



Meeting of the
**Presiding Officers
of the Regional
Conference on Women**
in Latin America and the Caribbean
29–30 September 2021

Side event for the 61st Meeting of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean

"The burden of unpaid care work on Caribbean women in the time of COVID-19"
29 September 2021
12:15pm to 1:45 pm (GMT-4)

Background

As of 23 August 2021, there have been nearly 1.5 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Caribbean subregion.¹ Even with mass vaccination drives underway in all territories, the prolonged restriction and lockdown measures since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, have exacerbated the existing economic and social vulnerabilities and inequalities in the subregion.

The Caribbean has grappled with long-standing structural constraints of high debt burdens, limited fiscal space, and undiversified economies that are highly dependent on services, with an average debt-to-GDP ratio at 70.0 per cent of GDP during 2010 to 2019.² Overwhelmed healthcare infrastructure, fragile air and sea transportation systems, as well as citizen security and food security have increasingly felt the brunt from the current crisis. Furthermore, vulnerabilities associated with high exposure to climate change and climate induced hazards continue to put Caribbean countries and their people at greater risk of aggravated impacts of the pandemic.

The impacts of the pandemic have highlighted pre-existing inequalities and have been more pronounced among the subpopulations that possess fewer resources and are more vulnerable, including women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and migrants. In particular, making visible the specific challenges faced by women not only as poverty levels are higher in female-headed households, but also because the greater number of unpaid care activities are performed by women, including the new and additional burden of educating children due to the closure of schools as a result of the pandemic.

Tourism, services and sales, as well as domestic sectors have been most impacted in terms of output and employment levels by the pandemic in the Caribbean. These sectors are predominated by informal sector workers and account for the highest proportion of female workers (54.3 per cent compared to 38.7 per cent

¹ CARPHA COVID-19 Tracker Dashboard as of August 23, 2021. See:

<https://carpha.org/Portals/0/Documents/COVID%20Situation%20Reports/Situation%20Report%20186%20-%20August%2023,%202021.pdf>

² Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), The Caribbean Outlook: forging a people-centred approach to sustainable development post-COVID-19 (LC/SES.38/12), Santiago, 2020.

of male workers)³, leading to increasing levels of female unemployment and underemployment. This would have severe implications, as many mothers will have limited to no means to feed their children and sustain their care responsibilities.⁴ Women are also more likely than men to be employed in essential services such as the healthcare sector, who have been significantly impacted as a result of excessive workloads combined with usual work responsibilities and new care demands at home.

With school closures, social isolation and the increased number of sick people, the unpaid work burden has become more onerous. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women spent on average between 22 and 42 hours per week on unpaid domestic work and caregiving tasks, however regional data showed that with schools being physically closed, they have had to spend considerably more time entertaining, feeding and supporting their children's online learning. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) and CARICOM, 54 per cent of women compared to 47 per cent of men experienced an increase in unpaid domestic work, while 46 per cent of women compared to 35 per cent of men increased their childcare duties.⁵ Additional findings from a regional IDB online socioeconomic survey indicated that twice as many women compared to men reported increases in domestic chores and home-schooling children.⁶ Women who are both parents and small business entrepreneurs, and those who work in other industries that remained open while schools were closed, had to manage their professional duties and their care responsibilities simultaneously. Additionally, as the teaching profession is predominated by women, many female teachers found themselves conducting online classes from home, as well as supporting their children with their own online learning.

This issue is of very great concern and interest in the Caribbean now, given the overwhelming increase in responsibilities that have fallen at the feet of women in the subregion who, in addition to attempting to find the space to work from home, where possible, must now deal with the added responsibilities of caring for the entire family – including school-aged children attempting to learn from home – while safeguarding the health and wellbeing of all persons in the domestic space in the midst of a virulent pandemic. This has major implications for women's productivity alongside their physical and mental health.

Very few measures have been put in place by Caribbean governments to mediate this burden. Even where flexible working arrangements were possible, it was relegated more to those workers in middle- and high-income households. As such, this has become a concerning reality for low income and female-headed households, more so for single parent households (the majority of whom are women) where family/friend support units may no longer be accessible due to COVID-19 movement restrictions.⁷ As the Secretary General noted in his recent Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean, recovery will urgently require a care economy in order to reduce the burden of unpaid care work, which falls disproportionately on women.⁸ However, the Caribbean lacks the comprehensive data to fully assess the hours spent on unpaid care work or how this time is divided between women and men (SDG 5.4.1 on unpaid domestic and care work), and is the only region that is yet to carry out a full-scale time-use survey

³ ECLAC (2021). The economic autonomy of women in a sustainable recovery with equality, COVID-19 Special Report No. 9.

⁴ UN Women, COVID-19 and Working Parents- An Action Brief, 2020

⁵ UNWOMEN (2021). A gender analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on women and men in 12 Caribbean countries.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United Nations (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean.

to quantify unpaid work undertaken primarily by women.⁹ This is an area of critical importance towards universal and comprehensive social protection systems which have the potential to drive a socioeconomic recovery in the subregion that leaves no one behind.

Objectives

This virtual side event will:

- Introduce the specific challenges faced by women in the Caribbean subregion, with special attention on identifying their needs based on their dual role as workers and caretakers
- Highlight some best practices of programmes and initiatives in the subregion
- The way forward (on issues of measurement of unpaid work and the need for time use surveys)

Format

The interactive 1.5-hour session will involve a series of short presentations on the burden of unpaid care work in the Caribbean within the context of the pandemic, which will be followed by an interactive dialogue on measuring unpaid care work and adopting a care lens across all areas of public policy.

⁹ ECLAC (2018). Advancing the economic empowerment and autonomy of women in the Caribbean through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.