

WORKING PAPER 22

WORKING WOMEN AND URBAN SPACE:  
EXPERIENCES IN THE SOUTHEAST  
OF BOGOTA, COLOMBIA  
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**WORKING WOMEN AND URBAN SPACE:  
EXPERIENCES IN THE SOUTHEAST OF BOGOTÁ<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This study analyzes the relationship between working women and the local space where they live and interact in community groups. A sample of 310 women age 12 to 60 from low and middle-low socio-economic status was interviewed and followed up during 1989. The city, Bogotá, as a typical Latin American metropolis is an excellent choice to explore the problems of a population affected by the complex processes of urban dynamics. The results of this research show a new field that could be relevant to studies of Latin American urban geography. Women's behavior within their urban space seems to be generating new mechanisms of social advancement while ratifying their values and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of my thesis (in Spanish) for the M.Sc. in Geography obtained in Bogotá, July 1989.

production. Worth mentioning is the influence and support of religious groups widespread in low-income areas.

### Introduction

Latin American women participate more in traditional jobs (including housework in and out their homes) than in other kind of occupations such as agriculture, industry, etc. (Naciones Unidas 1981). In Colombia, rapid urbanization, concentrated especially in Bogotá, has been accompanied by the growing presence of women using the local space and helping to modify the urban landscape.

It is popularly believed that in urban areas women with low levels of education tend mainly to use space near their homes while more educated women work and interact far from their area of residence. This research tries to test whether this belief is true or false by considering the following questions: a) Are there any differences in the use of the space between women with low incomes and those with higher incomes resident in urban areas? b) What are the relationships of the two groups of working women and the use of urban space in community activities?

Considering that urban neighborhoods are not isolated places but a part of the global system of a big city, women who work in and out their homes can reflect the use of local space in the kind of activities they perform...

### Study Design

The urban space considered in this research consisted of eight neighborhoods, three of the lowest socio-economic level and a high population (14,966), and five of a middle-low socio-economic level and less population (12,029). The boundaries of the area were established according to the methodology developed by the DANE (National Department of Administrative Statistics) which has classified areas according to their socio-economic levels. People in the lowest levels live in unfinished houses which are located in the urban periphery where paved streets do not exist. A few houses have running water and electricity, the rooms are extremely small with high levels of occupancy. The middle-low sectors are made up by semi-finished planned houses that have been built with some financial help from the state. They are usually found in old neighborhoods with public utilities including

telephone, and only one family lives in each house. Inclusion of the areas that provide the commercial, health, educational and welfare services of each sector was very important in the selection of the sample, given that this is the place where primary needs are satisfied.

The use of urban space was interpreted according to the activities carried out by people in each neighborhood (Chapin 1977). The concept of working women refers to those who do housework in their own houses without any salary, those who use their houses as the working place, and those who work outside their houses. Only 30% of the blocks in each sector were included in order to interview five women in each block. This selection was made after a lot of difficulties trying to determine the number of women age 12 to 60 in both socio-economic sectors.

As indicated previously, the goals of the study are to establish whether differences exist in women's uses of local space and degree of participation in community activities, reflecting their socio-economic status. With this in mind, the women's socio-cultural characteristics were identified, and they were interviewed regarding their knowledge of existing facilities (commerce, health, education, religion and

welfare) and the frequency with which they used these facilities.

## Results

### *Schooling and Occupations*

The difference in education between the two groups is significant. As shown in Table 1, relatively few of the women possess a high level of schooling. Some of the middle-low sector women have secondary and higher education which allows them to qualify for certain jobs, but most women in the low sector have only finished primary school. In general, the education of these women is far from good and the number of illiterates in the low sector is alarming compared to the other group.

Table 1. Women's level of education (%)

	Middle-low Area	Low Area
Illiterates	1.4	13.3
Primary	22.5	53.4
Secondary	42.0	29.8
Technical	10.9	25.0
University	23.2	0

In order to study the different kind of jobs that both groups perform, four categories were established (see Table 2). High proportions of the women in both groups do housework in their own homes, even those with more schooling. A much higher percentage of women from the low sector work as domestics with a salary. The proportion of self employed women in the middle-low group is substantial. They can afford to buy materials to make, for example, tapestries, crafts, ceramics, or flower decorations which they sell in open markets. Education has helped more women of the same group to get jobs outside their homes, they work as secretaries, teachers, or sales clerks.

Among women of the low socio-economic sector, baby sitting has become a common occupation. Women who have an extra space at home have created nurseries where they take care of the babies of their friends who work

Table 2. Categories of Jobs (%)

	Middle-low	Low
Housework (no salary)	52.9	67.1
Housework (salary)	3.6	14.9
Self-employed	23.9	8.7
Employees	19.6	9.3

outside the home. Because this work is considered socially important, Family Welfare, a State institution, provides financial help, supervising and training one woman of the area who then trains some others. Each house involved serves 15 to 20 children, with women responsible for care receiving a very small payment. They report being happy to contribute in this way to the development of their neighborhood.

When questioned about the place where they spend more time, including housework time, women of both groups answered "home". A recent study (Bonilla 1988) about Colombia's demographic trends, shows that in spite of increasing numbers of women working outside the home and diminishing fertility rates, women still regard it as "normal" to do all the housework every day, even while holding a job out of home.

The female population structure of the two areas also varies, as does the incidence of children, factors that will have bearing on the women's need for and use of services, their ability to work outside the home, and their movements in urban space. Within the middle-low-income areas, 71% women are aged 30-60 and 33% women are over 50 years of age, whereas in the low-income areas, 60% of the women are 30-60 and 9% are over 50. Related to this difference, we find that 42%



of the children are over 18 years of age in the middle-low economic areas while in the low-income areas only 12% are over 18 years of age.

### *Knowledge and Use of Local Space*

In order to fulfil their basic needs people have to move around. In this manner, they become aware of the local and regional spaces and perceive them not only as physical but also as human as they interact with other people. To investigate the degree of knowledge that working women have of their local space and whether or not they use it, we queried them about their use of a range of services (see Figure 1). Though larger in population, the low socio-economic areas have fewer stores to meet basic needs. They have 6 bakeries, 4 supermarkets and 2 butcher shops while the middle-low areas have 9 bakeries, 10 supermarkets, and 5 butcher shops. The middle-low sector with higher incomes has wider access to other kind of social places like cafeterias, restaurants and taverns which do not exist in the low income sector. The frequency in the use of the stores is higher among the people in the low sector, however, for example, they go to a supermarket every six days while the higher income group goes every twelve days. The difference reflects patterns of

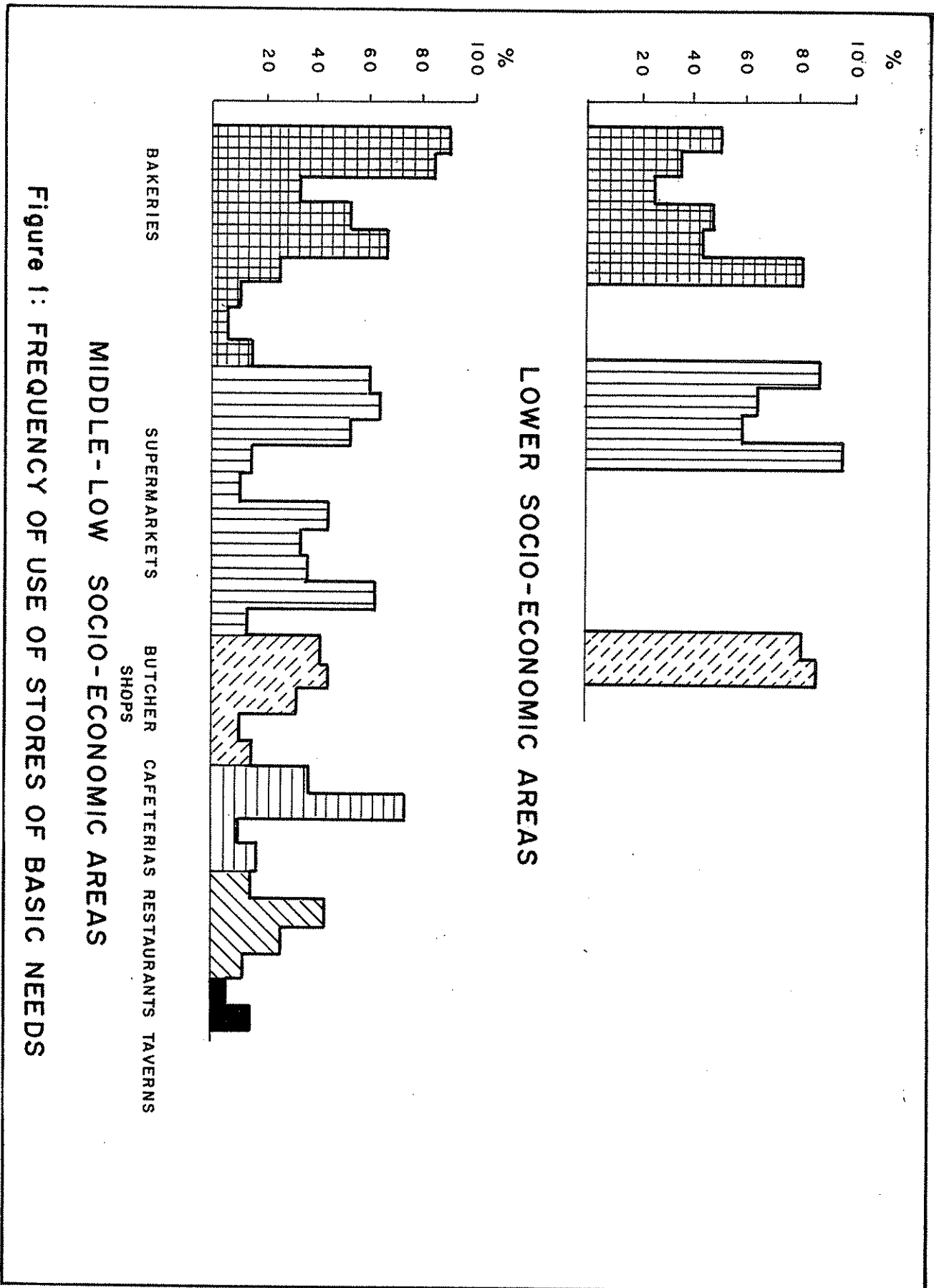


Figure 1: FREQUENCY OF USE OF STORES OF BASIC NEEDS

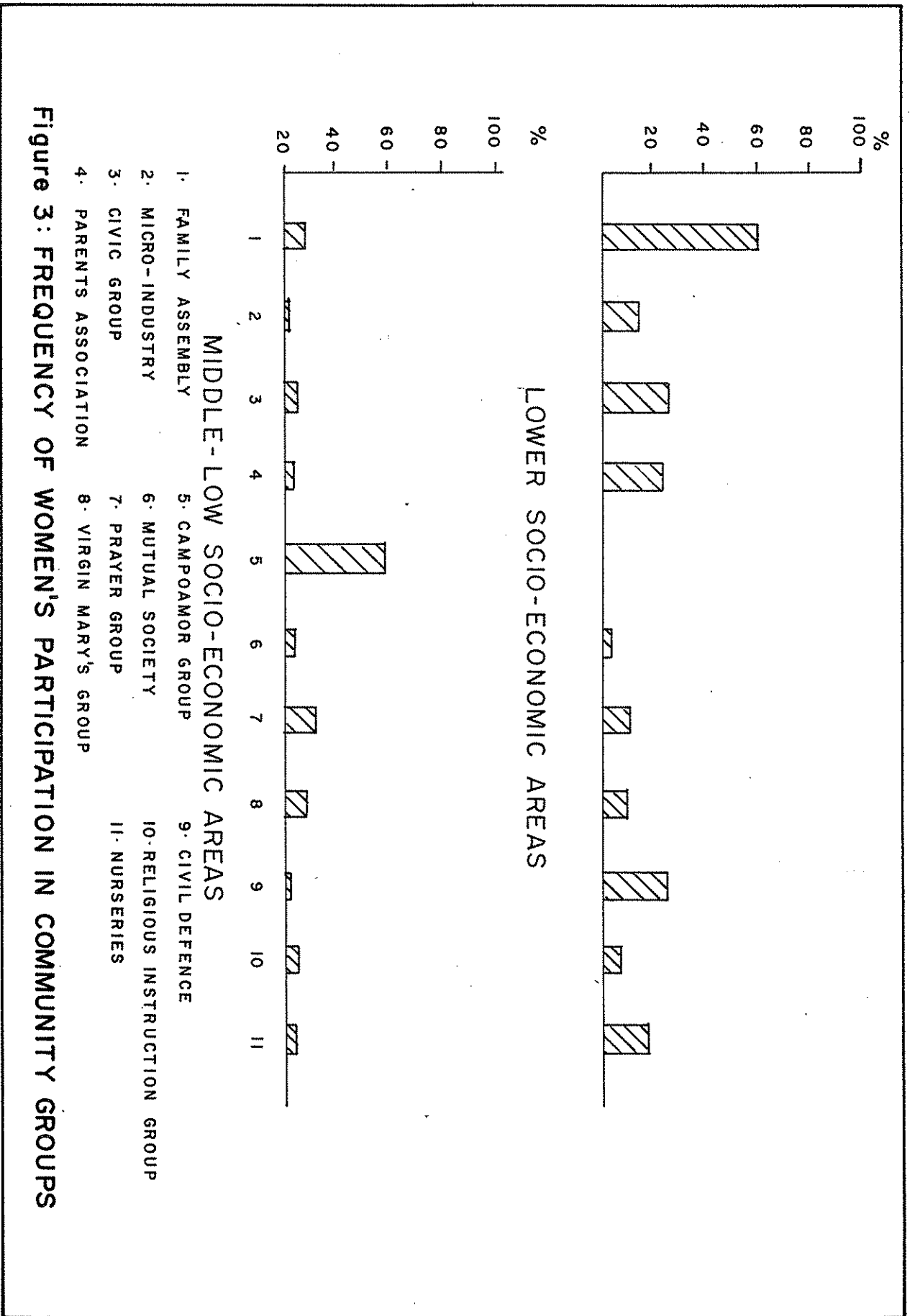
payment--people with lower incomes get their salaries daily or weekly and have to shop for short periods of time. Fifty percent of the women in the low socio-economic sector reported using each store, while 31 percent of the middle-low socio-economic group visit these places.

The results seem to indicate that working women of the low socio-economic level and use their local space and its resources more intensively than the middle-low working women.

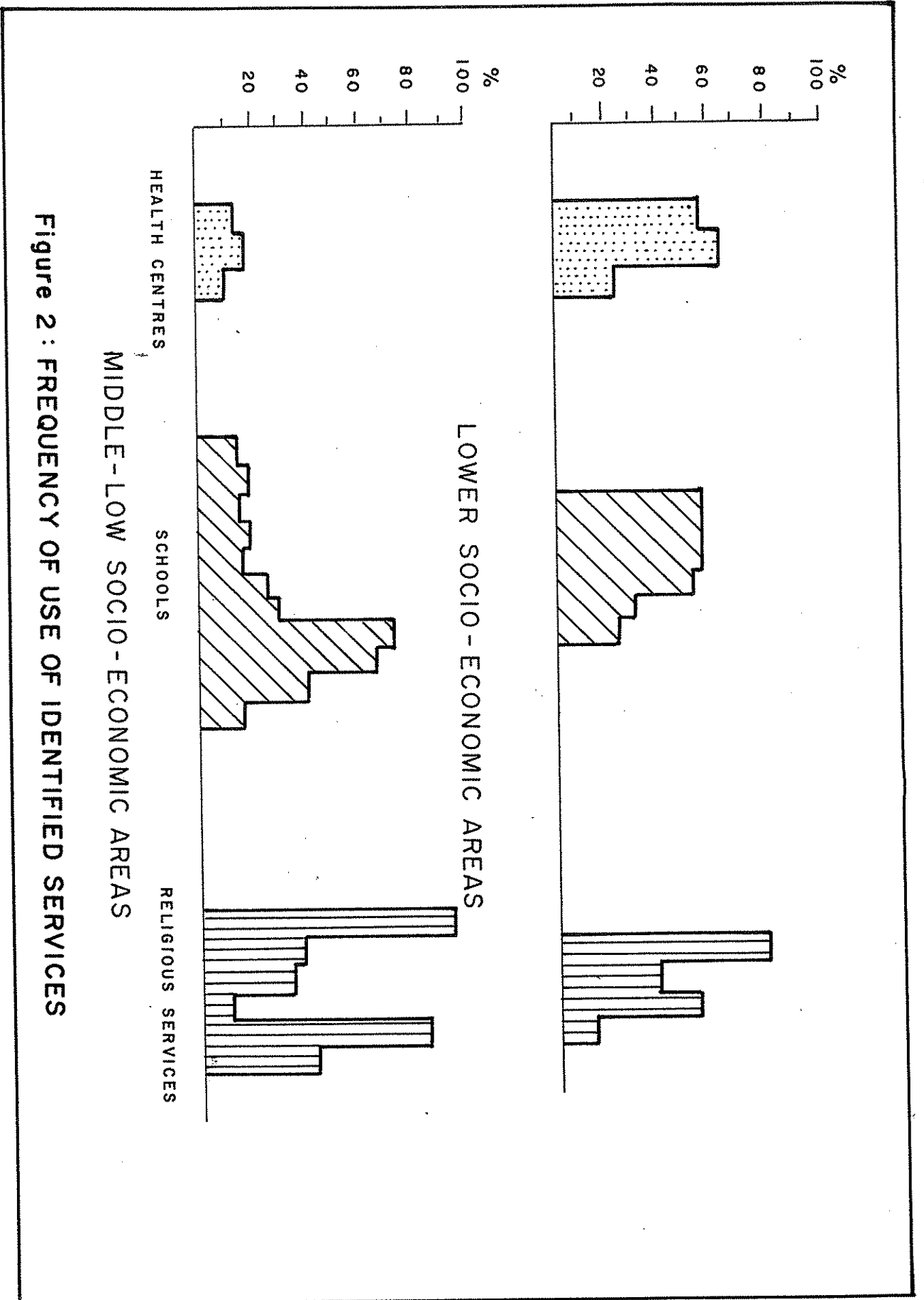
The study also investigated women's use of health, educational and religious services in their neighborhoods. Again, with a larger population, the low-income sector has fewer schools--and only elementary--and churches than the middle-low sector (Figure 2). Nevertheless, women from the low-income sector appear to take more advantage of these services, especially of the health and educational ones. Participation in religious cult is common among women of both groups.

#### *Participation in Community Groups*

Eleven groups were identified (Figure 3), with most of their members being women. These groups are made up of people who work voluntarily for the benefit



**Figure 3: FREQUENCY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY GROUPS**



**Figure 2 : FREQUENCY OF USE OF IDENTIFIED SERVICES**

of all the community. The aims and activities of each group are different, for example cultural, educational and religious. Five of the groups are Catholic organizations, some of which have existed for more than fifty years. Women get together on regular basis--they pray, they visit the old and sick, or they give religious instruction to children. Family assemblies, mostly attended by women of the low socio-economic level began to be organized in 1982. Inspired by Vatican II and by the Bible, the people who participate in these groups believe in both the importance of reflecting on their needs and of taking action in a cooperative form. Without government help they have created small industries which employ local women at different and convenient schedules. One activity resulting from the assemblies is "monthly shopping." Each month a different woman collects a certain amount of money from each participating family, then a group of women buy goods in large quantities from big markets and distributes them equally. In this way they end up spending less money than if they were buying things daily in small stores. The baby-sitting activity mentioned previously has also become an important aspect of community work in the low-income sector.

In the middle-low income sector, the group most attended is the Campoamor, started in 1973 and named after its creator, a priest. The members receive funds from private institutions, personal donations, or social activities and use them to help with children's education or to provide food for very poor families and old abandoned people. Overall, however, the lower socio-economic group participates in community organizations to a greater extent than the lower-middle status group.

### Conclusions

Even though the working women of the southeast of Bogotá do not participate very much in the formal sector of the economy of the city, they develop a significant number of activities in their own neighborhoods in order to satisfy family needs and to deal with community problems. These women contribute significantly to the creation of the urban dynamics of their neighborhoods. They are not only consumers, but also creators of new kinds of jobs.

The research demonstrates the existence of a social segregation in the study areas--in the living conditions, the access to education and services, and

the socio-cultural characteristics of women in each group.

This research has its limitations, considering the small area covered in such a big city as Bogota, but it suggests ways in which studies of small sectors could be of importance for understanding the urban dynamics of a big city. Research of this kind could be a contribution to theories about urban developments in Latin American cities. Comparative studies conducted in areas of different socio-economic levels could help to identify women's leadership and organization.



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