

BRIEFING OF MINISTERS AND HIGH-LEVEL AUTHORITIES OF MACHINERIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis from a gender perspective

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BACKGROUND

Amid the largest pandemic the world has experienced in recent decades, international agencies, governments, the private sector and civil society organizations have been seeking solutions and alternatives to stop the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The measures adopted by several of the region's governments to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus include quarantines and lockdowns, in some cases on a voluntary basis and in others mandatory.

The global economic recession that is expected to occur as a result of COVID-19, which some already anticipate to be a pandemic-driven depression, may affect the region's terms of trade and export-oriented production sectors in a region that is largely dependent on natural-resource-intensive exports. In the medium term, the capacity of States to generate income is also expected to be severely constrained, both because of the loss of revenue resulting from the economic slowdown and because of the roll-out of tax exemptions and benefits in response to the crisis. This will affect the region's macroeconomic balances, narrowing fiscal space and policy options at the national level, as well as the possibilities of generating employment and the conditions for exiting the crisis, which are already weakened in contexts of high external debt, exchange-rate volatility and the political and institutional fragility of several of the region's countries.

Tax relief packages do not always include special measures to alleviate the impacts of the crisis on highly feminized sectors and tend to focus exclusively on the recovery of productive sectors, without taking into account the impact of the crisis on unpaid reproductive and care work. There is also a significant risk that resources that are currently being allocated to basic programmes for women will be redirected to address the COVID-19 crisis, thereby depleting financing for already weakened equality policies and further eroding machineries for women's advancement in each country.

This situation poses new challenges for humanity and public policy at the global, regional, national and local levels and already points to a worsening of the care crisis, producing disruptions and changes in women's daily lives. Women assume the main burden of unpaid and care work, which becomes more acute in times of crisis and which, in turn, adversely affects their access to or retention of paid employment. At the same time, women are overrepresented in the informal sector of the economy, with more precarious jobs and lower productivity. This affects domestic workers in particular, as well as women running small enterprises who have no guarantee of social protection in the event of a crisis. Given that this is a health crisis, and that health services are in danger of collapsing in many countries, women are likely to take on additional burdens of care for sick dependants, with the risk this implies for their own health, and further eroding their presence in the labour market.

In this context, and in relation to the informal sector and the care economy, it is also essential to address the impact of the crisis on migrants and refugees in the region. Both *Social Panorama of Latin America*

and the Caribbean 2019¹ and the document *Women's autonomy in changing economic scenarios*,² prepared by ECLAC for the fourteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Santiago, in January 2020, discuss the impact of women's migration on the care economy, how this is reflected in the economic and social indicators relating to domestic work, and the need to further analyse what the report calls "migration corridors for care in Latin America".

These dynamics are also seriously affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market and in particular on refugee and migrant workers. These groups include a large number of refugee and migrant women throughout the region, whose capacity to send remittances to their families and to generate earnings to weather the crisis will be diminished. Many of these women lack social protection coverage and migration documentation and face xenophobia and discrimination, as well as limited access to public services—such as medical services—and in general, constraints to the exercise of their economic and social rights. They are also at very high risk of falling victim to human trafficking and gender-based violence. Moreover, lack of documentation and the restrictions being imposed at some borders may lead to many being excluded from the response plans adopted by governments to mitigate the effects of the crisis on the loss of livelihoods.

Also important is the fact that quarantines or lockdowns adopted by many countries in the region entail serious threats to the safety of many women and girls who suffer violence in their homes, by increasing the time they spend with their abusers and reducing the possibilities of seeking help. This confined situation can lead to an increase in violence suffered by women and make it more lethal. At the same time, it amplifies barriers to accessing essential services such as health services, legal services and social services like shelters, safe houses and psychosocial support. Crises can impact different types of gender-based violence. Experience has shown that when women are the main heads of household, increased food insecurity as a result of the crisis can lead to a higher risk of domestic violence due to increased tensions within the household. In the recent outbreak of Ebola virus disease, evidence indicates an increase in cases of violence against women, particularly domestic violence and sexual violence and exploitation.

There is also evidence of possible increases in abuse of power, harassment and sexual exploitation by armed forces and security agents deployed to enforce quarantines, curfews and other mobility restrictions enforced during the crisis. The closure of schools and educational establishments can increase the risks of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and child marriage or early union for girls and adolescents, as well as adolescent pregnancy.

In recent weeks, countries have announced various measures in areas such as violence against women, care, employment, social protection and participation to avoid worsening the gender inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination faced by women in the context of the pandemic.

The participation of women and women's organizations is essential to find a rapid and sustainable way out of this crisis, while also taking the opportunity to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Women's community leadership is key to emergency response efforts. A large proportion of front-line health workers and professionals are women. In this regard, strengthening women's participation in decision-making in the response to the crisis and in economic and social recovery measures is central to

¹ LC/PUB.2019/22-P/Rev.1.

² LC/CRM.14/3.

ensuring a high-quality, effective and relevant response. At the same time, the work of women and women's organizations at the national, regional and local levels is essential to address potential causes of conflict that may arise in the context of crisis management measures.

The Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, as an intergovernmental forum on gender inequality, and in fulfilment of its mandate, aims to address the regional situation with respect to women's autonomy and rights and public policies for gender equality. Furthermore, one of the pillars of the Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030 is regional cooperation to support efforts to achieve gender equality and ensure women's rights. In particular, the Strategy urges governments to promote cooperation initiatives on technical, financial and labour standards and women's rights, especially in critical situations.

For all these reasons, the dissemination and implementation of the Santiago Commitment, adopted at the fourteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, in January 2020, is of the utmost importance in the current context. The Commitment is a guide that ratifies the relevance of international commitments, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to accelerate the advancement of gender equality in our region. It is in this spirit that a briefing session is convened for the ministers and high-level authorities of machineries for the advancement of women in ECLAC member States. The aim is to use this special forum to share information on the current situation, disseminate initiatives and identify the main obstacles in terms of the challenges to women's autonomy and the guarantee of their rights in the response to the pandemic.

OBJECTIVES

1. Analyse the different economic and social scenarios of the current crisis and its differentiated impacts on women in the short, medium and long terms.
2. Share information on the main initiatives that the governments of the region are carrying forward, with special consideration for the needs of women and gender inequalities in the framework of the current crisis.
3. Analyse the available data on a possible increase in violence against women and femicide/feminicide, and discuss prevention and response measures in relation to COVID-19.
4. Promote regional, subregional and bilateral cooperation initiatives that support a coordinated response to the coronavirus crisis, by incorporating lessons learned from the region and other parts of the world.

MAPPING OF RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

In Latin America and the Caribbean, ministries and machineries for the advancement of women are designing and implementing initiatives and policies to address the gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contingency plans and protocols are being implemented in several countries, aiming to cope with the saturation of health systems and social lockdown/isolation.

At the meeting, an initial mapping will be presented of the initiatives announced to address gender dimensions in the responses to the pandemic in the Latin American and Caribbean countries. This mapping will be updated with the progress presented at the meeting and will become an updated digital repository available for the countries to consult.

TIMETABLES

Virtual meeting for Latin American countries (in Spanish): 11 a.m. Santiago (Chile) time.

Virtual meeting for Caribbean countries (in English): 4 p.m. Santiago (Chile) time.

PROGRAMME

- 4 – 4.15 p.m. Welcome remarks
- Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
 - María-Noel Vaeza, Regional Director for the Americas and the Caribbean of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)
 - Carolina Cuevas, Minister of Women’s Affairs and Gender Equity of Chile, in her capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean
- 4.15 – 4.30 p.m. Initial presentations: economic and social scenarios of the current crisis, differentiated impacts on women, available data on violence against women and girls, and mapping of government initiatives to address gender dimensions in responses to the pandemic
- 4.30 – 5.30 p.m. Statements by the countries: main initiatives and implementation challenges, and areas of collaboration among governments in the region to address the crisis
- 5.30 – 6 p.m. Closing and agreements of the meeting