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# Women

*in the region:*

## major changes

**Miriam Krawczyk**

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Division*

This article addresses concerns relating to the promotion of the advancement of women within the framework of ECLAC's proposal for changing production patterns with social equity. Virtually all the countries of the region have ratified the mechanisms set up by the United Nations to help attain truly equal treatment for women. Women have already been integrated into society, but their position in it needs to be improved, bearing in mind the social role which most cultures assign to them as women. As a means of illustrating some of the ways in which the status of women in the region has changed, the author analyses their participation in the spheres of employment, education and health. It is noted that women's growing participation in gainful employment is part of a structural trend that will continue to grow more marked in the future, despite the striking differences between the contexts in which women perform their productive and reproductive roles. In the field of education, enrolment continues to rise and male and female enrolment rates are starting to converge, but the distribution of women among the various fields of study has changed very little. Wage discrimination persists (women need to have had about four more years of formal education than men to earn as much) and most school textbooks continue to transmit images that militate against participation by men and women on a more equal footing. With regard to reproduction, the conscious separation of sexuality from reproduction, which until recently was not possible for women, is associated with free choice and the search for more effective birth control methods. Although most women in the region do not have access to contraceptives—due to lack of information and the cost involved—the average number of children per woman has dropped from 5.9 in 1950-1955 to 3.4 in 1985-1990. The modernization process inherent in today's new development styles has opened up new vistas for women through education, gainful employment, shared codes of communication and the spread of pro-choice models. The question which arises is whether all this will help to alter traditional power relationships, permit the formation of new types of links between the public and private spheres of activity, and promote more equitable interpersonal relationships, especially between men and women.

# I

## Women and changing production patterns with social equity

Strictly speaking, the status of women should no longer be studied as a separate topic within the broader subject of population, since all population variables affect women and vice versa: human reproduction, population shifts, economic and social development, and the cultural, ethnic and generational aspects of population. In practice, however, there are at least two reasons for doing so: to heighten concern for Latin American and Caribbean women in areas that are essential to the aim of greater social equity and in which women occupy a subordinate position despite their obviously central role; and to ensure that attitudes that take due account of gender begin to permeate all the various aspects of development, including population.

Today, in addition to sweeping technological change, we are witnessing thorough-going changes in the way our societies –including, of course, women and the roles they play– are being perceived. Our thinking and the way we look at things are apparently starting to change. The weakening of the major ideologies that had served up cosmo-visions of the world and the secularization accompanying modern-day life, at least in the Western model, are making room for new theories, cultural models and forms of interpersonal interaction, for a different kind of relationship between the public and private spheres and between economics and ethical considerations, and for a notion of democracy that involves a broader

domestic units and the overall socioeconomic structure; sexual stereotypes, and cultural patterns (ECLAC, 1979). Although there has been a good deal of progress in each of these areas, much work remains to be done in order to link them up to one another and thereby get to the root of the problems associated with the positions that people –both men and women– occupy in society, including their empowerment or lack thereof within a context of changing production patterns with social equity.

There is a great difference between the *de jure* and *de facto* situations with regard to equality for women in the region, despite the fact that the instruments and mechanisms established by the United Nations for the advancement of women have been ratified by all the countries of the region except one.

By definition, ECLAC's proposal for changing production patterns with social equity, which advocates the concertation of strategies and consensus-building as an avenue to development within a democratic framework, incorporates the principle of respect for individuals' civil rights, including, of course, women's rights to participate in society and in the sharing of power on an equal footing and to have children or not, according to their own personal convictions. The effort to change production patterns with social equity, including cross-gender equity, takes the most innovative schools of current thought and incorporates into them ethical considerations

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