Social Policies and Women’s Empowerment: an Unfulfilled Commitment

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Since the 90’s, governments and public agencies have recognized the necessity to integrate gender perspective in development policies, in order to have a real impact on women’s quality of life. Nevertheless, twenty years later, this postulate is still a pending issue in public policy. This paper focuses on the evolution of public policy implemented in Mexico with the purpose of both: reducing rates of extreme poverty, and improving social and economic conditions of poor women. First, we will present a short overview of Mexican public programs focused on women poverty; next we will evaluate Oportunidades, the most important anti-poverty program in the last 12 years, which explicitly claims to integrate gender perspective in its design. Finally, we will evaluate the probable impact on women’s empowerment of Prospera, the new anti-poverty program recently launched by the Mexican government as the next step in the efforts to alleviate poverty.

With this overview, we will demonstrate that, even though they enhance economic autonomy of poor women, those programs are reproducing and enhancing traditional gender roles, and ultimately, they have negative impact on women’s well-being; since they increase their workload and put a strain on the close relationships.

This analysis considers the following theoretical approach: care and social politics (CEPAL, 2013); strategic interests and practical needs (Molyneux, 1985); different dimensions of power/invisible power (Rowlands, 1995 and 1998).

The awareness that women's poverty has particular characteristics has been present in the design of social policies since the 80’s. The lines of action established in the Beijing Platform (1995) included commitments to assist female-headed households, increase the women’s participation in the community, especially in decision-making processes, and expand their access to productive resources. Reviewing the evolution of social programs in Mexico, one might think that in the last 15 years, women have become the center of the strategies in order to fight poverty and have gained access to previously unattainable resources. However, gender inequality persists, and poverty remains as one of the factors that aggravate the latter. Becoming the target of incidence of social programs, has undoubtedly brought advantages, but also significant costs for women living in poverty; and their empowerment -ultimate goal declared by politicians and program designers- remains an unfulfilled promise.

The main objective of this overview of social programs in Mexico is to demonstrate that its failure to address the profound causes of poverty and the lack of women’s empowerment is intrinsically linked to their design. A design that has been internally and internationally celebrated, and therefore keeps on being the predominant approach for

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governmental action, as we can see in the Prospera program, launched in September 2014. There are two main problems of this approach to social programs with a gender perspective. On the one hand, it is the simplistic conception of women empowerment, that relates empowerment exclusively to meeting their basic practical needs, without even considering the strategic interests of the gender (Molyneux, 1985 Young, 1998), resulting in an ignorance of the dimension of close relationships (Rowlands, 1998; Meza et al., 2002). On the other hand, the central role of women in the design of social programs responds to an instrumental view of its social function, as a more effective way of enhancing the material conditions of the family. This instrumental approach reinforce traditional gender roles, and does not allow to modify the dimension of power from within (Rowlands, 1998; Meza et al., 2002).

We will begin with a brief review of the conceptual framework for the empowerment of women, as well as the evolution of social policies with gender perspective in Mexico, to focus on the evaluation of the program Progresa/Oportunidades which has been the main strategy to fight extreme poverty in Mexico since 1997. Finally, we will analyze to what extent modifications in the program that give rise to the Prospera program in the current administration, have the potential to change past trends and promote the actual empowerment of women.

**Empowerment, a gender-blind concept?**

Marc Zimmerman’s definition of empowerment is probably the most general, and also the starting point for most studies. It define empowerment as "a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them" (Zimmerman 1995: 581). Being a concept directly related to power, even in studies without gender perspective, authors consider as factors of empowerment not only greater access to and control over resources but also critical understanding of social and political environment, as well as increasing feelings of value and social status (Kroeker, 1995: 752; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995: 569).

This very definition of empowerment allows us to understand the particular problem of the subordinate condition of women, as long as the critical understanding of the social environment includes the analysis of power relations that cause and maintain gender
inequality. Hence, unlike the definitions from social psychology, feminists emphasize the collective nature of women’s empowerment (Rowlands, 1995 and 1998; Batiwala, 1998; Young, 1998; Meza et al, 2002; Riano and Okali, 2008) as a process by which women develop the ability to organize themselves in order to increase their self-confidence, affirm their right to make autonomous decisions and control resources (Rowlands, 1998: 216).

The distinction of Rowlands (1995, 1998) of four types of power allows us to understand the complexity of the empowerment process in the case of women. Definitely, it is still imperative to eliminate the power that men have over women, the conventional definition of power, which entails relations of obedience in decision-making process, and primarily concerns the ability to impose on other’s will. It is the zero-sum relationship: the more power males have, the less power women have; but also vice versa.

Focusing on this traditional conceptualization of power, makes us forget that there are three other types of power: the power to stimulate other’s actions, leadership that is even more effective if it is also the power to act with others. Here the power is not exercised at the expense of others, but as a win-win relationship. This capacity of collective action is built on the power from within, which allows to overcome internalized oppression and subtle power, exercised through the internalized messages that tell us who we are, and also who we should be.

From this complex understanding of power relations derives the need to analyze independently the dimensions of empowerment. For social psychology, the empowerment dimensions relevant for the analysis are: individual (people); organizational (formally or informally constituted groups) and community. From the perspective of gender, it is more relevant to analyze, besides the personal, the collective and close relationships dimension of empowerment (Rowlands, 1995). If personal empowerment allows to have confidence in our own abilities and awareness of how power operates from within, the collective dimension enable us to exercise power to, allowing a joint action and cooperation in order to change social structures and public policies. The importance of this dimension for the empowerment of women is illustrated by the studies of participation and empowerment, which indicate that women often limit themselves to participate as assistants, or in local level decisions, while men seek leadership and to be representatives of the collective interests (Itzhaky and York, 2000).
Finally, for women, the dimension of close relationships is frequently the most difficult to change, because, -unlike the collective dimension- women face alone relationships with family or with colleagues in the workplace. In addition, close relationships, even with very pronounced gender inequality, are also a source of emotional support and affection, hence renegotiating power relations usually introduces tensions in these networks of support and care (Rowlands, 1998).

From this perspective, and as discussed below, the social programs that claim to seek the empowerment of women, ignore these complex distinctions about power and are built on a single element of the definition of empowerment: gaining greater access to and control over resources, understanding, furthermore, resources in a very simplistic way, as access to economic resources exclusively. Hence, the discourse of empowerment, although present in the development programs and strategies, has remained at the good intentions stage, and with the pass of time it has lost the ability to correct errors and suggest effective strategies in order to improve the situation of women (Rowlands, 1995, 1998; Batliwala, 1998; Wieringa, 1999).

Development and Gender: overview of dominant discourses
There is a consensus that gender approach is incorporated into the debate about development when Ester Boserup publish Woman’s Role in Economic Development (1979). Prior to this report, development programs considered women only in their reproductive dimension, as wives and mothers, whose poverty status would be overcome by increasing the productive capacity of men. (Schmukler, 1998; Arriagada, 1998). Boserup’s report was a watershed which demonstrated that development policies have not improve the situation of women in poor societies; on the contrary, in some cases they have had negative effects, by decreasing their status in the communities and limiting their access to means of production, including land ownership. Consequently, Women in development (WID) approach arises, calling for women’s inclusion in productive activities, nevertheless without questioning their role in household reproductive tasks. On the one hand, these programs focus on satisfying the practical needs of women, through independent wages, as well as access to education and health. However, satisfying practical needs is not conceived as an instrumental strategy that would lead to the fulfillment of the strategic interests. On the
contrary, it’s only the strategy to align reproductive tasks with the dominant concept of
development. That’s how some presuppositions emerge, assumptions that still dominate the
logic of social programs. These are:
1. There is a positive association between women’s level of education and lower rates of
fertility, as well as of infant and maternal mortality. At the same time, level of education is
positively related to the investment in children’s education.
2. The independent wage of women results in an enhancement of children’s living
conditions, particularly in better nutrition.
3. Credits granted to women, not only benefit the family but also financial institutions,
since women are more committed when it comes to loan repayment.

These conclusions of implemented programs became axioms as if they were
reflecting the essence of women and not their specific condition in the culturally built
power relations. Women have become the protagonists of cash transfer programs or of
micro-credits for productive projects, whose objective is not women’s empowerment but
the enhancement of family conditions. Women have become the *development bearers*
(Young, 1998), responsible for health tasks, family planning, children’s education and
household wage generation.

Although this approach is questioned, it kept on prevailing in the practice. In its
discourse, the need to modify the profound causes of inequality is recognized. However,
this discourse contrasts with the design of the projects, that reproduce the classic patterns of
the sexual division of labor: the productive projects are designed exclusively for women, in
activities such as alimentation or child-care, traditionally perceived as women’s
responsibility. Those are projects with low investment in technology, with intense manual
labor, and the logic of the informal sector, with the precariousness that it entails. As we will
notice in the review of the programs implemented in Mexico, they increase the workload of
women, without caring how relations inside the domestic unit and in society altogether, are
modified. At best, it is considered that with a generational change, the daughters won’t
have to repeat their mother’s destiny (Arriagada, 1998; Schmukler, 1998; Enriquez et.al,
2003).

In the nineties due to the crisis of the social model of the State and the austerity
programs, the situation grew worse, as the State shifts the responsibility of providing
resources to the Market and the family. In the case of the latter, the State leans on the unpaid work performed by women, in order to provide food, child and sick care, or to find strategies to generate alternative income for the family (Schmukler, 1998; Young, 1998; Riquer, 2000; Arriagada, 2006; Molyneux, 2006; Riquaño and Okali, 2008). In Latin America, women massively entered the labor market, but mainly in the informal work, and without renegotiating their reproductive responsibilities.

Due to the neo-liberal ideology, the discourse of co-responsibility and co-management was incorporated to the social programs. The poor must take responsibility for overcoming their condition, and the State’s intervention is limited to the provision of conditions to develop capacities. Education, health care and self-generation of productive activities are key strategies through which individuals establish mechanisms to face the risks of the uncertain economic context. In addition, the neoliberal discourse emphasizes on the condition of efficiency, by rapidly integrating the previously stated presupposition that women are the most efficient instrument in order to ensure the development of children’s capabilities. The strategies promoted by international agencies, national governments and also by civil society organizations, includes women’s empowerment as a central goal, but this understanding of empowerment –in alignment to the rise of individualistic values- does not integrate the collective or the close relationships dimensions. It simply considers that the women’s access to an independent income will increase their status in the family and community, at the same time as it will enhance their self-esteem and their capacity to make autonomous decisions. Without denying the importance of independent income for individual autonomy and the empowerment of women, it is clear that these strategies focus on how women must change, without questioning the power relationships existing not only in society, but also within the family. Empowerment demands that people not only gain access to resources, but also control their use; while social programs decide and control the use of transferred cash to satisfy the needs of the family, of children mainly, reinforcing in women the traditional view that the needs of the mothers of family are equal to the needs of the family.

In short, there is already awareness that poverty does not affect men and women the same way, that for women it is harder to overcome poverty, because of their family responsibilities and because of structural discrimination in the labor market. Social program
funders also recognize the need of integrating women into productive activities, through training, education and credits. However, as we will analyze in the case of social programs in Mexico, women are still seen as means and not as end in themselves, for which the potential of empowerment of these programs is still scarce.

**Social Policies in Mexico**

The model of social policies that emerged in the forties and remains until 1982, corresponded to what Filgueira and Filgueira (2002) call Dual Welfare State: on the one hand, insurance mechanisms for workers are built, in the case of strong syndicates such as oil, with high benefits. On the other hand, big sections of the population –urban poor people, peasants, and informal workers- are excluded from these mechanisms and depend on the social networks of reciprocity (Tetreault, 2012). The operating system of social protection corresponded to the Corporatist Welfare Regime of Esping-Andersen, and therefore it reinforced the patriarchal model of the family. The benefits of workers were designed for the family, conceived as the idealized and traditional structure, with a traditional division of roles: The male as the only provider, and the woman in charge of reproductive tasks\(^2\). Between 1982 and 1988, Mexico endured foreign debt crisis and was forced to implement structural adjustment programs, designed by the International Monetary Fund, according to the neoliberal ideology. The social cost of adjustment policies, as well as the political crisis originated from the massive electoral fraud in 1988, forced the government to implement the first major targeted social program: The National Solidarity Program (Pronasol, 1989-1994), aimed on people living in extreme poverty. This program operated on the principle of co-responsibility, which responded to the conservative interpretation that the poor become dependent of social aid and lose the motivation to solve their own problems. It also used discursively the approach of social capital strengthening, as a strategy to overcome the conditions of poverty. Actually, Pronasol was a program implemented with electoral aims, without evaluation mechanisms or transparency in resources allocation.

\(^2\) Even nowadays, women live the consequences of this model. According to the most recent data of the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy (Coneval, 2015:112), 81% of women have indirect access to health services, through their relationship with men.
The year 1994 ends with another economic crisis, the Mexican banking system is rescued with public aid, and new austerity measures are implemented. Between 1995 and 1997 there were no coherent strategies to combat poverty, while poverty increased to 60% or 70%, according to different sources (Tetreault, 2012). As we have pointed out, structural reforms and the cuts in social policies implied an increase in women’s workload and responsibilities. The State’s retreat from protection tasks, forced poor women to assume greater loads of traditional reproductive work (alimentation, child care, taking care of sick and dependent people), at the same time they were forced to look for an additional wage in order to sustain family expenses, forcing women’s incorporations to the labor market, mainly as informal workers, arrangement adaptable to double working day.

In 1997, the Mexican government launched Education, Health and Alimentation Program (Progresa), which became paradigm of the combat against extreme poverty and laid foundations for subsequent programs, such as Oportunidades The Program of Human Development (2000-2012), and Prospera, Program of Social Inclusion (launched in September 2014). Although these programs are not the only anti-poverty strategies, they have become emblematic policy, and have marked the social imaginary of poverty, the ways of fighting it and the role of women in this task.

The design of these programs corresponds to the following assumptions (Arriagada and Mathivet, 2007; Gammage and Orozco, 2008; León, 2011; Tetreault, 2012; Huesca, 2014):

1. In order to maintain fiscal discipline, the programs must be cost efficient, therefore targeted on extreme poverty exclusively.

2. People living in poverty, especially in extreme poverty, cannot overcome their condition because of restraints on their competitiveness, which impede their access to the labor market. Once their develop capacities, they will be able to generate their own income and will overcome the transgenerational poverty.

3. Overcoming the transgenerational poverty is a task shared between the government and the poor. It is recognized that people living in poverty are not passive beings, for they try to improve their situation by their own efforts.

4. The family is where reproductive and generational processes take place; therefore, it is also where behaviors and believes can be changed. Family is still conceptualized
in its traditional model: The father, who is the economic provider, the mother, who is taking care of the children, and other family members.

5. Women are the main agents of change and the most efficient instruments to assure that the money given by the government improve alimentation, health and the education of children.

Those programs consist of a conditional cash transfer to families living in extreme poverty. The resources are delivered mainly to women and are destined to education and alimentation. In order to keep the right of receiving this subsidy, women must demonstrate that their children under the age of 18, attend regularly to school and that the whole family attends to the scheduled appointments in health centers. Also, they must participate in workshops on health and nourishment. Although formally, the allowance is not conditioned to performing community work, the latter is expected, and promoted by the Committee of Communitarian Promotion, formed mostly by women, whose unpaid job is to promote the development of the community where they live.

**Twelve years after: summary evaluation of Oportunidades**

One of the undeniable advantages of the *Oportunidades* program is its evaluation framework, including impact’s quantitative evaluations and qualitative analysis of household dynamics, as well as the perception of beneficiaries. In this paper we will only synthetize findings related to the impact of this social program in the women’s empowerment. However, it is important to highlight the discrepancy between the declarations of the Mexican Government or International agencies, such as the World Bank, who talk about success, efficiency and integral design of the program, and the evaluations of specialists, that problematize positive impacts. Bearing in mind that the main objective of the program was to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty, the goal wasn’t accomplished. According to Enciso (2015), after 12 years of *Oportunidades*, in the 38.5% of the households, the children, once their own families formed, became beneficiaries. Even if we consider this program as a strategy to simply alleviate poverty, it is hard to talk about success: According to the author, in the first years of functioning (until 2006) none of the families improved their socioeconomic conditions enough to leave the program; in 2007, it was accomplished by 4% of the families; between 2009 and 2010, by the 5.5%; in 2011, the
22.3% and in 2012, by only the 20.6%. And in 2014, a quarter of the families (25.5%) still has no access to proper alimentation. These summary conclusions are endorsed by the Report on Social Policy of Coneval\(^3\) (2015), as well as by investigators like Cortés et al., 2007; Tetreault (2012) or Huesca (2014).

The positive evaluation is based on the short-term impacts on children alimentation, school enrollment extended to secondary and upper secondary levels, or on the improvements in children’s health (Escobar and González, 2002 y 2005a,b; Agudo, 2008; Saavedra and García, 2012). The positive impact on schooling is particularly interesting for our approach, for this has been the most significant in the case of girls and mainly in the case of indigenous girls; this fact is attributed to the design of the program that granted higher scholarships to girls than to boys. The extended school enrollment of girls is also associated to a positive impact in the decrease of teenager’s fertility rates (González, 2008; Agudo, 2008; Riquer, 2000). On the other hand, most researchers agree that school attendance has not decreased child labor, simply extended children’s workdays (Escobar and González, 2002, 2005a; Tetreault, 2012). The studies on women’s and girl’s use of time conclude that the decrease in unpaid domestic labors of girls, is mostly assumed by their mothers and above all, by grandmothers (Molyneux, 2006; Gammage and Orozco, 2008), the latter demonstrates a null impact on the renegotiation of the sexual division of labor, a problem that we will analyze later in detail.

Other indicators of short-term impacts are problematic also: the positive impact on education is measured by the years of schooling and not the quality of education, still the fundamental problem in Public education in Mexico\(^4\). As we presented, the conditional cash transfer programs are built on assumption that the investment in familie’s health and education will have positive effects on their capacity to access the labor market.

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\(^3\) According to Coneval (2015), in 2012, the 23.3% of the Mexican population were living severe or moderated food insecurity; the 13.6% of Mexican children under age 5 were suffering chronic child malnutrition; and 2.6 millions of children between 3 and 15 years were not attending school. Speaking of women’s poverty, the 45.8% of Mexican women were living in poverty in 2012.

\(^4\) In PISA 2012 Mexican students have the lowest scores between the 34 members of OECD. 55% and 41% of young Mexican do not meet minimum proficiency levels in Mathematics and Reading, respectively. Mexico is also the country with the biggest inequality in resources allocation between socio-economically disadvantaged and advantaged schools within education systems, a fact that illustrate the problem of unequal access to quality education (Coneval 2015).
Nevertheless, there is a consensus that 20 years after the implementation of Progresa, there is no evidence that young beneficiaries of Progresa/Oportunidades had had greater success in accessing the labor market (Tetreault, 2012; León, 2011; Escobar and González 2005b; Agudo and González, 2006; González, 2008). Even though statistics demonstrate a positive co-relation between being beneficiary of Oportunidades and increased mobility through the occupational levels, the explanatory factor seems to be what González (2008) calls opportunity structures, understood as a set of employment options, and of access to goods and services. The higher rates of exclusion concerning the zone of residence are, the greater deficiencies there’ll be in the structure of health services, education services and formal job supply. This way, the children of poorest families accumulate disadvantages and this is particularly true in the case of rural families, where -regardless the level of education- the job supply is limited to subsistence farming, informal work or migration. In addition, for Tetreault (2012), better education of young Mexicans, has translated into benefits for the capital, but not for work: there are now higher job requirements, while wages remains the same, so in real terms, the same employment pays less than 30 years ago.

The employment issue acquires special relevance in the case of women. If there are barriers to entry into the formal labor market for the poor, in the case of women, the problem is aggravated by the structural segmentation of the labor market, topic we will discuss while presenting Prospera, program that seeks to integrate benefited families into productive activities.

In the case of conditional cash transfer programs, women face additional barriers when it comes to accessing the formal labor market, a direct result of program’s design. As we have pointed out, the basic assumption is that women are the most effective and efficient instruments in order to assure that the money invested by the government has positive impact on life conditions for the family, as well as on health and education of children, girls particularly. This presupposition translates into the cash transfer program’s design, as we have seen: the money allocation is conditioned to the children attendance to school, the family’s regular attendance to a health center, and the participation in training workshops and in community work. Those so called co-responsibilities are not established as an
exclusive obligation of women. However, in practice those are women’s obligations, since family care is a role traditionally attributed to women, the money is given to them and they are responsible to demonstrate the fulfillment of these requirements. As proposed by Provoste (2013) or Lamaute-Brisson (2013), conditional cash transfer programs increase the quantity of time needed to coordinate the care tasks, between the family, the State and the Market, obligations such as taking kids to school or sick members of family to the clinic. Those are tasks different to the direct provision of care, however, they require time and they remain invisible to both program designers and women. Both actors assume that women perform this work without expecting anything in return, for this represents benefits for their children, family and even community. On the one hand, as we have pointed out, this design reinforce traditional gender roles and women’s identity as selfless caretaker, on the other hand, it increases women’s workload and stress. This maternalistic design also implies the inactivity trap: the time and obligations that women must assume in order to receive the benefit, handicap their chances in the formal labor market (Escobar and González, 2002, 2005 a,b; Molyneux, 2006; Provoste, 2013).

In Mexico, the time invested in co-responsibilities depends, again, on the opportunities structure. In urban households, schools and health centers are more easily accessible, however, urban women in the formal labor market invest more time in transportation. For both urban and rural women, the fulfillment of the health co-responsibility is particularly hard, due to the oversaturation of the public health system, which requires a whole day await in order to receive a doctor consultation (Escobar and González, 2002, 2005 a,b; Gammage and Orozco, 2008) 5.

Hence, being part of the program entails severe opportunity costs for women and in many cases it forces them to choose between being conditional cash transfer beneficiaries or to remain in the formal work market.

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5 Coneval points towards the same problem: an increasing amount of time needed for the tasks of coordination, in this case, specifically in health services. Access to health services improved between 2008 and 2012, however, the increase of the coverage entailed the reduction of their quality, mainly longer waiting time and reduced access to medicines (111, 203).
In the study of the impact of Oportunidades on the use of time, Gammage and Orozco (2008) present the following conclusions:

1. The requirements of assisting to health centers and attending health workshops entail an investment of 18 hours 24 minutes per year and per household. The 92% of this investment corresponds to women (17 hours) and 8% to men (1 hour 24 minutes remaining).

2. Administrative process related to money allocation requires an annual investment of 13 hours 42 minutes.

3. It is estimated that the beneficiaries of Oportunidades contribute annually in private costs associated to invested time, 192 million dollars, from which the 94% is covered by women. These numbers are equivalent to the 4.8% of the program’s annual budget.

Additionally, there are co-responsibility tasks related to community work, where the distribution of time is less inequitable, for it entails the investment of 31 hours 6 minutes for women and 27 hours 56 minutes for men. This contribution is equivalent to 15.7 million dollars.

The inequalities in time contribution is not the only negative externality of the cash transfer program’s design. Ultimately, any conditional cash transfer program assumes that the people living in poverty don’t know what is best for them, that they are submissive and apathetic, although they have the capacity of becoming assets if the government leads them towards the right direction (León, 2011; de Brauw and Hoddinott, 2011; Tetreault, 2012). In the case of Oportunidades design, specific indications about desired behaviors are stipulated (attending school, workshops, participation in community work), as well as the compliance control mechanisms are established. In contrast, there are no participation mechanisms included in decision making process. So the question is how to achieve self-determination and autonomy, if the beneficiaries are seen as passive subjects? It’s a
particularly relevant question in the light of the study made by Hernández and del Razo (2004), about the perception of well-being among the poor. Although Oportunidades beneficiaries think their economic situation is better, compared with no beneficiary poor, they present a bigger feeling of resignation and impotence, when it comes to solving their own problems, and also consider participating in political life less important. So, one of the possible interpretations is that the program which want be seen as a strategy to guarantee the full enjoyment of human fundamental and constitutional rights, has become a governmental philanthropy strategy, since access to rights cannot be conditioned, but access to aid can.

In the particular case of Mexico and Oportunidades, cases of authoritarian and arbitrary use of power by the managers of the programs, teachers and health centers personnel, have been documented (Escobar and González, 2005b; González, 2006c; Molyneux, 2006; León, 2011). Even if these practices aren’t predominant –most of the beneficiaries claim to have been treated respectfully- the design of the program enhance the idea that women are responsible for the improvement of the family’s well-being or for its failure. As we have mentioned, the co-responsibilities entail a significant investment of personal effort, due to the low-quality of public health and education services; however, the sanction (revocation of the subsidy) is imposed only to women who are beneficiaries, not to teachers or health centers personnel.

Despite those negative conclusions, some positive impacts have also been identified: Women at some degree assume empowerment discourse; they recognize that their status in the community and their economic autonomy have both been improved, mainly because they are now seen as subjects of credit; they foresee a better future for their daughters, and appreciate the training opportunities, although they demand more job training (Escobar and González, 2002; Molyneux, 2006). Negative impacts feared at the beginning, like an increase of men’s alcoholism and domestic violence, have not been noted. Actually, the access to a stable income has increased the number of women who have abandoned a relationship with an abusive partner, which entails a positive effect in the dimension of power of close relationships (Escobar and González, 2005 y 2005b; Molyneux, 2006;
González, 2006c). Finally, women recognize that they have more autonomy in deciding the destiny of the money they receive, however that is an affirmation that must be contextualized from the concept of *power from within*. Women keep on considering that the money they receive must be destined to the family, to improve the well-being of the children, because of the internalized gender roles and the design of the program⁶, which punishes the unauthorized use of the money, although it is also true that it liberates the familiar resource obtained through paid work for different purposes rather than alimentation and children’s education.

Until now, we have argue that the design of conditional cash transfer programs has a negative effect on women’s capacity to renegotiate power in close relationships, and to modify the dimension of *power from within*. What happens to the collective dimension of power? Here, there are also conflicting opinions. On the one hand, the training spaces and communitarian tasks offer women a chance to go out of their houses, create new solidarity networks and discussion spaces. However, this positive impact is not an intentional part of the design, but an unplanned positive externality, therefore, there are no mechanisms to assure their sustainability. The social capital, the networks of friends, relatives and neighbors that have always been a vital support mechanism between the poor, are finite resources and the increasing pressure on women’s time and capacity to dealing with stress leads to collapse of mutual aid relationships (Agudo, 2006; González, 2006b). Many studies also point out the negative impact of targeting on relationships between benefited families and those who are not, tensions that affect the communities social capital (González, 2006c; Arriagada and Mathivet, 2007). The limited impact of *Oportunidades* on collective power is illustrated by the study of Ávila and Gabarrot (2009) of indigenous communities, where women face particularly grave exclusion from public space. The authors consider that the program is easily accepted by indigenous communities, precisely because it reinforce traditional gender roles, and has no impact on women’s empowerment: neither does it increase women’s authority or presence in community, nor expands the decision-making spaces at home.

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⁶ In general, men agree that the money should be delivered to women, because the money is “for the family and the children”, which are women’s responsibility (Meza et al., 2002).
In conclusion and as we have argued, the maternalistic design of conditional cash transfer programs enhance the perception that women are the primary caretakers. For once, a small quantity of money destined to satisfy the needs of the family, does not strengthen women’s autonomy, neither inside the household nor in the community. It’s more, the time needed to articulate the care tasks and the allowance’s administration clashes with the need of paid work, increasing the pressure on the women workload. The program’s design does not question the distribution of work inside the household or the way decisions about the destiny of resources are made. In the best case scenario, we could recognize that there are gender equality mechanisms for girls, however, the data on the ineffectiveness of Oportunidades to break the transgenerational poverty, casts some doubts on the real impact on empowerment, even for the girls that grew up along with the program.

Although studies about the negative impact on the situation of women in general and their empowerment in particular, have accompanied the program for the last 10 years, when the current administration decided to modify Oportunidades, the only concern taken into account, was the low impact on the capacity to overcome and stay out of poverty. Meantime, the vastly criticized assumption that women are mere instruments through which the benefits are transmitted to the family, have not been questioned.

**Prospera: changing in order to stay the same**

As we have pointed out, the Program of Social Inclusion *Prospera* was officially launched the 5th of September of 2014 and analyzing the related regulations we can found the same ideological framework: the State must limit its action to facilitate people living in poverty to find “the adequate spaces and formulas to improve their life conditions”. Positive impacts and “historical lessons” of the previous program are recognized and praised. The need of change and “update” is justified by exigency of “competition, economic growth and productivity”, therefore “the absence of support to productive programs and employment (which) limits its capacity to improve wages in a sustainable way” must be redress (Decreto, 2014).
As we have reviewed in the previous section, many studies question the impact of *Oportunidades* on the empowerment, even on the well-being of women and yet these are not considered as part of the aforementioned “historical lessons”. In fact, if we review the Implementing Rules of both programs (Acuerdo 2013 and Acuerdo 2014), paragraph 11, concerning gender equality, have exactly the same wording. In that paragraph, it is established that the program must “identify the circumstances that widen the inequality gaps that generate overloads or disadvantages, in particular for women, in order to establish the mechanisms that could reduce or eliminate them”. However, the only equality mechanisms considered are channeling supports preferably through mothers, and the differentiated scholarship scheme, in favor of girls. In fact, *Prospera* Implementation Rules declare that education is “the most efficient mechanism to allow a real social mobility, based on a stock of knowledge and abilities that will allow to count with a critical mass capable of pushing for the fulfillment of other equally relevant rights” (Agreement 2014:3). This view ignores the complexity of the relationship between education and employment, for example the fact that streaming in education reinforces occupational segregation (Morton et al, 2014).

Accordingly to this ideological framework, the only difference between both programs, is one added objective: “the articulation and coordination of the institutional offer of programs and actions of social policy, including the ones related to the productive promotion, the generation of wages, economic well-being, financial and labor inclusion” (Decreto, 2014:11). As we can see, different existing programs are put together, without even reviewing their design. Four lines of action are incorporated in order to ensure social, financial, labor and productive inclusion. Summarizing, *Prospera* keeps the whole structure of the program *Oportunidades*, when it comes to nutrition, education and health, therefore it is the same maternalistic design, in two senses:

1. The economic resources compulsory_DESTINED to alimentation and child care, are allocated preferably through women, reinforcing both traditional gender roles and the social imaginary of women as care-takers.
2. The explicit mechanisms of empowerment (education and incorporation to the labor market) are aimed towards girls and young women, accepting that older and elderly women must be simply satisfied with the hope of a better life for their daughters and granddaughters.

In the program, the tasks of coordination between the family, the State and now to a greater extent, the Market, remain invisible. No correction mechanisms of the already identified negative effects for women are included:

1. Women are the ones who invest a greater amount of time in coordination tasks, and this fact, in a medium term, will not be modified if there are not incentives, so that men assume greater responsibilities in the reproductive tasks within the household.

2. Even if these tasks have already been quantified in economic terms, they are still conceived as voluntary contributions, or as errands without economic value.

3. Since the fact that coordination tasks are contradictory with the employers demands is not recognized, no mechanisms avoiding the trap of inactivity are included. Even worse, we can assume that it is recognized implicitly, and that is why the program explicitly focuses on young women labor inclusion, assuming that adult women must resolve this problem through their own means.

Finally, from the point of view of the collective dimension of empowerment, there are no mechanisms that can foster the debate on the social causes of inequality or that promote a collective participation of women in the design or evaluation of the program. In fact, the individualistic vision of the human condition is reinforced: The measures of social inclusion are designed for individuals and reinforce the interpretation, that the Market is the most efficient mechanism in order to level inequalities. Let us remember that the idea which governs the logic of the breaking of transgenerational mechanisms of poverty, establishes the fundamental role of education that will allow young men and women to access the labor market or productive activities, as an ultimate solution to their condition of vulnerability.
Additionally, as we have pointed out, the objective of *Prospera*, is to articulate the already existing programs. Here, not only what we learned from *Oportunidades*, but also a vast repertory of investigations and documented cases on the labor market, productive projects and gender equality are ignored. With reference to the productive projects, let us remember the following negative tendencies (Schmukler, 1998; Isserles, 2003; Escobar y González, 2005b; Morton et al, 2014):

1. Women are responsible for the productive projects, without having their reproductive household tasks renegotiated; this means a heavier workload, more stress and less physical and psychological well-being for women.

2. The projects focus on traditional activities for women: sewing, alimentation, crafting or child care, reinforcing the Market’s trend of segregating the labor market according to the gender.

3. Projects are designed exclusively for women and apart from commercializing traditional activities for women, or maybe as a cause of that, they have low investment in technology, they’re intensive in manual work and the training they entail is basic, without developing new capacities in benefitted women.

4. Both public and credit institutions officers have paternalistic attitudes towards benefitted women. There are also evidence of arbitrary use of power, including intimidation and threatening.

5. Speaking of credit for productive projects, women are responsible for the payment, while the destiny of the money is frequently decided by men. Even if women are the ones who decide in what they will use the money, the socialization patterns make it hard to distinguish between the interests of women and the ones of the family.

Regarding the insertion into the labor market, as we have pointed out, there are no specific mechanisms for older women. As for the young women, the assumptions is that labor market is gender-blind. The overwhelming evidence that women face horizontal and
Wage discrimination: On average, women worldwide earn between 10 and 30% less than men. In Mexico, a woman with basic education earns 78 pesos per every 100 a man with the same level of education earns. This gap decreases when the level of education increases, but even with higher education, women earn 92 pesos per every 100 men earn.

2. Labor Market segregation: Women have fewer probabilities of having a full time job. Part-time jobs or jobs at home are more flexible, but have lower wages and lack benefits or social protection. In Mexico less than 10% of women have social security through their job. There is evidence that flexible employment makes possible the combination of both paid and domestic work, but has no significant impact on the levels of stress that women go through.
   a. In developing countries, like Mexico, women focus on informal and invisible jobs, like domestic work or unpaid work in family businesses. Worldwide, women represent the 83% of domestic workers.

3. Limited ascending mobility and scarce access to decision-making.

4. Major employment stability: 40% of people, worldwide, still consider that if there are few jobs, they should be assigned to men.

5. Negative impact on women’s networking: The double workday increases the isolation of women because of the lack of time and energy to strengthen networks. This impacts not only the collective dimension of power, but also the well-being of women as individuals, since the support networks is the most important factor when it comes to decreasing stress.

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7 Horizontal segregation is understood as the concentration of women in occupations defined as feminine, in cultural terms (education, taking care of sick people, sewing, etc.) and vertical segregation refers to women’s sub-representation in high ranking positions of hierarchies (Arriagada, 1997).
Conclusions

The review of the social programs that we just presented demonstrates that the concept of empowerment that inspires them has neither potential to impact significantly the redistribution of power between genders, nor, in fact, to improve women’s quality of life. Undoubtedly, there is a slight improvement in the satisfaction of basic needs; however, this is not enough to overcome the condition of poverty in which households live. In addition, this improvement is achieved at the expense of women’s time and work. In fact, the design of the programs depends on this investment. Even if the Implementation Rules recognize that gender inequality generate overloads for women, mechanisms to eliminate this problem are not included.

Regarding the women’s strategic interests, the programs have a negative impact, for their maternalistic design reinforces the social stereotypes of the role of women as the caretaker of others, whose well-being isn’t different to the one of the children or family in general. Despite the already vast literature on the power relationships within the family groups, the designers of the programs do not recognize that the access to material resources is not equivalent, for many women, to the liberty of deciding their destiny. For that matter, as we have analyzed, in the case of conditional cash transfer programs, the resources that are delivered are already compulsory-destined to the care of the family, and compliance control mechanisms are included in order to ensure detailed surveillance ever those resources allocation. Finally, findings about the impact of the labor market on gender inequality neither are included.

Therefore, we can conclude that the empowerment of women living in extreme poverty, is just a declaration and does not reflect a genuine compromise with gender equality.

In order to better satisfy the basic needs of women and at the same time promote their strategic interests, the Mexican government should invest into the universal social policy, mainly programs that allow to:
1. **Redistribute in a more equitable way the caretaking tasks between the family and the State.** This task is particularly urgent due to the aging process of the Mexican society and the increasing need of taking care of elderly and/or sick people. If the State recognizes and assumes its responsibility in the caretaking tasks, it wouldn’t only have a positive impact on the workload of women, but it would also allow their integration into the formal labor market, expanding their access to social security independent of their relationship with men.

2. **Improve the quality of public services.** Currently, the low quality of public services in Mexico is a way to discourage their use by the middle class, decreasing their demand and easing the pressure on the public budget. As we have analyzed, families, namely women must invest considerable amount of time in order to have medical consultation; the low quality of public education limits the possibilities of both young men and women of poor families to access a quality job. The life quality of women is also affected by the virtual nonexistence of public transportation in big cities, high cost of private one, and the urban planning in general, which displaces public housing to suburbs, a phenomenon that entails the need to invest from 4 to 5 hours per day, in order to get to the place of employment.

3. **Overcome the occupational segmentation and promote the formal and decent employment for women.** This also entails the task of creating jobs, mainly in the regions that aren’t attractive for the Market. Higher education rates of girls that are presented as an achievement of Oportunidades, will have no impact on the situation of young women, if there aren’t available jobs, or they are informal and precarious. Regarding the segmentation of the labor market, affirmative action measures that don’t focalize on poor women, but on gender discrimination in general are needed. In Mexico affirmative action policies in the area of political participation, have been approved and we must recognize that their impact is ambivalent, but the following debate made visible the problem not only between political elites but in society in general. The world experience demonstrates that introducing the affirmative action in a business world is even harder, but the advantage of trying it, promotes the debate and awareness of discrimination, awareness that -as we have seen- is a vital element of empowerment.
Considering the levels of poverty in Mexico, as well as the implications of extreme poverty in the human development, in a medium term, targeted policies are needed. Particularly, in the case of conditional cash transfer programs, they can have a bigger impact on women’s empowerment, if this objective is recognized and assumed with the same importance as the overcome of extreme poverty. For that, it is necessary that the design of the programs:

1. Modifies the direct link between the money allocation and the fulfillment of the co-responsibility tasks. If the money is compulsory-destined to satisfy the needs of the family, mechanisms that promote -demand- an active participation of men in the fulfillment of co-responsibilities, must be created. This measure would not only allow a better distribution of time, but would also have a positive impact on the social imaginary of traditional roles of men and women. The programs must not be designed thinking of women, but of power relationships between men and women, recognizing that the dimension of close relationships is not a private problem.

2. Diversify workshops’ design. The current narrow focus on reproductive health considers the biological difference between the sexes, but not their social dimension. If these spaces exist and if participation is mandatory for young men and women, the gender equality must be discussed.

3. Expands the function of coordination mechanisms that currently have the sole objective of ensuring the functioning of the program. The meeting spaces must turn into spaces of reflection on the situation of women, awareness of the dimensions of power and how it is used in society and in households. It is important that women have the opportunity to exchange experiences, share narratives and create support networks that are sustainable, through time.

Finally, for the Prospera, Program of Social Inclusion that is just getting started, there is also a pending agenda that must not only seek to link the conditional cash transfer program to the employment or entrepreneurship programs. There is an urgent need to review these programs and to modify their mechanisms so that they stop reproducing gender stereotypes. Particularly:
1. It is necessary to create incentives and evaluation’s indicators that focus on closing the gap between the entrepreneurship projects that are offered to men and women. The training and technology mechanisms must explicitly seek that women enter to productive projects unrelated to activities traditionally identified as feminine; that these projects have a cutting-edge technological component, a sufficient investment to assure not only their financial sustainability, but also the growth of the project and its owners.

2. The current presumption that the linkage with the labor activities is for young beneficiaries, must be corrected. It is necessary to recognize that conditional cash transfer mechanisms impede or hinder the entry of women beneficiaries to the labor market. This negative impact must be eliminated and not assumed as a necessary sacrifice. We must recognize that women are not a homogenous group that always faces the same obstacles and difficulties. Age is also a factor of discrimination and the commitment to a better future cannot be built on a present that takes advantage of inequality simply because it is easier.

For decades the designers of social policies have affirmed that women have the capacity of building a better future for their families. There are plenty of evaluations and indicators that support this statement. It is time for designers to abandon the view of women as development bearers and consider them as citizens with rights, and persons with independent aspirations.

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