

# Latin America and the Caribbean: no solution to the crisis without gender policies

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The economic and financial crisis had a strong impact on Latin America and the Caribbean, with its most visible expression in the increase of unemployment and poverty. A variety of measures were implemented in the region in order to mitigate the devastating effects of the crisis, but these measures suffer from gender blindness, only increasing inequity. Such deficiencies are linked to the – not yet sufficiently robust – role of the state regarding the mechanisms for the advancement of women.

The decrease in trade – both in volume and in value –, the drop in remittances and unemployment along with an increase in poverty are the principal negative consequences of the global economic crisis in Latin America. Over two million people entered the ranks of urban unemployment in the region in 2009 and according to the warnings issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) it will be difficult to recover those jobs in 2010, despite forecasts of greater economic growth.<sup>1</sup> This is compounded by the revelation made by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) that 2009 exports dropped by 24% as a result of the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

So far, responses to the crisis in the region focused on stabilizing the financial sector and on actions to sustain demand, employment and care for vulnerable populations. Amongst them, the most noteworthy are: a) the extension of unemployment benefits, restricted to formal workers; b) the extension of non-contributive programmes (support provided for schooling, health care, etc.) amongst the poorer populations, particularly conditional cash transfer programmes; c) the implementation of subsidy policies for productive sectors, aimed at maintaining levels of employment; d) facilitation of credit and the reduction of social security contributions on the condition that employment is maintained; e) the establishment of public investment plans with the purpose of generating jobs in the sector.

## Accumulation and gender inequality

Although distributive policies have improved, constituting the basis of the success of many of the governments of the region in this period, the primary-extractive model has also been strengthened. While this generated a surplus for redistribution and the improvement of social policies, it also created environmental and social problems in certain areas, connected with dams, monoculture, water shortage, privatizations, etc. These negative effects – foreseeable in the short term – brought social organizations together in order to reinforce a strategy linked to the recovery of sovereignty over natural resources, along with attention to the impact that this model has on poverty and inequality.

1 2009 Labour Overview for Latin America and the Caribbean, ILO, January 2010.

2 International trade in Latin America and the Caribbean 2009: crisis and recovery. ECLAC, January 2010.

Very few of the measures taken by the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to confront the crisis mention women, despite the fact that its impact is greater on them, with regard to both unemployment and growth of precarious work, or access to jobs with lower productivity and less social protection.

Gender inequality is a basic issue to be taken into account in these policies since accumulation of profit is not only based on the exploitation of natural resources, but also on the basis of cheap labour, women's labour being the cheapest of all. The production process includes, though it is not formally acknowledged, placing a double burden on women within the household (or "voluntary" work) and through lower wage employment in order to increase profits and reduce salaries. During the last decade salaries went down in most of the countries of the region, due largely to the inclusion of women in the labour market.

## Employment

From the perspective of the employment sector, the measures taken so far are limited in the sense that they focus on formal employment and on specific groups of beneficiaries. They reproduce unsuccessful policies that were implemented before the 1990s – such as subsidies for private enterprises and the reduction of employer contributions – which also had a leading role in the depletion of social protection systems. A further weakness is that they do not take caregiving work into account, nor other specific targets of gender equity. In short, such measures do not call into question present forms of employment, or the relation between paid and unpaid labour.

With regard to formal employment, the impact of unemployment in this sector is greater than in the past, amongst other things because many of these jobs – mainly in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean – are linked to external economies. Along with the loss of these jobs, saturation occurs in the informal sector of the economy. ECLAC and the ILO have estimated that in 2009 unemployment will reach about 9% in the region, with women suffering a greater degree of unemployment than men, which means that three million more people will be unemployed.

According to Rebeca Grynspan<sup>3</sup>, the relation between paid and unpaid labour is an issue of joint social responsibility, not just of joint responsibility between men and women, but also within the world of work and in the design of public policies. Large infrastructure programmes do not generate female employment. Social and community infrastructure programmes do. However, most of the programmes in Latin America focus on large physical infrastructure projects.

## Social protection

With regard to gender equity in social protection and the organization of care, it should be pointed out that in Latin America the rate of female participation in the labour market is still low, despite the fact that the participation of women is important. The result of this disparity is a low level of social protection, as unprotected employment is mainly female.

Although there was growth in the region, it has not been possible to wipe out the negative impacts of 1990s structural adjustment policies. The central features of that process with regard to social protection were the withdrawal of the State and the commercialization of social protection.

In most of the countries in the region, people who lose their jobs also lose access to social protection, health care and education. As a result of deficient, exclusive or even practically non-existent social protection systems, jobless people are not only poor but also marginalized; they are socially excluded and are pushed towards an informal or illegal economy. The percentage of poor informal workers doubles that of formal workers.

## Caregiving work

With regard to caregiving, gender inequity is evident as a result of the weakness of such services provided by the state, commercial segmentation and the predominance of unpaid caregiving labour. Use of time surveys in the region shows how inequitable the distribution of this kind of work is between men and women: women devote a large amount of their time to such work and this resulting in the deterioration of their quality of living.

3 Analysis of the economic and financial crisis from the gender perspective: understanding its impact on poverty and women's work. Intervention at ECLAC, Meeting of Experts.

*The crisis and its impact on the global work of women.*

## A 15-YEAR OVERVIEW

During the forty-third meeting of the Board of the Regional Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean held in June 2009, an analysis was made of the regional challenges identified by the governments in the questionnaire on the application of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the final document arising from the twenty-third extraordinary sessions period of the General Assembly.

It was determined that large gaps persist on the issue of gender equality in the region and that they are ever more evident after the crisis as a result of the structural inequalities between men and women.

Maternal mortality rates are still high in most of the countries and only in those countries which already displayed low rates before Beijing were there any signs of progress.

With regard to reproductive health policies, whilst some of the countries have moved forward, others are in the same situation or have even regressed in connection with therapeutic abortion legislation, exposing women to maternal mortality and illegal abortion. In Nicaragua the interruption of ectopic pregnancies has been prohibited.

Such regressions go hand-in-hand with the onslaught of conservative Catholic and Evangelical religious sectors which systematically oppose contraceptive measures, sexual education and the approval of laws aiming at sexual and reproductive health.

Although there is in the region a legislative framework which contemplates the rights of women, its effects with regard to its application in everyday life are weak, which constitutes a threat to the slight progress achieved which could be lost if additional efforts are not made.

Women's access political decision-making positions has grown in the last decade, but it is still far from achieving parity. Women do not occupy

more than 20% of national parliamentary seats, supreme courts or higher judicial power courts and municipal government. Although they represent 29% of the executive branch's ministerial cabinet, at municipal levels they do not exceed an average of 7%. Legislative increases are a result of the reform of electoral systems or quota laws which were enforced in 12 of the 18 countries in Latin America, according to information compiled by the Observatory for Gender Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Violence against women has diverse aspects and dimensions,—including psychological ones—but the status of policies against violence is an indicator of the level of democratic development and the type of social development of a country.

According to a report arising from the governments' response at the forty-third meeting of the Board of the Regional Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, the social, political, economic and cultural inequality which is perceived in the region is the most favourable breeding ground for the abuse of power in the domestic arena and by institutions.

Within this framework, it should be pointed out that significant efforts do exist, such as those made by Chile's Observatory for Gender Equity in Health, Uruguay's Observatory for Criminality and Delinquency, Argentina's legislation for comprehensive protection which legally stipulates the generation of information and the creation of a bureau for women at the Supreme Court, the work of the Municipality of the Metropolitan District of Quito, in Ecuador, Paraguay's Secretariat for Women, the joint work carried out in the Dominican Republic by the Department of Statistics at the Attorney General of the Republic's Office and the National Bureau of Statistics (ONE, in Spanish), which keep a record of the murders of women. ■

In light of this situation, it should be remembered that the importance of caregiving work is implicitly acknowledged in human rights treaties and in many of the national laws in the region, and was expressly espoused by the governments which participated in the Quito Consensus.<sup>4</sup> Governments agreed at the time to “adopt all necessary measures, especially of an economic, social and cultural nature, in order to ensure that the States assume the social reproduction, care and well-being of the population as an objective of the economy and a public responsibility that cannot be delegated”. This is a very important commitment which the States have not begun to fulfill.

### The role of the state

The inability to enforce commitments made in the Quito consensus demonstrates deficiencies in gender equality policies which are linked to the weakness of the State's role in enforcing mechanisms for the advancement of women and to the predominance of skewed “welfare” policies.

Democracy has also shown deficiencies; while élites have shown themselves to be more open to acknowledging the lack of equity, it will still take nearly forty years to set targets for advancement unless immediate action is taken. In this regard,

the forty-third meeting of the Board of the Regional Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean in June 2009 pointed out that the institutional weakness of these policies “extends to other areas: social policies and particularly the encouragement of employment have not been able to revert labour segmentation, the salary gaps which are linked to it and the excess burden of unpaid caregiving work amongst women. The main government programmes aimed at women reinforce the sexual division of labour, either because they make women the intermediaries or the receptors of transfers or because they care for the reproductive needs associated with maternity, neglecting comprehensive health care and because positive action measures with a rights-based approach are few or nonexistent”.<sup>5</sup>

In order to reverse this situation a new fiscal pact is also essential: if the region maintains an average taxation of 16%, it will never be possible to implement social welfare policies. Also in this respect it is important to consolidate the mechanisms for a new financial architecture. For example, the Southern Bank or UNASUR can reinforce proposals of regional integration to which the civil society networks and organizations of the region are committed.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Regional Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean will be held in Brasilia from 13 to 16 July 2010. Its purpose is to discuss public policies which favour gender equality as well as the model of economic development and democracy necessary for the existence of equity between men and women. Once again, the contribution of society's networks and organizations will be significant.

### Sources:

Graciela Rodríguez, International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN, in Portuguese), Brazilian Network for the Integration of Peoples (REBRIP, in Portuguese).

Alma Espino, Norma Sanchis, Latin America: Social and Gender Impacts of the Economic Crisis, AWID 2009.

Alma Espino, *Las medidas anticrisis: posibles impactos en el empleo de las mujeres y en la conciliación entre el trabajo en el hogar y en el mercado* (“Anti-crisis measures: possible impact on the employment of women and on the compromise between work in the home and on the market”), December 2009.

4 Consensus achieved during the tenth ECLAC Regional Conference of Women of Latin America and the Caribbean.

5 Forty-third meeting of the Board of the Regional Conference on Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, June 2009.

## HAITI: AID MUST BE HUMANITARIAN, WITH A FOCUS ON WOMEN

According to the Pan American Health Organization, women have less access to resources and decision-making positions which are essential for preparation, mitigation and recovery from natural disasters and are taken the least into account when establishing aid plans.

"Immediately after a disaster, the 'tyranny of the urgent' prevails and gender concerns are ignored or cast aside as irrelevant. The unique opportunity provided by a disaster to change traditional gender roles is wasted if women do not take advantage of it or if decision makers do not take it into account".<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Haiti, the earthquake which devastated the country in January 2010 has highlighted the country's vulnerability to natural disasters. According to ECLAC the fragility displayed by the country's economy has added to this vulnerability. Haiti is the country with the highest number of dead and victims per event in relative and absolute terms in the region. It suffers a yearly loss of nearly 350 million dollars as a result of the destruction of property and the loss of economic flow and extraordinary expenses required for the partial recovery from the effects of the impact.<sup>2</sup>

Before the earthquake, Haiti was in the 148<sup>th</sup> place in the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI); 76% of its population subsists on less than two dollars a day and 56% subsists on less than one dollar a day. Remittances, on which there is a great reliance, constitute 52.7% of the Gross Domestic Product. According to Stephen Lendman of the Centre for Research on Globalization with headquarters in Montreal, Canada, one per cent of the Haitian population controls half of the country's wealth, five per cent owns seventy-five per cent of the arable land and six families control industrial production and trade.

The country imports 48% of the food it consumes and the rest arrives via the World Food Programme and other sources of cooperation to supplement domestic production. One third of new-born babies are underweight. In under-fives acute malnutrition affects 9% of the children and chronic malnutrition, 24%. Anaemia affects 50% of pregnant women and two-thirds of children below the age of five. One in five Haitians dies before the age of 40; nearly 2.5 million people suffer food insecurity. One in five Haitians suffers mental deficiencies caused by pregnancy insufficiencies and the maternal mortality rate is 523 women per 100,000 births.

Structural aspects on their own, however, do not explain the country's instability and economic weakness. There is a historic process to which countries in Latin America and the Caribbean owe much; the country has been made invisible and crushed by a multitude of invasions and blockades carried out by colonizers of all periods; by massacres carried out by the Trujillo dictatorship against Haitians in his insane desire to "whiten" the society of the Dominican Republic; for multiple invasions and blockades in the twentieth century, and so on.

### Humanitarian, not military aid

The concept put forward by the United States and accepted by the countries which are part of the UN stabilization mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) places the focus on military aspects. The earthquake has shown how wrong such a policy is and how far from meeting Haiti's most urgent needs.

What is required at present is for international aid to become humanitarian aid and promote sustainable development. To this end it is necessary that the Haitian people be guaranteed the right to self-determination and to exercise their sovereignty, which is constantly violated by coups d'état, dictatorships, foreign military invasions and the debts brought about by international financial organizations.

Humanitarian ethics consists in saving the lives of the neediest and, at the same time, respecting the dignity of individuals. Humanitarian ethics, when applied, is guided by two principles: neutrality and independence. These principles constitute the foundation for a code of conduct for humanitarian aid which over 200 organizations throughout the world have espoused.

### Women on the frontier, aiming towards the centre

In this country women are the poorest and most discriminated sector of the population, a situation which will get much worse as a result of the disaster. Women are the heads in 43% of Haitian families and are responsible for domestic chores and caregiving. As usual, they have a central role in the reconstruction of the country and of the families affected by natural disaster.

This is why civil society networks and organizations are demanding that governments, United Nations agencies and other multilateral bodies which are channelling aid to this Caribbean country should pay particular attention to the support provided for women and guarantee that aid should reach them and their families directly. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as channelling funds to the civil organizations working directly with women in Haiti and bearing in mind the strengthening of organizations of defenders of human rights. However it is not enough to guarantee that women receive aid; they play a leading role in the design and implementation of work carried out in support of their communities.

On the Jemaní border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti remarkable collective efforts have made it possible to establish the Feminist International Solidarity Camp for the transfer of resources and communication. This is a great collaborative effort which has the support of regional and international organizations and initiatives which have undertaken to empower women from a perspective of human rights, contributing to the human mitigation of the disaster, the reconstruction of the social tissue and infrastructure, and establishing links of solidarity which at the same time aim at overcoming inequalities which make it impossible to acknowledge the value of women and their contributions. ■

1 Gender and natural disasters (Pan American Health Organization, PAHO).

2 Preliminary overview of the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean 2009 (ECLAC).