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**CRISIS, ADJUSTMENT AND THE DYNAMICS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN
CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

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**CRISIS, ADJUSTMENT
AND THE DYNAMICS OF GENDER RELATIONS
IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN¹**

A. GESKE DIJKSTRA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of gender relations in Central America and the Caribbean, in particular between 1980 and 1990. Most countries of the region experienced economic crisis and carried out stabilization measures. Starting point for the paper is that gendered effects of crisis and adjustment are caused and mediated by existing gender inequalities of different types: cultural inequality, inequality in power, and inequality in access to social and economic assets.

The paper finds, among other conclusions, that gender equality improved in this period. It appears that cultural trends, public policies, and the strength of the women's movement played a role in improving the relative situation of women. The existing gender equality in a country proved to be of little predictive value for the impact of the economic crisis on gender equality.

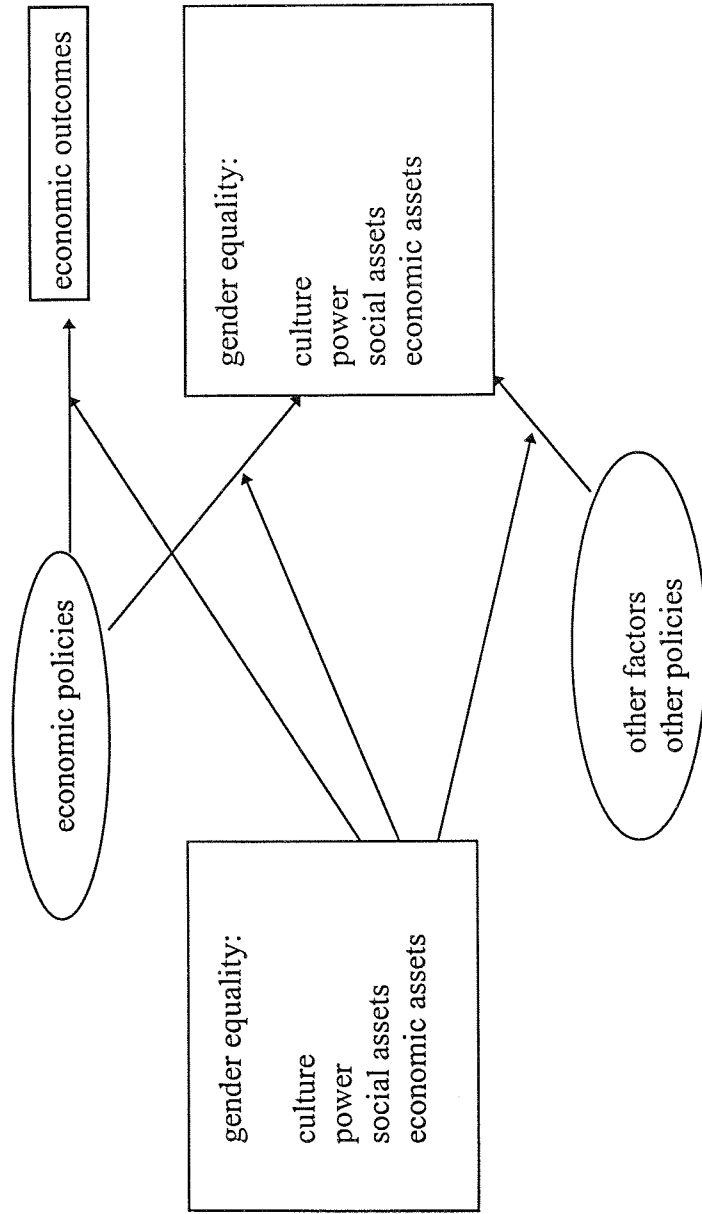
1. INTRODUCTION

For most countries of the region, the 1990s are a period of macroeconomic recovery after the "lost decade" of the 1980s. These countries went through a period of macroeconomic crisis in the early 1980s, attempted to solve the crisis first by increased borrowing and then, at some point in time, began to "adjust". This implied that austerity measures were taken aimed at stabilisation of the economy. Most countries also embarked on economic reforms, but this occurred towards the end of the 1980s or in the beginning of the 1990s.¹ The results of stabilization and adjustment programmes are mixed. In some countries, growth rates were still negative in the early 1990s, while in others the macroeconomic situation improved already in the second half of the 1980s. This paper examines the impact of crisis and adjustment on gender relations. Eventually, stabilisation and structural adjustment are expected to lead to economic growth in all countries. The sustainability of that growth depends partly on what happens to gender relations in the region.

From the literature, we know that stabilization and structural adjustment measures have different effects on men and women (Benería and Feldman 1992, Sparr 1994). This follows from the fact that "the economy is a gendered structure" (Elson and McGee 1995). This gendered structure is reflected, in particular, in the sexual division of labour, in the lack of recognition for unpaid work which is mainly carried out by women, and in the unequal access to resources within the household (Elson 1995). Policies that do not take these inequalities and specific gender relations into account, are less effective. In general, gender inequalities reduce the efficiency of the economy and cause lower growth rates (Agarwal 1995, Palmer 1995, World Bank 1995).

The starting point for this paper is that the gendered effects of crisis and adjustment policies are caused and mediated by existing gender inequalities of all types: cultural inequality (ideas and norms on gender roles), inequality in power, and inequality in

Figure 1. Relations between variables



access to social and economic assets. It is, therefore, important to measure this existing gender inequality. In addition, if adjustment affects women more than men, this should be reflected in a worsening of indicators of gender inequality.

The problem is, of course, that gender inequality is not *only* influenced by economic policies. Gender inequality may exacerbate by the political and religious system, as under the Taliban in Afghanistan, or may reduce as a result of structural trends such as urbanization. Positive trends or factors may counteract against eventual negative effects of structural adjustment policies. It is assumed that economic policies will affect the access to social and economic assets more directly. However, a change in these indicators will have consequences for gender inequality in other dimensions (culture, power) as well. In this sense, the different dimensions of gender inequality also interact with each other. The interactions between gender relations, existing inequalities, economic policies and other factors can be visualized as in figure 1.

The region Central America and the Caribbean is interesting to examine the relations between these variables. With respect to gender relations, there are large differences between countries. In particular, cultures are different, as they are influenced by the different colonial histories of the countries. Central America and the Spanish speaking Caribbean have been influenced by the catholic church and by a patriarchal culture in which men control their wife's labour and sexuality. Women are primarily seen as mothers and are responsible for reproduction. Men are seen as superior, and are active in the economy and in the public realm. Women are active in the house (*casa*) and men in the street (*calle*) (Safa 1995, 47).

In the Caribbean, a larger proportion of the population has a history of slavery. As slaves, women have always been important as workers and providers (Bolles 1991). Unlike Spanish speaking countries, this financial responsibility was seen as compatible with women's reproductive role (Deere et al. 1990, 10). Historically, female labour market participation in the english-speaking Caribbean has been higher than in Spanish speaking countries and Central America.² However, this shared responsibility of women for providing household income in the english-speaking Caribbean does not seem to have led to more visibility in society via higher labour market and political positions.

A first question to be dealt with in this paper is whether and to what extent these cultural and structural differences are reflected in comparative statistics on some indicators for the different dimensions of gender inequality. This is the assessment of the existing inequality. A further question is how these differences in gender inequality mediated the differential effects of crisis and adjustment measures. Finally, I examine what happened to some aspects of gender relations and gender inequality in general in a period of economic crisis and adjustment, bearing in mind that the changes in gender inequalities may have been influenced more by cultural and structural trends or factors than by (economic) policies.

Answering these questions is hampered by serious data limitations and analytical

problems. Gendered statistics on many relevant items are not available. Data sources used in this paper include statistical data bases, mainly from the Women's Indicators and Statistics Database of the UN (WISTAT), and secondary sources, in particular, available country case studies. A problem with available country studies is that they usually tell very little about the changes over time: the *dynamics* of gender relations.³ This paper attempts to provide some insights in these changes over time. In so doing, it is dependent on the limited availability of statistical data.

The data allow for comparisons between 1980 and (around) 1990. In 1980, the economic crisis for most countries began. However, most countries did not apply structural adjustment measures in strict sense (microeconomic reforms) in the 1980s. This means that I investigate the impact of economic crisis and stabilization measures, rather than the impact of economic reforms (adjustment in strict sense). The next section provides some background information on the different countries and their structural adjustment policies. The rest of the paper deals with the three questions defined above.

2. CRISIS AND ADJUSTMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Table 1 presents some background data on the countries of the region. The countries are ordered according to "subregion": first the seven Central American countries, then the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, then the English-speaking Caribbean (officially at least; many of them are bilingual with Spanish or French), then French Caribbean and finally Dutch Caribbean. There are large differences in size of the countries, as measured by population. Cuba, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Haiti are the most populous countries according to data of 1990 (first column). Central American countries are more homogeneous with respect to population size (with the exception of Belize) than Caribbean countries, where the differences are large.

In terms of GDP per capita, the Bahamas by far outweighs the other countries or territories. Other Caribbean countries or territories like Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados follow. The average citizen of Belize, Panama and Costa Rica is richer than citizens in other Central American countries. Haitians and Nicaraguans are the poorest of the whole region, followed by people living in Guyana and Honduras. To some extent, there seems to be a relationship between the level of GDP per capita and the degree of urbanization: the Bahamas, Cuba (for which no GDP is available), and Puerto Rico are most urbanized, Haiti and Guyana are least.

In the following, I concentrate on the larger Central American and Caribbean countries, excluding tiny countries and provinces, colonies, and territories (for which less data are available) from the analysis.

At around 1980 the economic crisis began to manifest itself in the region. The prices of the most important export products (coffee, sugar, bananas) began to fall in the wake

Table 1. General Indicators, Central America and the Caribbean

| Country | pop90 ¹ | gdpc90 ² | gr80-5 ³ | gr85-90 ³ | gr90-2 ³ | urb80 ⁴ | urb90 ⁴ |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Belize | 183 | 4.2 | 0.4 | 9.3 | 5.7 | | |
| Costa Rica | 3035 | 3.9 | 0.3 | 4.6 | 4.1 | 48 | 44 |
| El Salvador | 5172 | 2.0 | -1.9 | 1.9 | 4.3 | 40 | 47 |
| Guatemala | 9197 | 2.5 | -1.1 | 2.9 | 4.2 | 37 | 38 |
| Honduras | 5138 | 1.5 | 1.1 | 3.1 | 4.3 | 36 | 40 |
| Nicaragua | 3676 | 0.3 | 0.6 | -3.6 | 0.2 | 53 | 55 |
| Panama | 2418 | 3.6 | 2.9 | -1.4 | 9.1 | 50 | 47 |
| Cuba | 10608 | | 7.8 | -0.9 | -19.7 | 69 | 73 |
| Dominican Republic | 7170 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 3.6 | 52 | 59 |
| Antigua & Bermuda | | | 5.4 | 6.9 | 3.0 | | |
| Bahamas | 255 | 18.5 | 5.3 | 3.5 | -1.1 | 75 | |
| Barbados | 257 | 8.1 | -0.8 | 3.8 | -3.4 | 32 | |
| Dominica | | | | | | | |
| Grenada | 89 | 3.3 | 4.8 | 5.7 | 1.8 | | |
| Guyana | 796 | 1.2 | -3.5 | -3.3 | 6.9 | 22 | |
| Jamaica | 2420 | 3.2 | 0.1 | 4.6 | 0.9 | 41 | |
| Puerto Rico | 3530 | 10.6 | 2.9 | 4.5 | 3.2 | 67 | |
| St Kitts and Nevis | 44 | | 4.9 | 5.7 | 3.7 | | |
| St Lucia | 148 | 3.1 | 3.8 | 5.7 | 4.1 | 36 | |
| St Vincent & Grenadines | | 3.7 | 5.7 | 7.3 | 4.7 | | |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 1236 | 9.7 | -2.5 | -2.2 | 0.4 | 47 | |
| French Guiana | | | | | | | |
| Guadeloupe | 390 | | 0.4 | 5.2 | -0.9 | | |
| Haiti | 6486 | 0.7 | -0.9 | 0.1 | -5.3 | 25 | 31 |
| Martinique | | | | | | | |
| Neth Antilles | 172 | | -0.9 | 4.0 | -0.9 | | |
| Suriname | 422 | 2.8 | -0.3 | 1.2 | 3.8 | | |

¹ Population, in thousands.

² GDP per capita, in thousands of PPP \$.

³ Annual average growth rates.

⁴ Percentage of population living in urban areas.

Source: UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD (WISTAT)

of decreased world demand. In addition, interest rates on the extensive foreign debts soared. The impossibility of further borrowing on international commercial markets was the final blow. As a result, all Central American countries had low or negative growth rates in the early 1980s (table 1). In Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala growth rates

were also affected by civil wars. Panama was least affected by the economic crisis, with 2.9% average annual growth in the first half of the 1980s. However, in the second half growth rates became negative there also. In most other Central American countries some recovery took place in the second part of the decade. However, in Nicaragua the crisis intensified. This was due to increased activities of the contras and to inefficiencies in the economic policy (Dijkstra 1992). El Salvador, where the civil war also continued until 1990, also registered a low growth.

In the Caribbean, similar low or negative growth rates were registered in the early 1980s in the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Guadeloupe, Haiti, the Netherlands Antilles and Surinam. Among the non-tiny Caribbean countries, the only country that did not experience economic crisis in the early 1980s was Cuba. The impact of declining terms of trade began to be felt in that country at around 1985. A real crisis began around 1990 when Cuba no longer enjoyed aid and access to subsidized oil from the (former) Soviet Union and the whole economy collapsed (Eckstein 1997).

Most Central American countries could postpone harsh stabilization measures and economic reforms (Buttari 1992). Counterinsurgency (US) foreign aid was given on a large scale to Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Part of this aid could be used to finance balance of payments' and government deficits. Nicaragua enjoyed aid from Latin American, European and Soviet bloc countries, although this reduced substantially in the course of the decade. The only Central American country that did apply stabilization and structural adjustment measures early in the 1980s (in 1983) was Costa Rica.

Among the larger Caribbean countries, adjustment packages were adopted in Jamaica (1979) and in the Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago in the mid-1980s. These packages were mainly stabilization packages, however, and contained little reforms. Out of the countries that had carried out stabilization measures, Costa Rica was relatively successful while growth rates improved very little in the Dominican Republic. In Trinidad and Tobago, the economic crisis continued well into the 1990s. In Haiti the crisis also continued after 1990; this can be partly ascribed to political instability in that country.

3. GENDER EQUALITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

I begin examining gender inequality in the base year of this study, 1980. Several indicators can be looked at (see also Dijkstra 1998). A first set of variables is related to women's autonomy over their bodies, in particular reproductive rights: contraceptive use and fertility indicators. Many factors are of influence on contraceptive use by women: awareness, for example through education, physical and material accessibility, and attitudes. The latter implies that husbands, social environments and religion allow women

to decide to have fewer children. According to McLaren (1990: 253), "contraceptives can be ... predicted to work in societies where fertility rates are already dropping." This means that the use of contraceptives is in fact a strong cultural indicator since it reflects changing attitudes on size of families and the role of women therein. Apart from the possibility to decide on fewer children, contraceptives also allow women to have sexual intercourse without fear to become pregnant. However, the use of contraceptives is not always a sign of increased female autonomy. This is especially the case of women are forced to use contraceptives in the name of population policies and if proper information and tests are lacking (Smyth 1996). It is also the case if women are forced to use contraceptives by their husbands.⁴ Although sterilization of poor women has occurred in the region (Puerto Rico, some Central American countries), forced contraceptive use in the name of population control is less likely, although it cannot be excluded. On the whole, contraceptive use has been shown to be important for increasing female autonomy, for example for Jamaica (Rawlins 1987). In that country, there was a relationship with increased female education as well as increased participation on the labour market. For this reason, contraceptive use can be considered a rough and partial indicator for the extent to which women have control over their bodies and sexuality. It captures part of the cultural as well as the power dimension of gender inequality.

The available statistics include the fertility rate and the use of contraceptive methods by married women. A limitation of the latter is that it does not contain data for unmarried women. From the figures on contraceptive use shown (table 2) I subtracted "methods" that give either less security and/or reflect less female autonomy, namely abstention, rhythm, douche and withdrawal.

In Central America, the percentage of married women using a relatively reliable contraceptive method proved to be high in 1980 in Costa Rica and Panama. In the other Central American countries this proportion was much lower, and it was very low in Guatemala. In the larger Caribbean countries contraceptive use seemed to be rather widespread although lower than in Costa Rica and Panama. In the poorest countries Haiti and Guyana contraceptive use was lowest. Fertility rates were much lower in most Caribbean countries than in Central America - again, with the exception of Haiti. In this respect, the spanish colonization and the catholic religion seem to have led to a later reduction in fertility in Central America (and spanish-speaking Dominican Republic) as compared to the english-speaking Caribbean.

Another measure for female power is the share of women in parliament, as also used by UNDP (1995) for the construction of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The share of women in parliament is important in two ways. First, it is an indicator of women's access to the public sphere (calle), in other words, the relative autonomy of women to participate in institutions outside the household. Second, political power is an instrument for achieving laws and state policies that are in favour of women. In this second (instrumental) aspect, this dimension has relationships with all other dimensions.

Table 2. Urbanization, contraceptive use and fertility indicators

| Country | urb80 | urb90 | cc80 ¹ | cc90 ¹ | fert80 | fert90 |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|--------|--------|
| Costa Rica | 48 | 44 | 56 | 58 | 3.9 | 3.4 |
| El Salvador | 40 | 47 | 32 | 44 | 5.7 | 4.5 |
| Guatemala | 37 | 38 | 15 | 19 | 6.4 | 5.8 |
| Honduras | 36 | 40 | 24 | 33 | 6.6 | 5.6 |
| Nicaragua | 53 | 55 | 26 | 45 | 6.4 | 5.6 |
| Panama | 50 | 47 | 55 | | 4.1 | 3.1 |
| Cuba | 69 | 73 | | 68 | 2.1 | 1.8 |
| Dominican Rep. | 52 | 59 | 42 | 52 | 4.7 | 3.8 |
| Guyana | 22 | | 29 | | 3.9 | 2.8 |
| Jamaica | 41 | | 54 | 63 | 4.0 | 2.7 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 47 | | 46 | 45 | 3.4 | 3.0 |
| Haiti | 25 | 31 | 6 | 9 | 5.4 | 5.0 |

¹ Percentage of married women using contraceptive methods; abstinence, douche, rythm and withdrawal have been substracted.

Source: UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD.

Table 3. Female share in parliament, in percent¹

| Country | 1985 | 1994 |
|--------------------|------|------|
| Costa Rica | 11 | 12 |
| El Salvador | 3 | 8 |
| Guatemala | 7 | 5 |
| Honduras | 5 | 12 |
| Nicaragua | 15 | 16 |
| Panama | 6 | 7 |
| Cuba | 34 | 23 |
| Dominican Republic | 5 | 10 |
| Guyana | 37 | 37 |
| Jamaica | | |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 15 | 18 |
| Haiti | | 3 |

¹ If applicable, both representative bodies have been added.

Source: Elaboration of UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD.

The use of this indicator clearly has some limitations (Wieringa 1997). Women often use other ways and channels to further their interests (e.g. women's movements); if they use formal political representation, they tend to be more active at lower levels such as municipalities (Waylen 1996). In addition, female representation is no guarantee for the promotion of women's interests in laws and state policies in general. Yet, we can assume there is some relationship between female representation in Parliament and relative female power. In practice, female representation in parliament is very low in all countries except Guyana and Cuba (table 3).

For access to social resources, 1980 statistical data were available on relative life expectancy and on relative female school enrolment. For life expectancy, the relative female/male score was taken, after correcting for the fact that women, on average, live five years longer than men.⁵ For school enrolment, I computed the relative female/male ratio of combined primary and secondary enrolment. Most countries do rather well on relative female attainment (table 4).⁶ However, relative female life expectancy is significantly lower in Guatemala and Haiti, and relative female school enrolment is very low in these same countries. These countries also have a low score on use of contraceptives (see above). This confirms a relationship between education and the latter variable. To some extent, female access to education also reflects cultural attitudes; on the other hand, female education enhances the awareness of existence and likelihood of using contraception.

In Guatemala and Haiti, gender inequality seems to be high on several dimensions. Sugarman and Straus (1988) found that there was a relationship between income inequality and gender inequality, when comparing performance of US states. This seems to be confirmed for the region: Guatemala and Haiti are also characterized by large income inequalities in general: they have the highest scores on UNDP's Human Poverty Index of the region, with 46% (Haiti) and 36% (Guatemala) of the population being poor (see UNDP 1997). The low relative female social attainments in Guatemala are probably also related to the low public expenditure in this country (9.1% of GDP in 1995, World Bank 1997).

An indicator which cannot be gendered but which nevertheless reflects the way society deals with women's welfare, is maternal mortality rates. At the same time, one can expect a relationship with economic development in the country, and, in particular, with the quality of the health system. Maternal mortality rates were very high in Haiti, and also in Guyana and Nicaragua (table 5, first column). The english-speaking Caribbean countries Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago had low maternal mortality rates, as did Costa Rica. These countries are all known for their relatively good health system.

With respect to access to economic assets, several indicators have been examined. The female economic activity rate relative to the male activity rate⁷, is an indicator for the relative visibility of female labour. This rate was highest in Jamaica and Haiti, and also high in Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago. Some relationship with a historical dominance of

Table 4. Social indicators: relative female/male achievements

| Country | lexp80 | lexp90 | 90-80 | enr80 | enr90 | 90-80 |
|-------------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Costa Rica | 99 | 99 | | 104 | 100 | -4 |
| El Salvador | 116 | 111 | -6 | 98 | 102 | 3 |
| Guatemala | 97 | 99 | 2 | 84 | 84 | |
| Honduras | 97 | 98 | 1 | 101 | 107 | 6 |
| Nicaragua | 99 | 105 | 6 | 108 | 115 | 6 |
| Panama | 96 | 98 | 2 | 101 | 101 | |
| Cuba | 97 | 97 | | 100 | 104 | 4 |
| Dominican Rep. | 97 | 98 | 1 | | 111 | |
| Guyana | 100 | 102 | 2 | 100 | 101 | 1 |
| Jamaica | 99 | 99 | | 106 | 105 | -1 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 100 | 100 | | | 101 | |
| Haiti | 93 | 95 | 1 | 86 | 95 | 9 |

Source: Elaboration of UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD.

Table 5. Maternal mortality rates, per 100,000 births

| COUNTRY | 1980 | 1990 | difference ¹ |
|---------------------|------|------|-------------------------|
| Costa Rica | 35 | 25 | + |
| El Salvador | 71 | 127 | — |
| Guatemala | 96 | 200 | — |
| Honduras | 82 | 117 | — |
| Nicaragua | 190 | 103 | + |
| Panama | 73 | 60 | + |
| Cuba | 60 | 32 | + |
| Dominican Republic | 66 | 90 | - |
| Guyana | 200 | | |
| Jamaica | 36 | 115 | — |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 49 | 80 | — |
| Haiti | 367 | 340 | 0 |

Source: Elaboration of UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD.

¹ "+" means more than 10% improvement (so decline), and "++" means more than 50% improvement; "-" means more than 10% deterioration (increase) and "--" means more than 50% deterioration.

Table 6. Relative female/male Economically Activity Rate¹, and occupational segregation index²

| COUNTRY | EAP80 | EAP90 | segr80 | segr90 |
|---------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| Costa Rica | 28 | 28 | 44 | 36 |
| El Salvador | 33 | 34 | 45 | 38 |
| Guatemala | 16 | 20 | 55 | 45 |
| Honduras | 19 | 23 | | 58 |
| Nicaragua | 27 | 34 | | |
| Panama | 37 | 39 | 52 | 46 |
| Cuba | 44 | 48 | 45 | |
| Dominican Republic | | 14 | 18 | 31 |
| Guyana | 32 | 34 | 40 | |
| Jamaica | 83 | 83 | 33 | 30 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 40 | 43 | 42 | 44 |
| Haiti | 76 | 70 | 41 | 40 |

¹ Female activity rate (=female economically active population/total female population), in percent, divided by male activity rate, in percent.

² Duncan index, computed as follows: $D = 1/2 * \sum |f_i - m_i|$, $i = 1, 2, \dots, k$.

D is the index, f_i (m_i) is the proportion of women (men) in occupational category i as a percentage of the total female (male) labour force, k is the number of occupational categories (nine in this case), and the summation refers to the absolute difference between f_i and m_i (Tzannatos 1990, 106-107).

Source: Elaboration of UN, Women's Indicators and Statistics Database CD (WISTAT).

slavery can be observed here. Relative female labour market participation was clearly lower in spanish-speaking Central America and the Dominican Republic. In Cuba, female labour market participation also increased as a result of socialism. Policies have stressed the importance of women in social life while at the same time reducing individual wages so that women were forced to earn a living. However, in recent years female participation in the formal labour market has decreased again as a result of the economic crisis which required a fall back to a subsistence economy; this was accompanied by state propaganda emphasizing the importance of women as housewives (Eckstein 1997; Smith and Padula 1996).

Another relevant indicator for measuring inequality on the labour market is the degree of occupational segregation. This is a measure of the sexual division of labour among occupations. It is both a reflection of cultural ideas about "women's work" and "men's work", and an indicator of the degree of wage inequality between men and women: "male occupations" are generally paid better than "female occupations". Generally, men are in

the jobs with better career perspectives, and they are offered more training opportunities. This means that horizontal, or occupational segregation is often accompanied by vertical segregation in the labour market. For employers, job segregation is a way to circumvent laws on equal pay for work of equal value (World Bank 1995).

From WISTAT data I computed this segregation on the basis of the female/male distribution in nine occupational categories,⁸ using the Duncan index (see Tzannatos 1990). If segregation is lower (higher), it means that more (less) women are active in "male" occupations. In general, occupational segregation in 1980 was higher in Central America than in the Caribbean (table 6). This is in line with the overall higher gender inequality in the labour market in Central America, as reflected by lower female participation.

4. THE IMPACT OF ADJUSTMENT

In reviewing the effect of structural adjustment measures, a distinction must be made between stabilization policies aimed at reducing macroeconomic deficits, and structural reforms aimed at increasing production. Although restoring macroeconomic balances is a necessary condition for economic growth, it is generally acknowledged that stabilization measures, such as reducing public expenditure, may also harm long-term growth prospects. This is particularly the case if these measures include reductions in investment in social and physical infrastructure. Structural reforms, such as trade reform, financial liberalization and privatization, are generally assumed to increase the supply of goods and services.

The short-term expected social effects of stabilization policies are, in fact, not very different from the effects of the economic crisis itself. They include lower employment and reduced real wages, the latter also by a cut in subsidies for basic needs and for health and education services. Several authors have written about the gendered effects of these policies (see Benería and Feldman 1992, Elson 1995, Sparr 1994). In many societies, women already have less access to public services such as health and education. Reducing government expenditure for these services further limits the possibilities for girls and women to use them. In addition, reducing health services will increase the workload for poor women, since they will have to take over caring tasks at the household level (Palmer 1992). Policies usually do not take women's time in unpaid work into account. Women also tend to be affected more by reductions in state expenditure for health and education. Traditional gender identities lead to an overrepresentation of women in this sector of the labour market, so they are more likely to lose their jobs. Reduced household incomes will force more household members, usually women, to look for paid work. Since possibilities in the formal sector are limited, the informal sector is likely to increase. Due to their obligations in caring and household tasks, and their, on average, lower education

and skills, and lower access to assets in general (credit, means of transport, technology) women's possibilities to earn a good income in the informal sector are more limited. The general reduction in wage levels, and in state subsidies on food and other necessities, harm women and children in particular, since women spend more of their income and time on feeding their families than men. Given that unpaid work remains mainly a woman's task, women will experience longer working days.

These gendered effects may also reduce the effectiveness of stabilization policies, by reducing the basis for long-term growth (Elson 1995). Part of the costs of reducing state services is not immediately visible, for example, if girls' education is affected, women's health situation gets worse and if, due to time constraints, women have less possibilities to participate in the paid labour market.

Economic reforms, or structural adjustment in strict sense, will also have different effects on men and women. These reforms include changes in relative prices in favour of tradables at the cost of non-tradables, and a reduction of the state and state intervention in the economy. Export production is stimulated at the cost of production for the domestic market. Whether women are affected more than men by the reduction of the public sector and by privatizations depends on the existing employment structure (Elson 1995). However, women will often be the first to be fired. Other production shifts may both benefit women's employment and reduce it, depending on the concrete changes and existing sexual division of labour.

In urban areas, production is expected to move from formerly protected industries to industries producing for export, as well as to export oriented services such as tourism. Although total employment may increase, this shift is usually accompanied by lower wages and other deteriorating labour conditions for both men and women involved, especially within industry. Furthermore, the expansion of export industries is often limited to new assembly factories in "export processing free zones". These industries do bring employment opportunities for women, but labour conditions are harsh, turnover is high and it is mainly young women who benefit. Liberalization of food imports often means that production of food crops for the market is no longer competitive, which sometimes affects income opportunities for rural women. In general, these structural shifts are not gender-neutral, and they may have consequences for future gender relations.

However, in addition to these gendered effects of reforms, the effectiveness of these reforms itself is influenced by gender relations (Elson 1995). Unequal gender relations will prevent many women from taking advantage of market opportunities. Women suffer from a "tax on reproductive labour" (Palmer 1992). In order to participate on an equal footing in a market economy, women should have the same resources in terms of health and education, should be free from gendered violence, and should have equal access to assets such as property, credit, time, other state services and jobs. This is usually not the case. In consequence, fifty percent of the population is not or less able to benefit from market reforms. This is expected to hamper the "supply response" of reforms. This will

be even more serious if an increase of production is supposed to come from production that is currently mainly carried out by women. For example, if women are expected to shift attention from food crops to export crops but men receive the additional income from the latter, the incentive structure is not conducive for bringing about the desired shift in production (Elson 1995). The expected supply increase will not come about.

In sum, negative consequences of reforms may affect women more than men, and women may be last to benefit from the positive consequences. This is not only bad from an equity or welfare point of view, but may also affect efficiency, i.e. the effectiveness of reforms itself.

In this section, I analyze the gendered impact of economic crisis and stabilization measures, in particular, the *direct* impact, defined as the impact on social and economic indicators that can be assumed to be directly related to economic policies. The years 1980s and 1990 will be compared. In many countries of the region, structural adjustment implied a severe cutback in government expenditure on social services such as health and education (Evans et al. 1995).⁹ With respect to health, longevity (relative female/male life expectancy) is an important indicator. Very small differences in relative attainments can be noticed between 1980 and 1990 (see table 4 again). Most notable are a relative improvement in Nicaragua and a decline in El Salvador. In both countries, however, the 1990 figure for relative female life expectancy is well above 100, probably due to the war situation which reduced life expectancy for men more than for women.

An indicator that reacts rapidly to changes in health conditions is the maternal mortality rate. In all countries with very low or negative growth rates in the 1980s (except one), this rate deteriorated or remained at the same level (see tables 5 and 8). The largest increases (deteriorations) were registered in Jamaica, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Trinidad and Tobago. In Haiti a small reduction could be registered, but the mortality rate was and is very high in this country. Nicaragua is the only country of the region where maternal mortality decreased significantly in spite of very low rates of economic growth. This can be explained by Sandinista policies to improve basic health care, especially in the first part of the 1980s. It shows that an economic crisis not necessarily leads to a deterioration of basic health care, nor does (low) positive growth necessarily lead to a maintenance of basic health standards. In three out of the five countries with positive growth rates in the 1980s, Costa Rica, Panama and Cuba, maternal mortality also decreased, but in Honduras and Jamaica it did not (table 8).

In most countries, the reduction in government expenditure in education did not prove to have led to a reduction in relative female school enrolment: relative enrolment rates increased in Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. They decreased, however, in Costa Rica and (slightly) in Jamaica. It is remarkable that these are the countries where stabilization and adjustment policies were taken and where these policies led to positive growth rates in the second half of the 1980s. Of the two countries with low relative

enrolment rates in 1980, Guatemala and Haiti, Haiti improved performance significantly while these levels remained very low in Guatemala.

Studies of the region of the impact of structural adjustment on women have shown that more women began to participate in the labour market as a result of crisis and adjustment. This has been shown, for example, for Jamaica and the Dominican Republic (Safa and Antrobus 1992), for Nicaragua (Pérez-Alemán 1992), for Costa Rica (Gindling 1993, Tardánico 1993) and for Central America in general (Fletcher and Renzi 1994). Increased male unemployment and/or lower (male) real wages forced women to look for paid work. This increased female labour market participation is confirmed by our figures on relative activity rates (tables 6 and 8). The increased relative female labour market participation is strongest in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. Haiti is the only country where relative female participation decreased, but starting from a high figure. Although an increased female participation rate is often seen as negative, an increase in this relative figure can be considered positive. If the female activity rate increases more than the male activity rate, it means that, at least, relatively more women participate in the registered labour market than before. It is not clear to what extent this is the result of an ongoing trend, or of crisis and adjustment.

It is often stated that increased participation of women in paid work led to an increased work burden for women, since an equal sharing of unpaid work over men and women lags behind. Although there are no systematic data available on time use by men and women, the increased workload has been found in several studies.¹⁰ For Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, Safa (1995) found that an increased burden for women was often shared with women of other generations: mothers or daughters. Dierckxsens (1996) cites studies that show the same phenomenon for Costa Rica. In an interesting study of rural households in Guatemala, Katz (1995) found that increased female participation in paid work and in the production of non-traditional export crops is related to the presence of older daughters in the household. In Nicaragua, the closure of childcare centers after 1988 increased the workload for women (Pérez-Alemán 1992).

Studies elsewhere have established that in periods of economic crisis, women tend to have less bargaining power over the use of household income (Aslanbegui et al. 1994). Unfortunately, no data are available on the distribution of income within the household. What is clear, however, is that if women respond to higher incentives and begin to participate in the production of tradables as opposed to non-tradables, it cannot be concluded that women will also dispose over additional income. The study by Katz cited above found that the production of export crops was still seen as a male activity in spite of an extensive female workload in it. The additional income from these crops did not lead to increased purchases of "female" goods such as household utensils (Katz 1995).

Although more women participate in the labour market, this does not mean that they have an equal position in that labour market. One of the expected consequences of crisis and adjustment is that women's relative wages are reduced: because of their limited

mobility due to household and childcare chores, their lower education and fewer command of resources they tend to be occupied more in jobs with lower wages, more in the informal sector and, in particular, more in the lower-paid segment of the informal sector. In a comparative study of Latin American and Caribbean countries, Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos found that, indeed, more women than men work in the informal sector. At the same time, the percentage of women employees in the total labour force has increased in most countries. This is consistent with our positive interpretation of the fact that relative female participation in the registered labour market increased (table 6).

Funkhouser (1996) also reports that women tend to be more (than men) occupied in the informal sector in Central America. In Central America, the male/female wage differential proved to be much higher in the urban informal sector than in the urban formal sector. This difference was smallest in Nicaragua (table 7). The male/female wage gap in the urban formal sector is not so high, but still considerable (except for Honduras in 1985) if one takes into account that the average level of education of women in the formal sector is higher than that of men occupied in the formal sector.¹¹ In Costa Rica and Nicaragua the wage gap decreased in both sectors, while it increased in El Salvador. In Honduras the gap decreased in the informal sector, but came into being in the formal sector.

In almost all countries of the region occupational segregation decreased in the 1980s (table 6). The largest decreases were registered in Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Panama. For most Caribbean countries no comparison over time is possible. In Trinidad and Tobago, occupational segregation increased slightly in this period, but it was rather low at the outset. By 1990, the differences between Central America and the Caribbean seemed to have become smaller, although Honduras still featured high segregation (no 1980 figure was available for this country). For Central America, we may conclude that crisis and adjustment did not prevent a decrease in occupational segregation from coming about. At this level of aggregation, there was a trend toward a "degendering" of occupations. In sum, both relative female labour market participation increased, and occupational segregation decreased in most countries.¹² From these figures, we cannot conclude that vertical segregation also decreased. But the decreasing wage gap in the informal sector in three out of four Central American countries, seems a positive development in this respect.

Unfortunately, no systematic data were available for some crucial variables, in particular time use of men and women, in order to assess the impact of crisis and adjustment. From the data we could present, it seems that there was no systematic increase in gender inequality. With respect to relative social indicators, no country registered a serious decline although in Costa Rica women lost their relative advantage in school enrolment. Crisis and adjustment do seem to have led to higher maternal mortality rates in most countries, pointing to a deterioration of basic health care. However, since

Table 7. Relative female/wage hourly wages in urban formal and urban informal sector, Central America.

| COUNTRY | Formal sector | | | Informal sector | | |
|-------------|---------------|------|------|-----------------|------|------|
| | 1980 | 1985 | 1991 | 1980 | 1985 | 1991 |
| Costa Rica | 91 | 94 | 98 | 55 | 55 | 72 |
| El Salvador | | 96 | 92 | | 57 | 55 |
| Guatemala | | | 112 | | | 59 |
| Honduras | | 106 | 94 | | 49 | 58 |
| Nicaragua | | 89 | 90 | | 76 | 78 |

Source: Elaboration of data presented in Funkhouser (1996), based on household surveys.

Table 8. Improvements in indicators between 1980 and 1990, by country, in percent.

| | GDP ¹ | cc | parl | mmr ² | eap | segr ² |
|---------------------|------------------|------|-------|------------------|------|-------------------|
| Costa Rica | 2.4 | 3.6 | 9.1 | 28.6 | 2.7 | 18.2 |
| El Salvador | 0.1 | 37.5 | 166.7 | -78.9 | 1.4 | 15.6 |
| Guatemala | 0.9 | 26.7 | -28.6 | -108.3 | 21.5 | 18.2 |
| Honduras | 2.4 | 37.5 | 140.0 | -42.7 | 24.6 | |
| Nicaragua | -1.3 | 73.1 | 6.7 | 45.8 | 23.2 | |
| Panama | 0.7 | | 16.7 | 17.8 | 4.7 | 11.5 |
| Cuba | 2.3 | | -32.4 | 46.7 | 8.1 | |
| Dominican Republic | 2.6 | 23.8 | 100.0 | -36.4 | 23.6 | |
| Guyana | -3.4 | | 0.0 | | 4.4 | |
| Jamaica | 2.5 | 16.7 | | -219.4 | 0.6 | 9.1 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | -1.9 | -2.2 | 20.0 | -63.3 | 5.4 | -4.8 |
| Haiti | -0.4 | 50.0 | | 7.4 | -8.3 | 2.4 |

¹Average annual growth rates 1980-1990.

²Positive figures mean improvement in maternal mortality rate or segregation, so decline.

Sources: for GDP: Elaboration of World Bank tables, except for Cuba; for other indicators and Cuba's GDP growth: elaboration of WISTAT Data.

Nicaragua could escape this deterioration in spite of economic crisis, it also points to a low priority for mother and child care in most countries. This may be a sign of continuing gender inequality. Relative female participation in the labour market increased and occupational segregation decreased. For Central America, there was more evidence of a reduction in the male/female wage gap than of an increase.

5. CHANGES IN GENDER EQUALITY OVER TIME

Now we turn to the question what happened to some other variables related to gender equality during the 1980s, a decade of crisis and adjustment. I examine indicators that can be considered, at best, *indirect* effects of crisis and structural adjustment, and that are probably to a large extent influenced by other factors. Most indicators improved between 1980 and 1990 in the countries for which the two years can be compared.

Expectations with respect to the impact of the crisis on contraceptive use and fertility are mixed. Some argue women respond to an economic crisis by having more children. The higher workload leads to less breastfeeding, and, if there is an increased demand for women's time, children provide help (Palmer 1992). On the other hand, Sparr (1994) concluded that structural adjustment leads to changes in the household structure and, in particular, to delayed marriage. Forced by the economic crisis, women postpone or reduce childbearing.

In fact, fertility rates in the region declined (table 2). Whether this was the result of economic crisis or of an autonomous cultural trend, remains to be seen. Average fertility was in 1990 still remarkably higher in Central America than in the Caribbean. Only in non-english speaking Caribbean (Dominican Republic and Haiti) is the fertility rate still above 3 percent, while it is above 3 in all Central American countries. The influence of the (Spanish) Catholic tradition still seems to be strong. If there was an effect of the economic crisis on declining fertility, this was probably strongest in urban areas: in urban areas children represent a cost while they may be of help in rural areas. Indeed, there seems to be a relationship with the degree of urbanization: countries with lower urbanization show a smaller reduction in fertility rates.

The use of contraceptives has increased even more than that fertility rates were reduced (see table 2 again). Although the economic crisis may have played a role in a reduced desire for children, this same crisis has at least not reduced the accessibility of contraception. And a cultural trend seems to be going on in the region according to which women get more control over their bodies. The powers of the church and of tradition, that were against the use of contraceptives, seem to be fading away. Most notably this is evident in Spanish speaking countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and the Dominican Republic. The country with the largest jump in use of contraception is Nicaragua, probably due to Sandinista revolutionary rule in the 1980s. Health policies and income distribution have made contraceptives accessible to a wider group of women. Panama, Costa Rica and Jamaica apparently passed through this process of modernization already before 1980. Some other countries still lag behind in the 1990s, in particular Haiti and Guatemala. Cuba, for which no 1980 data are available, has the highest score of all countries in 1990. In that country, socialism reduced the influence of the catholic church at an early stage, and health policies made contraception available on a large scale.

In most countries, the trend toward more urbanization continued in the 1980s. The exceptions are Panama and Costa Rica, where in 1990 a higher percentage of the population lived in rural areas than in 1980. Probably, the reduction in urban employment and in real wages has induced migration to rural areas. This is consistent with the fact that there is more extreme poverty in urban than in rural areas in Costa Rica, contrary to the situation in other Central American countries (Pérez and Pichardo 1994).

Between 1985 and 1994¹³ female representation in parliament also increased slightly in most countries, except for Cuba, where it fell. However, female representation in parliament is still very low in most countries. The scores for Guyana are peculiar. Very high scores on female parliamentary representation are combined with average scores on social indicators and the labour market, and with very low figures on the availability of contraceptives. Perhaps this can be explained by a high inequality *among* women.

It is interesting to note that increases in contraceptive use went faster than improvements in other indicators like participation in the labour market and political representation. Nevertheless, most indicators of gender equality registered an improvement in the 1980s for most countries of the region. We must conclude that the economic crisis experienced by most countries in the (early) 1980s, and the economic austerity measures that accompanied the structural adjustment programmes do not seem to have prevented a general trend towards more gender equality in the region. This trend toward more gender equality is particularly evident in the use of contraceptives. However, it is still possible that gender equality would have improved much more without crisis and adjustment in the 1980s.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the dynamics of gender relations in Central America and the Caribbean. The main focus is on the period between 1980s and 1990, in which most countries experienced economic crisis and carried out stabilization measures. The paper analyzes gendered statistics of 1980 and 1990 for the region, in order to see whether there is some relationship between economic crisis and adjustment, and gender inequality. The impact of structural reforms cannot yet be measured, since most countries only began reforms towards the end of the decade.

From this combined longitudinal and cross-section approach with a limited number of countries, it is difficult to draw general conclusions. This can be considered a disadvantage. However, the limited number of observations means that there still is an image of a country behind the statistical figure. Given the enormous amount of factors and variables that may play a role, case studies of countries were used to help interpreting macro data and to identify meaningful relationships.

A first conclusion that can be drawn is that, on average, there was somewhat more

gender equality in the Caribbean countries than in Central America in 1980. This difference was particularly evident in the labour market and in the availability of contraceptives, but Central America has achieved some "catching up" on these indicators between 1980 and 1990. In most countries, there is not much gender difference in school enrolment and in life expectancy, although women lag behind in Haiti and Guatemala. In all countries, women are hardly present in parliaments, with Cuba and Guyana as positive exceptions.

A second conclusion is that the economic crisis and adjustment (or in fact, stabilization) measures of the 1980s have not led to a consistent decline in indicators for gender equality (table 8). Relative labour market participation has improved, and with respect to relative social achievements there is either no change or some improvement. Contraceptive use has increased (except for Trinidad and Tobago), which shows that women have achieved more autonomy over their bodies. This seems mainly a result of a cultural trend, but, at least, this trend has not been reversed by the economic crisis. On the other hand, increased female participation in politics seems to proceed very slowly in the region. Percentage increases are large for some countries (table 8), but they started from a very low base. Maternal mortality rates increased in many countries, which points to serious effects of the crisis on women's welfare. The, by and large, improved gender equality between 1980 and 1990 can probably be explained by structural and cultural trends, and much less by economic policies. In this respect, the time frame for this study has been too short. The impact of crisis and adjustment should ideally be established by looking at deviations from a long-term trend.

Looking at country experiences in more detail, this paper shows that women's relative position seems to be worse in Guatemala and Haiti, with low contraceptive use, lower relative social achievements for women and very high maternal mortality rates. However, in spite of the severe economic crisis in the 1980s in Haiti, relative female enrolment rates increased and there was a slight reduction in maternal mortality rates. The effects of economic crisis and adjustment seem to have been most severe for women in Trinidad and Tobago. Gender equality was at a relatively high level in 1980, but both occupational segregation and maternal mortality rates increased, and it was the only country where the use of contraceptives declined in the 1980s. The crisis had least effect on the relative situation of women in Nicaragua: this country registered improvements in all available relative indicators. In Costa Rica and Panama, all indicators improved (table 8) but these countries were less affected by economic crisis in the 1980s. The achievements of Costa Rica may be promising, since this was the only country in the region that implemented structural reforms in the 1980s. Apparently, these reforms did not prevent women from improving their relative position. In so far as data are available, Cuba had the best performance of the region. But in this country the economic crisis began after the decade analyzed here.

The relatively high gender equality in Nicaragua (in spite of severe economic crisis)

and the good performance of Cuba point to the importance of public policies. In particular, policies that give priority for providing basic health and education, and policies to improve the legal framework with respect to gender relations (family laws, anti-discrimination laws) can be assumed to contribute to gender equality. Countries with very low public expenditure for social services in general and with high income inequality, such as Haiti and Guatemala, also have the highest gender inequality. This region seems to confirm the relationship between overall income distribution and gender equality that was also found in another study. Another factor that has probably influenced gender equality is the strength of the women's movement. As far as Central America is concerned, this movement has been rather strong in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, much weaker in other countries and virtually absent in Guatemala.

A final conclusion is that, somewhat surprisingly, the initial level of gender inequality was of little influence in the gendered impact of crisis and structural adjustment policies. Relative scores decreased most in Trinidad and Tobago which had a rather high gender equality in 1980. In other countries gender equality improved in spite of crisis and adjustment. This reflects that gender relations are not only influenced by economic policies or developments, but also by other factors such as relative female power, cultural factors, and other state policies. In view of this, the idea of the economy as a "gendered structure", although analytically helpful for the study of women's relative position at a certain point in time, may be too static. The gendered structure is constantly moving. Far more longitudinal research is necessary in order to examine the interactions between different dimensions of gender equality.

NOTES

¹Costa Rica is the exception in starting earlier, see below.

²Other sources cast doubt on the relationship between slavery and labour market participation. In Brazil, for example, liberation of slaves meant that women and children withdrew from the labour market. See George Reid Andrews (1991).

³For example, Elson *et al.* 1997 analyzes gender relations at micro, meso and macro levels for five Central American countries, but contains hardly any comparisons over time.

⁴Some authors argue that the use of contraception may reduce women's power over their bodies since men use it as an excuse to force women to sexual intercourse. However, it seems that contraceptive use per se is neutral in this respect: rape can occur with or without contraception; the difference is that with contraception the possibility of becoming pregnant is minimized.

⁵As in UNDP (1995) for the construction of the Gender-related Development Index, the maximum for women was set at 87.5 and for men at 82.5.

⁶Relative female/male enrolment figures of above 100 may indicate scores of above 100 for female enrolment. This is not as positive as it seems, since it may be due to the presence of girls older than "normal" in primary or secondary school. (Enrolment is defined as number of school attendees divided by number of total population of certain age).

⁷Female economically active population/total female population, divided by male economically active population/total male population.

⁸The following nine occupational categories were distinguished: professional, technical and related workers; administrative and managerial workers; clerical and related workers; sales workers; service workers; miners quarrymen and related workers; agricultural, animal husbandry, forestry, fishing and hunting; production and transport operators and labourers; not defined or classified, unemployed and armed forces.

⁹The countries studied were Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica, and the only country where this expenditure did not decrease was Panama.

¹⁰Some of these are cited in Escalante (1997).

¹¹In the informal sector, average years of education of women is below that of men (Funkhouser 1996).

¹²The WISTAT figures for both economic activity rates for the distribution among occupational groups are taken from ILO data (Yearbook of Labour Statistics), and the total female labour force is the same in both. This means that one can indeed conclude that higher participation has been accompanied by less segregation.

¹³Data for 1980 and 1990 were not available, so figures for 1985 and 1994 are presented.

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