

COVID-19 Sets Back Progress Made on the Welfare of Women and Diverse Populations

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POLICY BRIEF N°
IDB-PB-00389

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December 2023



Cataloging-in-Publication data provided by the
Inter-American Development Bank
Felipe Herrera Library

COVID-19 sets back progress made on the welfare of women and diverse populations /
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p. cm. — (IDB Policy Brief ; 389)

1. Minorities-Economic aspects-Latin America. 2.Minorities-Economic aspects-
Caribbean Area. 3. Minorities-Social aspects-Latin America. 4. Minorities-Social
aspects-Caribbean Area. 5. Gender mainstreaming-Latin America. 6. Gender
mainstreaming-Caribbean Area. I. Bustelo, Monserrat. II. Frisancho Robles, Verónica
C. III. Martinez, Karen. IV. Suaya, Agustina. V. Inter-American Development Bank.
Department of Research and Chief Economist. VI. Inter-American Development Bank.
Gender and Diversity Division. VII. Series.

IDB-PB-389

JEL codes: J16, I12, D63, I14, J15, J18

Keywords: COVID-19, Gender Gaps, Women, Indigenous People, African Descendants'
People, Persons with Disabilities

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→ COVID-19 Sets Back Progress Made on the Welfare of Women and Diverse Populations

By March 2020, COVID-19 was confirmed present in all Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries.¹ [The region acted quickly](#), taking early social distancing and lockdown measures at the national and regional levels, and implementing border closures. But the limited health infrastructure, lack of well-structured social protection systems, and rapid spread of the virus in the most vulnerable areas meant that despite these containment policies, it was only a matter of months before the pandemic had a severe impact on the region.²

[Data](#) on the progress of the pandemic in the region show that the most vulnerable sectors were the most affected by the virus. This may be due not only to higher health risk factors in these populations, but also to greater mobility during the early months of the pandemic. As found by [a study](#) that analyzes the impact of national social distancing policies in 18 LAC countries, the most impoverished areas were less strict in complying with confinement due to the need to guarantee a minimum income.

Not only did the pandemic weakened the region's economy, it exacerbated structural inequalities. Women, indigenous peoples, African descendants, persons with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, reflecting both the vulnerability of these groups and the fragility of the progress made in recent years toward improving their social welfare.

→ What Is the Evidence So Far?

→ WIDENING GENDER GAPS IN THE LABOR MARKET

Women's participation in the labor market has declined sharply as a consequence of the crisis. [A study of six Caribbean countries](#) based on the results of a [survey](#) conducted by the IDB and Cornell University at the beginning of the crisis found that more economically active women reported job losses in April 2020 (44.3%) compared to their males counterparts (36.5%). Reported job losses were higher for single women (47% versus 40% for single men). These data coincide with other international assessments^{3,4} of the effects of the crisis on the labor market.

According to the [COVID-19 Labor Observatory](#), between February and July 2020, the region (15 countries with available data) lost about 14% of employment, or 31 million jobs. Despite representing 42% of the pre-pandemic workforce, by March 2020 women had suffered 56% of job losses, reducing female participation in the workforce to 2010 levels. Likewise, the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on the [closure of companies led by women](#): 40% of small and medium-sized companies led by women exited the market, while only 29% of SMEs led by men suffered the same fate.

The crisis meant not only more job losses for women, but also a slower recovery as lockdown measures were rolled back and vaccination progressed. According to the [October 2021 report from the COVID-19 Labor Observatory](#), in July 2021, regional employment was still 3% below pre-crisis levels, with a higher rate of job loss among women (5%) than among men (3%).

[This is due, in part](#), to the fact that women are overrepresented in the sectors most affected by the pandemic (services and retail). [In the Caribbe-](#)





an, for example, the greatest job losses were found to be in tourism-dependent countries, a sector where women are traditionally overrepresented. A study in [Mexico](#) found that female employment was the hardest hit due to the higher concentration of women in the sectors that recovered slowest, such as the service sector. The number of jobs held by women in the services sector at the end of 2020 was equivalent to 89% of its pre-crisis level, while jobs held by men had reached 97%.

Another important factor impacting the labor market of women is the unpaid domestic workload, which increased during the pandemic due to the closure of schools and care centers.

→ INCREASE IN THE BURDEN OF UNPAID DOMESTIC LABOR

The difficulty of balancing household responsibilities with paid work were exacerbated by the pandemic. Lockdown measures, the closure of schools and daycares, and the introduction of remote education and teleworking increased the burden of care in the home (which traditionally falls on women). Before the pandemic, [gender gaps were already significant](#) in this regard: women in the region devoted three times more than men to unpaid domestic work and caregiving (4.1 hours versus 1.7 hours, respectively). During the pandemic, these gaps increased. A survey conducted in July 2020 shows that 58% of female respondents in the region reported that the time they spent on household chores increased with the pandemic, compared to 45% of male respondents.⁵

An [analysis](#) based on the IDB/Cornell coronavirus survey for 17 countries in the region found a clear pattern of women taking the lead in unpaid domestic labor during the initial months of lockdown. Two-thirds of the women surveyed reported that they were the only ones doing the cleaning and cooking work, while less than a quarter of the men surveyed reported they were in a similar situation. Likewise, about 60% of women said they were the primary caregiver of their children, versus 14% among men.

Taking a closer look at the data from this survey, another study documents the gender gaps in these activities during the initial months of the pandemic for married or cohabiting men and women based on their employment status. The data highlight that during the pandemic, within two-parent homes, women take the lead on household chores and caring for children and the elderly, and this is regardless of their employment situation: whether they worked outside the home, teleworked, or did not work. The largest gender gaps emerge in caring for children younger than five, where men take on barely a tenth of the labor women do.⁶

The suspension of in-person education in 2020 was massive, affecting more than 137 million students in the region. Latin America was the region of the world where this measure lasted the longest, an average of 170 days without in-person classes (compared to a global average of 40 days).⁷ Although in-person learning was more widespread in 2021, two out of every three students still found their schools closed for the second year in a row.⁸ This situation not only impacted [the mental health of women](#) in many cases, burdened as they were by the simultaneous demands of teleworking and domestic and care labor, but it also influences the slow recovery of the female workforce that threatens to have a long-term impact on the labor decisions of women in the region.

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→ INCREASE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Lockdown and the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 increased the risk of violence against women. In the region, [one in three women](#) experiences physical and/or sexual violence at some point in her life, the majority at the hands of her partner. The risk of violence increases in times of difficulty and crises, such as during the pandemic.⁹ In fact,

anecdotal evidence from the region suggests that violence against women (VAW) increased during the most severe periods of the pandemic.¹⁰

[An impact evaluation for the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires \(CABA\)](#) shows that following the introduction of mobility restrictions, calls to 137—the assistance hotline for victims of domestic violence (DV)—increased by 32%. [A complementary study in Argentina based on an online victimization survey](#) found that women whose spouses were exempt from quarantine (for example, frontline workers) were less likely to be victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), compared with women whose partners were forced to stay at home. The increase in reports of domestic violence in this study points to the effect of quarantine on the amount of time couples spent together and the tensions caused by the decrease in household income.

The pandemic had a differentiated impact on the violence reporting channels and the type of violence reported to the emergency lines. [Granular data](#) from different DV reporting channels in six countries in the region showed an increase in demand for specialized help through DV hotlines and a reduction in reports through more traditional channels, such as emergency lines (for example, 911) and the police and/or legal complaints. The increase in calls made to domestic violence hotlines suggests that this channel was better suited to meet the needs of victims, while the drop in demand for traditional channels that offer in-person support is consistent with mobility restrictions. The data available from four countries in this study suggest that reports of psychological violence amplified (and led) the changes observed in violence reporting.



Social networks emerged as a means of facilitating VAW survivors' search for institutional help. During lockdown and partial reopening, technology became a key tool in providing access to information on survivor support services. [An experiment carried out in Honduras](#) during the months of lockdown found that the way information about support channels is provided is key. This study evaluated the effectiveness of different ads on Facebook. The ads were based on lessons from behavioral economics and sought to lower the behavioral barriers that can keep survivors from seeking institutional help. By comparing four types of ads, the study found that messages that reduce victims' uncertainty about what happens after a support service is contacted or that help survivors understand how staying with an abusive partner affects their well-being have a positive effect on the likelihood of women seeking help.¹¹

→ DIVERSE POPULATIONS AT GREATER RISK



In a context of structural weaknesses that existed before the crisis, indigenous peoples, African descendants, persons with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community face greater risk of falling into poverty and are more exposed to the risks of COVID-19 infection and mortality and to falling behind in terms of educational achievement.

This situation is a result of both [inequality of opportunities](#) faced by the diverse populations in terms of access to good-quality social protection services, education, health and employment, [as well as to the pre-existing health conditions](#) of persons with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ people that put them at greater risk.

However, there is still [very limited information](#) on the inequalities they face and the effects of the pandemic on this diverse groups. **Regarding the impact on health, a [study](#)** conducted using data from Colombia and Mexico found that infection rates during the peak of the pandemic

were higher for ethnic minorities in these countries due to limited access to health services. Persons from ethnic minorities in Colombia and Mexico with a positive COVID-19 diagnosis have a lower probability of hospitalization and, if they were, a greater probability of dying than non-minority populations. [Estimates for Colombia](#) based on data available up to January 2021 show that mortality rates for African descent and indigenous people were higher than for the rest of the population during the pandemic. Similar trends were identified in Brazil,¹² with higher mortality rates for hospitalized patients from Afro-descendant populations, a situation attributed to this population's limited access to health services, particularly intensive care units.

Regarding the impact on education, although there are still no direct estimates of the impact on education for diverse populations, recent data from household surveys show that students spend much less time on school activities than before the pandemic. For example, in Brazil and Peru, 43% of primary school students have not participated in educational activities since schools closed in March 2020. In Argentina and Bolivia,

almost half of primary school students spent less than 3 hours a day on school activities. In Mexico, more than half of high school students have not been participating in educational activities since the beginning of the pandemic. These low levels of student participation impact achievement and attendance, especially among the most disadvantaged students. These losses will have important implications not only for the education sector, but also for the labor market in the coming years.¹³



→ How Can We Move Forward?

The crisis associated with the coronavirus is unprecedented. The situation not only reveals deep-rooted structural inequalities in the region but widens pre-existing gaps. Post-pandemic recovery provides an opportunity to lay the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Turning the crisis into an opportunity requires, among other factors, advancing the agenda for measuring and monitoring the effects of the crisis on vulnerable populations and producing evidence on the effectiveness of programs aimed at eliminating inequalities in LAC.

Regarding labor markets, knowledge must be generated on long- and medium-term job losses for women and diverse populations, in addition to the challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises led by these population groups. We should better understand how the absence of a social protection system and access to care services affected female employment. Based on this, we should evaluate how to create social security systems that protect all female workers. A worth researching area is the differentiated impact of telework, especially for women in relation to the burdens of care, as well as the impact of the digitization of work in a world where the digital divide for diverse populations and based on gender pre-dates COVID-19. It should be relevant to understand what policies are effective for closing these gaps in the development of digital skills and key

competencies to access the jobs of the future, in areas such as sustainable energy, the digital economy, green jobs, and the silver economy.

Regarding gender-based violence, although the hotlines were established as an effective channel and substitute for face-to-face policing services, one of the lessons learned is that we need new models of care for victims during crises and in contexts of social distancing. Once again, technology is essential for extending the scope of gender-based violence prevention and care services, and the region must make further progress in studying the effectiveness of these mechanisms.

Turning the crisis into an opportunity requires, among other factors, advancing the agenda for measuring and monitoring the effects of the crisis on vulnerable populations and producing evidence on the effectiveness of programs aimed at eliminating inequalities in LAC.



Regarding education, rigorous evidence is required on the effects of temporarily closures of education systems and virtual education methods during the health crisis and lockdowns on learning, mental health, educational opportunities, and future employment of vulnerable population groups. An important issue that remains on this agenda is to make progress on measuring learning loss and its consequences in persons with disabilities or when people live in rural and outlying areas. Likewise, there is an urgent need to gather evidence on the effect of lockdown measures on the school dropout rate for girls and diverse groups, a phenomenon that has been observed in previous crises that involved lockdowns.¹⁴

Regarding health, it is crucial to produce evidence on the effect of mobility restrictions on family planning, unplanned pregnancies of girls and adolescents, and unsafe abortions. It is also necessary to understand the effect of increased male mortality from COVID-19 on their female spouses' vulnerability to cycles of poverty. Additionally, it is essential to improve measurement of inequalities in access to health services during the

health crisis for diverse population groups, which already faced significant barriers before the pandemic. In this sense, we must evaluate the effectiveness of current vaccination campaigns at reaching the most vulnerable populations. Lastly, the pandemic's impact on the mental health of women and diverse populations in other areas of development—such as education or work—must be evaluated.

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