as gay or lesbian couples. The diversity of new family forms should be integrated into research and family policy design to prevent the discrimination they often face in accessing services and programs.
4. The governments of Latin America and the Caribbean need to develop and strengthen their measurement instruments to know the situation of families and their members, follow up on the policies and programs that are implemented and evaluate their impact.

#### In relation to family policies:

1. In the LAC region, there is still a notable absence of a family perspective when family-oriented policies and programs are designed and implemented. Or, when there is one, the traditional heterosexual family features are privileged. In addition, an individual perspective seems to prevail, which focuses on family members separately, whether they are children, young people, women, or old age persons. This tendency leads to diagnoses being partial and incomplete, even if they yield important contributions; that policy efforts cannot be articulated within a framework (the family perspective); and that, for the same reason, they are limited in scope. Having a family perspective could foster more effective articulation and coordination -at the sectoral and intersectoral level- among the different policies and programs implemented.
2. The presentations showed that child poverty and socially and economically disadvantaged contexts are a global and worrisome problem in Latin American and Caribbean countries. This requires social protection policies that address children, single-mother families, and vulnerable socioeconomic groups. One policy that looks very promising is the implementation of the Universal Child Cash Benefit (UCCB), especially from the first year of life. This, combined with other policies and programs for children and families, can yield very positive



results, not only at the individual level (in this case the children) but also at the societal level (e.g., poverty reduction) and reduce the social spending that would occur in later stages as a result of not having taken care of and protected children in their first years of life.

3. Regarding the work-family relationship, many of the papers highlighted the persistent gender inequality suffered by women both in the labor market and in the distribution of domestic and care work in the family. In the region, it is striking that, despite the significantly high participation of women in the labor force, the distribution of care and domestic work burdens between men and women remains unequal in the region. Women not only have a significant burden as providers of economic resources but continue to be the main providers of care and domestic work. Inequality within households has remained relatively untouched, with the aggravating factor that they often also suffer violence at the hands of their male partners. Family policies in the region have unfortunately been weak and insufficient, and their structure and design have been blind to gender inequalities. This is clearly seen in parental leave, and in the scarce provision and unequal access, due to class differences, to childcare centers. Consequently, policies that are sensitive and responsive to such inequalities are required. Care systems, currently under discussion, design, and approval by several governments, are a promising alternative.
4. The need to sustain a family perspective when designing policies aimed at its members or the group, then, requires incorporating not only a perspective that is sensitive and responsive to gender equity but also to the possible challenges and risks that people face throughout their life course. A family perspective thus requires the incorporation of gender and life course approaches. One could develop a menu of policies aimed at individual family members, policies aimed at strengthening certain functions and relationships (e.g., parenting/parenting, couple, integration, and care for old age persons), and policies that address the different needs and situations of families and their members within a socio-ecological framework.