

Beyond mothers who father: the study of female headship

Chia Liu | November 7, 2016



More than half of a century has passed since Edith Clark first wrote “My Mother Who Fathered Me” in 1957, a classic study on single motherhood (marriage, sex, and concubinage) in Jamaica at the time. The Caribbean, along with Latin America, continue to experience high levels of non-marital childbearing today.

The traditional narrative of female headship tells the story of single mothers raising children with limited male assistance, whereas in modern reality female headship occurs under a plethora of circumstances. Latin America in particular has not only experienced a rise in cohabitation, but such expansion has reached even the higher strata of the societies, as predicted by the second demographic transition (LaPlante, et al, 2015; Lesthaeghe, 2014). This phenomenon thus begs the question: how should we interpret female headship now?

Definition of household head

The notion of household head lacks standardized definition across countries (Liu et al, 2016). In the case of Latin America, the wording for household head in census questionnaires has been updated in the past few decades. Earlier censuses tended to refer to the household head in masculine form, *jefe* (male head). Since the 1980s, all Latin American countries have changed the census questionnaire term to reflect gender neutrality, *jefe o jefa* (male head, or female head), and *pessoa responsável* (reference person). Figure 1 shows both the increase of female headship and the timing of census wording changes. It is unclear whether the census wording change led more women to self-report as the household head, or whether the fact that more women are heading households served as the catalyst for census wording change.

Interpreting the rise of female headship

Our study, which focuses on women aged 35 to 44 (a life stage by which most women have already experienced romantic relationships, have had children, but are usually not yet widows), shows the surge in female headship that has taken place across Latin America. The increase in the proportion of women aged 35 to 44 self-reporting as household head was

especially strong in Brazil and Uruguay, where in the course of four decades, the percentage more than tripled. Other countries such as Venezuela and Mexico showed less dramatic, but nevertheless steady, increases across the census rounds.

The context under which women head a household has evolved in the past few decades. In 1978, the sociologist Diane Pearce developed the concept of “feminization of poverty” as a theoretical framework to explain the parallel increase in poverty and in female-headed families in the United States. The idea of the feminization of poverty took hold in Latin America during the economic downturn of the 1980s (the “lost decade”), but has been heavily challenged and contested by scholars in the recent years (Chant, 2003; Damián, 2003; Klasen, Lechtenfeld, & Povel, 2015). Indeed, the increase in female headship is due in part to the diversification of family situations (more women live in cohabitation, separation and singlehood than ever before), but also to the increasing number of married women who, despite living with their spouses, report themselves as household heads (Liu et al, 2016). In combination with an earlier study conducted in Costa Rica, which showed that nowadays women are less likely to tolerate domestic gender inequality (Chant, 2009), the rise of female-headed households may be interpreted as a manifestation of women taking a more proactive stance on determining their lives and their social roles.

Legal hindrance

With the increase in their sheer number, and the variation in the typologies of female-headed households, the state of public policies and legal codes may need to catch up with demographic reality. For example, the Civil Code of Chile, Article 1749, published in year 2000, still stipulates that a married woman shall have her properties and goods administered by her husband, the legal head of the household (Library of Congress of Chile, 2015). In actual fact, about 9% of married Chilean women in our study consider themselves as the de facto household head. Whether or not this means that they control the household economy, or that they are the main decision maker in the household, these women’s self-reported status clashes with the outdated legal system in Chile.

Implications and future direction

How should we interpret household headship? Should Latin American censuses abandon the concept of headship, a byproduct of Eurocentric and patriarchal ideology, where one person is considered responsible for the entire household (Chant, 1997)? Should they employ the neutral term now used in the Census of the United States (and several other countries): “reference person?”

Female-headed households are not necessarily poorer once the partnership status of the household head is controlled for (Liu et al, 2016), and they tend to invest proportionally more in household goods compared to their male counterparts (Chant, 2003). Most importantly, women who head their own household are no longer just mothers who father. An understanding of the current state of female headship in Latin America serves to better inform policy makers that single parent households or high dependency ratio households should be the target of social intervention, not female-headed households per se, to avoid the stigmatization and marginalization of male-absent households that may or may not be living in precarious conditions.

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