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AGEING IN MEXICO
FAMILIES, INFORMAL CARE AND RECIPROCITY

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****** PRELIMINARY DRAFT: NOT TO BE QUOTED******

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Introduction

Over the next two decades demographic ageing will become firmly established in Mexico. According to projections, Mexico will have one of the ten largest elderly populations in the world. This chapter deals with socioeconomic, cultural and family trends associated with ageing, taking into account gender differences, as well as formal and informal exchange systems. The gender perspective takes account of the fact men and women of different generations assume different societal, familial and community roles. This reflects a complex process, whereby networks, representations, status and stereotypes related to ageing are constructed anew. Intergenerational commitments and obligations are negotiated and renegotiated by working-age adults and by older people – a process that takes place in a context of social security, family and social networks. Widowhood among women (due to their greater life expectancy) is a key issue for older people, influencing home life and income, as well as social constructions and exchanges. As will be seen, working-age and older generations are currently reinforcing female roles based on caring for the home and on the routinization of domestic activities. At the same time, the male's role as provider during adult years can lead to weak social and family networks by the end of his life. Thus, while the male is valued in his functional role as provider, he is devalued in old age.

In developing countries such as Mexico a lack of formal support systems and economic resources place older people at a disadvantage in their interactions and exchange negotiations with family and community. In the supply and demand structure for support services, older individuals find themselves in a weakened position, particularly when they are ill, disabled or living in extreme poverty. Rapid population ageing is putting formal social protection mechanisms to the test, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of informal support systems.

This chapter locates the ageing process within a socioeconomic context in which institutional or other formal support systems for older people are lacking, giving rise to a complex informal support system based on the family and on social networks. The central issues revolve around the support received by older adults and the types of exchanges in which they engage. Particular attention is paid to the direction of support, conflicts that arise in regard to inheritance, and expectations of reciprocity in cross-gender and intergenerational relations.

1. Socioeconomic and demographic context

Demographic transition in Mexico has been relatively recent. As a result of continued high fertility rates, the proportion of Mexicans aged over 60 in 2000 was lower than that of 1950 (Table 1). Despite this, rapid growth in the population as a whole meant that the absolute number of people aged 60 or more increased from two to seven million. The pattern of demographic transition means that there is currently a good potential supply of support for older people from younger age groups (assuming that older people require such support). However, the potential support ratio will fall sharply over the next 20 years.

Table 1. Demographic trends, 1950-2025.

	1950	1975	2000	2025
Population aged 60+ (% of total)	7.1	5.7	6.9	13.5

60+ (% of total)				
Potential support ratio*	12.1	12.4	13.2	7.3

*Number of persons aged 15 to 64 for every person aged 65 or over.

Source: UN Population Division, 2002.

Mexico is considered a middle-income country, and in 1999 was the world's twelfth largest economy (World Bank, 2000). As in Brazil, the economy's performance during the 1980s and 1990s failed to match that of preceding decades. Mexico also mirrors Brazil in terms of high levels of inequality between income groups, regions and rural/urban settings, and high rates of poverty. In 1995 a severe economic crisis produced a sharp drop in real household income and a contraction of formal labour market opportunities. **In 2000 24.2 per cent of the population lived in extreme poverty: a higher proportion than in 1992 (22.5 percent). The highest proportion was riched after the 1995´s crisis: in 1996 there were 37.1 percent of Mexican people in extreme poverty (Cortés at all, 2002).**

The initial evolution of formal social protection and the labour market in Mexico was also similar to that of Brazil. Since the 1930s, a corporatist political economy conferred varying levels of entitlement on different occupational groups (Mesa-Lago, 1978). However, unlike the Brazilian case, there was no substantial extension of social protection since the 1980s. As a result, pension coverage of older people remains relatively low: in 1996 27 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men received a pension (Wong and Parker, 1999). In contrast to Brazil, households containing older people were more likely to experience poverty than those which did not (op cit, 1999). Coverage of health insurance is rather higher than pension coverage: in 1999 50 per cent of those aged 60 or more were protected. It is thought that in many cases older people are included in health plans taken out by adult children (Wong and Parker, 1999).

Currently, 62 per cent of the total population are classified as economically active, but only 33% of adult women engage in paid work. Women are epecially concentrated in the informal labour market. The majority of the economically active population does not work under a formal contract, does not enjoy labour protection and does not contribute to a pension plan (**Gomes, 2001**). A key feature of Mexico is large-scale labour migration to the USA. It is estimated that this involved around 300,000 people a year during the 1990's. As will be seen, migration has important effects on household composition and on patterns of informal support. There is also an increasingly substantial wave of elderly return migrants, who have higher incomes and more valuable asset bases, but who lack formal social protection entitlements (Wong, 2001).

2. Families, households and ageing

Analyses of the family's role in rapidly ageing societies make the assumption that everyday interaction involves support systems and socially shared resources (De Vos, 1988; Chappel, 1992). Given the narrowness of formal social protection, the Mexican family is seen as a key source of support and protection against economic shocks (Tuirán,

1995). This is accomplished through specific survival strategies and support relationships provided through social networks (Lomnitz, 2001).[3]

According to Salles and Tuirán (1996), one of the most firmly established myths in the collective mind is that the family provides a roof under which all of its members (perhaps including three or more generations) are gathered and sheltered. Such myths obscure many inequalities within families that are a function of age, gender and kinship. Also, these myths overlook the emotional dynamics of family relationships, the play of feelings, conflicts, as well as hostilities and negotiations. Other authors (Leñero, 1998; Varley and Blasco, 2000; Contreras de Lehr, 1992) discuss the links between families and macro-social conditions, and stress the role of the family as a source of social, economic and psychological support.

This chapter identifies inherent contradictions in the role and concept of the Mexican family. On one side is the reaffirmation of a positive ideology, according to which the family serves as a protective shelter for its members; on the other are the family's internal inequalities, power relationships and differences based on gender, generation and kinship. On top of this, demographic, socioeconomic and cultural shifts associated with urbanization have changed the structure of the family, the behavior of its members, and the perceptions and values that influence the way family is regarded.

2.1 Households containing older people

Over the last decade, family structures and dynamics have been transformed and restructured. Due to increased life expectancy, numerous generations are alive at the same time, creating changes in the kinship structure (Tuirán, 1993 **and Gomes, 2001**). Historically, the nuclear family has been the most common type of household in Mexico (Tuirán, 1993; Rabell, 1996; Del Rey, 2001). The prevalence of nuclear structures reflects a near universal preference for marriage, along with a reluctance to live with parents. At the end of the twentieth century, 68 per cent of all households were defined as nuclear, and 25 per cent were defined as extended. In recent years, population ageing has led to an increase in the number of new household forms, including extended families with female heads and adult children; one-person households; and households made up of elderly couples living alone **(Gomes, 2001)**.

These changes are related to women's greater life expectancy and to high rates of marriage across all adult generations. Men and women aged between 70 and 74 now enjoy a life expectancy ten years higher than the generation born thirty years before them. More than 90% of these individuals married and were able to live with their spouses a decade longer than their predecessors. Marriages are ending increasingly late in life, since high life expectancy postpones widowhood. Moreover, separations and divorces are extremely rare in Mexico, and have been throughout the twentieth century (Tuirán, 1998; Quilodrán, 2001; **Gomes, 2001**). At the same time, increased life expectancy has meant that older adults are surviving long enough to see their children and grandchildren grow to adulthood.

The increase in numbers of older people has led to the emergence of new phases in the latter parts of the life course. First, adult children marry and leave home, leaving the older

[3] This thinking may also be applied to other strongly Catholic countries, such as Spain and the Philippines (Izquieta, 1996).

couple alone in the "empty nest." Second, one of the couple dies (most commonly the man), and the widow may continue living alone in the now one-person household. Alternatively, she may take in an adult child, or move in with one of her children, creating an extended multi-generational household (Gomes, 2002a).

Table 2 shows important variations in patterns of co-residence between older men and older women. In 1995 married men aged over 60 lived mostly in nuclear or extended families, with or without children. Women without spouses (mostly widows) mainly lived in one-person households and in extended families with or without their children, while another large segment of women lived in nuclear households with their children. Half of men over 60 without spouses lived in one-person households, while the rest lived in nuclear or extended families with their children.

Table 2

Percentages of household types, broken down by age, gender and marital status of the head of household, Mexico 1994.

Type of household		Married heads of household	Unmarried female heads of household	Unmarried male heads of household
Nuclear	Couple, children	39		
	Couple	23		
	Head of household, children		23	23
Extended	Couple, children, others	28		
	Head of household, children, others		28	18
	Couple, others	8		
	Head of household, others		18	6
One-person			28	49
Other		2	3	4
Total		100%	100%	100%

Source**:** **Gomes, 2001,** based on National Household Income and Expenditures Survey (ENIGH) 1994.

Thus, in the final stage of the life course, in addition to the emergence of the extended family as a household, we see –as a function of advancing age, gender, and the end of marriage (generally due to death) –a growing complexity of household types. Multi-generational households, which could guarantee the wellbeing of the older population, are not a norm in Mexico. Although the country is still at the beginning of the demographic ageing process, an increase in one-person households is already evident (from 4.9% of all households in 1990 to 6.4% in 2000). This trend is due in large part to the increase in households headed by widows (Gomes, 2002a).

Interpreting relationships bewteen household structures and the wellbeing of older people is not an easy task. For example, studies have found that some older widows with economic resources prefer to live alone; a situation that does not necessarily mean isolation from family networks and support. Living alone can mean greater autonomy, and that female roles associated with home care will not be reproduced in succeeding generations. In other cases, living alone may be the result of abandonment, most often related to lack of resources. In particular, older men without resources may not be attractive live-in candidates for their children or for other adult relatives (Varley and Blasco, 2001). In cases of extreme poverty, social and family networks built in earlier phases of life may be broken, especially at times of economic crisis and when the older adult in question is ill. Enríquez (2000) analyzes the increase in cases of social isolation among older adults in poor outlying areas of the city of Guadalajara, where one-person households of older people are typical, not by choice but due to broken social ties, isolation and abandonment. Enríquez views this as a result of a process of social disintegration associated with aging.

While it is dangerous to generalise about the living arrangements of older people in Mexico, there are indications that families do not provide an adequate safety net of social protection to compensate for the limitations of the social security system. The country contains a complex network of household types conditioned by the presence or absence of resources, income, possession of real estate, or home ownership. Other determining elements include past experience of urban life, migration to the city, whether the older people have children, and their health status, especially chronic illness or physical disability. Older adults who live in one-person households under conditions of extreme poverty may have opted to live alone in order to ensure their own welfare, or they may be living in extreme poverty and social isolation without any source of formal or family support. Those who live in extended families may be providing the living quarters in which they and their children live, and they may be contributing with their pensions or inheritance. In other cases they may move to the house of one of their children, in particular when physical limitations are an issue. We will now explore these issues in greater depth with refernce to multi-generational households.

2.2 Multi-generational households

Historically, multi-generational households have been a much less frequent phenomenon than the nuclear family. Extended family living situations were much less common than nuclear families in the past, since mortality was high and parents tended not to survive long enough to see their children become adults (Rabell, 1996). Today's greater life expectancy could allow for more multi-generational households. However, while multiple generations are now living contemporaneously, this does not necessarily mean that they live together in the same households.

Patterns of residence in multi-generational households are strongly influenced by the sex of the older person. Mexican women increasingly live in multi-generational households as they age, with sharp rises after the ages of 70 and 80. Conversely, men are less likely to live with their children or other adult relatives at age 80 than when they are 60 or 70 years old. This may have important implications for informal care for men and women. The socioeconomic characteristics of older people, especially men, are closely related to whether they share housing with their children or other adult relatives. Older men in work or those with pensions are more likely to live with other family members **(Gomes, 2001)**.

There are several explanations for these gender effects. Because of their longer life expectancy, women are more likely to experience the death of a spouse. They are also more likely to experience chronic illness and physical and mental disability, which increase their need to live with other people and receive support. At the same time, women are considered more appealing candidates for living with other adults, because their socialization is oriented to housework, cooking and caring for children (Chant, 1996; Varley and Blasco, 2001). As a result, older women are in an advantageous position to offer their own services in exchange for economic assistance and family support from their children.

Gender-related factors, such as the role of "provider," do not allow men to establish relationships with their children which are as close as those enjoyed by mothers. Thus, when relationships end due to divorce or death, an emotional break tends to occur as well, reproducing the stereotype of the male as "unreliable" or "picky," This reinforces the disadvantageous position of men, who are not seen as desirable co-residents by their children and other relatives. While they may have contributed as economic providers, men who lack resources are unlikely to realize their hopes of future reciprocity vis-à-vis their children. This situation is particularly severe for older men who lack income, property or other economic assets (Varley, 2001).

Older men are less likely to experience poverty than older women (Wong and Parker, 1999). It might therefore be expected that they would have more to offer family members in return for their support. Older mens' labour earnings are concentrated in the early stages of old age, when some adult children have not yet established homes of their own, increasing the desirability of co-residence. When men retire, it is likely that their children will have already established an independent household. Furthermore, retirement in Mexico invariably means a drastic reduction in income level, and this makes the home of the retiree less economically attractive as part of an exchange (Gomes, 2001).

Similar gender effects may influence patterns of access to health insurance. Wong and Parker (1999) note that older women were rather more likely than older men to be included in health plans, even though they were less likely to have been employed in the formal sector. One likely reason for this discrepancy is that adult children are better disposed towards older women and are therefore more likely to include them in family health plans.

A small proportion of older people have clear needs to live with and receive support from other adult relatives. However, most inter-generational living is more a reflection of the economic needs of the working generation. Older people with economic resources are more likely to be part of multi-generational households, particularly if they are homeowners. At the same time, there is a small number of men and women (roughly 7 per cent) who never had children and who, in the absence of economic resources will be faced in old age, with no support from children or grandchildren.[4]

In short, economic factors play an important role in multi-generational households. Even when individuals would prefer to live in their own home, apart from parents, the ability to do so is limited by economic constraints. Living independently requires an ability to pay

[4] According to the National Survey the current generation over 60 years old have had in average of 6.6 children born alive, and 6.3 of their children still alive. Only 6.9 percent of people over 60 years old have never had children **(Gomes, 2003).**

for and maintain a separate household. Another factor in determining whether or not multi-generational households are the arrangement of choice is, of course, the preference of the parents. Some older parents prefer, or at least accept, living with other adults, especially when it involves their own children.

3. Family support networks and patterns of informal support

Informal support systems involve flows of resources within the family, and may include help from other households. Recent information provides a general view of informal support patterns in Mexico, and sheds light on the role of social and family support networks. The National Survey on the Sociodemography of Ageing[5] (ENSE-1994) was the first survey in Mexico to focus on the social and family support networks of people aged 60 and over.

According to the National Survey, the household is the primary source for various forms of instrumental support (personal care, housework, food and money) provided to older people. At least one form of support was reported by 57 per cent of respondents. This support is more widespread than transfers from the state (52 per cent of older adults received either health services or some type of pension.) A third, more restricted but potentially significant, type of support is from other households, either in Mexico or abroad (benefiting 38 per cent of those surveyed). The primary providers of such aid are children living at a distance from the older adults (Montes de Oca, 2001). The National Survey reported that 30 per cent of respondents received support primarily in the form of housework, 29 per cent as food, 26 per cent as money and 16 per cent personal care. The main providers of such support are children (57%), spouses (18%), children-in-law (6%), grandchildren (5%) and other relatives (14%).

Support within the household, from other households and from institutions varies significantly between rural and urban areas. According to the National Survey, older people living in urban areas report more support within the home than in rural areas (61 versus 55 per cent). At first sight, this trend is surprising, as it contradicts the general view that informal support is stronger in rural areas than in urban ones. It is possible that home support in rural areas is under-reported, as it is seen more as an obligation than a courtesy in this setting. Higher levels of poverty and disruption caused by migration may be other factors at play. Urban elders are also more likely to report receipt of institutional support than are their rural counterparts (68 versus 41 per cent). This difference reflects rural/urban disparities in the coverage of the social security medical system.

Although household exchange plays an important role in support, a significant percentage of persons reported no help from any relatives with whom they live.[6] This is at odds with the fact that, as described above, the majority of older adults live with someone. The National Survey indicates that support within the home increases when the older adult has problems functioning. In such scenarios, 63% received support within the household unit. The pattern

[5] The survey is representative at the national level, drawing on a sample of slightly over 5,000 men and women 60 years of age or over (46.9% and 53.1% respectively). The survey employed a non-self-weighted probabilistic sample.

[6] The population not receiving support within the household may still receive support from outside the home or from state transfers. Only 10% of population aged 60 or over reported receiving no support frrom any of these sources.

of support is different for these people, however. Personal care is reported much more frequently (22%), and there is a slight drop in reports of housework (27%), provision of food (28%) and monetary contributions (26%) compared to support received by people in good health.

A separate survey of older people in Mexico City[7] investigated the support they provide to other household members (Table 2). It found that 60 per cent of men and 40% per cent of women provided some type of support. This is most frequently provided to spouses (60 per cent of total support received), although the survey found that a substantial amount of support went to children (accounting for 20 per cent). Table 3 shows that older people also provided significant support to a variety of other relatives, with older women slightly more likely to offer support.

Table 3

Distribution of support from older people to relatives, Mexico City, 1999.

Men	Child	Parent	Brother/ Sister	Son- or daughter-in-law	Grand-child	Other relative	Other non-relative	Domestic worker	Total
Money	8.33	5.29	5.10	6.69	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	**25.42**
Services	35.32	13.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	**48.32**
Gifts	6.81	5.29	0.00	5.38	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	**17.48**
Child care	3.76	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	5.02	0.00	0.00	**8.78**
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	**0.00**
Total	**54.23**	**23.58**	**5.10**	**12.07**	**0.00**	**5.02**	**0.00**	**0.00**	**100.00**
Women	**Child**	**Parent**	**Brother/ Sister**	**Son- or daughter-in-law**	**Grand-child**	**Other relative**	**Other non-relative**	**Domestic worker**	**Total**
Money	4.60	0.56	1.23	1.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.57	**8.10**
Services	29.75	0.54	5.64	8.50	1.76	3.31	2.42	0.00	**51.93**
Gifts	16.48	0.56	2.38	3.01	1.01	1.74	0.00	0.00	**25.19**
Child care	5.23	0.54	0.73	2.44	0.00	1.95	0.47	0.00	**11.37**
Other	2.16	0.00	0.00	0.68	0.00	0.57	0.00	0.00	**3.41**
Total	**58.23**	**2.20**	**9.98**	**15.78**	**2.77**	**7.57**	**2.89**	**0.57**	**100.00**

Source: United Nations SABE survey for Mexico City, 1999.

The most common type of support provided by older people consists of services. These are mainly provided by women, and directed to all family members, including household employees. Not surprsiningly, monetary contributions are typically made by men and are largely directed at their children. Women are more likely to engage in child care than men are, not only for their own grandchildren, but also for the children of other. When men do provide care, it is only their own grandchildren. A very significant exchange of services also occurs between spouses of an advanced age, and this includes services provided by men.

[7] In 1999 the United Nations sponsored household surveys in seven Latin American cities, including Mexico City. These examined family support networks, health and ageing. The Mexico City sample represents the city's entire elderly population, consisting of 1,881 cases, of which 73% were women over 50 and 27% were men over 60. In order to make the data comparable for men and women, this analysis only takes into account the surveyed individuals over 60, 44% of whom were men and 56% were women.

It is likely that the contributions of older people to their family networks are influenced by significant gaps in institutional support systems and a lack of economic resources. They reflect marked gender-dependent differences and disadvantages for women, especially in terms of participation in the labor market and retirement systems. However, women have an important cross-generational role in providing services. Patterns of gender and social inequality are extremely varied for older adults in Mexico. The family has been an important locus for the exchange of support of various types, and older people have filled important gaps in the lives of working-age adults; more by providing services, care and gifts than through financial contributions.

Inheritance practices are central to any understanding of intergenerational exchange, and often have a large bearing on informal support for older people and on the position of widows. In urban areas, few older people make wills, even among better-educated, high income groups. This often gives rise to protracted legal disputes within families. In some cases, older people are pressured to transfer assets to children before their death. This may then be reciprocated in the form of improved support. However, the Mexican Association of Notaries has documented numerous cases where such asset transfers were followed by abandonment or abuse. In rural areas, inheritaince primarily involves the transfer of land rights. Patterns of rural landholdings in Mexico display a number of unusual features. Historically, a high proportion of land (especially in the centre and south of the country) has been owned communally in "*ejidos*". In this system, land would be granted to individual farmers through the ejidal assembly. In the event of the farmer' death, the assemly would reallocate the land, usually to the farmer's oldest son. This practice has tended to exclude surviving widows from their husband's assets. Indeed, before the 1970s, women's potential inheritance rights were completely ignored by the assemblies (Espinosa, 2001).

4. Patterns of reciprocity in Mexico City

The principle of reciprocity is implicit in relationships of support and exchange, from the simple family or parental context to the complex fabric of society and generations. Reciprocity is part of a complex of attitudes and behaviours involved in protecting and supporting, and one can expect to find it even in the simplest, family-based contexts. Analysis of reciprocity has centered on the family, with special emphasis on certain essential links (between spouses, among siblings, between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, parents-in-law and children-in-law, among neighbors and friends). This analysis has focused on the nature of the relationships as well as on the temporal aspect (immediate or deferred) that is involved in the exchange process (Harraven and Adams, 1999; Izquieta, 1996).

The theory of social exchange is based on the idea that one person provides benefits to another, and that although there is a general expectation of response, the timing and particular nature of the response is left undefined. Indeed, it must be left undefined, since any attempt to make it explicit beforehand would destroy the social significance of the exchange, making the expectation of future support into an economic transaction. Thus, reciprocity must be seen as part of a social exchange in which the provision of benefits creates a diffuse future obligation. The value parents attribute to their children and their expectations of reciprocity are fundamental in understanding the impact of ageing on the structure, relationships, commitments and obligations that link the different members of the Mexican family.

According to Donati (1999, p.42): "There is a risk of not understanding what is to be given, to whom, and how much. Nor is it clear what it is fair to take, from whom and how much". This raises a wider issue about how to determine whether or not a form of behaviour is in some way reciprocal, and how it can be evaluated. As discussed in Nussbaum's chapter, relationships of exchange often occur under conditions of real inequality, because the things being exchanged have very different meanings to the people involved. This may be a function of experience, as well as of the effort involved in obtaining them. In other cases, the normative and ethical values of society may emphasize material and financial resources above other kinds of support, such as companionship or simple personal contact. This uncertainty about what is fair lends an element of inconsistency and uncertainty to perceptions of reciprocity.

Research has been conducted on the experience and perception of old age in Mexico City, asking respondents what kind of support they receive, and from whom. This approach made it possible to take into account the network process, as well as the flow and meaning of support (Montes de Oca, 1996). Some illustrative cases may help to distinguish three types of support and exchange relationships, and reveal the direction of support, the manner in which the time factor is managed, and the expectations of reciprocity. These different relationships can be illustrated with reference to specific case studies of older people. The following cases are taken from a wider study of thirty older men and women who were selected for interviewing according to a predefined guide. The respondents resided in central districts of Mexico City, and had varied living arrangements and socio-economic backgrounds (Montes de Oca, 1996).

Gudelia lives with her son in a middle-class neighborhood. She values the role played by her younger son, now that she is ill, and understands that her other children can not be with her as much as she would like. "My children come to visit me, and when they can help me they do, and when they can't they don't." Despite the care she receives from her youngest son, she feels lonely and feels she "can not count on them." She signed a power of attorney so that her youngest son could collect her pension now that she is ill. This concession on her part allows the son to manage an income in addition to the one he earns himself. Since she can no longer leave the house because of the illness, she has slowly lost contact with neighbors and friends. On the subject of other relatives and the significance of this, she answered, "No! I'm telling you, they're here to be helped by me, not for me to help them. For example, my cousin lives in Tampico and never speaks to me. Juan, who is my cousin, lives in Coatzacoalcos. He speaks to me, but doesn't come to see me. But he does speak with me." (Gudelia, an only daughter, is 68 years old and lives in Mexico City, but is originally from Tamaulipas. She receives a pension, has five children, is a widow, owns her home, and suffers from chronic illness.)

In this case, family reciprocity is based on immediate return, with specific arrangements for exchange between the older adults and their families. The number of children is very important in the flow of support, but whether it actually leads to more support depends on how it combines with other factors. When the parents are better off, there are ways of supporting the children—and, in such cases, without an expectation of return, either immediately or in the long term. Gudelia's pension alone makes her financially independent, but she also owns her own home. Hence, she is able to meet her own financial needs. Despite her illness, she continues supporting one of her children with money, shelter and food. In this case, illness was a factor in reducing contact with other children and relatives. Geographic distance from relatives also diminishes the flow of

support from them, at least on the emotional level. The lack of reciprocity of the other children is excused on the basis of their work and family obligations. When necessary, support is given without expectation of receiving anything in return.

Brígida lives with her father, who is in his eighties. She currently considers herself married, though it is some time since she lived with her husband, and indeed she has lost contact with him. She has a place to live thanks to her work as a caretaker in a building, and is the head of her household, but she does not own a home. Since childhood she has done domestic work. She married at the age of 29 and had three sons, two of whom survived. She worked doing washing and ironing, enabling her to contribute substantially to the welfare of the family. At 50, she stopped working, and her children began supporting her. Now, she works as a caretaker in a building, where she cleans, thus earning her living space. She sees her children almost every day, and the oldest is her primary source of funds. Despite their humble origin and the conditions in which they were brought up, Brígida sees her children as fulfilled, with good jobs and financial security. She depends financially on her oldest son, and she visits all the families weekly. It is important to her at this stage to live with her children, especially the eldest son. She will soon be without housing, and will most likely go to live with her oldest son. She has difficulty speaking of this. She does not seem to have a history of problems in her family relationships. (Brígida is 68, lives in Mexico City, originally comes from San Luis Potosí, works, has one sister, two children, is separated, and does not own her own home.)

Brígida does not have many children, but she feels a sense of support from her oldest son. She sees her son as returning the effort she made for him, but she no longer has anything to give to her children, despite the fact that she needs help from them. It is worth noting that she continues to work in exchange for her living space. This strategy reflects a hidden rea of concern: she lives with and takes care of her father, and the two of them cannot live in the house of one of her children. Her work puts her in touch with people, who constitute the social support network that keeps her in contact with people and support mechanisms. This is a case where support goes from children to older people, and where the arrangement is perceived as a deferred exchange in return for the older person's past efforts.

Antonio lives with his wife and children in a working-class neighborhood. They are work in retailing. He owns the house in which they live, but family relations are very tense. There is no support relationship. Antontio is financially independent, and his children are grown. He feels that his children do not show him respect, that he has to demand his place in family affairs. His frustration is rooted in the fact that the large amount of time he has had to spend working has made it impossible for him to pay enough attention to his children and, now that they are grown up, their attitude toward him has changed. "When they were children they were a joy when I got home at night, but I almost didn't exist in the house. I left at five in the morning to work, and sometimes got back at four or five in the afternoon, or as late as eight in the evening. The point is that I had to earn money. There were seven children and they were all in school." Antonio has not only been mistreated but has been hit by his sons and daughters-in-law. He definitely expects no support, but does feel he can demand respect at this stage of his life. (Antonio had 13 siblings, has no pension, owns his own home, has eight children, and suffers from diabetes.)

This case illustrates a situation where older adults do not receive support from their close relatives. Although Antonio supported them in the past and once had great expectations of

reciprocity, this has evaporated as family conflicts have proven intractable. There is also evidence of abuse by his children, which is borne out by records of complaints showing that Antonio's own sons are his principal aggressors. Antonio fulfilled his role as provider, and in his old age he hoped for respect from his children. But the family alliances, in which the children side with the mother, have excluded him from the basic solidarity that family ties ordinarily provide. He lives with them, but not in a relationship of mutual support. In this case, the family reciprocity tie has been broken, and he is left with only the social networks created in the context of work.

These three cases cannot be taken as in any way representative of the wide variety of experiences of older people in Mexico. However, they can be taken as a good reflection of the wider findings of the qualitative survey from which they were taken (Montes de Oca, 1996). They illustrate the complexity of relationships between informal exchanges and reciprocity and the wellbeing of older people. They also reveal different expectations of reciprocity depending on the differing relationships of support and on the financial circumstances of the older person and their relatives. In some cases, reciprocity is limited by a scarcity of children, and by their difficulty financial and family circumstances, as well as by geographic distance. In other cases, disabling illness limits contact and the ability to maintain relationships with relatives and friends. This deactivates family and social support networks. On occasion, reciprocal exchange takes place immediately, but in other cases it takes place over time, once children are grown and have resolved their own problems.

Final comments

Along with demographic change, Mexico's economic situation reduces opportunities for the population as a whole and has far-reaching effects on families. More people in the family must work in order to generate household income. At the same time, fertility and mortality rates are declining, leading to a reorganization of families and households. These units create complex systems of informal self-protection, which seek to meet the needs of the various generations. However, informal support systems operate within the limits of the households, according to gender, social, cultural and economic dynamics.

Most households containing people over 60 are either nuclear, extended or mono-person. There are also multiple-family and other complex arrangements, some of which are contained within households, while others extend beyond household boundaries. Complex household arrangements make it difficult to accurately assess support strategies and the direction of support. In addition, economic factors affect whether parents and adult children live together. Households with higher levels of income and education are more likely to contain two generations. With advancing age, women in Mexico more often live with their children than do men. This is partially due to illness, but also to the fact that women are in a position to exchange services for support. At a less advanced age, men also live with their children, but they cease to do so with advancing age, as a result of their financial situation and gender-based issues.

Households provide significant support to older people in a number of areas. These include housework and food preparation, as well as providing money and personal care. These activities tend to increase when the older person suffers disability or illness. However, support from the family is not universal or uniform, and thus it does not compensate for the poorly-developed formal social protection system. It is apparent that households assist and care for their older members differently, depending on the

advantages or disadvantages represented by the older person. In some cases, caring for an ill older person is made easier by the presence of financial resources, home ownership and property that can be drawn on in an emergency.

Older people provide an extensive and varied range of support to other family members. While older men mainly help their families with money, women provide a wide range of services, gifts and care to their dependent relatives. The principal recipients of support are spouses, followed by children, and then by other relatives. Older people often act as primary care givers when adult children are ill, and they take full responsibility for grandchildren in cases where the grandchildren's parents die. Overall levels and patterns of support provided by older people are strongly shaped by economic factors. When financial resources are particularly limited, this is reflected in the types of support which predominate.

Reciprocity between generations is a key, albeit implicit, principle in support and exchange relationships. However, it tends to vary according to the socioeconomic situation both of the older adults and their children. Pensions and other monetary resources make old people more attractive or less of an inconvenience for the working-age generation, as well as giving the older generation autonomy and the ability to decide whether or not to share their living space with children and grandchildren. Both options may or may not involve solidarity networks, negotiation or conflict. The number of children also affects the perception of reciprocity and the exchange relationship. A large number of children who lack a solid economic position may not be a source of any support whatsoever, while a smaller number of children who are better off can mean an expectation of support and reciprocity. Reciprocity may be immediate or deferred, although non-familial support networks ususally require immediate reciprocity. While inter-generation exchange remains central to Mexican society, there are ground for questioning the long-term survival of norms of reciprocity in family care giving and support. These include concrete sociological changes such as decreasing family size, the dissolution of kinship ties, an increase in one-person households, migration and increasing distance between family members. They also include less tangible effects, relating to shifts in attitudes and emotional ties between the genrations.

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