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**Early Childhood Education and Care Policies in Latin America:  
For women or children or both?**

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## Acronyms

ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
IMSS	Instituto Mexicano de la Seguridad Social (Mexican Institute for Social Security)
Junji	Junta Nacional de Jardines Infantiles (National Council of Kindergartens)
Mideplan	Ministerio de Planificación (Ministry of Planning)
Mineduc	Ministerio de Educacion (Ministry of Education)
PAN	Partido de Acción Nacional
PRI	Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada
Sedesol	Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (Ministry of Social Development)
SEP	Secretaria de Educación Publica (Ministry of Public Education)
SERNAM	Servicio Nacional de la Mujer (Woman’s Ministry)
SNTE	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Union of Education Workers)

## Introduction

While demands for public child care support have been part and parcel of women’s movements’ struggle for gender equality since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, three developments have spurred recent state interest and activity in the area of child care. Concerns about demographic change and declining birth rates, the quality of “human capital” as a factor of economic competitiveness and the desire to create new employment opportunities in the service sector have propelled child care issues on the agenda of a wide range of developed economies. They have triggered policy change in different areas, including parental leaves, working time regulations, cash benefits and early childhood education and care services (Williams 2009). At the same time, social policies vis-à-vis women as a “massive untapped labour reserve” (94) have been put forth as a means of reducing welfare dependency and poverty risk among low-income and/or single-earner families as well as increasing the sustainability of social security systems (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). Women’s care responsibilities have come to be recognized as an obstacle for achieving these goals.

These ideas have found their way into policy discourses and practices of the Global South where they have mixed with concerns specific to the developing context, such as persistent poverty, inequality and development. As a result, children have acquired a somewhat iconic status on the welfare agenda and targeting poor children is being perceived as an adequate measure to reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty and overcome social exclusion. “Investing in women”, on the other hand, has long been promoted by multilateral organizations as a strategy to foster efficiency, economic growth, self-reliance and poverty reduction since the early 1990s (Jackson 1996; Razavi 1997).

Among different policy options for supporting care, care services are particularly important in a developing country context, as other responses, such as paid parental leaves, are typically limited by high degrees of informal and non-standard employment (Benería 2008). This is also the case in Chile and Mexico, where 28.6 and 41.4 percent of the labour force is informal (Mesa-Lago 2008). Both countries have recently taken steps to increase the availability of early childhood education and care services (ECEC). These efforts differ from other child-centred social policies, including conditional cash transfers, aimed at improving children’s health, educational and nutritional indicators, without taking into account – or deliberately making use of – the work borne by primary care givers and (unpaid) community members, most of whom are women and have to juggle income earning and care responsibilities at the same time. By dismissing the opportunity costs associated with unpaid care, these approaches play out the future of children against the present of their caregivers (Molyneux 2007).

The historic experience of Nordic countries shows that the stylized inconsistency of women’s and children’s welfare is not inevitable. Here, egalitarian models of childcare provision expanded both out of a commitment to gender equality and to children’s rights, seeking to combine care and education in one system (Mahon 2002). Hence, the universal provision of public child care services has proven a powerful tool for promoting women’s employment and child development alike. The extent, to which synergies can be achieved today, depends on how “social investment” ideas and objectives are translated into concrete policy practice.

In this paper we look at the recent efforts to expand ECEC services for young children (0-3 year) in Chile and Mexico. Although concerns over low female labour force activation and child welfare have emerged on both countries’ political agendas, their approaches to service expansion differ significantly. We argue that each country’s overall approach to social policy,

institutional legacies and the ways the state deals with influential non-state actors have made particular modes of ECEC services provision more attractive to governments than others and have shaped the ways in which similar objectives are translated into different policies. These policies, in turn, have important implications for the kind of opportunities the programmes are able to create for women and children from low-income families.

In order to locate the two approaches to ECEC services within the larger regional context, the first section briefly reviews current trends in social and care policies in Latin America.

## **1. Locating “social investment” in the Latin American context**

In Latin America, “investing in children” has taken diverse forms, including nutritional and health programmes, conditional cash transfers, the promotion of parenting skills, and the expansion of a range of formal and informal care and educational programmes (Schady 2006). However heterogeneous, these policies have been characterized by a set of similar features, such as targeting, decentralization, pluralisation of providers (including provision through private-for-profit, non-profit and community-based organizations), and the promotion of the of co-responsibility and/or co-management by beneficiaries (Molyneux 2008).

In terms of social services, the concern for children’s wellbeing together with externally or self-imposed constraints of public social spending have made family and community-based provision attractive interventions. Since the mid-1980s, this tendency has been particularly visible in programmes aimed at improving child nutrition. Peru’s *Glass of Milk* programme is one of the best-known community-based schemes in this area. Launched in 1983, it built upon the basis of popular grass-roots organizing for collective provisioning during the time of crisis and retrenchment, using local “mothers’ clubs” and women committees as key administrators. While participation in these popular initiatives fostered women’s organizing and provided them with access to training, education, health and counselling, the Glass of Milk programme relied heavily on the unpaid work of female volunteers. Similar programmes were implemented throughout the region and continue to this day. A more recent example is Argentina’s National Nutrition and Food Programme, implemented in 2003 as a response to the hike in food prices triggered by economic crisis.

Other programmes have combined nutritional objectives with non-formal day-care. This is the case of Colombia’s Community Nurseries Programme (*Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar*), Targeted at low-income families, it promotes the creation of parent committees which select a volunteer mother from their community (*madre comunitaria*) to offer home-based day-care at her house. The volunteer mother receives some training and funds to adapt her house as well as a small stipend of around 4 US-\$ per month and child paid by families. Almost identical programmes have been implemented in Bolivia, Venezuela and Guatemala.

More recently, conditional cash transfer programmes have proliferated in the region. The two largest and long-standing programmes in this area – Mexico’s *Progresas/Oportunidades* and Brazil’s *Bolsa Familia* – have served as blue-prints and by 2008 at least ten Latin American countries had initiated similar schemes. Cash transfers are targeted to the poor or extremely poor and usually paid to the primary caregiver of young children, most often the biological mother. With very few exceptions, stipends are conditional on the compliance with requirements linked to children’s health and education, such as regular health checks, school attendance as well as the participation of care-givers in health and/or nutritional workshops.

As benefits are targeted to women, they are usually in charge of fulfilling these requirements (Serrano 2005; Molyneux 2007; Bradshaw 2008).

A number of evaluations have shown the positive effects of some of these schemes on several indicators, including increases in primary and secondary school enrolment and attendance rates, improvements in food consumption and child height as well as a decline in school dropout rates and child labour (Perez Ribas et al. 2008). Some claim that the cash benefit empowers women and increases their autonomy vis-à-vis men in the same household (Adato et al. 2000). Whether this is actually the case, remains a contentious issue.<sup>3</sup>

Positive findings notwithstanding, conditional cash transfers raise some critical issues with regards to gender equality. While they can assist women in their responsibilities as caregivers (and are sometimes claimed to empower them as such), they fail to broaden their options, by giving them a more secure footing in the labour market for example. Instead, they tend to reinforce traditional gender roles and often add to the total workload of poor women whose (paid and unpaid) inputs into household survival have both diversified and intensified in many developing countries (Molyneux 2007; Chant 2008). Conditional cash transfer thus bear the risk of overburdening women and discouraging men from assuming care-related tasks. More importantly for the argument of this paper, they seem to endorse different logics for children and their mothers: “the former are invested in as citizens, their capabilities and life chances are expanded through education and health; the mothers, meanwhile, are treated as having responsibilities rather than needs and rights” (Molyneux 2007).

What these programmes share is the way in which they fail to take into account – or deliberately make use of – the unpaid (or poorly paid) work borne by primary care givers and community members, most of whom are women. By dismissing the opportunity costs associated with unpaid care, they play out the future of children against the present of their caregivers. At the same time, they fall short of delivering the kind of educational services professional staff can provide, if “social investment” in the human capital of children is to be taken seriously.

## **2. For women or children or both? ECEC services in Mexico and Chile**

Mexico and Chile have undergone market reforms during the 1980s and 1990s which have accentuated already high levels of income inequality. Poverty and income inequality intersect with significant gender gaps in labour force participation rates and access to “decent” employment and earnings. Both countries have tried to address “social deficits” experimenting with new social programmes, some of which later became influential blue prints in the region, including different cash transfer schemes, such as *Progresa/Oportunidades* in Mexico and *Chile Solidario*.

More recently, both have become active in expanding ECEC services for children aged 4 and younger. Apart from being targeted to “vulnerable” groups, the two programmes differ significantly in design. While a declared objective of the Chilean programme is to create “equal opportunities from the cradle” through professional ECEC services for children from disadvantaged families, the Mexican programme’s main aims are to reduce poverty and

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<sup>3</sup> In Ecuador, for example, the women’s movement has voiced the concern that men may withhold their financial contributions in households where the women receive the transfer (Armas 2004). In Nicaragua, the cash transfer has been argued to compensate for a reduction in male wage labour (Bradshaw 2008).

facilitate women’s employment. It is geared at taking care of children without explicit educational aims. Thus, while the Mexican programme has chosen to subsidize community-based care, the Chilean programme puts emphasis on the expansion of professionalized public childcare services.

The following subsections provide an overview of the main developments in ECEC services in each country since the mid-1990s, followed by a more detailed analysis of the recent approaches to childcare services expansion for 0-3 year old children.

### *Early childhood education and care services in Mexico*

The development of ECEC services in Mexico can be broadly divided into three periods in each of which a different institution entered the scene: (1) the Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS) from the mid-1970s, focusing on day-care for the children of working mothers who are covered by social security; (2) the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) from the early 2000s, when pre-school education was made mandatory for all 3-5 year-olds; and (3) the Ministry of Social Development (Sedesol) since 2007, when the most recent day-care programme was put in place to target children of working mothers without access to social security coverage.

Access to institutional childcare for children aged 43 days to 4 years was established as a right of mothers working in the formal sector in 1973, to be guaranteed by The Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS) and financed by a 1 percent across-the-board payroll deduction. Expansion of service provision, however, was sagging until the mid-1990s, when IMSS was running 487 centres nation-wide. These centres most of which were directly run by IMSS offered day-care for less than 60,000 children corresponding to around 5 percent of eligible children (Knaul and Parker 1996).

This changed in 1997, when IMSS decided to expand services through agreements with employers, community organizations and individual families. These new providers would offer company-, neighbourhood- and home-based day-care services funded and regulated by IMSS. Increased outsourcing can largely be seen as a response to severe financial constraints. The Institute has witnessed a continuous decline in revenue since the early 1980s, struggling with a combination of falling real wages, increasing informalization of the labour force and declining government subsidies (Laurell 2003). The cost difference between the outsourced modality and the previous model was tremendous, plummeting from around 95 000 US-\$ to 23 000 US-\$ per centre and month.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, coverage has picked up more rapidly. Within a decade, the number of centres tripled and coverage rose to over 200,000 children – almost 20 percent of the target group (children of formal sector workers aged 43 days to 4 years). However, IMSS is still a far cry from fulfilling formal sector demand and there have also been doubts about quality standards due to underfunding (Leal 2006). More importantly, however, IMSS offers no alternative to parents working in the growing informal sector, a gap that the most recent programme is trying to address.

In 2002, preschool education was made mandatory for all children aged 3-5. This *educational* policy – tailored to children’s rather than their (working) parents’ needs and independent of

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with the National Coordinator of the IMSS Day Care Centers, Carla Rochin Nieto.

the latter’s employment status – has universal aspirations and achievements have been significant. Since the reform, overall preschool enrolment for the age group under question has risen from 3.5 to almost 5 Million children, improving coverage from 50 to 80 percent. By 2007/08, universal coverage of 4 and 5 year-olds had been achieved, while coverage of 3 year-olds had doubled from 15 to 34 percent (Presidencia 2008).

Most preschools are public and run only half-day programmes, limiting the extent to which they can alleviate working parents from their childcare responsibilities. A recent evaluation also shows huge differences in quality and student achievements across public preschools in rural and urban areas as well as private schools, with the latter (catering to 12 percent of 3-5 year-olds) performing considerably better (Educación 2008; INEE 2008).

While the proposal to make pre-school education mandatory for all children aged 3-5 years originated in the rows of PRI opposition in Congress and received crucial support by the teachers’ union (SNTE), the PAN government under Vicente Fox (2000-2006) embraced the idea despite the fact that this meant a considerable expansion of SEP’s mandate and with it SNTE’s leverage over educational policies. This may seem surprising, but in fact fits nicely with PAN’s overall strategy to confront union power. While the 2000 elections had ended over 70 years of one-party rule by PRI (*Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada*), the legacy of PRI corporativism is significant, particularly in the area of education. As a result, the teachers union practically co-governs the educational system through a strong presence in the related Congressional Commissions as well as among educational authorities at the federal and state levels (Santibañez 2008). The new administration under Vicente Fox’s conservative PAN (*Partido de Acción Nacional*) decided to stick to corporatist strategies rather than entering into a conflict with the teachers’ union. SNTE’s leadership, on the other hand, proved flexible enough to give up its loyalty to PRI. Indeed, during the (extremely contested) presidential elections in 2006, the union provided crucial support for PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón. It was rewarded with key political positions in the area of primary education (Ornelas 2008).

A third childcare programme was introduced in 2007, again focusing on women workers’ access to childcare rather than early education. The *Federal Day-Care Programme for Working Mothers* started operating shortly after Felipe Calderón assumed office in December 2006, designed to fill the gaps left by IMSS activities by expanding childcare services for working mothers without access to social security-based services. It forms part of a larger national strategy to reduce poverty and inequality (Presidencia 2007), within which women’s role as earners is seen as crucial. Indeed, it is based on an extension of the maternalist ideal to include paid work and appeals to working mothers’ “heroism” which makes them worthy of public support. Calderón went as far as referring to working mothers as the “pillars of the Mexican household (...) who with their work and care pull their families through” and should be supported in their quest for “harmonizing their family and work activities, and of course to improve their life quality as women and also that of their children” (Calderon 2007).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, rather than an investment in child wellbeing or “human capital” through early childhood education, the programme’s main rationales are the mobilization of female labour force and employment creation. Indeed, it is listed as one of four programmes implemented by the Ministry for Social Development (Sedesol) aimed at “increasing productivity” through

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<sup>5</sup> Note that these are constructed as responsibilities of women rather than men. It is mothers “who pull their families through” and will therefore be entitled to services, not fathers.

access to employment and income earning opportunities which are expected to contribute to poverty reduction (Sedesol 2008b).

The programme’s specific contribution to these broader goals is the subsidized provision of day-care services for children from the age of 1 to 3 years and 11 months from low-income households (below six minimum salaries corresponding to around 950 US-\$) who have no access to social-security-based daycare provided by IMSS. This is meant to allow the participating mother to work, study or look for a job. The objective is to offer day-care places to half a million children by 2012 (corresponding to 5 percent of children in this age group according to the 2005 Census). It will further create important employment opportunities for childcare providers.

Rather than expanding the role of public institutions in the provision of care, the programme creates a “quasi-market” for *home-based* day-care services through supply-side incentives and demand-side subsidies. Thus, Sedesol offers a lump-sum (3,500 US-\$) to individuals or civil society organizations who are interested in opening and running a day-care centre at their individual home or community centre in order to adapt and furnish their facilities according to the requirements. To qualify for the grant, the potential service-provider does not need any formal training or previous experience. However, candidates have to pass a psychological test and participate in training courses regarding programme rules and the “basics” of childcare. After finishing this process, potential providers are granted a month’s time to recruit “clients”, reaching the minimum enrolment target of 10 children who fulfil the targeting requirements of the programme. Once the centre is operating, it has to provide day-care services for at least one year, during eight hours a day, five days a week. According to the rules and regulations the person running the centre has to hire at least one care assistant per 8 children. All operational costs have to be covered through the public demand-side subsidy plus a fee charged to parents which the caregivers are free to determine based on operational costs.

In order to be able to enrol their children and receive the state subsidy, parents have to fulfil a series of requirements. Thus, the mother of a child must be working, looking for a job or studying, her household income must be below the threshold of six minimum salaries and she should not have access to day-care services provided by IMSS (either because they are not covered by social security or because the waiting lists are too long). Apart from meeting the other criteria, fathers must be single in order to apply for the service and subsidy for their children. The subsidy is provided on a three-step scale and decreases with rising household income. The maximum subsidy is 70 US-\$ per month and child.

The subsidy is paid directly to the day-care centre (rather than the mother who enrolls her children) according to assistance tracked through an attendance sheet signed by parents. According to a 2007 survey, the average day-care centre attended 28 children and charged 85 US-\$ per month and child (including the state subsidy). For the average caregiver, this scenario resulted in an average monthly revenue of 2,380 US-\$ from which they have to deduct all operational costs, including the provision of two hot meals and a snack per day as well as the salary of one childcare assistant per 8 children. Assistants’ salary is subject to the primary caregiver discretion and was an average 205 US-\$ per month in 2007.

For parents, the co-payment means that they get the day-care service at a lower cost, but not for free. With an average 85 US-\$ charge, parents pay between 15 and 40 US-\$ per child and month, depending on the subsidy they receive which in turn is determined by their household income (GEA-ISA 2007). The vast majority of enrolled children belong to the lowest-income

group (receiving the highest subsidy of 70 US-\$). On an aggregate basis, this means that 80 percent of the operational costs of the programme are borne by the state and 20 percent by parents.

In terms of quantity, achievements are remarkable. Within one year, the programme stimulated the creation of over 5,000 day-care centres, reaching over 200,000 children (Sedesol 2007). In 2008, another 3,000 day-care centres were created and coverage rose to more than 244,000 children and around 222,000 mothers (Sedesol 2008a). In two years, the programme has already outnumbered the capacity of IMSS’s centres built up over a 30 year period. Sedesol also claims to have created jobs for over 38,000 women, including primary caregivers and their assistants (Vega). The quality of these jobs is questionable, however, since caregivers and their assistants are self-employed, thus lacking social security benefits (Milenio 2008).

The program has also been criticised for providing a low quality service to low-income families (Zaragoza 2007; Milenio 2008). Indeed, quality standards are lower than those at centres managed by IMSS. To become a caregiver, for example, IMSS requires a first degree in pedagogy, child care, nutrition, early education or preschool education (IMSS 2009).

Overall Mexican ECEC policies have tried to address the issue of female labour force participation as well as children’s access to early education. They have not, however, pursued these goals in tandem. Since none of the policies considers early education (for children) and childcare services (for working mothers) together – but enshrines them in different institutions and modalities of provision – there are substantial discontinuities. Thus, some working mothers may have access to full-day childcare for children aged 0-3, but once their children enter preschool, half-day programmes are the norm. At the same time, childcare services have few educational components with the potential to prepare children for pre- and primary school. While IMSS childcare services never pursued educational goals<sup>6</sup>, the absence of educational concerns is even stronger in the recent Sedesol programme which has lowered the standards and regulations vis-à-vis the IMSS centres.

Without a doubt, Sedesol has made considerable progress in increasing the availability of childcare services for working mothers in a very short time period. However, the programme’s design also contributes to the segmentation of childcare services. Because entitlements are largely tied to labour market status, prevailing inequalities in the Mexican labour market are reproduced in the kind of services the children of working mothers are able to access. The *Federal Day-Care Programme for Working Mothers* thus mirrors a general trend in Mexican social protection policies according to which sectoral ministries produce watered-down versions of IMSS’ social protection schemes for workers who are not covered by social security.<sup>7</sup> With the conditional cash transfer scheme *Oportunidades* it shares the fact that benefits are not based on social rights, but provided as assistance measures that can be withdrawn any time.

The disconnect between education and child custody in the recent Sedesol programme reflects overall trends in and conceptualizations of social policy as well as the specific institutional example it intends to replicate (IMSS centres). There is anecdotal evidence, however, that a

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication with the National Coordinator of the IMSS Day Care Centers, Carla Rochin Nieto.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2004, for example, Ministry of Health (*Secretaria de Salud*) runs a voluntary health insurance scheme (*Seguro Popular*) for informal sector workers who are not covered by IMSS. Benefits offered by *Seguro Popular* are far less comprehensive than those offered by IMSS’ health insurance.

third factor may have shaped the design of the Sedesol programme. Indeed, Sedesol has been careful not to frame the programme as a first step on the educational ladder.<sup>8</sup> Political calculations may have played a role in keeping childcare and education separate as to avoid drawing the attention of and further strengthening the teachers’ union who may have claimed its grounds.

### Early childhood education and care services in Chile

The Chilean approach to ECEC services has been quite different. To start with, it has been closely tied to the Ministry of Education (Mineduc) and educational goals seem to have a greater historical importance than in Mexico, even for the younger age groups. ECEC services are structured according to age groups, with the *crèche level*, attending children from the age of 84 days up to 2 years, the *intermediate level* in charge of 2 and 3 year-olds, and the *transitional level* catering to 4 and 5 year old children. While some services are targeted to “vulnerable” groups and executed by specialized institutions, most of them are overseen by Mineduc. In contrast to Mexico, the private sector plays a much larger role in education due to far-reaching reforms carried out under the Military regime (1973-1989). In the following we will briefly describe the different modalities in the Chilean context in order to provide the background for the analysis of recent service expansion for 0-3 year old children started in 2006 under the Bachelet administration.

Since the mid-1990s, the *transitional level* (4 and 5 year-olds) is considered part of the educational system. In contrast to Mexico, it is not mandatory for any age group. Though coverage has increased steadily since 1992 (43%), Chile has moved more slowly towards universal coverage for 4 and 5 year-olds than Mexico, reaching 63.5 and 87 percent in 2006. Services are provided by five main institutions, mirroring the primary and secondary educational system, which was municipalized and opened up to private sector participation under military rule. Truly public (municipal) schools account for 30% of enrolment, subsidized private schools for another 36%, while purely private schools cater to 12%. The remaining 21% is absorbed by two semi-public institutions (JUNJI and *Fundación Integra*) bound to Mineduc. As in the rest of the educational system, there is a clear segmentation along the lines of household income with respect to coverage and the type of institution children attend. While the richest quintile sends 94 percent of children from this age group to preschool – half of which are enrolled in private schools – coverage in the first quintile is 81 percent and largely concentrated in public institutions (Mideplan 2007).

Up until 2003, coverage at the *intermediate level* (2 and 3 year-olds) has been rather stagnant, and institutional childcare for infants at the *crèche level* (under the age of 2) was practically insignificant. Since 2003 there has been a notable increase in ECEC coverage, also reaching the lower age groups and the poorer income quintiles which have been historically underrepresented. The institutional setting for the *crèche and intermediate level* (0-3 year-olds) shows a stronger tendency towards public and purely private providers. The private subsidized variant is much less significant. Two institutions play a particularly important role: (1) centres run or accredited by the *National Council of Kindergartens* (JUNJI), a government body; and (2) centres run by *Fundación Integra*, a private non-profit foundation that belongs to the Presidency’s network of foundations. Both are linked to MINEDUC through annual agreements. Their centres are free of charge for children from households belonging to the

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with programme manager.

first two income quintiles. Together, they absorb more than half of the enrolment in the younger age group. Purely private providers account for almost 20% of enrolment.

During the Lagos administration (2000-2006), the lack of childcare services formed part of a public debate over the country’s low female labour force participation rates and the conflict between employment and family responsibilities was seen as one of its major causes. The deficiencies of available childcare service regulations for working women, such as the obligation of employers to provide work-based crèches in companies with more than 20 female employees, were increasingly subject to criticism, as they reached only a limited proportion of women who are formally employed in larger companies, were rarely complied to, weakly enforced, and acted as a disincentive to female employment (Valenzuela 2000; Trabajo 2003). The coverage of company-based childcare was and still is absolutely negligible in numbers.

In 2004, Lagos called on the national women’s machinery SERNAM (*Servicio Nacional de la Mujer*) to come up with proposals for childcare provision as a way of facilitating women’s participation in paid employment.<sup>9</sup> As a response SERNAM launched the so-called *comunicentros*. This pilot project was quite similar to what the Mexican government decided to take to scale two years later. As in the Mexican case, the project was based on the idea of taking advantage, regulating and supporting already existent community-based efforts to organize childcare through a subsidy per child paid to an informal home-based caregiver. It was implemented in three municipalities, but seems to have vanished into thin air after the 2006 elections, as the new administration has concentrated its efforts on scaling up the availability of institutional childcare services in public crèches and kindergartens linked to the MINEDUC. Whether this was due to a lack of success of the pilot project or political priority setting after the 2006 election is not clear. It seems, however, that the Ministries of Education and Finance – under the leadership of the following President – pooled efforts to push for the expansion of formal institutional ECEC. Educational authorities had criticized the programme’s lack of attention to quality educational, suggesting that it would have been preferable to direct these funds to increasing institutional coverage through JUNJI (Honorato Barrueto 2006).

Under the Bachelet administration (2006-) the expansion of ECEC services became priority. Following the recommendations of the Presidential Advisory Board on Childhood Protection, the government launched *Chile Crece Contigo* (“Chile Grows with You”) in October 2006. Clearly, the title of this integrated approach to child protection resonates strongly with the national and international social investment narrative. Two of its goals are (1) guaranteed access to crèches and kindergartens for all 0-3 year old children from the two poorest income quintiles and (2) universal preschool coverage for 4 and 5 year-olds (Mideplan 2007c). The policies has recently passed Congress and now establishes free access to creche and kindergarten services for children (0-3) from low-income families.

JUNJI and *Integra* act as implementing institutions and almost all new places at the crèche and intermediate level have been created by these two institutions. Modalities include centres run by both institutions as well as subsidies to centres run by municipalities and non-profits. Subsidies to market providers – which dominate at the transitional, primary and secondary school level – have not formed part of the expansion strategy. This can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the kind of structural constraints associated with the country’s larger

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<sup>9</sup> At this point in time, the Ministry of Education was only in charge of preschool education for 4 and 5 year-olds.

educational system, reshaped and buttressed under authoritarian rule and inherited by the democratic regime. This system is still highly segmented, with public schools absorbing more than half of the country’s poorest students, while (high-quality and fee-based) private schools cater to the wealthiest segment. The type of school children attend (private, subsidized or public) has an important impact on a set of variables, including test results for university entry, years of education, employment in manual versus non-manual work, and hourly salary. In secondary education, attending a private school yields students a substantial advantage in this respect (Helgø 2002).

A prominent and much criticized aspect of primary and secondary education is its financing mechanism according to which the central government has to allocate equal subsidies to public and private subsidized schools. This scheme has been claimed to be responsible for the financial deterioration of public municipal schools (Riesco 2007).<sup>10</sup> The fact that coverage of children under the age of 4 was extremely low before the reforms arguably increased the government’s room for manoeuvre for shaping the institutional setting in which services would be provided. It is likely that the government used this leeway to strengthen the role of public institutions and avoiding subsidies to market providers – in contrast to the larger educational system where powerful private-sector interests have been a major obstacle to more far-reaching reforms.

Since 2006, the number of public crèches has increased significantly: from around 700 in March 2006 to 3.000 by the end 2008 according to official sources (Source). The number of available places in public crèches for 0-1 year old children has more than quintupled from around 14.000 in 2005 to 61.000 in 2008. The creation of another 900 crèches is foreseen for 2009, for which resources have already been allocated in the 2009 budget. It is estimated that 85.000 public places for under 2 year olds will be available by the end of the year.

Although JUNJI’s expansion has almost exclusively taken place through agreements and transfer of funds to third parties, mostly municipalities, more than three quarters of the kindergartens and more than half of the crèches were directly administered by the institution (JUNJI 2008b). Similarly, *Integra* provides ECEC both through its own crèches and kindergartens and through agreements that delegate administration to non-profit providers, including community, faith-based and non-governmental organizations conditional on compliance with *Integra*’s curricular standards. According to official sources, *Integra* attended around 74,000 children at 954 centres in 2006. The great majority of children (90%) were enrolled in centres run by the Foundation (Hacienda 2008c). Despite a higher share of “outsourcing”, JUNJI services are said to have a higher degree of professionalization.

Contrasting sharply with the Mexican case, educators in public or accredited crèches and kindergartens are required to have a five-year university degree in early education. Supportive staff involved in the direct care of infants are required to have a technical degree in early education from an institution recognized by the Chilean state. The two institutions through which services are currently being expanded employed around 16,000 workers in 2006/2007. JUNJI workers are public employees and their salaries are negotiated alongside salaries for other public sector workers. Around three quarters are employed on a fixed-term basis, while

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<sup>10</sup> Due to drastic cuts in the educational budget, the public school system deteriorated during the 1980s. With the return to democracy the public budget for education has increased consistently, but the funding modalities remained the same. As most of the new enrolments have been concentrated in private subsidized schools (due to the low quality of underfinanced public schools), they have received around 80 percent of the newly allocated government funds between 1990 and 2003.

the remaining staff has permanent posts. According to the Ministry of Finance, JUNJI had not resorted to self-employed staff in 2006 (Hacienda 2008). There have been concerns, however, regarding the modality under which JUNJI carries out the current expansion of crèches (i.e. through agreements with municipalities). While staff in municipal crèches are considered public employees – and therefore entitled to the same kind of benefits – there have been complaints about them receiving significantly lower salaries than their colleagues working in centres directly administered by JUNJI (Crónica Libre, 15 November 2008).

While their employment status is likely to be better than that of self-employed care-giver in Mexico, the salaries of early childhood educators are among the lowest in the educational sector. Professional preschool educators who graduated in 2005 and 2006 earned an average 644 US-\$ in their first year (around 20 percent less than primary teacher). This is a very low amount when compared to graduates from professional careers of similar duration, both care related, such as nurses (1,300), and non-care related, such as accountants (1,250), construction engineers (1,110), chemical engineers (1,540), and industrial engineers (1,990). After five years, the average salary of preschool teachers who had graduated in 2000 and 2001 had increased by only 11 percent, showing that neither higher education nor work experience are valued highly in this educational group.<sup>11</sup>

While the main rationale of the recent expansion has been on guaranteeing children from disadvantaged households a “fair start”, strategies did not completely lose sight of the gender and employment issue. Indeed, the majority of children attending JUNJI and *Integra* centres at the crèche and intermediate level are enrolled in full-day programmes (from 8.30 to 16.30) and there are efforts to offer extended schedules until 7.30 pm. Similar to the Mexican case, however, the availability of full-time programmes is much lower at the transitional level (particularly at private subsidized schools). While at the crèche and intermediate level 68 and 54 percent of enrolled children were in full-time care in 2006, this share descended to only 25 percent for 4 and 5 year-olds.

The current administration has also engaged in a powerful communicational strategy that promotes institutional childcare as being “good” for children. This stressing of the benefits of institutional care and education for children has the potential of liberating women from “the moral predicament between working and caring” (Kremer 2006:263). The careful calibration of professional and motherly concern is well captured in the following extract of her May 2007 speech:

“You have heard me say this many times and I have said that – *as a woman, as a mother, but also as a paediatrician* – I am convinced that initial education is fundamental, that all the efforts in primary, secondary and later, of course, tertiary education won’t be enough if we arrive late. And one way to be on time is to start at the youngest age. Therefore, and because we fight against inequality as of the cradle and we give mothers the opportunity to work, we will vigorously continue the crèche programme.” (Bachelet 2007)

The government has also made sure that media attention is drawn to the provision of childcare by staffing inaugural ceremonies with high profile politicians and government bureaucrats.<sup>12</sup> Thus, both on the practical and the symbolic level, the recent expansion of public childcare can be seen as a major improvement for women, especially poorer women who do not have

<sup>11</sup> Data from the database of Futuro Laboral ([www.futurolaboral.cl](http://www.futurolaboral.cl)). All salaries are gross salaries.

<sup>12</sup> Bachelet has delivered speeches during visits and inaugurations of at least twelve crèches and kindergartens across the country since March 2006. Both the Director of Fundación Integra and the Vice-President of JUNJI, have published numerous editorials in virtually all of the country’s large newspapers on the benefits of ECEC.

the possibility to resort to market-based childcare solutions, such as private kindergartens and crèches or domestic service.

In Chile, recent ECEC policies are clearly trying to exploit the synergies of children’s access to early education and relieving women of some of their unpaid care responsibilities – potentially enhancing their ability to engage in paid employment. Public social services under the aegis of the Ministry of Education were chosen as a route to expand the availability of ECEC services for children under the age of 4. Similar to the Mexican case, this choice reflects general trends in social protection, institutional legacies as well as political considerations.

The decision to go for publicly provided professionalized childcare rather than home- or community-based daycare fits with the country’s overall social protection strategy which has focused on improving the quality of social services and on *extending* existing protection mechanisms to groups that have been excluded or disadvantaged (rather than creating a parallel programmes as in the Mexican case).<sup>13</sup>

Institutional legacies also play a role. Other than IMSS’ childcare services which were mainly a way of satisfying working mothers’ need for child custody, the creation of JUNJI in 1970 was the product of both a growing interest in the early stimulation of children and the struggle of women activists from different party backgrounds for women’s workers’ right to childcare (JUNJI 2005). From the very beginning, the institution was linked to the Ministry of Education and although it was moved to the Ministry of Domestic Affairs’ Division for Social and Community Organizations under authoritarian rule, it was reintegrated into Mineduc upon the return to democracy.

At the same time, the recent expansion did not consider a greater involvement of the private sector through state subsidies – a strategy which has been quite common in other countries such as Argentina and South Korea (Faur 2009; Peng 2009). This may reflect the reluctance to replicate a modality which in the broader educational arena has led to far-reaching segmentation and social inequality. Since services at the crèche and intermediate levels are basically being created from scratch, the government had greater leverage over institutional shape than at the transitional level, where coverage was more advanced and the subsidized private variant an already established fact.

### 3. Discussion

The different modalities of ECEC services provision for under 3 year-olds resulting from this process have important implications for sustainability and service quality. An important difference between the two programmes is the basis of entitlement. While both programmes are needs-based and means-tested, the Chilean programme targets a much broader public (40 percent of households compared to around 14 percent of households in the Mexican case). It is likely to be more easily extended to other sectors including middle-income groups as service quality and professionalism are put at the centre and services are marketed as “good

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<sup>13</sup> In health, for example, Plan AUGE (launched in 2004) defined a number of health conditions to be universally covered by the public system regardless of age, gender, race, insurance status and income. The pension reform (approved in 2008) introduced a series of changes in order to improve coverage and efficiency of the existing system of individual accounts.

for children” and access is not as closely tied to the labour market status of parents as in the Mexican case.

The co-responsibility component – a pet concept of the “New Poverty Agenda” according to which beneficiaries of social services should not be mere recipients of state “hand-outs”, but shoulder part of the costs to be paid in money or kind – is much more developed in the Mexican programme where parents, however poor, are expected to make some kind of co-payment for childcare services. In Chile, on the other hand, ECEC services are offered free of charge to parents and children belonging to the poorest 40 percent of households.

More importantly, however, *Chile Crece Contigo* has been passed as a law which defines the right to a crèche and kindergarten place for children from the first two income quintiles. No such move has been made in Mexico for children under the age of 3. The *Federal Day-Care Programme for Working Mothers* is an unilateral offer by the state which can be withdrawn any time and depends to a significant extent on the “market” response to public subsidies. The state does not decide or influence where childcare centres are established, but leaves this process up to the forces of demand and supply.

Looking at the pace of expansion, the Mexican programme has increased the availability of childcare places at an impressive speed. Within two years, more than 200,000 places have been created. This is a significant improvement which enables women to participate in paid employment. While childcare expansion in Chile has moved more slowly, it looks more promising with regards to sustainability. The construction of new crèches implies important investments in public infrastructure (i.e. new crèches and kindergartens) and more public employment. The Mexican programme, on the other hand, subsidizes the remodelling of private housing tying the grant to the operation of a childcare centre for one year. After this year, the centre can – at least theoretically – be closed down.

## **Final Remarks**

This paper has shown that despite the convergence around certain concerns or ideas around “social investment” and female employment promotion, there are significant differences in how these ideas translate into policies, even within one policy area. We have argued that these differences are shaped by three main factors: the overall dominant approach to social policy, institutional legacies and political calculations aimed at circumventing powerful non-state actors – such as the teachers’ union in Mexico and private for-profit interests in the educational system in Chile.

With regards to gender equality, has the commodification of care through ECEC services resolved its under-valuation, or the fact that it is carried out by women. However, in terms of the *kind* of employment created through ECEC policy, the Chilean case seems more promising as services are professionalized and preschool teachers are organized to articulate their demands. In Mexico, on the other hand, childcare workers join the ranks of informal workers without access to social security and protection. The highly decentralized and individualized mode of service provision is also likely to hamper the prospects of workers’ organization.

In both countries, the absence of men from policy debates around childcare is striking. Since it is hardly possible (nor particularly desirable) to commodify all unpaid care work, a huge

amount of it remains to be done even in case full-time quality ECEC services are available. There has been little improvement in public policies aimed at a more equal intra-household division of caring labour. Maternity leaves remain short and are still restricted to mothers. In Chile, fathers are entitled to 4 days of leave after childbirth since 2005 – a regulation that may have some symbolic value, but falls short of substantially changing gendered norms and practices in childrearing.

Last but not least, the extent to which recent policy innovations will work out from a gender equality point of view also depends on the kind of employment opportunities the countries’ growth models generate for women and how they fare in the labour market vis-à-vis male workers. The expansion of ECEC services certainly contributes to reducing women’s burdens of unpaid childcare and supervision. However, it does not in and of itself resolve gender inequalities. More and better policies are needed to improve women’s status and end discrimination on the labour market, including the promotion of women’s participation in stable and productive employment, the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, and the investment in training opportunities (Mesa-Lago 2008).

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