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Family in Latin America

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here to commemorate the 5th Anniversary of the Doha Conference. Mexico has been a close partner with Qatar in family issues since 2004, year of the 10th Anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family, when the World Congress of Families was held in Mexico City. This was followed by the Doha Conference in Qatar. Both events served to raise the profile of the “family perspective”, in particular, the Doha Declaration, which was presented and adopted by the General Assembly on 6th December 2004. Since then both Mexico and Qatar have remained active in defending family values.

Mexico is extremely grateful to Qatar, and the Doha Institute for Family Studies and Development, for co-sponsoring the “Colloquium of the Migrant Family” held in Mexico City last October.

This talk is based on a summary of a national survey on the family in Mexico in 2005. The aim of the survey was to identify the strong and the weak points of the Mexican family. This was to serve as a tool in the design and implementation of public policies with a family and community perspective in the interest of generating social capital.

This survey points to critical changes in Mexican family and society. The question that faces us today is how to convey the importance of the family as a permanent institution for the benefit of society and nations to the younger generations.

Mexico remains a country of young people, with about 64% of the population of children and youth. In 2000, Mexico had 20.6 million households. There is an important relationship between the socioeconomic status of families and family dynamics in Mexico. The 4 main socio-economic categories of Mexican families are: Families living in poverty, representing 31.4% of households. Working class families, representing 32.8% of households. Middle class families, representing 22.5% of households. Wealthy families, representing 13.3% of households. The survey identifies three trends of structural change in Mexican families:

First, a transition from an institutionalized family structure to an informal family organization; second, a process of breakdown in family structure due to family malfunctions, and, third, a trend towards new forms of family organization, other than the nuclear family structure.

Signs of fracture in family structure can be seen in:

the loss of formal leadership by the male;

the loss of authority of the head of the family in the democratization of decision-making within the family;

The change and loss of control in parent-child relationships; sexual liberation; the allocation of new family roles; the empowerment of children, still minors, towards their parents; the desecration of family life, which weakens traditional moral standards; the flexibility of the family residence;

the feasibility of separation, divorce and remarriage, and, the replacement of family relationships by friends.

The family is considered both a place for affection and solidarity, as well as a space for conflict. More than 60% of people interviewed were positive about their communication, feedback, closeness and satisfaction in their relationship as a couple. When questioned on the activities undertaken in common, two out of three said they always or often did things with their partner. Two out of three said they always or often took into account the feelings of their partner and two of every three felt they always or often were taken into account on entertainment decisions. In decision-making, 80% of respondents said they always or sometimes needed the opinion of their partners to make important decisions. In general, higher socioeconomic status seems to be associated with better partner satisfaction. In relation to parents' relationships with their children, 82% of respondents said they always or often know where their children are, 12% rarely know where their children are and only 1% never knew. Three in four respondents said they always or often supervised their children's homework.

Regarding punishment,

73% of respondents said they had not punished their children during the week preceding the survey, 20% had once, the rest had twice or more.

Physical punishment was more common in rural than in urban areas.

As for the support that parents give their adolescent children, three of every four respondents mentioned that they always or often complimented their teens when they did things right; six out of seven said they had at least kissed or hugged their children, in the last seven days.

The expression of affection was higher in urban than in rural areas. One in four respondents mentioned that their teenage children always or sometimes asked for their opinion when taking decisions. In general, Mexican parents and their children have a warm, close relationship. In the higher socioeconomic households, there is greater supervision, support, trust, dependence, sanctions and expression of affection, and less physical punishment, than in the lower categories.

Mexican families enjoy eating together at home, watching TV, going for a walk, going to Mass or to the temple, and eating out. In urban areas, families ate together slightly less than in rural areas, but were much more likely to watch television together, go for walks and eat out. The higher the socioeconomic status, the higher the frequency of recreational activities together as a family. Attending Mass or church turned out to be the only common family activity across all socioeconomic sectors.

The survey inquired about personal relationships with relatives and non relatives. In all cases, there was greater closeness among people of the same sex. A higher proportion of males were closest to their father or brother than to their mother or sister. Women were closest to their mother

or sister. Contrary to the bad image prevalent in popular culture, mothers-in-laws did not appear to be rejected, contact with their daughters and sons-in-law turned out to be quite frequent (daily or least once a week in 50% of cases). In general, people closest to each other were parents and siblings.

The survey also sought to explore the social networks that impact the family through aid-giving and receiving. Overall, one in four respondents in rural areas and one in three in urban areas said they had received help in everyday life. The higher the socioeconomic status, the greater the exchange of aid. This finding contradicts the hypothesis that the poor rely more on their support networks than the rich. Moreover, more men are helping each other. Women helped more than men in three major types of situations: the death of a relative, a serious illness, and in serious economic problems.

Men helped more than women in cases of problems at work and accidents. The survey aimed to identify the most common causes of conflict within the family. These were, in order of importance:

- economic issues, conflict of authority, difficulties of communication and coexistence, behavior and education of children, problems of personality and difference of opinion, care of the home, addictions (especially alcoholism), jealousy, infidelity and violence.

The main causes of conflict varied significantly according to the socioeconomic status and place of residence. In poorer urban areas, the primary cause of conflict proved to be addictions, while in rural areas, in the same socio-economic segment, the most common problems proved to be the result of the management of permissions and the exercise of authority. Among families who enjoyed greater material comfort in urban areas, economic problems proved to be the main cause of conflict.

The study notes that among the younger generations, very often relationships are conducted on a trial basis, with the express purpose of not having children, at least during the early years. In other cases, the option for living together is presented as a less complicated and less costly alternative for a possible separation. There is also seen a higher tendency to merely civil marriage, even among couples professing a religion.

It was reported that the dissolution of first marriages through separation or divorce was relatively low compared with levels observed in industrialized countries and other countries of Latin America. However, the percentage of women who had separated or divorced after 5 years from her first marriage was higher in the age group 25 to 39 years than in older women. That is, the probability of separation among young couples was nearly twice that among older couples.

The growing trend among young couples is indeed worrying. Similarly, women with higher education separate by a much larger degree (280% more) than those who had not studied. The average age at divorce for men was 36 years while the age for women was 33. Those couples who had married in a religious ceremony were much less likely to separate after 5 years of marriage than those who had married non-religiously. That is, the probability of separation after a religious marriage was 6.5 times lower.

The main challenge facing the family in Mexico today is the threat to its stability due to new behavioral trends by younger people who question the existence and permanence of marriage. The individual actions of thousands of individual decisions that undermine the sacredness of marriage and the family lead to collective costs.

It is important that research, social analysis and educational campaigns are introduced to heighten the importance of the institution of marriage and the stability of the family for the well-being, not only of its members, but of society as a whole.

The principles of the Doha Declaration include the recognition of the family as the basic unit of society and as the focus for sustainable development, in recognition of the vital role families play in the socialization of its members and the transmission of ethical and moral principles that enrich social life.

The design and implementation of a comprehensive family public policy is not without its difficulties. What serves to strengthen the family? How can we create conditions for its formation and permanence? How do we protect the vulnerable?

The Mexican Government, institutions and civil society as a whole need to continue to preserve and support the family which, as a community of people, fosters love and life, serves to attend to the needs of its members, and participates in the development of society and the economy of the Nation.

Strong families create strong nations. The majority of Mexican people are generous, affectionate, kind, hard-working and resilient. Mexicans love their family! Let us strive to preserve this heritage for our children!

Thank you.