

Gender inequality during the pandemic: Perspectives of women workers in Latin America and the Caribbean

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The Latin America–Caribbean region is fragmented by extreme and persistent inequalities. One of the most deeply rooted is that between men and women, whose structural causes are related to factors originating in patriarchal relationships and the different roles assigned to men and women, which leave women more vulnerable. Acknowledging and resolutely addressing these causes is essential for adequately responding to the complex challenges posed by the historical legacy and the cumulative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public policy must play a critical role in contending with sources of inequality, especially those associated with the distinct ways in which men and women are impacted, by considering gender responsiveness as an element of analysis.¹

This article seeks to inform the debate on the unequal impact that the pandemic has had on men and women in the Latin America–Caribbean region due to the gender divide. It includes valuable contributions made by both women workers active in various labour sectors, and trade union representatives, from 13 countries via an online survey conducted in March 2021.²

After examining the background to the persistent gender inequalities in the region, the article focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's working conditions, their increased burden of unpaid care work, the increase in violence and harassment targeting women, and the challenges and effects of teleworking. ILO priorities for furthering gender equality in general and for bringing gender issues to the fore during the pandemic are then examined, including the challenges for the trade union movement. Proposals include the perspectives of women workers in the region as well as recommendations addressed to the tripartite actors – governments, as well as employer and worker organizations. Our aim is to help to orient the debate within the trade union movement, to serve as a reference during negotiations with employers, and to help shape government policy on these issues.

¹ The gender analysis to which this article refers is limited to the binary construct of male and female; it does not account for all the forms the social construction of gender may take.

² Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). We wish to extend our gratitude to the participants in the survey.

Background

One of the largest gender gaps concerns unpaid domestic work: “Worldwide, women spend over twice as many hours as men doing unpaid work, limiting the possibilities of paid employment” (Durán Heras 2012). Cultural prescriptions and role distributions have led to women and girls shouldering a heavier burden of paid or unpaid care work. As a result, they are a key component of communities’ response to the pandemic and its ill effects. Whether in the formal or informal economy, the greatest responsibility falls on women. Globally, without exception, time spent by women on domestic activities and care work is estimated to be three times that of men, accounting for 76.2 per cent of the total hours spent by both sexes (ILO 2018a).

According to the United Nations (UN), the impacts of the pandemic may reverse gains that have advanced gender equality and obstruct efforts to achieve Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, making it harder to close gender gaps and worsening the situation in various countries.

Data from the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) show that in that region, even before the pandemic: (a) one in three women had no income, as opposed to one in ten men; (b) women were doing 70 per cent of all unpaid domestic work; and (c) 24 per cent of women were occupied exclusively with (unpaid) domestic work, whereas less than 1 per cent of men were in the same situation. Lockdowns have only increased this burden on women, resulting in less time spent on self-care and more on mental health issues. They have also hindered professional development and increased the risk of labour exclusion (Fernández-Luis et al. 2020).

The existence of a clear imbalance in the distribution of leadership roles in response to the pandemic is alarming. Women are finding themselves relegated to the front lines of care work provision and are primarily active in the most economically vulnerable sectors – including commerce, tourism, and hospitality, as well as healthcare institutions – but they hold disproportionately fewer decision-making positions, whether in hospitals or government bodies. For example, only 25 per cent of the highest positions in the Latin American healthcare sector are occupied by women (UN Women 2020a). World Health Organization (WHO) data indicate that women make up only 24 per cent of the Emergency Committee on COVID-19.

In the political sphere, there is currently no woman president of a Latin American nation. Relying on 2020 data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women (2021a) has calculated that, on average, stateswomen account for only 33 per cent of parliamentary membership in the region.

The Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly (UN 2020a)

stated that another 47 million women and girls would fall into extreme poverty due to the pandemic, bringing the total up to 435 million. The consequences of the pandemic thus threaten to reverse decades of progress and many hard-won victories (UN Women 2020b).

Impact of the pandemic on women's working conditions

According to the ILO report *Labour Overview* on Latin America and the Caribbean (ILO 2020a) women are most often employed in segregated, inferior and more precarious labour markets, diminishing the economic resources they need to face the current crisis. This precariousness has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the loss of jobs and social protection. The decrease in labour force participation was proportionately greater for women (–10.4 per cent) than for men (–7.4 per cent). Women working in those sectors marked by decreased job security are thus left in an especially vulnerable situation.

In the current crisis, unlike previous ones, women's jobs are disproportionately more threatened than those of men. A recent ECLAC report (2021a) warns that the crisis fomented by the COVID-19 pandemic has harmed the employment and working conditions of women in Latin America and the Caribbean, undoing more than a decade of progress in matters of labour. It states that, in 2020, the rate of female participation in the labour force stood at 46 per cent, versus 69 per cent for men. (The 2019 rates were 52 and 73.6 per cent respectively.) Furthermore, according to ECLAC calculations, the female unemployment rate reached 12 per cent in 2020. This rate rises to 22.2 per cent if we assume the same labour force participation rate as in 2019. The report also highlighted a major exodus of women from the labour force, the need to attend to care work in their homes preventing them from resuming their employment searches. A participant in our survey noted:

In my family life, it affected our health: we were all positive for COVID-19. It had a professional impact too: without income, our savings were depleted. There is no job security now. So many years of service to one company, and at any moment I can find myself without work – despite 20 years of service ... For the most part I and other women in my country have been affected because we work in the service industry, commerce, and education. We've taken on more care work, and more informal work. (Panama)

The division of labour along gender lines has also increased women's exposure to the virus. Data from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO 2020) indicate that 75 per cent of infected healthcare workers are women. Many of these women say that the lack of suitable protocols and adequate personal protective equipment was responsible for their infection with the virus, which they later transmitted to family members. Women make up a large share of the frontline workers responding to the COVID-19 health crisis, especially in the healthcare and social work sectors. Many are struggling with professional demands and a greater unpaid workload, finding it difficult to reconcile paid work and family responsibilities (ILO 2020b). The so-called "new normal" has brought with it major changes in modes of schooling and work, as public infrastructures are not compatible with needs for social distancing (UN Women and ECLAC 2020). It is therefore not surprising that socio-economic

analyses reveal a greater loss of income and employment among women, along with more precarious informal employment. This has a direct impact on women's work, employment and income, as one female worker explains:

Everything is in chaos: less income, lack of medical care, and kids without schooling or childcare, but we still have to go to work. I work in the health sector, so I got sick with COVID and contaminated various members of my family. Many more women than men have found themselves without work, because when it comes to choosing who stays at home, it's women who stay, and then they are fired for not showing up at work. (Paraguay)

Women work not only in the health sector, but also in childcare at nurseries, adult care at nursing homes, social services, cleaning and private homes (paid domestic work), among other settings. Viral exposure is elevated in these lines of work due to the social contact they entail, as has been indicated by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE n.d.).

Worthy of special mention are women doing domestic or care work or working in the informal economy, who face losing their jobs in conditions that doom them to poverty. Between 11 and 18 million people in the region (ECLAC 2019; ILO 2016) are paid domestic workers, 93 per cent of whom are women. Incomes in this sector are the lowest in the economy. These jobs often lack social recognition and offer little to no protection. The ILO (2020a) reports that 70.4 per cent of women domestic workers are affected by lockdown measures due to diminished economic activity, unemployment, lost hours and pay cuts, as described in the following testimony:

When it comes to labour, the government and employers took advantage of the pandemic to pass the Ley Humanitaria [Humanitarian support law] which serves business owners and not the working class. This law has resulted in thousands of mass lay-offs of women employed as domestic workers. Monthly salaries were reduced to \$220 for women who have employment contracts. Those without a contract have had their salaries lowered to between \$100 and \$150, whereas the market basket is around \$716.14, meaning that the level of poverty has risen in our sector and for all Ecuadorians. (Ecuador)

This is in part due to the precarious nature of paid domestic work, which is characterized by low wages and lack of welfare assistance to help these workers make ends meet and support their families in the event of lay-offs or reduced incomes (UN Women 2020c). In addition, women workers in this field face the double risk of infection, if they continue working, and poverty, if they stop. Hence the crisis has gravely affected the well-being and economic security of female migrant domestic and care workers.

They let me go because of the virus. I had fewer hours cleaning as a live-out domestic worker. Now I'm trying to sell odds and ends. Sometimes they call me for a little bit of cleaning work. Now they don't want to give me a contract because there's no money. They are looking for live-in workers, but that doesn't suit us now. Furthermore, when we're old, we're not as reactive as younger people any more. My health was fragile, but social security doesn't cover the other medicine: social security just takes care of basic medicine. Last year we didn't know what to do: sister workers became seriously ill. As we were unemployed, we had nothing to pay with. (Bolivia)

In nearly 75 per cent of Latin American countries, according to the ILO (2016, 2018b), women are more exposed than men to informal employment. A report by UN Women (2015) indicated that women in the informal economy often lack social protection and work daily for low wages in unsafe conditions, which includes the risk of sexual harassment. The latest publication by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) (Ogando, Rogan, and Moussié 2021) states that female informal workers in 2020 took on more responsibility tending to domestic needs and caring for children and sick or elderly family members in their own homes, which meant fewer days of work outside the home, reducing their purchasing power relative to other informal workers. The coping strategies they have adopted are consuming their resources, deepening intergenerational poverty and narrowing their horizons. The authors of the publication note that the greatest gender imbalance is seen among street vendors, 80 per cent of whom are women.

Increased burden of unpaid care work

Growing care work requirements and a shrinking range of services, as a result of lockdown and social distancing measures adopted to contain the health crisis, have worsened the situation of women. For example, school closings and the neglect of care and education needs by public institutions in the region have translated into shorter formal working days for women. Domestic and care workloads have often grown, and have primarily been shouldered by women.

The situation is all the more serious for women who are heads of households, unemployed, or dependent on precarious employment. The lockdown has lessened the support many households received for tending to care work – through hiring of domestic workers, reliance on public care services, or assistance from neighbours and family members – thus increasing the number of hours spent at home caring for young and elderly individuals with some level of dependency or disability, or completing domestic tasks (Bergallo et al. 2021). This has led to overwork and has impacted health and emotional well-being, as woman workers recount:

I have seen the effects mirrored in my health and emotions, as I had to take on housework and childcare tasks while also meeting the responsibilities of my job and postgraduate studies. Struggling with all of this has left me feeling more tired than normal, as if I were on autopilot. I've had to turn to my family for help. (Peru)

Confinement affects you psychologically. (Chile)

Working class women keep on dying. (Brazil)

Increase in violence and harassment targeting women

One of the most devastating consequences of lockdowns has been the increase in the number and severity of episodes of sexual, physical and psychological violence, which was already widespread in Latin America. A report by the UN Development Programme (UNDP

2020) based on data for 2019 and 2020 indicates that gender and domestic violence in the region has risen during the pandemic. Isolation has reduced the ability to obtain protection. This process has been shaped by reduced contact with extended family and other contacts outside the home, more hours spent with abusers, and tension within households born of their deteriorating socio-economic situations.

Another element that should not be overlooked is workplace violence and harassment faced by healthcare workers, the majority of whom are women. The ILO's COVID-19 Observatory "COVID-19 and the World of Work" (see ILO n.d.) describes different dimensions of the discrimination, violence and vulnerability observably threatening women in various countries and production sectors, such as the Asian garment industry. The ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) has drafted emergency recommendations for protecting women from increased workplace harassment and violence due to the COVID-19 crisis (ILO 2020c).

Challenges and effects of teleworking

Many companies have imposed teleworking rather than on-the-job presence, without establishing rules or satisfactory conditions for this mode of work. As a result, actual teleworking conditions have increased workloads for women, as described by one worker:

It has turned everything upside down, because now I do everything at home: I'm on call 24 hours a day for household tasks, but at the same time fulfil my professional and union obligations from my home, by telecommuting, leaving less time to spend with the family. So it means doing everything at the same time. (Mexico)

In the face of this reality, an especially worrisome aspect is the digital divide between men and woman. Only 45 per cent of women worldwide have internet access, and most cell phones are in men's hands. In Latin America, 40 million homes are not connected to the internet, and while women have more opportunities for teleworking than men, lack of connectivity doesn't allow it (UN Women 2021b). This is also described by female trade unionists:

We rural women trade unionists have been limited when it comes to use of technology. Not having modern cell phones or Internet has hindered our professional and trade union activities. (Peru)

Finally, it is important to point out that the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic have not been neutral, impacting men and women in trade unions differently. The crisis provoked by the irruption of COVID-19 has only intensified gender inequality already present in these organizations, since women trade unionists have been forced to bear greater loads in their triple roles as homemakers, workers and union members, which has sometimes eroded their physical and mental health:

In home life, a lot of stress; in work life, too much physical and mental fatigue, and a little bit of frustration and anxiety. In union life as well, some physical and mental fatigue. (Costa Rica)

Work piling up: more hours, more stress. (Peru)

The lockdown made it impossible for me to effectively honour my commitments within my organization's Office of Education. (Paraguay)

With regard to trade union matters, many processes previously initiated with the executive organs and the constituencies have been delayed. (Honduras)

In general, one can see how the pandemic has exposed the serious difficulties, risks, and tensions that woman trade unionists face due to increasing volumes of care work.

ILO priorities for furthering gender equality and placing gender issues at the centre of attention during the pandemic

The clear vision of the ILO's Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) gives gender responsiveness a concrete historical projection. The Declaration looks at the deep transformation the world of work is experiencing and states that efforts must be focused on:

achieving gender equality at work through a transformative agenda, with regular evaluation of progress made, which:

- ensures equal opportunities, equal participation and equal treatment, including equal remuneration for women and men for work of equal value;
- enables a more balanced sharing of family responsibilities;
- provides scope for achieving better work-life balance by enabling workers and employers to agree on solutions, including on working time, that consider their respective needs and benefits; and
- promotes investment in the care economy. (II.A.vii)

Accordingly, recovery measures must be gender-responsive, taking into account the diverse realities shaping the region. Thus, urgent action needs to be taken to tackle the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, acknowledging the fundamental importance of sound health and care work for our well-being, and to safeguard human existence. This is all the more so if we consider that care work, as Gálvez Muñoz (2016) writes, "is recognized as a human activity that is also economic in nature, insofar as it entails the use of scarce material and non-material resources, energy, and time, with evident direct and indirect costs, and the performance of real work that meets basic human needs. Care work is also recognized and analysed as a specific, fundamental element [bearing on] social problems, economic policies, and economic analysis itself."

As demonstrated in previous sections of this article, the pandemic has affected women and men in dissimilar ways and compromised gender equality. It therefore demands comprehensive, inclusive responses that, on the one hand, meet the needs of women and, on the other, integrate gender responsiveness into all aspects of how the crisis is being handled. In this regard, the UN Secretary-General has stated that "gender equality and women's rights are essential to getting through this pandemic together, to recovering faster, and to building a better future for everyone" (UN 2020b).

Challenges for the trade union movement

Confronted with the combination of negative impacts described above, trade unions, which represent the interests of the world of labour, face the major challenge of bolstering their capacity to organize and collectively represent an increasingly more diverse group of workers.

There is a need for innovative measures directed towards achieving gender equality in trade unions, labour systems and society, boosting the capacity to integrate new groups of workers. Here it is important to spotlight the Joint Statement by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the UNI Global Union, Public Services International, Education International, the International Domestic Workers Federation, and WIEGO, who “demand government action to build more inclusive, accessible, resilient, and caring economies” (ITUC et al. 2020).

On the continental scale, the Trade Union Confederation of Workers of the Americas (CSA) has established its position and priorities vis-à-vis the pandemic and points out, among other key points, that “informal workers are present in various sectors of activity: platform economy, domestic work and care economy, [street vending], retail, [and] self-employ[ment], among others”. It calls for extending coverage to workers in informal and precarious settings for “policies and benefits that already exist or that are implemented during the period of the pandemic ... This includes special subsidies, extension of social security and social protection (distributive and non-contributory policies), reduction and/or freezing of [fees] for basic services and access to hygiene and food products” (CSA 2020).

Thus the orientation and commitment of the international trade union movement, and its resulting accomplishments in various countries, may be appreciated.

Proposals reflecting women’s perspectives

In formulating any policy or action strategy that addresses inequalities and gender-based double standards in the commitments made to men and women within the current pandemic context, it is crucial to consider the proposals advanced by women themselves. Women have defined the following priorities and needs, informed by a concern for the preservation of human life:

On employment

- ▶ Adoption of decent work policies
- ▶ Fair pay and clear minimum-wage policies
- ▶ Special guaranteed income and humanitarian aid programmes for women workers who are unemployed or have been laid off
- ▶ Living wages and minimum-wage protection policies

On workers' rights

- ▶ Resources for COVID-19 prevention, including appropriate and equitable vaccination programmes; treatment; and mitigation
- ▶ Equipment for hospitals and health centres, and vaccines for everybody
- ▶ Adherence to work schedules
- ▶ Respect for workers' rights in their entirety

On social protection

- ▶ Greater public and private investment in health and social security
- ▶ Effective workplace biosafety protocols and systems
- ▶ Public and institutional policies that protect the health of all women workers in occupational settings and communities
- ▶ Innovative social protection policies that address psychosocial risks and care work

On social dialogue

- ▶ Social dialogue to promote socio-economic policies that guarantee the health and quality of life of the population

On care work

- ▶ Focus on care work in the COVID-19 crisis response
- ▶ (For governments:) Promotion of a plan of social and economic development to foster conditions for living in dignity, with decent work
- ▶ (For employers:) More humane working conditions, greater investment in technology, decent work, training, and respect for workers' rights
- ▶ Strengthening of trade union capacities and structures to protect rights and promote decent work

Direct demands and requests addressed to tripartite actors

The female trade unionists interviewed in preparation for this article adamantly asserted the need to:

- (a) respect biosafety protocols, in light of the obligation to work, and reinforce institutional measures addressing employment, health, education and housing, and combat corruption;
- (b) communicate broadly and transparently on the pandemic to build people's trust; and
- (c) provide workers in the informal economy with more financial and medical assistance, and offer effective vaccines.

With these aims in view, they present the following recommendations and concrete demands to each of the tripartite actors:

For governments

- ▶ Put people's health before economic interests, and allocate resources to COVID treatment and vaccination. (Mexico, Peru, Brazil)
- ▶ Ensure better, more effective distribution of vaccines. (Peru)
- ▶ Communicate openly, on a daily basis, about the impact of COVID-19 on the population, and dispel all doubts about vaccines. (Venezuela, Dominican Republic)
- ▶ Implement public policies that protect workers' health, provide for universal social protection, and strengthen health centres. (Peru)
- ▶ Jump-start economics with a human face. (Bolivia)
- ▶ Launch an effective plan for social and economic development to foster dignified living conditions. (Panama)
- ▶ Do not allow emergency legislation aimed at containing the crisis to harm the working class. (Peru)
- ▶ Audit the government and public policies for economic recovery to ensure respect for human rights. (Peru)
- ▶ In transitioning out of the crisis, embrace fairness and equity, without compromising economic and social ideals. (Dominican Republic)
- ▶ Uphold social dialogue and a commitment to tripartism. (Costa Rica, Venezuela)
- ▶ Widen access to social security. (Paraguay)
- ▶ Ratify and enforce the ILO Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156); Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183); Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189); and the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). (Costa Rica, Venezuela)
- ▶ Elaborate programmes and policies to eradicate workplace discrimination and gender-based violence. (Costa Rica)
- ▶ Provide greater support for the transition from the informal to the formal economy. (Honduras, Mexico, Peru)
- ▶ Recognize that female domestic workers have the same rights as others. (Panama, Colombia)

For employers

- ▶ Promote more humane working conditions and labour relations, as people need sound health as well as work. (Paraguay, Peru)
- ▶ Invest in decent work, technology and training to close digital divides and offer equal opportunities. (Brazil)

- ▶ Guarantee better vaccine distribution in institutions run by public or private partners. (Peru)
- ▶ Prioritize workers' health, safety and income sources, because work is not a commodity. (Peru)
- ▶ Collaborate with governments to support small and large initiatives and get out of this situation. (Bolivia)
- ▶ Do not take advantage of people's vital needs, but through tripartite and bipartite dialogue and collective bargaining, agree on measures to preserve businesses and employment, with policies that allow a balance to be struck, for mutual benefit. (Ecuador)
- ▶ Provide more opportunities for work, employability and entrepreneurship for women. (Peru)
- ▶ Enhance socially responsible programmes – not as philanthropy, but from the angle of the ILO, focused on promoting responsible company behaviour respectful of human rights – to meet the crisis head on and contribute to workplace stability. (Paraguay)
- ▶ Transform business as usual, fearlessly launching and investing in initiatives to reap economic and social profits. (Peru)
- ▶ Adopt gender-responsive mechanisms to stem violence and harassment targeting women in the workplace. (Venezuela)
- ▶ Comply with labour law and respect rights, including initiatives to eradicate gender-based violence and discrimination. (Ecuador, Panama)

For trade unions

In spite of the severe restrictions affecting women workers and trade unionists in the region, they have demonstrated the ability to conduct an array of activities from within their organizations. Perseverance in pursuing the following lines of action is critical if they are to provide adequate responses to the effects of the pandemic crisis:

- ▶ Propose comprehensive reform of the social security system, including domestic, informal and migrant workers in social programmes; and regulate teleworking, taking care work into account. (Dominican Republic)
- ▶ Support sick trade union members. (Dominican Republic)
- ▶ Ensure that workers have both biosafety equipment and access to isolation areas, and can alternate periods of rest through staggered work schedules; and assist those who have contracted the illness and the families of those who pass away. (Paraguay)
- ▶ Continue to inform constituencies about social and labour developments in the country, and train them in standards of biosafety with technological support. (Panama)
- ▶ Continually advise and defend workers' rights in labour courts. (Panama)
- ▶ Take action against gender violence and discrimination. (Venezuela)

- ▶ Campaign for the ratification of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). (Costa Rica)
- ▶ Ensure capacity building and empowerment for other labour issues (new initiatives that springboard from training for trade union members equipping them to deal with new labour market strategies). (Honduras)
- ▶ Offer guidance for employees of online businesses; form alliances with governmental and non-governmental entities to obtain more support for trade union members; and secure technical support through international cooperation. (Honduras)
- ▶ Support women by sharing expertise and advice on personal and professional matters. (Costa Rica)
- ▶ Offer capacity-building courses on COVID-19, and foster growth and personal empowerment. (Peru)
- ▶ Ensure that legal support and health advice are available to network service professionals who are working outside or responsible for maintenance, customer service, or technical support for landlines and cell phones. (Brazil)
- ▶ Draft and adopt agreements to: (a) maintain workers at home until pandemic conditions are safe enough for a return to the workplace; and (b) establish procedures for that return. (Mexico)
- ▶ Identify discrimination against migrant workers, and keep going after companies that exploit them and leave them to die of hunger. (Costa Rica)
- ▶ Address current situations in which, nothing having come of documents that have been drafted, statements of protest, and proposals for social dialogue, the State has only favoured business recovery, putting it before health. (Peru)
- ▶ Come to the aid, and acknowledge the expertise, of domestic workers' organizations, which have acted in solidarity to provide support, notably by:
 - attending to the mental health of women members, ensuring they are eating well, attempting to minimize the damage done by the pandemic, pursuing the dialogue with authorities and employers, and persevering in the struggle; (Ecuador)
 - offering food baskets and community meals for trade unionists; (Paraguay)
 - training women workers in the use of the Zoom videoconferencing platform and building their capacities; and pursuing the project with the Pan American Health Organization for the benefit of all women trade unionists, to guarantee workplace health and safety; (Panama)
 - taking to the streets to protest government orders that harm the whole working class; and distributing food baskets, face masks and money vouchers donated by a non-governmental organization. (Ecuador)

Conclusions

COVID-19 knows no borders: everyone is at risk and many have been affected. However, in all countries, it is women who have suffered most. Therefore, the war against this pandemic must acknowledge gender inequalities and divides, which have made women into essential instruments for containment, mitigation, care, recovery and resilience. Policies and strategies that are proposed and implemented must take these considerations into account in order to tackle the health crisis, promote recovery and resilience in the short term, and make societies sustainable in the future.

Gender responsiveness must be integral to the recovery of the economy, businesses and employment. This crisis offers a clear reminder that the world needs more international solidarity and active roles for government and the public sector, which cannot be minimized or revoked. A clear, comprehensive, tripartite commitment must be encouraged in constructing the new normal, one that answers the calls of women workers by adopting policies that seek to lessen and eradicate the inequalities of which they are victim, in order to contain the spread of the virus and its consequences.

Immediate priorities to consider during this crisis impacting countries and the world include:

- ▶ recognition of unpaid care work, tapping into its potential to create decent work opportunities, improving working conditions, and recognizing that domestic workers are entitled to the same rights as others;
- ▶ reduction and fair distribution of unpaid care work between the men and women of households, the government, businesses, and the community;
- ▶ greater coverage and effectiveness of social security for women, especially domestic and informal workers;
- ▶ granting of maternity, paternity, and other parental leave; and
- ▶ promotion of fairer legislation furthering the economic empowerment of women.

Care work must be recognized as a radically political act in times of harsh living and lockdowns. By encouraging sustained debate and discussion on these themes within trade union institutions, we offer a crucial alternative. This is especially clear when we acknowledge that the exercise of transformative leadership by women trade unionists is greatly dependent on their sound physical and emotional health, and on their autonomy in meeting care work demands and contributing to the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8.

To these ends, we consider it appropriate to spotlight best practices among trade unions. In concluding this article, we would therefore like to draw attention to an initiative of the Costa Rican Rerum Novarum Workers' Confederation (CTRN), which launched an online training course on female leadership and self-care in times of crisis, aimed at women members of CTRN women's affairs offices and associated women directors. In their preliminary evaluations, participants expressed their satisfaction with the structure and delivery of the course.

There were also online conferences on the relevance and application of the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190), 2019, and Recommendation (No. 206), within the scope of the pandemic response and recovery. The second conference presented the findings of the online survey on workplace violence and harassment, in which male and female members of the confederation were invited to participate. They will be used to support the CTRN action plan pushing for ratification of the aforementioned Convention (No. 190). Both events were held under the auspices of the ILO Office in Costa Rica, with the support of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) in Geneva. Together with other similar practices, this is an approach that merits further development, to be repeated in other countries after adaptation to national contexts.

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