

Families in Latin America from a Social Work Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the contributions to family studies in Latin America from the perspective of Social Work. The article is based on a systematic documentary review of articles published in six disciplinary journals. The methodological proposal identifies three categories for its organization: family practices, conflicts, and care. Despite the general call to understand the family from a multicultural and diverse perspective, studies show that families in LA still construct their dynamics and relationships according to heteropatriarchal patterns, generating gender inequalities and violence. Social intervention with families focuses on minimizing the risks of social problems and contributing to developing empowerment and agency in the family unit. Health, education, and domestic violence are the most frequently addressed topics in the revised scientific production, leaving a potential void of currently controversial issues. Although Social Work has optimal methodological tools to approach and understand the realities of families, and its theoretical and empirical academic production provides an enriching discussion for professional work, it is necessary to incorporate the gender approach in the research-intervention process, generate alternatives for social transformation, focus on another guideline of social action towards public policy and re-conceptualize the diversity of families from everyday life.

Keywords: Social Work; Family; Latin America; Social intervention; Gender; Health; Education; Care; Welfare.

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Las familias en América Latina desde la mirada del Trabajo Social

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los aportes de los estudios de la familia realizados en América Latina desde la perspectiva del Trabajo Social, a partir de una sistemática revisión de literatura basada en artículos publicados en seis revistas disciplinares. La propuesta metodológica plantea tres categorías para su organización analítica: prácticas familiares, conflictos y cuidados. A pesar del llamado general a comprender la familia desde una mirada multicultural y diversa, los estudios muestran que las familias en esta región aún configuran sus dinámicas y relaciones de acuerdo con patrones heteropatriarcales, generando desigualdades y violencias de género. La intervención social con familias se enfoca en minimizar los riesgos ante las problemáticas sociales y en coadyuvar al empoderamiento y agencia en la unidad familiar. La salud, la educación y la violencia intrafamiliar son los temas más abordados en la producción científica revisada, dejando un potencial vacío de cuestiones actualmente polémicas. Si bien el Trabajo Social tiene herramientas metodológicas óptimas para acercarse y comprender las realidades de las familias, y su producción académica teórica y empírica provee una discusión enriquecedora para el quehacer profesional, es necesario incorporar el enfoque de género en el proceso investigación-intervención, generar alternativas de transformación social, enfocar otra directriz de acción social hacia la política pública y re-conceptualizar la diversidad de las familias desde la cotidianidad.

Palabras clave: Trabajo Social; Familia; América Latina; Intervención social; Género; Salud; Educación; Cuidados; Bienestar.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 3.1 Approaches to Family Intervention, 3.2 Family Practices and Education, 3.3 Conflicts, Problems, and Strategies, 3.4 Family Health, Care, and Gender, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographic references.

1. Introduction

An emerging debate centers on whether research on the family should be approached through the various disciplinary lenses within the Social Sciences or whether it should be considered a distinct field of study (López-Montaña & Herrera-Saray, 2014). Historically, the organization and dynamics of the family were primarily studied within anthropology, a discipline that, toward the end of the twentieth century, shifted its focus to other areas, coinciding with a broader exploration of everyday life (López, 2003). For Social Work, however, the family has long been a focal point, recognized as a unit of change and a recipient of support and intervention, particularly from public and private social development institutions. Since its inception, Social Work has been closely connected to populations experiencing vulnerability and social challenges. In this context, engaging with families in their homes and shared spaces offers a unique opportunity to understand their complexity across diverse contexts. This understanding is not as readily achieved through other disciplinary frameworks (Aylwin-Acuña & Solar, 2002).

The definition of “family” varies significantly depending on the disciplinary perspective and the specific approach. These definitions are fluid, adapting to social, legal, and historical shifts and the ethical, political, and social positions of those interpreting them. A conceptual framework emerging from this review defines the family as a primary social group connected through marriage, cohabitation, kinship, or personal choice. Such a group is structured around shared values, practices, and spaces, which in turn shape relationships, dynamics, and strategies for personal development, growth, and coping with adversity.

In contemporary discussions, a gendered perspective has become a key lens for analyzing family dynamics. This perspective not only informs social welfare policies addressing gender disparities but also helps address broader economic and political challenges societies face (Puyana, 2012). The United Nations asserts that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals depends on advancing gender equality within families (UN Women, 2019).

The triadic relationship of person-family-society is socioculturally constructed. It is a valuable framework for understanding the family as a core unit for individual development and a bridge to the more extensive societal system. This perspective underscores the family's vital role in education, ethics, socialization, caregiving, and child-rearing. Consequently, public policies focused on welfare and poverty alleviation have prioritized families in their social action plans and programs (De Martino, 2020).

The conceptualization of family and its definitions and social representations have evolved historically in response to social, legal, economic, and cultural transformations. Family studies explore a wide array of topics, including family organization and dynamics, daily life practices, norms and values, education and socialization, youth, childhood, aging, gender roles, caregiving (both maternal and paternal), grandparenting, family leadership, leisure, subsistence strategies,

support networks, inherited and reconfigured lifestyles, coexistence patterns, and health, among others. This diverse range of themes highlights the importance of understanding families while advocating for diversity and equal rights.

Interventions with families typically focus on providing collaborative support for conflict management, addressing everyday challenges, coping with chronic or temporary hardships, fostering a healthy and secure environment for family members, and strengthening mutual support and trust. In order to enhance the well-being of families, social workers must critically assess the direction and goals of social policies, as well as the socioeconomic structures in which families are embedded. This is crucial for addressing inequalities, removing barriers to well-being, and creating dignified living conditions for the population (Puyana-Villamizar & Rojas-Moreno, 2011). Thus, professional practice in Social Work focuses on three interconnected areas of intervention to provide comprehensive support to families: individual, socio-family, and socio-structural (Romero-Plana, 2023).

Social work is committed to advancing community well-being by promoting “social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2023, par. 1). Within this framework, families play a crucial role in fostering healthier lifestyles and strengthening social relationships, both of which are instrumental in driving group and community transformation (Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2011).

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In 2024, the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family was commemorated, underscoring the importance of addressing family issues to improve the quality of life for populations across cultural boundaries. Through its professional practice, Social Work has positioned families as a critical category of study and intervention, analyzing the socioeconomic challenges they face (Carballeda, 2007; Duarte *et al.*, 2010, cited in Charry-Higuera, 2014), as well as examining relational, structural, and political dimensions of family life.

2. Methodology

This article aims to analyze the contributions of family studies in Latin America (LA) from the perspective of Social Work through a documentary review employing a hermeneutic, descriptive, and systematic approach (Byrne, 2016; Dakduk *et al.*, 2010; Guirao-Goris, 2015; Whittemore *et al.*, 2014). The review focuses on six disciplinary journals published within the region. While this study does not seek to encompass all research on family studies within Social Work, it is intended as a methodological proposal that can guide future investigations, such as theses, presentations, book chapters, and books on the topic.

Over the past four decades, social workers have increasingly engaged in scientific production within the social sciences (Lorente-Molina & Luxardo, 2018). Although its visibility has grown, it remains one of the least recognized and rewarded disciplines in disseminating



knowledge (Rodríguez-Otero & Facal-Fondo, 2019). This situation is evident in the emergence of new journals that are only now beginning to be included in quality scientific catalogs. A portion of Social Work's scholarly output is published in general Social Sciences journals (or related fields such as Sociology or Anthropology). This complicates the dissemination of research within specialized disciplinary journals, limiting the visibility of published works and the field's overall growth. The selection of journals for this study aims to highlight the academic contributions of the profession in LA, as well as its growth in research output and contributions to the field in recent years.

The inclusion criteria for journal selection were indexing in recognized scientific production catalogs that adhere to quality guidelines, open access availability, and free downloads. The journals selected are indexed in the following catalogs and bibliographic databases: Dialnet, DOAJ, Latindex, Redalyc, SciELO, and Web of Science (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selected Social Work Journals.

Journal	Publisher Institution	Country	Publication Frequency
<i>Interacción y perspectiva. Revista de Trabajo Social</i>	Universidad de Zulia	Venezuela	Biannual
<i>Perspectivas. Notas sobre intervención y acción social</i>	Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez	Chile	Biannual
<i>Prospectiva. Revista de Trabajo Social e intervención social</i>	Universidad del Valle	Colombia	Biannual
<i>Revista Científica y arbitrada de Ciencias Sociales y Trabajo Social: Tejedora</i>	Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí	Ecuador	Biannual
<i>Trabajo Social</i>	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México	Mexico	Quarterly
<i>Voces desde el Trabajo Social</i>	Colegio de Profesionales del Trabajo Social de Puerto Rico	Puerto Rico	Annual

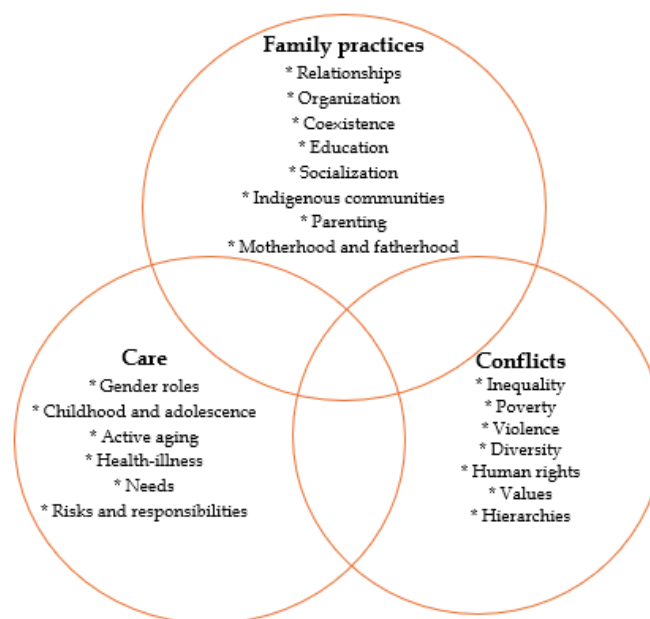
Source: own elaboration

A keyword search for "family" was conducted in each journal, narrowing the results to publications from 2014 to 2024 to ensure the discussion remained current. Of particular note, a special monographic issue titled "Family" (2015) was identified in one journal, which included eight articles.

The search yielded a total of 267 articles. Articles that did not focus on family as a central object of study within the LA context were excluded, resulting in 59 articles that met the inclusion criteria. This emphasizes the importance of selecting keywords that are closely aligned with the research topic being explored.

After an initial review of each article, a table was created to capture key details, including the journal of publication, article title, authorship, year of publication, article type (theoretical or empirical), geographic area of study, topic, classification category, and key ideas shared across the articles. The methodological strategy outlined in this article proposes a categorization framework for family studies, incorporating a transversal analysis of categories related to gender, ethnicity, and social class (see Figure 1). A second reading of the articles highlighted key ideas aligned with the three main analytical categories. Based on this concentrated information, the results section was developed, linking the findings to core concepts in family studies and fostering a discussion of the contributions made and future directions for research in Social Work.

Figure 1. Categories and axes of analysis.



Source: own elaboration.

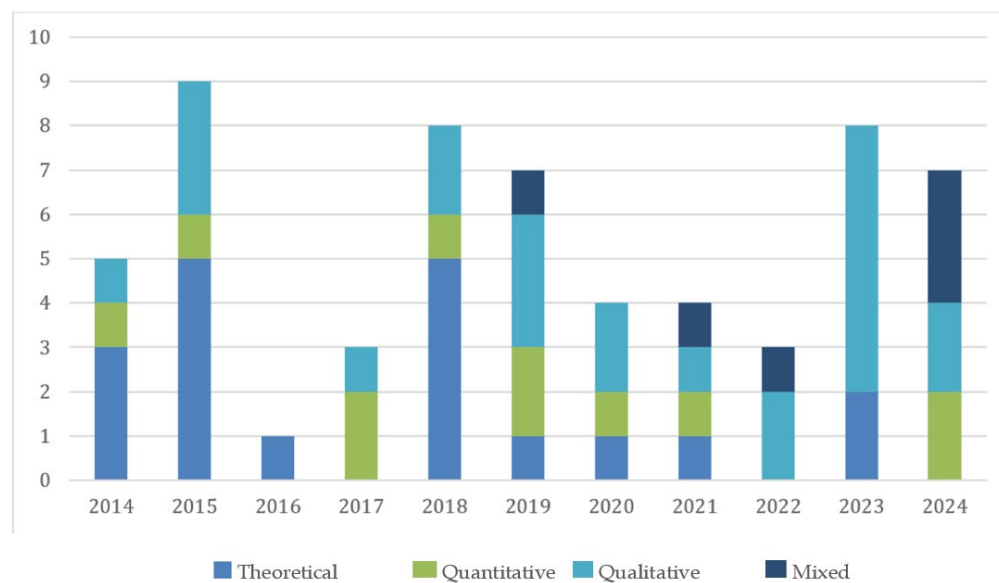
Characterization of Family Studies Production

Except for two articles, all of the works reviewed are written in Spanish, which may limit their accessibility to a broader international audience. However, one of the journals has announced that starting in 2024, articles will be published in Spanish and English to increase the impact and citation of the works.

Family studies in Social Work have seen a steady increase in production since 2023, with notable peaks in 2015, 2018, and 2023. The publications were categorized based on the type of study: theoretical articles, which include literature reviews, essays, theoretical-methodological proposals (19 articles), and empirical articles (40 studies). The empirical studies were further divided by methodological approach: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (see Figure 2). There is

a clear preference for qualitative methodologies, with 23 articles using this approach. This preference underscores the potential of qualitative research to refine governmental social policies aimed at families by shedding light on their daily challenges and highlighting the diversity of family structures.

Figure 2. Years of publication and research approaches.



Source: own elaboration.

The most commonly used techniques in empirical studies are interviews and surveys, which are essential tools in case studies and community research within the discipline. The populations most frequently surveyed or interviewed tend to be very specific, such as female heads of household and students, indicating a gap in studies focusing on other demographic groups. Notably, no studies were found that specifically address families in rural or indigenous contexts.

The production of family studies in Social Work is primarily led by female researchers, as evidenced by the additional bibliography consulted for this article. Of the reviewed works, 23 male researchers appear as first or sole authors in 11 publications, whereas 91 female researchers contribute as primary or sole authors in 48 articles. Collaborative authorship is predominant, especially in work on caregiving, where female researchers are most frequently involved. This pattern reflects two key aspects: (a) Social Work remains a profession predominantly led by women, despite increasing male participation, and (b) the concept of family is often associated with the domestic, emotional, private, and caregiving spheres, which are socially constructed through the sexual division of labor within a heteronormative framework. This focus on caregiving can also be interpreted as a form of symbolic violence within academic spaces (Romero-Plana, 2024), reinforcing gendered expectations and norms.

A notable trend among the journals is the publication of studies conducted within the national context of the respective country, reflecting a commitment to disseminating research that addresses local professional practice. However, this tendency limits the broader, global discussion within the professional readership of these journals. Two journals, both indexed in the Web of Science catalog, distinguish themselves by publishing research from other countries, thereby fostering comparative analyses and methodological exchanges and strengthening academic connections on an international level.

3. Findings

3.1 Approaches to Family Intervention

The reviewed studies collectively emphasize the importance of adopting a more inclusive perspective on family (or families) based on principles of diversity and non-discrimination. However, they also highlight persistent legal barriers and societal resistance rooted in classism, which impede the development of a discipline-specific theoretical foundation, leaving family studies largely reliant on interdisciplinary advances (Coronado-Pulido, 2024). From a traditional assistentialist and functionalist standpoint, the conceptualization of family as defined by the legal framework—granting it rights and participation in public life—limits the scope of disciplinary intervention. A deeper understanding of family dynamics requires an appreciation of families as entities deeply embedded in a cultural matrix that grants them identity and autonomy, independent of legal and demographic frameworks (Reyes, 2016). The approach that facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the structural, sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and interpersonal relationships within families comes from the ecosystemic and interactional perspectives (Páez-Martínez, 2017; Quintero-Velásquez, 2004), which emphasize the active participation of all family members while recognizing the flexible, dynamic nature of relational patterns.

Social transformation processes involving families are primarily aimed at modifying family dynamics to address specific issues, promote the well-being and rights of family members, and prevent psychosocial risks and vulnerabilities. Freedoms, rights, and respect for family diversity should be integral to all professional interventions. Supporting families necessitates the involvement of a multidisciplinary network and collaboration between public and private institutions (Silva-Minotta *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the social expertise required for family interventions is highlighted as a central area of Social Work Practice, providing a more humanistic, culturally sensitive perspective on family conflicts and aligning with contemporary social changes in legal and interdisciplinary contexts (Casas-Cervantes & Niño-Zúñiga, 2015; Pérez-Márquez, 2018).

Family assessments should capture each family's unique processes to identify their strengths and challenges (Cruz-Martín del Campo, 2015). Such assessments are crucial for developing tailored intervention strategies that align with the family's goals, functions, and

necessary changes. Conducting family assessments and characterizations is particularly beneficial for families with complex needs (Mancinas-Espinoza *et al.*, 2017). These assessments help establish appropriate intervention strategies, define short- and long-term objectives, measure impacts on family well-being, and ensure a structured support process for family members.

3.2 Family Practices and Education

Traditionally, families have been classified according to the bonds between their members: biological, adoptive, foster, or institutionalized communal families (Ruiz-Serrano, 2015). The organization and relational dynamics within these categories are shaped by the values of parents (or guardians), legal frameworks, cultural contexts, socioeconomic status, and political-religious ideologies. However, this traditional definition does not fully incorporate diversity or the principle of inclusion, which treats families as subjects of rights, guiding legal and policy reforms. In addition to the four traditional family types, the concept of the family now also encompasses reconstituted families, chosen families, same-gender families, single-mother and single-father families, and child-free families (Román-Sánchez *et al.*, 2009). This broader perspective reaffirms that family units are defined not only by legal categories but also by personal and social interests shaped by daily practices and the choices of individuals.

Considering the diversity of family structures without losing specificity, a comprehensive family diagnosis is crucial for developing appropriate intervention proposals. Recognizing the diversity of family forms allows for more nuanced and practical approaches to family intervention and support.

The family remains a central institution for the comprehensive development of children and the well-being of its members, as it addresses personal and social needs. In this context, international and national legal frameworks provide guidelines to combat vulnerability, with public institutions and non-profit civil and religious organizations playing a key role in social action initiatives.

In the field of family education, there is a strong focus on improving vertical communication among household members (Páez-Martínez, 2017). Adult-centrism is a key concept in childhood and youth education studies, as it helps to understand learning and teaching styles in informal but significant environments that influence the development of children and adolescents.

Healthy, proactive family relationships are rooted in good communication, respect, and empathy, regardless of whether the couple that forms the family is married or otherwise united. In alignment with the defense of family diversity, and contrary to the view of Urzúa-Salas and Cabello-Garza (2019), it is not marriage that provides stability, responsibility, and commitment

within a family, but rather the values and attitudes of the individuals who form the family unit or the couple.

Ensuring that communication is horizontal, healthy, and covers all aspects of family life is essential for addressing issues such as low self-esteem and lack of confidence among young people (Moreta-Pilco & Espín-Miniguano, 2024). A family environment characterized by strong bonds, effective communication, emotional intelligence, and a healthy atmosphere is conducive to fostering autonomy, independence, and group growth, which, in turn, enhances commitment and satisfaction in the educational processes of younger family members (Rivera-Flores *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, when communication is poor or ineffective, unresolved conflicts between parents and children can escalate, leading to family violence, lack of trust, disrespect, and poor social skills (Díaz-Estupiñán & Borja-Riscanevo, 2020).

Changes in family situations – such as death, separation, illness, or unemployment – affect all household members. One indicator of these changes' impact on children and adolescents is academic performance (Intriago-Delgado, 2018; 2019). Parental involvement in their children's education is crucial for building stronger connections between educational interests and the life projects of young people (López-Ávila & Mendoza-Muñoz, 2021; Suquilanda-Agurto *et al.*, 2021).

3.3 Conflicts, Problems, and Strategies

Family dynamics often give rise to conflicts among members, necessitating adjustments in behavior regulation, practices, dynamics, and the allocation of time and space. Family functioning varies according to the type of household, sociocultural context, and economic stability. Consequently, when conflicts or obstacles arise, the strategies and their effectiveness differ.

Family disintegration, partner separation, or poor communication impede the resolution of issues (Cuenca-Cuenca & Aragundi-Muñoz, 2022). Emotional management education emerges as a key area within family dynamics, as inadequate responses to obstacles can cascade, leading to further issues that directly and indirectly affect family members. Domestic violence, which stems from multiple causes, is aggravated by other problems, such as substance abuse, resulting in a hostile environment for children and adolescents (Alay-Choez & Pibaque-Tigua, 2024). This environment negatively impacts their self-esteem, physical and emotional well-being, and academic performance (Canseco-Montesdeoca *et al.*, 2019).

In Latin America, families also face challenges caused by political violence and armed conflicts, including disappearances and forced displacements, which place families in a state of helplessness that affects their health, well-being, and overall quality of life (Ayala-Ortiz *et al.*, 2024). This situation underscores the importance of family resilience as an inherent characteristic (Sánchez-Zepeda, 2023). The issue of disappearances and violent deaths within families calls for a reevaluation of how social work should strengthen its role in grief support. Strategies such as

death pedagogy and culturally sensitive education on coping with family losses are necessary (Del Rosario-Meléndez & Chévere-Rivera, 2014). Furthermore, it is essential to understand how families provide refuge to individuals returning from forced displacements, violent conflicts, or failed migrations, as they serve as the foundation for social reintegration. In these cases, family care is rooted in security, respect, understanding, affection, and non-judgmental support (Vargas-Parra *et al.*, 2020). Social intervention projects should be based on experiences, identity, learning, and the recognition of men and women as rights-bearing individuals.

Similarly, this sense of helplessness extends to families of incarcerated individuals, who must adapt to new economic, social, and emotional realities. Punitive measures affect not only the individuals who break the law but also their entire families, particularly women (Pérez-Ramírez & Castillejos-Cartas, 2024).

Although families express their domestic issues through various channels, social policies do not always address them adequately or provide effective solutions due to weak action plans and limited resources. Poverty is one of the most significant challenges facing Latin American governments, not only because it is the first Sustainable Development Goal set by the United Nations but also because it leads to additional forms of violence within households. In response to poverty and extreme poverty, families, especially women, develop and implement their own survival and quality-of-life strategies. These strategies include mutual support networks, savings, increased formal and informal work, child and elderly labor, restricted diets, requests for donations and services, participation in development programs, migration, resource reuse, self-sufficiency, and the application of traditional knowledge (Romero-Plana, 2018; 2024). Poverty creates conditions of insecurity, violence, and precariousness. One of its most severe consequences is child labor, which significantly disrupts the development of children and adolescents in Latin America. Understanding each household's reality is critical in developing a joint intervention model that prioritizes restoring the rights of this vulnerable group, a key focus of social work (Mero-Panchana & Bojorque-Pazmiño, 2024).

3.4 Family Health, Care, and Gender

The family unit plays a critical role in providing care and attention to the health of its members, addressing both primary and secondary needs. The responsibility for the physical and emotional health of children, adolescents, and dependent individuals initially lies with the family. Family environments where health is managed through care practices such as hygiene, nutrition, safety, communication, and trust tend to face fewer risks of illness.

When a family member is ill or living with different abilities, the family becomes the cornerstone of recovery or adaptation. In the case of illnesses such as cancer, family support, and motivation are key factors that positively impact the patient's emotional recovery (Andrade-Macías *et al.*, 2024). Family environments, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics influence

the type of support provided to the ill individual. In these situations, the family unit often needs to reorganize its structure and make decisions in essential areas of life, such as employment, housing, or relationships. Illnesses, disorders, or mental disabilities bring about emotional, economic, and social changes that affect the family, which must adjust to the “new normal” (Silva-Montealegre, 2015). Accepting diagnoses and the following emotional transition are areas where Social Work should play an essential role, offering support as part of its responsibilities (Santiago-Fernández, 2018). If not properly managed, this transition can negatively affect family dynamics, exacerbating conflicts or creating additional issues.

The Covid-19 pandemic, starting in 2020, diversified the challenges families faced. Issues related to health, safety, emotional management, caregiving, mourning, and socio-family distance had to be addressed. The confinement within family homes or living spaces triggered conflicts or changes related to communication, interpersonal relationships (Cobeña, 2020; Vera-Del Pezo *et al.*, 2021), recreation, education, work, and relationships. Virtual support services played a crucial role in maintaining continuity of care and reducing time and travel expenses, although they also highlighted existing gaps between families in terms of internet access, connectivity, and privacy (Gutiérrez-Cortez & Zapata-Giraldo, 2023).

During this time, violence against girls, adolescents, and women increased, especially in physical, psychological, and sexual forms – virtual spaces exposed new forms of aggression and violence against women. Domestic violence responses were often clumsy and inadequate, emphasizing the need to incorporate protocols, models, and strategies to safeguard the well-being of children, adolescents, and women who are victims of gender-based violence (Morales-Rojas *et al.*, 2020).

Power-dominance conflicts and the subordination of women to caregiving roles were exacerbated (Rodríguez-Pizarro *et al.*, 2023). Women took on additional burdens, already facing the double or triple shift of labor. This reflects how symbolic violence persists, even in the most seemingly egalitarian family settings.

The studies reviewed often link caregiving to physical health without considering gender dynamics, which weakens the analysis of family reality. For this reason, it is crucial to include a gender perspective to understand how caregiving roles shape family relationships. Addressing topics such as motherhood, fatherhood (Álvarez-Plazas *et al.*, 2023), same-sex and homoparental parenting (Andrade-Villegas & Uribe-López, 2015; Herrera-Sanguino, 2015), and family caregiving competencies would contribute to a broader understanding of in-home caregiving. It would also highlight the overburden of work, the self-neglect of female caregivers, and the practices of inclusion and exclusion within and outside the home.

An important aspect integrated into Social Work is active aging or promoting quality of life for older adults (PAM). One pressing issue identified is loneliness and depression among the

elderly (Paredes *et al.*, 2024). The lack of social policies to address the needs of older adults places the responsibility of care on families, who often lack the resources to support their elderly relatives adequately. The physical and mental decline of older adults limits their ability to live independently, prompting Social Work to focus on three key areas of action: a) promoting active aging and quality of life for older adults, b) providing comprehensive care for older adults, and c) educating families about the care of older adults with a gender perspective. One challenge for Social Work is to reconsider the needs, limitations, strengths, and obstacles that families face in order to develop public policies that will significantly impact the well-being of older adults, mitigate the effects of aging in Latin America, and involve older adults in active participation, while also addressing gender roles and family conflicts over the unequal responsibility for elder care (García-Gutierrez, 2018; López-Lara & Castro-Vázquez, 2022).

Grandparenting is an additional family role performed by older adults, where grandmothers and grandfathers take on caregiving responsibilities. This role can disrupt their active aging contexts when family needs are incorporated into their life projects. Therefore, Social Work should foster democratic participation within the family and help clarify the relationships and meanings of grandparenting, contributing to the well-being of older adults (Marín-Rengifo & Palacio-Valencia, 2015).

The establishment of gender roles within the family is deeply rooted in the entrenched system of gender-sex norms within communities. Although an increasing number of families deviate from these traditional norms, family structures continue to reflect a macho culture that adapts oppression to social changes, intensifying both symbolic and structural violence. Maintaining traditional gender ideals not only generates violence, inequalities, and injustices but also impedes comprehensive family and community development. Subordinating family organization and vision to rigid gender roles leads to imbalances in caregiving, child-rearing, and the care of other dependents, adding authoritarian practices and adult-centered hierarchies that deny democratic relationships within the household (García-Torres, 2023; Marín-Rengifo & Uribe-Arango, 2017). These dynamics replicate intergenerational patterns over time.

There is a noticeable gap in studies addressing the impact of sex-gender transitions in women and men on family dynamics. How families accept or reject these transitions, the support available for a healthy process, how relational dynamics are reorganized, and the social outcomes for families—especially those of trans children and adolescents—remain underexplored (Alvarado-Morales, 2021; Macías-Pico & Mendoza-Muñoz, 2019). Given the diverse legal, social, and ethical professional perspectives on these emerging topics, the ongoing debate on sex-gender diversities exceed the discipline's authority to adopt a unified stance. What is essential for Social Work professionals is to stay updated, acknowledge new realities, and critically evaluate pathways that ensure optimal well-being for children, adolescents, and their families.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for ongoing reflection on the emotional strain and unquantifiable responsibilities of household caregivers, family members, and those raising children (Ramírez-Rodríguez, 2017).

Social work must incorporate a gender perspective into family diagnostics and transformation processes. We can better understand local socioeconomic development pathways by identifying vulnerabilities, violence, and inequalities through a structural critique. Social intervention projects with women, in any capacity, should focus on recognizing their rights, amplifying their experiences and identities, breaking down ideological barriers, claiming public space, defining private space, empowering them, and enabling them to chart their paths to well-being (Carabalí-Viveros & Ladino-Mosquera, 2014; Carrillo-Montoya *et al.*, 2018; Chávez-Plazas & Bohórquez, 2014). Opening spaces where women are seen, recognized, and valued, promoting their political, economic, and cultural leadership, and addressing our professional work with a gender perspective may be complex within the hetero-patriarchal structure of Social Work. Nevertheless, it remains an ethical commitment to family development, a daily resistance to gender-based violence, and an honor to practice social justice and equality.

4. Conclusions

The literature review reveals that the family as a subject of study in Social Work is currently experiencing a revaluation, with an increasing body of academic production.

There is a growing commitment to addressing family diversity and respecting how families are formed their structures, roles, parenting processes, and caregiving practices. However, the results of the studies also show that families in Latin America are still far from breaking away from patriarchal systems and the traditional functionalist view of the family.

With a few exceptions, most research lacks a gender perspective, which is a significant weakness. One of the distinctive commitments of Social Work is the promotion and defense of gender equality and family well-being, which makes the integration of a gender perspective into the methodological process of understanding reality and professional practice essential.

Families are deeply embedded within a neoliberal and capitalist system that exacerbates inequalities. In this context, the challenges they face in their daily lives stem from broader economic, social, and cultural conditions that limit their resources and opportunities. Therefore, social policies aimed at family well-being should focus on structural changes that provide legal frameworks for protecting human rights, recognizing family stability as the cornerstone of a healthy, (Altamirano-Altamirano, 2017), resilient society engaged in continuous, integral development.

Social transformation processes with families should dismantle vertical structures based on shared responsibility, promote knowledge exchange, focus on social justice goals, highlight each family's inherent strengths, and commit to social development.

Social intervention with families can be directed toward three key goals: a) Reducing vulnerability levels, eliminating psychosocial risks, and addressing the issues families face to safeguard the well-being of individual members and the family dynamic as a whole. b) Promoting family values and competencies, encouraging healthy and responsible lifestyles, and creating spaces for empowerment and agency among family members. c) Clear social transformation pathways for creating public policies and challenging institutional support that is merely assistive towards families in vulnerable situations are proposed. In line with the final guideline, experience, theoretical discussions, practice systematization, and the trajectories of research-intervention professionals should all contribute to decision-making processes in creating social development policies targeting families (Ruiz y Munévar-Vargas, 2021).

Research on families from the perspective of Social Work contributes significantly to the body of family studies within the Social Sciences. However, there are still gaps in scientific production, as the discipline has primarily focused on intervention rather than systematizing support experiences. Some of the less explored topics not visible in this literature review include families in rural, indigenous, or extreme poverty contexts; migrant or transnational families; childless family lifestyles; young people's pregnancy interruptions; adoption strategies; good practices; healthy living styles; egalitarian coexistence; grandparenting; challenges for families of individuals with suicidal ideation; transgender processes; or those facing extreme exclusion, as well as evaluations or proposals for social policies, among others. This represents a potential niche for further exploration.

The rapid modernization of this millennium and the increasing visibility of diverse family structures in Latin America have posed a challenge for Social Work: to develop a more creative, critical, alternative, and ethical theoretical (Navarro-Bulgarelli, 2019; Valbuena-Vanegas, 2012) and methodological approach while reflecting on processes of moralization and intervention with families that are based on punishment and pedagogization (Mancinas-Espinoza y Rodríguez-Otero, 2019). These guidelines help challenge and break away from assistentialism and the verticality of social action.

In summary, the call for innovation and alternative ways of thinking about families is urgent. It encourages the development of a critical perspective toward the research and intervention methods applied to them from disciplinary work. It also advocates for theoretical-methodological updates, discussions among professionals, and a flexible conceptualization of families based on everyday lived experiences rather than rigid legal frameworks or social policies. This approach would help address the realities of families more effectively. The publication of monographs on families in Social Work journals is strongly encouraged to facilitate the exchange

of processes, findings, diagnoses, and intervention practices, both on a national scale and in a comparative manner between regions, thus strengthening the position of our discipline as a powerful ally in understanding the social issues that affect families.

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