

Unpaid work and income poverty in countries in the Latin America and the Caribbean region [ECLAC]



Key points

- Women in lowest-income households spend more time on unpaid work compared to women in highest-income households (39 hours versus 29 hours per week); in contrast, there is little difference in the amount of time men in both lowest-income and highest-income households spend on unpaid work, on average, less than one hour per day. For this reason, the gender gap in time spent on unpaid work is even wider in lowest-income households.
- In 2017, for every 100 men living in poor households in the Latin America, there were 113 women in the same situation, a ratio that remained stable over the period 2012–2017.

Time poverty and income poverty: a vicious circle in countries in Latin America

Time-use data allow for the evaluation of public policies and programmes from an innovative perspective: an analysis of time-use data, based on household income per capita as a stratification variable in six Latin American countries, shows that women in lowest-income households spend more time on unpaid work than women in highest-income households. This is partly related to the size and dependency ratio of lowest-income households, which tend to have specific family structures.¹

The differences in unpaid working time are significant: while women in the poorest households (quantile I, poorest 20% of households) spend an average of 39 hours per week on unpaid work, those in the wealthiest households (quantile V, wealthiest 20% of households) spend around 29 hours per week on unpaid work, an average of 10 hours less. Meanwhile, the differences in the amount of time spent on unpaid work between men in households in the poorest and wealthiest quintiles is not significant, generally less than one hour per day.

Data show that men's contribution to domestic and care work is generally independent of their socioeconomic stratum, and that the gender gap in time spent on unpaid work is wider and more unequal in lowest-income households.

Monetary poverty and lack of time sustain a vicious circle that is difficult to break without policies focused on strengthening women's economic autonomy. The burden of unpaid work that has historically been assigned to women hinders their access to the labour market and thus their ability to generate their own income; this situation is even more pronounced in households with children under the age of five.

In addition, women in poor households are unable to acquire goods and services that could save time on domestic and care work and there is a lack of quality public services that provide care for children, older persons and persons with disabilities and with chronic illnesses, a regressive situation that is set to worsen, given the ongoing demographic changes in the region, including a rise in the older population.

Figure: Time spent in unpaid work (in hours per week) by women and men aged 15 and older in selected countries in Latin America by income quintile: 2014, 2016 and 2017 (latest available)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of the repository of information on time use in Latin America and the Caribbean (<https://oig.cepal.org/en/infographics/repository-information-time-use-latin-america-and-caribbean>).

Note: Q I denotes quintile I: poorest 20% of households and Q V denotes quintile V: the wealthiest 20% of households.

Poverty reduction measures in the region have not benefited men and women equally, nor have they advanced at the same pace. In general, poor households contain a higher proportion of women of ages at which productive and reproductive demands are the greatest. In 2017, for every 100 men living in poor households in the region, there were 113 women in the same situation.

Moreover, despite variations in the regional poverty level, the femininity index of poverty (the ratio of women to men living in poverty) remained relatively constant during the period 2012–2017, with values between 1.13 and 1.14, equivalent to 113 to 114 women for every 100 men.²

In the case of extreme poverty, the index has been equally stable, with a slight increase between 2014 and 2016, before falling in 2017, returning to a level similar to the 2012 level, that is, 1.16, representing 116 women for every 100 men.³ The poverty suffered by women in Latin America is closely linked to the barriers they face in carrying out paid work.

The strong link between time and income means that lack of time worsens or reproduces poverty; for this reason, time-use analysis is fundamental to a more comprehensive and multidimensional management of this phenomenon.

Related stories and further reading

- [Unpaid work and total work burden](#)
- [Youth "not in employment, education or training" \(NEET\) and unpaid work in Latin America](#)

About the data

Definitions

- **Unpaid work:** in this story refers to work done without payment, which is measured by quantifying the time a person spends on own-use goods production work, unpaid domestic work, unpaid care of household members or unpaid work for other households or for the community and/or volunteer work.⁴

Coverage

Women living in six selected countries in Latin America.

Availability

Data on the six selected countries in Latin America have been provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Footnotes

1. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Social Panorama of Latin America 2016, Santiago, 2017.
2. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Women's autonomy in changing economic scenarios, Santiago, 2019.
3. Ibid.
4. International Labour Organization (ILO), Department of Statistics (ILOSTAT), Unpaid work, subsistence production, unpaid care work and volunteer work.