



UNITED NATIONS

ECLAC

# Introduction to gender inequality

## B. Assessment of gender inequalities



### Economic autonomy

- There is a significant gap between women's and men's labour participation rates in Latin America. As of 2019, that differential amounted to 23.6 percentage points.
- Women spend substantially more time than men do performing unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks. In some countries, they spend an average of twice or three times as many hours per week on these tasks or even more.

### Physical autonomy

- The issue of teenage pregnancy continues to pose a challenge in the region, and the teenage pregnancy rate is higher among lower-income women, less educated women and women who belong to a minority ethnic group. In some countries of the region, the teenage pregnancy rate among indigenous adolescents residing in rural areas is over 20%.
- Femicides continue to be committed in Latin America at an alarming rate. In 2019, 4,640 women were killed in Latin America and in four Caribbean countries simply because they were women.

### Autonomy in decision-making

- Fewer women than men occupy elective posts in political parties and management positions in the public and private sectors in Latin America. Although there are a few exceptions, in most cases only 30% of such positions, at the most, are held by women.

A number of barriers hinder women from fully exercising their human rights. These obstacles, which ECLAC has characterized as the structural constraints associated with gender inequality, include: (i) socioeconomic inequality and the persistence of poverty; (ii) discriminatory, violent and patriarchal cultural patterns and the predominance of a culture of privilege; (iii) the sexual division of labour and the unfair social organization of care; and (iv) the concentration of power and hierarchical relations in the public sphere (ECLAC, 2017a, p. 14).

Guarantees for the human rights of women are closely linked to the three dimensions of women's autonomy: (i) the physical dimension (the freedom to make decisions about their own bodies, their sexuality and reproduction and the ability to exercise their right to a life free of violence); (ii) the economic dimension (the opportunity to access and control their own assets and resources); and (iii) the dimension of decision-making (full participation in making decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families, their communities and society as a whole).

Women's economic autonomy is restricted by the fact that, even though the labour participation rate of women aged 15 and over in Latin America has climbed by 11 percentage points in the last 30 years (ECLAC/ILO, 2019), it was still 23.6 percentage points lower than the male participation rate in 2019. One of the main reasons for this inequality is the fact that women spend more time on unpaid domestic tasks and caregiving, which leaves them less time to devote to paid work (see figure IV.1). This hampers women from gaining access to advantageous positions in the labour market and makes them more likely to engage in part-time work or informal forms of employment. This, in turn, translates into lower earnings and a lack of employment benefits.

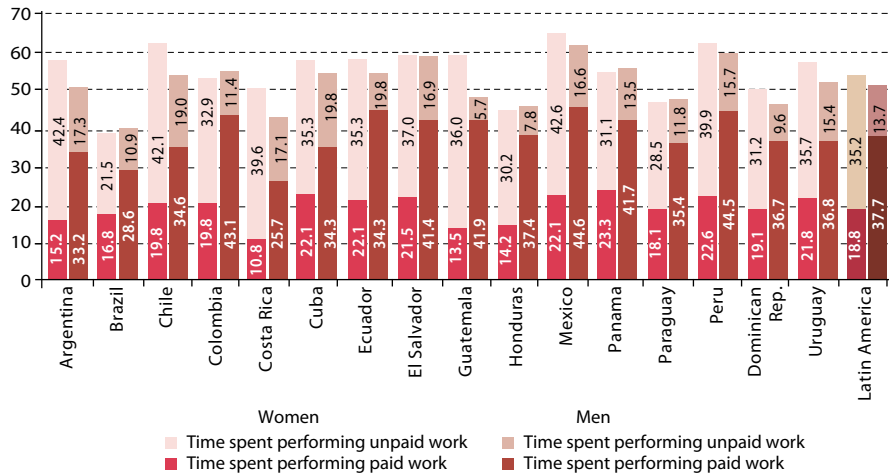


In Latin America, women devote nearly three times more hours to unpaid work than men do.

See [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/es>

**FIGURE IV.1**

Latin America (16 countries): average amount of time spent on paid and unpaid work by the population aged 15 and over, by sex, during the most recent year for which data are available (2009–2017)<sup>a</sup>  
(Average number of hours per week)



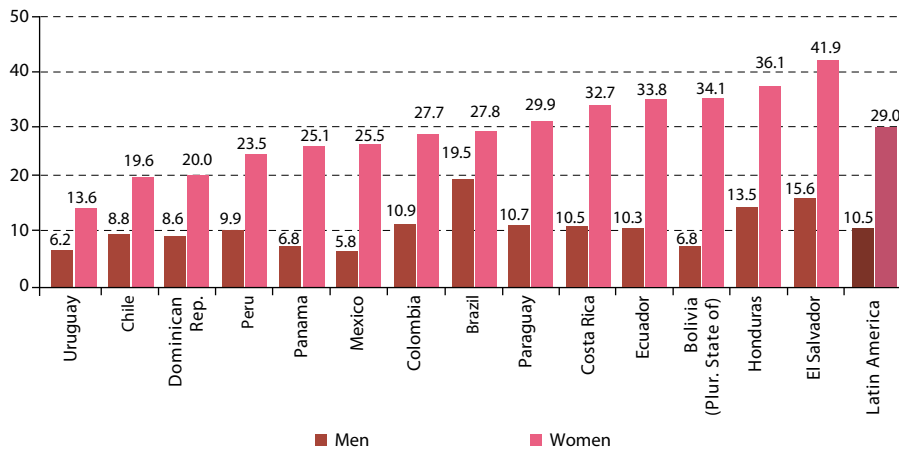
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.

<sup>a</sup> These data are for the following years: Honduras, 2009; Peru, 2010; Panama, 2011; Ecuador, 2012; Argentina and Uruguay, 2013; Mexico, 2014; Chile, 2015; Cuba, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic, 2016; and Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala, 2017. The figures shown for Latin America are simple averages.

Data compiled by ECLAC indicate that more women than men lack incomes of their own in all of the Latin American countries. Around 2018, 29% of women versus 10.5% of men at the regional level lacked their own incomes. In the best of cases, the differential was 7.4 percentage points (Uruguay) and, at the other end of the spectrum, it was 37 percentage points (Guatemala) (see figure IV.2).

**FIGURE IV.2**

Latin America (14 countries): population without own income, by sex, around 2018<sup>a</sup>  
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), CEPALSTAT [online] [https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/WEB\\_CEPALSTAT/estadisticasIndicadores.asp?idioma=i](https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/WEB_CEPALSTAT/estadisticasIndicadores.asp?idioma=i).

<sup>a</sup> The data for Chile are from 2017. The data for the rest of the countries, as well as the simple averages for Latin America as a whole, are from 2018.



There is also a pay gap between working women and their male counterparts, with women receiving lower wages even when they are performing work of equal value that involves similar responsibilities and working conditions. CEPALSTAT data (ECLAC, 2019g) indicate that men's earnings were 12.8 percentage points higher than women's in Latin America's urban areas in 2018.<sup>5</sup> When the findings are controlled for years of education, the differentials are sharpest at the two ends of the spectrum. The pay gap for women and men with between 0 and 5 years of education was 19.9 percentage points, and it was 22.9 percentage points for women and men with between 10 and 12 years of schooling. These gaps are generally even greater when they are cross-referenced with other axes of inequality, such as age, ethnicity<sup>6</sup>, race<sup>7</sup> and migrant status (ECLAC, 2016a and 2020a).

Wage levels are not the only metric of inequality between women and men in the labour market. For example, one of the occupational areas in which working conditions are the poorest for women is paid domestic work. This type of work has traditionally been an important source of jobs for women, particularly those from poor households and those who belong to indigenous and/or Afrodescendent groups, and it has been an increasingly important source of employment for migrant women as well. Slightly more than 11 million women are employed as paid domestic workers in Latin America today (ECLAC, 2019a). These regional averages mask widely differing figures for the individual countries, however: Costa Rica is currently the country in which paid domestic work accounts for the largest share of female employment (18%), while the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is at the other end of the spectrum (3.4% in 2013). Domestic employment is generally informal in nature, pays poorly (as of 2017, wages were the equivalent of 62% of what women in other sorts of occupations were earning) and, for the most part, does not provide social benefits.

One of the consequences of the substandard working conditions associated with the jobs that many women hold is a lack of social protection, and this is reflected in the fact that fewer women than men have pensions or access to health-care systems, upon reaching old age. Of the persons who were paying into pension systems in Latin America in 2017, 56.6% were men and 43.4% were women (Arenas de Mesa, 2019).

In addition, while the attainment of a higher level of education has traditionally enabled people to obtain better jobs, this is not always as true for women as it is for men. Even more highly educated women often end up in positions where they are subordinate to men and in which they are not doing the kind of work for which their education qualifies them.<sup>8</sup> They often find themselves performing administrative or caretaking activities or receiving less pay than men for the same work (ECLAC, 2019a).

Major challenges in terms of women's physical autonomy include the lack of guarantees for their sexual and reproductive rights and for their right to a life free of violence. This is reflected in a lack of quality sexual and reproductive health services, the greater economic responsibility borne by women in reproductive matters, high pregnancy rates among girls and teenagers, forced motherhood and sexual violence (ECLAC, 2016b).

In the area of sexual and reproductive health, one of the factors that may interfere with women's ability to make decisions about their own bodies, including whether or not to become pregnant, how many children they want to have and at what age they want to become mothers, is the lack of access to contraceptives. CEPALSTAT data (ECLAC, 2019g) indicate that, although the extent of unmet demand for family planning services has diminished in recent decades in most of the countries, falling from 17.2% in 1990 to 10.6% in 2013, gaining access to such services remains a challenge in countries such as Haiti,

<sup>5</sup> CEPALSTAT, weighted average. The data are updated to December 2019.

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see ECLAC (2013 and 2014).

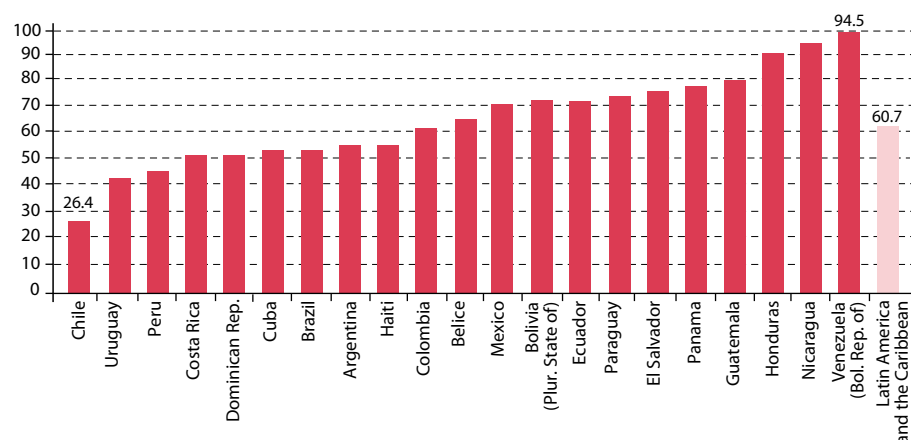
<sup>7</sup> For further information, see ECLAC (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Women have a higher enrolment rate at the tertiary level than men do. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the gross enrolment rate, disaggregated by sex, was 45.1% for men and 58.6% for women in 2018.

where 35.3% of the demand for family planning services goes unmet (which means that nearly 4 out of 10 women do not have access to contraceptives), or Guyana, where the figure is 28.5%.

Teenage pregnancy is a continuing problem in the region even though the fertility rate is trending downward. The persistence of this problem is accounted for by limitations on access to contraceptives, difficulties in overcoming uneven power dynamics between a man and a woman within a relationship (ECLAC, 2016b), sexual abuse and violence and, in some cases, a lack of the necessary knowledge or information. Figures drawn from the CEPALSTAT database (ECLAC, 2019g) indicate that the fertility rate among adolescents remains high at over 50 per 1,000 adolescents in most of the countries (see figure IV.3).

**FIGURE IV.3**  
Latin America and the Caribbean (21 countries): fertility rates  
among girls between 15 and 19 years of age for the most recent year  
for which information is available  
(Per 1,000 persons)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of United Nations, "World Population Prospects 2019", 2019 [online] <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

<sup>a</sup> The data correspond to 2017 for Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Uruguay; 2012 for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; 2015 for Haiti, Paraguay and the Plurinational State of Bolivia; 2018 for Costa Rica and Mexico; 2013 for El Salvador; 2016 for Guatemala; 2014 for Honduras; 2009 for Nicaragua. The average for Latin America and the Caribbean is a projection for the year 2020.

Teenage pregnancy rates tend to be higher among lower-income, less educated and indigenous groups. The pregnancy rate for teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 years who are members of indigenous peoples living in rural areas of Panama, Brazil, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Colombia is over 20%.

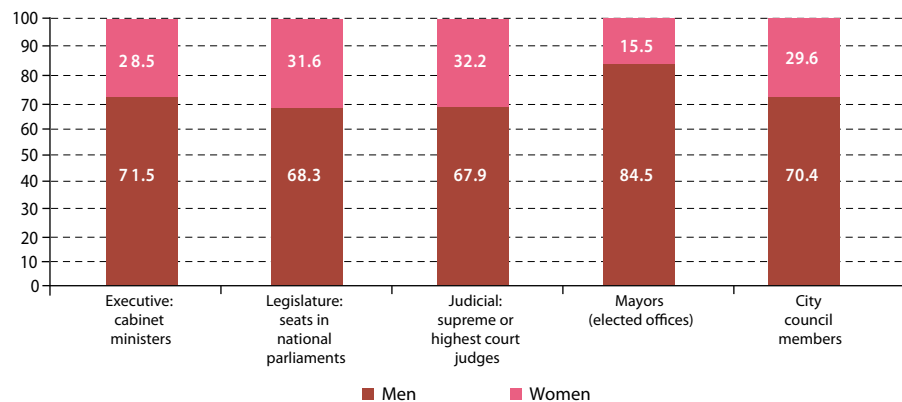
Forms of violence perpetrated against women in the region include sexual harassment; the smuggling and trafficking of women; obstetric, domestic, economic and psychological violence; violence suffered by women deprived of their liberty; lesbophobia and transphobia; and femicide—the most extreme form of violence against women of all. The official information for 20 Latin American countries and 4 Caribbean countries that has been made available by the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2019h) indicates that, in 2019, over 4,640 women were killed simply because they were women. According to the data compiled by the Observatory, the largest number of femicides for that year occurred in Brazil and Mexico (1,941 and 983, respectively), but the highest rate in the region was that of Honduras, with 6.2 femicides per 100,000 women.

The third dimension of autonomy—decision-making—involves the right to gain access to elective posts in political parties and to management positions in the public and private sectors, in civil society organizations and in academia.

Major strides towards gender equality have been made in the region. Policies aimed at promoting women's political participation have succeeded in increasing the percentage of women who hold public positions. Most of the initiatives launched in this area have taken the form of normative frameworks that recognize and apply the principle of gender parity and, to that end, mandate quotas in political elections. For example, Guyana has passed the Election Laws (Amendment) Act 2000 to establish a quota whereby at least one third of the candidates on the lists for national and local elections must be women (Guyana, 2000). National plans or strategies have also been devised to promote women's participation in various public and private decision-making forums, and measures have been introduced to promote civic participation, communication activities and gender-related capacity- and institution-building. Mexico, for example, reformed its Constitution in 2019 in order to guarantee gender parity in all public posts in the three branches and three levels of government (ECLAC, 2019b).

Despite the passage of parity laws and quotas for elections and political parties in a number of Latin American countries in recent years, the goal of having women make up 50% of the three branches of government has yet to be achieved. In the region as a whole, women occupy at most around 30% of the positions, on average, in the three branches of government. Generally speaking, local government is the level at which women account for the smallest percentages (see figure IV.4).

**FIGURE IV.4.**  
Latin America (33 countries): overall average shares  
of decision-making posts, around 2018<sup>a</sup>  
(Percentages)



**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en/autonomies/autonomy-decision-making>.

<sup>a</sup> The data for the legislative branch on the number of seats held in national parliaments correspond to 2019.

The extent of women's political participation varies not only across countries of the region but also across different groups of women in each country. The fact that few Afrodescendent, indigenous and young women are represented demonstrates that these groups are largely excluded from the political arena. Consequently, their experiences, interests and needs do not find their way onto governments' political agendas or, if they do, are given no more than cursory attention and are underfunded.

According to data compiled by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), during the period from 1991 to 2018, 65.9% of management posts were held by men and just 34.1% by women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Women had a 3.7% greater chance, on average, of occupying a management position in a national firm than in an international one and a 10% greater chance of holding such a position in a gender-balanced workforce.

This text is part of a United Nations publication coordinated by Simone Cecchini, Senior Social Affairs Officer of the Social Development Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Raúl Holz, Consultant of the same Division, and Humberto Soto de la Rosa, Social Affairs Officer at ECLAC's subregional headquarters in Mexico. The document contributes to the activities of the project "Leaving no one behind in Latin America and the Caribbean: strengthening institutions and social policy coherence and integration at the country level to foster equality and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals", financed by the eleventh tranche of the United Nations Development Account. More information on the project, including other relevant materials, is available at: [igualdad.cepal.org/en](http://igualdad.cepal.org/en)

The authors are grateful for the valuable comments of Fabián Repetto to an earlier version of this document and Nicole Bidegain, Fabiana Del Popolo, Andrés Espejo, María Luisa Marinho, Malva- marina Pedrero, Leandro Reboiras, Claudia Robles, Lucia Scuro, José Ignacio Suárez, Varinia Tromben, Daniela Trucco and Heidi Ullmann on specific chapters, as well as the support of Daniela Huneus in the preparation of the document. They also thank all the participants in the discussions at the training workshops "Que Nadie se Quede Atrás en la Senda del Desarrollo de Panamá" (Panama, November 15-16, 2018) and "Políticas Sociales para que Nadie se Quede Atrás" (Santiago de Veraguas, April 9-10, 2019, and Panama, April 11-12, 2019), organized by the Social Development Division and ECLAC Subregional Headquarters in Mexico, in collaboration with the Social Cabinet of the Government of the Republic of Panama. Thanks are due to María Elisa Bernal, Simone Cecchini, Raúl Holz, Daniela Huneus, Francisca Miranda, Beatriz Morales, Marcelo Munch, Amalia Palma and Daniela Trucco for their generous contribution of photographic material for this publication.

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United Nations publication  
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This publication should be cited as: S. Cecchini, R. Holz and H. Soto de la Rosa (coords.), *A toolkit for promoting equality: the contribution of social policies in Latin America and the Caribbean* (LC/TS.2021/55), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2021.

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