

# **The Feminisation of the Mexican field**

*Strengthening 'feminisation' and 'poverty' in  
agricultural policies for Mexican women*

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## **I. Introduction**

History has a habit of repeating itself. Mexico's underdevelopment and poverty can be seen throughout the country's history, repeatedly. The European conquest and the colonization of the New Spain, the industrial revolution and the boom of a global economy, all of them played an important role in leading poverty and corruption to Mexico's present-day. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico never really had the opportunity to expand and make economic revenue. Most of its resources were being used to create economic growth overseas. For example, in a desperate attempt to boost Mexican revenue through agriculture, congress passed a resolution inviting Europeans to settle in Mexico, purchasing lands at barely any cost (Farnham, 2015). However, what critically shaped Mexican economy was Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the economic standpoint where the government is kept out of the solutions to economic and social problematics (Farnham, 2015). It reduced the spending on social programmes, affecting those of middle and lower classes the most. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an uneven wealth distribution resulted as the new market became too small to sustain a profitable industry for Mexico. Dependency on foreign markets was widely popular, and with it, a lack of control over the economy. Further, Mexico's heavily dependency on foreign trade and affairs left people in even more poverty. Over centuries, Mexico endured harsh and unfortunate situations that shaped the economic and social situation that stands today.

Economic growth is often credited for both opportunities and resources. It is said to transform traditional cultural practices, increase income and reduce poverty. According to the World Bank (2005), with basic rights, higher incomes generally translate into greater gender equality in resources, whether in health or in education. This statement was based on Dollar & Gatti (1999) study on 100 countries' gender inequality levels and considered access to education, increments in overall health, legal equality indexes, and economic and empowerment equality as key markers. They concluded that economic development and gender equality are interrelated, since the increase of the income per capita translates in higher levels of gender equality. However useful these findings may be, to talk about poverty, particularly Mexican women's poverty within rural communities in terms of economic indicators is a narrow, constricted point of view. It dehumanizes women and fails to address any other challenges they may face on a daily basis, such as escaping

violence, owning and protecting their land, or accessing healthcare and education. Therefore, the research question of this project is, how does a wider conversation about the ‘feminisation of poverty’ in Mexico, that questions both *feminisation* and *poverty* as concepts, may benefit the construction of social development programmes and policies within the agriculture sector? Throughout this thesis I will analyse how defining poverty determines not only the ways it is measured but also the necessary policies to overcome it, and how incorporating non-material dimensions is urgently needed for women’s poverty alleviation.

While monetary poverty may be the easiest to quantify, it is not always the most accurate. Other criteria should also be included, such as access to land and credit, decision-making power, legal rights, vulnerability to violence, and (self)-respect and dignity. Considering this, in 1995, Beijing’s Platform for Action established four strategic objectives to aid women experiencing poverty. First, to evaluate, apply, and maintain economic policies and development strategies that tackle the needs of women experiencing poverty. Second, to modify laws and public policies to guarantee equal rights for women and their access to economic resources. Third, to provide the access to financial services and products to women. And fourth, to develop gender-based methodologies and conduct research to address the ‘feminisation of poverty’ (Chant, 2003). For the first time, the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis was given a global-challenge status. This thesis is based on three hypotheses. First, that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor, second, that this tendency is deepening, and third, that women’s increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship (Chant, 2006).

Undeniably, the term created the space to discuss how women experienced poverty differently, at times, even more. However, its creation is fundamentally based on two misconceptions. First, women are either presented as a homogenous group, or are differentiated depending only on household leadership. And second, monetary poverty seems to be the central measurement being used (Chant, 2006). Throughout the first chapter of this thesis I will present the different ways the existing ‘feminisation of poverty’ discourse has overshadowed Mexican women’s current struggles, and how a change in the household model used for its construction could significantly improve the ‘feminisation of poverty’ discourse. Further, I will present Katya Rodriguez’s findings on the criteria used by Mexico’s Social Development Ministry (SEDESOL) to define and

overcome women's poverty through their social programmes and how the Official Poverty Line measurement has setback poverty alleviation in Mexico, especially in rural communities where 58% of the population experiences poverty and whose main income derives from agriculture practices (CONEVAL, 2018). According to Sachs (1994), the majority of women in the Third World reside in rural areas and participate in agricultural activities. Over time, their contribution has increased as a response to land shortage, male migration, and the growth in the number of female-headed households. However, even when women do perform most of the agricultural work at a global level, elder men, for the most part, still own and decide over the land (Sachs 1996, p.6).

In Mexico's specific case, women still play a significant role in its agricultural sector, both as small producers and wage workers on larger plantations. The first half of the second chapter will discuss how legal changes and reforms have left women in a particular disadvantaged position. For example, as a result of the agrarian reforms carried out under the presidency of Lazaro Cardenas (1934-40) the system of *ejidos*, or government-owned land given to farmworkers to use and make profits, was created (Gollás, 2014). Still, the vast majority of rural women who live on *ejidos*, do not hold use rights since Mexico's original agrarian reform law (which emerged out of the 1910-17 Revolution) established that the benefactor of land reform was to be male. While this changed with Article 200 of the Federal Law of Agrarian Reform in 1971, by then most of the land that was going to be distributed had already been distributed. The 1992 reform to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution provides land titles to *ejidatarios*, but since most of these are men, the many rural women who live and work on *ejido* land will still have no rights to the newly privatized land (Gollás, 2014). The second half of this chapter will discuss the response to this necessity in the shape of microfinances programmes that focused mostly towards women to increase their role in production (World Bank, 2006). According to Arriagada (2005), an approach based on women's empowerment that included a lack of self-esteem and independence, gender-based violence or access to employment, health and education would result in more sustainable programmes, especially in the long run. However, for almost 30 years, Mexico's government has focused on short-term solutions that fail to improve women's welfare and access to economic resources. Thus, at last, I will present the work of the local non-governmental organisation, Fondo Semillas, who supports smaller, grass-root organisations that promote women's rights through economic

resources and capacity building to fully illustrate how Mexico's policy-making process can benefit from a NGO multidimensional approach to women's challenges.

### **Methodology –**

Throughout the first and second chapter of this thesis I will attempt to explore a number of barriers that prevent women from fulfilling their full participation in agricultural activities, and how it derives mostly due to a lack of political voice. Central to this research is the scholarship and literature review of Mexican author Katya Rodriguez's work on female poverty in three of her articles: *The Policy Against Poverty in Mexico* (2009), *Is There Feminisation of Poverty in Mexico?* (2012), and *A characterization of female poverty in Mexico based on the collective household model* (2014). I will conclude by analysing Fondo Semillas' Land programme, and how it comprises that by improving women's role as providers and producers within their communities, the economic empowerment of others can be achieved, too. For this, I had the opportunity to perform a feminist semi-structured interview to the Land programme coordinator, Angelica Gomez. Her time was of invaluable support for this thesis.

The main objective of the semi-structured interview with Fondo Semillas was to complement the quantitatively-oriented research discussed on the first and second chapter. In the words of Hesse-Biber "I am interested in issues of social change and social justice for women" (Hesse-Biber, 2014 p.113). The purpose of this thesis was to promote not only a fact-oriented, at times traditional, analysis of the 'feminisation of poverty' but also a multidimensional understanding of the different variables that inter-cross when defining poverty. Initially, the questions asked to Fondo Semillas were about the rural financial services being offered and its relation to women's economic empowerment. However, the exchange was more interviewee-guided, meaning, it focused less on getting all questions answered and more on understanding how their support helps overcome gender inequalities. I originally sent Angelica, a questionnaire with ten points I wanted to discuss. These included questions about poverty and the overall impact of the Land programme on women's lives. In a way, these questions would create the space for her to talk about what she considered important (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.115). I was surprised to hear her responses, they changed my entire understanding of how the organisation is run. Instead of an individual approach, Fondo Semillas grants their support to more local organizations so they can improve their

organizational process. They do not support women's microfinance projects, at least not directly, but instead train smaller organizations so they can effectively promote rights and justice. Though the questions changed, what prevailed still was a feminist research. It acquired an understanding of women's lives, aspiring for social justice and social change (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.117) through empathy as another mode of studying, embracing their ideas while also aiming for a balanced and objective research.

The last section of the second chapter is a reflexion of the most relevant conclusions from the interview and serves as a bridge between academia and field work. This project is guided by the strong belief that through the fair incursion of Mexican women in rural households to the agricultural sector, women can become agents of economic change within their families and communities. Not only can women's self-employment help them advance in their personal and professional lives, but their incursion may strengthen local economies, helping alleviate the poverty Mexico has been dragging for the past couple of decades.

## II. The construction of poverty in Mexico within the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis

“Law and justice are not always the same... When they aren’t, destroying the laws may be the first step toward changing it” Gloria Steinem (2005).

Societies that neglect to invest in girls and young women eventually pay the price for it in the form of slower growth and reduced income (Medeiros & Simoes, 1997; Lampietti & Stalker, 2000;). The following is a dialogue between two foundational theses: ‘the baskets of goods and services’ and ‘the standards in relation to society’. The first, being employed in the construction of public policies within the agricultural sector aimed at women experiencing poverty in rural areas of Mexico, in the hope that such discussion will contribute to a more effective public policy making and therefore, spending. To reach this goal, it is important to understand that the ‘feminisation of poverty’ depends not only on what is understood by ‘feminisation’ but also on the definition of poverty. Therefore, the first analysis is related to the definition of poverty applied in the creation of Mexico’s gender and development policies, as well as the set of characteristics used for its determination. The second analysis will be the dissection of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis, and the changes needed in its construction to better describe the current situation of Mexican women in marginalized communities.

### Defining Poverty

The definition of poverty is the basis to better determine the actions needed to overcome it. Gender plays a significant role in creating social divisions. However, it is the process of it being mixed with other partitions that creates different life opportunities. Meaning that within a society, some groups of people may be more or less equal in one dimension but unequal in others. Within this lies the importance of analysing a broad set of indicators when studying women’s poverty. Robert Chamber’s *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1995) raised the importance of analysing rural poverty beyond the numbers. Instead, he proposed to include adequate shelter, access to services and medical care, and/or having a healthy base of assets. These last set of characteristics should not be necessarily economic, “but may include ‘human capital’, such as education and skills and ‘social capital’, such as kin and friendship networks and community organisations”



(Chambers, 1995 as qtd. in Chant 1997, p.36). Similarly, in *Feminización de la Pobreza: Mujeres y Recursos Económicos*, Amaia Orozco defines poverty through two approaches: absolute and relative. Absolute poverty is defined as the inability to satisfy the basic needs for survival, while relative poverty is the inability to achieve a full lifestyle, previously determined by society. That is to say, the inability to fulfil the needs that, without being directly related to survival, are established as normal/basic by society (Orozco, 2003 p.2).

According to David Dollar and Roberta Gatti in *Gender Inequality, Income, and Growth: Are Good Times Good for Women?* it is fair to assume that, compared to developed countries, women in the developing ones tend to be poorer than men. Both authors have stated that especially among the poorest countries, girls have less access to education than boys, women's health has a lower investment than men's, and legal rights for women are weaker than men's (Dollar, D. & Gatti, R., 1999 p. 20). Among the authors that have analysed such disadvantages, Shahra Razavi & Silk Staab (2010), and Ruth Lister (2010), have determined three social institutions that mediate the access to income and therefore the risk of living with poverty: the working market, the State, and the households. The interaction of these three determines the economic status of women and distinguishes men's and women's poverty experience. Razavi & Staab explain this process in that institutions who rule the working market are the determining forces of income access as well as the distribution of work according to class and gender. Furthermore, an additional limitation resides in the fact that women are placed with social responsibilities such as the care of other household members which in consequence, translates into informal sector jobs where they receive lower salaries and a more restricted access to social security.

The factors that contribute to a working market inequality against women have to do with less working participation, informal jobs and that even with the same level of education, women may receive a lower salary than men (Costa & Silva, 2010). The second institution with the ability to shape the access to income is the State, thru the creation of development policies. The State compromises the right to access health insurance, education, and any other social services. All of them which will allow citizens to fully exercise their rights and obligations. According to Razavi & Staab (2010), the importance of the State as a mechanism of resource redistribution relies in its potential to mitigate female poverty created by the labour markets (Razavi & Staab, 2010 p.427).

Last but not least, the household sphere can crucially influence women's positions regards poverty in two major ways. First, the working market relies on families to accomplish the reproduction of the labour force, and women are often the ones who assume a disproportionate part of these work. Secondly, because the access to income is mediated through the relationships within the household. Therefore, the possibility for women to live in poverty depends not only on their personal economic status, but also of the other household members (Razavi & Staab, 2010 p.428). This second relationship is the epicentre of this thesis, but to fully address the definition of poverty and how it is overcome in Mexico, it needs to first be discussed the two main approaches used globally, and how they differ from one another.

The first one relies in a "basket of goods and services", used more commonly by the governments of the United States and Mexico. The second one defines poverty as the "standards in relation to society", and is mostly used by the European Union (Rodríguez, 2009). The "basket of goods and services" defines as poor those who lack the resources to purchase the specific goods of said basket. In this case, the poverty line is placed where the individual's income is equal to the cost of purchasing such basket, which is generally fixed, but can be modified over time. This method, originally called 'primary poverty', was first created in England during the late nineteenth century by Joseph Rowntree (1902). According to Rowntree, a household faced primary poverty when its total income was insufficient to sustain the physical efficiency of all its members. Throughout his study, he considered three basic needs for survival: food, dress and dwelling (Rodríguez, 2009 p.111). This method has faced several critiques. One of them lies in its circularity: life standards of those living within poverty become the poverty line (Townsend, 1979, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.114). Also, more often than not, it does not take into account the different needs and activities performed. These may include gender, age, disability, sickness and/or any type of social activity performed. Generally, the poverty line ignores the different needs of workers and non-workers. It overlooks the unavoidable costs of performing a job and does not distinguish the different coverage of healthcare services or housing prices depending on their location. However, as explained by Rodríguez, the strongest misconception of this method is that although the "basket" is originally built in relationship to its social context, it is not updated even after a prolonged period of time. Therefore, the basket loses all contact to reality and contributes to create the false pretence that all needs are fixed (Townsend, 1979, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.114).

Throughout their research, Peter Townsend (1979) and Amartya Sen (1981, 1984 & 1992) have used the “standards in relation to society” method for the conceptualisation of poverty. This approach is not done only through economic indicators but also through multidimensional welfare ones. This line of thought has been characterized by its constant analysis and discussions, (Gordon & Townsend, 2000; Gordon, 2006; Piachaud, 1981; Nolan & Whelan, 1996; Scott, 1994; Lister, 2004; as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.120) and by the rejection of poverty as static. It has been widely influential in the development of public policies within Europe, since it considers poverty through a social exclusion perspective. According to Peter Townsend (1979) poverty is defined as the inability to fully participate in the social sphere due to the lack of resources available. However, this incapacity is not determined by fixed or absolute terms, contrary to the “basket of goods and services” approach.

Complementing this method, Amartya Sen (1981, 1984 & 1992), suggests that the root in determining poverty should not be the total income or life standards within a household because they are only the means to an end, and they both depend on each society’s degree of commodification. What should be determinant is the access to choices that fulfil each individual’s life expectations. Sen determines these choices as the ability to be properly fed, escape from avoidable diseases, own a home and clothing, being able to travel or transport, live without regret, participate in the activities of the community and have self respect (Rodríguez, 2009 p.122). Sen’s conception of poverty has two important lessons to teach. First, that the relationship between the income and the satisfaction of the previously mentioned abilities is not uniform, rather it depends of each individual’s characteristics. Therefore, according to Sen, it is unfitting to determine a fixed poverty line that excludes any interpersonal variables. Secondly, more than the actions taken or not by the subjects analysed, what matters the most is their ability to have an option, to choose from different lifestyles depending on their own values (Sen, 1990 p.114 as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.122).

### **How Mexico Defines Poverty**

Mexico’s inability to acknowledge its feminisation of poverty has been delimited not only for the methods used to analyse this particular problematic but also by its very own definition of poverty.

According to Katya Rodriguez (2014) when analysing poverty, the majority of Mexico's studies use the household income as the determinant factor. The lack of income is deeply related to other manifestations of poverty such as emotional stress, health related issues, discrimination and general social exclusion (Razavi & Staab, 2010). The main argument for using income as a measure for women's poverty determination is that apart from the specific life conditions any woman can live within a given moment, her vulnerability against poverty relies in her privation to control and access resources, therefore lacking the ways to economically sustain herself (Lister, 2010). However, it is imperative to recognise that in Mexico, qualitative studies have demonstrated the distinctive way women perceive poverty (Chant, 2007, 2009; Moghadam, 1997). Meaning that the lack of income is not necessarily the most relevant aspect of how women perceive poverty, but rather it is evading violence and the "secondary poverty in which they are sometimes submitted by male-leader households" (Rodríguez, 2014 p.119). According to Rodríguez (2014) having a partner plays a detrimental factor for women's living situation. Women living in male-headed households tend to be poorer than women leading their own household. With respect to single women, women with life partners' labour participation decreases substantially as a consequence of their family responsibilities. Rodríguez findings also suggest that when mothers have the right to access an independent, fixed income for the care of their children, they face a better living situation than mothers without such protection.

Before the year 2000, evidence made clear that poverty was the biggest challenge for Mexico to overcome (Carrasco, 2000; Boltvinik & Hernández-Laos, 1999; Levy, 1993; CEPAL-INEGI, 1993, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.108) but no real consensus that met the criteria to properly address and measure it was available. Within this context, the creation of the Official Poverty Line created by the Social Development Ministry (SEDESOL) in 2002 was seen as a significant step to eradicate it, and in a way, it was. It relies on the results of a survey that measures spending and income. The method is applied from the calculation of the monetary values of three "baskets of goods" according to the following:

- The first basket is called the "food basket", and is made up of foods that ensure the minimum requirements for people to survive. Households whose income does not exceed the value of the "food basket" are considered in a situation of food poverty, also known as "extreme poverty".

- The second basket is made up of the elements of the previous one, plus the achievements in education and health. Households whose income does not exceed the value of this second basket live with “poverty of skills”.

- The third basket is made up of the first and second basket in addition to the expenses of items such as clothing, housing and transport. Households whose income does not exceed the value of this basket are living with “heritage poverty”.

All of those covering the value of the third basket are considered not poor (Yúnez & Stabridis, 2011, pp.4-5)

Thru this segmentation of poverty not only was the recognition of poverty made “official”, but a sort of guide to measure progress was also created. However, it is the purpose of this thesis to understand why the Official Poverty Line was neither a clear nor assertive diagnosis of the problematic faced, and therefore has not created any substantial changes since its creation. As one prominent newspaper read in December 2007, “In Mexico, poverty is real, and it appears to be indestructible. Never, in the modern history of this nation, were more resources destined to overcome it with results so ineffective or little attributable to public policies” (Rocha, 2007, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p. 109).

Throughout “The Policy Against Poverty in Mexico” (2009), Katya Rodríguez examines the fundamental reason for the lack of influence the Official Poverty Line has had over the design of effective policies to address poverty. Her findings played an essential role in this thesis. According to Rodríguez (2009), such ineffectiveness lies in its own construction. Since its creation, it entirely ignored the previously discussed conversation held by countries of the Global North. Of course it is not to be assumed that effective policies in certain countries should directly benefit Mexico. But the decision to disregard the whole conversation was detrimental for the Mexican economy, and more importantly for its citizens. To choose the “basket of goods and services” approach shaped Mexico’s roots of poverty and as a consequence, the public policies considered appropriate to eradicate it.

Mexico’s Official Poverty Line was determined fairly recently (2002) and was characterized by a complete obliviousness to this debate. The SEDESOL assumed the lowest Official Poverty Line

categorized as “poverty of patrimony”. In resume, the construction of such definition came to be by the use of two 1992 basic food baskets. The food component was determined by calculating the cost of a basic basket that met the nutritional needs of both the urban and rural areas, assuming that the total expenditures of a household double in price those of food, and that such value is 75% higher in rural areas than in urban ones (Lustig, 1992, p.728).

The criteria set by the SEDESOL to divide the urban and rural localities differ from the one set by the National Survey of Household’s Incomes and Expenses (ENIGH). The ENIGH considers rural communities as those with less than 2 500 inhabitants, while areas between 2,500 and 15,000 are considered semi-urban. The localities in the latter range have characteristics more similar to the urban than to the rural localities (Cortés, 2000; Damián and Boltvinik, 2003; Rodríguez, 2008; as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.131). However, the SEDESOL considered semi-urban localities as rural. This biases the results of poverty by increasing the total population of rural areas. In doing so, it decreases the total numbers of individuals in poverty because more individuals are considered by a much lower line. Not only that, but the household referenced at the limit between the poor and non-poor is a very unfortunate one, incapable of meeting basic food requirements. The line assumes that Mexico has universal access to social security. However, if people lack the access to free healthcare services, it is impossible for them to cover their needs within the budget considered by the Official Poverty Line. What is worse, families with such scarce resources most likely do not have any member employed in the formal sector of the economy to guarantee access to healthcare. The SEDESOL assumed the spending patterns of very poor households as the official poverty norm, and therefore consolidated poverty. Individuals who live just above the line, in an equally difficult situation, cannot claim to be experiencing serious deprivation, preventing them of any public aid. By not being subjects of any policy attention, their chances of overcoming poverty are scarce (Oyen, 1996, as qtd. in Rodríguez 2009, p. 136).

Therefore, to alleviate poverty it is much more useful to conceptualize it as the inability to pay the costs that are associated with fulfilling a whole lifestyle (Townsend, 1979, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p. 136). A relative-measure-income is more advantageous in that it is related to a percentage of what constitutes a normal income within society. This does not automatically assume that all of those below said line are poor, but considers in poverty to those who meet both conditions: they

are below that line of income and are also not meeting needs considered normal for a citizen of such society. Nevertheless, it is important to keep including the measurement of poverty with relation to the average income because it implies that such income responds to what is necessary to live in a society according to its own standards.

The Official Poverty Line employed in Mexico was born without any real contact with poverty due to the circular process when measuring it. The SEDESOL defined poverty as the minimum income needed to meet specific needs where food gets the most part of the resources. Added to this, the poverty line has failed to be updated, increasingly losing its connection with social reality. Current policies are not being effective enough in alleviating poverty because they fall into this vicious cycle. On the one hand, the government is not in the ability to subsidize the poor with the necessary amount of resources to put them over the poverty line. It is financially unsustainable since, more or less, half the population of the country faces this reality. On the other hand, there are no significant changes to the conditions that create poverty in numerous sectors.

### **Feminisation of Poverty**

The term ‘feminisation of poverty’ first appeared in the late 1970s in the US to describe the fast-rising proportion of households headed by low-income women, especially among the Afro-American community. According to Sylvia Chant (2006), quantitative measures in assessing poverty focused almost exclusively on economic indicators, such as income and expenditure. By 1995, the fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing, declared the ‘feminisation of poverty’ as a global challenge that urgently needed to be addressed. By then, most studies based their analysis of poverty by distributing the total household income equally within all family members (Chant, 2003 p.16). However, research has demonstrated that the household income is not shared evenly among all family members. On the contrary, this distribution is often detrimental for women (Pahl, 1989; Heintz, 2010; Razavi & Staab, 2010). As Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Simoes pointed out in *Poverty Among Women in Latin America: Feminization or Over-Representation?* within a gender perspective, the assumption of equal distribution can be disputed. According to their study “there is no reason to believe that the factors that determine gender inequalities in the public sphere will not act within the families (Medeiros & Simoes, 1997 p.5).

As cited in Sylvia Chant's *Female Household Headship and the Feminisation of Poverty: Facts, Fictions, and Forward Strategies* (2003), women-headed households have been often referred to as the 'poorest of the poor'. The statement arises from the assumption that most female-headed households occur from situations of economic stress, insecurity, labour migration, conjugal instability, and/or the inability of one party to assume responsibility for abandoned women and children (Chant, 2003 pp.10-11). The 'feminisation of poverty' thesis implies dynamism, meaning women's economic situation should worsen over time. It also implies female-headed households as poorer than its counterparts (Villareal & Shin, 2008; Damián, 2003, 2008, 20011, Nauckhoff, 2004, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2014 p.114). Despite the multiple definitions for the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis, it should not be confused with the overrepresentation of female-headed households among the poor. According to Medeiros & Simoes (1997), the term 'feminisation' refers to the way poverty changes over time, whereas 'over-representation' focuses on a static view of poverty at a given moment. Feminisation is a process, a trend observed in the behaviour of poverty's dimensions. Over-representation is a state, related to the levels of those measurements at a single point in time (Medeiros & Simoes, 1997 p.3).

The analysis of intra-household relationships, rather than absolute household incomes is crucial to better understand women's economic vulnerability. According to Chant (1997) one of the biggest risks in comparing male vs. female-head households as units is that the results can obscure poverty among the individuals within those households and over-emphasise other ones. The fact that the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis has linked female-headed households to the transmission of poverty from mothers to their children is problematic. As social anthropologist Henrietta Moore explained, "the assumption that poverty is always associated with female-headed households is dangerous, because it leaves the causes and nature of poverty unexamined, and because it rests on the prior implication that children will be consistently worse-off in such households because they represent incomplete families" (Moore, 1996 p.61). Although it is true that the access to economic resources may be harder for women, it is also true that female leadership can be a means through which women can free themselves from inequality, dependence, or domestic violence, as well as to achieve greater welfare for them and their children. It is not surprising then, to find female-headed households in a better situation than its counterparts, finding a balance between lower income and greater well-being (Rodríguez, 2012 p. 186). In addition, the fact that many women



become leaders of their household has to do with their exercise of the right to decide. Therefore, the apparent ‘feminisation of poverty’ (in terms of fewer resources), is not necessarily a harmful issue. In fact, many studies have demonstrated that children are in a better situation in households headed by women than in households headed by men (Blumberg, 1995; Chant, 1997 as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2012 p. 187). Thus, better measurements that fully illustrate the complex and at times unequal relationship between men’s and women’s access to resources within their home is needed.

### **Feminisation of Poverty in Mexico**

Examining poverty is much more than understanding how resources are being generated and used. It involves studying how these are transformed into assets and how they, in turn, are being distributed among household members (Gonzales de la Rocha and Grinsupun, 2001 pp.59-60 as qtd. in Chant, 2003 p.29). The complexity of analysing poverty arises when we understand that these assets go beyond the numbers. In Mexico, low-income women have stressed time and again how they actually feel more financially secure without men, even if it means having lower earnings or properties. They claim to feel better and freer to make their own decisions when they are not dependant on a male partner (Chant, 2003 p.29). Similar, studies conducted in Mexico (Bortolaia Silva, 1996; Chant, 1997; Jackson, 1996; Kabeer, 1996; Moser *et al.* 1996) have concluded that female-headed households do not score that much lower from male-headed ones, and agree that female-household headship may be a positive strategy for survival. These findings in no way diminish or deny the major difficulties women face in securing their means of living, but they do challenge the stereotype associated with the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis, and highlight how the ‘poorest of the poor’ phrase has been somewhat exaggerated (Chant, 1997). Further than that, these findings challenge the hypothesis that ‘feminisation of poverty’ only exists within female-headed households.

In Mexico, quantitative evidence has refuted the ‘feminisation of poverty’ thesis (Villareal & Shin, 2008; Damian 2003, 2008, 2011; as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2012 p.182). Empirical evidence, however, seems to suggest the exact opposite. An enormous lack of public policies backing the integration of women to the labour markets, and a lack of support for mothers with young children are some of the challenges Mexican women face. According to the latest analysis on female poverty from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), in 2009, women were

vastly overrepresented in the informal work sector. This renders into a lack of healthcare and therefore, social security. Hence, if they do not have this protection as a result of their own work, they can only access it as dependents of their spouses.

As contradictory as this may seem, conventional analyses of female poverty through a unitary model have demonstrated that female poverty's rates are not greater than male ones, and that women's poverty rather than worsen throughout the years, has significantly improved (Damián, 2003; Rodríguez, 2012). Studies have also confirmed that female-headed households are less poor than male-headed households (SEDESOL, 2002; Damián, 2008; Villarreal & Shin, 2008). However, all of these findings rely on the basis that the income distribution within all household members is equal. This means that regardless of whom the resources come from, all members receive an equal part of them. Challenging this model, studies have proposed to analyse poverty through a collective model (Falkingham & Baschieri, 2009, 2010; Quisumbing, 2010; Sen, 2010). This model assumes that members who receive income decide to destine some part of their income in a 'common bag' while also retaining some resources for their own. Therefore, if a member of the household does not receive any additional income, the only resources he or she can access to are the ones from this 'common bag'. What determines each member's welfare is their power of negotiation.

Katya Rodríguez's *Is There Feminisation of Poverty in Mexico?* (2014) and Sylvia Chant's *Female Household Headship and the Feminisation of Poverty* (2003) questioned not only the numbers, but the whole construction of the definition and analysis of the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis. Their findings are the basis of this project. According to both authors, when the distribution of wealth among household members is changed from a unitary model to a collective one, Mexico's 'feminisation of poverty' becomes tangible. The collective model assumes that household income is not equally shared among all parts, but that members who receive an income withheld a certain amount for themselves. According to Rodríguez (2014) the household member who receives the income may experience a better position against poverty than the one who does not receive any income at all. This analysis allows us to understand and reveal the gender disparities hidden by the unitary model.

In Mexico, there is no solid evidence on the way in which resources are distributed within households, because the household income and expenditure surveys that apply do not collect information on how these are distributed among its members. The Survey for the Determination of the Multidimensional Thresholds of Poverty, commissioned by The National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) in 2007, is the only instrument that incorporates the question about the quantity of money that members of the household retain for their own consumption. Because the results of said survey are not reliable due to a lack of information on income, Rodríguez based her calculations on findings by Falkingham and Baschieri (2009) where they assumed people retain between 50 and 20 percent of their income. This computation is reaffirmed by what Sen (2000) demonstrated: inequalities inside the home between men and women are more pronounced within poorer families. According to the author, studies conducted in Asia and in Latin America showed that the majority of poor men retain between one third and one half of their income (Sen, 2000).

Rodríguez (2014) concluded that when a model that accounts for the differences in access to resources within household members is applied, women's poverty increases slightly while men's decreases substantially. The magnitude of the gap cannot be expressed exactly because it is based on assumptions about the distribution of household resources. However, any modification, no matter how small, of the unitary household model, clearly shows the existent gap. The findings are relevant for two main reasons. First, because it attempts to overcome the criticism that has traditionally been made towards studies on poverty: its inability to account for gender differences. Second, because this result is much more consistent with the situation Mexican women face. Although the traditional analysis of the 'feminisation of poverty' has failed to describe the current situation of women in Mexico, it does not, by any mean, implies it should be disregarded or ignored. It created the space to discuss how poverty should be addressed, and most importantly, it has raised a real problematic: women *are* poorer than men. As Steinem (2005) remarked, the first step to achieve justice is to destroy existing laws that impede us from moving forward. Let us reconfigure the old 'feminisation of poverty' model and do justice for all women working in the Mexican field.

### **III. Lessons for the Mexican field and its policies**

“The nation-state is becoming too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life” Daniel Bell (1988)

In Mexico, one of the most critical characteristics to consider when analysing poverty is the geographical location of its population. Whether it is the access to better job opportunities or the quality of social services, all of them greatly depend on their location. It is not surprising then, that when analysing and comparing poverty's inequality between men and women, the gap tends to increase within rural communities. About a quarter of the Mexican population still lives in such regions. The vast majority depend on agricultural and livestock activities, and continue to be the most affected by the phenomenon of poverty, presenting serious setbacks in areas of human development such as health, education, housing quality and access to basic social services (Mora, Arellano & Mendoza, 2011, p.12). The following chapter will provide a background on the importance of agriculture for Mexico's economic development and alleviation of rural poverty, and how the previous dialogue between poverty and the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis can be applied in the development of public policies and practices. Following, will be an analysis on the work done by Fondo Semillas, a local non-government organization that promotes rights and freedom for all Mexican women. Finally, to further understand how Mexico's government has failed to define, and therefore overcome, poverty in the rural landscape, the remarks from my interview with Angelica Gomez, Programme Officer of Fondo Semillas' Land Programme will be presented.

#### **National Public Policies Development**

To understand the importance of public policies for the rural development in Mexico it is necessary to first analyse the efforts directed by the State for the past 40 years, during which, the need to create and improve strategies for agriculture has leaded presidential agendas. Mauricio Merino, specialist in Political Science and Sociology, and professor/researcher at the Centre for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE), has analysed the two opposing methods that the State developed during the 1970s and 1980s. The first one was led by presidents Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1977-1982). They both intensified the participation of the State for

rural development and national food security. Further, the policies were not only targeted to the agricultural production, but they also focused in the infrastructure development of schools, roads, and healthcare facilities, as well as financial credits and technical support for local producers. The 1982 economic crisis, characterized by a corrupted management of public funds and the collapse of the oil prices, brought with it the urgent need to change the 1970s approach. This is how the second method came to be, and with it, it was decided that the economic forces would now determine the direction of the agricultural sector (Merino, 2009). This, however, did not translate in the complete abandonment of the government in the development of public policies for rural communities.

In 1994, the State decided to invest in the implementation of farming programmes to alleviate the serious problems of poverty and marginalization the country faced. The leading programme within this context was the Direct Support Programme for the Field (PROCAMPO). Its main purpose was to reach low income producers, whose crops were often not sold but used mainly for self-consumption, changing not only the production of farming goods but also the welfare of rural households. Throughout the years, similar programmes have been developed changing its name to better suit national leaders' strategies (*Progresa*, during Ernesto Zedillos' presidency from 1994 to 2000, *Oportunidades*, during both Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón's leadership, from 2000 to 2006 and 2006 to 2012, respectively, and *Prospera*, Enrique Peña's current approach). However, its purpose and *modus operandi* has not been modified. In general terms, the government provides local farmers with a fixed allowance determined by a list of needs that the State has agreed on as basic. This process goes in line with the previously discussed Official Poverty Line through the "basket of goods" method<sup>1</sup>.

To further understand the failure of social development programmes, I will briefly present Fernando Cortés' et al. (2007) findings on the Oportunidades programme, for which the fixed allowance was created not to inhibit personal efforts of households to overcome their condition of extreme poverty, but only to facilitate a base to develop initiatives for their own self-sufficiency (Cortés, et al., 2007, p.8). This means that, theoretically, by increasing the income of extremely poor households they will become closer to the second poverty line, previously referred as

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<sup>1</sup> See page 10.

“poverty of skills”, not necessarily overcoming it, but significantly decreasing the intensity and inequality of poverty. Cortés’ research analysed the overall impact of households receiving the compensatory grant during the years 2002, 2004, and 2005. For all three of them, the levels of extreme poverty were reduced, but not significantly. Oportunidades contributed to “make the poor less poor” (Cortés, et al., 2007, p.31), but not really overcome it. As much as these findings align with the original purpose of the programme, it contradicts the government’s discourse that it has played a substantial role in Mexico’s rural poverty alleviation.

### **The importance of agriculture for Mexican women**

Generally, women continue to be the main providers of food security and welfare within their households, especially in rural communities. According to the World Bank (2005), agriculture still is a meaningful strategy for economic growth, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability. When analysing low income countries, in which the majority of its population reside in rural areas, women make up a “substantial majority of the agricultural workforce and produce most of the food that is consumed locally” (World Bank, 2005). Yet, as it will be further discussed, relative to men, women have less access to land rights and financial services. These gender-based inequalities translate into a lower production of goods, and therefore income, and higher levels of poverty. The following section will discuss the overall impact of agriculture for Mexican women, and the key changes needed for better public policies and programmes, whether these are called *Progresá*, *Oportunidades*, or *Prospera*.

In 2005, the World Bank concluded that farming products served as the primary source of income for Mexican women in rural communities. Following this, the way gender and development public policies are established by Mexico’s agriculture ministry plays a determinant factor for women’s poverty alleviation. One of the main challenges Mexican women face within such policies is the access to land. Its roots can be traced back to more than a hundred years ago. The main goal of the Mexican Revolution 1910-17, was to distribute the land to those who worked it (Zapata, 1911), and as a result, the system of *ejidos* was created. *Ejid*os were government-owned land that was given to farmworkers in usufruct, meaning that they were given the legal right to use and enjoy the profits of territories that belonged to the government (Gollás, 2014 p.2). It was also established that the benefactor of the land was to be male. While this changed with Article 200 of the Federal

Law of Agrarian Reform in 1971, by then most of the land had already been distributed. When analysing Mexico's agricultural sector, women play a significant role in it, both as small producers and wage workers on larger plantations. Nevertheless, Mexico's initial policies prevailed and left women in a particular disadvantaged position (Gollás, 2014 p.14).

According to the World Bank in *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook* (2009), programmes that support public administration reforms result valuable for the agricultural sector in that the latter may benefit an overall improved governance, with changes such as the promotion of community-driven development, public sector management reforms, legal reforms, and anticorruption measures (World Bank, 2009, p.23). Nevertheless, even if reforms aid in the improvement of rural means of support by making agricultural policies more effective, it cannot be assumed that any of these will automatically promote gender equality. Therefore, it is necessary that governance reforms are "(1) sensitive to gender differentials; (2) gender specific; (3) empowering to women; or (4) transformative, by attempting to change prevalent attitudes and social norms that lead to discrimination against rural women" (World Bank, 2009, pp.23-24). In terms of the improvement of agricultural livelihoods, the World Bank has also defined several strategies to reform governance in the agricultural sector such as the efficiency and fairness in the delivery of agricultural services and infrastructure, reduction of corruption, meaning, the abuse of public officers for private gains in the agricultural sector, and access to justice and enforcement of rights that are related to food and agriculture, including rights to land and the right to food (World Bank, 2009, p.37). These strategies have the potential to make policies and programmes more effective and lead to a more efficient use of the funds invested.

#### *Public policies with microfinance programmes*

Placing poverty at the centre of public policies' elaboration can strongly influence the possibilities of overcoming it, because it can change the breadth and nature of the relationships between the poor and those who are not. However, if poverty is measured simply through the income method, the most frequent consequence is to act on short-term compensatory measures (Raczynski, 2003, as qtd. in Arriagada, 2005, p.108). On the other hand, an approach based on empowerment, the exercise of social citizenship and decision-making, may result in more sustainable programmes, especially in the long run. This last approach emphasizes the promotion of policies to overcome

poverty that take into account all the factors that cause poverty, from the most personal ones, such as a lack of self-esteem, independence, or gender-based violence, to the ones of a social and economic nature, including access to employment, health, education and technical-financial services (Arriagada, 2005, pp.109-111).

In the 1990s microfinance programmes were mostly directed at women as an effective strategy to increase women's role in production (World Bank, 2006, p.87). This gender-responsive-strategy helped to overcome discrimination against women's access to rural financing, benefiting both the development process and women themselves in two main ways. First, in terms of efficiency and economic growth. Women have often proved to be better savers than men, better at repaying loans, and more willing to form effective groups to collect savings and decrease the cost of delivering many small loans. Therefore, enabling over half the rural population to save and gain access to loans, insurance, and other services may contribute to rural economic growth (World Bank, 2006, p.87). Secondly, it may benefit the development process in terms of poverty reduction. Research suggests (Burjorjee, Deshpande & Weidemann, 2002) that women tend to invest any additional earnings in the health and nutrition of all household members, as well as in children's education. Directing economic resources such as credit or savings facilities to households through women can enable them to play a more active role in household decision making, and, therefore, may reduce gender inequalities within it (World Bank, 2009, p.88).

In this way, unified rural development programmes and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that offer financial and nonfinancial services can mobilize rural communities to gain access to financial services and overcome major challenges (World Bank, 2009, p.86). Through savings, credits, or insurance services, women can promote their own economic activities, create and protect resources, enter formal labour markets, or diversify their economic activities. By strengthening women's economic roles and boosting respect for women's decision-making, wider social and political empowerment can be encouraged. The positive effects on women's confidence and skills can enhance the status of all women within a community. A woman who gains respect within her household and community can become a role model for others, leading to a "wider process of change in community perceptions and men's willingness to accept change" (World Bank, 2009, p.90).



Microfinance groups may form the basis for collective action to address gender inequalities within a community, including issues such as gender violence, access to resources, and local decision making. These have been used strategically by some non-governmental organisations as an entry point for wider social and political mobilization of women around gender issues, such as the case of Fondo Semillas.

### **Fondo Semillas and the Land Programme**

The following section will discuss the work of Fondo Semillas, particularly their Land Programme. It is important to acknowledge that all the information presented above related to Fondo Semillas' activities was retrieved from an interview with the Land Programme coordinator, Angelica Gomez.

In 1990, a group of feminist women saw the need to support small organizations. These were mostly oriented to Indigenous artisans, but others worked for mothers, lesbians, migrants, and women alike. Since its creation, Fondo Semillas continues to be the only women's fund in Mexico dedicated to distribute resources for more than 100 organizations directed to women. Through economic resources and capacity building, Fondo Semillas works to eradicate injustices and inequalities towards women. For the past 28 years, its history has adapted to the constantly changing political climate and needs. The organization is divided into four axes that seek to strengthen women so that little by little they lead a dignified, healthier and respected life. These are Body, Identities, Work and Land. Each one of these works to allocate resources to approximately 25 local organizations that defend diverse women's rights.

Fondo Semillas does not provide help, or short-term solutions, but rather they offer accompaniment through an organizational process. This means that in practical terms, they do not directly support microfinance projects but rather train organizations so that they become stronger and more professional about their different themes and struggles, financing literacy to name one. In a way, these organizations are the front in the fight for women's rights, while Fondo Semillas supports and strengthens them. Through requests, Fondo Semillas receives profiles from different organizations that seek to improve their performance. These should not hold membership or affiliation with any specific political party or religion, they must be run by women and their

objectives must be aligned in favour of women. Fondo Semillas supplements organizations through a monitoring and evaluation process to analyse their results and the different ways they can be strengthened. However, this diagnosis is constructed by the local organization itself. In this way, smaller, more local organizations, learn to measure their impact independently, but always supported and under the supervision of Fondo Semillas.

As previously discussed, a number of barriers prevent women from fulfilling their ability to participate in agricultural activities, mainly due a lack of political voice. Fondo Semillas' programme Land acknowledges this, but also recognises that by improving women's role as producers within their communities, the economic empowerment of girls and young women can also be supported. I had the opportunity to discuss the goals and processes of the programme with the programme coordinator, Angelica Gomez. During a 45-minute call, Angelica described me the different ways the programme has changed, and the reasons behind such modifications. Previously, the Land Programme was focused on obtaining women's rights over land, and the participation of women in the agricultural production. However, derived from the high demand in extractive and energy projects between 2015 and 2016, a new strategic planning of the programme now also focuses on the defence of land and territory. The three main topics surrounding the programme are defence against dispossession, the autonomy of the land, and its sustainability. Without them, it is impossible to access land in the first place. This is why the programme supports defence projects and allocates funds only to organizations that are politically influencing decisions, both in the community and in the government, organizations whose voices are being heard through assemblies and political participation, as well as organizations that allocate spaces for community discussions.

During the interview, Angelica explained that the increase of extractive projects has brought as an indirectly consequence a greater migration of men from their households, leaving women, children, and the elderly behind. This is mainly due to the fact that the land worked by extractive companies is being exploited and contaminated, affecting local, self-consumption crops. Men turn typically to the north of the country, at times even to the United States, for a more stable income. In best-case scenarios, they will send money to their families, however this is not always the case. The women and family members who do stay are affected mostly in terms of health and food security. Added to this challenges, the dispute over land has significantly increased the levels of

violence, most of the times involving drug cartels. Despite of all these setbacks, women find ways to thrive. Perhaps it has to do with Chant's (2003) findings in that in Mexico, women in rural communities feel freer to make their own decisions and feel more financially secure in the absence of men, even when this means having a lower income (Chant, 2003 p.29). With their absence, they are forced to take leadership roles within their communities and often organize work cooperatives to create products derived from the planting and harvesting of their lands. Even when the legal situation of their property is not in their favour, the support of their community protects women from being displaced. This new reconfiguration of the communities has an impact on the organizational councils, often led by men. Little by little women begin to have a voice and vote in community decisions.

Learning about the different ways women prosper and support their communities was encouraging, to say the least. It set the ground to fully understand why Fondo Semillas surpasses the definition of poverty in the development of their projects. They move on from an academic point of view, and surpass the discussion of how the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis fails to describe Mexican women's current situation. Moreover, according to Angelica, defining poverty is a very difficult, almost impossible task. It is subjective and depends on the purpose or gaze with which it is measured. Not only that, but it may also be problematic and at times, contradictory. As Rodríguez (2012) defended, women-headed households may represent women who freed themselves from inequality, dependence, or domestic violence, and who achieved a healthier wellbeing for them and their children. As it was previously reviewed in the first chapter of this thesis, female-headed households often hold a better situation than its counterparts, making the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis not necessarily a harmful issue (Rodríguez, 2012 p. 186). Therefore, Fondo Semillas aims to improve the welfare of all Mexican women, regardless of their upbringing, geographical location, or heritage. By supporting a wide range of grass-root organizations, Fondo Semillas understands that even within a small community, some groups of people may experience inequalities in one dimension, but others may face challenges in different ones. More than analysing a broad set of indicators defined by the Official Poverty Line, Fondo Semillas seeks to strengthen every aspect of women's lives, including access to healthcare, education, dignified employment, or food security and land rights. Going back to the methodological chapter of this thesis, this in-the-field approach goes in line with the findings of several authors backing up the

“standards in relation to society” method to conceptualize poverty (Richardson & Le Gran, 2002; Burchardt et al., 2002, as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009). The reason for it is that most social problematics affect not only the most vulnerable but also other social sectors, preventing their full participation in different social spheres (Rodríguez, 2009, p.121).

Throughout the first chapter, I analysed Chamber’s (1995) proposition of going further than what the numbers could tell and include a set of characteristics not necessarily related to economic development but to ‘human and social capital’ (Chambers, 1995 as qtd. in Chant 1997, p.36). However, what sets apart Fondo Semillas from most State policies focused on the improvement of women’s welfare is the lack of focus on what it means to live in poverty. By ignoring the check list of weaknesses for women to be considered poor, they thrive to include all Mexican women facing any type of struggle, for example, the lack of access to land, education, health facilities or financial benefits. This creates better and more complex solutions that address the different vulnerable intersections women cross depending on their specific location. This wider ‘audience’, however, should not translate into an obliviousness that assumes all women face the same struggles, nor should it endorse that all needs are fixed, as the “basket of goods” approach continues to do in Mexico. As previously discussed, the focus should be the access to choices that satisfy each woman’s life expectations. The relationship between economic indicators or any given poverty line and the level of happiness is not parallel, rather it changes depending on each woman’s characteristics (Rodríguez, 2009). What matters the most is women’s capacity to have an option depending on their personal values (Sen, 1990 p.114 as qtd. in Rodríguez, 2009 p.122).

The ultimate goal of Fondo Semillas is the complete independence of women by learning how to manage their own resources, either thru self-management or with the help of smaller organizations strengthen by Fondo Semillas. Therefore, when looking for partners to work with, Fondo Semillas pays special attention for organizations not to be assistance-oriented, meaning that rather than looking for short-term compensatory solutions, and focusing on personal empowerment, the exercise of rights and decision-making processes, result in a more beneficial, sustainable programme. For both State development and gender policies, and programmes in non-governmental organizations, it is essential to carry out their activities with broader objectives than only allocating resources towards poverty. Especially considering that it is financially

unsustainable since, in the past eight years, the number of people experiencing poverty in Mexico added 3.9 million people (El Universal, 2018). Campos & Monroy (2016) demonstrated that in Mexico, communities with better access to basic services such as water, gas, and electricity, as well as access to health facilities and schools presented an economic growth with a greater impact on poverty reduction. This translates in that, by improving the access for meeting the needs considered normal using Rodríguez's relative-measure-income<sup>2</sup> method, instead of focusing on income only, a household has a greater chance to overcome poverty.

When the core of a public policies fails to be clearly defined, it loses its capacity to adapt to new circumstances or needs. In terms of poverty alleviation, it also hinders the evaluation of progress and improvements, making it even harder to achieve its original goal. When analysing the discourse of State policies for women's poverty alleviation in rural areas, this can be clearly exemplified. Not only by failing to understand the complexity of female poverty from a multidimensional lens but also by aiming for the increase of economic indicators that were not adequately defined in the first place. Employing income as a measure for women's poverty determination may be useful in understanding that this relies in her lack of control and access to resources, making it impossible to economically support herself independently (Lister, 2010). However, as previously reviewed, for Mexican women, a lack of income is not automatically related to how they experience poverty, but rather it is escaping violent homes (Rodríguez, 2014 p.119). Further, when income is the only, or at least the main indicator of the well-being of a household, it assumes the perfect distribution of it with all family members, which has been demonstrated, time and again, not to be the case within Mexican rural households. Even when using fixed allowances as an immediate solution for the improvement of women's welfare, the studies analysed throughout this chapter demonstrated the incapacity of such strategies to improve Mexico's rural population welfare. Most importantly, these programmes do not guarantee women a better access to healthcare, education, security, or any other multidimensional welfare indicator used in the "standards in relation to society" approach. However, when women are encouraged and supported throughout their agricultural activities, chances for poverty alleviation are greater. In fact, in 2011, Yúnez & Stabridis demonstrated that between the years 2002 and 2007 six of the 10 sources of income of Mexican rural households experienced significant positive changes, based,

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<sup>2</sup> See page 12

above all, on the increase of income from agricultural activities (Yúnez & Stabridis, 2011, pp.13-14). By incrementing the number of goods resulting from the planting and harvesting of their lands, women have a better chance to improve their current situation.

Thirty years have passed since Daniel Bell predicted that “The nation-state is becoming too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life” (Bell, 1988). According to Bell, the lack of tangible responses by the government to diverse local needs is the underlying structural problem for the fragmentation of the nation-states (Bell, 1988). Thirty years in which four Mexican presidents have led the fight against poverty through bad designed and ineffective policies, that neglected to understand the nation’s needs. The next chapter will present the conclusions of this project, and will more thoroughly discuss the implications of eliminating a fixed Official Poverty Line to broaden the discussion around poverty. Within this context, by eliminating SEDESOL’s definition and standardization of poverty, and by understanding the power dynamics in the distribution of income within male-headed households, State policies with a broader understanding of social phenomena can succeed.

## IV. Conclusions and Reflection

For the past 28 years, Mexico has repeatedly tried and failed to expand social programmes to amplify the coverage of social security as a way of strengthening social rights. Arguably, one of the main reasons for its failure lies in the use of conditioned monetary transferences. *Progresa*, *Oportunidades*, and *Prospera*, all of them relied in transferring small quantities of money (much lower than the needed to surpass the Official Poverty Line) to the poorest 5 million families of the country with the condition that they take their children to school and healthcare facilities. These programmes transfer the money directly to women (Cortés & Benegas & Solis, 2007). Although one could assume this programme contributes to the immediate improvement of women's welfare and the distribution of their economic resources, this does not. Women are being asked to play functions that are traditionally associated with their gender condition, such as economic management in situations of deprivation, daily performance of unpaid work and their responsibility as caregivers for other members of the household. These initiatives reinforce the traditional role of women and recharge even more the intensive work associated with their situation of poverty (Chant, 2010). In this sense, when the priority of governments and international organisations is to alleviate poverty in general, the role given to women in these programmes responds more to practicalities than to any attempt to achieve gender equality (Molyneux, 2006a). Due to how these programmes were conceive, they do not guarantee better access to the labour market for women, nor economic security, since the transfer of this particular funds will stop when certain conditions are met (for example, when the children finish high school), no matter if the home continues or not to experience poverty.

It is not a woman's right to obtain resources in Mexico, and yet evidence<sup>3</sup> has annihilated the “feminisation of poverty” thesis to describe the challenges Mexican women face. Since its construction, the term *feminisation* failed to analyse the power relations within a male-headed household, basing its whole structure on households led by low-income women. As discussed on the second chapter of this thesis, this is problematic for a number of reasons. The analysis distributes the household income equally among all members (Chant, 2003). It is hard to believe

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<sup>3</sup> See page 15.

that gender inequalities within the public sphere will not act within families too (Medeiros & Simoes, 1997), especially within poorer households where inequalities inside the home are especially pronounced (Sen, 2000). Most importantly, the implication that a male-headed household should be the norm, and that any other type of household may be the most affected ones completely diminishes and vanishes any struggle faced by women in male-headed households (Davis and van Driel 2001, p.162, as qtd. in Chant, 2003 p.36), such as disproportionate share of household duties and a lack of power in family decision-making. However, a reinterpretation of the quantitative evidence under the collective model shows that female poverty is higher than male poverty, and is found in a greater proportion in households headed by men (Rodriguez, 2012). Even if the common understanding of the “feminisation of poverty” thesis failed to describe Mexican women’s current situation, it initiated a dialogue and gave visibility to a situation that was ignored for far too long: women *are* poorer than men.

### **On Fondo Semillas**

During the second chapter I studied the work done by the non-governmental organisation Fondo Semillas. It addresses gender inequalities towards women by supporting more local, grass-root organisations that promote women’s rights through economic resources and capacity building. When Fondo Semillas grants their support and supervision to this smaller organisations, it does so surpassing the definition of poverty. It is not numbness or obliviousness to women’s struggle, but the opposite. It is a complete understanding of the layers and intersections women cross throughout different moments of their lives, deeply rooted in the context each one is placed in. Rodriguez (2012) demonstrated that women’s well-being can be determined through many variables. As she suggests, when women, who often carry the greatest burden of domestic chores also work outside their household, it can be considered as a double working day. However, if these women have a sufficient level of resources at their disposal, having less free time than men may refer to a condition of gender inequality, not necessarily of poverty. Another condition that can affect women is violence perpetrated by men within their households. But again, domestic violence can happen at all socioeconomic levels (García et al., 2005 as qtd. in Rodriguez, 2012 p. 188). Therefore, suffering from domestic violence does not make poor women if they own an adequate income. In fact, having the sufficient income can make a significant difference for a woman to decide to leave a home where she suffers violence.



Throughout the second chapter, I analysed the two most common methods used to define and overcome poverty, which are the “basket of goods” approach, often used by the United States and Mexico, and the “standards in relation to society”, used by the European Union. I discussed the structure and characteristics of each one of them, and how Mexico would greatly benefit from the ‘social exclusion’ methodology. However, to further understand Fondo Semillas’ decision to “ignore” poverty and the further implications of eliminating the fixed Official Poverty Line in Mexico’s development policies, I would like to go back to Rodriguez (2009) results derived from applying the European model.

In 2000, the European Union considered poverty a form of social exclusion with the aim of expanding the way it was understood. Since then, the need to coordinate policies to eradicate poverty and social exclusion was agreed. To achieve this goal, a group of indicators known as Laeken indicators was created to measure social exclusion. Currently, there are 21 indicators that recognise poverty’s multidimensionality, which include the number of people with resources below 60 percent of the median, indicators of inequality in the distribution of income, indicators on employment rates, indicators that measure low educational qualification, low life expectancy and poor health conditions (Atkinson et al., 2005, as qtd. in Rodriguez, 2009, p.125). One of the most important research results derived from applying this model was to demonstrate that there is no clear division between those included and those excluded (Richardson and Le Grand, 2002; Burchardt et al., 2002, as qtd. in Rodriguez, 2009). The reason for it is that most social problems not only affect the poor but also affect other groups of people. This prevents the full participation in social life due to the creation of social divisions and inequalities, such as gender, class, ethnicity, age, etc. For this reason, the notion of social exclusion has focused on highlighting the importance of carrying out public policies with broader objectives than just focusing resources on poverty (Whelan et al., 2002, as qtd. in Rodriguez, 2009).

With an absent fixed Official Poverty Line, the discussion about poverty would be broaden because there would no longer be a mark that defined its exact coverage. Following this principle, Rodriguez (2009) suggests that it may be more feasible to develop comprehensive policies that take into account the social majorities affected by the same phenomena. After analysing the two

different experiences of Mexico and the European Union, Rodriguez concludes that it is not only important to take into account the political consequences of having an official poverty line but also how this line is constructed. If the poverty line is fixed, as in the case of Mexico, the existence of an official line can lead to an official vision accepted by the government and the general public that has completely lost contact with the social reality, therefore inhibiting any effective actions against poverty. In this context it is preferable not to have an official poverty line because at least in that case, the discussion would be opened. The best option, however, would be to have an official line related to the standard of normal life in a society, through the establishment of a percentage of the average income. That would mean that poverty is explicitly recognized by the government and society, and that the line remains permanently in line with the reality of poverty because the update is fundamental to this method (Rodriguez, 2009, p.140).

### **On Policies**

Even though the creation of public policies for women's welfare should always aim to increase their personal autonomy and empowerment, their construction cannot ignore that women's lives are deeply influenced by their families and communities, both of them who shape their performance and future. If little or no attention is paid to the gender relations within a community, then chances for women to lift themselves out of poverty are scarce (Chant, 2003 p.49). Regarding the labour market, Rodríguez (2014) suggests that for Mexican adult women, their economic status determines their probabilities of living with poverty. According to her analysis, their occupation condition is the variable with the greatest influence. If a woman has a job her probabilities of living with poverty are of 29%, if she does not her chances increase to 38%. What is most revealing from her study is that when a woman works, her chances of experiencing poverty are equal to the ones of men. Throughout the first and second chapter I exposed the conditions that contribute for women's greater disadvantage in accessing resources. Costa & Silva (2010) have determined the three factors contributing to gender inequality in the labour market, which are less labour participation of women regarding men, greater rates of informal jobs and unemployment in regards to men, and lower salaries in equal conditions in respect to men. However, the factor with the greatest influence in Mexico is the first one. Meaning, that if the labour participation rates between men and women were equal, women's situation would radically improve. This, however, does not mean that by creating more job opportunities for women their situation will automatically change.

The formal market as it exists today does not compensate the household work and care women are disproportionately being placed with. As of today, the labour market has a structure that favours men in that there still are inflexible work hours, inadequate and insufficient day-care for children, and short school days for children's basic education. All of these affect negatively women's incorporation to the labour market. It is not enough to create job opportunities for women, but these have to acknowledge and improve their position within the labour market and access to resources.

For all of those whose access to the formal labour market may be limited, one of the most effective ways to avoid poverty is through social development programmes. Within Mexican rural communities, this is especially important. As discussed in the first part of the second chapter, women in small communities are still considered the main providers for food and care. This makes agriculture a major strategy for poverty alleviation (World Bank, 2005). However, when development policies focus simply on poverty alleviation through agricultural practices based on the income method, then most probably these will act on short-term compensatory measures (Arriagada, 2005), as was the case of *Progresas*, *Oportunidades* and *Prospera*. As discussed earlier, this programmes focused on increasing the income of households experiencing extreme poverty to reduce the intensity of it and become closer to the second poverty line, also known as "poverty of skills". Needless to say they all failed to substantially alleviate poverty in Mexico (Cortes et al., 2007).

On the other hand, an approach similar to Fondo Semillas', based on women's empowerment regardless of their upbringing or current situation, may result in more effective policies. Especially when these consider women's lack of self-esteem and independence, any gender-based violence they may be experiencing, or privations to employment, healthcare, education or financial services (Arriagada, 2005). In 2009, the World Bank demonstrated that by strengthening women's economic roles, wider social and political empowerment can be stimulated, impacting the status of all women among the communities (World Bank, 2009, p.90). This aligns with women's experience taking charge of all decision-making when their husbands flee in search for better job opportunities, described in Fondo Semillas' interview in the second chapter.

Although it is fundamental to improve women's access to income sources, this alone is not enough. As evidence has shown (García and Oliveira 1994, González de la Rocha, 1994; Johnsson-Latham, 2004; Johnson, 2005), among the main causes of female poverty, inequalities stand out in the domestic sphere. It is essential to perform broader actions that seek to achieve women's equality, particularly in their homes. However, for the past three decades, most policies have focused only on achieving women's participation in the labour market, ignoring that one main reason for their lack of participation is the unpaid workload they perform at home (CEPAL, 2009 p.26).

### **Reflection**

Throughout this thesis I analysed two public discourses in the development of social programmes sphere. I did so in the hope that by recognising the changes needed in the definition of poverty and the "feminisation of poverty" thesis would help create better public policies for rural women working in the Mexican field. Studying the work of a local NGO made me question the relationship between academia and the field work. On the one hand, the first pushes for a new definition, new concepts and standards of what it means to live in poverty and by doing so, improving the current paternalistic policies. On the other, local organisations directly working with women affected, avoid getting lost in a debate that seems to be taking too long, especially when actions are needed urgently. However, there is a lot to learn from both point of views. Yes, Mexico desperately needs a different way to define and measure poverty, especially in terms of female poverty. As observed, it needs a different household model, one that does not lose contact with reality, like the Official Poverty Line did. The gender gap continues to be enforced through policies that impose stereotypes and that ultimately fail to incorporate women in the formal labour market due to a lack of support that goes beyond economic indicators. Fondo Semillas' does things very differently. The definition of poverty seems inconsistent and simply not enough to describe the different ways Mexican women face challenges within the social structures. More importantly, it questions the idea that all efforts should be focused on overcoming one aspect of women's lives when escaping violence, owning and protecting their land, accessing healthcare or education are just as important to them, sometimes even more.

This project aimed to strengthen the 'feminisation of poverty' thesis by exposing the number of reasons to expand the construction of poverty proposing to even, move past it. Yet, there are still

a lot of questions to be asked, and in that sense I recognise that this thesis could have gone deeper in the analysis of statistics and numbers to back up the urgent need to end the use of the inadequately constructed Official Poverty Line. However, I believe that by doing so I would have lost human contact in the search for rigidity and structure. Though I failed to provide a step by step guide on how to improve women's lives within the agricultural sector in Mexico's rural communities, I hope this thesis serves as an example of how far we have come, and how much we still have to go through, but most importantly that it enlightens the path to a fairer more equal Mexico.

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