

# ASSISTANCE AND FAMILIES IN LATIN AMERICA: SOCIAL TIES, INTIMACY AND GENDER

This dossier was developed with the collaboration of eight researchers from the cross-discussion group “Eixo família” (Family Axis) under the Latinassist Project – Offre institutionnelle et logiques d’acteurs: femmes assistées dans six métropoles d’Amérique latine – of the Agence Nationale de Recherche-ANR Les Suds Aujourd’hui (France), developed between 2010 and 2014. Under the coordination of Bruno Lautier (2010-2013), and later Blandine Destremau and Isabel Georges (2013-2014), teams in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba and Mexico took part of the Project. During the Project timeframe, international meetings in the form of seminars were held in the cities of São Carlos – São Paulo, Brazil (2011), Nogent-sur-Marne – France (2012) and Guadalajara – Mexico (2013), ending with an internal seminar, methodological discussions and an international colloquium “Gouverner les pauvres en Amérique latine: gérer les femmes par l’assistance” in Nogent-sur-Marne, in February 2014.

Over the past thirty years, Latin America has experienced major political, administrative, demographic and social changes, creating a “new generation of public policies” that lies at an intermediate

level between social protection and the fight against poverty (Projet Latinassist, 2010). The right to social security, previously reserved for workers of the formal labor market, became universal, extending to the poor. From the international point of view, the continent has become a successful “laboratory” of new social initiatives, particularly with regard to policies focused on families and conditional cash transfer programs, mobilizing various institutional actors – public, private and public-private partnership. This change also means the investment in the professionalization of social workers. One of the important tasks performed by policy managers has been the evaluation of the efficiency of the programs created in this context. However, as the Latinassist Project suggests, it is not really known what the targeted population actually does with the assistance and what the assistance does with this population. Thus, the Project sought to clarify the impact on behaviors and social relations of gender and generation, both at the family and institutional levels, as well as women’s agency in the six countries that constituted the object of our analysis.

The creation of this new assistance in Latin America is the result of the aggregation of theories on poverty and development, which point to dimensions that are not limited to low income, but instead include other deprivation factors, such as those concerning the right to work, health, housing, education, security and social ties. Thus, recent assistance managers has employed the term “social vulnerability” more than the term poverty, to mark the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon, as well as the possibility of social mobility through participation in these programs and services.

The family, as the primary institution, is understood as an efficient object for reducing social vulnerability and strengthening social ties. Within it, its members become targets of programs and services designed with different purposes: children and adolescents, as an object of investment in human capital; the elderly, as potential dependents and vulnerable to poverty; and women, as mothers, caregivers and mediators, constituting the pillar of effectiveness of the new social programs in Latin America. Men, on the other hand, remain on the margins of the management of impoverished families. In this sense, most social programs are committed to family well-being and solidarity according to traditional roles and gender relations. The field work carried out by researchers from Latinassist Project in cities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba and Mexico clearly shows the consequences of this family focus on welfare as well as the forms (narratives/practices) of adhesion, resistance and transformation that especially impact the daily lives of poor women.

Based on a robust *corpus* built with approaches of qualitative research (interviews, focus groups and participant observation), this

dossier analytically describes the tensions, conflicts and solidarities that arise at the intersection between familist trends of new social programs in Latin America and the individualizing inclinations of women who crave greater autonomy while participating in the labor market. Our analyses question the reproduction of gender roles focused on the care of the elderly and children embedded in the designs of programs and services, and highlight the social dynamics produced by these initiatives. A central question addressed here are the forms of articulation between the pillars of wellbeing – institutions of the State and the market, civil society and families – for inclusive social protection and redistribution of transversal care, with a gender perspective.

The article by Ania Tizziani, “Género y trabajo: perspectivas sobre un programa de empleo”, critically analyzes the modes of operation of an urban social program for the training and employment of domestic workers, in a county located in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. It puts in doubt the gendered nature of domestic work and occupation in general. The author highlights the explicit commitment of this program in the revaluation of knowledge and skills as well as the denaturalization of traditional female roles and the search for new forms of labor for women in a market that is clearly segmented and discriminatory. Based on a careful and reflective ethnographic research, she concludes that, although it has not been possible to demonstrate a clear process of professionalization, training activities promote social exchange scenarios that enrich the knowledge of the beneficiaries in the workplace. The author shows that, even when they possess coursework certificates from official institutions, women still find themselves subjected to precarious and disadvantageous socio-occupational conditions, which accentuate the differences of class. Finally, she highlights the importance of understanding the heterogeneity of female insertion in the social, personal and professional spheres, in order to strengthen initiatives that promote better working conditions for traditionally marginal economic activities. In this way, she also tries to turn visible gender inequalities and discuss it.

The article by Blandine Destremau, “Que ‘boa família’? Assistência e solidariedade familiar em Cuba”, presents the issue of social assistance in Cuba, where family solidarity has been crucial for social reproduction in times of crisis, which has extended for more than two decades. In a study that offers the rare opportunity to know about welfare services in a socialist regime, where in a sense is not supposed to be needed, the author places the creation of this sector in the post-revolutionary period. She focuses on the issues that emerge in the context of recent structural transformations. As in other Latin American countries, we witness in Cuba a falling birthrate and an increasingly aging population, combined with the emergence of new

family configurations in a context of increased impoverishment, which imposes a new form of social assistance, involving a strong demand for family solidarity by the State. As female labor is the norm in Cuba, the situation of the elderly in the context of an aging population becomes a social issue, and public policies for this stratum of the population are insufficient. The responsibility for care ends up falling on the daughter, who is forced to reconcile work with family needs. The author points out the paradox between the need, now greater than ever, for a “good family”, one that is capable of caring, combined with the weakening of the family in times of crisis. This paradox generates a new inequality between those who enjoy family closeness and those without such a social bond.

Carolina Rojas Lasch, in her work “Sexuación y subjetivación en las prácticas de asistencia en Chile”, shows us new ways of managing social vulnerabilities in contemporary Chile and the prominent place of families, in their heterogeneity, in implementing a focused model of social policy. Methodologically, the author uses an ethnographic approach regarding household intervention in social programs and seeks to explain how the current policies reconfigure gender roles in family dynamics among the beneficiaries. The analysis focuses on three acts/mechanisms of current Chilean social policy, related to focusing, transferring and visiting. The author shows how these forms of state intervention influence gender relations within families. She accurately indicates the ways in which social assistance and the State gain legitimacy to penetrate vulnerable households and influence household dynamics and the private space. She also discusses the use of women in social programs, the weakening of conciliation between domestic and extra-domestic female labor and the absence of co-responsibility in caregiving tasks. The article shows how current policies legitimize assistance to women as caregivers and make male vulnerability invisible. This would be a problem for the labor market and therefore social security. As a result, the processes of feminization of social assistance and care within families that are the subject of social policy are reinforced.

The article by Edith Carrillo Hernández and Elba Karina Vázquez-Garnica, “Emociones de ancianos beneficiarios de programas sociales en metrópoli de Guadalajara”, analyzes the forms of expression and emotions of older people who experience social vulnerability daily, with respect to social programs to which they are beneficiaries. The authors approach their subject of study using an ethnographic approach and analyze the ways in which social programs offered by the government influence the conditions of emotional and social well-being of the elderly, as well as their position within families. The findings indicate that, despite the fact that economic transfers are still incipient, seniors can position themselves, in some cases, to have

greater capacity and autonomy in their daily situations of disadvantage. The authors emphasize the importance of psychosocial care for the elderly and their caregivers, in order to formulate programs they go beyond economic transfers and also highlight the need for long-term social co-responsibility.

The article by María Julieta Oddone, “Ancianas cuidadoras, redes y estrategias en el uso de programas sociales”, closely examines the scenarios and practices of care that older women provide to even older family members with one or more illnesses, implying different levels of dependence. The author conducted a study focusing on the qualitative paradigm and carried out in-depth interviews with family member-caregivers receiving support from social programs as a result of their own caregiving tasks. The inquiry focused on characterizing the strategies developed by family member-caregivers to meet the demands of dependent elderly relatives as well as the support derived from social programs and assistance networks related to caregiving. Oddone examines the physical and emotional effects that caregiving tasks produce in those who perform it daily. She also draws attention to the use of care and preventive programs and the lessons learned through existing courses for families and caregivers and the strengthening of intergenerational relations to ease the burden of care. The author concludes the article by cautioning about the need to create comprehensive social programs to support both those who need assistance and those who provide it, through complex codes that allow the reciprocal character of the act of care to be deciphered.

In the work of Rocío Enríquez Rosas, “Feminización y colectivización del cuidado en la vejez en México”, the problem of care from the perspective of the women who are beneficiaries of social programs is analyzed. The methodology focuses on the constructionist paradigm and qualitative approaches are used. The findings indicate the complex intersection, from the analysis of care, between the processes of precariousness/impoverishment in the urban setting and the demographic processes of the aging of the population, as well as the fragmentation and failure of policies and programs for the elderly. The article highlights the essential collectivization of assistance through complementary relations between state institutions and their role of inclusive social protection; the market and its necessary regulation; civil society and its organizations; as well as families in their heterogeneity, starting from a new gender contract that redistributes responsibilities of care through the principle of equity.

The article by Yumi Garcia dos Santos, “Família, trabalho e religião das mulheres assistidas em São Paulo”, is based on field research conducted with women from the outskirts of the city of São Paulo who are assisted by new health and assistance programs for families. The author

discusses the outlook of these programs that depend on the disposition of women to mobilize for their accomplishment. However, although women fulfill a key role in the success of new Brazilian social programs, little is known about these women as individuals who possess their own values and subjectivities. By systematizing the trajectories of seven women who receive government aid, the author sought to grasp the realities constructed in their narratives based on everyday life, articulating the experiences and values of marriage, building up a family, raising of children, work and religion. The author reveals that in a context where access to work is difficult for these women, either due to lack of qualification/skill, or lack of support from their partners, some sectors have offered them “a legitimate space for talking and listening”, even though they are not places where the social relations of gender can be reversed. Rather, they are spaces that reproduce the social relations of gender-based sexual division of labor, maintaining the “ethics of the poor”. Religion, especially of a Charismatic nature, arises spontaneously in conversation between women, becoming a place where they find encouragement for a degree of agency, as well as an ability to make men “more docile”. Assistance also provides a place for women’s acting out, though not with the same intensity as religion.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to all members of the Latinassist Project with whom we have developed, over a period of more than three years, fruitful discussions about assistance and family issues, the political and institutional aspects of new social programs, as well as research methodology. We are also grateful to the collaborators with whom the Project has developed meaningful dialogues, either occasional or ongoing, which allowed our reflexions’ improvement. At last, we thank the editorial staff of *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, which published this bilingual dossier with great interest and openness, offering us the opportunity to disseminate the scarce existing literature on gender and new assistance services in Latin America.

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