



# The effects of neoliberal structural adjustment on women's relative employment in Latin America

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**Abstract** *Neoliberal structural adjustment policies (SAPs) have been criticized as having negative effects on women's employment. An analysis of several Latin American countries in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that differences in SAP contribute to differences in the growth of women's relative employment. Countries with less orthodox adjustment policies appear to have had greater growth in women's relative employment than countries with more orthodox policies. This pattern is illustrated with reference to specific countries and is tested for generality using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, incorporating data from all Latin American countries from which suitable data are available.*

## Introduction and background studies

As the global economy becomes increasingly neoliberal, the impact of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) on women continues to interest scholars in many disciplines. Broadly speaking, a SAP is any economic policy aimed at shifting resources (or allowing resources to shift) from one economic sector to another. However, in most current discussion scholars are usually referring to neoliberal adjustment policies, those that include fiscal and monetary restraint, an emphasis on market mechanisms in the allocation of resources, and a general opening of the economy to international trade and investment. Policy implementation is generally characterized by two stages – first, policies aimed at stabilization of the economy, and then those focused on structural changes. Stabilization stresses goals such as balance of payments equilibrium and controlled inflation, while structural adjustment emphasizes long-term growth via improved resource allocation. A government can implement these policies on its own initiative, but they are often executed in developing countries due to conditions set by the international lending and aid agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Elson, 1989, 1995).

Stabilization and SAPs have been criticized as having adverse effects on women. It is said that stabilization policies that lower real incomes will generally hurt those in the lower classes most, and because women are disproportionately poor, such policies are likely to affect women more than men. In addition, changes in incomes, prices, working conditions, and government spending that arise from such policies often negatively affect women to a greater extent than they affect men in the same class (Elson, 1989; Tanski, 1994). This is because women are generally the household budgeters, they work more hours than men on average (when both paid and unpaid work are considered), they depend on social services to a greater degree than men do, and they are often more highly represented in public employment. Several studies of stabilizing



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