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# WOMEN, WORK AND FAMILY

*by Maria Cristina A. Bruschini  
and Maria Rosa Lombardi*

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## Authors

*Maria Cristina A. Bruschini*  
Fundação Carlos Chagas

*Maria Rosa Lombardi*  
Fundação Carlos Chagas

*Fundação Carlos Chagas carries out study showing the presence of Brazilian women in the job market over the last 30 years. Maria Cristina A. Bruschini and Maria Rosa Lombardi are sociologists and researchers of Fundação Carlos Chagas. Swisscam, the Magazine of the Swiss-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, n. 45, July, 2006.*

From the seventies until today, participation of women in the workplace has increased astonishingly. Whereas in 1970 only 18% of Brazilian women held jobs, in 2004, more than half of them were employed (51.6).

However, women's ability to hold a job does not depend only on market demand or their qualifications to meet these demands, but it is also a result of a complex articulation of personal and family characteristics. The presence of children, together with the life cycle of female workers, their position in the family – as spouse, head of family, etc., and the need to provide or complement the family income, are all factors that always have to be considered when women decide to enter or remain in the workplace.

Traditionally, the effects of motherhood on women's professional life were evidenced, until the seventies, by the decrease in the employment rate among women aged 25 and above, when, supposedly, children were still very young.

From the mid-eighties, however, a reversal in this trend has been consolidated, indicating that holding a job has become as important to women as motherhood and children's care. Firstly, the effects of motherhood on women's careers remain, but it has been quite reduced, according to data showing that the employment rate among women aged between 25 and 29 has become similar – or even surpassed – that recorded among women between 20 and 24 years old.

Although the presence of small children really impact women's professional life, other variables may encourage it: the availability of public and private child care services (more



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common in urban zones), the economic needs of families faced with either unemployment of one or several family members, or the reduced family income, or even if to a smaller extent, the possibility of attaining a higher purchasing power, which would provide female workers, even in the absence of such services, the necessary support to hold a job out of the house. This is exactly of 1998's data seem to indicate, and that is even clearer in 2004: last year, the employment rate among women with children aged up to 2 years old (53.8%) was a little lower than the total rate (56.1%), although it was still far from the rate among women with children aged above 7 (71.4%), who, freer from having to take care of small children, can fully dedicate themselves to their careers.

Secondly, women have remained longer in the workplace: whereas in 1970, only 19% and 15% of women aged between 40 and 49 and 50 and 59, respectively, were professionally active, in 2004, the rate for the same age group were 68.4% and 52.2%, respectively.

Another indicator, which reveals this trend, is the increasing participation of wives in the workplace: in a period of 24 years (1980/2004), their employment rates jumped from 20 to 57%, almost three times higher in such period.

Also in 2004, 29% of Brazilian family heads were women; among the country's different regions, the highest rate was verified in the northeastern region (30.6%), and the lowest, in the South (26.7%). Among all other states, the Federal District had the highest rate of female family heads (40.9%). On the other hand, the lowest rate was found in the state of Santa Catarina, where only 23.5% of all family heads were women.

In most of the states, family heads were predominantly black and dark-skinned women, and, invariable, the monthly income of the households headed by women was lower than that of households headed by men. Thus, in 2002, 53% of female family heads had a monthly income of up to 3 minimum wages (MW), compared to only 45% of male family heads. Also, note that in less than 5 years, between 1998 and 2002, the level of family income, for families headed either by men or by women, had visibly decreased: in 1998, 35.3% and 42.4% of households headed by men and women, respectively, had a monthly income of up to 3 MW per month.

Therefore, it is possible to state that within the context of the female worker pool significant changes have taken place. There are, however, some other factors that still hamper women's dedication to their careers or make them second-class workers. Firstly, women are still the main family member responsible for the housework, children, and family care, all of



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which represent an extra workload for those who already perform a professional activity. As a concrete example of this extra workload, compare the great difference between male and female dedication to household chores: men spend an average of 10.6% on such activities while women spend around 27.2 hours. Another indicator is the number of hours usually dedicated to these tasks: 7 hours a week for men, and 20 hours for women.

Regardless of holding a job, all women are housewives, and perform duties that, despite being essential for the survival and wellbeing of everyone, are underestimated and not considered in the statistics, which rate women as “inactive” or “house workers”. From a conservative perspective, if we included in women’s employment rate the percentage of women who, in 2004, dedicated themselves exclusively to household chores (the so-called “full time” housewives), the global rate of employment among women would have been much higher – 75.3%, virtually the same recorded among men. ✕

\* These great trends verified in “female work and family” interface, in addition to several other details, may be viewed on site <http://www.fcc.org.br/mulher/index.html>