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Changes in the *urban female* labour market

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This article seeks to make an orderly summary of the information on urban female labour in Latin America in the 1990s and thus make a contribution to an updated diagnosis of the female labour market to help serve in the formulation of policies for women. It looks at the past evolution of female labour, analyses the effects of the crisis of the early 1980s on this sector of labour, and reviews the changes that have taken place in it, which have undermined the validity of some myths on this subject. It also looks at some critical aspects of female labour, such as income, occupational segmentation, the segregated incorporation of women into jobs involving new technology, and the reduction of the stability of female employment, as reflected in the increase in homeworkers and own-account workers. Finally, the author analyses the situation of domestic workers, who have traditionally enjoyed little stability or social protection. The statistical information presented comes from the 1980 and 1990 household surveys for thirteen countries which account for over 80% of the population of Latin America. On the basis of the analyses, policy guidelines are proposed regarding the labour market, the educational system and the family and society, with a view to improving the situation of working women and making better use of female human resources against the background of a new regional setting which assigns increasing importance to technical change, innovation, intellectual added value, and flexibility in adapting to this new situation which will permit really effective participation in development.

I

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 in real conditions, or rather, the hypotheses concerning those conditions are verified, while at the same time it influences and modifies them. These changes must be recorded if it is desired to develop effective and efficient public policies. An up-to-date diagnosis of the real conditions is therefore of fundamental importance for the formulation of economic and social policies, and moreover public policies must be formulated from the standpoint of societies made up of men and women who behave in different ways in different stages of their life-cycle, taking into account the needs arising from such conditions.

On the basis of special tabulations of household surveys, this article gives an ordered compilation of the information on urban female labour in Latin America in the 1990s. It seeks to prepare an updated diagnosis of the situation as regards female labour and the main changes observed in it between the 1980s and 1990s, as a contribution to the formulation of policies for women.

Section II looks at the evolution of female labour and analyses the effects of the crisis of the early 1980s. Section III reviews the changes which have taken place in the female labour sector and which have shown many of the assertions hitherto in vogue in this area to be pure myths. Section IV reviews the aspects of female labour which give rise to the greatest concern, namely, income, occupational segmen-

tation, the segregated incorporation of women into jobs involving new technology, the reduction of the stability of female employment, as reflected in the increase in homeworkers and own-account workers, and the situation of domestic servants, who have traditionally enjoyed little stability or social protection.

The statistical information presented is based on household surveys carried out in 1980 and 1990 in thirteen countries which account for over 80% of the population of Latin America. These surveys were processed and standardized by the ECLAC Division of Statistics and Economic Projections. 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 affect the labour market and flexibility to adapt to these new conditions will make possible really effective participation in development.

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II

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 which organize 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 lines 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. 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 the younger women. Moreover, as much of the female labour force works in sectors which are not clearly structured and have low levels of productivity, 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 State employment for women, so that not only was the pre-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 lower-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 the restructuring of daily life. Most families survived the crisis by making an enormous effort in which all their members participated through new combinations of 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 bear most of the burden. The paradoxical aspect of this strategy is that it made possible the continuation of adjustment policies involving great social costs (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 in line with a long-standing trend, the effects of the crisis sharply accentuated it. The greater female unemployment in Latin America is due to the following structural factors: insufficient economic growth to absorb the increasing labour supply, further accentuated by the crisis; the difficulty of finding jobs for women because of the occupational segmentation of the labour market, which limits the number 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. The data for the 1990s indicate that in 12 countries 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, except in Chile and Paraguay, whose economies were in a growth phase (ECLAC, 1993). Even so, however, the information for 1992 indicates that in Chile female unemployment rates for the 15 to 24 age group were higher than those for men (SERNAM, 1993).

With regard to the effects of the crisis on non-wage-earning 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 vitally needed goods and the reduction in social service 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 which has not been analysed much is that of the changes caused by the crisis within Latin American societies in the dividing lines between the

areas of action of the State, society at large and the family. For many years, there was a tendency to transfer functions from the private to the public area: a good example of this is the care of small children, which has tended to be transferred from the mother to a kindergarten attendant. With the crisis, however, many activities formerly carried out by the public authorities were “privatized”, so that with 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 the State in looking after preschool children, some interesting initiatives have emerged,¹ 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.

III

Women in the 1990s: myths and concrete facts

Along with the great changes that have taken place in the macroeconomic indicators and the effects of the crisis and the adjustment, structural trends have also changed the life of Latin American women through their longer life expectancy, their higher level of education, and the tendency to have fewer children. These aspects have affected their participation in the labour force, which has steadily increased and has been reflected in an increase in the number of years of economically active life of the female population. Thus, between 1970 and 1990 the life expectancy of

women in the region increased by seven years, their global fertility rate went down from 5.0 to 3.1, and their economically active life increased by rather more than five years (CELADE, 1989 and 1993). 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 73% in 1990 (CELADE, 1991).

¹ For example, the Association of Community Mothers in Colombia (AMColombia). For more details, see *Mujer/Fempress*, 1994.

Although these data do point to a substantial process of change over these twenty 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 has been done in the case of Spain (Garrido, 1992)– that there are two different social biographies for the region, covering two very different worlds: that of the population over 50, and that of the people who have not yet reached that age. The distance between two generations of women –mothers and daughters– 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 1980-1990 period. Nevertheless, despite the generalized increase in female participation (except in urban areas of Panama), and although male participation has gone down or remained unchanged, the gap between the sexes continues to be very considerable. Information from household surveys (table 1) shows that rates of female activity in urban areas range from 34% in Chile to 50% in Paraguay, whereas male participation rates range from 73% in Bolivia to 84% in Paraguay and Guatemala. Panama registers declines in both female and male participation in the labour market, probably due to discouragement at the very high rates of unemployment: around 22% for women and 17.2% for men.

Information for urban areas shows that the highest rates of female economic activity are between the ages of 20 and 54. In the group of women between 25 and 29 (the group with the highest proportion of economically active members), participation rates ranged from 45% in Mexico to 71% in Uruguay. Women over 55, and especially women

between 60 and 64 (who reflect a historical tendency 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.

Conventional wisdom and some studies for the 1970s in other regions or in Latin America have given rise to various assertions on female labour participation which, according to the information collected for urban areas of the region in the 1990s, are now mere myths (that is to say, beliefs which serve as the 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 has the shape of a "U"

A very common belief –based on the experience of the developed world– is that female participation has the shape of a "U", with two points when it is at its maximum: thus, participation is allegedly greatest before the birth of the first child, and after the youngest child starts school.² 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 of different groups of women shows that in the 1990s, in 13 urban areas of Latin America, female participation has risen steadily in the 15 to 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 (table 2), with the biggest increases in female participation taking place in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups.

² See in this connection the stylized curves for the industrialized countries and for Latin America prepared by Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1992, p. 17).

TABLE 1

Latin America: Participation rates, by sex, 1980 and 1990^a
(Percentage)

Country	Female economically active population		Male economically active population	
	1980	1990	1980	1990
Argentina	32.4	38.2	75.6	75.7
Bolivia	...	46.6	...	73.3
Brazil	37.2	45.1	81.5	82.5
Colombia	41.8	45.7	79.3	79.2
Costa Rica	33.6	39.1	77.6	77.6
Chile	...	34.0	...	73.2
Guatemala	...	42.9	...	84.4
Honduras	...	43.4	...	80.2
Mexico	...	35.9	...	77.3
Panama	44.5	42.8	76.2	75.6
Paraguay	...	49.7	...	84.2
Uruguay	37.3	43.8	74.6	74.7
Venezuela	31.2	37.5	78.4	77.9

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division and Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for the respective countries.

^a Urban population aged 15 or more.

TABLE 2

Latin America: Rates of female economic activity of selected age groups in urban areas, 1980 and 1990
(Percentage)

Country	15-24 years		25-34 years		35-44 years	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Argentina	44.9	41.1	45.4	52.5	42.7	52.9
Bolivia	...	33.8	...	56.7	...	62.0
Brazil	42.9	48.1	43.9	55.7	42.3	55.3
Colombia	42.4	41.2	52.1	61.2	49.2	56.8
Costa Rica	33.2	39.2	45.6	52.6	44.4	51.8
Chile	...	26.4	...	46.1	...	46.8
Guatemala	...	42.1	...	50.1	...	50.0
Honduras	...	34.5	...	53.8	...	57.2
Mexico	...	36.4	...	44.6	...	42.3
Panama	40.0	35.5	63.3	58.7	58.3	60.6
Paraguay	...	50.6	...	62.8	...	61.4
Uruguay	43.2	46.5	56.6	69.3	54.5	65.7
Venezuela	25.7	24.8	42.6	50.8	42.0	53.7

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division and Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for the respective countries.

A recent 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: there, on the basis of fertility surveys, it is concluded that labour force participation by married women or common-law wives between 20 and 49 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 married women and common-law wives, 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.

Since the 1980s, the percentage of households headed by women who are the sole breadwinner has reached very substantial levels: between a quarter and a third of all households.³ There are also households –not detected in population censuses or household surveys because of the definition of “head of household” used– where the woman’s contribution is equal to or greater than that of the male head. A study carried out in the metropolitan Buenos Aires area which went into this matter in detail found that the proportion of households where a woman was the main breadwinner had risen from 19% in 1980 to 25% in 1989 (Geldstein, 1992). 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 which have analysed career paths show that men and women with similar levels of qualifications start off at similar income levels, but as their careers progress the paths of men and women tend to

³ 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%, St. Kitts & Nevis 46%, St. Lucia 39%, St. Vincent and the Grenadines 42%, Trinidad and Tobago 25%, Uruguay 21% and Venezuela 22% (United Nations, 1991). The information from the 1990 household surveys gave the following values for urban areas: Argentina 21%, Bolivia 16.7%, Brazil 20.1%, Chile 23.2%, Colombia 22.6%, Costa Rica 22.6%, Guatemala 20.8%, Honduras 26.6%, Mexico 17.7%, Panama 24.7%, Paraguay 19.7%, Uruguay 25.2% and Venezuela 22.1%.

diverge, as men quickly rise to positions of greater income, prestige and power, while women remain at the levels where they started. Recent studies 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 (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 for all levels of education. In the 1980s, the income gap between men and women tended to improve in four countries and got worse in two (Costa Rica and Uruguay), but if the educational variable is introduced the situation changes. At the lowest level of education (less than three years’ schooling) the gap narrowed in all cases, but at the highest level of education (over 13 years) the gap between women’s wages and those of men widened again in urban areas of Costa Rica, Uruguay and Venezuela. Thus, when the 1980 data are compared with those for 1990, the biggest income difference corresponds to the highest levels of education (table 3).

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 raises doubts about the neoclassical analyses of cost and benefits as determining factors regarding women’s “option” to work. It would be very interesting, in this respect, to study women’s labour behaviour by economic and social 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 number of kinds of jobs: a situation which some authors interpret as a “preference” of women for certain types of work.

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

TABLE 3

**Latin America: Income differences, by sex, for selected levels
of education,^a 1980 and 1990
(Percentage)**

Country	Total		0.3 years education		13 or more years education	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
Argentina	63.5	68.8	...	...	...	...
Bolivia	...	57.4	...	58.4	...	46.0
Brazil	46.3	56.0	41.0	45.8	38.8	50.7
Colombia	56.1	66.7	51.0	58.8	55.0	60.4
Costa Rica	80.6	71.0	48.2	51.3	86.4	64.2
Chile	...	59.2	...	67.7	...	41.9
Guatemala	...	65.8	...	45.4	...	64.2
Honduras	...	57.9	...	49.9	...	51.5
Mexico	...	68.2	...	63.8	...	61.2
Panama	...	77.0	...	46.1	...	68.4
Paraguay	...	56.7	...	64.0	...	47.1
Uruguay	53.9	44.3	46.6	50.1	44.0	37.3
Venezuela	67.8	72.7	56.3	64.0	71.1	68.0

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division and Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for the respective countries.

^a Average female income as a percentage of average male income for urban population aged 15 or more.

information from the household surveys of the 1990s, however, gives quite a different picture. First of all, the proportion of women in 13 cities and urban areas of the region who describe themselves as housewives varies widely, ranging from 20% in Montevideo to 49% in Santiago, Chile.⁴ Only from the age of 45 onwards do the majority of women describe themselves as housewives. Moreover, 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 is greater than this, 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 mostly 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 who are domestic servants is much

higher—between one-tenth and a quarter of total female employment, depending on the country—,⁵ the total 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 housewife 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 have to play the dual role of worker and housewife. This has important consequences which should be taken into account in the design of policies for working women.

To sum up, then, the statistical information for the 1990s shows that most Latin American women, and especially those between 20 and 45, participate in the labour market, and that they have high levels of education but are paid much less than men, whatever the educational level in question. It also shows that the changes which have taken place in the female labour market are doing away with some myths regarding working women.

⁴ The figures for urban areas are as follows: Argentina 37%, Bolivia 29%, Brazil 41%, Chile 49%, Colombia 39%, Costa Rica 42%, Guatemala 46%, Honduras 40%, Mexico 48%, Panama 36%, Paraguay 36%, Uruguay 20%, and Venezuela 46%.

⁵ With regard to domestic servants, see section IV, subsection 4 a).

There are still many other similar beliefs, however, which the information from household surveys cannot prove or disprove, so that it would be interesting to investigate them by other means in order to see whether they are true or not: for example, the beliefs that absenteeism among women workers is more frequent because they need to look after their children; that women work fewer hours than men, and that the cost per woman worker is higher than for men because of the cost of day nurseries and pre- and post-natal leave. This latter belief does not appear to take account of the fact that the wages of female workers—married or single, with or without children—are much lower than those of men. The dynamism of the situation of female workers makes it more and more necessary to verify this and many other assertions empirically.

Most of the quantitative studies of women's labour participation determine the effects that such participation has on their lives, but little research has been done on the new feelings of women entering the world of work and the changes to which women give rise when they enter it. It has been suggested that women's abrupt transition from the home to the outside world means moving 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 also bring with them some criteria from the private, domestic world, along with values such as affective attitudes, which they display in line with the degree of labour satisfaction they derive from the treatment and recognition given to them. 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, domestic life, reflects 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 work in (more or less traditionally feminine, more or less modern) and the form of work chosen. In the latter 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, thus facilitating their transition from the home to paid work.

Some elements derived from qualitative studies made in business firms show that when women begin to work in previously male workplaces there is a change in the workers' language, although in the modernization process the "culture" of the firm is maintained, and the only things changed in it are the forms of reproduction of discrimination against women. This phenomenon takes place in particular through the firms' practices of selecting, hiring, evaluating and promoting staff (Hola and Todaro, 1992). The male stamp is so strong that if a woman who enters the firm wants to be listened to and understood, she has to make a special effort to express herself in a language that fits in with the model prevailing in that social environment, rather than in her own normal way of thinking and feeling. In modern firms, however, proposals are being made for the recovery and enhancement of "feminine" elements which could lead to more efficient organization of the firm, such as negotiating capacity, better personal relations, greater commitment and fulfillment of tasks, etc., although in other contexts these same elements have been used to justify the exclusion of women from certain posts.

Through in-depth studies it could be possible to find out if the concentration of women in "female" sectors is determined only on the side of 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. On the one hand, increased female participation has been favoured by the increase in the number of jobs in the tertiary sector, where women have traditionally worked on a large scale. 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.

IV

Critical aspects: income, occupational segregation, new technologies, and the growing precariousness of some female jobs

1. Income

The greatest inequalities between men and women in the labour market are in income. Of the difference in income between men and women, the percentage 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. Some studies suggest that occupational segregation and the resulting differences in income are much more extreme in the region 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 attributed to discrimination tend to go down with the passage of 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 have been less successful in countries with highly decentralized labour markets, such as the United States (González, 1992).

In the region, the income differences 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, whatever the level of education in question, and discrimination is present 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, the statistical data show that in the five countries for which information is available, the wage difference between men and women improved between 1980 and 1990 in the case of the lowest levels of education, but at the higher levels the disparity increased in three cases and went down in

only two (table 3). A probable explanation of the smaller wage difference 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 difference increased during the crisis and stabilization period (1980-1983) but went down 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 study recently published by the World Bank 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 income between men and women 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 the selection that women make themselves 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 determined for more advanced countries (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos, 1992). This unexplained 60% corresponds mainly to cultural aspects which segregate the labour market and establish a limited number of jobs considered to be suitable for women.

The information available for the 1990s on 13 urban areas of the region shows that the average income of women is only between 44% and 77% that of men. This disparity is even more marked in the

TABLE 4

Latin America: Differences in average income, by sex and household status, ^a 1980 and 1990
(Percentage) ^b

Country	Wome/Men		Heads of household	
	1980	1990	1980	1990
Argentina	63.5	68.8	70.5	69.6
Bolivia	...	57.4	...	56.0
Brazil	46.3	56.0	40.2	53.2
Colombia	56.1	66.7	59.2	62.1
Costa Rica	80.6	71.0	63.3	64.7
Chile	...	59.2	...	56.4
Guatemala	...	65.8	...	62.6
Honduras	...	57.9	...	51.3
Mexico	...	68.2	...	65.9
Panama	...	77.0	...	64.2
Paraguay	...	56.7	...	54.7
Uruguay	53.9	44.3	52.5	45.0
Venezuela	67.8	72.7	59.2	65.6

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division and Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for the respective countries.

^a Urban population aged 15 or more.

^b Average female income as a percentage of average male income for all employed persons and for those who are also heads of households.

case of heads of households: the average income of female heads of households is only between 45% and 69% that of their male counterparts (table 4). This information points once more to the need for special social and employment policies for such women, who suffer from the highest levels of poverty.

2. Occupational segmentation

Sex-based occupational segmentation 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 indexes of segregation increased in the 1980s, and in some cases there was even resegregation of occupations, with marked vertical segregation within occupations and 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 each industry

followed an organizational principle involving strict division of labour into male and female jobs, although there was a wide variety of different situations among the firms studied (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 1990 this sector grew steadily and absorbed between 42% and 65% of the female labour force.⁶

The occupations with the largest numbers of women are professional and technical posts, saleswomen and domestic servants. The information for 1990 also shows that a higher proportion of women than of men work as professionals and technicians, while a higher proportion of men work as 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 (table 5).

⁶ The values for the various urban areas are as follows: Argentina 66%; Bolivia 43%; Brazil 64%; Chile 57%; Colombia 47%; Costa Rica 53%; Guatemala 42%; Honduras 44%; Mexico 52%; Panama 65%; Paraguay 55%; Uruguay 61% and Venezuela 61%.

TABLE 5

Latin America: Distribution of economically active population^a among selected types of occupations, 1990
(Percentage)^b

Country	Professionals and technicians		Managers		Service worker		Manual workers	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Argentina	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Bolivia	13.8	13.5	1.8	4.7	23.3	6.3	12.4	52.9
Brazil	15.9	6.2	5.0	10.2	33.2	16.6	14.6	38.2
Colombia	13.6	13.3	...	...	30.8	8.7	17.6	47.0
Costa Rica	20.2	14.6	3.4	6.2	26.1	9.9	18.8	39.9
Chile	14.7	7.1	2.6	5.5	32.1	7.8	11.6	46.1
Guatemala	13.9	10.1	4.8	5.9	25.1	5.5	19.1	41.1
Honduras	13.9	9.4	1.9	4.3	30.3	8.5	18.9	47.0
Mexico	17.7	11.7	1.7	4.5	23.5	7.9	13.6	48.3
Panama	20.2	10.8	4.0	7.8	31.4	12.0	7.8	34.8
Paraguay	13.7	8.9	1.3	4.6	36.3	9.9	12.3	44.5
Uruguay	17.7	6.9	1.6	4.7	31.0	9.8	16.2	47.5
Venezuela	24.5	10.0	2.2	5.3	26.6	10.0	10.1	43.2

Source: ECLAC, Social Development Division and Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, on the basis of special tabulations of household surveys for the respective countries.

^a Urban population aged 15 or more.

^b Percentages of total number of employed persons of each sex in each category.

^c "Professionals and technicians" also includes "Managers".

It has been noted that in Venezuela the rapid growth in the number of workers with university education has not been accompanied 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. A study made in Chile shows that women are more concentrated in certain types of jobs and certain economic sectors than men. Thus, a single occupational category (personal services) absorbs over 70% of all the women working in the financial sector, while for all sectors taken together it accounts for 31.3% of the female employees (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 plants, followed by services and finally commerce (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 the participation of women is lower; ii) by industrial branch: women are concentrated in the textile, clothing and leatherware, 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 effects observed 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 in 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 been an ongoing feature in recent years. In the 13 urban areas of the region already referred to, female participation in this branch varies from 28% of the total number of employees in Guatemala to 40% in Venezuela and has been increasing since the 1960s.⁷ 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 terms of socialization and domestic matters; failure to give proper credit to the greater discipline and obedience of women, and finally, failure to acknowledge the experience acquired in previous jobs (Hirata and Humphrey, 1986, quoted in Rangel de Paiva Abreu, 1993).

A study carried out in Chile shows that female employment has increased considerably in the financial sector. In 1990 the proportion of women in this sector (33%) was higher than in 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 made in Brazil in the 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 only 4.7 minimum wages (Rangel de Paiva Abreu, 1993).

4. The growing precariousness of 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 instability of employment; 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 precarious work (García, 1993).

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 precarious in terms of their discontinuity in time and the lack of regulation regarding labour laws (failure to sign proper contracts), wages (failure to comply with the minimum wage), working hours, social security, and health protection. Among these jobs are traditionally precarious occupations such as domestic service, but also 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 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 precariousness need to be investigated

⁷ The 1990 values for the 13 urban areas are as follows: Argentina 38%; Bolivia 29%; Brazil 35%; Chile 32%; Colombia 36%; Costa Rica 20%; Guatemala 27%; Honduras 35%; Panama 36%; Paraguay 30%; Uruguay 36% and Venezuela 40%.

in greater depth. In general, however, it can be said that in Latin America there is widespread deregulation of labour and loss of the labour advances won by the workers in the past.

In measuring women's participation in the informal and precarious sector, the general problems 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 some countries of the region, according to data from household surveys, women make up between 8% (Panama) and 64% (Cochabamba, Bolivia) of the informal sector (Pollack, 1993).

The characteristic difficulties in 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. 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 place for prolonging a person's working life), migrants, Indians, 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 unstable, precarious nature. They comprise domestic servants (on whom most information is available), home workers, and own-account workers (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 can be included in the informal sector, but in fact not all belong to it, as in the case of some own-account or home workers.

a) *Domestic servants*

According to the United Nations, if housework were taken into account 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 (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 which absorbed most female labour, but in 1990 women working as paid domestic servants in the urban areas of 13 countries of the region represented between 7% (Venezuela) and 24% (Paraguay) of total female employment. Among the countries where information is available for 1980 and 1990, domestic service has tended to decline as a women's occupation in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Uruguay, while it has increased slightly in Argentina, Panama and Venezuela. In the latter country, however, although the proportion of women working as domestic servants went up between 1980 and 1990, it is still less than in the other countries. This tendency towards the decline of paid domestic work in general terms and as a women's 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 the years 1989 and 1990, 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: live-in or live-out. The vast majority of live-in maids are single, under 30, and have a somewhat lower level of education than live-out maids. Live-out maids have a rather higher level of education, receive lower average wages, are older, and are mostly married or common-law wives (table 6).

One of the most serious problems faced by domestic servants is the isolation in which they work, which makes it difficult to organize them 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 Castro, 1993). Nevertheless, a substantial change is taking place, since domestic servants have managed to organize themselves into a regional confederation covering 11 Latin American 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 awareness of their position as workers.

TABLE 6

Latin America (seven countries): Characteristics of live-in and live-out domestic servants, 1990^a
(Percentage)

Characteristics	Bolivia ^b	Brazil	Colombia	Chile	Guatemala	Uruguay	Venezuela
Unmarried	89.8	...	88.6	87.7	76.2	77.4	85.8
10-29 years of age	87.7	78.5	76.4	55.2	77.2	52.8	69.9
No education	9.7	41.2	6.1	...	...	3.8	6.1
Primary education	51.9	12.8	69.5	...	...	67.0	67.1
Average income ^c	47.4	38.0	91.1	...	48.7	84.1	44.7
Unmarried	52.8	...	40.5	40.1	28.8	33.8	39.1
10-29 years of age	63.0	58.0	46.2	33.9	48.8	37.2	61.3
No education	8.8	33.1	10.5	...	58.2	3.8	13.0
Primary education	52.1	27.7	64.6	...	7.9	63.6	67.2
Average income ^c	...	35.7	...	...	27.4	29.5	22.1

Source: ECLAC, Special tabulations of the 1989 and 1990 household employment and unemployment surveys carried out by Rosa Bravo for the Second Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers.

^a Urban population aged 10 or more.

^b Urban population aged 15 or more.

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

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 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 incapacity, 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.

There are not enough regional-scope 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*

The sector of own-account workers is 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 precarious character of this category

takes the form of the absence 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 1990. The numbers of men and women who engage in own-account work are fairly similar, except in Bolivia, where over half the working women do so in this category.⁸

In the 1980s, both men and women increased their participation in this form of work in all the countries of the region. It has been noted, however, that women participate as own-account workers to a larger extent in countries with a large Indian population: Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras and Paraguay. Another occupational category which is very small in numbers but receives very small incomes is that of family workers (paid or unpaid). Consequently, in order to make a really thorough evaluation of the precariousness of own-account work in the informal sector it is necessary to make a more detailed analysis than that permitted by household surveys, that is to say, one which also covers the number of hours worked, the income received, and the past labour background.

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

Attempts have been made to favour own-account workers through various measures, such as special systems of credit, training with a view to the development of entrepreneurial capacity, support for the creation of small enterprises, etc. 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.

⁸ According to data from the 1990 surveys, the percentages of urban women who are own-account workers or unpaid family workers are as follows: Argentina 26%; Bolivia 55%; Brazil 24%; Chile 22%; Colombia 24%; Costa Rica 18%; Guatemala 37%; Honduras 39%; Mexico 21%; Panama 14%; Paraguay 30%; Uruguay 21% and Venezuela 20%.

IV

Final comments

1. Summary

Latin America has partly overcome the short-term adjustment stage following the external debt crisis of the early 1980s 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 brought great dynamism to the labour market, expressed in changes in the 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 they have had strong effects on women's labour participation. Among these effects, the most noticeable has been the so-called "feminization of the labour force" or the "silent revolution". This phenomenon has been taking place since the 1960s, and although its pace has been slackening in recent years, it still continues.

Although the increase in female participation is tending to bring it close 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 informal (and more precarious) sector. There can be no doubt that in the 1980s substantial changes took place in the situation of female workers which involve a change in the perceptions regarding female labour held in the past. The trends which have been observed in this respect display both continuities and breaks which tend to make many past or existing assertions obsolete.

The information from household surveys on the urban areas of 13 Latin American countries 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 which are generally higher, and an increase in own-account and informal-sector work by women.

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 analyse gender-related aspects of 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 which 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, average income, etc.: 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.

Such processes back up the idea that the effects of external changes and social actions should be continually evaluated. The undesirable effects of the legislation on domestic servants' rest periods

(referred to earlier), or what happened when legislation was adopted on the need for day nurseries in firms, are a warning on the need for continuous monitoring, not only to check the application of legal measures but also to avoid evasion of the spirit of the rules.

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 of women, such as working conditions, the expansion of work options, and the elimination of occupational segmentation.

3. Significance of the changes

A challenge which still remains to be faced is that of elucidating the mutual relations between the dimensions of female 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 the evolution of these dimensions takes place at uneven rates, but it is also known that their interrelation means that when changes take place in one dimension, the others will necessarily be affected too: consequently, the magnitude and direction of these changes should be closely analysed. A query also arises in this connection: does female labour participation, which is a basic requisite for women's independence, lead to independence on other levels too, or does it merely mean an increase in their responsibilities and an overload of work?

In the new development proposals, especially the ECLAC proposal for changing production patterns with social equity, improving the skills and qualifications of human resources is one of the key elements. 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. Changes in the organization of the system of production offer women opportunities of which they must take advantage. Whether these potentials strengthen or weaken occupational segregation, for example, will depend on the

bargaining power that working women achieve. From the standpoint of the labour market, the greater flexibility of highly educated female labour could become a highly attractive feature within the new development pattern.

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 greater potential and possibilities for following working careers different from those of their own age-groups and generations, in accordance with their greater flexibility as human resources.

The fact that a third of the region's labour force consists of women has a new and different significance in the cultural image of the region. Firstly, in sheer numbers working women represent a factor that 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. The acceptance in the received social image of the idea that women with small children may work outside the home should be reflected in more support services, especially for the care of pre-school children (creches and day nurseries) and children who are attending school (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 further heightens the need for policies designed to provide much-needed aid in child care.

With regard to the labour market, on the other hand, there is ample scope for improvements in such areas as regulating the working hours and pay of home workers, whether own-account workers or subcontractors, and raising the status of female labour in

the eyes of employers. Society still needs to recognize the domestic work, and especially the child-raising duties carried out by women, as socially vital tasks that could well be carried out by both sexes.

(Original: Spanish)

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