

RESTRICTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



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The purpose of the project is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public policies to promote gender equity in labor markets and improving economic opportunities for women through research. Participating research teams from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Uruguay.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents the main results of a research carried out in eight Latin American countries on the restrictions women find in the labor market: progress made regarding their insertion and laws penalizing discriminatory practices are not enough to ensure their continuity and upward mobility in a market that continues to replicate inequalities for women.

The quantitative study shows that employers' preference for hiring and giving promotions to men arises from their perception of women as giving priority to household responsibilities and as more willing to occupy the worst jobs. The qualitative study clarifies that this prioritization is not innate, but due to the fact that household and family responsibilities still fall on women.

Entering the labor market, staying in it by holding quality and well-paid positions, competing under the same conditions as men to be promoted and to achieve stability is not easy for those who may even have to abandon it or change the way of insertion due to reasons connected with maternity and the household. What women no longer see as the only source of personal development is still considered their destiny, which poses a difficulty even when getting a paid job to fulfill it.

Interviews and focus groups show how women look for solutions in situations marked by restrictions which demand strategies and actions by all the actors of the labor market and the State to reduce gaps even between female workers themselves.



INTRODUCTION

This work collects the results from a research carried out as part of the project known as **Improving female participation in the labor market and women's economic empowerment through better policies in Latin America**. Based on quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the restrictions and opportunities faced by women to achieve processes of economic empowerment in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico and Uruguay were analyzed.¹

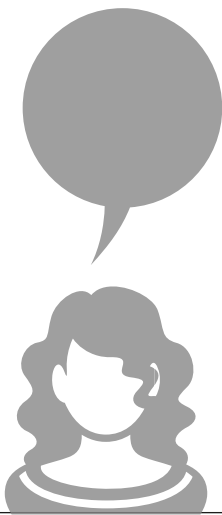
MAIN QUESTIONS

Which are the obstacles faced by women to enter the labor market? Is paid work a basis for female empowerment? Under which conditions? How does the female income affect the negotiations at household level?

PURPOSE

Starting from the assumption that paid work and quality jobs may constitute the basis for female economic empowerment, the aim of this study consists of identifying the restrictions faced by women in order to have an income and to gain experience in the labor market. These restrictions are translated into gender inequalities which operate as an obstacle in the path of empowerment to achieve economic autonomy. The ultimate aim is to obtain resources for the creation and design of effective public policies to ensure gender equality in labor markets.

¹ The studies were carried out by researchers from: Asociación Civil Lola Mora (Argentina), ARU Foundation (Bolivia), CIGENERO and FLACSO (Ecuador), CEM (Chile), FUSADES (El Salvador), FIDEG (Nicaragua), Mujer y Medio Ambiente (Mexico), CIEDUR and Department of Sociology at the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales (Uruguay).



CONCEPTS

Gender inequalities may be explained on the grounds of the different kind of restrictions faced by women. On the one hand, there are intrinsic restrictions: rules, beliefs and values that determine and characterize social and family relationships and define the dominant models of masculinity and femininity in each society. This is how, men, women, boys and girls play certain roles and are socially assigned responsibilities in the distribution of household duties and occupations in the labor market which are considered feminized or masculinized due to the existence of gender stereotypes comprising different qualifications and abilities. On the other hand, there are rules (formal and informal), procedures and practices associated with the way in which markets operate, that reflect and replicate preconceived ideas about the concept of masculinity and femininity. These restrictions, recognized as being imposed are expressed, for instance, in the employers' preferences, in cultural standards and legal regulations for the access to resources and their control (lands, capital, credit, technology, etc.), among others. These restrictions establish differences even between women themselves because they have different abilities to design personal strategies and to take decisions inside and outside their homes, not only regarding their own lives but also regarding family and community issues.

The possibility of overcoming these restrictions, and, therefore, reverting the gender inequalities through empowerment processes, is related, at least partly, to the possibility of having their own income coming from a paid and quality work (in terms of access to social security and an appropriate income level). Participation in the labor market may be a basis for the women's economic empowerment, considering that those who achieve a better quality in their labor insertion will have better capacities—material and cultural—to take relevant decisions which allow them to live the life they want to live.

Chart 1 **Gender Restrictions.**

Intrinsic gender restrictions may be classified as follows:

- The existence of gender stereotypes and attribution of different qualities and abilities to women and men.
- The distribution of gender roles in relation to household and care duties.
- The differentiation regarding the kind of activities that men and women may do within the productive area, which leads to the sexual division of work in the labor market. Women are concentrated on activities related to care and service (household, education, pediatrics, secretary and administrative tasks) while men principally work on industrial production and building works, for instance.

The imposed gender restrictions are associated with the States and markets. These institutions turn out to be “gender carriers” when they reflect and replicate preconceived ideas about masculinity and femininity as routine aspects of their rules, procedures and practices:

- Cultural standards and legal regulations which establish the resources’ access and control (land, capital, credits, technology, etc.). For example, the uses and costumes related to the definition of an establishment owner.
- Social networks which control the transference of knowledge and technology.
- Access to trading channels. The employers’ preference. For example, they prefer to hire men because women are perceived as having a more fragile relationship with the labor market; however, in highly competitive exportation sectors that require intensive workforce, there is a preference for women, partly determined by the lower salaries.

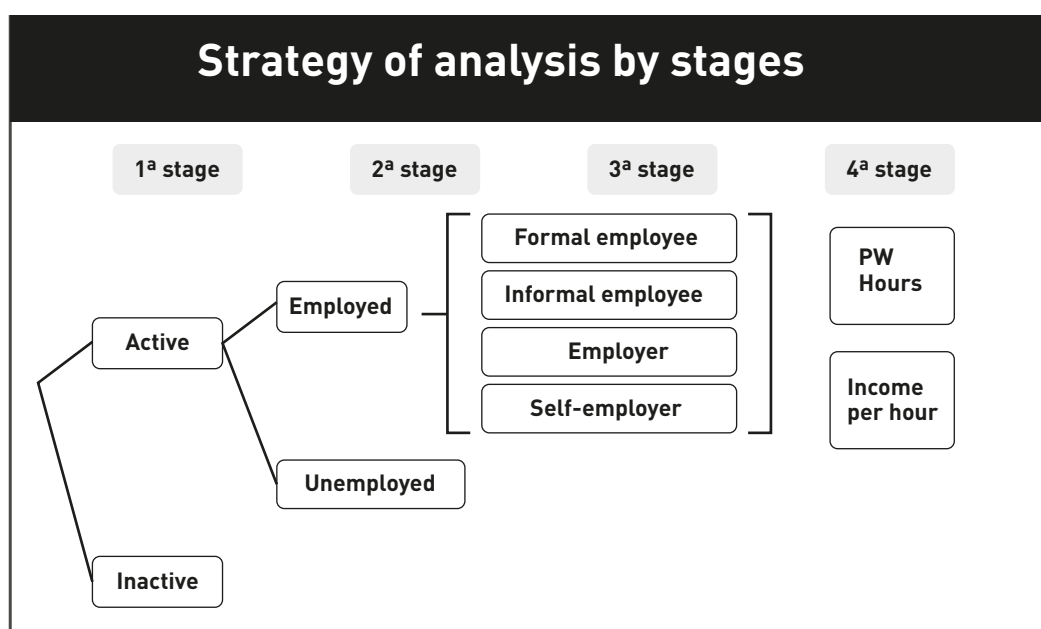
Based on Kabeer (2012).

METHODOLOGY

The empirical strategy used for identifying and classifying the restrictions faced by women in the labor market refers to the application of both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

The quantitative analysis studies the determining aspects of the labor supply and demand of female workforce by occupational category through the application of probability models.² In addition, the study based on qualitative techniques (discussion groups, interviews) aims at understanding the way in which gender restrictions operate upon the female empowerment processes and what can be done to transform them. In this way, it is necessary to understand the sense that paid work has for women and its relation with economic empower-

ment, how do women explain their decisions in this area and how do the different restrictions operate according to their experience (Chart 1). It also has the purpose of comprehending the women's perception of the differences between individuals of both sexes in the labor market and if they have experienced them. To achieve this, is necessary to examine more closely the behaviors which are less perceptible through statistics (such as those related to practices and costumes). Part of the literature in this field, outlines the importance of perceptions and attitudes towards the relation between paid work and economic empowerment.



²Multinomial logistic models were used which enable to compare the determining factors of participation in different occupational categories.

PRINCIPAL RESULTS

1. Gender gaps: the labor market produces and replicates inequalities

The study of intrinsic and imposed restrictions through a quantitative analysis allows to distinguish if the gender gaps in labor participation, occupation, occupational category (formal employment, self-employment, employer or non-paid family worker), the income per hour and worked hours are determined by factors related to personal or family characteristics of individuals and to their qualifications for work, or if they are determined by gender stereotypes, institutional practices and regulations in the labor market which replicate the preexisting inequalities.

The most significant result reveals that the imposed restrictions which reinforce or replicate preexisting inequalities in the labor market explain most of the gender gaps in all the analyzed countries.³ Relatively, this kind of restriction is less important in Bolivia and Ecuador where women are at a disadvantage in terms of education compared with men. In the rest of the countries, the education level of women does not represent an obstacle to their participation in the labor market considering that, on the contrary, women have achieved higher education levels than men; thus, the imposed restrictions acquire more importance.

The responses of the market have more importance than the intrinsic restrictions in all countries. As long as the difficulties of having access to the labor force and finding a job are overcome, these restrictions start to be more noticeable (occupational category, salary levels and worked hours).

The results of quantitative research show that women with higher education level have more opportunities to achieve quality jobs (formal employee or business owner) and to receive higher income levels. Furthermore, as they are better qualified for having a job, they also have access to care services (household and child care). Qualitative studies confirm this and also verify that the most difficult thing is to transform the unequal distribution of roles at home, which is reproduced in the labor market and in the policies which aim at promoting employment.

One of the resulting evidences from the study shows that gender gaps in the labor market are not much associated with personal or intrinsic aspects but to restrictions imposed by the market or institutions, i.e. to the employers' preferences, to cultural standards and legal regulations. (Sanchís, 2016).

2. Persistence of gender stereotypes

In the qualitative studies, the interviewed women and participants of focus groups identify and describe stereotypes associated to gender, either from a critical point of view or from a natural perspective which leads to assume them as inherent. These stereotypes refer to the attribution of different capacities, roles, responsibilities and activities for men and women.

³The participating countries in this first stage of the study were Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay.



In this way, most of the attributes assigned to women are closely related to their role in the private sphere: their skills to relate, their household responsibilities, their role of mothers-caregivers. An important group of women consider these characteristics as natural and assume them as inherent:

“Women’s mindset is to be mothers, not to have an occupation you like...It happens to me that when I am offered a job to do I don’t accept it until I have everything organized...first, I have to check if I have an appointment with the pediatrician or if I have to pick them up from school...” (Argentina, self-employed.)

“The thing is that women are more conscious of responsibilities... Men can be tired so they arrive home and go to bed; women always have to be doing something. So I think it has to do with that... with responsibility.” (Uruguay. Focus group: low socioeconomic status, youth.)

“I think that women are going back to their roots, their relationships, like ‘my most exciting project is to build a family’...because ok, it’s cool to be great and just travel around the world but, your children? Who will raise them?” (Uruguay. Focus group: middle socioeconomic status, youth.)

However, there is an important part of the interviewed women who consider that the characteristics assigned to women in regard to their role at homes are a problem and identify them as gender stereotypes:

“I had a friend who had to leave for about two months because her work required traveling. If you like the job, I think it’s perfect. ‘Oh, that’s horrible!! How can she leave her child??’ People don’t let you be... The child has a father, let him deal with the situation. The society is really demanding with mothers and the role of being a mother.” (Uruguay. Focus group: high socioeconomic status, youth.)

Contrary to the ideas associated with women, the interviewed women identify **abilities, responsibilities and roles related to men** and they are mostly connected with the public sphere. Most of the women recognize that the concept of men-supplier still plays a significant role in the way relationships are built within a family; in fact, the most important responsibility of men is identified as being the breadwinners and devoting their time to paid work, as an intrinsic characteristic:

“I think that men [have more opportunities] because they are less attached, let’s say, to the household duties, aren’t they? So they are 100% devoted to work.” (Bolivia, self-employed.)

“There is considerable social pressure on men as being the ones who have to bring money. I don’t know how much, but they have to go out and work because men staying at home... I don’t know if we are prepared for this.” (Mexico. Focus group: up to 40 years of age.)

“Men are almost entirely and exclusively devoted to work.” (Mexico. Focus group: up to 40 years of age.)

“There is a difference with men, because if you are taking a course and you have to assist, then as a woman or mother, you will be absent; at some point you will miss a class, whether you inform or not. And this doesn’t happen to men because generally they don’t have the obligation of staying with the child.” (Uruguay. Focus group: low socioeconomic status, youth.)

These stereotypes, which persist in the society, perpetuate the sexual division of work and replicate inequalities in the labor market.

3. Sexual division of work is maintained

The division by sex of domestic and care work determines the gender roles which are socially built and therefore, operates as a restriction for the women's active participation in the public sphere. As above mentioned, while some of the interviewed women consider gender roles as a problem, other women consider them as a natural thing, even in dual earner family models. Generally, women regard as significant progress (in some cases even enough) the fact that their partners collaborate with the household and care duties although it does not equate to their own load of global work:

"Juan helps me a lot with the baby: he bathes her, changes her diapers, feeds her...but there are other things that are not so obvious, he doesn't realize and it's fine: sometimes Paula only wants to be in our arms and he doesn't realize." (Argentina, entrepreneur.)

"In the mornings I stay at home doing the household chores, I cook, do the laundry and clean... and in the afternoons I go to work. There my husband doesn't help me at all." (Ecuador, self-employed.)

"And during nights, as I already had my child, my husband looked after him when I did the shift." (Nicaragua, formal employee.)

"The father with his children, no matter the effort he makes... I mean, when it comes to showing affection, love and the social development of the child...the mother has a lot to do with these aspects, there are things we can't give up although we want." (Mexico. Focus group: up to 40 years of age.)

In other cases, the restrictions related to the division of non-paid work are forced by the partner, and this leads to adopting a traditional role at home:

"I couldn't have a social life, nothing, because I had to be there, I was somehow subjugated... I didn't have the

possibility to travel to the south, he didn't let me see my family, I had to be fully devoted to my children in my house, we argued a lot, as I didn't have any degree he always told me 'you depend on me, you have nothing without me, you come from a poor rural family', he tried to make a fool of me. I spent days and nights crying, lying on the bed, I couldn't get up..." (Chile, microenterprise.)

"My husband and I get back together and that's it. When my daughter turned one year old we organized a party...so he started to say that I shouldn't work, so I could stay at home with the child and... naive as I was, I thought it would be great and accepted. I spent almost one year without working." (Mexico, informal employee.)

In general terms, the predisposition and **attitudes of women towards maternity** partly determine their speech about gender roles and have influence on the restrictions they self-impose when dividing the household chores and care duties. Those who consider that being mother is the main priority and part of the women's nature seem to be more likely to accept household and care duties as their own responsibility. Other women express a problematic vision of maternity as the only aspect to achieve personal development and sometimes they consider it a restriction on such development:

"I have just become mother and now I am trying to do the things I used to do before, but having a daughter, it's not easy. I am really happy but I don't know if having a baby is the best thing in the world, as everybody says. As a woman I think it's difficult. There is no way back, even if you have support. The dependence of a child on the mother is too strong." (Argentina, entrepreneur.)

"Sometimes because a woman is over-protective towards her children and because she has to take care of them, then she limits her professional growth." (Nicaragua, formal employee.)

"When we have a child, we stop our training, our studies and it's difficult to be updated, that's why it's hard to get top jobs and hold important positions..." (El Salvador, formal employee.)

According to the interviewed women, work and maternity are important aspects of their identity and constitute a basis for their personal self-esteem. However, the unequal distribution of reproductive labor between men and women and the lack of commitment of the state on social reproduction, transform maternity into an obstacle to labor participation and generally there is a contradiction between being a mother and fulfilling personal projects. (Guzmán, 2016).

4. Gender restrictions perpetuate the segmentation in the labor market

The restrictions derived from rules and values determine the gender patterns in the labor market. For example, while the rate of male participation is high in all the countries, the female rate tends to be considerably lower. These restrictions are the basis of occupational segregation (horizontal and vertical), salary gaps and discrimination.

The quantitative studies show that, in the case of all countries, women who have small children tend to reduce the load of paid work and prefer to be self-employed or informal employees, they tend to choose temporary jobs or to leave the labor market. The shortage of services, labor regulations and cultural changes, that allow the redistribution of care duties, represent a limitation to find quality jobs with higher salary. This is confirmed by qualitative research. Women mention that they prefer flexible hours, so they can take care of their children. In many cases, the care of their children during their first years is more important than their professional fulfillment or the income received:

"Depending on a schedule, it would be impossible now. Even worse with small children. At some point, they require attention or become ill, whatever, and you have to be with them... bosses can't understand this. They can understand you one month, but uh-oh!...that month will change the work relation." (Bolivia, self-employed.)

"I have done the calculation, it's like having a minimum salary also [the one she earns as being self-employed] with the advantage that I can keep an eye on my children, I arrange everything...the food and we are more aware of the economy at home, we try to control and save." (El Salvador, self-employed.)

"I decided to work on my own because at that moment my second child was very sick, he suffered from asthma and this condition needs time, I mean, I had to be there with him, I wanted to be with him." (Nicaragua, non-wage earner.)

"I think that we can arrange our time better, particularly if we have children; what can be better than staying at home, where we can have our children under control... In a formal job, you have to comply with certain rules, be on time and no matter what happens to you, you have to be there, forget about your kids." (Uruguay. Focus group: low socioeconomic status.)

"I wanted to be in both places. And, then, for other reasons, I stopped working in the family business and decided that I don't want to be in the labor market as an employee, so, with my husband I am trying to start my own project in order to have what I want: flexible hours." (Uruguay, focus group: high socioeconomic status.)

As a way of adapting paid work to care needs, most women choose **reduced working hours and telecommuting**. These flexible options may have negative consequences in terms of economic autonomy as there is a reduction in salary, facilities and experience.

This is also associated, in some cases, with the income and family structure, and marital situation (if they live with a partner or not). The employment options many times depend on the resources they have to afford certain services or to rely on a family member (among whom they can consider their own older daughters) the care needs of their children or dependent relatives.

When the education level and job opportunities of a couple are levelled, the distribution of household duties tends to be more equal. This is also reflected on the labor categories. The following is observed in the study carried out for Bolivia:

Informal female employees show two tendencies: they go to work with their children and do the household chores during weekends or at night, or they do household chores and care duties between the working hours (first thing in the morning, midday, night or as alternate activities when the working hours are more flexible). When it comes to formal employees, there is more male participation in the child care and household and also more participation of their children, boys, girls and adolescents get involved in the household chores. (Marco, 2015).

The difficulties caused by care responsibilities, usually lead to withdraw from the labor market to take care of their children personally and avoid delegating that responsibility to other people. In many countries, this option is associated with a future reinsertion in informal jobs:

"As I am, I preferred to be at home with the baby and not having a job. Considering the things that may happen, you have to pay close attention. I suffer when I see that mothers leave their children alone, they go into the streets...I was 'really' a mother...I don't think they [referring to the daycare center] will take care of my children as I do." (Argentina, entrepreneur.)

For other women the only alternative is to withdraw from the market considering the lack of other care facilities:

"Mainly because of the girl, because she is only breastfed. I started to give her 'pacha' but she doesn't like it. So my fear, as she is very tiny and if I don't breastfeed her, is that she may get sick. That's why I decided to give her my time, at least I will breastfeed her one year and a half and then I will try to get a job..." (El Salvador, inactive.)

"As I didn't have someone to look after my children, I decided to stop working for a while so I could adapt to them. My mother-in-law helped me but then we argue because one day she wanted to see them but another day she found excuses." (Mexico, informal employee.)

The decision to stop work is often promoted by their partners, who consider gender roles in a traditional way. Some other women take this decision by themselves, although they express that it implies to lose an important space for their personal development and empowerment.

"So many problems at home, you think... your children, husband... the pressure made me give up, because family and work are too much pressure; if you are not at ease then you can't deal with both aspects in a nice way. That was the reason to give up work... I became a home-maker." (Bolivia, formal employee.)

"I was about to graduate [from the university when she left it]. I had my baby and devoted my time to her for about two years, only to her and the household. During those years I realized that I didn't like to be a housewife because I enjoy being outside doing something. It doesn't mean that I didn't look after my daughter but I really didn't enjoy it." (Bolivia, informal employee.)

“My husband and I get back together and that’s it. When my daughter turned one year old we organized a party...so he started to say that I shouldn’t work, so I could stay at home with the child and... naive as I was, I thought it would be great and accepted. I spent almost one year without working.” (Mexico, informal employee.)

The study reveals that, compared with men, the career path of women tends to be more unstable and this is combined with changes according to the labor category (differences between formal employees, informal employees and self-employed). This mobility is expressed in all the countries but it is more frequent in the places where the education level of women is not very high and job opportunities are less attractive. The research carried out in Bolivia shows that:

This mobility can be observed in all the different levels of income and it does not depend on the children’s age, even when there is a clear tendency to interrupt the career path on the grounds of care and to be reintroduced in the market specially under the self-employed category. (Marco, 2015).

In the case of Argentina, different paths are distinguished:

[...] young women and those who have higher education level, to whom the family structure and maternity do not represent an obstacle to their labor participation, but do imply some changes or adjustments. This reflects a deep commitment to the professional career of those who have achieved university or tertiary studies and consider paid work as a source of personal fulfillment and economic autonomy. [In contrast] for older women, having children meant to interrupt their career paths for

some years as a way of showing respect towards the cultural traditions and giving more importance to the household and their role of mothers than to the paid work. Once the family demands are fulfilled, they tended to be reintroduced in the market as they recognize that paid work is a source of self-esteem and personal development. (Sanchís, 2016).

The interviews show that there are intrinsic restrictions which operate at the time of choosing a job (labor insertion). For example, the case of choosing a job on the grounds of ‘conciliation’. In addition, the interviews also show imposed restrictions represented as ‘availability’ which sum up the fact that it was the job they found considering their low level or lack of formal education and considering the absence of other resources as social capital. (Marco, 2015).



5. The sexual division of activities in the labor market is replicated

The job opportunities offered to women in the labor market are divided according to gender roles and the ideas about masculinity and femininity. The interviews show that women are considered as more sensitive and weaker than men who are associated with strength and a dominant character:

"If there is an available position and there is a qualified woman to occupy that position, then they will choose a man because if the woman has children she may need to miss work or she will miss work during her period, during pregnancy...because it is natural to think of women as being weaker, more sensitive, etc. It is a common idea." (Argentina. Focus group: employee.)

"If I have a man as a boss, as I am a woman, he is less strict. Not because they think I am not good, but because they are more flexible, more protective. [...] I've had very paternal bosses, not only with me but with women in general." (Mexico, formal employee.)

"It's complicated, maybe because we think of men as being dominant. In my case, as I am in a company, it's difficult to be promoted, they don't allow us, it's hard for them to say 'she is the director.'" (Mexico. Focus group: over 40 years of age.)

The relationships in the labor area are affected by roles and stereotypes, as well as the female access to certain positions, for example those which require leading skills. In this sense, leadership as well as the abilities of women to negotiate or undertake new projects are usually underestimated:

"He is the one who deals with the employees because he has a stronger character than me." (Bolivia, self-employed with employees in charge.)

"There are works that are specifically for men, there are people that...I don't know...they can't even think of having to negotiate a contract with a woman." (Mexico. Focus group: up to 40 years of age.)

"At the time of executing, in all businesses, although a woman was in charge of negotiating everything, then the one who takes decisions, who knows everything, whatever it is, the one in the top is a man." (Uruguay. Focus group: high socioeconomic status, youth.)

When women are introduced in a masculinized environment, it is usually mentioned that their male counterparts establish paternal and protective relationships towards them; in other cases, the interviewed women complained about harassment or mistreatment:

"I worked for a long time in building works with men, I mean; I feel that we are the same, at the same level, to do whatever. But always the same idea: 'Hey! Can I help you to lift the box because maybe you can't' Yes, I can lift the box, that box and forty more, I don't need a man; I felt that things. Or the typical comment, if there are men and only one woman, and something spills...in that case, men can't clean that, call her because she is a woman!" (Uruguay. Focus group: low socioeconomic status, youth.)

"As I arrived early, he always found the way to bother me and made invitations... I tried to focus on my work but you can't work if someone is only harassing you, is watching you to see when you are alone, when you leave or tries to find you alone so he can bother you... I was really upset so I just left my job. I have never seen, during the time I was there, a manager leaving for harassment, it only happened to female employees." (Mexico, self-employed.)

Given the fact that men devote more time to paid work than to non-paid work and women have to divide their time between both, the idea of multitasking is deeply fixed as an exclusive female skill. This is perhaps one of the less problematic stereotypes according to the interviewed women: they consider it as a natural, inherent skill which differentiates them from men. However, many women are reluctant to accept this as a skill as they are able to identify the gender inequalities caused by this "attribute", not only at household but also at the labor level:

"As women we have an advantage. We can be in the computer, while taking care of our children, cooking, being on the phone, all at the same time. Men can only do one thing, we can do everything. I can be talking to you, on the phone and writing." (Ecuador, self-employed.)

"Men do not have the ability to do more than one thing at the same time. A woman has to work and if she is at home, she has to pay attention to the stove, the washer, the child... A man just focuses on one thing, he's useless." (Mexico. Focus group: up to 40 years of age.)

"We can be in many things at the same time. It's the discussion I always have with my husband. My husband leaves, he is a hardworking man, I admit it, hardworking, but 'you leave at 6 am and then come back every day at 9 pm. You close the door at 6 in the morning and you forget about home. You don't know if the children go to school, if they have something to eat, if they have breakfast, or if they have to go to the doctor, eye doctor, pediatrician or lung specialist.'" (Uruguay. Focus group: high socioeconomic status, adults.)

6. Discrimination

Many of the interviewed women from the various countries express having suffered discrimination in the labor

market when trying to get a job, keep it, achieve a promotion or a raise. Specifically, there are numerous accounts which refer to discrimination in cases of pregnancy:

"He treated me worse than my dad, he didn't like it, he was so upset by my pregnancy that he told me 'remember that the previous secretary left because she got pregnant.'" (El Salvador, formal employee.)

"My boss did not like the fact that I got pregnant. I mean, I was not pregnant when they hired me, I got pregnant after I started working. They didn't like it. My boss at the time practically insinuated that I could not return to work [after maternity leave] because apparently they would not want me back." (El Salvador, self-employed.)
"I was dismissed when I was pregnant... I wasn't three months along yet. I didn't want to say anything, but you could tell, I was putting on too much weight. I didn't want to say anything and they told me I would be let go because my contract was over. But a coworker told me what had really happened: 'The boss asked me if you were pregnant.'" (Uruguay, focus group: low socioeconomic status.)

"I was denied three promotions at the Bank, because I was either pregnant or working part-time post-maternity." (Uruguay, focus group: middle socioeconomic status, adults.)

Beyond the employers' attitudes towards pregnancy, interviewees construe that discrimination against women in the labor market is generally based on the abovementioned stereotype of the mother as a woman and caregiver. This results in men being preferred by employers to occupy certain positions, even above women who are neither mothers nor necessarily plan to become mothers in the medium-term:

"She [her potential boss] interviewed me and everything was fine, she said she would contact me later to do the pre-employment exams. Then they said no, that they would not hire me. I found out through the cook, who was a friend of mine, that the reason for this was that I was a 25-year-old woman who had recently got married, thus in less than a year I would have a child and that would be a problem for them. That was the first time I felt discriminated. As a matter of fact, I only got pregnant six years later. At that time, I was not planning to have children, but she didn't even ask me." (Argentina, entrepreneur.)

"When they wanted to hire a woman for a job, I, as doctor, had to make sure she was not pregnant. It made me very sad and has affected me very much as a woman. This was because of social benefits and maternity leave, which is three months in total. Therefore, companies try not to hire women. We are diminished because they do not want to hire us, or they ask us how old we are, if we are married, if we use contraception, which contraceptive method we use, if we plan to have children." (Bolivia, formal employee.)

"I believe when you are 30 years old you have fewer chances as a woman; or at 35 or so, your chances of getting a job are fewer than a man's. Because they already see you becoming a mom." (Uruguay, focus group: high socioeconomic status, young women.)

In the case of women who have dependent people with health problems or disabilities under their care, keeping their jobs is a challenge. Discrimination by employers is even higher and, if women's needs are not taken into consideration (especially as regards time), this may result in their exit from the labor market:

"On that occasion I had to leave because I had a baby who was very ill, so I had to constantly ask for per-

mission to be excused. She was in the hospital a lot and I had to take her to get checked often. As a consequence, they started telling me that I was not working well, that I was neglecting my job, that I was on the phone a lot, so they let me go, they fired me. And last year they called me again because my baby passed away, so..." (Bolivia, informal employee.)

"But after six months [since her son was born] I left my job because I had many problems. My son died. And my son was very ill in the hospital and they would not give me permission to leave." (El Salvador, self-employed.)

"My son was born with a disability and I said 'I can't do it.' I was a notary's secretary; I worked eight hours and they gave me four. But if I had to take him to the psychomotor specialist or to the speech therapist, if the nuclei failed to appear in the hips, the drama was such that I couldn't handle it." (Uruguay, focus group: middle socioeconomic status, adults.)



Chart 2

Meanings of economic empowerment: the voice of women

- **Self-esteem**

"It has given me freedom. I've always worked and I've always earned much more than my husband... Having economic independence was essential to my self-esteem." (Uruguay, focus group: high socio-economic status, adults.)

- **A space for socializing and building relationships**

"I am very happy with what I do and I put a lot of love into it. It allows me to meet and be in contact with people and that is wonderful." (Mexico, focus group: over 40 years of age.)

- **Freedom, autonomy, economic independence, emancipation from the partner**

"A job is a guarantee and it also helps you move away from poverty... I am not dependent on a man, which is important, and I don't allow any abuse—if he mistreats me I dump him because I have a fixed income as backup. That gives me confidence. If all women had jobs, I think none of them would tolerate any violence or mistreatment." (Bolivia, formal employee.)

"Before, women had to tolerate things because husbands provided for them, and they had to be home so they had to put up with their man cheating on them and hitting them... In the future, the fact that he [her husband] is around or not will not determine my life—this gives me peace of mind, because I feel that I don't need him. I need him because we are a family and I love him, not because without him my economy would fall to pieces. That dependence has a big impact on your decision-making." (Chile, formal employee.)

"Earning my own money and not having to put up with anything or anyone, especially with him [referring to her husband] who would always humiliate me and step on me—always. All my life has been very ugly but that has changed; now I don't have to tolerate him or anyone else." (Mexico, business-woman).

- **A model for children**

"Not having a mother in a robe in the house, cooking and not doing anything else. I don't want to give that image of being dependent, it's awful... I wish to give my daughter a good example of a woman, of a mother who earns her own money, who does what she likes, who is happy, who can be at home but also work." (Argentina, self-employed.)

- **A space for personal development (beyond the economic aspect), for planning their own life**

"I think it is absolutely necessary to have an activity, a trade, a job, because it is clearly empowering." (Chile, formal employee.)

"[Having a job means] economic independence, staying active, not only being at your children's disposal, because that is a very limited view of life." (Uruguay, focus group: high socioeconomic status, youth.)

- **Sacrifice**

"I think education is essential now. I tell my children 'Kids, you need to have a plan.' I don't want any of my children to end up working like me, stuck to a machine all day and overnight to provide food for them." (Chile, informal employee.)

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The research carried out in these eight countries, which despite having some similarities also show clear differences, allows to confirm that there are gender inequalities which persist and replicate in the labor market, and which are the result of intrinsic and imposed restrictions.

Particularly, imposed restrictions are identified as being the most relevant to account for the gender gaps in this group of countries. This relates to the absence of strategies of public policy seeking to redefine current regulations and institutions, which rule the practices in the labor market and the habits and customs of those responsible for public policies (Espino and Salvador, 2016).

While progress has been made in female labor insertion, there are also obstacles which make women's continuity and upward mobility in the labor market difficult. The idea that the responsibilities of taking care of the children and the home correspond to women is still held by household members and families, as well as by employers and decision-makers. Therefore, gender inequalities in the labor market continue to replicate, with an ongoing overrepresentation of women in the informal work sector, occupational segregation (in connection with the tasks and responsibilities assigned and the categories they hold: employer, employee, self-employed), income gaps and paid work hours. Moreover, discriminatory practices persist, which are generally seen as having been overcome because of the existence of laws penalizing them.

Women confirm that in order to have better opportunities for economic empowerment it is important to have higher education levels which guarantee access to quality jobs, with higher wages and social benefits. They also perceive the need to eliminate stereotypes and gender gaps by addressing the implicit discrimination mechanisms coming from the market and the institutions.

Economic empowerment is not limited to women having access to and managing their own income—it also encourages and enhances their capacity to choose and build their career path with high degrees of autonomy and decision, according to their aspirations and expectations. (Sanchís, 2016.)

