

**Interpersonal Communication in Dual-  
Income Couples: Challenges and  
Strategies of Mexican Women to  
communicate with their partner**



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## **INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN DUAL-INCOME COUPLES: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF MEXICAN WOMEN TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR PARTNER <sup>1</sup>**

*Comunicación Interpersonal en Matrimonios de Doble Ingreso: Retos y Estrategias de las Mujeres Mexicanas para comunicarse con su pareja*

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### **ABSTRACT**

With a focus on work-family balance, this exploratory study focused on finding the communication and consider what strategies women use to solve them. Also explore the nature of the main issues on which the couple talks about. This study was conducted in the northern city of Monterrey, in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and included 23 female participants, age 22 and older, who live in a marriage where both spouses work outside the home and have children, and who agreed to be audio-taped in an interview. The results of this qualitative study indicate that the main challenge of communication for women to verbally interact with their partner is not having enough time to do it, followed by fatigue experienced after a day of work. The strategy used to overcome the challenge of being able to talk with their partner was eating together. Finally, the main issues the couple talks about are: children, their jobs, and future plans as a family. The results of this study indicate that work and family as a factor in husband-wife communication, does not prevent women to efficiently develop their own patterns to be involved in their life work and in family life.

### **RESUMEN**

Con un enfoque en el balance trabajo-familia, este estudio exploratorio se enfocó en encontrar los retos de comunicación que las mujeres mexicanas perciben en su matrimonio. El objetivo fue identificar esos retos y examinar qué estrategias utilizan las mujeres para resolverlos. También se exploró la naturaleza de los principales temas sobre los que habla la pareja. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en la ciudad de Monterrey, en el estado de Nuevo León, México, e incluyó a 23 participantes de sexo femenino, de 22 años en adelante, que viven en matrimonio en el que ambos cónyuges trabajan fuera del hogar y tienen hijos, y que accedieron a ser audio-grabadas en una entrevista. Los resultados de esta investigación cualitativa indican que el principal reto de comunicación para que las mujeres se comuniquen con su pareja es no tener tiempo suficiente para hacerlo, seguido del cansancio que experimentan después de una jornada de trabajo. La estrategia más utilizada para vencer el reto de poder conversar con su pareja fue comer juntos. Finalmente, los principales temas de los que habla la pareja fueron acerca de los hijos, de sus trabajos y de los planes futuros como familia. Los resultados de este estudio indican que el trabajo y la familia como factor que interviene en la comunicación esposo-esposa, no impide que

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las mujeres desarrollen de forma eficiente sus propios patrones para involucrarse tanto en su vida de trabajo como en su vida familiar.

## Introduction

Mexico has seen significant demographic, social and economical through the second half of the twentieth century. In this context, the different roles of men and women have also changed, especially because of the involvement of women in the workforce [1]. One of the consequences of migration of women into the labor force is the need to balance work and family, by the fact that married people, who work, also have their personal and family lives and other relationships that have how to balance their work and family responsibilities [2]. This is a challenge for women, who despite being over 30% of the economically active population of Mexico [3] of 100 women in the workforce, 90 also carry the burden of housework. That is, housework and childcare. The variable that explains this regard is that in Mexico, the caretaker of children is women [4].

*Why study couple´s communication?*

The state of research on the balance of work and family, from the nineties, indirectly reflects an interest in communication processes in terms of working couples [5]. This interest includes issues related to communication flexibility in sharing financial and household responsibilities and commitment to communicate, behaviors, attitudes and desires in a relationship [6]. Research on family communication is a field that has evolved rapidly. For over 30 years, different family issues have been studied from various perspectives, such as psychological and sociological. However, it is through communication that not only the cognitive or social aspects of the family are examined, but their processes of meaning that help us understand why families communicate as they do, how family members are expressed affection, or how the spouses negotiate household tasks [7].

In the interest of knowing the family processes such as maintaining relationships, conflict management, or expression of affection, that is, to understand the how's and why's, research and interpersonal communication theories are relevant for several reasons. First, the *centrality of communication*: Through communication family gives meaning to all the processes occurring

within it, and although it is through communication that conflicts are created, communication is also an ally to help us deal with them. In other words, through family communication its own communicative interaction and their interactions with others outside the household take place or deteriorate; is created and maintained. Second, the *change over multidimensional time*: Families change over time. This process affects not only the relations among its members, but their communication. Space time and time of the social process are important concepts to consider because they give meaning to family interactions. For example, space time covers events that happen every day, and the social process time includes the events that set the dynamics of the family (for example: Before my departure from work, after the death of my father, before the birth of my first child) and this has an impact on how communication occurs. Third, *the impact of external environment*: We assume that the social and cultural contexts have an influence on families. That is, people make contact with other people besides their families, their workplace or school. This has an impact on how they communicate in their household. In addition, the rules, rituals, rites and cultural traditions, specific to a particular family, can dictate how they communicate with each of its members and the outside world [8].

*What is the difference in the study of families from other disciplines?* The communication in family life, reflects family relationships, and is a tool for the family to function as such. While other disciplines such as psychology, sociology and family studies provide us with information to understand the family, the growth of our own field of study allows us to put the communication at the research center of our families.

From the perspective of communication, we focus on the processes of interaction within the family, and messages (topics) about the family. We ask questions such as why the family members communicate as they do? What makes couples discuss? How do you express affection between family members? How do you negotiate household chores between spouses? What communication strategies couples use to keep their relationship? That is why implicit theories need to help us understand, explain, predict what we observe, what we wonder about the interactions within the family. This is where the role of interpersonal communication in the study of family interactions gains strength

and importance. It is worth mentioning that in order to understand the changes that have taken the family "is necessary not only to understand the relationships between work and family roles for both spouses, but also examine the effects of the characteristics of the couple's roles in family life" [9]. When wives work, not just a change of power and a redefinition of marriage roles, but an adaptation that determine the "quality of family life and sometimes even the survival of the relationship" [10]. In addition, handling multiple roles provides families and particularly women, new challenges and dilemmas. Some of them, as a result of work-family imbalance, include not having time or energy to the relationship, among others. This is because women who choose to combine work and family "are at high speed most of the time" [11].

Considering the multiple roles of the modern woman (wife, mother, and provider), from the standpoint of interpersonal communication, research raises several questions: What communication challenges are women working to maintain a flow of communication with couples despite the workload inside and outside the home? What strategies are used to solve the communication challenges with their partner? And what are the topics of conversation when they have overcome the challenges to communicate?

The purpose of this exploratory study was to answer these questions by identifying the communication challenges that women perceive in double-income marriages, to communicate with their partners, examining strategies to overcome these challenges, and identifying what are the main topics of conversation when communication challenges have been overcome. This qualitative study sought to contribute to the field of study of the family, presenting new information on communication in Mexican dual-income marriages, from the perspective of working women.

## **Methodology**

Participants were adult women, aged 22 and older who live in dual-income marriage, and have children. The study was conducted in the city of Monterrey in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and included 23 participants who were invited to participate in a study of couple communication. They agreed to be audio-taped

in an interview from 15 to 25 minutes long, which were asked a series of closed and open questions about their perceptions of communication with their husbands. The questions, with a focus on the fact that these women had a dual income couple with children, were interrogated about their perceptions of the communication challenges they face when they want to talk to their partner. Moreover, considering that the responsibilities of work and family can restrict or enhance work-family balance, other questions included the strategies or solutions used to solve the communication challenges, the themes of their conversations, and their perception of their marital relationship in terms of communication, in their quest to have a work-family balance. The questions presented to the communication challenges as the obstacle, barrier, problem, or difficulty for a woman to enable you to communicate with her husband in his work and family responsibilities. The strategies were conceptualized as the solutions, action plan, procedures or practices to meet the challenges they faced in communicating with your partner. Finally, issues that women speak with their husbands were conceptualized as the focus of conversation, topics, issues of discourse, discussion or conversation. Demographic information was also collected, including age, number of children, age of the children, when he entered the workforce and working hours. To measure the variables of perceived communication challenges, strategies to solve them, the topics of conversation and the reasons why the relationship is or is not affected by the fact that both spouses work open questions were used to collect data. Closed questions were used to find the age of participants, number of children, age of children, hours of work (1 = full time, 2 = half time, 3 = three quarters), when it began in the force labor (1 = before marriage, 2 = after marriage), and if the relationship is affected by the work (1 = no, 2 = yes, 3 = both answers.) To answer the research questions of this study, interviews were transcribed and then conduct a content analysis. The perceptions of 23 women of different jobs and professions, from executives and doctors to teachers and secretaries who live in dual-income marriages are currently working with children, yielded the following results.



## Results and conclusions

Age of the participants ranged from 22 to 49 years (M = 37). The number of children ranged from 1 to 4, and their age was 1 month to 30 years of age. Work schedule: 52% of women in the sample work full time, 35% work part time and 13% worked three quarters. 87% of them entered the labor force before marriage and after marriage 13%; 13% of women reported having no communication challenges with their partner, while 87% reported that they face a variety of communication challenges due to the fact that both spouses work. Content analysis of interviewed responses helped to determine the following results: (Table 1).

**Table 1:** *General perception of challenges, strategies and talking points of women in dual-income couples who have children and work. (We present the highest percentage).*

Challenges	Strategies	Topics
<p><b>Time (52%):</b> The most common communication challenge was time, and included phrases such as "one of us comes home late," "priorities of work."</p>	<p><b>Having meals together (91%)</b> chose women as the most healthy among communicating with their husbands. Other responses include those couples who are out of the office to go to lunch together and return to work after eating out of home once a week or more</p>	<p><b>Children (74%)</b> About education, grades in school, friends and activities, how they are educating their children, what their needs are, how they are growing, plans for them, in short, their concerns as parents and how they to celebrate the achievements of their children</p>
<p><b>Fatigue (30%)</b> This challenge was reported as the second most important. Although women did not report the cases explicitly, its hours of work, childcare and housework were discussed during interviews.</p>	<p><b>Night (52%)</b> women reported that night was when they made their dialogues with their husbands (when children are asleep, while preparing the baby to sleep before going to bed)</p>	<p><b>Work (52%)</b> The results suggest that many women and their partners talk about their work in different ways. From the challenges faced every day by the fact of belonging to a certain position to the latest news</p>

		from the organization of each one of them.
<p><b>Children (13%)</b> Includes taking children to bed, help them with their responsibilities and meet their demands of time. In most cases, the challenge was that children are a priority before the couple's communication, since most of the women reported caring for their children before taking the time to talk with her husband.</p>	<p><b>Telephone (39%)</b> The use of technology helps to overcome communication challenges, women reported using the telephone, cellular and paging, receiving or making calls several times a day.</p> <p><b>In the car (22%)</b> This response was reported by several women, indicating that some of them have the opportunity to talk while driving to work, or when their husbands are picked at the end of a day's work</p>	<p><b>Plans (short and long term) (30%)</b> Planning for the future which includes plans for their children's education, weekend activities, vacation, building a new home, planning a party, the future of business, distribution / investment income, marriage and relationship, plans for work and retirement.</p>

Other challenges to communicate with their partners included: Organization: Lack of organization to be able to combine the activities of work and home and children (taking them to school, extra-curricular activities, feeding, bathing, etc.) and lack of energy, low tolerance for the day, wants to talk, be in a hurry, do not have domestic help.

Solutions / strategies to address the challenge of communicating with the partner were also mentioned: activities together (15%). For those couples who because of their children and household duties they are unable to communicate even though they want, some reported that doing exercise together, take cooking classes together, and other walks at night with their partners to find a time where they could communicate. In addition, they mentioned that the other options presented during the weekends, attending meetings with family and friends, visiting relatives and friends, or leave the entire family as most couples



do not work Saturdays and Sundays. A small percentage (9%) reported as solutions / strategies to communicate using email, watch TV together, or go out at night.

Finally, with regard to other topics of conversation that arose after overcoming the challenge to communicate were mixed. For example, the family (26%) The role of Mexican couples is important. The women mentioned that they talk so much the immediate family of their husbands like yours as a conversation between them. Did not reveal what they were saying when they talked about family. How was your day (26%). This was a common theme when women talked to their husbands. The phrase 'how was your day?' "Included questions about the workload in the office, how they felt at work, they did again, as are his co-workers, events and situations that happened at work, etc. Their relationship (22%) In this regard, women reported talking about how they feel in their marriage and their relationship has developed. Some said they talked with their husbands on their physical and emotional feelings, their needs as women, which both needed with regard to marriage. In short, needs, marriage and emotional states. Home economics (17%) This item included accounts payable, basic expenses, priorities must be taken into account, grocery shopping, financial management, etc.

Events national/international. Some women reported that their talking points trying on events both locally and internationally. They talk with their husbands about politics, economics and social facts. Our businesses, friends, God and our lives. Only 9% reported talking about these issues. This indicates that their children, work as a couple plans cover most of their conversation. Other issues that were reported included places to go, how to organize (both at work and at home), jokes, your pet, calendars, music, movies, video games, and what they read. It is noteworthy that the list of issues that women reported the three priority topics were considered: children (83%), work and plans (short and long term) (39%), and their relationships (26%).

## Conclusions

The results of this study have created a watershed in the understanding of the perceptions of Mexican women in dual-income marriage, in regard to work-family balance for a communication partner. It can be concluded that taking the

work and family as a factor involved in communication between husband and wife, did not prevent women from developing their own standards to manage and balance work and family lifestyle. Because the changes in family dynamics have been presented since the woman has been part of the workforce, the ability of families to survive in these situations suggests that they are flexible and that flexibility is based on the way in which family members communicate with each other. This study indicates that the perception of women in the communication challenges they face in talking to your partner, because their responsibilities at work do not stop them from finding strategic solutions to talk and be with their husbands in an efficient manner. One of the most profitable in terms of solutions to overcome the challenges of communication was to have meals together. This strategy supports the notion of taking into account each other to share not only food, but the communication, to help alleviate some of the pressures and stress caused by work, to nourish themselves through food and conversation. Finally, we mention that although the conclusions about cause and effect can not be finalized on these data, the results suggest that the opinion of a woman to share the same world as her husband's work enhances their marital communication in many cases. In turn, this decreases the conflict between his roles of work and family. These women reported feeling confident with their multiple roles in carrying out their work while performing her motherhood. In addition, these women described themselves as competent to perform their multiple roles and maintain their marital relationship through communication.

### **Study Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it is unclear how much of the results reveal how modern parents are. That is, if there are other factors, besides work, that affect their communication partner. Another limitation is that there is no comparison group which is comparing the results obtained in this sample, for example, a group of non-working mothers.

Due to the paucity of research exploring the issue of work-family balance in Mexico in terms of communication, the results suggest that it should expand the understanding of these issues. For example, research is needed to clarify what factors within the individual and the work environment can facilitate the couple's

developing sense of efficacy to perform multiple roles and how they communicate. Other studies could look at the relationship between the employment status of the mother and negative outcomes for children, marriage, or some other aspect of communication in the family. Regarding the shared responsibilities of work and home, studies are needed to discover how couples reach an agreement in terms of the responsibilities of housework, for example, what are the strategies of influence that the couple used to the other part of the housework.

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