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Commentary: Labour Market: The key to women's equality in the Caribbean and Latin America

Published on March 8, 2017

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By Alicia Bárcena

Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region in the world where, for the last four decades and without interruption, states have met to debate and commit politically to eradicating gender discrimination and inequality and moving toward guaranteeing the full exercise of women's autonomy and human rights.



Alicia Bárcena is the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Since the first regional conference on women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Havana in 1977, the region has lived through years of political, economic, social and cultural changes, which have entailed progress for women in the region but have also shown how inequalities persist.

The goal of sustainable development with gender equality, which is born of the synergy between the regional gender agenda and the 2030 Agenda, compels us to set our sights and focus our actions on the structural knots of inequality in our societies.

First, we think about socioeconomic inequality and poverty and about the necessary transformation of the reigning development model toward one that incorporates new patterns of sustainable production and consumption and of the redistribution of wealth, income and time.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 78.1 percent of women who are employed work in sectors that ECLAC defines as being of low productivity, which means worse pay, less contact with technology and innovation and, in many cases, low-quality jobs.

The labour market is the master key to equality and that is where the redistribution of income, and the guarantee of rights, effectively occurs. The region's countries have increased the proportion of women in the labour market; however, in the last ten years, the rate of female activity in the region has stagnated at around 53 percent, marking a ceiling on women's incorporation into paid work.

In its most recent studies, ECLAC has demonstrated that an increase in the female workforce that is available and inserted in the market would contribute to reducing poverty in the region, with paradigmatic cases such as El Salvador, where poverty could be cut by up to 12 percentage points if women had labour income.

In the region, the proportion of women with no income of their own is approximately 30 percent, which is to say that nearly one in every three women in Latin America and the Caribbean still does not have her own source of income.

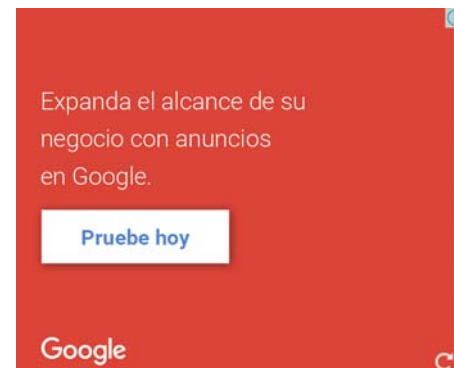
On top of this, 26 percent of women above 15 years of age earn less than the minimum wage.



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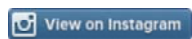
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Proposals such as the universal basic income, or the regulation and enforcement of the minimum wage in certain highly feminized sectors that have no legal protection at all today, are tools that would allow for expanding and improving women's access to income.

With regard to time use, figures reveal that if currently unpaid domestic and care work were valued at market prices, approximately one fifth of the wealth that is calculated as part of national accounts today would be produced in households, mainly by women.

In October 2016, the region's governments, gathered at the XIII regional conference on women, reached an agreement to implement the Montevideo Strategy and strive for compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This synergy poses the challenge of implementing gender equality as a fundamental, leading and cross-cutting element in all public policies, with a view to fulfilling the 2030 Agenda.

It is time to pave the way to parity in all its forms and scenarios, to respect and go beyond gender when looking at women, recognizing all our abilities, our comprehensive view of life, and our constant efforts to build a more just society – not just for all women but also for all people.

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