

DATA NEEDS FOR THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF  
FAMILY, WORK, AND GENDER<sup>1</sup>

Catalina Wainerman

National Council for Scientific and Technological Research  
at the Center for Population Studies  
Institute for Economic and Social Development

Catalina@cenep.satlink.net

Buenos Aires, Argentina

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In this paper I will comment on some of the problems faced by social scientists when doing quantitative research on family and work from a gender perspective in Argentina. I will start by summarizing partial results of a study on the changes from single-provider to double-provider households over the last twenty years based on the Argentine census and Permanent Household Surveys.<sup>2</sup> I will then move on to reflect on the availability, and/or the validity of adequate data in this area of study.

#### FAMILY, WORK, AND GENDER

The gender composition of the Argentine labor force like that of most countries in the region, has undergone profound changes. The economic crisis, accelerated since the mid 80s, has had different effects upon men and women. The activity rate for women aged 15 to 64 consistently increased from 37.8% to 54.9% in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, between 1980 and 1999. Since men's activity rate remained at 85%, the process of 'feminization' of the labor force, which started in previous decades, accentuated. As in the 70s, the women that made a greater contribution to the labor force in 1980-1999 were middle-aged and over (30 to 60 years old), mostly married with family burdens -who increased near 50%-, and spouses of the household head -who increased near 66%. While this occurred, the differences between women and men unemployment rates dropped as a consequence of a sharp increase in the rates for men, primarily among head of households.

The flow of married women with family burdens into the labour force has meant a quasi revolutionary transformation. From a female labour force mostly composed of working daughters (as it was up to the 60s), it shifted toward one formed by working daughters and mothers. Today, many women enter, and stay into working life -either employed or unemployed- as men do, regardless

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<sup>2</sup> The study is summarized in Wainerman, C. and M. Heredia, 2000.

the family situation. It makes no difference if they get married or have children at home, either at preschool, childhood or early or late adolescent stages.<sup>3</sup>

The changes in the labour force summarized are associated with a number of dramatic socio-economic and demographic changes that occurred throughout the last three decades (Wainerman and Geldstein, 1994, Wainerman, 1997). The life expectancy notoriously rose -primarily the proportion of people over 65 and 75 years of age, more so among women. Education expanded, also relatively more among women. Fertility and marriage went down, but the age at marriage, consensual unions, divorces and separations, and remarriages went up. The number of step-families; of single parent families (headed by females, but also by males); nonresident couples; nonresident children; female-headed families which replace the economic headship left vacant by unemployed husbands; etc.; have all increased. The major engine for these changes was the growth in women's economic participation, accompanied by the increase in male unemployment.

As a consequence of these transformations, the model of the traditional 'single (male) earner' family became less frequent, whereas the opposite was true for the 'double-earners' families. In the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, the figures make the point quite evident.<sup>4</sup> Between 1980 and 1997, among nuclear families, the traditional 'single (male) earner' household (active male and inactive female spouse) decreased 24.1%, from 68.0 to 51.6%, whereas the 'two-earners' model (both active spouses) increased much more, 93.5 per cent, from 22.6 to 40.3 per cent.

The economic crisis, which made a single economic income insufficient and required the addition of the other spouse's income to sustain the family budget, was a major cause for this

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<sup>3</sup> Data on the changes in the female labour force come from Cortés, 1990; García de Fanelli, 1991; and Sautu, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> For reasons to which I will refer later, data at the national level are not useful for this period.

shift. But only part of the couples were successful, another considerable number failed. The increase of 'satisfied' households -with both spouses employed- from 21.6% to 31.0%, was accompanied by that of 'frustrated' households, with women spouses unemployed -0.7% to 5.1%-, and by that of households in 'desperate situation', with both spouses unemployed -0% to 1.5%-. The deterioration of the living conditions of households attempting to sustain the traditional single-male provider model also increased since unemployment went up, from 0.3% to 4.0%.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of the double-provider model between 1980 and 1997 characterized all households, those at the early as well as the late stages of the family cycle (as indicated by the mother's and by the youngest child's ages). It also characterized households of different socio-economic conditions (as indicated by the per capita household income, and the mother's education level), though in varying degrees. As a consequence of these changes, between 1991 and 1997, the number of over-employed mother-spouses (working 41 hours a week and more) went up from 27.3% to 35.8%. Hence, women in these households who have worked 50% and more of the total weekly hours worked jointly by both spouses also went up from 31.8% to 37% -relatively less than those who contributed 70% and over of the couple's working time (0,9% to 2.2%).<sup>6</sup>

#### STATISTICAL DATA FOR STUDYING FAMILY, WORK, AND GENDER

Large social surveys only recently are becoming frequent in Argentina.<sup>7</sup> So far, national surveys have been the domain of the

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<sup>5</sup> Data come from unpublished tables of the Argentine Household Survey provided by INDEC (National Institute for Censuses and Statistics).

<sup>6</sup> Data on working time was not gathered before 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Mostly for the evaluation of educational performance (at all primary, secondary and university levels), living conditions, and opinion polls.

National Institute for Census and Statistics, which is responsible for the population censuses and the Permanent Household Survey. In reflecting on some of the problems faced by social scientists when trying to do quantitative research on family and work from a gender perspective, I will concentrate on the non-availability, the low validity, and/or the inadequacy, of the Argentine census and Permanent Household Survey data on family structure, and economic variables.

I will start by quoting Fitoussi and Rosanvallon's (1997) reflections on the socio-occupational statistics currently being gathered in France. According to them, society became less readable, more difficult to decipher, in the last twenty years. They then go on to assert that the sum of opinion polls, macro-economic data on national accounts, and Census Bureau statistics that allowed to gain a relatively accurate image of society no longer allows it. This is so because:

The tools for statistical knowledge -the classifications they produce, the categories they use, the concepts they organize- were conceived and introduced in the 50' to capture a class-society, segmented, organized hierarchically, moving slowly. They do not apprehend any longer but a limited part of current society (pp. 28-29).<sup>8</sup>

Traditional statistics, hence, seem unable to describe the new social universe, more atomized and individualistic, with more unstable and fluctuating profiles. Old classifications assumed the existence of stable differences. (p. 30)

The words we use fit less and less realities; we increasingly face a problem of denomination. We no longer need to describe relatively stable collective identities, we need to look at individual trajectories and its variations in time. (p. 31)

#### FAMILY ISSUES

Fitoussi and Rosanvallon's reflections are wholly applicable to labor force statistics in Argentina, as well as to many other social contexts. Moreover, changing labor terms for family terms -

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis added.

head of household, eating from the same pot, single, divorced, separated, consensual/free unions, step-father, step-mother, step-son/daughter, parenthood, nuclear household- also apply to the family in Argentina. Statistics from population censuses are inadequate to capture new family forms. For indeed, as Macklin (1987) says, to gain an idea of a person's life style,

it is no longer sufficient to learn whether she/he is a single, never married person. It is much more useful to learn that she/he is a never married person, childless on her/his own will, who co-resides in a heterosexual, exclusive relationship with a partner who has two children from a former union, with whom he/she has formed a household which attempts to be a permanent alternative to a legal union, both being in the labor force, and with no other adults co-residing at home.

Indeed, census data have been designed many years ago, and keep being gathered as if society remained unchanged. This applies to the family structure as well as to the labor market. Let us start with issues concerning the study of family structure and composition.

#### Family structure

Argentine family is accelerating through the same path already taken by more developed societies in the US and Europe. That means: decrease in the number of members; postponement of the age at marriage; increase in consensual unions and decrease in legal unions; increase in marriages of pregnant brides; in extra-marital births; in divorce and separation; in childless couples; in non co-resident couples; in single-parent families, mostly formed by mothers, but increasingly more by fathers; in step-families where the new couple of her or his co-resides with the children she and/or he have had in a former union with a former couple, eventually with the children born of their current union; in families where children 'commute' or co-reside part of the week with one or the other parent, etc. (Wainerman, 1994; 1998).

In spite of these changes, censuses keep showing the nuclear

household to be the most widespread co-residence mode of family living. According to the 1991 Argentine census, this group represented 75% of all of the country's families, a figure that went up from 66% since 1970-1980. The complete nuclear household, with both mates present, with or without children, amounted to 50% of all families in the country in 1991 (Geldstein, 1994).

The complete nuclear family is a unit formed by father, mother and children. But it is not just any kind of parents and children. Censuses implicitly define it as a family unit formed by a couple, married to each other, only once, with children (biologically) born out of their union. Indeed, in the 1991 population census, and in previous censuses, the nucleus is conceived as an actual or potential unit of reproduction since it implicitly requires the presence of a co-resident heterosexual couple, with or without children, i.e., first generation offspring, either step or biological. This is made evident by the fact that the census does not classify as 'family nucleus' a group of people related by other kinship ties than marriage-union and descent. Thus, households of solely aunts/uncles and nephews/nieces; brothers/sisters; cousins; grandparents and grandchildren, are not considered nuclear but extended family households.

The 1991 Argentine census, for instance, looked into the family composition and type by means of questions on the kinship relationship of parenthood each household member has with the one (self) identified as 'head of the household'<sup>9</sup> without further inquiring on the children's filial relationship. Those registered as children are assumed to be, by default, born to both, the head and his/her conjugal mate.

But, under the apparently single mode of nuclear household, family households as diverse as the following are hidden:

1. married couple, where one or both spouses have had one, two, three or more previous unions, co-residing with children

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<sup>9</sup> See the next section on "Data on head of household".

conceived by both as a result of their current union.

2. married couple, where one or both spouses have one, two, three or more previous unions, co-residing with children from the previous marriage or consensual union of one or both spouses [step family].

3. married couple, one or both for the second time, with children from the previous marriage or consensual union of one or both members of the couple plus children (biologically) conceived by their current union. [step family].

4. married couple, formed by a widow man/woman, from a former marriage, and a never-married before woman/man, with children from his/her previous marriage. [step family]

And many other family types.

Even though in terms of the number of generations and kinship relationships involved the formal structure of these households is identical (only two generations linked by marriage/union and motherhood/fatherhood-filial relationships) and classified as nuclear, they are in fact quite different ways of family living for parents and children. It is not psychologically the same for a child to co-reside with his/her two parents than with his/her mother and her new spouse. Among other things, the number of family relationships multiplies (more than four grandparents, larger number of aunts/uncles, step-siblings, cousins, etc.) Likewise, it is one thing for a woman to be the mother of the children she has had out of the union with her spouse. It is another thing for her to act as the mother of the children her spouse has had with another woman who is alive and in contact with her children, or with another woman who no longer lives, hence, does not compete for the current motherhood.

In other words, the nuclear category as used today hides such a large heterogeneity of family structures that turns its usefulness doubtful, especially if the aim is to describe the actual ways people live in current families. At least the children's filial relationship should be gathered in order to differentiate step families.

## Head of household

The implicit conceptualization of 'household head' the Argentine census uses to organize the description of the kinship relationships of the remaining members of the household around him/her suggests that the underlying conjugal model is a couple inherently unequal in power in terms of economics, authority, or capacity for making decision. Indeed, the Argentine censuses leave to the interviewees the responsibility for the self-identification of the household head on the basis of subjective criteria without asking what are these criteria, and without allowing for a joint or shared headship. (Only as recently as the 1991 census the question was phrased in he/she terms. In previous censuses, the phrasing was in he terms.)<sup>10</sup>

As shown by the analysis of preparatory data for the 1991 census, the identification of the head of the household (which is the one so recognized by the remaining members) is not univocal, i.e., it does not respond to a single criterion. In decreasing order, the criteria are: gender, age, and income level. I.e. the probability for a household member to be identified as head of the household increases if he is male, older, and, finally, if he is the one who supplies most of the income.

The evidence for this assertion comes from a pioneer study by Geldstein (1994) on female head of households defined in terms of their share in the overall household income rather than in terms of the census (or Permanent Household Survey) data on heads (the members' self definition). In the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, the proportion of households where women are the 'major economic

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<sup>10</sup> In Spanish, gender is embedded in the structure of the language. A he household head is 'jefe', and a she head is 'jefa'. In previous censuses, the question posed to interviewees was gendered biased: 'Who is the jefe (he head) of the household?'. The 1991 census eliminated the gendered bias by asking: "Who is the jefe/jefa (he head/she head) of the household'.

provider' (i.e. whose earnings makes the largest individual contribution to the overall household income) went up from 19% in 1980, to 25% in 1989, to 27% in 1992, whereas the females registered as household heads by the Household Surveys only increased from 11% to 12% between 1980 and 1989.

In general, women who are actually heads in the sense of being the major economic provider, are only identified as such when there is no other adult man in the household. The gender bias embedded in official statistics is also shared by a large portion (though decreasing) of the population. To diminish the effects on the validity of the data gathered on family structure (since it is classified in terms of the relationships of the remaining members to the household head), steps are needed to provide interviewees with a definition of household head couched in an univocal criterion that is not gendered bias.

#### Activity and employment status

The 1991 Argentine census introduced a major technical change in measuring 'activity condition', one that has recently been adopted by Brazil and Uruguay. After many years of producing consistent evidence on the low validity of the census data on the female (and the 'informal'/'precarious' sectors of the) labor force <sup>11</sup>, the 1991 census succeeded in improving the coverage of the population that supplies its labor force to produce goods and services for society. Previous censuses had under-registered occasional, irregular, temporary, seasonal, part-time, informal, and self employed workers (more frequent among women and among young and old men).

The 1991 census registered a much larger labor force as a result of its success in bringing into light female workers and

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<sup>11</sup> See Wainerman and Recchini de Lattes, 1981; Wainerman, 1990; Wainerman, 1992; Wainerman and Giusti, 1994; Giusti, Gómez Rojas, Rodríguez Gauna, and Cucca, 1994.

young and old age men workers. These came primarily from the less educated sectors, occupied as self employed and unpaid family workers, for relatively few hours weekly, in the less structured and informal sectors of the economy. They were registered as housewives, students, and retired, i.e., as economically inactive in previous censuses.<sup>12</sup>

The improvement in the validity of the measurement attained was largely welcomed, but at the same time it has impaired the historical comparability of the statistical series turning the 1991 census data useless for studying labor force trends. This means that the study of labor force trends at the national level became impossible.

The problem is not just one of sheer size but also of composition. The improvement in the measurement of the 'activity status' was not matched by a similar improvement in the measurement of 'employment status' for the working population. Data on this economic variable has been known to be inaccurate for many years now. The situation has worsened since the 80s. In the context of the economic and social changes that accompany the acute recession, the labor market became more diversified. The traditional classification of 'owner', 'salaried worker', 'own account worker', and 'unpaid family worker' keep new modes of social relations invisible. That is, the traditional question on

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<sup>12</sup> An experiment was carried out in two districts in 1991 to assess the effect of the change of instrument. Two representative samples of the population were interviewed with the 1980 and 1991 census questionnaires. The figures obtained with the 1980 questionnaire (in 1991) were then compared with those obtained (in 1980) by the actual 1980 and 1991 censuses. The men activity rates in La Matanza (urban district), were 79.9% for the 1980 census, and 77.9% for the 1991's; the corresponding rates for women were 28.1% and 38.5%. In Trancas (rural district), the equivalent figures for men were 78.6% and 80.3%, and for women 14.7% and 30.4%. In other words, female rates were greatly affected by the change of instrument, whereas male rates remained quite stable. The increase in the female rates was mostly 'apparent' due to instrumental reasons rather than to 'real' changes in the economic structure.

'occupational status' is not valid to gather data on substitute, or complementary forms that appear with the new labor market dynamics. It is the case for subcontracted, commissioned, home workers, and many other forms difficult to denominate.

The situation became even worst with the increase of precarious forms of labor, which not only exist in the informal but also in the formal sector. Precariousness characterizes the relationship with the labor process ('activity status'), but also the social relations of production ('employment status'), as well as the social division of labor (occupation-industry sectors and occupational groups).

The common trait of precarious labor in the three dimensions is the 'weak working relation'. Regarding 'activity status' this weak relation manifests itself in an irregular, intermitent, labor relation with succesive movements from employment to unemployment and vice versa, and even to inactivity. Regarding 'employment status', it manifests itself in the conditions under which the process of buying and selling labor takes place, blurring the difference between the salaried and the self- employed conditions, which in turns makes actual salaried workers to appear as self-employed workers. These are cases of contract relations that do not guarantee the permanence of a relation of dependence: part-time, temporary, contracts not entitled to compensation for layoffs, fringe benefits, leave of absence in case of illness, salary bonuses, paid vacations.

In reference to occupation-industry sectors, certain ones have a greater probability of opening the way to precarious labor. It is the case of occupations that are on the way to disappearing or that are redundant in terms of the needs of the productive structure such as domestic service.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Researchers who employ quantitative, statistical data, are used to worry about the non-reliability and/or low validity, or

inadequacy of national census and permanent household survey information. The worries are mostly placed on the data gathering process. But the focus needs to be moved now to the process of designing instruments that adequately portray new social phenomena. In countries like Argentina, where funds for conducting large social surveys at the national level are extremely scarce, most researchers turn to census and permanent household surveys for data.

Statistical sources are an intellectual construction, and statistical data have symbolic effects upon the generation of the scientific and political speeches that describe social reality. They are neither passive nor simply descriptive measurement tools. The categories they provide for social analysis should not be autonomous to the historical process and the needs to report on the transformation of the social reality. Keeping categories to collect data on family and labor unchanged give an unchanged image of society, thus impairing the knowledgeable recognition of current social problems.

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