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WOMEN TRADERS IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Aspects of the Women in Development Programme of UNECLAC
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean



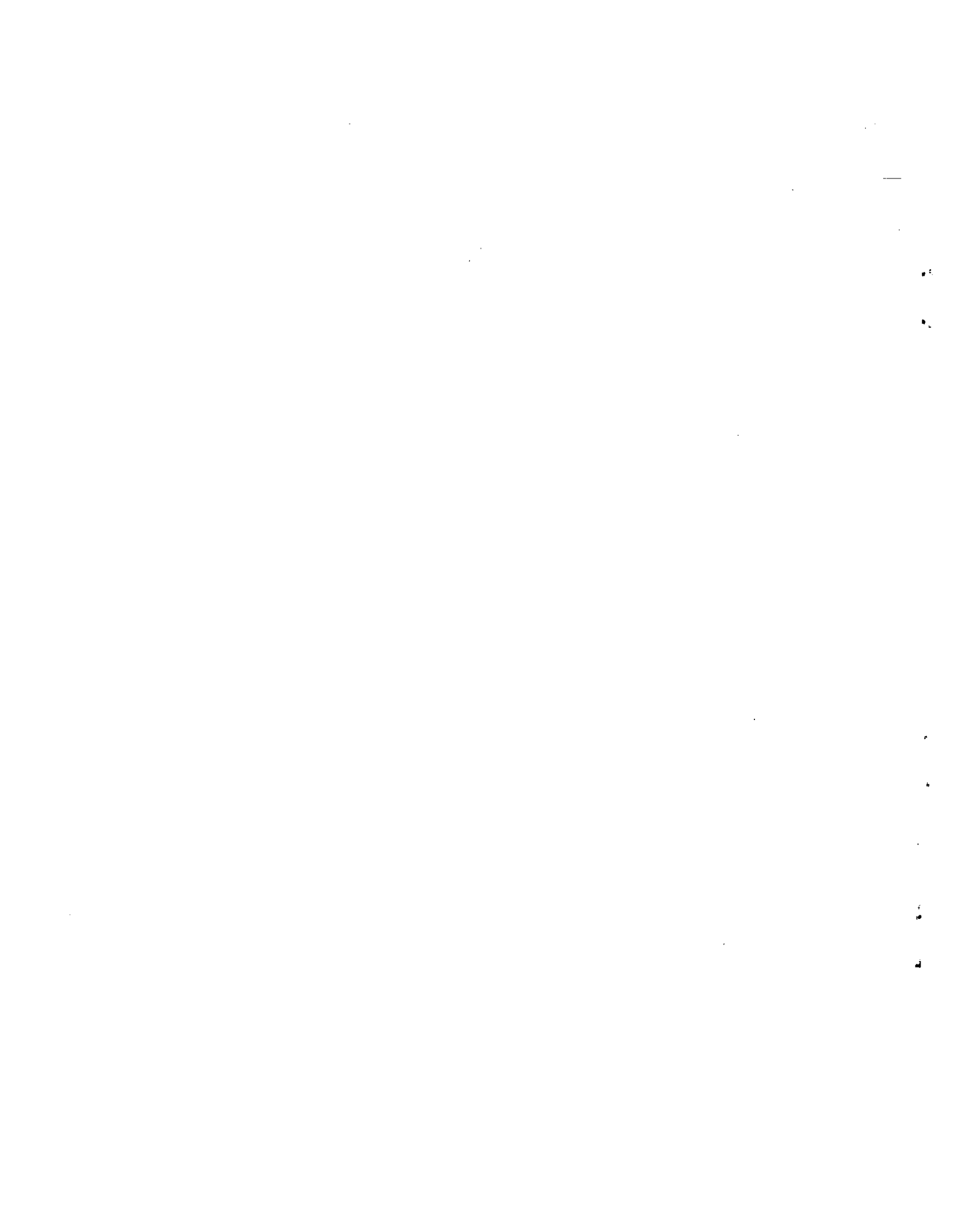
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The authors are staff members of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean. The document was prepared for the Subregional Round-table on the Participation and Integration of Women in Agricultural and Rural Development in the Caribbean, 6-10 July 1987, Castries, Saint Lucia. The views expressed herein are the exclusive responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily coincide with those of ECLAC.



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UNECLAC WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

1. Member States of the Caribbean Development and Co-operation Committee (CDCC) at their eighth and ninth sessions had given a mandate to ECLAC Secretariat and had agreed on priority issues in the area of women. Among these are two which have major relevance for the subject of the FAO Round-table, namely Women in Development and Trade, and the Development of a Data Base on Selected Areas of Women's Social and Economic Development.
2. Projects initiated within the data base project have so far been designed taking into account the needs identified in the project on women in development and trade. Both projects are significantly related to agricultural development, which considering its importance within mainstream development concerns in the Caribbean subregion, has not been adequately addressed from the perspective of women. Ongoing research shows that a wide range of issues needs to be addressed, if the forward-looking strategies adopted in Nairobi as regards women in agriculture are to be implemented.^{1/}
3. ECLAC has and will continue to serve primarily as facilitator for the implementation of the forward-looking strategies both in promoting action programmes and in carrying out research and training programmes. The major areas in which it has been involved in recent years are women in development planning, women in development and trade and violence against women.

^{1/} The Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women have been adopted by the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, Kenya, 15-26 July 1985.

4. As regards women in development planning studies have been conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Dominican Republic and Jamaica. The studies have been concerned with a review of public services, analyzing the extent to which women benefit from these services, highlighting specific needs of the female population in relation to resources allocated in the national budget. This has contributed to government efforts which seek to achieve equal distribution of its resources to both sexes. In some of the countries the study has been submitted to national consultation of sectoral experts or have been reviewed in workshops with representatives from the public service, women's organizations and trade unions. The Women in Development Unit, Extra-Mural Department of the University of the West Indies (WAND) has collaborated with ECLAC/WID in conducting one of these workshops.

5. The women in development and trade project proposes to increase the visibility of women's contribution to trade through their self-created income generating activities and to provide some insights into the movement of women in the region through their trading activities. The intention is, of course, to identify the needs of women engaged in this sector and to promote the formulation of programmes and projects which will address those needs. Within the framework of this project a pilot study on women traders in Trinidad and Tobago was followed by similar research undertakings in Guyana, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. A separate focus on the inter-island trade in the Eastern Caribbean has led to the design of terms of reference for the collection of very specific data on various aspects of the inter-island trade in agricultural commodities in this part of the Caribbean particularly as regards female participation.

6. Violence against women is not only one of the priority subjects within the ECLAC Women in Development Programme, but it is also included in the areas of special concern of the Nairobi forward-looking strategies. In this regard, ECLAC has facilitated the participation of Caribbean experts in the international expert consultation meeting on family violence, held in Vienna last

year. Donors were identified to fund a national seminar on physical violence against women, held in Barbados last month. A training seminar for researchers on violence against women was conducted in Dominica in March this year, while technical assistance for national activities has been provided to Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago's Rape Crisis Centre. A pilot study conducted in Trinidad and Tobago in 1984 has provided useful insights into the forms of violence committed against women and the ways in which society is dealing with the problem. These insights are being used in advisory services provided for the formulation of research projects and action programmes in the region.

7. The development of a data base on selected areas of women's economic and social development project has been initiated recently and attempts to concentrate on the priority areas addressed by the women in development programme. As a result of data needs identified within the women in development and trade project, the data base project is currently addressing the situation of hucksters (traders) in the inter-island trade comprising Dominica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago. This project implements recommendations of the CARICOM meeting on the question of statistics on women, held in Barbados last year. It also addresses the problem of the lack or inadequacy of statistical data on women. By coincidence, the project also implements elements of the Nairobi forward-looking strategies on the adequacy of gender-specific data.

8. All these activities, of course, have an indirect impact on women in agriculture and rural development as they address issues concerning the entire female population. The subproject on the inter-island trade, the so-called huckster economy, however is of major relevance for the present round-table. Therefore, it is important to share some of the findings obtained from ongoing research.

THE INTER-ISLAND TRADE

Background

9. Trade among the islands in the Caribbean dates back to pre-colonial times. After a discontinuity of the period of enslavement, trading activities resumed with varying intensity up to the present day. Towards the end of the 1960s we observe a rapid growth involving products such as rice, coconut oil, fruits, vegetables, ground provisions and petroleum.

10. The increase in inter-island trading since the 1960s is mainly due to government policies in the region which promoted the establishment of regional integration schemes such as the Agricultural Marketing Protocol, the Guaranteed Market Scheme, CARIFTA, and the Customs Union, which eventually became CARICOM. Problems in regional co-operation combined with others such as the economic crisis, the decrease in agrarian production for export, and increased international competition, led to an overall decline in the inter-island agricultural trade in the 1970s.

11. The inter-island trade in fresh produce is mainly organized by the hucksters. For the moment, the focus is on the traders who are presently exporting agricultural commodities and are actually travelling to other islands in the region to market their products. Marketing agencies, producers associations and export companies are more interested in the extra-regional trade. In spite of significant government intervention for inter-island trade operations, the communication links with the farmers remained very weak, resulting in insufficient marketing of the abundant supplies of the farmers. Inadequate infrastructural factors and other difficulties of communication and efficiency represented unattractive conditions for established institutions and the private sector. As a result the women traders have entered into the market for food crops. They work under poor conditions, for long hours, taking the risks which participants in the formal sector are not prepared to take. They undertake trading transactions, particularly with small-scale farmers in remote areas of the country.

12. Existing research indicates that the section of the inter-island trade in which women predominate is divided into two major geographical circuits: the upper circuit which includes Martinique, Dominica Saint Lucia and Barbados, and the lower circuit which includes Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Tobago, Guyana and Trinidad. These circuits are not closed. At times some islands of the upper circuit enter the lower circuit and vice versa.

13. Preliminary research already indicates that women participating in this informal sector of the Caribbean economy face a wide range of problems. One of the major problems concerns decrease of revenues. In addition, research indicates that male traders are increasingly becoming involved in the inter-island trade. The impact of this development on female participation needs to be examined. In the light of this trend, it seems important to explore the situation further at both regional and national levels. Adequate and reliable data may assist governments in planning and policy formulation with regard to a mainstream economic development activity and to the advancement of women in rural development. Such data may also offer suggestions to improve possibilities for wider market penetration by women in this sector.

14. The ECLAC study has so far concentrated on the case of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The following is a summary of the preliminary findings.

The Vincentian Traders

15. Intra-Caribbean trade from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to Trinidad and Barbados concerning agricultural produce supplied by small farmers is limited to fruits, vegetables and ground provisions (tannias, yams, sweet potatoes, dasheens, eddoes, etc.,). The principal commodity marketed by Vincentian traders is ground provision, of which production, mainly by small farmers, has increased in the period 1980-1985.

16. The number of active traders who marketed agricultural produce in Trinidad and Barbados in January 1987 is two hundred and fifty two (252). If one hundred and forty (140) incomplete registrations for that month are added, the total number of traders who operated from Saint Vincent is three hundred and ninety-two (392). From this group only twenty-nine (29) traded in Barbados. No records exist in which traders are specified as male or female. The information had to be derived through investigating the names of traders in various documents. As regards twenty-three (23) names, the exercise has not been successful (see Appendix I).

17. As regards the group of two hundred and fifty-two (252) active traders, one hundred and sixty-four (164) were female and sixty-nine (69) were male. From the one hundred and forty (140) non-active traders the sex ratio was different namely sixty-nine females to forty-six males.

18. The majority of the traffickers are female. The history of the sex ratio is quite interesting. While men dominated the trade in the first half of this century, the rate of female participation has increased in the second half of this century. Today it is observed that younger people are entering the business and that male traders are on the increase again. As a result, competition has increased and the business has become less attractive for those who had been trafficking for many years. Some chose to leave the business or have migrated. Although figures show that women are the largest group, there are indications that some women actually work on behalf of male dealers who operate within the context of illegal trade. One notion is widely held that women seem to pass through customs more easily than men. While a number of male traders have entered extra-regional markets, it seems that women traders have not been able to do so.

19. Although exact research figures are not yet available and they may differ per country, it has been estimated that a significant number of traffickers are small farmers themselves. However, for inter-island trading purposes they still need to obtain additional produce from other farmers.

Cycle of Activities

20. For the women traders, marketing the produce includes all activities starting with farmers from whom purchases are made. The women have to negotiate, purchase and collect the produce. The women traders have to transport, sort, clean, crate and package their products. They are also involved with documentation procedures, customs procedures, shipping, product presentation, wholesale and retail arrangements at the market of destination. The women traders depend on a number of other persons to carry out these activities. Such persons could include carriers, truck drivers, crate makers, brokers, shippers, etc. An overview of the cycle of activities is provided in Appendix II to this document.

Major Problems

21. Credit facilities for female traders are limited. Money is needed, not only to purchase the goods, but also to pay for transport, documentation, shipping, etc. As far as the goods are concerned, it may not be too difficult to obtain the goods on credit. It is a fact that farmers with whom they have developed personalized relationships over time, particularly those in isolated, remote areas, depend heavily on the traders for the marketing of their supply. Due to increased problems concerning payments, the farmers are no longer willing to give credits. The lack of the availability of credits constitutes a problem for the traders.

22. Women traders have developed creative skills in conducting their business. For example, a trafficker might obtain her goods on credit from farmer A the first week. The second week she goes to farmer B, who also agrees to provide her with goods on credit. Only in the third week she pays farmer A and in the fourth week she pays farmer B, apologizing for the delay.

23. With regard to health, the following should be noted. As the traffickers deal with perishable goods and they depend on fixed days and time schedules for shipment of their goods, they have to make very tight arrangements with farmers, truck drivers and all others involved

in the marketing of the products. Failure to do so causes serious problems. For example, when a trafficker is ill or there are problems related to her household. She develops stress especially if she cannot afford to postpone a trip.

24. Transport by boat presents some difficulties. In the case of trafficking between Saint Vincent and Trinidad, the traders have to travel by air and ship their goods separately by boat. In the past they would normally travel with their goods. For safety and security reasons, the Trinidad and Tobago Government has prohibited transportation of persons on the schooners. Weekly conflicts between traders and airline companies in Piarco, Trinidad seem to be very frustrating for the traders. It should be noted, however, that intense air travel of traffickers significantly benefits regional airlines, particularly LIAT.

25. A serious problem concerns the high rate of spoilage of the goods on account of packaging, handling and transportation. In addition, traders and their goods are not covered by any insurance.

26. Finally, competition among traders is very intense. They undercut each other. If traders would organize themselves, some of the problems encountered might be eased.

Association of Traffickers

27. The Traffickers Small Business Association was founded in 1983. One of the main concerns of the association is to secure remunerative prices for the goods marketed by its members and to avoid heavy loss on account of unsold goods. In order to deal with this concern the Association tries to control the quantity of goods shipped to Trinidad and Tobago every week. Limited shipment avoids flooding of the Trinidad and Tobago market and may guarantee better prices. Another strategy tried has been the introduction of a rotation system of traffickers trading on the Trinidad market. Initially some success was recorded, but as soon as the business appeared attractive newcomers came in and the revenues declined again. As Trinidad and Tobago is also supplied from Grenada, the Association entertains a certain degree of contact with Grenadian traders

when specific actions are considered in order to combine forces and unite efforts. The Association has two hundred and seventy-five (275) members, of which the majority are female, according to the records of the Association. Out of 164 female traders active in the month of January 1987, 69 (24.4%) were members of the Association. Also, out of 69 male traders over the same period, 13 (5.2%) were members of the Association. As the records of the Association were not up to date at the time of research, it may very well be that newcomers have not been registered. Consequently, the above percentages may not accurately reflect the present situation (see Appendix III).

28. The functioning of the Association is hampered for many reasons. Traffickers basically operate as individuals and prefer to do their business as individuals. Therefore they are very difficult to organize as a group, even for purposes of collective concern. The intensity of the concern may allow the Association to mobilize them to a certain degree.

29. Discussions are ongoing with regard to required action in order to promote the formation of traders' organizations and to strengthen existing ones. Continued research on women in the inter-island trade of agricultural produce is in progress. It is expected that the hard data which is now being collected, will enable the identification of trends and priority areas for action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

30. The following recommendations were made:

(a) Efforts should be made to retrieve and systematize statistical data on the inter-island trade and the participation of women in this informal sector of the economy;

(b) Linkages should be established among organizations and institutions involved in research or action programmes related to the inter-island trade;

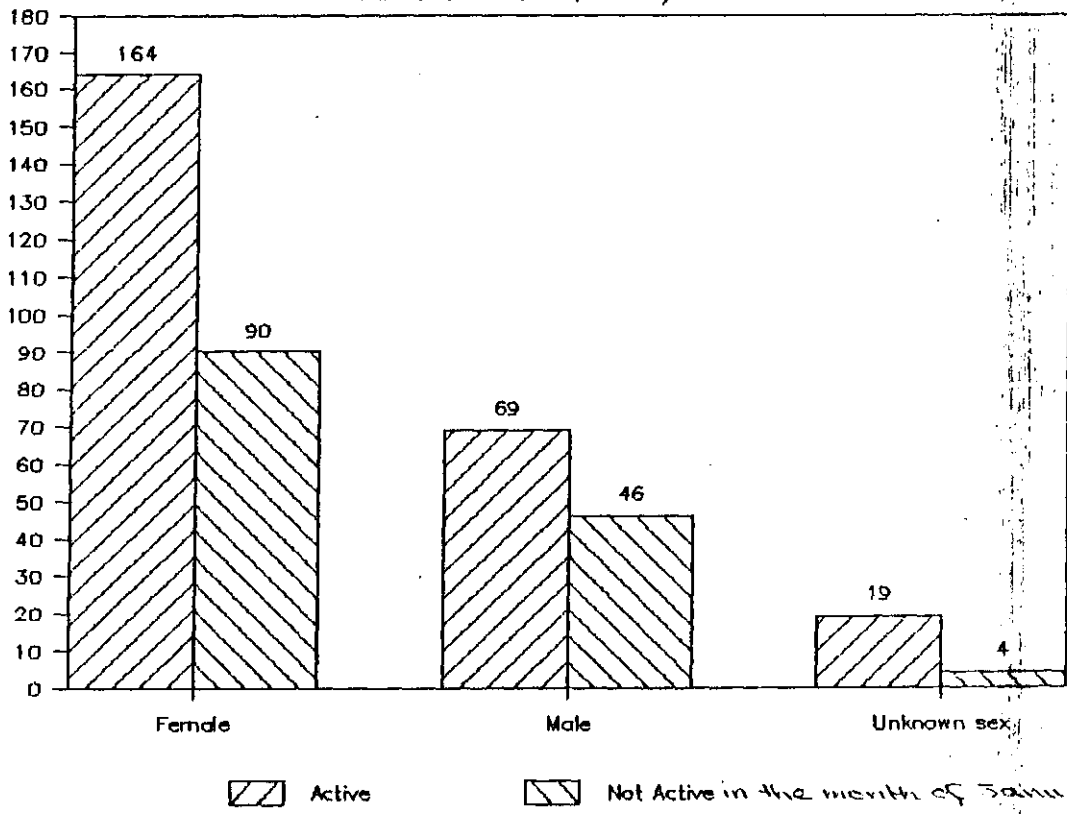
(c) Organization of women traders should be promoted, taking into account the specific nature of the activity in which they are involved;

(d) Inter-island networking among women traders should be encouraged, not only for improvement of their individual activities, but also for sharing and developing self-created skills and to deal with the burdens, including household-related activities, of this particular form of economic survival; and

(e) Appropriate ways and strategies should be explored to ensure that women traders acquire knowledge relevant to the possibilities of penetrating extra-regional markets.

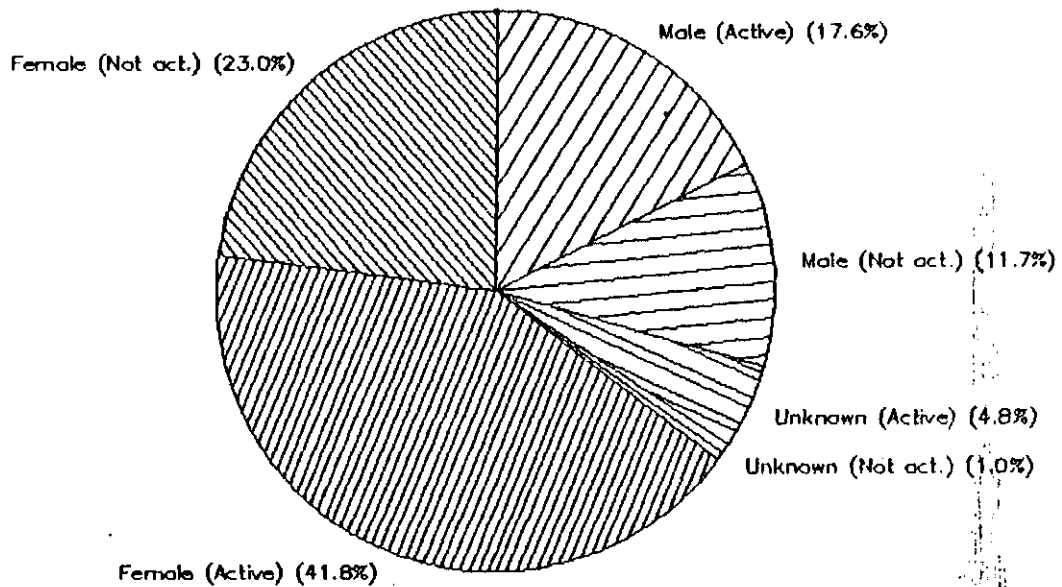
Appendix I
Traders of St. Vincent & Grenadines

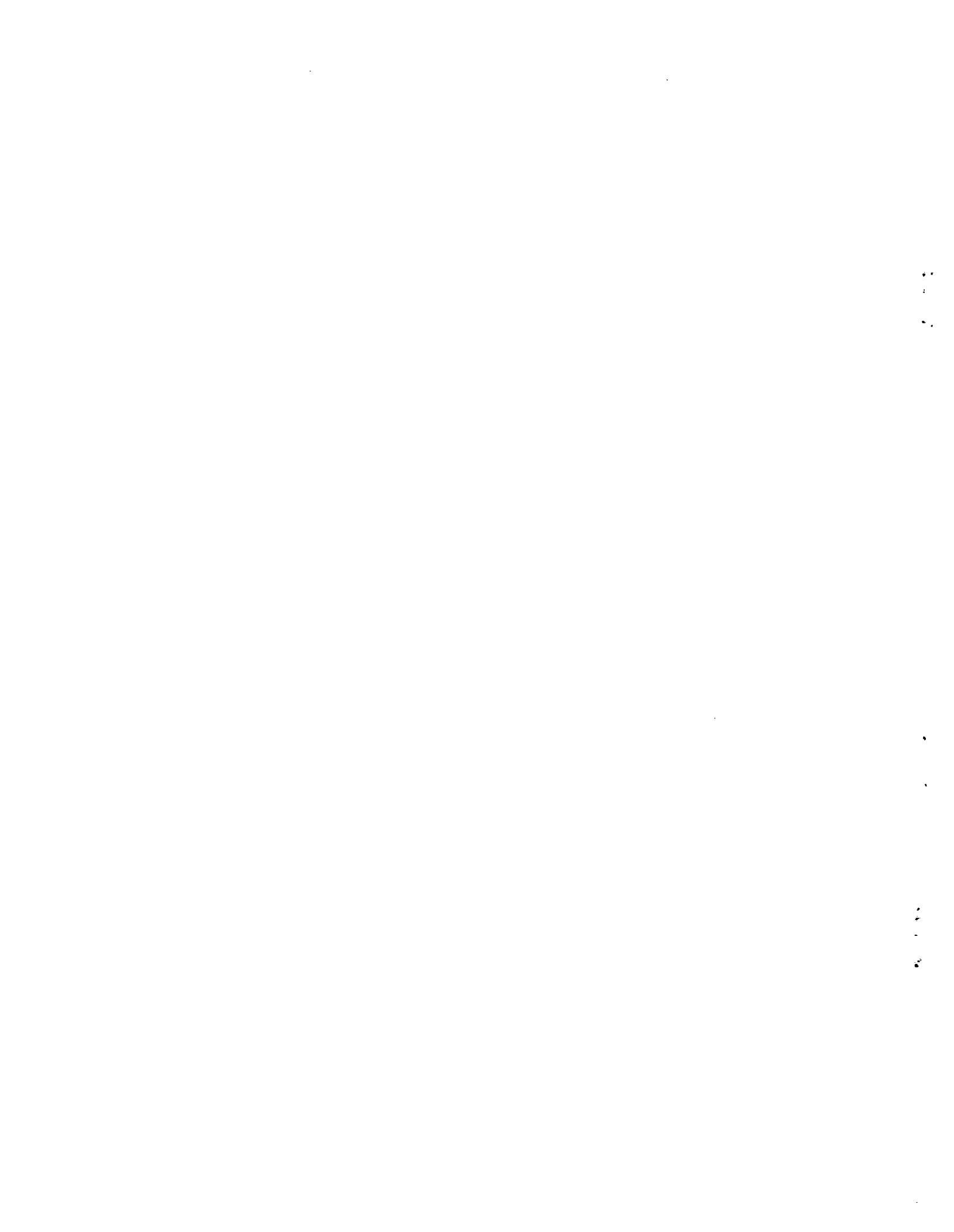
Sex ratio of Traders, January 87



Traders of St. Vincent & Grenadines

Sex ratio of Traders, January 87

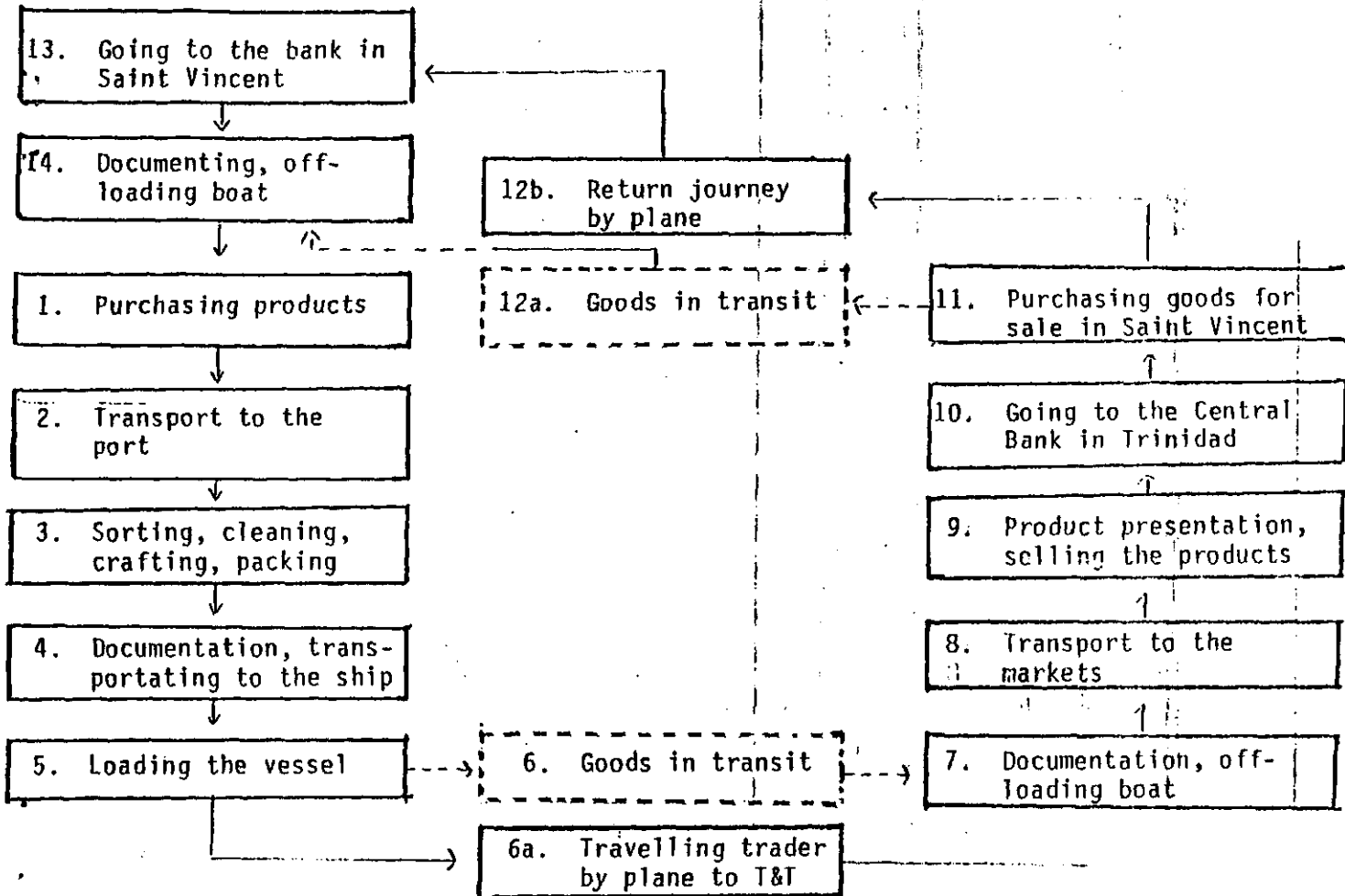


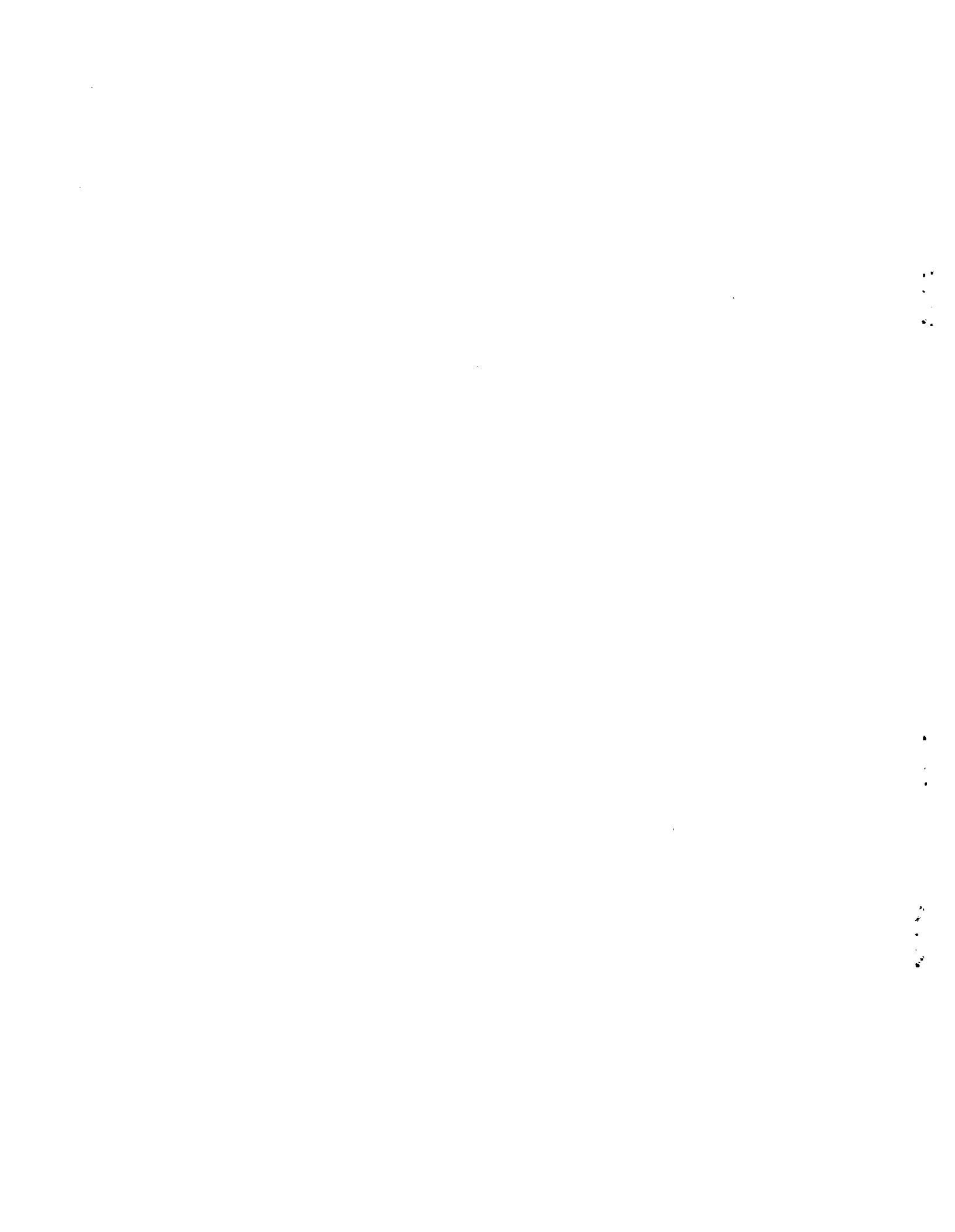


Appendix II
CYCLE OF ACTIVITY: 1 WEEK

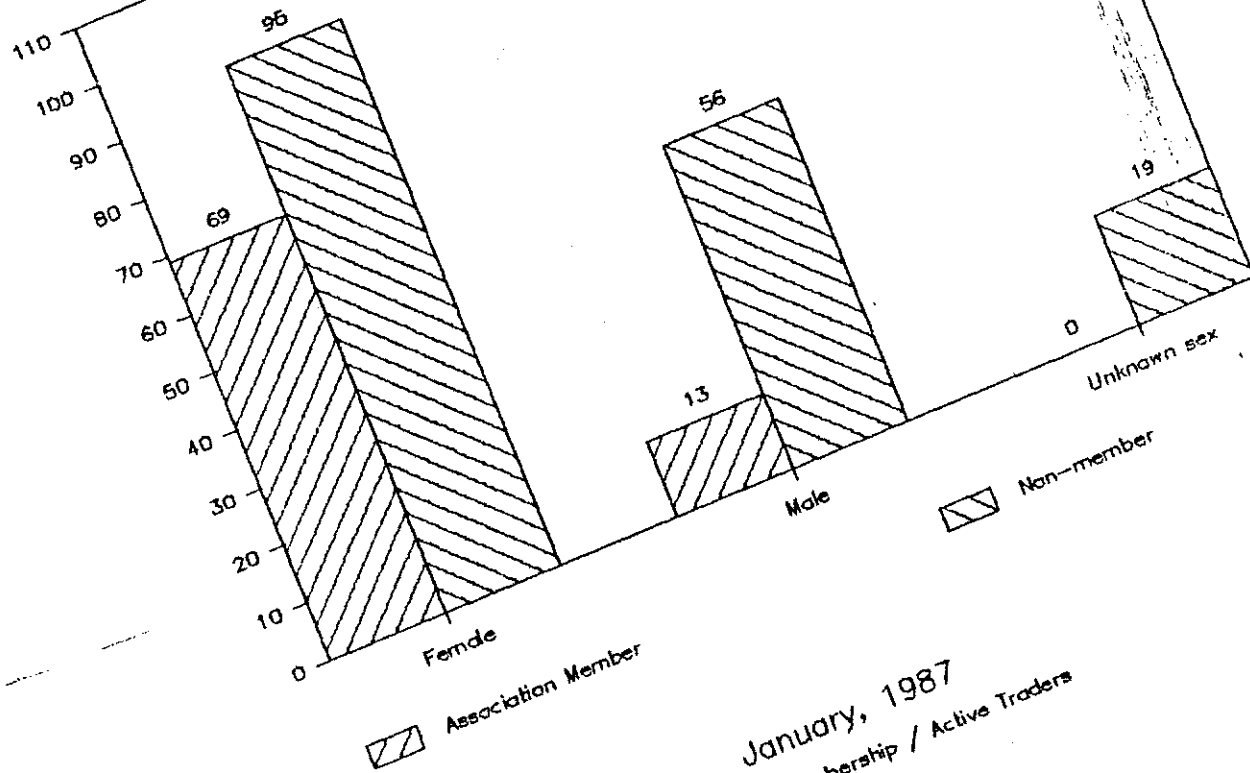
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Trinidad

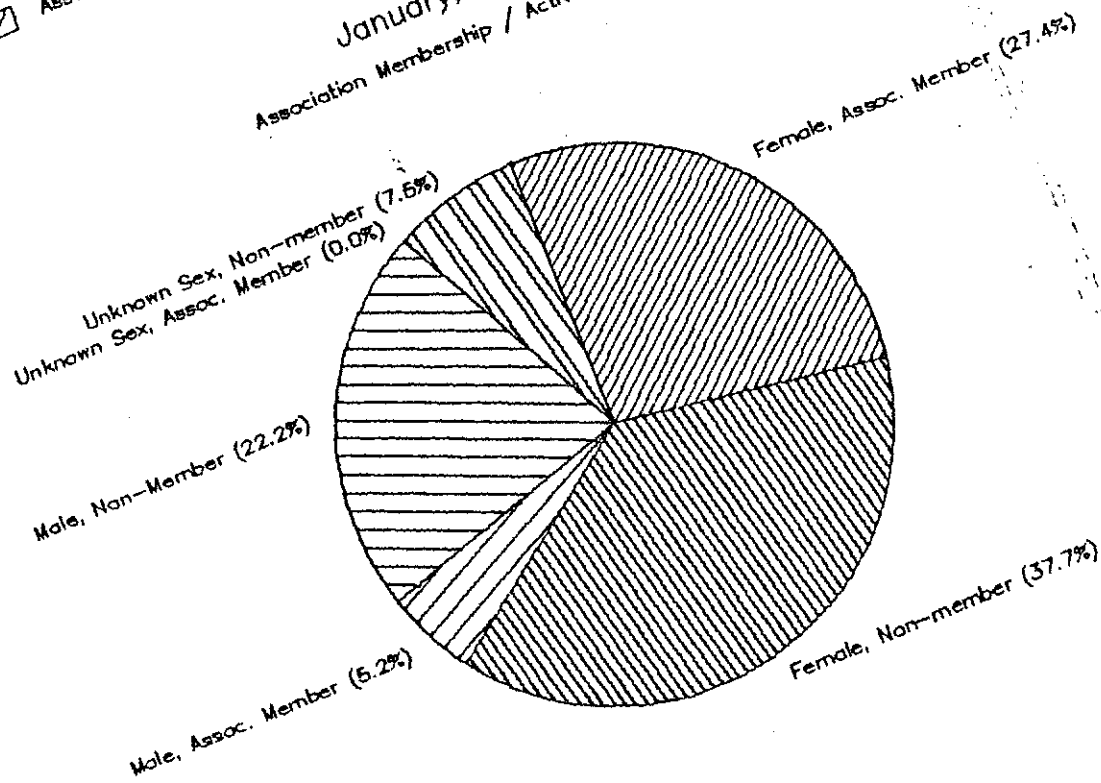




Appendix III
 Traders of St. Vincent & the Grenadines
 Association Membership / Active Traders



January, 1987
 Association Membership / Active Traders



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