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Economic Commission for Latin America

WOMEN IN THE HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
OF LATIN AMERICA

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I. Background and activities

(a) Introduction

The activities of the secretariat aimed at bringing about a better integration of women in development stem from a series of recommendations and resolutions which have gained increasing consistency and received broad government support in recent years. The consensus on the need to formulate and execute a programme of effective regional action to this end has grown steadily. A summary follows of the sources of international and regional mandates stemming from government decisions, which set forth the basic guidelines for such action.

(b) Mandates

In recent years there has been widespread recognition of the great human and social significance of the problems connected with the status of women in society, and of the importance of the integration of women in both the development efforts of their countries and the achievement of international peace. This international recognition culminated in United Nations General Assembly resolution 3010 (XXIX) which provided for the holding of the World Conference of the International Women's Year in 1975. That Conference adopted a World Plan of Action outlining a series of concrete actions designed to carry into practice its recommendations and mandates to achieve those lofty objectives. Subsequently, the General Assembly endorsed the World Plan of Action in resolution 3520 (XXX). It also stressed that the progress of women was a basic element in the development process, and urged states to make all the necessary changes in their economic and social structures to ensure their full participation on an equal footing with men (resolution 3505 (XXX)).

At the regional level, the natural sphere of action of the Economic Commission for Latin America, mention must be made of resolution 321 (XV), adopted at the Commission's fifteenth session

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(Quito, March 1973). It requested the Secretariat to carry out a study on the participation of women in the development of the region and the measures to be taken to eliminate discrimination and the lack of educational, employment and economic opportunities for women.

Strictly speaking, the Secretariat had been carrying out, on an increasingly regular basis, social and demographic studies on the participation of women in various aspects of the development of Latin American societies. These studies are included in a number of documents, analyses and appraisals published in earlier years.

As a preparatory stage of the World Conference of Mexico, the Latin American Regional Seminar on the Integration of Women in Development, was organized at the government level in Caracas between 28 April and 2 May 1975 by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs with the collaboration of CEPAL. The recommendations of the Seminar were subsequently submitted to the sixteenth session of CEPAL (Port of Spain, May 1975), which took note of them and decided to forward them for consideration by the World Conference in Mexico.^{1/} The Seminar recommended that CEPAL should carry out studies and other activities connected with the integration of women in the development process, emphasizing the particular importance of factors such as the family, education, employment, legislation, health, mass communication media and political participation. It also recommended that a regional conference should be held "after the World Conference of the International Women's Year in order to evaluate the results of the latter and consider its application to the Latin American region".^{2/}

In addition, the World Plan of Action adopted by the United Nations General Assembly recommended that the regional commissions

^{1/} See document E/CEPAL/1006/Rev.2.

^{2/} The document with the background material and recommendations of the government seminar in Caracas, together with the contributions made in a personal capacity by a number of secretariat staff members and consultants were published in book form. Cf. CEPAL, Mujeres en América Latina. Aportes para una Discusión, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975.

should give priority to the development and implementation of effective strategies to further the objectives of the plan at the regional and subregional levels, taking account of their respective plans of action.

In the preparatory phase of the regional plan, the "Regional Seminar on the Participation of Women in Economic, Social and Political Development: Obstacles that hinder their Integration" was held in Buenos Aires between 22 and 30 March 1976, organized by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in consultation with CEPAL. That Seminar recommended, inter alia, the convening of a working group made up of specialists appointed by governments in accordance with the principle of equitable geographic distribution with a view to preparing a draft regional plan of action under the auspices of the United Nations and in the sphere of action of the Economic Commission for Latin America.^{3/}

While CEPAL was engaged in the work described above, the General Assembly, when endorsing the World Plan of Action in resolution 3520 (XXX), also announced and provided for the holding of a world conference in 1980 to appraise the results of the activities undertaken in the first five years (1976-1980). The Conference would be preceded by regional preparatory conferences aimed at reviewing and appraising the progress made in that field, particularly in relation to the minimum targets established in point 46 of the World Plan of Action. In addition, in accordance with the mandate received from the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, the study of the progress made in the social situation of women has now been included in CEPAL's regular appraisal activities in connexion with the International Development Strategy and the Programme of Action for the establishment of a new international economic order. During 1977 CEPAL will be responsible for this process of regional governmental appraisal, initially in the third session of the Committee of High-Level Government Experts (CEGAN) and subsequently at the seventeenth session of CEPAL (Guatemala, 25 April to 5 May 1977).

^{3/} See document ST/ESA/SER.B/9, section III, Conclusions, paragraph 89.

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Furthermore, the abovementioned General Assembly resolution also invited all the relevant organizations of the United Nations system to prepare and execute a joint interagency programme. An interagency meeting was held in Geneva in 1976; it adopted an agreement for the implementation of the recommendations of the World Plan of Action at the world, regional and national levels. As the co-ordinating body at the regional level, CEPAL has begun to carry out that agreement, deciding with the relevant bodies on the immediate steps to be taken in the Latin American sphere.

It is in the framework of these mandates that the United Nations secretariat, through the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and the Economic Commission for Latin America, decided to convene a Technical Consultation Meeting with a limited but representative group of experts of the region, invited in a personal capacity following consultation with their respective Governments.^{4/}

In conformity with the recommendation of the Buenos Aires Seminar, the main purpose of the Technical Consultation Meeting, held between 10 and 14 January 1977 at the CEPAL office in Mexico City, was the preparation of a draft regional plan based on the World Plan of Action and the background material from the abovementioned Caracas and Buenos Aires seminars.

In order to facilitate the work of the Meeting, the secretariat prepared a comparative reference document, in the form of an orderly compilation of material from the World Plan of Action - which serves as a core - and from the discussions, conclusions and suggested amendments of the Caracas and Buenos Aires seminars. The full text of the reports adopted by the World Conference of Mexico, the United Nations General Assembly and the Caracas and Buenos Aires seminars, including the various recommendations and resolutions adopted, were also distributed to the participants.

^{4/} Experts from the following countries participated in this capacity: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela. Full details of the participants appear in the annex to the report.

The aim of the technical consultation meeting, given its nature, was to reach the highest possible level of agreement by means of consensus. As a result, an effort was made to gather the greatest possible number of initiatives and proposals arising from the co-operative work of the group of experts.

The following draft plan reflects the consensus reached by the experts, together with the reservations likewise expressed at the meeting.

In distributing this draft regional plan of action on the integration of women in economic and social development prepared by the participating experts, the secretariat, while expressing its thanks for this contribution to the work for which it is responsible, ventures to stress that it is now for the governments members of the Commission to consider and communicate to the secretariat, if possible before 31 March 1977, the observations and suggestions they see fit. It is considered particularly important to learn the views of the member governments on the priorities to be established for the achievement at the regional level of the "minimum objectives", established in point 46 of the World Plan of Action in the first half of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1980). It is also important to learn the positions of the governments of the region with respect to the institutional aspects of the Plan of Action, including the machinery and resources considered necessary for its execution, a question on which section IV of the enclosed draft contains some specific proposals aimed both at "the governments" and at "the CEPAL secretariat". All these elements together would greatly facilitate the consideration at the government level of the regional plan of action by the States members of CEPAL in the framework of a regional conference to be convened to that end.

II. Appraisal

Since the Second World War, the social situation of women in the region has developed favourably on the whole, although without reaching targets which may be considered entirely satisfactory. In overall terms, perhaps the area where this progress has been most evident - and even most important - is in the formation of a growing social consciousness fundamentally opposed to the persistence of any kind of social discrimination on a sexual basis, and on the contrary, although more recently and less actively, favourable to greater integration of women in development. The right of women to greater and fuller social participation is becoming more and more widely accepted, while becoming enhanced by more realistic ideas and relatively viable formulae. However, in practice the broadening of this social awareness has not gone much beyond the middle strata, which is where the social status of women has made the greatest legal and social progress, as will be seen below.

The process of recognizing the rights of women to full participation in society has been received in a positive manner by the governments of the region. They have set up a variety of specialized national bodies and have carried into practice policies and strategies to achieve a better integration of women in the development effort, while seeking at the same time to overcome the barriers of discrimination and the negative stereotypes which still persist in various fields and levels of social activity.

As stated above, the international field has provided a great stimulus in this direction. The main source has unquestionably been the action undertaken and the decisions made in the United Nations framework, although due acknowledgement and appreciation should be given to a broad worldwide movement in which a great variety of public and private bodies and organizations participate, largely overcoming their other differences to agree on the need to intensify action in this field. There is greater interest in the part of associations,

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concerned groups and political parties which are becoming increasingly aware of these needs, primarily at the national level.

In its various aspects, the social situation of Latin American women, while developing positively in overall terms, presents appreciable differences with respect to the progress made in the various sectors and strata involved. The following report contains a concise appraisal of the social situation of women in the more important social circles and sectors from the standpoint of their insertion in the development process.

The effective participation of women in society in development depends primarily on the structure, size and social functions of the family group, and on their position within the group. It is well known that the resistance to change of family structures is very great, and it is only over long periods and after much effort that it has been possible to introduce changes of any importance in their patterns of life and, consequently, in the position and duties of women in the home and in society in general. Even in societies where this problem has been the object of deliberate planning by the government, as in the case of Cuba, the progress made, while undeniable, has nevertheless been slower than expected. This is largely to be explained by the peculiar dependency of women in the family structures prevailing in the majority of the countries of the region.

However, family life is transformed not only from within but also from outside its institutional settings. A very important factor here has been the population growth rate, where the slightly falling trends in the growth of regional population (with great national variation in birth rates) have reduced the number of pregnancies and births and, consequently family size. The most immediate and important result is the shortening of the reproductive period of women, and thus the greater possibility for them to participate more fully and for longer in activities outside the

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family. This is accompanied by a slow but sure change in their family position, with a reduction in their domestic responsibilities and dependence on the home.

Although insufficient time has passed for all the consequences of the decline in birth rates to make themselves felt on family life, it is already clear that they will be important. However, they will not be of the magnitude forecast by the populationists who argued that women were both the victim and no less the main cause of the population explosion. This position was defended energetically until recently, but has now been largely superseded in practice as well as in theory.

The more comprehensive ideas currently popular stress the complexity of the problem of women and suggest more diversified causal relations. The social definition of sexual roles, occupational differentiation and its relationship with the various job markets, social classes and social mobility, rural migration and urbanization, no less than productive growth and development styles are closely related with the social situation of women, although this is not to deny in any way the great importance of population factors.

The modernization of the more dynamic economic and social sectors has produced profound changes in the behavioural patterns of men and women, and tends to produce a rapprochement in terms of social equality. Urban life styles with their predominant consumer tendencies, the change of the place of production for one outside the home, and the marketing of a broad range of personal services and goods previously produced in the home by women have reduced household chores, thereby freeing an increasing number of married women to swell the ranks of the labour force.

These processes and others which are similar are operating on an intensive and extensive scale within the middle and upper ranks of the urban sector and also, although less so, within the same ranks of the rural sector of Latin America. Neither have the popular strata of both the rural and urban areas failed to feel their impact,

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although in their case it has been rather slight. The social status of poor women remains unchanged together with its most unfavourable features which are relatively pronounced at present owing to the disorganization introduced by modernization in the traditional patterns of family and social life, both in the underprivileged urban sectors and in the more backward rural areas.

Up the 1950s the greatest impulse to feminist protest movements, mainly middle-class, was related to the call for the "legal emancipation of women". It was directed generally towards the modification of the main codes - family law and the law of succession - towards winning political rights, and the granting of greater benefits and job protection to women. Most of those objectives were achieved in the years that followed, and accordingly those movements tended to disappear rapidly.

In fact, juridical progress has been widespread, so much so that the rights granted to women rapidly approached the ideal of formal equal sexual status, which has still not been fully and effectively achieved in practice. Political rights were granted to them largely through the widespread recognition of electoral participation in the form of their franchise and their right to stand as candidates for high public office. However, relatively few of them are active in politics. They have also made much progress in the field of civil and commercial rights. But, it cannot be denied that there is still a certain degree of ambiguity in their status due mainly to the paternalistic spirit running through recent legislation since it subordinates them at the same time as it protects them, either by depriving them of some important civil rights (personal, family, succession) granted to men, or by protecting them from certain risks inherent in a number of jobs, occupations which involve heavy work, night work, and dangerous or unhealthy work. An example of this paternalistic philosophy can be clearly seen in the social welfare systems of some Latin American countries which grant women the right to retire at an earlier age than men in spite

of the fact that their life expectancy is relatively higher. As a whole, such protective labour legislation has had an unfavourable impact on cost-benefit calculations of female labour leading directly or indirectly to its higher cost, often a disincentive to entrepreneurs, who on the basis of a strictly rational economic alternative prefer male workers. Other social factors have also worked in this direction, arbitrarily closing the door to women as regards certain occupations or limiting their professional career and promotion possibilities in others.

Perhaps employment in the social sector provides the most obvious example of the high disparity in jobs between women from the various social classes and areas of residence. Since the 1950s the proportion of women in the labour force in most of the countries of Latin America has fluctuated around the comparatively low levels of between approximately 15 and 20 per cent. This participation rate showed increases in the 1960s in several countries, recording levels of approximately 25 per cent around 1970 in Panama and Argentina. In contrast, in countries such as Chile, Peru, and Nicaragua a slight decline was observed in the participation rate in those years. In any event, these participation rates are low by any standard, either compared with those of the central countries or those recorded in other regions of the Third World.

Of even greater importance than the significance of such low participation is the fact that not less than two thirds of the women in the labour force work at two levels separated by a considerable gap and yet have quite a lot in common. Taking first that half of the group made up of domestic employees, wage earners, the large majority living at their place of employment, it is increasing in absolute terms but is decreasing very slowly in terms of its share of the labour force. The second half - or perhaps an even greater number, approximately half the women employed in some countries - is made up of middle and upper-class women who hold positions as teachers at primary and secondary levels, jobs in the civil service and in commerce, working as professionals and technicians, executives and

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specialized secretaries, who employ those in the first group to take care of their homes and to handle the brunt of the house work and take care of the children.

Under the conditions created by the prevailing development styles and the expansion of education, the relations of this second group of women - professionals, executives and administrators from the middle and upper levels whose numbers, incomes and standards of living have risen considerably - with domestic servants and, in general, women performing services at the lowest level of the tertiary sector have tended to become symbiotic since one group has come to depend on the other, although the meaning of dependence is quite different in each case.

In fact the outflow from their homes of women from the middle and upper strata is greatly facilitated by the presence of a large number of young single women in the lower strata who are prepared to do housework in conditions of semi-claustration, and others who perform similar services as dailies. The proliferation of other types of home help further facilitates this trend, in other words, the professionalization of the educated women of the middle and upper classes. Their share of the labour force in both absolute and relative terms has been increasing continuously and more rapidly than that of other sectors of the population, stimulated to a large extent by the expansion in secondary and higher education in recent years, which has led to the rapid increase in the supply of qualified female staff.

A second aspect of female employment which deserves mention is that relating to women from low-level rural sectors whose contribution to the economy rarely seems to be duly recorded in employment statistics. Of the total number of women in the labour force only a small proportion of them - between 3 and 7 per cent - appear as workers in the agricultural sector. It is obvious that these rates are very low and do not reflect even remotely the economic contribution which female domestic production in rural areas

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represents. This is a problem of inadequate statistical indicators for recording this type of contribution, which is sizable in the indigenous rural and more traditional population, where women play a fundamental role as producers in the semi-subsistence economies.

A final and rapid observation is related to employment markets. In most of the countries in the region approximately half of the women employed belong to what is called the "informal" labour market in which temporary, part-time, badly paid jobs, which call for lesser qualifications, abound. This low-productivity employment sector is very unstable and tends to be more acutely affected in times of economic recession. Accordingly, poor women who perform tasks in the lowest occupational strata, mainly in the tertiary sector, show the highest rates of chronic under-employment, open unemployment, and the lowest and least steady incomes. In fact, the dynamic of the prevailing development styles in most of the countries of the region fails to solve the problem of providing both men and women with suitable jobs, but it is worth pointing out that the worst is reserved for a large number of the latter.

In the field of education woman's progress has been outstanding and in most of the countries it is rapidly approaching the level of male scholarship. At primary and secondary levels registration is practically the same for both sexes, whereas in higher education there still remain some gaps which are being rapidly closed by a proportionally greater increase in registration by women. However, there are still a few problems such as the different sexual preferences for stereotyped male or female technical and university careers; those linked with teaching and auxiliary health services, the humanities, artistic and expressive activities and office jobs being mainly taken up by women. It can also be seen that the professional use made of university education continues to be less among women, many of whom after graduating stay at home - in some cases only for a certain time - to take up domestic responsibilities as mothers and wives.

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Nevertheless, the impact of education is considerable and it is producing far-reaching changes in the patterns of sexual behaviour. It is for this reason that the greatest social changes are to be seen invariably among better educated women, whose participation in employment has increased appreciably. In contrast, women with less formal education from a lower social level are those who are affected to a lesser extent by the impact of the transition towards modernization under the styles of development prevailing in the region. Their access to the labour force is subject to the disadvantages outlined above, and is partly the result of the major limitations to their capacity to organize themselves and to take social action to obtain better jobs and better working conditions, the extension and improvement of health services, and improved standards of consumption and housing.

There is no doubt that the education of women - on average higher than that of the active male population - is important in generating a suitable capacity for formulating and raising social issues for consideration by the public authorities, for example, social aspects such as urbanization, participation in organizations and pressure groups, and the modernization of social attitudes. Exposure to mass communication media, whose impact in raising the levels of aspirations - mainly of consumption and social mobility - and instrumental rationality are in practice considerable is also conducive to ambiguous and contradictory behaviour. Very often traditional ways of life are abandoned more rapidly than new social behaviour patterns are adopted.

Often too, the movement towards greater social participation by women through associations and pressure groups took place in such conditions that social participation of that type was considerably limited by the strategies of the prevailing development styles, which were more concerned with the acceleration of the growth of production than the promotion of social development. These general conditions undoubtedly have some incidence on the social

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conditions in which the members of one or other sex find themselves and cannot, therefore, be overlooked in any attempt to analyse them.

For that reason, before terminating, it seems necessary to reiterate that the important broader context, to which the estimates on the changes experienced in the social roles of women in development must refer, ought of course to be that of the global social dynamic since in fact what occurs in the economy and society as a whole and in the separate sectors is of no less concern to women than to men. Strictly speaking, in an analysis of this type one should not overlook those aspects which have represented and represent efforts designed to overcome the various discriminatory social mechanisms which impede their progress and set them apart from men socially, neither should one forget the determinative influence of the social structure and styles of development on specific situations where discrimination may be exercised. In other words, the subject of the participation of women in the development of society is so complex that the analysis of the mere differences which may be observed between their social situations and those of men cannot exhaust it. And this is so because, inter alia, in addition to these considerations the community of life and experiences which they share with the men of their own class and social background cannot and should not be ignored, as is customary when attention is focussed on purely discriminatory aspects. In this connexion, regard must be had - and not only as a backdrop - for the views expressed in the document 5/ which provides a general analysis and evaluation of the dominant features of the Latin American development process from both global and sectoral viewpoints, and in which attention is drawn to, and evidence provided of, a series of social problems which have either a positive or negative effect on the various sectors of the population, whether they be men or women.

5/ The document in question is entitled: The economic and social development and external relations of Latin America;
(E/CEPAL/AC.70/2).