2

Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: The PROGRESA/ Oportunidades Programme in Mexico[1]

Maxine Molyneux

In Latin America as elsewhere in the world, gender bias and masculine prerogative have prevailed in social policy as in social life more broadly, with entitlements resting on culturally sanctioned and deeply rooted notions of gender difference and patriarchal authority. These have generally accorded with idealized assumptions about the asymmetric social positions occupied by the sexes with male breadwinners and female mother-dependents receiving benefits according to these normative social roles. Such assumptions have proved remarkably universal and enduring even where, as in Latin America, gender divisions have been modified by women's mass entry into the labour force and by equal rights legislation.

This chapter considers the changes and continuities in social policy provision in Latin America through a focus on the ways that women, in particular mothers, are positioned within the new anti-poverty programmes that have followed structural reform. It examines a flagship anti-poverty programme known as Oportunidades (Opportunities) established in Mexico at the end of the last decade.[2] Seen by some commentators as a quintessentially neoliberal programme, and embodying many of the main ideas of the 'New Poverty Agenda',[3] Oportunidades represents a novel combination of earlier social policy approaches with the contractarian, co-responsibility models associated with new approaches to social welfare and poverty relief. This chapter is in two main parts; the first provides the background context for the emergence of the new approaches to poverty; the second describes and critically examines the Mexican programme's selective construction of social need.

Social policy in Latin America prior to the reforms

In Latin America, low tax revenues and weak commitments to redistributive policies ruled out the development of effective, universal welfare systems. Only five countries, Argentina, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Chile and Cuba[4] developed a form of welfare state and, with the exception of the latter, none achieved universality of entitlement or coverage.[5] Nonetheless, from the late nineteenth century, if to

S. Razavi et al. (eds.), *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context*
© UNRISD 2006

widely different degrees, some forms of social provision began to evolve. These were principally concentrated on the education and health sectors and, where Bismarckian models were influential, as in Mexico and Chile, state pension schemes, along with other forms of social insurance for privileged (predominantly masculine) sectors of the labour and armed forces, accompanied the process of state formation.

From the first decade of the twentieth century social rights increased as a result of successful demands by organized labour and socialist parties for social reform, with an incremental assumption of social responsibility by governments. In the 1920s and 1930s 'improving the "race" ' in order to secure the conditions for development and head off threats of disorder became the leitmotif of the social reform and eugenics movements. Many women were among the promoters of 'social hygiene' and its derivative, the science of *puericultura* (child development). They energetically supported policy and legal changes which were maternalist in orientation, demanding benefits and services for mothers and children. Mothers were among the first to be recognized as social policy claimants whether as married women or as 'unfortunates', that is, impoverished single mothers. However, it was often stated in the discussion of these provisions that it was primarily in the interest of their *children* that women might receive benefits of a financial, educational or medical kind. In other words it was in the construction of children's needs that their mothers received entitlements, that is, in order to better fulfil their maternal responsibilities.

The era of nationalist state-centred development under corporatist populism was inaugurated by the crisis of 1929 but was more securely established in the post-war period. It brought some expansion in entitlements, notably for organized labour, the natural constituency of corporatist regimes and a relatively privileged sector for long afterwards. Social rights correspondingly expanded in Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Brazil among others, and even as populist corporatism waned, the technocratic developmentalism that replaced it continued to expand the social sector.

By the end of the 1960s all but the poorest states had established the main planks of social welfare, if at times in skeletal form. Health and education were publicly funded, and social insurance systems covered some categories of formal-sector workers. Regional policies were now influenced by the ECLAC (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) or *CEPALISTA* guidelines which drew on human capital theory to anchor social policy more firmly in a discourse of development priorities, as Latin American states presided over a rapid expansion of literacy programmes and primary education. At this time too, the 'basic needs' approach was gaining support, leading to some greater attention to 'subsistence rights'[6] through the provision of food to the poor, sanitary works, potable water and affordable housing. Positive growth rates, rapid urbanization and social mobilization, all caused Latin American states, irrespective of political inclination, to embark on programmes to meet rising social demands and expectations. These decades saw Latin America leading the developing countries in terms of social expenditure and social coverage. There was a corresponding