



# Women's Economic Empowerment, a driving force for accelerated and inclusive post covid-19 economic recovery in Ibero-America

By Rebeca Grynspan

As I write this essay, humanity is confronting one of the deepest crises it has faced in over a hundred years: the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst it is still too early to understand the long-term effects of this crisis, social and economic forecasts predict extremely concerning scenarios, especially for my

region, Ibero-America, with particularly devastating effects for women.

The entire world is facing a multidimensional crisis that will lead to a significant increase in poverty (estimated to increase by more than 45 million people in

Latin America<sup>1</sup>), unemployment, informality and inequality, and a major setback in access to education and financial stress in the health and social security sectors, as well as in the quality of public services at large. As I write these lines, Ibero-America has already lost more than 350,000 lives to the coronavirus pandemic, more than a third of the world's total,<sup>2</sup> even though our region represents no more than 9% of the world's population<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, we still lack an approved treatment and despite the race to develop a vaccine, there is no guaranteed immediate access once it becomes available, so the crisis and quarantines may be longer than necessary. The region and the world are therefore far off from returning to 'a new normal'.

On the other hand, whilst 2020 was meant to be a year to take stock of progress made towards achieving gender equality on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the spread of the pandemic could instead entail a roll back in the gains (though limited and slow) made in past decades. Even before the crisis, the World Economic Forum estimated the overall global gender gap would take at least another 99.5 years<sup>4</sup> to close. This figure will unfortunately most likely have been set back by generations more.

As the crisis interacts with the structural problems the region already faced before the pandemic – such as, high levels of inequality, low social protection, high rates of informality, insufficient investment in education and health, high youth unemployment and significant digital divides, among others – the compounded effect on women is expected to be even more

---

## The region and the world are therefore far off from returning to 'a new normal'.

---

severe, given they are disproportionately affected by them.

In the current context, women are more likely than men to lose their jobs, fall into poverty, return to informality, or drop out of school. Women's entrepreneurship is also at greater risk: women-owned SMEs are 7% more likely than male-owned ones to close their businesses as a result of the pandemic - this figure increases up to 11% in Latin America<sup>5</sup>. Although one the reasons to explain this difference lies in the concentration of female-led businesses in industries immediately affected by the pandemic, mainly the services sector, women-run SME's are also more vulnerable as a result of their lower access to digital technologies and skills, financial services and assets and business networks, as well as their high levels of informality<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, unlike in other crises, the hard-hit informal economy has failed to buffer the effects of rising unemployment.

We are also witnessing a concerning increase in reports of gender-based violence during confinement periods, as well as an increased risk of infection among working women given their over-representation in the care sector (75% of the world's healthcare workforce is female<sup>7</sup>) and in frontline industries considered as essential during lockdowns and

---

<sup>1</sup> ECLAC, 2020, *Enfrentar los efectos cada vez mayores del COVID-19 para una reactivación con igualdad: nuevas proyecciones*.

<sup>2</sup> WHO, 13 September 2020, *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Weekly Epidemiological Update*.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>, accessed on 19 September, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum (2019), *The Global Gender Gap Report 2020*.

<sup>5</sup> Facebook, OECD and World Bank, (2020). *Global State of Business Report*.

<sup>6</sup> UN Women (2020) *Guidance for action: Supporting SMEs to ensure the economic COVID-19 recovery is gender responsive and inclusive*.

<sup>7</sup> Global Resource Centre, Accessed May 2020, *Resource Spotlight: Gender and Health Workforce Statistics*.



quarantines. Furthermore, rising demand for care in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and response has deepened and exacerbated the already disproportionate burden of women's unpaid care and domestic work.

The severity of the impact of this crisis has naturally left us in a state of shock. The world has changed overnight, and as we dedicate our efforts to dealing with today's most pressing issues - how to contain the pandemic and how return to normality in a sustainable manner- it is sometimes difficult to find the time to pause and reflect with a long term vision on the kind of society we want to build back.

This essay has two objectives. Firstly, to examine the impact of the pandemic on the gender equality agenda, particularly regarding women's economic empowerment. And secondly, to advocate for women's economic empowerment to be considered a central pillar of all post COVID-19 reconstruction efforts as a means to ensure an accelerated, inclusive and sustainable recovery and development.

## The Structural Impact of the Pandemic

One of the most significant characteristics of this pandemic is its interaction with the aforementioned long-standing structural gaps. It is clear that this crisis has differentiated effects both within and between countries, also in relation to its impact and recovery. United Nations studies show that, just as countries with more resources have a greater response capacity than developing countries, people living in poverty and operating in the informal economy have less access to supports,

remote education and health services, are at greater risk of infection and have fewer prospects of recovering rapidly.

This binary effect of the pandemic, which threatens to widen inequality gaps both within and between countries, is especially acute for women. However, the specific threat of the pandemic to the gender equality agenda, is not a consequence of the characteristics of the disease it produces, or even of the virus itself; but rather of the interaction of the multiple crises that the pandemic generates in the existing socio-economic structures that in turn, threaten to increase pre-existing gender gaps and inequalities in all countries. Identifying these gaps and understanding how the pandemic interacts with them, is therefore an essential pillar of any work agenda that seeks to make gender equality a catalyst for recovery.

For the sake of brevity, I will not be exhaustive in listing these gaps, but rather point out some of the most representative ones in their interaction with the current crisis.

## Women on the frontlines

This crisis has highlighted in an unprecedented way the key role played by women in the development and sustainability of our societies. Globally, women represent 3 out of every 4 health workers worldwide, and 57% of all medical personnel in Latin America<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, women in this sector tend to be engaged in lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs, which are associated with wider gender pay gaps - 26% in high-income countries and 29% in upper-middle-income countries<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, women are significantly under-represented in decision-making positions in these sectors, occupying only 25% of

---

<sup>8</sup> UNDP, 2020, *Briefing note: The economic impacts of COVID-19 and gender inequality. Recommendations for policymakers.*

<sup>9</sup> ILO, 2020, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition Updated estimates and analysis.*

---

**In contrast to previous crises, women's employment is at greater risk than men's employment, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector, that accounts for a large proportion of women's employment, and to the increased burden of unpaid care brought on by the crisis.**

---

senior positions in the Latin American health sector<sup>10</sup>, and leading less than 1 out of every 4 Health Ministries in the Americas<sup>11</sup>.

In the current context, without adequate protocols and the necessary personal protective equipment, this gendered division of labour has also led to an increased exposure of women to the virus - in the Americas, for instance, 75% of infected healthcare staff are women<sup>12</sup>. This figure is similar in Spain, where women accounted for 75.5% of the 28,236 total health workers infected with COVID-19<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, women have also been at the frontline in other essential and undervalued jobs that have been crucial to keep interdependent societies functioning, such as pharmacists, cleaning and supermarket staff, among others. In Mexico, women represent 62% of the essential service workforce<sup>14</sup>. Whilst in Spain figures show that women

account for 71% of pharmacy employees, 93% of the cleaning staff and 84% of cashiers in supermarkets<sup>15</sup>.

## Women's economic participation

Despite important progress in recent years towards gender equality in education, health and political representation, women's economic empowerment continues to lag behind. In fact, pre-COVID19 it was estimated it would take 257 years to close the gender gap in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity<sup>16</sup>. A dire projection that will most likely suffer considerable setbacks under the current circumstances.

Although the economic downturn resulting from the crisis will have serious consequences on the income and employment of all individuals and households, women are in a worse position to face this crisis, since not only do they earn less, but have a lower labor market participation, have more part time jobs, are more affected by unemployment and more concentrated in vulnerable, informal and low productivity sectors.

Before the pandemic, women's labor participation in Latin America was at 50.3%, that is 25 percentage points below that of men. Women also earned 17% less than men per hour worked<sup>17</sup>, and accounted for 57% of part-time work in the region<sup>18</sup>. Women's employment was also concentrated in the informal sector, with over 54% of women working informally<sup>19</sup>, and in low-productivity sectors, with a staggering 82.2% not affiliated

---

<sup>10</sup> UN Women (2020). *Policy Brief: COVID-19 and women's leadership: From an effective response to building back better*.

<sup>11</sup> PAHO and UN Women (2020). *La contribución imprescindible de las mujeres: sector sanitario y trabajo de cuidados*.

<sup>12</sup> PAHO (2020). "Cerca de 570.000 trabajadores de la salud se han infectado y 2.500 han muerto por COVID-19 en las Américas"; Available on: <https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/2-9-2020-cerca-570000-trabajadores-salud-se-han-infectado-2500-han-muerto-por-covid-19>

<sup>13</sup> Instituto de Salud Carlos III (2020). *Informe sobre la situación de Covid-19 en personal sanitario en España*.

<sup>14</sup> INEGI (2019). *Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (ENOE)*.

<sup>15</sup> Noemí López Trujillo, 2020, *Covid-19: Las mujeres asumen más los cuidados y la exposición al virus*.

<sup>16</sup> World Economic Forum (2019), *The Global Gender Gap Report 2020*.

<sup>17</sup> ILO, 2019, *Persistent gender gaps at work make it necessary to adopt transformative measures in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

<sup>18</sup> ILO, 2020, *¿Qué es el trabajo a tiempo parcial y el trabajo a pedido?*

<sup>19</sup> ECLAC & UN Women, 2020, *Cuidados en América Latina y El Caribe en tiempos de COVID-19. Hacia sistemas integrales para*



with or contributing to a pension system.

In contrast to previous crises, women's employment is at greater risk than men's employment, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector, that accounts for a large proportion of women's employment, and to the increased burden of unpaid care brought on by the crisis. In effect, without adequate care systems and increased measures to reconcile work and family life as well as to redistribute domestic and care responsibilities within households, including in the context of remote work schemes, the harder it will be for women's employment to recover<sup>20</sup>. Against the backdrop of gender inequalities in the labor market, the conclusions of recent studies are grim: According to McKinsey, women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men's jobs and will account for 54% of overall job losses<sup>21</sup>. Projections for Latin America are also stark, with ECLAC estimating that women's unemployment rate could reach 15.2%<sup>22</sup>, higher than the 13.5% regional estimate<sup>23</sup>.

This will inevitably lead to devastating effects. The economic crisis generated by COVID-19 is expected to leave 118 million women in poverty in Latin America this 2020, a 22% increase from 2019. This means 2 out of every 5 women in Latin America will be living in poverty<sup>24</sup>.

In short, these disproportionate impacts on women could reverse many of the gains achieved in gender equality in the labor market, as well as exacerbate existing disparities and the perspectives of recovery. The bigger the loss of employment during the lockdown phase and the greater the

scarcity of jobs in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, the harder it will be for women's employment to recover<sup>25</sup>. A scenario that is further exacerbated by the especially severe effect of the pandemic on SME's, that concentrate 72.6% of all salaried and self-employed women<sup>26</sup>.

The coronavirus pandemic has also put a spotlight on the centrality of care work to sustain human life, as well as its unfair and unequal distribution and insufficient visibility in the world economy.

With the evidence at hand, we now face an invaluable opportunity to advance towards a society that fully recognizes care work as a fundamental component and contribution to our economic production, development, and wellbeing.

Already before the pandemic women spent on average three times as much time as men on unpaid care and domestic work. The saturation of health systems and the closure of schools and care centers for the elderly, as well as mandatory quarantines, have undoubtedly increased and exacerbated this burden for women even further. The social norms that

---

**The coronavirus pandemic has also put a spotlight on the centrality of care work to sustain human life, as well as its unfair and unequal distribution and insufficient visibility in the world economy.**

---

<sup>20</sup> ILO (2020). Observatorio de la OIT: La COVID 19 y el mundo del trabajo. Quinta edición.

<sup>21</sup> McKinsey & Company, 2020, *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*.

<sup>22</sup> Bárcena, Alicia (2020), *Cuidados en América Latina y el Caribe en tiempos de COVID-19. Hacia Sistemas Integrales para fortalecer la respuesta y la recuperación*.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations, 2020, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean*.

<sup>24</sup> Bárcena, Alicia (2020), *Cuidados en América Latina y el Caribe en tiempos de COVID-19. Hacia Sistemas Integrales para fortalecer la respuesta y la recuperación*.

<sup>25</sup> ILO, 2020, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition Updated estimates and analysis*.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank (2020). *The COVID-19 crisis disproportionately affects women – here's how Latin America is addressing it*.

attribute these responsibilities to women, risk interacting with the previously described long-standing gender inequalities in paid work<sup>27</sup>, making women more likely to quit their jobs during and after lockdown, to take care of childcare and other domestic responsibilities. Pre COVID-19, Oxfam had estimated that unpaid care and domestic work contributed, by very conservative estimates, US\$10.8 trillion a year to the global economy – three times the size of the world’s tech industry.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, despite these figures and its role in greatly mitigating the effects of the pandemic, women’s unpaid care and domestic work continues to be highly undervalued and invisibilized in the world economy.

Women in paid domestic work have also been highly vulnerable to containment measures. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 93% of the estimated 18 million people engaged in paid domestic work are women, with domestic work representing up to 14% of women’s employment in the region<sup>29</sup>. The majority – more than 77% - work in informal conditions, which often entails job instability, low pay, and a lack of protection and rights. According to ILO estimates, 70.4% of domestic workers in the region report having been affected by quarantine measures due to a decrease in economic activity, an increase in unemployment, less working hours or salaries not being paid<sup>30</sup>.

## Conclusions: Women’s leadership and international cooperation key in the way forward

Crises destabilize, but they also present an opportunity for change. We are at a turning point: our choices, actions and omissions will configure the fabric of our society for years and perhaps decades to come. As the consequences of this pandemic interact with unresolved long-standing structural gaps, the region risks jeopardizing hard earned gains in gender equality, particularly in relation to women’s economic empowerment. Moreover, global economic recovery and the achievement of the sustainable development goals and the 2030 Agenda will also be at risk. In a gender-regressive scenario in which no action is taken to counter these effects, McKinsey notes that losses in global GDP growth could account for up to US\$1 trillion, whilst taking action now to advance gender equality could add US\$ 13 trillion to world GDP in the next decade<sup>31</sup>. If we fail to create transformational gender-sensitive and gender-responsive policies and interventions that recognize and respond to the differentiated impact of this crisis on women, impacts will be felt for decades.

The majority of national-level committees established to respond to COVID-19 however do not have equal female-male representation. According to Care, women in effect only make up 24% of these committees<sup>32</sup>. Women’s full and equal participation at all levels of decision-making in this crisis nevertheless is critical

---

<sup>27</sup> The Atlantic, 2020, *The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism: Pandemics affect men and women differently*.

<sup>28</sup> Brookings Institute, 2019, Trends in the Information Technology Sector. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/trends-in-the-information-technology-sector/>

<sup>29</sup> ILO (2020). *Observatorio de la OIT: La COVID 19 y el mundo del trabajo. Quinta edición*.

<sup>30</sup> ILO (2020) *Impact of lockdown measures on the informal economy*.

<sup>31</sup> McKinsey & Company, 2020, *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*.

<sup>32</sup> Care, 2020, *Where are the women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them*.

if we are to ‘build back better’. Only with equal participation can we ensure that the differentiated impacts of the pandemic on the life and well-being of women and men are considered.

Furthermore, we know that women’s leadership and equal participation reaps benefits for all. In fact, whilst women are Heads of State or Government in only 21 countries, their early response to the pandemic and success in ‘flattening the curve’ has been widely recognized<sup>33</sup>. Before the pandemic, nearly half of the world’s population (47%) believed that men made better political leaders than women - perhaps these visible successes will help dismantle the discriminatory social norms driving these beliefs<sup>34</sup>.

COVID-19 has also reminded us how fundamental multilateralism and international cooperation is, not only as a means to ensure a coordinated and fair response to the effects of the virus, but also to safeguard commitments and progress made in past decades towards gender equality.

In this regard, I would like to mention the ongoing initiative to promote the reform and elimination of discriminatory laws for women’s economic empowerment led by the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB) and UN Women. This initiative, has already launched a regional report and country profiles, that identify persisting manifestations of discrimination in legislative frameworks in the areas of equal pay, recognition of unpaid care work, protection of domestic workers, parental leave, freedom of choice of employment and access to social security. In the current global crisis, continuing to promote equality in the law in regard to women’s economic empowerment is more important than

---

## **COVID-19 has also reminded us how fundamental multilateralism and international cooperation is, not only as a means to ensure a coordinated and fair response to the effects of the virus, but also to safeguard commitments and progress made in past decades towards gender equality.**

---

ever, especially given the aforementioned gender dimensions of the economic impact of the pandemic.

To take the initiative further, SEGIB is also co-leading, together with the Presidency of Colombia, the Ibero-American Coalition for Women’s Economic Empowerment<sup>35</sup>. Seizing upon the momentum of Beijing+25 and Generation Equality, the Coalition aims to promote a more active participation of women in the economy and in the post-pandemic economic recovery of Ibero-America. The Coalition action points are four-fold: (i) to advocate for the adoption of measures to encourage entrepreneurship and guarantee decent work for women in Ibero-America, as well as increased investments in gender-responsive social protection and care systems; (ii) to prompt action to repeal and reform laws that directly or indirectly discriminate against women’s economic empowerment and promote the adoption of gender-sensitive normative frameworks; (iii) to foster the establishment of national funds to support women’s entrepreneurship with

---

<sup>33</sup> Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, 2020, *What Do Countries With The Best Coronavirus Responses Have In Common? Women Leaders*, Publicado en Forbes.

<sup>34</sup> UN Women, 2020, *Expert’s take: Four lessons from COVID-19 that should shape policy decisions everywhere*.

<sup>35</sup> In collaboration with UN Women, ECLAC, Epsy Campbell -Vice President of Costa Rica, and Susana Malcorra - Dean of the IE School of the IE School of Global and Public Affairs.



international financial assistance and (iv) to push for the adoption of measures to increase women's participation in public or state procurement processes. This Coalition will seek to engage and garner a set of concrete commitments at Heads of State and Government levels in the next XXVII Ibero-American Summit expected to take place in April 2021, as well as mobilize the support of other key actors, such as parliamentary representatives, local governments and international and regional organizations. COVID-19 has known no borders: all countries have been affected. The fight against this global pandemic is a stark reminder that the world needs more, not less multilateral cooperation and global solidarity. With this in mind, we must continue to work together, to rebuild not only a new normality but a better one, in

which women can fully enjoy their rights on an equal footing with men. Overcoming the challenges exposed in this essay is not only a moral imperative: it is an urgent political, social and economic necessity. The Ibero-American General Secretariat, in alliance with the United Nations system, and multilateralism at large is committed to working in all dimensions and at all levels to continue driving the gender equality agenda forward. For as Antonio Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General, has stated "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"<sup>36</sup>. May these words be a strong reminder to us all that in our collective quest to recover from this crisis, gender equality must be at the centre of our efforts.

---

<sup>36</sup> United Nations Secretary General (2020). "Secretary-General's video message on Women and COVID" on April 9th, 2020





## Rebeca Grynspan

Rebeca Grynspan was born in San José, Costa Rica. She was unanimously elected as Ibero-American Secretary-General at the Extraordinary Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs held in Ciudad de Mexico, on 24th February 2014. She took office on 1st April 2014 and in 2018 her mandate was renewed for a further four-year term.

In 2010 she was named Under Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) and Associate Administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). From 2006 to 2010, she was UNDP Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Prior to joining the United Nations, Ms Grynspan served as Vice-President of Costa Rica from 1994 to 1998. She was also Minister of Housing, Minister Coordinator of Economic and Social Affairs, and Deputy Minister of Finance. In addition, she has been a member of the High-Level Panel on Financing for Development, convened by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2001.

She is a renowned advocate of human development, who has helped to focus the world's attention, and also that of Latin America, on relevant issues such as the reduction of inequality and poverty, gender equality, South-South cooperation as a tool for development, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among others.

She was also a delegate to the United Nations Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti, a group consisting of the Haitian government, the former President of the United States Bill Clinton, and other prominent international partners.

In June 2014 she was appointed as chair of the Board of Trustees of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), one of the most influential organisations worldwide in the field of policy research, devoted to the study of the interface between development and the environment.

Ms Grynspan is a member of the steering committee of the UNICEF Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement; member of the Governing Council of the Society for International Development (SID), a global network of individuals and professionals at the forefront of development; and member of the ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work, among others.

In addition to her experience as a conference lecturer and advisor to a number of international organisations and institutions, she has been actively involved



in key United Nations initiatives, such as the Millennium Project's Task Force on Poverty and Economic Development and the High-level Panel on Financing for Development.

In 2014 and 2015, she was recognized as one of the 50 leading intellectuals of Latin America. Since 2016 she serves as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Complutense Institute for International Studies (ICEI), which forms part of the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. In 2017 she received the Forbes Award for Excellence and the Spanish government awarded her the Gran Cruz de la Orden Civil de Alfonso X El Sabio and in 2020 received the Aquí Europa-Vocento award as a Latin American personality which has done the most for the EU-Latin America construction.

Forbes magazine has chosen her in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 as one of the 100 most powerful women in Central America.

Ms Gynspan holds a degree in Economics by the University of Costa Rica and a MSc in Economics by the University of Sussex. She has been awarded a Doctorate Honoris Causa by the University of Salamanca, the University of Extremadura and the European University of Madrid in recognition of her professional career.