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**THE URBAN FEMALE LABOUR MARKET IN LATIN AMERICA:  
THE MYTH AND THE REALITY**

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## ABSTRACT

Latin America has partly overcome the short-term adjustment stage following the external debt crisis and is now in a stage of restructuring marked by opening up to external markets. These changes, which have included the reorganization of production processes, with the incorporation of new technologies, have altered the composition of the labour market and had a strong impact on women's labour participation. One of the most noticeable effects has been what is known as the "feminization of the labour force".

The broad structural trends, at times magnified by the crisis and adjustment processes, have brought about a shift in the urban labour market, and particularly female participation, which exhibits differences from male participation. On the basis of information from household surveys conducted in 13 countries of the region between 1980 and 1994, this study describes the major developments in labour participation by gender. In the second part of the paper, the author makes an empirical analysis of six assertions —the result of context gaps and time gaps— that continue to figure in the debate on female labour in the region even though the rapid pace of change has transformed them into mere myths.

The study also addresses a number of "areas of confrontation", where the inequality between men and women is starkest: income, access to new technologies and their use, and the increasing insecurity of certain types of work such as domestic service, home work and own-account activities. Lastly, the author summarizes the major issues, makes some methodological recommendations and poses a series of questions as to the significance of these changes in the social, family, political and cultural spheres.

## INTRODUCTION

Social policies are formulated on the basis of the knowledge and hypotheses of real social conditions which are obtained from research. Policy design is tested retrospectively, in real conditions, or rather, policy implementation enables the hypotheses concerning real conditions to be verified, while at the same time it influences and modifies those conditions. These changes must be recorded if it is desired to develop effective and efficient public policies. An up-to-date analysis of the real conditions is therefore of fundamental importance for the formulation of economic and social policies; moreover, public policies must be formulated in the light of the fact that they are to be applied in societies made up of men and women who behave in different ways at different stages of their life-cycle, and must take into account the needs arising from such conditions.

This study gives an ordered compilation of the information on urban female labour in Latin America in the 1990s, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys. It seeks to provide an up-to-date analysis of the female labour market and the main changes observed in it between the 1980s and 1990s, as a contribution to the formulation of more appropriate policies for women.

Part I looks at the evolution of female labour and analyses the effects of the crisis of the early 1980s. Part II reviews the changes that have taken place in the female labour sector and that have shown many of the assertions hitherto in vogue in this area to be pure myths. Part III reviews some of the aspects of female labour that give rise to the greatest concern, namely, income, occupational segmentation, the segregated incorporation of women into jobs involving new technology, the reduction of the stability of female employment, as reflected in the increase in home workers and the self-employed, and the situation of domestic servants, a group that has traditionally enjoyed little stability.

The statistical information presented is based on household surveys carried out in 1980, 1990 and 1994 in 13 countries that account for the bulk of the population of Latin America. These surveys were processed and standardized by the Division of Statistics and Economic Projections of ECLAC. The author was responsible for the design of the special tabulations and their final preparation. As most of the surveys did not have national coverage, in order to make them comparable with each other only the urban areas of the countries were taken into account. For the same reason, the economically active population considered is that consisting of persons of 15 or more years of age.

The analysis of this information suggests various policy lines regarding the labour market, the educational system, the family and society. It is not only a question of improving the situation of working women, but also of achieving more efficient use of female human resources. This aspect is of central importance in a new regional setting in which technical change, innovation and intellectual added value will increasingly shape the labour market, and flexibility to adapt to these new conditions will be the key to really effective participation in development.

## I. CHANGES IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT: THE CRISIS AND ITS EFFECTS

Gender-based relationships are strongly affected by the State and the market, in accordance with the various movements of the existing cultural substrata. These institutions create the material bases that structure people's daily life. In the region, deregulation and the greater role played by the market in resource allocation are having a pronounced effect on the functioning of the labour market and labour relations, as well as on the thrust of employment, wages and social security policies. Here, we shall look at some aspects of the labour market and its effects on women during the period of crisis and structural adjustment.

The main changes due to the crisis and the adjustment policies took place at the household and the production levels and affected men and women differently (Arriagada, 1987). At the production level, there was an increase in the participation of women in the labour market and in the number of hours they devoted to paid work. In spite of the crisis —or, indeed, because of it— more women entered the labour market (with an anti-cyclical form of behaviour). The female participation rate rose and so did female unemployment, especially among younger women. Moreover, as much of the female labour force works in unstructured, low-productivity sectors, women are affected not only by actions aimed specifically at women workers but also by those aimed at the sectors in which they work. In this respect, the reduction in the size of the State meant a decline in public-sector employment for women, so that not only was the existing inequality a cause of the differential effects of the crisis on men and women, but at the same time the most far-reaching consequence of the crisis was the perpetuation of that inequality.

The subsistence needs of the working-class sectors had various effects within the family. The need for the reproduction of the family unit strengthened the interdependence of its members, while the family structure underwent some quite complex changes which do not display any clear trends, since in some cases the family shrank, while in others it expanded with the arrival of "allegados" who contributed to the subsistence of the family group. Observations in various Latin American countries indicate that women increased their participation in the labour force, as did children and young people.

A study on Mexico shows that the restructuring of the Mexican economy after the debt crisis, with the consequent adjustment policies, also forced a restructuring of daily life. Most families survived the crisis by making an enormous effort in which all their members participated, finding new ways to combine work for home consumption and work to earn an income. There was thus an increase in the participation of the family members in work for the market, but at the same time there was an increase in work on reproductive activities, the result being an unequal distribution of responsibilities within the household, where the women had to shoulder most of the burden. The paradoxical aspect of this strategy is that it made possible the continuation of adjustment policies despite the high social costs they involved (Benería, 1992).

Another of the most obvious effects of the crisis was the growing unemployment among the population in general, but especially among women, and above all among young women. Although female unemployment in the region is a structural trend, the effects of the crisis sharply accentuated it. The greater female unemployment in Latin America is due to a number of structural factors, including insufficient economic growth to absorb the increasing labour supply (further accentuated by the crisis); women's difficulty in finding jobs because of the occupational segmentation of the labour market, which limits the range of jobs for which women are eligible; the generalized view of employers that female labour suffers more interruptions because of pregnancy and child-rearing; and the mistaken idea that the contribution made by women is not vitally important in the family income. In 1994, in 12 urban areas of the region, rates of unemployment among young people were almost double the overall unemployment rates, while the rates among young women were higher than those of young men in 10 countries: in Paraguay and Uruguay, female unemployment rates for the 15-24 age group exceeded 30% (ECLAC, 1997).

With regard to the effects of the crisis on unpaid domestic work, studies made in various countries of the region indicate that female work increased in order to make up for the absence or reduction of family income, and to cope with the rise in the prices of foodstuffs and essential goods and the reduction in social services budgets, which was reflected in the deterioration of health, education and housing services. A world study based on information for 17 countries —among them Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Jamaica, Mexico and Peru— shows that the application of structural adjustment policies has caused a marked deterioration in the male/female ratio at all levels of education, but especially in secondary education, and above all among girls from rural and marginal urban families; it also reveals, on the basis of some case studies, that there has been a bigger increase in the incidence of malnutrition among girls than among boys (United Nations, 1989).

An aspect that has received little attention is the shift that has taken place within Latin American societies in the boundaries between the areas of action of the State, society at large and the family as a result of the crisis. For many years, there was a tendency to transfer functions from the private to the public sphere: a good example of this is the care of small children, which has gradually been transferred from mothers to nursery school teachers. With the crisis, however, it became necessary to "privatize" many activities formerly carried out by the public authorities, that is, as a result of the cuts in such areas as the education and health budgets the responsibility for this care was given back to the family and hence to women in their homes. Likewise —to continue with the same example— the decline in family income and the chronic insufficiency of public resources for free preschool care has obliged families, and especially mothers, to look after small children themselves once again or to seek community or individual solutions for the problem of child care. As a result of the shortcomings of State preschool care some interesting initiatives have emerged, which have also had some unexpected side effects: women's need to organize themselves to deal with these problems has meant that they have broken out of their isolation and there is a new-found awareness of their potential, while their work is now more visible. These changes in the borders between the public and private spheres, which vary from one country to another, are a little-explored area of the relations between the sexes. An integrated approach would be needed to gain a clearer view of these movements.



## II. WOMEN IN THE 1990s: MYTH AND FACT

### 1. Background

Along with the great changes that have taken place in the macroeconomic indicators and the impact of the crisis and the adjustment, structural trends have also changed the life of Latin American women: a longer life expectancy, a higher level of education, and the tendency to have fewer children have affected women's participation in the labour force, which has steadily increased and has been reflected in an increase in the number of years of active life of the female population. Thus, between 1970 and 1995 women's life expectancy increased by eight years, the total fertility rate went down from 5.0 to 3.1, and women's economically active life increased by rather more than nine years (CELADE, 1989; 1991; 1993 and 1996). At the same time, many women migrated to the cities in search of paid employment, thus joining an urban population which rose from 58% of the total population in 1970 to 74% in 1995 (CELADE, 1991 and 1996).

Although these data do point to a substantial process of change over the last 20 years, they do not express the full magnitude and nature of the changes to which women have been exposed. Perhaps there are grounds for maintaining —as in the case of Spain (Garrido, 1992)X that there are two different social biographies for the region, covering two very different worlds: that of the population aged over 50, and that of the people who have not yet reached that age. The distance between two generations of women Xmothers and daughtersX is seen to be very great even if only two indicators are considered: level of education and participation in the labour force. The cut-off point between these two worlds would appear to be in the 1970s. Methodologically, in this context the age variable and still more the generational dimension take on enormous importance as explanatory factors. The cut-off point in question raises some uncertainties about labour trends, however, for if the structural trends towards increasing female participation continue, this generational dimension will lose importance.

Among the most evident of the new phenomena in Latin American societies is the growing presence of women in the labour market. This tendency is particularly marked among young women, whose rates of participation (and also of unemployment) are among the highest. The participation of middle-aged women also increased appreciably during the 1980-1994 period. Nevertheless, despite the generalized increase in female participation (except in urban areas of Honduras), and although male participation has gone down or remained unchanged, the gap between the sexes continues to be very considerable. Information from household surveys (see table 1) shows that female activity rates in urban areas in 1994 ranged from 37% in Mexico to 55% in Paraguay, whereas male participation rates ranged from 74% in Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay to 85% in Paraguay.

Table 1  
**LATIN AMERICA: PARTICIPATION RATES BY SEX, 1980, 1990 AND 1994**  
*(Urban population aged 15 and over)*

COUNTRY (Urban areas)	Female EAP			Male EAP		
	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994
Argentina <sup>a</sup>	32.4	38.2	41.2	75.6	75.7	75.9
Bolivia	-	46.6	50.6	-	73.3	74.9
Brazil <sup>b</sup>	37.2	45.1	50.2	81.5	82.5	82.9
Colombia <sup>c</sup>	41.8	45.7	48.3	79.3	79.2	79.3
Costa Rica	33.6	39.1	39.7	77.6	77.6	76.3
Chile	-	34.0	38.1	-	73.2	74.8
Guatemala	-	42.9	-	-	84.4	-
Honduras	-	43.4	42.5	-	80.2	80.0
Mexico	-	35.9	37.3	-	77.3	79.7
Panama	44.5	42.8	46.5	76.2	75.6	78.6
Paraguay <sup>d</sup>	-	49.7	55.0	-	84.2	85.7
Uruguay	37.3	43.8	47.1	74.6	74.7	74.9
Venezuela	31.2	37.5	38.2	78.4	77.9	78.9

**Source:** ECLAC, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Federal capital and conurbation.

<sup>b</sup> Figures are for 1993.

<sup>c</sup> Until 1992 the geographical coverage was extended to nearly the whole urban population.

<sup>d</sup> Asunción and urban areas of the central department.

Information for urban areas shows that the highest rates of female economic activity are found between the ages of 20 and 54. In 1994, in the group of women aged 25 to 34 (the group with the highest proportion of economically active members), participation rates ranged from a low of 48% in Mexico to a high of 74% in Uruguay. Women over 55, and especially women aged 60 to 64 (with a historical trend towards non-participation), and very young women under 20 (who may still be in the educational system and have difficulty in finding jobs) are those who have the lowest rates of participation in the labour market. In other words, rather than trying to establish a direct link between participation and age, a distinction should be made between the activity of two generations of women.

## 2. Myths surrounding female labour

Conventional wisdom and some studies made in other regions or in Latin America during the 1980s have given rise to various assertions which, according to the information collected on urban areas of the region in the 1990s, are now mere myths (that is to say, beliefs which serve as a basis for prejudices although they have no foundation in reality). These myths have arisen as the result of two gaps: a time gap between the knowledge of a fact and the occurrence of changes in that fact, and a context gap due to the application to one context of an empirical observation made in another. Some of these myths are examined below.

### *Myth No. 1. Female participation is a "U"-shaped curve*

A very common belief —based on the experience of the developed world— is that female participation is a "U"-shaped curve, with two points when it is at its maximum: before the birth of the first child, and after the youngest child starts school.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of female participation by age groups which makes it possible to gain an idea, through the age cohorts, of the labour participation trends among different groups of women shows that in 1994, in 13 urban areas of Latin America, female participation has risen steadily in the 15-54 age group but has fallen sharply among older women. This indicates that urban women who enter the labour market do not withdraw from it when they have children, but remain economically active throughout the period of greatest reproductive work. This tendency became more marked between the 1980s and the 1990s (see table 2), with the biggest increases in female participation taking place in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups.

A study carried out in Argentina tends to confirm this trend, since it shows greater growth in the labour participation of married women than in that of single women (Montoya, 1993). The same phenomenon is to be seen in Mexico where fertility surveys show that labour-force participation by women aged 20 to 49, in legal or consensual unions, increased by 62% between 1976 and 1987 (García and Oliveira, 1993). In Uruguay, the category of women which most increased its share was that of women in legal or consensual unions, followed by divorcees, separated women and widows, with single women coming in last place (Filgueira, 1992). These changes also entail substantial modifications in the organization of the daily life of households and in the amount of work needed inside and outside the home.

### *Myth No. 2. Female workers are a secondary labour force*

According to another very widespread myth, female workers are a "secondary" labour force, subject to the cyclical fluctuations of the labour market, to which they only resort at times of crisis, in order to supplement the family budget.

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<sup>1</sup> See in this connection the stylized curves for the industrialized countries and for Latin America prepared by Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1992, p. 17).

Table 2  
**LATIN AMERICA: RATES OF FEMALE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN  
 SELECTED AGE GROUPS, 1980, 1990 AND 1994**  
*(Urban population aged 15 and over)*

COUNTRY (Urban areas)	Age 15-24			Age 25-34			Age 35-44		
	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994
Argentina <sup>a</sup>	44.9	41.1	43.1	45.4	52.5	58.7	42.7	52.9	55.9
Bolivia	...	33.8	37.0	...	56.7	61.9	...	62.0	69.1
Brazil <sup>b</sup>	42.9	48.1	50.9	43.9	55.7	60.4	42.3	55.3	62.5
Colombia <sup>c</sup>	42.4	41.2	43.1	52.1	61.2	64.9	49.2	56.8	61.4
Costa Rica	33.2	39.2	35.4	45.6	52.6	54.0	44.4	51.8	54.0
Chile	...	26.4	31.6	...	46.1	50.1	...	46.8	51.2
Guatemala	...	42.1	...	...	50.1	...	...	50.0	...
Honduras	...	34.5	35.3	...	53.8	54.3	...	57.2	51.4
Mexico	...	36.4	32.5	...	44.6	48.1	...	42.3	47.4
Panama	40.0	35.5	39.1	63.3	58.7	60.5	58.3	60.6	64.0
Paraguay <sup>d</sup>	...	50.6	55.4	...	62.8	65.9	...	61.4	65.2
Uruguay	43.2	46.5	52.1	56.6	69.3	74.0	54.5	65.7	72.8
Venezuela	25.7	24.8	25.8	42.6	50.8	52.3	42.0	53.7	54.9

**Source:** ECLAC, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Federal capital and conurbation.

<sup>b</sup> Figures are for 1993.

<sup>c</sup> Until 1992, the survey covered around half the country's urban population. In 1993 the geographical coverage was extended to nearly the whole urban population.

<sup>d</sup> Asunción and urban areas of the central department.

Since the 1980s, the percentage of households headed by women who are the sole breadwinner has reached very substantial levels varying between a quarter and a third of all households.<sup>2</sup> There are also households —not detected in population censuses or household surveys because of the definition of “head of

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<sup>2</sup> In 1980, the percentages of households headed by women were as follows: Barbados 44%, Chile 22%, Cuba 26%, Dominica 38%, El Salvador 22%, Grenada 45%, Guadeloupe 34%, Guyana 24%, Honduras 22%, Jamaica 34%, Martinique 35%, Netherlands Antilles 30%, Panama 22%, Peru 23%, Saint Kitts and Nevis 46%, Saint Lucia 39%, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines 42%, Trinidad and Tobago 25%, Uruguay 21% and Venezuela 22% (United Nations, 1991). The information from the 1994 household surveys gave the following values for urban areas: Argentina 24%, Bolivia 18%, Brazil 22%, Chile 22%, Colombia 24%, Costa Rica 24%, Honduras 25%, Mexico 17%, Panama 25%, Paraguay 25%, Uruguay 27% and Venezuela 25% (ECLAC, 1997).

household" — used where the woman's contribution is equal to or greater than the man's. An in-depth study of women's role in sustaining the household, carried out in the metropolitan Buenos Aires area, found that the proportion of households where a woman was the main breadwinner had risen from 19% in 1980 to 25% in 1989, and to 27% —i.e., 1 in 3.7 households— in 1992 (Geldstein and Delpino, 1994).

Moreover, in the countries where the stabilization process is beginning to take hold more strongly and employment conditions have improved for men, there is no evidence of any withdrawal by women from the labour market, as would occur if women really were a secondary labour force.

### *Myth No. 3. Women earn less because they have a lower level of education*

There is a widespread belief that women earn less than men because they have a lower level of education or less experience. Some qualitative studies analysing career paths show that men and women with similar levels of qualification start off at similar income levels, but as their careers progress their paths tend to diverge, as men quickly rise to positions commanding greater income, prestige and power, while women remain at the levels where they started. Recent studies in Latin America show that even for the same number of hours worked and the same level of education and training, there are very substantial differences of income between men and women for which there is no valid explanation other than gender-based discrimination (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos, 1992).

Statistical data show that, on average, women in the labour market have a higher level of education than men. Both in the 1980s and now, women's wages are markedly lower than those of men regardless of level of education. Between 1980 and 1994 the income gap between men and women tended to narrow in five countries, while it widened in one (Costa Rica); however, between 1990 and 1994 the gap widened in half the countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela). If the educational variable is introduced the situation changes. At the lowest level of education (less than three years' schooling) the gap narrowed in 10 out of 12 cases, but at the highest level of education (over 13 years) the gap between women's and men's wages widened again in urban areas of Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela. Thus, when the data for 1980 and 1994 are compared, the biggest income difference corresponds to the highest levels of education (see table 3).<sup>3</sup>

It is a surprising fact that even when women with high levels of education earn wages far below those of men, female participation in the labour force still remains almost the same as that of men for the highest educational level (over 13 years). This finding casts doubt on the part neoclassical cost-benefit analyses play in determining women's "option" to work. It would be very interesting, in this respect, to study women's labour behaviour by socio-economic groups and household characteristics, as it is only in the highest income groups that women can view work as an option. Perhaps a more detailed analysis should be made of the segregation of the labour market, which restricts women to a limited range of jobs: a situation which some authors interpret as a "preference" on women's part for certain types of work.

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<sup>3</sup> See also the section on income.

Table 3  
**LATIN AMERICA: INCOME DIFFERENCES<sup>a</sup> BY SEX, FOR SELECTED LEVELS OF  
 EDUCATION, 1980, 1990 y 1994**  
*(Urban population aged 15 and over)*

COUNTRY	TOTAL			0-3 years of schooling			13 + years of schooling		
	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994
(Urban areas)									
Argentina <sup>b</sup>	63.5	68.8	70.5	...	...	66.6	...	...	61.5
Bolivia	...	57.4	54.4	...	58.4	59.7	...	46.0	54.1
Brazil <sup>c</sup>	46.3	56.0	55.8	41.0	45.8	47.9	38.8	50.7	45.9
Colombia <sup>d</sup>	56.1	66.7	68.1	51.0	58.8	59.1	55.0	60.4	56.7
Costa Rica	80.6	71.0	69.2	48.2	51.3	61.1	86.4	64.2	69.9
Chile	...	59.2	66.8	...	67.7	...	...	41.9	52.8
Guatemala	...	65.8	...	...	45.4	...	...	64.2	...
Honduras	...	57.9	62.7	...	49.9	59.4	...	51.5	56.0
Mexico <sup>e</sup>	...	68.2	55.5	...	63.8	54.3	...	61.2	48.1
Panama	...	77.0	73.1	...	46.1	58.5	...	68.4	61.1
Paraguay <sup>f</sup>	...	56.7	59.9	...	64.0	63.4	...	47.1	52.1
Uruguay	53.9	44.3	60.6	46.6	50.1	61.4	44.0	37.3	50.0
Venezuela	67.8	72.7	69.4	56.3	64.0	63.0	71.1	68.0	66.0

**Source:** ECLAC, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Average female income as a percentage of average male income.

<sup>b</sup> Federal capital and conurbation "0 a 3 years schooling" refers to incomplete primary schooling (0-6 years) and "13 + years of schooling" refers to higher education (whether completed or not).

<sup>c</sup> Figures are for 1993.

<sup>d</sup> Until 1992, the survey covered around half the country's urban population. In 1993 the geographical coverage was extended to nearly the whole urban population.

<sup>e</sup> "0-3 years of schooling" refers to uncompleted primary schooling (0-5 years) and "13 + years of schooling" refers to higher education (whether completed or not).

<sup>f</sup> Asunción and urban areas of the central department.

*Myth No. 4. Most Latin American women are housewives with a large number of children*

Among the stereotypes of the region is the myth that Latin American women are mostly housewives and, as they have a large number of children to look after, they cannot work outside the home. The information from the household surveys of

the 1990s, however, gives quite a different picture. First of all, the proportion of women in 12 cities and urban areas of the region who describe themselves as housewives varies widely, ranging in 1994 from 17% of economically active women in Montevideo to 46% in Mexico and Venezuela.<sup>4</sup> Only from the age of 45 onwards do the majority of women describe themselves as housewives. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the fertility rate (for both urban and rural areas) has gone down in the region, and the estimated fertility rate for the five-year period 1990-1995 is 3.1 (CELADE, 1993). The decline in urban fertility will be greater, as this estimate covers the countries of the region as a whole and hence also covers rural areas, where fertility rates are much higher.

*Myth No. 5. Latin American working women have domestic servants*

A myth which is complementary to the preceding one is that the growing female participation in the labour force has been made possible by the existence of domestic servants. Although it is true that, compared with developed regions, the proportion of Latin American women are domestic servants is much higher —between one-tenth and a quarter of total female employment, depending on the country<sup>5</sup>— the proportion of working women is much greater still. Furthermore, many domestic servants are employed by housewives who do not work outside the home. Finally, the proportion of women working as domestic servants is going down, while women's participation in the labour market is increasing, especially in the case of married women with children. Thus, although there is indeed a certain proportion of households where the woman works outside the home but has a domestic servant or servants to look after the family, there are more and more women who are not in this position and thus have to work a double shift. This has important consequences which should be taken into account in the design of policies on labour and on families.

*Myth No. 6. Companies hire fewer women because their labour costs are higher*

One of the arguments most frequently put forward to justify not hiring female labour is that it costs more to hire women than to hire men because of the social security and welfare expenditure associated with maternity. A case study conducted recently in Chile (Todaro and Lerda, 1996) shows that the overall cost of female labour is lower than that of male labour. In five companies studied in depth, the ratio of female costs to male costs ranged between 40.4% and 86.5%. In none of these companies were female labour costs found to be equal to male costs, i.e., with a ratio of 100%. Wage costs were consistently lower for women, varying from 40.5% to 81.9% in the five companies studied, showing how the practice of paying women less than men persists in the labour market. Generally speaking, women's earnings are on average 78% of men's in Chile. Non-wage costs for women were greater than 100% in only one company, 100% in another and 73.5% and 39.4% in

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<sup>4</sup> The values for the urban areas are as follows: Argentina 32%, Bolivia 27%, Chile 40%, Colombia 37%, Costa Rica 40%, Honduras 41%, Mexico 46%, Panama 35%, Paraguay 30%, Uruguay 17% and Venezuela 46%.

<sup>5</sup> See the section on domestic servants.

another two (no data was available for the fifth company).

In short, relative labour costs by sex are not a decisive factor in the presence or absence of female labour in the different occupational categories, since, *inter alia*, women's earnings are much lower than men's. More likely explanations for such discrimination against women's labour are the segregation of work in the home and the labour market, and the gender-based allocation of tasks and occupations.

Statistical information for the 1990s shows that most Latin American women, and especially those aged 20 to 45, participate in the labour market, and that they have high levels of education but are paid much less than men at all educational levels. It also shows that the speed with which the female labour market is changing is sweeping away some of the myths regarding working women.

There are still many other similar beliefs, however, which the information from household surveys cannot prove or disprove, but which it would be interesting to investigate by other means in order to see whether they are true or not: for example, the belief that absenteeism is higher among women workers because they need to look after their children, or that women work fewer hours than men. The rapidity with which female workers' situation is changing makes it more and more necessary to verify this and many other assertions empirically.

Most of the quantitative studies of women's labour participation have highlighted the effects that such participation has on women's own lives, but little research has been done on the shifts in emphasis and the changes women bring to the world of work. It has been suggested that women's abrupt transition from the home to the outside world means switching from a family-oriented, domestic outlook to a new commercial rationale. The most interesting point, however, is that when women enter the world of work they take with them some of the standards they apply in the private sphere, along with, for example, affective values, which influence the degree of satisfaction they derive from the treatment and recognition they are accorded. This attitude that women have towards their work, and their conscious or unconscious attempts to modify some of its rules by bringing in concepts from their private sphere, implies a criticism of the separation between life and work which offers considerable political potential for change (Aranda, 1991; Darcy de Oliveira, 1989). This general assessment must be tested, of course, in the light of the different positions that women occupy in the world of work (the degree of power they attain), the type of jobs they do (more or less traditionally female, more or less modern) and the way they choose to work. In this last respect, a more detailed analysis of own-account work—which has increased in recent years—would make it possible to confirm whether they choose this kind of work because of the more flexible working hours it offers or because it is the option most similar to the kind of work women do as housewives and thus facilitates their transition from the home to paid work.

There are indications, from qualitative studies carried out in companies, that when women start work in male workplaces a change takes place in the workers' language, even though, in the modernization process, the "culture" of the firm may be maintained, and the only things that change are the ways in which discrimination against women is reproduced. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the firms' practices of selecting, hiring, evaluating and promoting staff (Hala and Todaro, 1992). The male stamp is so strong that if a woman who joins the firm wants to be listened to and understood, she has to make a special effort to express herself in language that fits in with the model prevailing in that social environment, rather than according to her own way of thinking and



feeling. Modern firms, however, are now considering encouraging and re-evaluating such "feminine" attributes as negotiating skill, better personal relations, greater commitment and task fulfilment, which could improve company efficiency, although in other contexts these same attributes have been used to justify the exclusion of women from certain posts.

Through in-depth studies it may be possible to find out if the concentration of women in "female" sectors is determined only by the demand for female labour or if, on the contrary, part of this concentration represents a choice by women themselves because of the obstacles they face in seeking to enter jobs that are not seen as "women's work". Among these obstacles are firms' recruitment practices, their rank and salary structures, the way they evaluate job performance, and the access they provide to training and upgrading (Rico, 1994). In order to break with sex-based occupational segregation and move towards unbiased labour participation it is necessary above all to clearly identify the obstacles women face in their working life, but also to identify elements that favour greater female participation. Increased female participation has been favoured by the increase in the number of jobs in the tertiary sector, where women have traditionally worked. It remains to be seen if the growing demand for versatile human resources may become a positive factor for well-educated women entering the labour market

### III. CRITICAL ASPECTS: INCOME, OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION, NEW TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE INCREASING LACK OF SECURITY OF SOME FEMALE JOBS

#### 1. Income

The greatest inequalities between men and women in the labour market are in income. The percentage of the male-female income differential that is attributable to sex discrimination varies, depending on the country, from 10% to 85%, and it tends to be greater than 50% in the developing countries (González, 1992). Some studies suggest that occupational segregation and the resulting income differentials are much more extreme in Latin America and the Caribbean than in developed countries (Barbezat, 1993). Estimates of the effects that occupational segregation has on women's income likewise vary greatly. With growing female participation in the labour force, both the income disparities and the percentage of them due to discrimination tend to decrease over time. This latter trend, which it has only been possible to measure in the developed countries, is linked with government policy initiatives or trade union efforts through collective bargaining, but these strategies have been less successful in countries with highly decentralized labour markets, such as the United States.

In the region, the income differentials between men and women confirm the existence of wage discrimination against women. In no country do men and women with the same level of education receive identical wages. The wages of young or adult women are usually less than those of men at all levels of education, and discrimination can be found in all occupational groups. The relative disadvantage in terms of hourly pay between adult women and men is equivalent to some four years' formal education (ECLAC, 1993). If we look at what happened in the 1980s and 1990s, the statistical data show that in the five countries for which information is available, the wage differential between men and women with the lowest levels of education improved between 1980 and 1995, but at the higher levels the disparity increased in two cases and went down in three (see table 3). One possible explanation of the smaller wage differential between men and women at the lowest educational levels is that the wages received by women with this level of education are so low that it is impossible to reduce them further.

More precise information on Costa Rica shows that the wage differential widened during the crisis and stabilization period (1980-1983) but narrowed somewhat with the recovery (1983-1986). The increase in the disparity between male and female wages during the recession (1980-1982) was due mainly to the increase in the labour participation of less educated women who entered the labour market in response to the drop in the real income of heads of families. These women mainly entered sectors of the economy which paid the lowest wages (Gindling, 1992).

A World Bank study concludes, on the basis of information on 15 countries of the region for the period from 1950 to 1985, that only 20% of the differences in men's and women's income can be explained by differences in their human capital: the rest is due to factors of discrimination. After correcting this estimate to take account of women's own choices with regard to the labour market (their work options), it is estimated that a further 20% is due to women's smaller capacity to generate

income, so that finally the unexplained portion of the income disparity between men and women amounts to 60%: much more than the level found in more advanced countries (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos, 1992). This unexplained 60% reflects mainly cultural considerations that segregate the labour market and establish a limited number of jobs deemed suitable for women.

The information available for 1994 on 12 urban areas of the region shows that the average income of women is between 54% and 73% that of men. This disparity also applies to heads of household: the average income of female heads of household is between 53% and 76% that of their male counterparts (see table 4). This points to a need for special social and employment policies for such women, who are responsible for the financial maintenance of the household and for child care, particularly in view of the fact that indigent households include a higher proportion of female-headed households (Arriagada, 1997).

Table 4  
**LATIN AMERICA: DIFFERENCES IN AVERAGE INCOME BY SEX<sup>a</sup> AND  
HOUSEHOLD STATUS, 1980, 1990 AND 1994**  
*(Urban population aged 15 and over)*

COUNTRY (Urban areas)	Women/men			Heads of household		
	1980	1990	1994	1980	1990	1994
Argentina <sup>b</sup>	63.5	68.8	70.5	70.5	69.6	76.6
Bolivia	-	57.4	54.4	-	56.0	60.9
Brazil <sup>c</sup>	46.3	56.0	55.8	40.2	53.2	57.0
Colombia <sup>d</sup>	56.1	66.7	68.1	59.2	62.1	58.8
Costa Rica	80.6	71.0	69.2	63.3	64.7	59.0
Chile	-	59.2	66.8	-	56.4	63.6
Guatemala	-	65.8	-	-	62.6	-
Honduras	-	57.9	62.7	-	51.3	53.9
Mexico	-	68.2	55.5	-	65.9	57.8
Panama	-	77.0	73.1	-	64.2	64.4
Paraguay <sup>e</sup>	-	56.7	59.9	-	54.7	57.5
Uruguay	53.9	44.3	60.6	52.5	45.0	59.5
Venezuela	67.8	72.7	69.4	59.2	65.6	60.3

**Source:** ECLAC, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Average female income as a percentage of average male income for all employed persons and those who are also heads of households.

<sup>b</sup> Federal capital and conurbation.

<sup>c</sup> Figures are for 1993.

<sup>d</sup> Until 1992, the survey covered around half the country's urban population. In 1993 the geographical coverage was extended to nearly the whole urban population.

<sup>e</sup> Asunción and urban areas of the central department.

## 2. Occupational segregation

Sex-based occupational segregation is a common denominator of the labour markets of both industrialized and developing countries, and it has persisted through the decades and across international frontiers. In a number of countries the segregation indices rose in the 1980s, and in some cases there was even resegregation of occupations, with marked vertical segregation not only within occupations but also within firms (Barbezat, 1993).

In the region, sex-based occupational segregation in the labour market is reflected in the concentration of women in a small number of jobs culturally defined as suitable for women (horizontal segregation). On top of this, there is vertical segregation, since women are concentrated in the lowest ranks of each occupation, meaning that their jobs are the worst-paid and the most unstable (Abramo, 1993). A study made in Peru revealed that the strict division of labour into male and female jobs was in fact an organizational principle of each industry; moreover, the assignment of jobs varied greatly from firm to firm (Guzmán and Portocarrero, 1992).

The information available on 13 urban areas of the region reflects a process of growing tertiarization, since women continue to be concentrated mainly in the services sector. Between 1980 and 1995 jobs in social, personal and community services alone absorbed between 20% and 46% of the female labour force (see table 5). The occupations with the highest concentrations of women are professional and technical posts, sales and domestic service. The information for 1994 also shows that a higher proportion of women than of men work as professionals and technicians, while a higher proportion of men are managers and manual workers. Among workers in the services sector, there are two or three times as many women as men, depending on the country. In Venezuela, one out of every four employed women is a professional or technician (see table 5).

It has been noted that in Venezuela the rapid growth in the number of workers with a university education has not been matched by a similar increase in the demand for such workers, thus leading to greater unemployment, a deterioration in real wages, greater internal differentiation, and growing frustration among professionals. Female university professionals have suffered most from this situation, as they tried to enter a market in which they had not been able to consolidate their position earlier when it was expanding slowly. Women gained access to education in similar numbers to men, but the credentials they obtained were not enough to ensure them jobs (Bonilla, 1992).

Generally speaking, women work in a smaller number of occupations than men. Data from around 1992 shows that in six out of the 12 countries studied nearly half the urban women worked in five occupational groups out of the existing total of between 72 and 113 trades and professions (ECLAC, 1995). A study made in Chile shows that women are more concentrated in certain types of jobs and certain economic sectors than men. Thus in 1992, for all occupations at the three-digit level, there was an above-average proportion of women in 37 occupations, while the proportion of men was above average in 116, which means that women's choice of jobs is far more limited (Arriagada, 1995). A single occupational category (personal services) absorbs over 70% of all the women working in the financial sector, even though for all sectors taken together it accounts for only 31.3% of the female working population (Hola and Todaro, 1992). When an index of occupational segregation by

sex was constructed for the manufacturing, commerce and services sectors in Mexico, it was found that the greatest degree of segregation was in manufacturing followed by services and finally commerce

Table 5  
**LATIN AMERICA: DISTRIBUTION OF ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION <sup>a</sup>**  
**AMONG SELECTED TYPES OF OCCUPATIONS, 1994**

COUNTRY (Urban areas)	Professionals and technicians		Administrators and managers		Commercial sector workers		Service sector workers		Skilled/unskilled manual workers	
	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)
Argentina <sup>b</sup>	...	...	2.8	1.7	...	...	16.8	46.3	36.4	9.6
Bolivia <sup>c</sup>	14.4	14.3	6.7	2.5	...	...	15.0	44.8	58.2	31.3
Brazil <sup>d</sup>	5.9	14.4	...	...	13.2	14.6	2.6	26.9	29.8	11.4
Colombia <sup>e</sup>	9.9	13.1	2.2	1.7	20.0	21.0	9.9	30.6	45.8	16.4
Costa Rica	13.7	20.3	6.4	3.8	14.4	15.8	9.3	24.7	32.2	15.4
Chile <sup>f</sup>	14.4	20.3	6.6	5.6	...	...	11.1	22.9	56.7	35.3
Honduras	10.5	14.4	5.1	3.5	12.9	22.7	7.4	24.6	38.6	24.8
Mexico	12.6	18.7	3.9	1.9	16.1	24.2	11.0	20.3	36.4	14.2
Panama	11.8	18.4	6.5	5.3	10.8	12.5	13.4	29.0	31.0	7.3
Paraguay	8.7	12.8	7.3	3.4	17.8	27.4	7.3	32.3	37.2	11.0
Uruguay	7.3	17.5	5.0	2.6	13.1	15.8	9.2	30.6	40.6	13.0
Venezuela	9.6	23.5	4.1	2.1	...	...	10.0	24.9	17.2	3.6

**Source:** ECLAC, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of all employed persons of each sex in each category. <sup>b</sup> It is not possible to distinguish between professionals and technicians, nor between administrative staff and other managerial positions (only "management" occupations are listed); services include commerce and transport. <sup>c</sup> Services include commerce, transport and other occupations. Domestic service is included under "manual workers". <sup>d</sup> Figures are for 1993. <sup>e</sup> Transport service workers are included under "manual workers". <sup>f</sup> "Manual workers" include unskilled services.

(Rendón, 1993). In Greater Santiago (Chile), it has been confirmed that in the manufacturing sector women are segregated from three angles: (i) by size of firm: as the size of the firm increases women's participation decreases; (ii) by industrial branch: women are concentrated in the textile, clothing and leather, and foodstuffs, beverages and tobacco industries; and (iii) by occupational category: women are concentrated in the areas of administration, sales and services (Abramo, 1993).

### 3. The new technologies

Various studies have found that no systematic effects of the new technologies are to be observed as regards the definition of jobs and the divisions between them, since these technologies have given rise to movements of male and female workers both into and out of the labour market and between different types of jobs. Their short- and long-term effects therefore need to be analysed.

The analyses carried out in some countries of the region show that there has been an increase in women's participation in banks, insurance and financial establishments, in which substantial technological changes have taken place. This process of incorporation of women into "modern" high-technology occupations has not meant any decrease in occupational segmentation, however, for it would appear that the modern jobs into which women move are promptly redefined as "women's jobs", and although they involve the use of complex technology the wages paid to women are lower than those earned by men in the same branches. It is therefore necessary to make an in-depth study of the changes due to the incorporation of new technologies into production processes and the trends towards greater or lesser occupational segregation brought about by such incorporation.

In financial establishments, banks and insurance companies, modernization has gathered pace in recent years. In Brazil, a study of technological change and its effects on the division of labour by sex reveals various ways in which female qualifications are not properly recognized in the microelectronics sector. They include the payment to women of wages far below those warranted by their educational level; failure to recognize the skills acquired by female workers in the social and domestic spheres; failure to give proper credit to the greater discipline and obedience of women; and lastly, failure to acknowledge the experience acquired in previous jobs. Women are always recruited at a lower occupational level (Hirata, 1986; Hirata and Humphrey, 1986).

A study carried out in Chile shows that female employment has increased considerably in the financial sector. In 1990 the proportion of women compared with men in this sector (33%) was higher than the average for all sectors taken together (31%), but men nevertheless monopolized the posts of managers and directors to an even greater extent than in the economy as a whole (Hola and Todaro, 1992).

A study of the Brazilian printing industry reveals that the labour force associated with the new technologies is younger and better educated than the employees of the industry as a whole, but here too there is a marked difference between the sexes. Thus, the average income of scanner operators (who have a lower level of education and are mostly men) is equivalent to 14.1 minimum wages; for photocomposition operators (who have a higher level of education and include a substantial number of women) it is 5.22 minimum wages, and for keyboard operators (who have the highest level of education and are largely women) it is 4.7 minimum wages (Rangel de Paiva, 1993).

#### 4. The increasing lack of security in women's jobs

During the crisis of the early 1980s the growth of the informal sector was the main variable in the adjustment of the Latin American labour market. The increase in unemployment and informal sector activities was accompanied by sharp drops in labour income and rapidly growing job insecurity; temporary and part-time work increased, and at the same time its quality went down. In 1989 over 50% of non-agricultural employment corresponded to micro-enterprises or informal activities (compared with 38% in 1980), to say nothing of insecure work (Garcia, 1991). On the basis of data for 1994, the population employed in low-productivity sectors can be estimated at around 42% of the total employed population; this proportion has increased since 1990 in five of the region's biggest countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela) as a result of the increase in unskilled own-account workers and micro-enterprise employees (ECLAC, 1997).

One of the trends in the region which has already been referred to is the increase in non-wage-earning work. The crisis and the new pattern of restructuring of production has led to an increase in jobs—a great many of them done by women—which may be defined as insecure because of their discontinuity in time and the lack of regulation in terms of labour laws (failure to provide contracts), wages (failure to comply with the minimum wage), working hours, social security, and health protection. Among these jobs are traditionally insecure occupations such as domestic service, but they also include new forms of home work, own-account work and work in micro-enterprises, some of which are virtually clandestine activities. We thus see how three factors—the crisis, which caused medium-sized and large firms to reorganize their activities and reduce the number of their workers; the restructuring process, which led to the replacement of permanent staff with subcontracted small enterprises; and the various survival strategies of the sectors most affected by the crisis—all converged to foster the emergence of small production units. In view of the growing heterogeneity of production units, their various degrees of lack of security need to be investigated in greater depth. At any rate, there is widespread deregulation of labour in Latin America and an erosion of the ground won by workers in the past.

In measuring women's participation in the informal, insecure sector, the problems generally encountered in measuring female labour are greatly aggravated. Many of the activities carried out by women which could be classified under this sector are not recorded in any way, as they are considered a normal part of women's domestic duties. Nevertheless, it can be confidently stated that the poorest working women are in the urban informal sector, and if those employed in domestic service are added to them, then women's share in total employment in the sector exceeds 70% in most cases. In 12 urban areas of Latin America, according to data from household surveys, women make up between 35% (Panama) and 74% (Bolivia) of the informal sector (ECLAC, 1997).

The characteristic difficulties of measuring informal activities are compounded by the wide variety of definitions and indicators used in such measurement, which partly explains the differences in the estimated size of the informal sector within a single country or between countries. The visibility or invisibility of this type of work is a very important feature, since the labour activities of a substantial proportion of women are not registered. A study of the informal sector made in Guatemala City shows that in this sector there is a greater relative presence of women, old people (it is seen as a suitable way of prolonging a person's working



life), migrants, indigenous people, and above all people with low levels of education (Pérez Sáinz, 1992).

We shall now take a brief look at the situation of female workers in some types of new and traditional occupations where there is a high proportion of women. The main feature of these occupations is their insecure, precarious nature. They comprise domestic servants (on whom most information is available), home workers, and self-employed women (on whom there is less information, and such information as is available is more patchy). This list is not exclusive, since broadly speaking all these workers, with the exception of domestic servants, can be included in the informal sector. In fact not all belong to it, as in the case of some own-account or home workers, either because of the level of wages or because of the specialized or skilled nature of the work.

#### **a) Domestic servants**

According to the United Nations, if housework was posted on national accounts it would make up as much as 40% of the gross national product of the industrialized countries. In spite of the great technological advances made in order to lighten this work, women in industrial countries still work an average of 56 hours per week in the home (United Nations, 1991).

With regard to paid housework, or domestic service, and especially that carried out on a live-in basis, the following characteristics have been identified: workplace identical with dwelling, in the case of live-in maids; labour relations which are close to servitude and in which labour relations proper are mingled with affective and personal elements; and elasticity of supply in the case of live-out maids (ECLAC, 1990). Domestic service is a dead-end job, since a rise in status can only take place by changing jobs or, in a few cases, by changing from live-in to live-out status. Because of the solitary nature of this work, domestic servants are out of the circuit where other employment opportunities may be found (Montero, 1992).

Up to the 1980s, domestic service was one of the occupations that absorbed most female labour, but in 1995 women working as paid domestic servants in the urban areas of 13 countries of the region represented between 9% (Venezuela) and 24% (Paraguay) of total female employment. Among the countries where information is available for 1980 and 1995, domestic service has tended to decline as a women's occupation in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, while it has increased slightly in Argentina, Mexico and Panama (ECLAC, 1997). The proportion of women in domestic service is less in Venezuela than in the other countries. This tendency towards the decline of paid domestic work in general terms and as a female occupation has been noted in several studies, although it has been suggested that the impact of the crisis and of the adjustment programmes may have tended to reverse it.

Although there may be some under-recording of the number of domestic servants, as this is a job which is looked down on and is of low status, the figures indicate that it is still very important for women as a way into the labour market.

According to some special tabulations of household surveys for 1994, most domestic servants are young, single, have a low level of education, and work on a live-in basis. There is a tendency, however, towards a move to live-out employment, especially in the countries with a higher level of development. At the same time, there are big differences depending on the country in question and the type of work chosen: live-in or live-out. The vast majority of live-in maids are around 30 and single,

have an average of four to seven years of schooling, and earn between 24% (Panama) and 61% (Uruguay) of the average wage. Live-out maids have a similar level of education, earn less (between 22% (Honduras) and 47% (Argentina) of the average wage), are older, and are mostly married or in consensual unions (see table 6).

One of the most serious problems faced by domestic servants is the isolation in which they work, which makes it difficult for them to organize and engage in a joint struggle to improve their labour conditions. They also suffer from the fact that they are not covered by the regular labour laws, on the grounds that they do not share a common workplace, do not produce tangible goods, and receive part of their wages in the form of board and lodging. In countries (such as Peru) where legislation has been passed ensuring them eight hours' rest, this has had the opposite effect to that desired, since employers have interpreted it as a licence to demand 16 hours' work per day (Chaney and García Castro, 1993). Nevertheless, a substantial change is taking place, since domestic servants have managed to organize themselves into a regional confederation covering 11 countries (the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Employees). Although this enormous organizational effort does not include all those working in the sector, it nevertheless represents an important new awareness of their position as workers.

#### **b) Home workers**

The existence of home workers stems from the quest for cheaper production arrangements, especially in the case of labour-intensive tasks. Home work helps to increase the flexibility of the labour supply to meet a demand which is not subject to regulations on working hours or time worked (Benería and Roldán, 1992). This work does not involve much use of tools or machines, but instead makes intensive use of labour; it requires very little capital investment and can easily be carried out at home. It generally represents a phase or step in the production process involving simple, repetitive, monotonous tasks. The increased geographical flexibility made possible by the adoption of new technologies offers potential for reorganization which can have a considerable impact on women's labour participation.

Home work forms part of a modern flexible production strategy which can permit greater accumulation for capital and an income generation strategy for workers (Benería and Roldán, 1992). It is a possible alternative to traditional forms of work for people who have family responsibilities (as is the case of most of the women who work in this way), suffer from some physical disability, or simply need greater independence. When the unemployment rate rises, it is also a way in which those who cannot get a steady job can obtain some income. Women who work at home represent the cheapest form of labour, and at times of crisis and adjustment this also makes it possible to solve the dilemma of increasing the family income while doing more housework. The activities in which home work is mostly concentrated are of a traditional nature: clothing, textiles, leather, footwear, tobacco products, etc.

Table 6  
**LATIN AMERICA: CHARACTERISTICS OF DOMESTIC SERVANTS, 1994**  
*(Urban population aged 15 or over)*

Characteristics	Argen- tina	Boli- via	Brazil <sup>a</sup>	Colom- bia	Cost a Rica	Chile	Hondu- ras	Mexico <sup>b</sup>	Panam a	Para- guay	Uru- guay	Vene- zuela
Percentages of all employed women	<b>12.3</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>12.7</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>24.3</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>9.4</b>
Live-in									37.0	50.8	7.5	35.3
Average age	31.5	23.3	26.3	26.4	33.2	34.6	23.5	...	26.4	24.2	36.6	27.3
Aged 15-19	73.6	83.7	73.1	74.3	44.4	41.0	81.0	...	73.3	79.6	51.3	71.6
Aged 45+	19.6	4.0	9.7	9.8	9.5	24.9	5.7	...	7.2	6.3	39.6	9.4
No education	...	6.7	17.5	6.0	5.8	2.4	9.7	...	1.3	2.6	2.9	6.5
1-6 years' schooling	...	58.4	65.2	71.3	86.4	38.4	78.9	...	52.0	67.9	58.4	68.2
Average years of schooling	...	5.6	3.9	5.1	5.0	7.6	4.8	...	7.4	6.3	6.5	5.8
Difference in income <sup>c</sup>	51.2	27.5	25.0	53.8	42.1	46.8	26.1	...	23.5	36.8	61.2	38.5
Live-out	<b>93.6</b>	<b>39.8</b>	<b>85.0</b>	<b>42.1</b>	<b>88.1</b>	<b>69.1</b>	<b>58.4</b>	<b>68.7</b>	<b>63.0</b>	<b>49.2</b>	<b>92.5</b>	<b>64.7</b>
Average age	38.4	29.7	32.4	34.2	34.9	39.6	31.7	...	34.3	30.6	39.0	36.7
Age 15-29	26.6	58.2	46.2	40.2	37.0	23.9	52.9	...	41.0	53.2	30.4	33.8
Aged 45+	33.3	14.2	17.9	21.5	23.9	35.6	19.8	...	24.0	14.9	37.1	26.7
No education	...	4.0	17.2	6.6	4.8	4.0	18.3	...	1.6	1.9	2.1	17.4
1-6 years' schooling	...	52.1	66.8	73.1	70.7	38.1	72.1	...	49.2	69.3	59.4	59.8
Average years of schooling	...	6.4	3.8	4.8	5.6	7.4	4.3	...	7.2	5.9	6.6	5.0
Difference in income <sup>c</sup>	46.5	27.5	25.0	30.8	26.3	29.0	21.7	...	23.5	28.9	32.7	41.0

**Source:** ECLAC, *Social panorama of Latin America. 1996 Edition (LC/G.1946-P)*, Santiago, Chile, 1997. United Nations publication, Sales No. S.97.II.G.4. Special tabulations of household surveys in each country.

<sup>a</sup> Figures are for 1993.

<sup>b</sup> In Mexico it was not possible to define domestic service.

<sup>c</sup> Average income of live-in and live-out domestic servants, as a percentage of the average income of all employed persons.

There are not enough regionwide studies to show how this sector of workers has evolved, but it is obvious that their labour conditions, like those of informal-sector workers and domestic servants, are either not subject to any regulations, or if they are, then those regulations are not complied with. There is extreme dependence in the case of home workers who are subcontracted, since the negotiations on prices and continuity of deliveries are carried out through third parties who act as intermediaries between the workers and the enterprise. As this is a form of activity in which the technical and production decisions are taken by the employer, however, it could well be considered as a wage-earning job and thus be subject to the relevant regulations, the only differences being that the work is carried out outside the firm, at the worker's home, that there is no stability over time, and that payment is on a piece-work basis.

One of the general conclusions reached after a comparative analysis of home work in developed and developing countries is that this activity appears to be "regulated" by an extensive collection of laws in the various countries. The fundamental problem, then, would appear to be the lack of real application of those laws. Thus, "...home work is seen to be a dispersed and isolated phenomenon, subject to little or no control: the truth is that if there is an appropriate term for describing this phenomenon in general, it is undoubtedly the word 'precarious'" (Vega, 1992, p. 19).

### **c) Own-account workers**

Own-account workers form a category that displays great diversity in censuses and household surveys, as the occupations it covers may range from independent professionals such as doctors or dentists to street vendors whose activities may even be of a semi-clandestine nature. What distinguishes own-account work from wage-earning employment is the form of payment, which does not come from an employer but is the result of the operation of an enterprise or the independent practice of a profession or trade. For women who are not independent professionals, the insecure nature of this category takes the form of the lack of social security, paid holidays, maternity or sick leave, and other benefits received by wage-earners. Information from household surveys shows that the category of own-account workers grew between 1980 and 1995. The number of male and female own-account workers who are self-employed are fairly similar, except in Bolivia, where over half the working women fall into this category.<sup>6</sup>

Both men's and women's participation in this form of work has increased in all the countries of the region. It has been noted, however, that the proportion of female own-account workers is greater in countries with a large indigenous population: Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras and Paraguay. Another occupational category that is very small in numbers but also receives very small incomes is family workers (paid or unpaid). Consequently, in order to make a really thorough evaluation of the degree of insecurity of own-account work in the informal sector it is necessary to make a more detailed analysis than that permitted by household

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<sup>6</sup> According to data from the 1994 surveys, the percentages of urban women who are own-account or unpaid family workers are as follows: Argentina 26%; Bolivia 52%; Brazil 21%; Chile 20%; Colombia 23%; Costa Rica 16%; Honduras 34%; Mexico 25%; Panama 12%; Paraguay 27%; Uruguay 19% and Venezuela 24%.

surveys, that is to say, one which also covers the number of hours worked, the income received, and past work experience.

A study carried out in Buenos Aires reveals an increase in own-account work in recent decades. When compared with wage workers, it is noted that own-account workers are older —especially in the case of women— that they have migrated more often and that they also display a greater degree of informality in terms of the type of work they do (Gallart and others, 1990). The same conclusion has been reached regarding female informal-sector workers in Chile, who are less educated and older, in comparison both with the rest of the labour force and with men working in the urban informal sector.

Attempts have been made to help the own-account workers through various measures, such as special systems of credit, training with a view to the development of business skills, and support for the creation of small enterprises. It is also necessary, however, to consider the adoption of special measures for female own-account workers, who have both special skills and also special difficulties due to the gender-based system prevailing in the region.

## IV. FINAL COMMENTS

### 1. Summary

Latin America has partly overcome the short-term adjustment stage following the external debt crisis and is now in a stage of restructuring marked by opening up to external markets, in which it is trying to incorporate itself into international trade on competitive terms. This process has greatly stimulated the labour market, and this has been reflected in the changing role of the State, in the regulation of labour relations and, more generally, in employment, wage and training policies.

These changes, which have included the reorganization of production processes, with the incorporation of new technologies, have altered the composition of the labour market and had a strong impact on women's labour participation. One of the most noticeable effects has been what is known as the "feminization of the labour force" or "silent revolution". This phenomenon has been taking place since the 1960s, and although its pace has slackened in recent years, it still continues.

Although the increase in female participation is tending to bring it closer to male levels, the patterns by gender are different, and there continues to be a wide gulf between the two. On the labour supply side, there are differences in terms of age and civil status (which are tending to diminish), and in terms of the educational level of women. On the side of the demand for labour, women are employed in a smaller number of occupations, they are paid far less than men, and there is majority female participation in the less secure informal sector. There can be no doubt that since 1980 substantial changes have taken place in the situation of female workers that force us to change our perception of female labour, for the new trends display both continuities and breaks that render many hitherto accepted assertions obsolete.

The information from household surveys on the urban areas of 12 Latin American countries in 1994 shows —as do many studies made in the region— the growing female participation in the labour market, especially by middle-aged (25-45) and married women. Together with this feminization of the labour force there has been a process of tertiarization of the active population (new employment opportunities have opened up for women in the services sector) and growth of small-scale economic activities. This increase in the economic participation of women in the region shows the ambivalence of the change, since at the same time there is still a highly segmented labour market and women's employment is increasingly unstable and precarious, as reflected in income levels markedly below those of men, unemployment rates that are generally higher, and an increase in own-account and informal-sector work by women (see box).

**TRENDS IN FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET  
IN LATIN AMERICA  
(1970-1995)**

**A. RISE IN FEMALE PARTICIPATION RATE AND SHIFT IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS**

1. RISE IN NUMBER OF HOURS (PER DAY, PER WEEK) WOMEN SPEND IN PAID WORK
2. EXTENSION OF WOMEN'S ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE LIFE
  - a. Between 1970 and 1995 the number of years women spend in paid work increased on average by just over nine years.
3. GREATER CONTINUITY IN WOMEN'S WORKING CAREERS
  - a. There has been an increase in the proportion of women who do not stop working when they have children and who continue to be economically active throughout the period of greatest reproductive work.
  - b. The increase in female participation in the labour market occurred among women of childbearing age. The greatest increases were to be found among the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups.
4. LEVEL OF EDUCATION AMONG WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET (ALREADY HIGHER THAN MEN'S) RISES

**B. NO SIGNIFICANT DECREASE IN INEQUALITIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET**

1. REPRODUCTION OF OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION
2. WAGE GAP PERSISTS: WIDER AT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL LEVELS
3. WOMEN'S UNEMPLOYMENT RATES STILL CONSIDERABLY HIGHER THAN MEN'S
  - a. The unemployment rate for young women is also higher.
4. INCREASE IN PROPORTION OF WOMEN IN INSECURE EMPLOYMENT

## **2. Methodological suggestions**

Some methodological comments are called for here with regard to the analysis of the labour situation. Above all, it is important to examine gender relations in the labour market. Failure to do so tends to bias analysis of the labour sector, since opposing trends for men and women cancel each other out when considered as a whole.

It is also important to maintain some degree of continuity in evaluating the changes that are taking place, in view of the speed at which the labour sector evolves, especially with regard to such sensitive variables as activity rates, employment and unemployment, and average income: assertions which were valid at the beginning of the crisis no longer hold good in phases of economic recovery.

Analysis of the situation indicates that in order to fully understand the processes of change in the countries, it is necessary to have a clear knowledge of the context in which the crisis occurred and in which the adjustment policies were applied, since this is of enormous importance for understanding the different reactions of the labour market and of the social actors, both men and women.

For this reason it is essential to continually evaluate the effects of external changes and social actions. The undesirable effects of the legislation on domestic servants' rest periods (referred to earlier), or what happened when legislation was passed on the need for day nurseries in firms, are a warning on the need for continuous monitoring, to ensure not only that the law is being applied, but also that the spirit of the law is being observed.

Finally, it may be concluded from an analysis of the features of female employment that the growing labour participation of women should not be viewed as the only key dimension. At the present time there are also other aspects which are important for evaluating the labour situation by gender, such as working conditions, the expansion of work options, and the elimination of occupational segmentation: in short, the quality of the employment available to both men and women.

## **3. Significance of the changes**

A challenge that still remains to be faced is that of elucidating the mutual relations between the dimensions of participation in the economy and the effects that may be observed in other areas, such as the family, social, political and cultural spheres. It is well known that these dimensions evolve at uneven rates, but it is also known that, because they interact, changes that take place in one dimension will necessarily affect the others too: consequently, the scale and direction of these changes should be carefully analysed. One question that arises in this connection is whether female labour participation, which is a basic requisite for women's independence, leads to independence on other levels too, or merely means an increase in their responsibilities and an overload of work.

One of the basic tenets of the new development proposals, especially the ECLAC proposal, is the need to improve the skills and qualifications of human resources in order to change production patterns with equity. There can be no doubt that highly qualified female labour is a resource which is currently misused in the labour market: women are not paid in keeping with their level of education, and they are segregated in a limited number of occupations. The labour market could make better use of women's qualifications, however, if their work opportunities were



expanded and the rigid vertical and horizontal segmentation of occupations were eliminated. The changes that have taken place in the organization of the system of production offer women opportunities they must seize. Whether these opportunities strengthen or weaken occupational segregation, for example, will depend on the bargaining power that working women achieve. From the labour-market standpoint, the greater flexibility of highly educated female labour could become a highly attractive feature of the new pattern of development.

From the point of view of their social background, the labour situation of women is more complex and heterogeneous than that of their male counterparts. In the future, they will have the potential and opportunity to follow working careers that differ from the ones followed by their own age-group and other generations, in accordance with their greater flexibility as human resources.

The fact that a third of the region's labour force consists of women introduces a new element into the Latin American world-view. Firstly, the sheer number of working women cannot be ignored or denied. Secondly, it has a major demonstration effect on society as a whole, since now there is no longer any doubt that paid work is a valid option for women. What remains to be cleared up is whether the future new context will tackle the "ambiguity" that prevails as regards the recognition of women's right to work, not in the legislation itself, but in unwritten social practices (Aguirre, 1990). This ambiguity is reflected in the lack of social support services, lack of family backing, and a feeling of guilt among women themselves for not fulfilling their "natural" duties. If the regional world-view now admits the idea that women with small children may work outside the home, then this should be reflected in more support services, especially for the care of pre-school children (creches and day nurseries) and schoolchildren (extension of school hours to coincide with the working day).

With regard to the relationship between work and the family, the changes in female employment undoubtedly have effects on the family. A woman naturally has more influence within the family when she has an income of her own, but it is well known that the distribution of labour by gender within the home remains largely unchanged. If, as the data show, the greatest increase in female participation is among married women with children, while at the same time the proportion of domestic servants is going down, then the consequences in terms of an overload of work for women are beyond doubt. This fact is further proof of the need for policies designed to provide much-needed aid in child care and of a shift in the values of Latin American societies.

With regard to the labour market, on the other hand, there is ample scope for improvement, including affirmative action to alter the rigid gender-based division of labour, regulation of the working hours, pay and social security of home workers, whether own-account workers or subcontracted, and action to raise the status of female labour in the eyes of employers. Society has yet to recognize women's domestic labour, especially child-rearing, as socially vital work that could well be done by both sexes.

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