

Comments to Neil Gilbert Working Paper.

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Comments to the Working Paper on the subject: Marriage Benefits to Encourage Family Life

The paper establishes some interesting questions underlined by premises. These premises can be discussed in order to guide the answers to the author's questions.

One authors' assumption rests on the value of marriage as a condition to ensure family stability, a second assumption is that children will be negative affected by parents breakdown, a situation lived more frequently by cohabiting partners. Effectively, statistics show that couples within marriage stay together longer than cohabiting couples, and also show that children from cohabiting couples present more cognitive and social development difficulties.

One question rise by Gilbert's paper underlined by those assumptions is: can public regulation of cohabitation create formal ties as binding as marriage?

Answer:

About the natural goodness of marriage, research as shown that 'statistical associations establishing that married couples stay longer together when compared with cohabiting couples do not tell us anything about whether marriage itself has protective effects' (Goodman and Greaves 2010). The authors found that pre-existing differences in the characteristics of couples that have chosen to cohabit or marry, rather than marriage itself, could account for some of the difference in the rate of separation for married and cohabiting couples.

Thus, parents' formal status will not be the condition explaining differences in staying together, but underlying observable differences among them. The differences the authors observed within their study included characteristics of the couple such as their education, occupational status and income, their housing tenure and the relationship quality of the couple (measured early in the child's life).

The study also found that these characteristics help enhancing relationship stability and as consequence lead to better outcomes for children. Some of the characteristics included in Goodman and Greaves' model and parents' relationship stability were:

1. Ethnicity: the mother being Black (Caribbean or African) is associated with a greater probability of separation and the mother being Indian with a lower probability of separation (relative to being White);
2. The mother being a Christian (relative to having no religion) has a negative association with the probability of separation;
3. The mother's own parents having separated has a positive association with the probability of separation;
4. The mother having a low level of education has a positive association with the probability of separation;
5. Having a low household income has a positive association with the probability of separation;
6. Not owning their own home has a positive association with the probability of separation;
7. The mother being young (in particular having a teenage pregnancy) has a positive association with the probability of separation;
8. Having an unplanned pregnancy has a positive association with the probability of separation; higher relationship quality of the parents reported when the child is 9 months old has a negative association with the probability of separation.

Considering these findings and valuing that marriage is a personal and private decision for responsible adults, therefore answer to the author's question is that the aims to inform a policy debate should not be on the merits of encouraging individuals to enter marriage before they bear children or creating formal ties as binding as marriage in regulations of cohabitation, but promoting some living conditions for couples as those indicated above. Policy also should be informed by research about the difficulties faced by minorities groups

to enjoy stability in their relationships; the values, practices, routines underlying lifestyles of religious people that enhance stability.

A second question underlined by the assumptions based on the natural goodness of marriage is: What incentives and disincentives for formation and dissolution of marriage bonds are generated by means tested social benefits such as social assistance, housing subsidies and children allowance?

Answering that question requires an earlier thinking, as Fiona Williams (2005) indicates, there is a need to know how 'this growing diversity is absorbed, interpreted and acted on, in the family realm'. The transformations quoted by Gilbert in his paper gives account of norms and lifestyles that encourage equality, and individualism expressing new ideas about the place and role of individuals in relation to their families and larger communities. These changes affect the way we live in family, and some of the consequences are family breakdown, a fact that is considered detrimental to children.

Williams makes a call for understanding how these new concepts are integrated into new perspectives on marriage, the roles of women and men, the relationship between generations and the role of children in families. In doing so, the author make a claim to learn 'from historical patterns and assume that as globalization and its concomitant forces play an ever greater role in family lives, the phenomenon of globalization itself will also be impacted by families, however they may be defined'.

Families *with agency* appear to be a huge consideration for policy making, where it is important to establish causal relationships carefully rather than to rely on statistical associations. Today people's commitments may be different: less dependent on blood or marriage ties, it does not mean there is a loss of commitment itself. Fiona Williams established in her study that people make morally informed responses to the contexts in which they find themselves. When faced with dilemmas, they draw on repertoires of values about care and commitment in order to work out what, in practice, would be the 'proper thing to do'.

Therefore, policies and social benefits need to focus on practical support for people to carry out their commitments, respecting and recognizing the diversity of these commitments. Policy debate should include the recognition of families' moral decisions, the ways they understand care and how manage interdependency. Policies should not only focus on self-sufficiency, policies should incorporate what matters to people in their family lives and personal relationships.

### Considerations for Latin America

Latin American families have faced changes in their age structure that challenges the protection and care systems; have been impacted by migration, especially of women; families also have been changed in their formation, dissolution, and structure. Lastly, intra-familiar dynamics in families have changed, especially sexual division of paid and not paid labour, challenging traditional patriarchal models. These transformations have left families challenged to reorganize their classical patterns of care and production.

Women have been especially affected by these changes, particularly when they live in vulnerable conditions. They have become in great numbers house holders, keeping at the same time the role of providing care for children and elderly. Social policies tend to be familiarized, loading women with great responsibilities under a conditioned transfer scheme, because, even though the weight of value of extended families networks in our culture, the main responsibility of ensuring the accomplishment of conditions asked by the state to be eligible for benefits, falls on the grandmothers, mothers and girls.

This last consequence shows the reproduction of cultural views of organizational structures about family constitution. Poor families in the social protection system are mainly represented by women and are stereotyped as hard to change. In relation to stereotypes about families, two main type casts about family conformations appeared among social programs, the conservative patterns of role distributions within the families, and the apportioning of blame by staff to families for the vulnerable social condition they live.

The relation between the notion of 'poor' family and its incapacity to change responds

to classical understandings about the 'culture of poverty' pulling together smaller stereotypes that, although false, have coalesced stealthily into monolithic and predictable beliefs about poor families grounded on a deficit perspective that only distinguishes families weaknesses and their difficulties for good parenting, such as the predominance of patriarchal and sexist relationships among family members. The condition of poor and needy would act, in the view of the staff, as an impediment to review and improve patterns of relationships, prompting instead quick fixes through which the unquestionably good intentions of staff meet with their low expectations about families. The lack of actions directed at the transformation of familial patterns only accentuate measures that confirm the role of men as breadwinners and of women in their roles as wives and mothers, restricting children's opportunities to involve their fathers in the understanding and solution of their problems, and placing on the mothers only the responsibility of rearing. This, in turn, does not help challenging patterns of gender inequality.

There is also a fixed construction about what good parental care should be, invalidating other possible arrangements or understandings of parental practice in these families. The prevalent idea among social programs staff users correspond to 'broken families', which from their point of view are families characterized by single – parent arrangements, or by the involvement of step parents or extended families.

These preconceptions present a difficulty which is the lack of acknowledgement that other modern-day family arrangements are increasingly common among the Latin American, there is also a stigma towards them, as unworthy of social investment. In these two scenarios the notion of moral failure appears as a reason to legitimize marginalization. This situation contributes to the process of making invisible the existence and contribution of less advantaged social groups, excluding them from reciprocal relationships, an aspect that in turn denies a citizen condition that safeguard peoples' rights.

When social policy accentuates the value of marriage, and the possibility of stability as unique feature of married couples, it may increase the exclusion poor families face in regions like Latin America.

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