

GENDER EQUITY PROGRESS BLOCKED BY HARD-CORE "MACHISMO"

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More than 60 percent of Chileans surveyed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are opposed to full equality between women and men, according to a new national report released by the agency on Friday.

Pablo González, coordinator of the 2010 UNDP National Human Development Report from Chile, told IPS that the basic message of the study is the following: "Chile has made a great deal of progress with regard to gender equity, and people value this progress, but nonetheless, we have come up against entrenched pockets of resistance that will hinder further progress.

"Now it is important to tackle certain aspects resistant to change, which include the country's culture, which is not egalitarian," added González, who presented the main findings of the study, subtitled "Gender: The Challenges of Equality", at a report launch held in the seat of the national government, currently led by right-wing President Sebastián Piñera.

A survey conducted by the UNDP in 2009, which served as the basis for the report, found that 62 percent of Chileans, both male and female, are opposed to full equality between the sexes.

Of this total, 18 percent are classified as "machista" - people who believe that men should have the power, give the orders and be the "breadwinners", while women should obey and limit themselves to their roles as mothers and wives.

Close to 80 percent of these "machistas" are men from lower socio-economic brackets, and most live in the southern region of the country, according to the study.

Another 18 percent of respondents are considered "traditional": they believe that men and women should complement and support one another while fulfilling their traditional roles. This group is made up primarily of people over the age of 50, and is evenly divided between men and women. They tend to be from the lower middle class and have strong religious ties.

The remainder of those resistant to full gender equality, who accounted for 26 percent of respondents, fall under the category of "pragmatists" – people who feel that gender roles can be modified when necessary, but that it is important to maintain the difference between the sexes and traditional morals. These pragmatists are mainly middle-aged and middle-class Chileans.

The other 38 percent of respondents, who do support the concept of gender equity, fall into two categories.

On the one hand, there are the "fighters", who made up 15 percent of respondents. The majority of them are women who feel that they essentially do everything, but it is men who have the advantages.

The remainder are classified as "liberal" (23 percent). In their opinion, there are no differences between the sexes, and everyone is equal and independent. Most members of this group are relatively young and from higher income brackets.

"Another hard core of resistance is shared responsibility for domestic tasks: women continue to do most or all of the household chores, which means that many women who have entered the job market essentially work a double shift," noted González. In fact, a full 78 percent of the women surveyed by the UNDP reported that they are solely or mainly responsible for housework, while 52 percent of men responded that they "normally don't do anything."

González stressed that different policies are needed to address the different realities faced by women in Chile.

Rural or urban women with precarious employment or "machista" husbands do not have the same needs as higher-income women who choose to stop working temporarily to devote themselves to raising children and subsequently find it difficult to re-enter the labour market, he said.

On the UNDP's Human Development Index, which measures life expectancy, education and income, Chile ranked in 44th place among 182 countries in 2009, thus classifying as a country with a "high" level of human development.

But when it comes to the Gender Empowerment Measure, also calculated by the UNDP, this South American country of 17 million people ranked 75th among 109 nations.

The continued inequality faced by women is illustrated by other statistics as well.

Women's participation in the paid labour force rose from 32 percent to 49 percent between 1987 and 2006, but still lags behind other countries in Latin America.

Women also occupied only 22 percent of high-level political posts in Chile in 2009, in the legislative and executive branches as well as within political parties.

When it comes to the UNDP's measure of women's "economic power", the situation is even worse: only five percent of company managers, board members and executives in Chile are women.

Meanwhile, the UNDP report also found that between 2006 and 2009, during the administration of Chile's first female president, socialist Michelle Bachelet, the largest number of bills related to gender equity were tabled in parliament compared to any other period since 1990, the year that democracy was restored after 17 years of dictatorship.

On Apr. 29, President Piñera announced the creation of a Presidential Advisory Committee on Women, Work and the Family. The committee has been given a 90-day mandate to study alternatives aimed at increasing women's participation in the workforce while protecting the family and eliminating the obstacles that keep women from having children.

These include a proposal for longer and more flexible maternity leave, which is currently 84 days.

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