COVID-19 and its impact on gender inequality
Social distancing measures and the closure of schools and workplaces in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have caused job and income losses, but they have also increased the caregiving burden borne by women, since they are the ones who do most of the housework and caregiving and, if children cannot go to school, the ones who provide most of the educational support. Children, adolescents, older adults, persons with disabilities and persons who are ill are all at home and in need of more attention and care, which is primarily provided by women.

The health crisis has pointed up the unjust nature of the social structure of care in Latin America and the Caribbean and has highlighted the inequality of women’s and men’s roles. It has also, however, deepened existing socioeconomic inequalities. This heavier caregiving burden has been shouldered disproportionately by women in the lower-income quintiles. These women often have to continue working outside the home because they cannot afford to forego their wages, and many of them are performing domestic service and caregiving work in other people’s homes while lacking the economic means to shift any part of the increased caregiving burden in their own homes to others.

The lockdowns have left women who were already faced with violence in the home, often at the hands of their intimate partner or former partner, closed in with their aggressors and unable to turn to health centres, seek psychological help or go to shelters for women victims of violence. Women who are attacked and are able to get to a health centre often find that the centres are swamped with people suffering from COVID-19 or that shelters or psychological support centres have been closed because their funding has been diverted to emergency services.

In the Economic Commission’s view, mounting an effective response to violence against women and the care economy is of key importance in order to get through the pandemic and, once it is over, embark on a sustainable and just economic recovery. The Santiago Commitment is a useful guide for the implementation of public policies for driving a sustainable reactivation in which caregiving issues are a core element.

The Santiago Commitment declares that, in order to accomplish this, the following steps must be taken: (i) move towards a fiscal and gender compact that takes into account the needs of women in order to mitigate the emergency and promote a sustainable and fair recovery, (ii) strengthen the financing of policies focused on women during and after the pandemic (comprehensive services in gender violence, sexual and reproductive health and care) and guarantee a basic emergency income to women in poverty, (iii) invest in the care economy as a catalyst for economic recovery with equality, including the formalization, remuneration and social security of all workers, (iv) redistribute the responsibilities of care, advance in the transformation of labour markets and achieve greater co-responsibility between the State, households, the market and communities, and (v) expand coverage of employment and social protection programmes to guarantee the rights of migrant, Afrodescendant, indigenous and rural women, women at the grassroots community level and women with disabilities.

Even as the pandemic continues, the Latin American and Caribbean countries have been implementing public policies regarding such issues as violence against women, the care economy, women’s employment and income-generating activities, social protection and women’s participation in the digital area. Information on these measures is available from the Commission’s COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean.
