



Series **The agrifood system and the challenges of COVID-19**

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Differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and its connection to the pillars of the agrifood system

Food systems

The most recent figures on gaps in the distribution of poverty by sex in Latin America and the Caribbean indicated that, prior to the pandemic, “for every 100 men living in poor households in the region, there were 113 women in a similar situation” (ECLAC, 2020a). This highlights women’s lack of economic autonomy in the region. This situation strongly affects the food and nutritional security of this group. In 2018, 8.4 percent of women in Latin America and the Caribbean experienced severe food insecurity, compared to 6.9 percent of men, demonstrating the link between poverty and food insecurity and malnutrition (FAO *et al.*, 2018).

Concerning the effects of COVID-19, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) (2020b) estimates that extreme poverty in our region will increase by 28 million people, bringing the number of hungry people to approximately 75 million. In other words, more than 1 in 10 of the region’s inhabitants will suffer from hunger. In rural areas, this situation is even more acute, as extreme poverty is projected to increase by 28.5 percent this year, and extreme rural poverty would reach an unprecedented 42 percent (FAO and ECLAC, 2020). This means that 10 million inhabitants – of whom almost 6 million are women – could be

¹ At the same time, in 19 countries in the region, the prevalence of obesity among women is at least 10 percent higher than among men, favouring chronic non-communicable diseases (FAO *et al.*, 2018).

Market closure measures that were needed on grounds of health reasons make it difficult for women producers to access peri-urban and urban markets, affecting their income (CARE, 2020).



added to this condition in which their income will not even be sufficient to acquire a basic food basket. Besides, this group living in extreme poverty tends to present higher levels of labour informality and is concentrated in economic sectors that have been hard hit by the pandemic, such as services, tourism and paid domestic work (ECLAC, 2020c).

In this regard, the necessary measures to close markets for health reasons make it difficult for women producers to access peri-urban and urban markets, affecting their income (CARE, 2020). Moreover, social security affiliation among rural workers is highly stratified by income (ECLAC, 2012a, 2012b), which means that coverage deficits are concentrated among employed women who are less able to cope with the crisis, such as self-employed workers and unpaid domestic workers (Rossel, 2012).

According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), 37 countries and territories in the region have closed their schools, which means that at least 113 million children and adolescents are at home, needing 24-hour care. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) also warned that nearly 85 million children

of primary school age would no longer receive food at school, stressing that for 10 million of them, school meals were perhaps the only means of a healthy diet (FAO, 2020). In this regard, in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, innovative emergency protocols were activated to ensure school feeding, delivering baskets and food bags in the most vulnerable territories (FAO and ECLAC, 2020a).

On the other hand, childcare tasks traditionally fall to women, who are responsible for 76.2 percent of all hours of unpaid care work, more than three times that of men. This, coupled with their productive work, puts them under pressure to work double or triple shifts; a reality that has been aggravated by confinement measures, particularly in families with children of pre-school age or who are unable to take on distance education independently, making it difficult for them to obtain paid employment or to undertake entrepreneurial activities (Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020).

At the same time, tensions within the household associated with necessary confinement measures are increasing the risk of gender-based violence for women and girls, as has already been documented in several



countries in the region (Vaeza, 2020). The pandemic has widened regional gender gaps in the exercise of fundamental rights. These gaps put pressure on women's ability to secure their livelihoods, which is hampered by the double or triple burden described and limited access to inputs, services, markets and financial resources, further limiting their purchasing power and thus their access to healthier diets (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Such situations demonstrate the greater economic impact of COVID-19 on women, as a result of their disadvantaged position in the labour market and in relation to commercial markets.

The pandemic has widened regional inequality gaps in the exercise of fundamental rights between men and women. These gaps put

pressure on women's ability to secure their livelihoods, which is hampered by the double or triple burden described above and a limited access to inputs, services, markets and financial resources.

Latin America and the Caribbean must move towards the development of agrifood systems that are inclusive, sustainable and based on equal rights for women and men – gender equality. This requires addressing all phases of the value chain and coming to an understanding of the problems and constraints that lead to the exclusion of those involved in the production, processing, preparation and consumption processes. It is necessary to observe the capacity of public policies to address these particularities and the relevance of the interventions developed on that basis.

Agrifood Systems, Women and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has not left any area of our lives unscathed. Food and nutrition for individuals and the population have been inevitably affected; the distribution, availability and access to food have changed, and possibly even the way it is produced. Access to productive inputs has been hindered by disruptions in the import and transport processes, price volatility and distribution difficulties. FAO and CELAC (2020) and FAO and ECLAC (2020b) foresee a contraction in the supply and demand of agricultural products, pointing to possible interruptions in trade and logistics.

The pandemic has changed our relationship with the food system and consumption patterns. In this sense, food and nutrition could be affected by confinement, reduced household purchasing power, economic contraction, a potential non-availability of safe and healthy food and difficulty in accessing it, especially among the most vulnerable groups (Butler and Barrientos, 2020).

Observing the food situation from a gender perspective shows that social and cultural systems establish a differentiated and unequal order between men and women that favours food insecurity, especially among rural women. The pandemic forces us to see that food in Latin America and the Caribbean, despite being a daily and basic activity for people's subsistence, presents differences in terms of access, availability and enjoyment of a good quality

of life according to social coordinates such as sex, ethnicity and age group. This can increase the precariousness of some people and, on the contrary, consolidate the privileges of others, generating a disproportionate gap.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, traditional gender roles place women in the domestic space and make them responsible for care work, while men are associated with formal, paid work and productive actions that translate into monetary income for the household. However, when women are formally employed, they tend to be paid less than their male colleagues. Gender inequalities affecting women are expressed throughout food systems. In rural areas, women's agricultural work is often invisible, making it more difficult for women agricultural workers to participate in value chains, as they have less access to productive resources, credit, markets and technical assistance (FAO *et al.*, 2018).

Because of their triple burden and their productive, reproductive and community roles, women often have less time to meet their own needs, generating, in most cases, different forms of malnutrition. It is paradoxical that women – traditionally considered the main responsible for preparing and distributing food in their families and households – are precisely the group that presents greater risks or a higher prevalence of diseases associated with undernutrition, anaemia and obesity (WHO, 2001; FAO *et al.*, 2018).

In this sense, evidence has shown that, in the face of food crises, women engage in a pattern of food exclusion in favour of children (especially boys) and their partners, neglecting their own consumption. This pattern of dietary discrimination reinforces the social devaluation of women's work and their own bodies. This appears in two ways: on the one hand, as reduced access to certain types of food, for example, high biological quality protein (differential dietary quality); and, on the other hand, as reduced access to all food (differential dietary quantity) (FAO, 2013; CELAC, 2016).

Therefore, early in life, women are trapped in the vicious circle of poverty and malnutrition, reducing their learning potential, increasing their health risks and decreasing their productivity. This situation contributes to a decline in their ability to access other assets later in life and undermines attempts to eliminate gender inequalities (Sen, Östlin, and George, 2007).

Studies and reports find that when access and control of resources are increased equally between sexes, agricultural production and investment in children's education increase, access to health facilities is improved, household food security is enhanced and child growth and development is accelerated, with economic benefits for society as a whole (Oniang'o and Mukudi, 2002). In short, a reduction in gender asymmetries benefits the entire community.

Therefore, in the face of the pandemic, the greatest challenge for states in the region is to ensure that recovery does not deepen these inequalities. To achieve this, they must pay special attention to the situation of women in general, especially those living in rural areas and indigenous and Afro-descendent women, by implementing comprehensive and systemic measures that address the structural nodes of inequality between men and women in social protection systems and in productive inclusion policies, programmes and projects (Brito and Ivanovic, 2019).



Recommendations

Making visible, recognising and transforming the gaps experienced by women in the exercise of their rights requires, on the one hand, understanding the intricated nature of these gaps. On the other hand, it involves designing and implementing policies, strategies, programmes and projects aimed at dealing in a differentiated manner with the requirements of the vulnerable population through diagnoses that observe the scenario as a set of gaps that are mutually reinforcing and on which it is necessary to act in a strategic and coordinated manner.

All adults may need care and must be able to care for others, without this hindering their access to income and decent living conditions. It is, thus, essential to have

comprehensive approaches that recognize their productive, reproductive and community roles, understanding that the solution must not reduce the female subject to care work, or the role of mother.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to review and redesign social protection systems so that they favour women's access to decent jobs and to resources that are crucial to their productive work (land, water, financing, tools, livestock, training, etc.) by favouring co-responsibility in relation to care work.

In particular, a short-term response to the urgency of the crisis requires the following elements:

- Guarantee the realisation of diagnoses and social characterisations of vulnerable populations, considering factors such as sex, ethnicity, geographical location, employment modality and age condition.
- Remove possible entry barriers based on gender biases in policies, programmes and procedures, favouring the exercise of human rights. For example, it is necessary to review the requirements to access conditional transfer programmes, so as not to overburden women.
- Increase the coverage of programmes and projects related to food security and nutrition. Some initiatives to guarantee the right to adequate food for families are outstanding, such as the development of public procurement programmes and short supply circuits, which favour the economic reactivation and the empowerment of rural women producers.
- Give priority to care, education and school feeding systems for economic recovery.
- Strengthen systems and programmes for the prevention and care of victims of gender-based violence, as well as the protection of the identity of complainants, with special emphasis on those operating in rural areas.
- Protect the population's access to a varied food supply, including fruit, vegetables and legumes (among others). To this end, supply circuits must be strengthened, promoting the reopening of supply markets and the development of health measures to protect those who visit or work in them. Make visible and value the productive and commercial work carried out by women in these spaces.



At the same time, it is necessary to begin planning and developing structural measures capable of modifying the factors that determine the vulnerability of marginalised groups, which are today strongly affected by the crisis. To this end, it becomes imperative to:

- Abandon the notion that the development of public policies with a gender perspective is costly and that, although they have positive effects, we can do without them for the time being. Investment in policies and actions in favour of equal rights between women and men is central to the achievement of sustainable development, since the weaknesses of our economies will be perpetuated as long as half of our population experiences difficulties in accessing decent jobs, social protection and decent living conditions.
- Activate the role of the private sector in the development of programmes to ensure decent employment for women and men.
- Invest in women's leadership and involve them in planning the response to COVID-19, which is critical to addressing the needs of both men and women in the context of the pandemic.



In conclusion, the response to the crisis demands a strong political, governmental, intersectoral and development cooperation reaction. From this reaction, the region must be able to respond to the urgency and, at the

same time, move towards an equal exercise of the rights of women and men, as the only way to transform ourselves into more equitable and resilient societies.

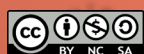
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