

## ***EFFECTS OF LABOR PRECARIZATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT ON MEN AND ON GENDER EQUITY***

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### Abstract

The present article presents the results of a multidisciplinary research project undertaken with a gender perspective in Mexico and Argentina. The project studies those changes taking place in gender relations and in the life of the subjects that are due to transformations of the economic structure leading to a growing unemployment. The aim is to relate the profound changes taking place in the economy and within labor relations to the crisis of masculinity, showing some of its effects. The starting point for the research is the precarization of working conditions and unemployment that are typical of today's globalized neoliberal world. Specialists from different fields of the two countries participated in the project. The qualitative methodology of the project included various research techniques, such as deep interviews and life histories. The men that were interviewed came from the middle and upper classes with a high level of education. The research presents certain results and conclusions that contribute to the reflection on the effects of structural transformations on the lives of men, families, and on gender relations, in terms of the problems, pathologies, and profound crisis created, but also on the possible positive changes that might take place.

*Key words:* Gender, masculinity, labor precarization, unemployment, crisis

## ***EFFECTOS DEL DESEMPLEO Y LA PRECARIZACIÓN LABORAL EN LOS HOMBRES Y EN LA EQUIDAD DE GÉNERO***

### Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar resultados de la investigación multidisciplinaria, realizada en México y Argentina, con perspectiva de género, que se realizó para estudiar cambios en las relaciones de género y en la vida de los sujetos, derivados de transformaciones en la estructura económica, fundamentalmente del empleo. Se trata de vincular los profundos cambios económicos y laborales con la crisis de la masculinidad y algunos de sus efectos. La investigación tiene como base la precarización laboral y el desempleo, característicos del mundo actual, neoliberal y globalizado. La investigación se realizó con la participación de especialistas, de distintas disciplinas, de los dos países. Es una investigación cualitativa en la que se utilizaron diversas técnicas de investigación, como entrevistas en profundidad e historias de vida. Se realizó entrevistando a hombres de clase media y alta, con alto nivel de escolaridad. Aporta reflexiones, resultados y conclusiones acerca de los efectos de cambios estructurales en la vida de los hombres, las familias y las relaciones entre los géneros, en términos de problemas, patologías, profundas crisis y también posibles cambios positivos que pueden presentarse.

*Palabras clave:* Género, masculinidad, precarización, desempleo, crisis.

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## ***EFEITOS DO DESEMPREGO E DA PRECARIZAÇÃO DO TRABALHO NOS HOMENS E NA EQUIDADE DE GÊNERO***

### Resumo

O artigo tem como objetivo apresentar os resultados da pesquisa multidisciplinar, feita no México e na Argentina, com perspectiva de gênero, que realizou-se para estudar mudanças nas relações de gênero e na vida dos sujeitos, derivados de transformações na estrutura econômica, fundamentalmente do emprego. Tenta-se vincular as profundas mudanças econômicas e trabalhistas com a crise da masculinidade e alguns dos seus efeitos. A pesquisa tem como base a precarização do trabalho e o desemprego, características do mundo atual, neoliberal e globalizado. A pesquisa foi feita com a participação de especialistas de diferentes disciplinas, dos dois países. É uma pesquisa qualitativa em que foram utilizadas diferentes técnicas de pesquisa, como entrevistas em profundidade e histórias de vida. Foi feita entrevistando homens de classe média e alta, com alto nível de escolarização. Contribui com reflexões, resultados e conclusões sobre os efeitos de mudanças estruturais na vida dos homens, das famílias e das relações entre os gêneros, em termos de problemas, patologias, profundas crises e também possíveis mudanças positivas que possam apresentar-se.

*Palabras chave:* Gênero, masculinidade, precarização, desemprego, crise.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important social problems is the persistence of gender inequality. There are changes taking place that show that in certain social sectors more equal relations are being constructed, and there is a belief that one of the factors contributing to this change is the fact that women are being incorporated into the labor market.

The profound changes in the world of employment occur within a context and result from structural economic relations, characteristic of the current development of capitalism, which have been categorized as “neoliberal” in a “globalized” world.

From 2005 we have undertaken an international and multidisciplinary research project, in which researchers from Mexico and Argentina participated with the objective of understanding the effects of work precarization and unemployment on masculine hegemony. We understand the latter to be characterized by the fact that men have been the main economic providers for the family, and this has been a source of their power within gender relations. Following repeated economic crisis, the changes taking place in the world of work have led to the situation where men can no longer accomplish this important mandate of masculinity. Thus, important societal transformations have taken place, as the need for women to work outside their homes has increased in society, in order to contribute to the sustainability of their families. The disruption of gender relations that ensued provoked a great number of problems, but has also allowed for the possibility of constructing greater gender equality. The authors of this project were able to validate many of these changes (Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007; Jiménez & Tena, 2007).

The labor crisis that is experienced in countries such as Argentina and Mexico, among many others, regardless

of their particularities and degrees of complexity and economic deterioration, is related to various aspects, such as the implementation of a neoliberal model of development characterized by its open and competitive economy, its market regulation and the decreasing participation of the State in the economy; technological and organizational transformations seeking lower costs, notwithstanding the decline in workforce and employment conditions; bankruptcy of companies incapable of adjusting to the new conditions of unequal competition and the increase of imports characteristic of the global economy; privatization of State owned industries and public services; and the weakening of government employees which are substituted by entrepreneurs of limited or no experience in the corresponding sector, as seen in the recent Mexican case.

It is interesting to note that when the current research project started in 2005, unemployment was present in both countries. However, Mabel Burin and Irene Meler, project correspondents in Argentina, had already decided some months ago to refer to the respective process in their country as labor “precarization”. This has come about because Argentina has managed to advance notably in only a few years – at least this is what their economic growth markers indicate. Whereas Mexico, closely tied to the United States, its recessions and problems, as well as its limited diversity in its production and exports, reports less than half of Argentina’s annual growth. To cope with the situation, Mexico would have to generate one million jobs a year, and given current growth rates – less than 3.5% –, this is totally impossible. Thus, there is more and more unemployment each year. The Mexican government’s bet is to guarantee investment, particularly foreign investment, more than required. Hence the insistence by the current government to perform a labor legislation reform project (which has been latent for over 20 years), which will leave workers helpless.

It must be acknowledged that this reform, if passed, will legalize the existing conditions of overexploitation, which are in the process of being generalized.

In general terms, both public opinion and the academic sector have acknowledged the existence of a new economic paradigm conceptualized in terms of neoliberalism and globalization, which is related to changes in employment conditions to such an extent that some authors have already talked about the end of labor (Rifkin, 1996).

The transformation of the labor market is subject to several analyses (Gómez, 1999). Some authors point out that, automation and robotization processes, the use of state of the art technology (Colon, 2000), the weakening of the public sector consequent with adjustment policies, the deficit reduction and governmental withdrawal from economic conduction or intervention, and the public sector privatization policies (De la Garza, 2012; Mackinlay, 1999), which operated with the logic of public employment generation, are factors responsible for the decreasing demand of employment.

A remarkable transformation in the structure of the companies (post-Fordist companies), both produced by the processes of mergers and concentration, the demise of uncompetitive enterprises (Coriat, 1995; Rivoli, 2009), and the so-called process of outsourcing of functions, which were a constituent part of integrated companies in the past, is also displayed. These processes are accompanied by legislative deregulation measures of the labor market and decreased impact of corporate structures, especially syndicalism (Neffa, 1994), within the employer-worker relationship. Changes in the job structure, the closure of sources of employment and deregulation, lead some authors to describe the globalization model as exclusionary (De Soto, 2001; Jacquard, 1995; Sotelo, 2012; Standing, 2011), which expels from the labor market, and therefore from consumption, a large contingent of the population.

On the other hand, these processes affect countries and regions with convergence processes in a different manner (Alba, 1998; Diaz, 1995). Parallel to these processes, there is an increasing informality of production processes and services, both by the so-called “work in black” in business working in the formal sector, and the expansion of informal market (Bayon, Roberts & Saravi, 1998; Busso & Pérez, 2010; Charmes, 1998;), defined as one that develops outside the existing regulations. At the level of workers’ perceptions, changes might have been terrifying. In the past, they used to thrive in a productive culture that praised the values of stable jobs, regulation and dependent relations (Arrospide, Barringer & Bedoya, 1998), in which employment rights prevail and benefits exist, as well as the desire for a worthy retirement.

In contrast, the new job market appeals to the entrepreneurial mindset, the “freelance” work in a free market, deregulated, with minimum benefits and minimum guarantees of a secured future and autonomy.

The gap between the perception of decent jobs and market opportunities creates frustration, depression, impotence, stress and family conflicts, bonding and social network breaks, in addition to the inevitable economic results of unemployment or underemployment which prevents the full utilization of individual and social productive skills, and consequently, generates the destruction of productive forces and social decline at the personal and family levels.

It is true that, as outlined in various studies conducted in Mexico and Argentina, there is a greater propensity for wives and children to work as a survival strategy, when the heads of the households no longer receive income or when their income decreases (Cerrutti & Centeno, 2000; García & Pacheco, 2000; García & de Oliveira, 1998). However, it is still important to explore the meaning of the decrease or loss of income in men who had previously been considered as the economic providers and heads of their families. It is relevant to examine what this means in terms of men’s self-perception, when changes occur in the family as a result of the new circumstances and a process is experienced towards a possible redefinition of the roles or acknowledged social functions, as well as subsequent changes and conflicts that arise between the traditional normative values and the emerging ones.

The focus of this research has been related to the so-called “crisis of masculinity”, being understood in terms of a series of social and subjective redefinitions of the public and private functions of men. The traditional roles assigned to them, which gave rise to the stereotypes of masculinity in our society are been questioned.

It is a fact that at least in some societies and social groups it is still true that there are stereotypes of what it means to be a man and that they constitute the standards which determine the assessment of men’s actions and the ways in which men relate to other men and women. The research in Mexico found that one of these fundamental demands lies in the field of male sexuality (understood as performance). Another relevant demand is that men who want to be considered “real men” must assume the role of providers of the family, which is also synonymous with becoming responsible in a world of adults. A serious problem for these men, who are characteristic of the “dominant or hegemonic masculinity”, is that we live in an age in which the provider does not depend solely on the skills and vocational training of the individual affected by these standards. To be a provider depends upon labor market movements, which are the result of a change of economic

paradigm towards the free market and the decreasing participation of the State.

All of these changes are having serious consequences on the lives of individuals, families and people, and it is relevant to explore the relationship of the labor crisis with the masculinity crisis in the terms set forth above and the various ways in which men experience these processes, how they resist or adapt within their own families and its possible restructuring. As part of this research project these issues were addressed by gathering testimonials of some of the affected men affected by the situation.

## METHOD

The research project has focused mainly on linking aspects of the socio-economic reality of the contemporary world with people's lives, the structuring of their psyche, and their various kinds of crises. Twenty researchers of different specialties from Mexico and Argentina have participated in this project. This has allowed approaching the problem from various angles: psychological, psychoanalytical, anthropological, sociological, and economical and has yielded significant results for a multidisciplinary form of analysis.

### *Participants*

The population sample was selected according to the specialized field of the researchers. The sociologists selected a random sample of 50 people who were interviewed in Mexico and Argentina according to the following characteristics: men between 25 and 70 years of age, married or living together with children; unemployed men or those that suffered a reduction in position or salary; who lived with a woman that they supported; that were employed in non-manual work, with a university degree or higher, and belonging to the middle or upper classes. In the case of the psychoanalysts, they chose for their study those male patients that showed the same characteristics.

### *Instruments*

The research was done using a qualitative methodology that included in-depth interviews and life histories. The sociologists and anthropologists carried out semi-structured interviews where they took up central issues that related to the hegemonic mandates of masculinity with their families of origin, their working life histories, their unemployed condition and diverse consequences of the latter on the personal and family levels of the subjects.

### *Procedure*

In the initial stage a research project was developed by the very same researchers that later on wrote the articles

that appeared in two books. Afterwards the work of coordination was achieved through four research seminars that were held separately during a four years period.

Each of the authors achieved his/her goals in the research project in relation to the basic postulates of his/her specialized field. A state of the art revision of the pertinent bibliography was undertaken, and the theoretical framework and methodologies were defined, as were also the basic concepts. Fieldwork was undertaken; the interviews were analyzed, completing the final stages of the project.

## RESULTS

Depression, violence, drug-dependency, death, are some of the effects on men and their psyches due to lack of work or from having a substantial reduction of work, of being "precarized". Particularly, the experience shows, when it comes to men who are "real men", i.e. who have lived almost all their lives fulfilling the mandates of hegemonic masculinity and are not allowed to "fail", particularly in the area which is fundamental when defining themselves. Two of the subjects that were interviewed and that presented symptoms of being depressed died sometime after they gave their testimony.

These kind of socio-psychological phenomena, constituted by serious pathologies that may be rooted in the social structure and the social construction of gender, continually appear in all the in-depth interviews that were conducted, as well as in the specific life histories of the subjects who were interviewed. However, they can also be documented in a more social and general manner, in other social groups and regions of Mexico. Such is the case of the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, which is an evil result, among other factors, of prevailing injustice and impunity, as well as retaliation for the changes in gender relations, which are clearly sustained in the fact that women have an income thanks to their work in the manufacturing industry. For the researcher in Human Rights, Aguiar (1998) in Valladares (2007), unemployment or the possibility of losing a job leads to worry about death, which may be physical, mental or social, since it curtails the continuity of the life project of the couple, giving rise to uncertainty. That is to say that, unemployment makes the couple feel hopeless and undergo anguish of catastrophic proportions, by shaking the stable framework upon which it rests.

"... Unemployment triggers a traumatic situation that attacks the three psychological spaces of unemployed people or those threatened by unemployment. Unemployment marginalizes socially, generates profound personal and family crisis, affects the body in accidents or psychosomatic illnesses, since it generates a load of tension and violence

that manifests against others or against himself, generating unpredictable effects” (Valladares, 2007. p. 20).

Thus the overload of frustration and uncertainty falls on the couple and the family, causing violence and uneasiness. In men, emotional ailments like depression, alcoholism or drug addiction are expressed, which are ultimately forms of violence inflicted on themselves and / or transmuted into violent behavior towards others, especially on wives and children. The crisis caused by unemployment is “embodied” by all the people who suffer from it, both men and women. However, experience tells us that the common social and family reaction is to minimize these incidents of male domination and control conducts known as “micro-machismos”, and how masculine violence tends to be socially justified, because the man is in “crisis”. It is interesting to note in this paper that this research project came about only as a personal concern derived from articles that began to appear approximately four years ago, reporting several cases of males with violent behavior that murdered their families and later commit suicide (or at least tried). The media attributed these cases to mental health problems. No one referred to the conditions and “life demands” on these subjects. After further research, it was discovered that these men had lost their jobs. From this, the scientific and social need of making these processes more visible and to provide a sociological interpretation with the gender perspective at its core were evident.

The tragedy of *violent-unemployed-men* is that they are doomed to recycle their discomfort, composed of frustration, anger, blame, resentment, which will lead to illness, loneliness and isolation. Victims of the economic system unconsciously become victimizers of themselves and the persons close to them.

The investigation shows that losing a job, earning less or providing less support to the family, leads men to inadequate forms of behavior with regards to their family. Some of the subjects recognized this fact as can be seen in the following testimony: “When you don’t have a job you begin to see things in a more radical manner, you are much more sensitive and everything bothers you. You become angrier and you begin to accumulate things. You become desperate and you start fights with you wife and with your children. You suffer great changes and it becomes more difficult to control yourself: you become violent.” (Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007; p. 155).

Lucioni (2007) reports in her recent research that the men interviewed began to reflect on the meaning of being “men” in different ways. They began to pose questions that their parents never did, or at least never posed in the same way. Undoubtedly, gender configurations have been strongly shaken in recent times, which also affect this

subjectivity. The boundaries of the definition of “man” have become more confusing and flexible. But this flexibility does not indicate that it is the same in all settings. On the contrary, it is characterized by emerging at different speeds and not necessarily in the same direction. It is no longer proclaimed that women do not have the same rights, or that only men are characterized by their role as providers. At present, the deployment of multiple configuration modes of social bonding became evident as well as the production of subjectivity. Also, because of this, the masculine violence and male provider relation is not configured in the same way in all contexts. It is clear that the deterioration in the level of income affects people, especially as the construction of their subjectivity has evolved around performing as economic providers, but it is evident too that all changes produced within the family system or the social system or even the individual changes, do not have the same linear effect on other systems or dimensions (Ynoub, 1996). On the other hand, in the extreme, it was found that men were extremely pressured by the economic crisis. Unable to generate adequate responses, men fell in frequent episodes of violence. Such behavior confirms the importance of the social situation in the type of bonding established within the families. This kind of contextualization is relevant since it is increasingly indispensable to avoid further generalizations.

There is no doubt that the processes of economic and social deterioration derived from unemployment as a life experience and / or the decline of employment together with the perception of constant insecurity, as the constant risk of losing employment, has not only economic but also psychological consequences on the individuals. The psychological consequences of employment problems in men, are particularly related to affective problems (moods, emotions and feelings) associated with stress and depression, discomforts that sometimes men not always relate consciously with the causes, and therefore, are not in a position to change immediately. The affective discomforts are understood not only as a result of economic disadvantages, but linked with a construction of masculinity as a duty that requires the demonstration of providing capabilities and economic superiority, safety and protection of the family, projecting himself as a figure of authority, which involves the overt denial of his fears and problems, since they are perceived as signs of weakness usually associated with being a woman.

Men that lose their job feel generally insecure and suffer in their self-esteem. As one of the subjects put it: “There comes a moment, in which you begin to say I’m not so good in my job, my qualifications are not so good, that’s why I’m not employed. I lost everything. I’m going to try to sell myself, but I think nobody will want to buy

me “(Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007 p. 154). This situation is so stressful that they become sick.

Another subject expressed the following: “I feel that I’m not young anymore. I can’t be so stressed. I feel that my body goes to sleep. I can’t sleep. I think I’m depressed... That’s bad. I don’t have the money to seek medical help. It’s not an excuse, what I need is to have a job, money, that will cure me” (Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007. p. 155).

On her part, Ravazzola (2007) found positive elements in the changes, in family relationships and the roles of men:

With regard to the concerns about the crisis families must face, where the father-provider has lost his job, it has been found that the stories linked to the values and appreciation for the performances of each member have to change, including the appreciation of other ways of performing useful tasks and functions that meet the family needs. Also the ideas related to the personal prestige of men must change, so that no longer they are only associated with their functions as providers of goods, but also as providers of knowledge, experience and managers of specific activities that benefit their wives, children and themselves in more democratic and balanced ways to organize the family. To build a more flexible subjectivity may be an interesting proposal.

There were 10 interviews showing that some of the male subjects wanted to live differently, and that the economic crisis and unemployment served to question their masculinity and to try to change. “I don’t want to repeat the story of my parents where my father was always isolating himself and had problems with smoking and alcoholism... I want to enjoy my children. My father believed that in order to educate me he had to hit me with a stick. Now that I’m unemployed and have no money, as a father I have changed. Before I was tired, I didn’t want my children to bother me, now I want to be with them.” (Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007. p. 109).

Rascón (2007) suggests that men need to change the meaning of gender concepts that allow the formulation of new ways of being and acting within the household, with the partner and the family, as well as in social and political development, so that the endeavor of loving and caring for himself becomes part of his masculine subjectivity.

In the specific case of labor related problems, the author proposes that thinking and talking about the discomforts produced by the feeling of failure, humiliation, powerlessness, so as to analyze the introspected meaning of the values that support the expectations he is meant to fulfill and are part of his personal conflict, helps men face the problem in a different manner, and they may even be capable of observing the political dimension of the situation. It is considered that it is crucial to analyze, especially in high and middle socio-economic classes, the permanent imposition of the

values that among other things, have focused on the job, the fundamental means to earn money, success and having access to the objects and situations that may grant men social prestige and power within the current cultural order, concepts that may have even alienated him from affective family ties and the parental role.

There is a fundamental issue. Although the incorporation of women into the workplace has been accelerating in the last decades, and that certain changes have taken place in domestic affairs, the truth is that men’s contribution to the economic value of homework has risen very little, growing from 15.8% of the total in 1996 to 20.46% in 2009; all the rest is done by women (Pedrero, 2009).

With deteriorating working conditions for both male and female workers, the increasing presence of married women in the job market is gaining importance for the economic upkeep of the family. When socially reproductive non-remunerated labors are included, the increasing relevance of female work is undisputable, both in the public and private spheres (García & Oliveira, 1998). It has been estimated that, in 1990, 38.2% of Latin American women, aged 15 years old and older, were economically engaged, while in 2010, the proportion had grown to 52.8% (García & Oliveira, 1998). Reality has shown that although many social, economic, and even cultural transformations have taken place, there is still much to be advanced in relation to gender equity. It is indispensable that public policies and institutions are proposed that enable women to work, receive a decent salary, and not have to work longer hours than men. It is also essential that men be incorporated into domestic housework, not as some sort of help, but rather as sharing equal responsibility with women. This is one of the crucial themes, present at least in Latin America.

For traditional men, even those with higher education, it is still a problem not to have a job, or that their wives earn as much as they do and support the house. In one of the testimonies this is very clearly stated: “When my children were ten or eleven years old, my wife started to work. Then the moment came, even before I lost my job, when she was earning the same as I was. That’s when the problems began. I don’t have a theory, it’s only that men are educated in a “machista” society, where it is the man who makes the money and supports the family. Before, we were afraid to retire, now we were afraid of becoming unemployed. Then everything in the family goes to pieces”. (Burin, Jiménez & Meler, 2007, p. 137)

## DISCUSSION

Gender relations do not take place in a vacuum. The feminine and the masculine are socio-cultural and historical

constructions that are being transformed and are affected by social and economic elements.

There are differentiated mandates for men and women. In the case of men, some of the basic mandates are to show strength, to be infallible, and to be able to support the family. These mandates imply the capacity to exercise power and define them as real men that are respected, and even admired, by their sentimental partners, their families, their equals, and by the whole of society.

We have documented that changes in the economic and labor structures are affecting the lives of people, men and women as well as their relationships. To lose one's job or to suffer a reduction in working conditions affects men and women in different ways. They also affect different men in different ways as there are individual factors, derived from their personal life histories, which determine how they experience the precarization of work.

These changes which are definitely harmful from the human development, social and human rights point of view have various impacts on gender relations and, while affecting and often giving rise to severe psychopathologies, in particular the increase of violence since anger is an emotion permitted to men by hegemonic masculinity, have also fostered in some cases the democratization of relations between the sexes, in specific couples. Hence, it is interesting to consider the idea of Mabel Burin, who expresses the possibility of seeing a crisis as an opportunity. On the other hand, despite the similarities, important differences between Mexico and Argentina were also found. One of those differences, related to the economy and the national project, has to do with the fact that in Argentina it is more relevant to talk about labor precarization or precarious employment, rather than unemployment. In the case of Mexico, besides an important level of precarization of work, there is enormous unemployment.

In both countries, men have been affected by these processes, but in the case of Argentina, as reported by Collin (2007), there are important nuances, as traditionally men in this country are more committed to raising the children and are more present in the households. In the Mexican case, because of the population studied (high and upper middle classes, with a high degree of education, well-paid positions both in the public and private sectors), we found that these men were used to living more vertical than democratic gender relations, that their homes presented a traditional distribution of work, and therefore losing their employment and staying at home not only implied a loss of income and social status, but also a position of power. The presence of men in the household implies serious problems for themselves as well as for their wives and children.

Hence, another important conclusion refers to the need for conducting research in specific contexts. This, we believe, will lead to a better understanding of these social phenomena, to contextualize them, to be more open minded to various approaches and scenarios that are sometimes totally opposing and that will enable us to avoid generalizations that are often not relevant.

It is fundamental to transform gender relations, rendering them more flexible and equitable, in order for the social subjects to enjoy a better life, to construct more harmonic families, and to be able to survive in a world marked by precarization, uncertainty, and the lack of opportunities and security.

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