

# The Role of Men and Women in a Latin American Setting

By Ronald Baerbock

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The psalmist David writes in the first verse of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." To reflect on the creation as treated by God is to reflect on the wisdom of God also. How wonderfully the Lord put together our bodies with all of the working parts. How wonderfully the Lord put together the world so that nature could take care of itself. There was balance in the Lord's creation. We likewise see this wisdom and love of God in the creation of man and woman, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." How wonderfully the Lord created both the man and the woman giving to each the abilities necessary to carry out his or her purpose in life. The Lord has given to the woman abilities and a sense of love that the man will never have. The Lord has given to the man the physical characteristics necessary to carry out his role in the world, the home and the church.

Let us move quickly to Latin America to see how this role of man and woman in the world, the home and the church has been preserved or contorted at times by sinful mankind. First we wish to list the characteristics of the man-woman role in the Latin American culture. Then we wish to move into the realm of the church to see what difficulties or blessings the Latin American culture offers us.

As we list the following characteristics, we need to keep three things ever in mind: 1) These characteristics are generalizations and do not fit everyone; 2) One often finds a changed person in the church as compared to the world, a person changed by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word; 3) Characteristics which may seem strange to us of a different culture and which seem to present obstacles to church work can actually be used in a positive way to foster the growth of faith and church. Much of the following information was taken from the book *Understanding Latin Americans* by Eugene A. Nida:

- 1) On the part of the male there seems to be a sense of inferiority which expresses itself in a sense of irresponsibility, for which the symbol of the cock is so frequently employed--as for example, in the folk song, "*Soy como el gallo, que tiene cincuenta y a ninguna. Ia mantiene.*" ("I am a cock who has fifty hens but doesn't provide for any of them"). This refusal to assume responsibility for educating and caring for the children reflects a feeling that this would be something too "feminine."
- 2) Despite the fact that the man-woman role in Latin America calls for women to be passive, abnegating, long-suffering, and enduring, it would be a mistake to think that all Latin women are mere puppets or dolls. Quite the contrary! Latin women are often quite strong-willed and in many situations are aggressive, even within their passive role. They manage to dominate, though usually not overtly. Their real power comes from their role in the family, for as the father tends to be irresponsible, it is obviously the mother who becomes the emotional center of the family, the one who provides the security and permanence so indispensable to the continued meaning of the home. She often becomes the mediator between the authoritarian father and the children.
- 3) In Latin America the grandmother is much more likely to try to assume some responsibility for the education and care of the grandchildren and as such compete with her daughter, for her security is to be found in the mother role, not in the men's world.
- 4) On the social level "machismo" expresses itself in a variety of ways. "Machismo" becomes a form of violent aggressiveness, often assuming the form of murder. In Latin America

murders are far more "crimes of passion" than calculated attempts to liquidate an opposing gang. The home can become a violent place. The abused wife is common.

- 5) Gangs of young boys often show their aggression. Without responsible father figures, these young boys express their aggressiveness by strong emphasis on "machismo" values, through robbing, thieving, and taunting and escaping from authorities. Aggressiveness also shows itself in loud speech--but also makes dynamic preachers.
- 6) Males frequently seem to prefer the companionship of other males rather than of females. This helps to explain the tendency for Latin males to congregate in bars, coffeehouses, and places of recreation. They seem to be uneasy in the company of women unless they are fully dominant.
- 7) "Machismo" also leads to isolation. He cannot confess his real problems, for to do so would be to have his dominant role exposed and his weakness made evident. He certainly cannot afford to confess this to a woman, for then he would have reversed roles and would no longer be a man sociologically.
- 8) Traditionally, the emphasis on the male role has meant that women have been kept somewhat in the background of Latin life--in the home and in social situations. This is changing rapidly.
- 9) The figure of Christ has traditionally been a symbol either of death or of a small child dependent on the care of his mother. As a symbol of death he fails to elicit continual identification, and as a child he tends rather to focus emotional response to his mother, the Virgin, who cares for him and by implication is prepared to care for all believers. Churches are full only on Good Friday (death of Christ).
- 10) Religion tends to be identified with the feminine role. The church has its greatest appeal to women, who find security in its opposition to divorce and the opportunity for self-expression in an area of life that poses no threat to their interpersonal relations.
- 11) Men tend to be strongly anticlerical, not merely because the Church seems to compete with their authority but also because it is a feminine institution. So much is this the case that many men think that only men without manliness enter the church and the ministry.
- 12) The Virgin also becomes the symbol of solace for women--the symbol of the ideal mother, who bears children without being conquered.
- 13) For men the Virgin becomes an identification with their own mother, the intercessor with the stern Father, and the emotional focus of the security of the home, for the mother always remains the faithful, suffering one.
- 14) "Machismo" becomes rather instinctively a justification for a double moral standard. A strict division of labor is brought about with little or no possibility for the confusion of roles.

With the above we have taken a general look at some of the characteristics of man and woman in Latin America. In summary we can thus make the following conclusions (drawn from family life in Puerto Rico):

- The husband is very much the head of the family but does not understand the job description that goes with it and the responsibilities.
- The husband may very well have other women that "he has conquered."
- The family will jump when the husband speaks at times because of fear rather than respect.
- The husband and father will spend much time with his "buddies" rather than at home with the family.
- Sons of the family will be allowed to express their "manliness" without discipline. Discipline or a correct form of it is absent in many families.

- The father will tend to stay away from the church and yet will at times be more devoted to the Virgin Mary than are other members of the family.
- The husband at times is likely to abuse his wife especially if he has been drinking heavily.
- The woman is very emotional which plays right into the hands of the conquering males. There are many early pregnancies and young marriages.
- The wife and mother carries a heavy load of responsibility in the home. She holds the family together and helps it survive.
- The wife and mother is often a very domineering person, but only in the absence of the male. When the husband is present, he is boss.
- The mother often has trouble controlling and disciplining the children, especially the boys.
- In Puerto Rico more and more women are now crossing the divider between man and woman so that more women are being found in government leadership positions and high business positions.
- The women love their church because for many it is their source and only source of comfort. It is often the only place where they feel loved.
- Religious training is left to the mothers, yet they must seek the permission of the fathers before attending or sending a son or daughter off to church or to a church function.

It is obvious that we have much work to do in regard to family life. With regularity they need to hear what the Word of God has to say about family job descriptions. It is evident that many of the above characteristics do not fall in line with what the Scriptures teach us about the Christ centered family. But I guess we could say the same about many other cultures.

As I stated earlier, some of the above characteristics of the man and woman in Latin America can be used for the benefit and growth of the Lord's Kingdom. Earlier we talked about the aggressiveness. I find that friendship evangelism works much better in Puerto Rico than it seemed to work in the States. They are not afraid to share the joy they find in the gospel with their friends and neighbors. There is no trouble getting volunteers for the Vacation Bible School program. As an emotionally charged people, they love to sing and to hear forceful sermons.

In our churches the male is looked upon as the head and it is clearly understood that the woman is not to have "authority over the man." The place of man and woman in the church and how the Lord would want their gifts used in the church has never been an issue here in Puerto Rico. The voters are male according to the constitution. The council members are male as are the called pastors. The Latin American culture has made this part easy for the time being. I say for the time being because the winds of change are blowing. The woman in Puerto Rico is emerging as a leader.

The men respect the opinions of the women in the church. Often the council will ask the opinion of the women before proceeding. The majority of the members are women, although this too is changing. By the grace of God we are seeing more and more families in our worship services. The women often read the Sunday Scripture readings from where they are seated in the congregation. The ladies play the organ and sing in the choirs.

The family and its values within our churches is often much different from the family unit outside of our churches. We thank our gracious Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit for that. I am thankful I have had the opportunity to work with the people of Latin America. Though there are many problems in the family structure, they are a warm and loving people who offer hospitality that is unmatched. May the Lord continue to strengthen this people with his Word as he says to the man and woman of Latin America as well as to all cultures: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord . . . husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

## **Dilemmas of families run by single mothers**

*(An article written by Delma S, Fleming, Ponce)*

It is indeed a striking revelation that 205,508--or 23 percent--of the families in Puerto Rico are run by single mothers.

If you have been aware of the changes that have transpired in the male population, it will be easy to recognize this phenomenon as a sequel to that mutation.

It is not easy to explain social changes in such a small space, but I'll try to make sense within the limitation.

It is very important, in order to follow the social phenomenon I am trying to describe that we are aware that there are deep-seated differences between a man and a macho-man. The culture of machismo has taken an interesting turn on this island.

The birth of a male child, like in any machista society, is a highly valued "achievement" and an aspiration and ambition that must be realized at almost any cost. But what happens to that child once he is born? He is spoiled rotten from day one.

Often, and interestingly I have noticed that it is rather common to give the child the nickname of "Machito," "Macho" and other derivatives. It is also interesting how the child is socialized into thinking that because he is "el macho," or "el machito" he is somehow the epicenter of the universe and has certain prerogatives that his sisters wouldn't even dare dream about.

He is somehow superior even to his own mother, for after all he is a macho and mom belongs to the other group, the "defective or undeveloped male," to bring up one of Thomas Aquinas interesting postulations: She is a woman.

He soon comes to believe that all the females in the home are actually there to serve him and the other males in the family. And the women contribute to his delusion with their behavior.

In exchange the women will be fiercely and jealously protected by the "machoman," particularly from other males.

Machos quit school early, but roam around it, courting the girls that, beside all the work they do at home, also make all kinds of sacrifices to study so that later they can land a job.

Since in our culture no woman should be without a man, she is only a complete person when she gets married, when she is made a woman, "*La hizo mujer*," the girl eventually gets married to one of these hybrids.

So, sooner than later she will be feeding him, he will be driving her car, she will be doing all the chores at home when she comes back from work and he will be having "*la fría*" with his male friends in a bar while she helps the kids do their homework and puts them to bed.

Exhausted after doing the laundry and ironing the clothes she goes to bed. By midnight, husband comes home demanding a warm dinner. After this he will demand to have sex, and if she disagrees or fails to perform he will pick a fight and even beat the poor woman. And so will her life go until he finds another "girl," one that will "understand" him better, or in the case of the more assertive women, she will throw him out of her life and will carry alone the burden of running a family.

Here you may have a large number of those 205,508 families which are run by single mothers.