

2 A comprehensive policy strategy for achieving a balanced sharing of paid and unpaid work

This chapter argues that closing gender gaps in key economic outcomes requires a strategic approach towards a better sharing of paid and unpaid work between men and women in Costa Rica. It presents a comprehensive framework to reach this goal, following two main policy axes. The first axis focuses on the policies aimed at reducing the barriers that stand in the way of a more equitable division of time and responsibilities between partners: creating a more effective care system, expanding parental leave, and reducing the transmission of gender stereotypes through the education system. The second includes the policies that aim to improve the participation of women in the labour market by ensuring girls' access and enrolment in the education system, promoting women in non-traditional careers and leadership positions, supporting female entrepreneurship, and fighting gender-based violence. The chapter reviews each area in detail and provides policy insights for possible improvements.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a combination of societal, institutional and economic factors underpin the higher unpaid work burden of women, which weakens their economic outcomes despite the significant progress achieved to eliminate gender gaps in basic education and reduce those in the labour market.

As a result, women in Costa Rica continue to be less frequently employed; to work more frequently in the informal sector; to more rarely pursue STEM careers; and to earn lower wages than men. The welfare and income gains of reducing these gaps are potentially substantial for both men and women (OECD, 2023^[1]; Fluchtmann, Keese and Adema, 2024^[2]). A more equitable division of paid and unpaid work thus represents a high priority policy concern.

Given the interplay between different drivers of gender inequality discussed in Chapter 1, a comprehensive and strategic policy framework is needed to achieve a more balanced sharing of paid and unpaid work in Costa Rica. The framework is based on two policy axes:

- On the one hand, the policies aimed at reducing the barriers that currently stand in the way of achieving a more equitable division of time and responsibilities between men and women, and
- On the other hand, the policies that aim at fostering the participation of women in the labour market through ensuring that women's paid work pays is better compensated.

The first axis consists of the policies to reduce the overall amount of unpaid work that families have to carry out, as well as to tackle the hurdles that make it difficult for couples to share paid and unpaid work more equally. Key examples of specific areas within this axis are the policies aimed at the expansion of the public care system for both children and the elderly; introducing or strengthening the regulations governing parental leave and flexible work; and the promotion of gender-neutral approaches at all levels of education.

The second policy axis highlights the policies that help reduce the gender gap in labour income. These policies lessen the incentive for women to spend long hours on unpaid work to free more hours that they can then dedicate to paid work. Concretely, this policy axis aims at addressing the barriers for all groups of girls to access quality education; promoting women's careers including in leadership positions; strengthening gender equality in business entrepreneurship; and fighting violence against women in public spaces and the workplace.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the policy framework and its components. The two policy axes are mutually reinforcing: the interplay of positive policy changes across each of them has the potential to significantly increase the number of women who could and would like to work outside the home, as well as the number of men willing to take over caring and domestic tasks.

The specific areas addressed in this chapter emerged during a virtual fact-finding mission with Costa Rican authorities as the most relevant policies, in terms of both potential impact and feasibility. The remainder of the chapter reviews each area in detail, starting with an assessment of the challenges and existing policies. A discussion of policy insights completes the analysis of each area, building on the large body of OECD work on international good practices in these areas. While there is a general need to ensure that policies and programmes benefit all women, many of the policy recommendations focus on the needs of some population groups, including indigenous women and women living in remote areas. The key policy insights of each policy area are summarised in Box 2.1 and Box 2.2, respectively.

Figure 2.1. A comprehensive policy framework for achieving a balanced sharing of paid and unpaid work in Costa Rica

Reducing barriers to sharing paid and unpaid work equally	Making women's paid work pay more
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a more comprehensive care system • Expanding parental leave in the formal and informal economy • Reducing the transmission of gender stereotypes through the education system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring access to quality education for all • Promoting women in non-traditional careers and leadership positions • Supporting women's entrepreneurship • Fighting violence against women

Reducing barriers to sharing paid and unpaid work equitably

Creating a more comprehensive care system

A significant proportion of unpaid domestic work involves caring for babies, children and physically dependent adults. In the absence of a comprehensive national care system, the bulk of these activities falls on women. On a typical day in Latin America and the Caribbean, women spend between 20% and 30% of their time in care and domestic work, while men only dedicate 10% of their time to these activities. The gap in Costa Rica is among the highest in the region. Women spend almost three times as much time on these activities (23.7% vs. 8.2% for men (Bidegain, 2018^[31])). The availability of affordable public and private care services can help rebalance the care burden between men and women, if complemented by broader efforts to shift attitudes, along with the policies to increase parental leave and part-time work opportunities for men and women.

Public spending on early childhood education and care (ECEC), as well as family policies is relatively low in Costa Rica. In 2020, these spending stood at 0.29% of GDP, significantly below the level five years earlier (0.42% in 2015). This share is lower than in OECD countries, and below other countries in the region. In 2020, public spending on ECEC stood at 0.64% of GDP in Chile, 0.47% in Colombia and 0.50% in Mexico (the latter figure is for 2019). In 2019, the latest year where data is available, Costa Rica spent a total of 1.02% of GDP for family benefits in cash, as services, and tax breaks for families, lower than in Colombia (1.75%), and Chile (1.76%), but higher than in Mexico (0.63%) (OECD, 2024^[4]).

In Costa Rica, the *Red Nacional de Cuidado para la Infancia y la Persona Adulta Mayor* (National Care Network for Children and the Elderly) was established in 2010 based on the 2007 *Política Nacional para la Igualdad y Equidad de Género* (National Policy for Gender Equality and Equity) and regularly updated subsequently (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2007^[51]). This Gender Policy included as a key goal that every woman who wants to participate in the labour market and requires access to care services should have options either provided by the government, private sector or funded by mixed resources (e.g. private providers receiving government subsidies) (OXFAM, 2022^[6]). For example, the *Red Nacional de Cuidado* aims at expanding the coverage and ensuring minimum quality standards, putting special emphasis on increasing the availability of services for low-income households. It was structured around three care subjects, children, the elderly and persons with functional dependency or disability, respectively.

For childcare, the *Red Nacional de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil* (REDCUDI, National Network for Care and Child Development), established in 2014, co-ordinates different modalities of childcare services for children up to 12 years of age funded by public, private and mixed funding schemes (IMAS, 2023^[7]). It aims to expand childcare services that promote comprehensive child development (including access to adequate nutrition and cognitive stimulation). The main providers of childcare services include (REDCUDI, 2018^[8]):

- Ministry of Health, through the *Centros de Educacion y Nutricion* (CEN, Centers for Education and Nutrition) and the *Centros Infantiles de Atencion Integral* (CINAI, Child Centers for Comprehensive Care). Both the CEN and CINAI offer daily childcare services (at day and night) to children up to 13 years of age, meals for children not requiring care, pregnant and lactating women and activities to promote children's comprehensive development. The difference between the two is that the CENs provide childcare services for up to 8 hours daily and the CINAI for up to 12 hours. The CEN-CINAI are located in 95% of the country's districts and it is estimated that in 2014, among the beneficiary households 55.3% were extremely poor and 39.5% were poor (REDCUDI, 2018^[8]).
- Private modalities subsidised by the *Instituto Mixto de Ayudas Sociales* (IMAS, Joint Social Welfare Institute) for children up to 12 years of age. To receive a subsidy from IMAS, the service must include at least: (i) care services for 10 hours or more daily, for at least 5 days a week, and (ii) meal services including breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch and mid-afternoon snack. Modalities include the *Centros de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil* (CECUDI, Center for Care and Child Development), community homes and *Casas de la Alegria* (Houses of Joy). The CECUDIs can be established by municipalities, private or mixed funding providers including co-operatives, development associations, solidarity associations and small businesses. CECUDIs' providers need to demonstrate the suitability of their staff including minimum qualifications and an adequate ratio of staff per children in care. The Community Homes are private initiatives lead by parents and usually organised as microenterprises. The *Casas de la Alegria* constitute a seasonal care service designed for migrant indigenous populations that travel with their families during harvest time.
- *Centro Infantiles Diurnos de Atención Integral* (CIDAI, Comprehensive Day Care Center for Children) funded by the public *Patronato Nacional de la Infancia* (PANI, National Agency for Child Welfare). These centres serve children up to 12 years of age and provide care services as well as educational, recreational and other health-related activities for children at different ages. They are operated by non-governmental organisations or municipalities, which receive resources to cover their expenses on the basis of co-operation agreements with PANI. The co-operation agreements include provisions on the conditions and quality of the service provided.

The 2018-22 strategic plan for the expansion of REDCUDI identified five main challenges (REDCUDI, 2018^[8]). First, the geographical distribution of the care centres is uneven, 61% of them concentrate in about 23% of the country's *cantones* (18 of a total of 81), mainly in central regions. Second, REDCUDI's coverage has increased but without reaching all vulnerable children. In 2019, it was estimated that only 14.6% of children up to 6 years of age in poor households accessed services of the REDCUDI (ILO, 2022^[9]). Third, lack of formal mechanisms for the co-ordination of services under REDCUDI. These include, for example, the identification of legally binding standards setting out minimum requirements of services. They also involve the creation of a responsive system to ensure that the supply of childcare centres lines up to demand needs, which may vary geographically. Fourth, the quality of services is uneven, particularly across the community homes, as revealed by the fact that about 79% of community homes provide care services that are inadequate to promote comprehensive child development (that includes nutrition and cognitive stimulation). Finally, there are insufficient public resources to support the expansion of the *REDCUDI* and to ensure adequate coverage of all children in poor households.

For the care of the elderly, the country established in 2012 the *Red Progresiva de Cuido Integral para las Personas Adultas Mayores* (Gradually Implemented Comprehensive Care Network for the Elderly). The aim of this Network is to improve the co-ordination of the actions to meet the needs of the elderly, ranging from basic day-to-day needs, to health and socialisation, with special emphasis on poor households (CONAPAM, 2012^[10]). Care services are provided by municipalities, social welfare organisations and private institution that receive subsidies from the public body responsible for ageing matters, the *Consejo Nacional de la Persona Adulta Mayor* (CONAPAM, National Council for Seniors) (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2022^[11]). The Network regulates the quality of existing services (public and private) with a focus on supporting the poor. Care modalities include nursing homes (for permanent residence and comprehensive

care), shelters for temporary residence, day centres to cover elderly's needs of socialisation, recreation and nutrition and support to elderly in their own homes (OXFAM, 2022^[6]). Analysis from the University of Costa Rica identifies challenges in the implementation of the Network reflecting weak monitoring and evaluation processes, a lack of mechanisms to strengthen the co-responsibility between the care centres and the community and an absence of co-operation with educational institutions to raise awareness on population's ageing and their care needs (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2022^[11]).

To strengthen the care of people with functional dependency, including the elderly, in 2021 Costa Rica launched the *Sistema Apoyo a los Cuidados y Atención a la Dependencia* (System to support care of people with dependency) (IMAS, 2021). The target population of this system are people fulfilling the concurrence of three conditions: (i) having problems performing basic daily activities such as moving around, eating, grooming, washing themselves, among others; (ii) that another person is required to support these activities; and (iii) that these difficulties are permanent or present for an extended period of time. The system was designed as a case management service, involving a preliminary assessment of dependency and living conditions, the preparation of a specific list of services and programmes reflecting the results of the assessment, and an individualised access plan to the services (IMAS, 2021). Since the policy is less than 3 years old, it has not yet been evaluated.

Policy insights

Sustain the effort to ensure availability and affordability of early childcare. Costa Rica should continue to strengthen the REDCUDI by expanding coverage, improving quality and co-ordination mechanisms. Expanding opportunities of access to care could benefit both carers and cared for. International evaluations show that the long-term educational and social benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) may be particularly strong among children from disadvantaged families (Nores and Barnett, 2010^[12]; Heckman et al., 2010^[13]). In many OECD countries, there is a significant gap in childcare use across income groups, particularly so for children under the age of three. In countries such as Finland and Switzerland, relatively high net childcare costs likely contribute to a large gap in ECEC enrolment between children in families of the lowest and the highest income groups. As ECEC is also positively associated with a wide range of child and family outcomes – such as cognitive development, well-being and reduced poverty – this gap in participation can perpetuate socio-economic inequalities (OECD, 2023^[11]). In the context of Costa Rica, this suggests that children from families that belong to cultural and linguistic minorities, for example, should be primary candidates to receiving affordable and quality ECEC ahead of being enrolled in formal schooling in primary school. For mothers, a 2020 study found that in Costa Rica those that accessed subsidised childcare had a higher probability of participation in the labour market of about 9 and 14 additional percentage points (Quiros and Robalino, 2020^[14]). These women also worked between 8% and 19% more compared to those with no access to subsidised childcare alternatives. The effects on labour participation are larger for women that have not finished high school and the effects on the numbers of hours worked are larger for those in the poorest quintile.

To strengthen affordability, OECD countries have implemented a variety of childcare support programmes for low-income households, ranging from childcare allowances, tax concessions and fee rebates to increases of other benefit entitlements, such as childcare provided at reduced fees (OECD, 2023^[11]). Some countries have extensive discount schemes that reduce out-of-pocket costs of childcare to a minimum. For example, Estonia limits childcare fees to 20% of the monthly minimum wage, while Germany exempts low-income and other vulnerable households from paying ECEC fees. In Norway, these fees are capped at a maximum of 6% of gross household income, and the government recently introduced a right to 20 hours of free childcare for lower-earning parents. Between 2021 and 2026, Canada is rolling out a large-scale ECEC reform towards a country-wide Early Learning and Childcare System which, among others, includes a guarantee for a childcare fee of maximum CAD 10 a day. Earlier reforms with similar maximum fees (today CAD 8.7 a day) in the province of Québec contributed to an increase in mothers' labour force participation.

An interesting example of an effective care system in the region is the case of Uruguay. In 2010, Uruguay launched a comprehensive social protection matrix focussed on health, education, and social security. The matrix was complemented in 2015 by the introduction of a fourth Care System pillar, encompassing early childhood and physically dependent people. Both expanded the coverage of successful existing programmes while complementing them with innovative initiatives such as the *Centros Siempre* (a public-private day care facility for children) and medical teleconsultations (MIDES, 2021^[15]; OPS, 2020^[16]). Uruguay's first Care Plan has five components: access (ensuring access to care either through its own state facilities, cash transfers or care licenses); training; regulation; a care commission and a communication campaign to include more men in care while focusing on co-responsibility and new masculinities (QUANTA, 2021^[17]). The budget of the Care System was increased incrementally since 2015 reaching 0.2% of GDP in 2020. Out of a total budget of 3 084.8 million Uruguayan pesos in 2020, 62% were destined to ECEC, 35% to care of other dependent individuals, and 3% to training (UN Women, 2019^[18]).

Professionalise community-based programmes. In addition to the effort to ensure availability and affordability, it is important to improve the capacity of the REDCUDI to shape the quality of services. This can be achieved through reinforcing training programmes in combination with incentives to formalise care workers, especially at community homes. By strengthening recognition of the essential role that care workers play, the professionalisation of caring services can make the sector more attractive to a qualified and more gender-balanced workforce. Some countries have chosen to reinforce the offer of continuous training programmes to childcare workers, by increasing the options for shorter, but more regular and better-spaced programmes. Viet Nam, for example, offers opportunities for continuous training of up to two months each year (Neuman, Josephson and Chua, 2015^[19]). In Costa Rica, a similar approach would suit the needs of rural and far-away areas well, since a well-trained childcare workforce is in particularly short supply in these areas, compared to the urban centres. At the same time, childcare needs tend to follow the seasonality of agriculture outputs in these regions, meaning that they pick up when agriculture and harvesting activities intensify, before bouncing back as soon as seasonal factors moderate. Accommodating these variations, unknown to the urban centres, requires a high capacity of service providers to adapt.

Furthermore, several countries have adopted more decisive compensation policies. Ecuador, for example, has tripled the pay for community childcare providers from one-third to the full minimum wage (Moussié, 2016^[20]). Aside from pay increases, the professionalisation of care occupations can entail feedback effects by qualifying individual carers for pension credits and health coverage, hence supporting the formalisation of childcare work. Increasing the attractiveness of the childcare profession has also the potential to support labour force participation.

Maintain investments in care provision for the elderly. Considering the country's demographic trends, it is estimated that by 2050, the care needs per household with people over 65 years of age in Costa Rica will demand 30 additional hours per week (4 working days) (OXFAM, 2022^[6]). Ideally, lessening this burden will require expanding the *Red Progresiva de Cuido Integral para las Personas Adultas Mayores* and the *Sistema Apoyo a los Cuidados y Atención a la Dependencia*, both geographically and across income groups. Those who provide informal care at home can benefit from training opportunities, easy access to information about available public services, respite care to help carers rest, financial support, and social security coverage (Rocard and Llena-Nozal, 2022^[21]). For example, in La Plata in Argentina, a network of residents, academic experts and service providers created a website to provide information to families about resources that could help them. Respite care, aimed at providing a temporary relief to families of any income category through daycare services, in-home or institutional care, is another key policy tool to support family carers. In Belo Horizonte in Brazil, for example, social and health workers spend a week in a family to allow carers to recover and to learn how to best care for their relatives (UN Women, 2017^[22]).

In addition, the need for more support in the form of regular visits by trained care workers, or of institutional care, is likely to increase. Public oversight is a key to ensure the enforcement of care standards, as well

as labour standards, for paid care workers, many of whom are women. In OECD countries, where population ageing is particularly pronounced, poor working conditions of the long-term care workforce limit recruitment and retention in the sector. Social dialogue matters to improving labour rights and working conditions for care workers. In Argentina, for example, a tripartite agreement led to a progressive increase of the minimum wage for domestic workers to become closer to the minimum living wage in 2018. Appropriate employment models and regulatory measures can formalise care work and offer adequate social protection for long-term care workers (Global Deal, 2023^[23]).

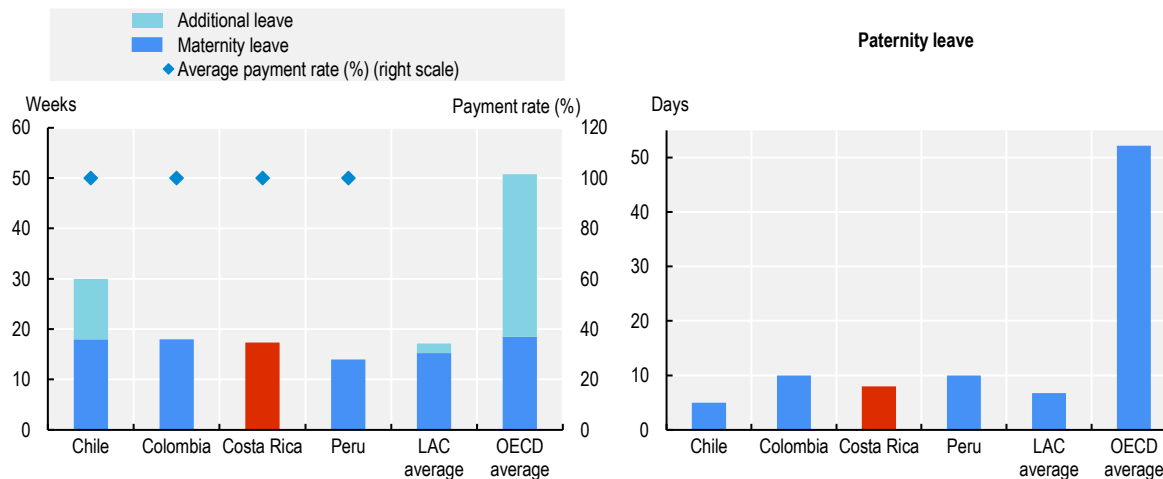
Expanding parental leave in the formal and informal economy

Parental leave policies affect family decisions about the division of paid and unpaid work between partners. When there is no maternity leave, mothers may have to drop out of the labour force and subsequently find it difficult to re-enter. A study of 159 countries finds that female labour force participation is positively correlated with the length of maternity leave, if the leave remains under 30 weeks of length (Del Rey, Kyriacou and Silva, 2021^[24]; World Bank, 2022^[25]). In OECD countries, the female employment rate rises slightly with the length of the statutory maternity leave but starts to fall when the duration exceeds two years. This underscores that beyond a certain limit, excessively long maternity leave periods may be counter-productive, leading to a widening of the gender employment gap, rather than shrinking it (Thévenon and Solaz, 2013^[26]). It also underlines the important balancing role that fathers can play by taking paternity leave in order to break the frequent pattern whereby couples revert to a traditional division of labour when they become parents. For example, in Norway, couples whose child was born four weeks after the introduction of paternity leave reported fewer conflicts about the division of unpaid work and some improvements in the sharing of housework tasks than couples whose child was born just beforehand (Kotsadam and Finseraas, 2011^[27]). Evidence from Sweden and Spain likewise suggests that couples split unpaid work more equally following the introduction of more gender-equal parental leave policies (Hagqvist et al., 2017^[28]). A detailed analysis from Germany shows that fathers who took parental leave decreased their paid work afterwards and increased the hours devoted to childcare. However, only fathers who took more than two months of leave also increased the involvement in other types of unpaid work (Bünning, 2015^[29]).

Two rounds of laws, one in 1996 and a recent one in 2022 established maternal and parental leave in Costa Rica. Law 7621, passed in 1996, included in the country's labour code a maternity leave of four months split before and after the birth of the child. This translates into 17 weeks and exceeds the regional average of 15 weeks (Figure 2.2). The 2000 ILO Convention No. 183 on Maternity Protection defines a minimum standard of 14 weeks, and a recommended standard of 18 weeks to allow mothers an adequate time to rest and recover after birth (ILO, 2022^[30]). Paternity leave in Costa Rica was introduced in the labour code by the approval of the draft bill 21 149 in 2022. The bill envisages parental leave of 2 days per week for the first 4 weeks after childbirth – 8 days in total – for employees of private companies and a leave of one month for those working in public entities. Accordingly, paternity leave in Costa Rica exceeds the regional average of 7 days but is far below the OECD average (Figure 2.2). However, it is important to note that the OECD average of around eight weeks reflects in part the extremely high entitlements of one year of paternity leave in Korea and Japan. Very few men in either of the two countries take any paternity leave, let alone during a one-year period (Rich, 2019^[31]).

Figure 2.2. Maternity and paternity leaves in Costa Rica are slightly above the regional average

Maternity leave in weeks and paternity leave in days, 2022 or latest available



Note: The Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) and OECD averages are unweighted. The 12 weeks of additional leave in Chile can be taken by either mothers or fathers and can be extended to 18 weeks at 50% rather than 100% of pay. For Costa Rica a 2022 law introduced paternity leave for 8 days (2 days per week for the first 4 weeks of birth) for private companies and 30 days (one month leave) for public employees. Values for Latin American and Caribbean countries generally refer to the leave that workers in the formal sector are eligible for. The weeks of paternity leave are multiplied by five to arrive at a daily value, assuming a five-day working week. The OECD average is based on the sum of paternity leave and parental leave reserved for fathers.

Source: For OECD countries, data refer to OECD, “Table PF2.1.A. Summary of paid leave entitlements available to mothers” and “Table PF2.1.B. Summary of paid leave entitlements for fathers”, OECD Family Database, www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.xlsx and IPC-IG and otherwise data refer to UNICEF (2020), “Table 6: Duración y beneficios de las licencias (regímenes generales)”, *Maternidad y Paternidad en el lugar de trabajo en América Latina y el Caribe – Políticas para la licencia de maternidad y paternidad y apoyo a la lactancia materna*. www.unicef.org/lac/media/13931/file/Maternidad_y_paternidad_en_el_lugar_de_trabajo_en_ALC.pdf.

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The schedule of maternity leave for a dependent employee in Costa Rica typically includes 1 month of pre-birth leave and 3 months of post-birth week. In the case of adoption, the maternity leave is of 3 months starting one day after the official date of adoption. These months of leave are not regularly transferable between parents. Only in the case of the mother’s death during birth or in the first three months of life of the child, the leave is transferable to the father or another caregiver in the family. During the time of leave the parent taking the leave is entitled to a full salary with the cost being shared equally – 50% each – between the employer and the contributory government-sponsored insurance of the Costa Rican Social Security Administration (*Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social*), if the beneficiary has contributed for at least 3 consecutive months before the birth, or six months in the 12 months prior to the birth (OECD, 2022^[32]). Regulations in the country include antidiscrimination measures, such as prohibiting employers from requiring a pregnancy test as a condition of employment.

Although, maternity and paternity leaves for dependent workers are generous in Costa Rica, relative to other countries in the LAC region, it is important to note that about 4 in 10 working age adults in the country are employed in the informal sector. These workers are not covered by the system, even though self-employed workers can contribute to the *Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social* and receive the benefits. As dependant employees, self-employed workers must also have contributed for at least three consecutive months immediately before the birth or for at least six months in the 12 months prior to the birth. The National Institute of Statistics and Census of Costa Rica estimates that in 2022, 42.5% of working age individuals work in the informal sector and that the prevalence is higher among women (44.9%) than men (41.1%) (INEC, 2022^[33]). Most informal workers are employed in micro enterprises with 5 or less

workers (36.9%), precarious employment (27.6%) or informal domestic or care work in houses (10.5%) (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2021^[34]), which tend to be characterised by limited capacities to provide benefits, such as maternity leave, to its employers.

Once parents return to work, they have little options for easing the time-crunch of simultaneously working and caring for the children. In Costa Rica, the statutory maximum of daily work is 8 hours for a maximum of 6 days a week, for a total of 48 hours per week for ordinary daily work. This maximum work hours are above the standard work week of 40 hours that is common to many OECD countries. Estimates based on household surveys show that on average a fully employed individual in Costa Rica works about the time established in the law, that is 47.9 hours per week, with differences among sexes, 49.1 hours for men and 45.7 for women (OECD, 2023^[35])

Policy insights

Promote joint care responsibilities by facilitating take-up among fathers and shared leave between parents. Although Costa Rica has introduced a paternity leave of 8 days, the system could be made more flexible by allowing mothers to share their longer maternity leave of 17 weeks with fathers as a way to encourage joint caring during the first months of life of the child. Furthermore, additional measures might be needed to strengthen the take-up of leave among fathers. In 2021, Colombia introduced a reform that expanded paternity leave from eight to 15 working days, that is, three weeks. The reform also introduced paid shared leave, whereby parents can freely attribute the last six weeks of maternal leave to either the mother or the father (Congreso de Colombia, 2021^[36]). Several European countries (including Iceland and Sweden) have successfully boosted fathers' take-up by reserving a certain share of the total leave allowed for both parents to fathers, meaning that the total leave that a couple can use is longer if both take it. Another policy option is to lengthen paternity leave, which can per definition not be transferred to the mother (OECD, 2019^[37]).

Extend parental protection to informal workers. Extending maternity protection to workers in the informal sector is essential to achieve a more balanced distribution of paid and unpaid work activities between partners. In addition, by releasing women who work in the informal sector from the pressure to work too far into pregnancy and to return too soon after childbirth, it will likely help reducing the high exposure of the vulnerable populations to healthcare and economic risks (WIEGO/ILO/UNICEF, 2020^[38]).

To expand the coverage to informal workers, Costa Rica could consider a non-contributory scheme targeted to most vulnerable parents. A study of OECD economies finds that having the government administer maternity benefits financed by public fund makes it less likely that employers will discriminate against women of childbearing age (Thévenon and Solaz, 2013^[26]). In Costa Rica, the main conditional cash transfer programme *Avancemos* (Let us move forward) covers only children of school age (from pre-school to high school) and does not benefit new parents. The country also has a large unconditional cash transfer named *Atención a Familias* (Care for families) that supports poor households with various basic needs such as nutrition, healthcare, housing, and public services. However, the programme is not specifically designed for households with young children, although it is open to them if they are poor (identified using a proxy means test) (World Bank, 2022^[39]).

In this setting, Costa Rica could consider introducing non-contributory allowances targeted to the most vulnerable, similar to allowances implemented in Argentina and Ecuador. In Argentina, the *Asignación Universal por Hijo* (Universal Child Allowance) for children up to 18 years of age and the *Asignación por Embarazo* (Pregnancy Allowance), which is accessible from week-12 of pregnancy through childbirth or interruption of the pregnancy, are paid to microentrepreneurs registered for the Simplified Tax Regime for Small Taxpayers, unemployed people, workers in the informal economy with income below the minimum wage, and domestic workers (WIEGO/ILO/UNICEF, 2020^[38]). In Ecuador, the cash transfer *Bono de 1 000 Días* (Bonus of 1 000 Days), launched in 2022, targets households with children in the first 1 000-day of life and pregnant women living in poverty (identified by a means-test) and promotes enrolment during

pregnancy or in the first 45 days of life. The transfer was designed as both unconditional and conditional, with one part of the transfer being a monthly, fixed transfer, and the other part being conditional on attendance at essential health services such as prenatal visits and routine well-baby visits in the first two years of the child's life (Secretaria Técnica Ecuador Crece sin Desnutrición Infantil, 2022^[40]).

Reducing the transmission of gender stereotypes through the education system

There is a vast literature on attitudes about gender roles, how they are transmitted to children, including the role that stereotypes play in influencing student's career choices and job preparedness strategies (OECD, 2012^[41]; Karlson and Simonsson, 2011^[42]; Wahlstrom, 2003^[43]). They shape and structure ambitions, including the professional careers people aspire to (UNESCO, 2021^[44]; OECD, 2020^[45]). As noted in Chapter 1, girls may shy away from choosing educational tracks and occupations perceived as traditionally masculine, such as STEM degree programmes (OECD, 2015^[46]). Given that occupations characterised by a strong presence of male workers tend to be well paid, these choices can permanently hamper women's earning potential (Kunze, 2018^[47]). At the same time, boys brought up to believe in traditional gender roles may gravitate away from care professions (OECD, 2017^[48]), and may be less willing to participate in housework and childcare activities once they are adults (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010^[49]).

Gender equality and education are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020^[50]), which recognises the key role that education can play in challenging and transforming unequal social and gender relations, norms, and practices. A stereotype-free educational approach can benefit both boys and girls, by allowing them to acquire full awareness of their strengths and interests. This approach rests on two notions:

- The first is that the education system has a key role to play in tackling the persistence of gender stereotypes (Bousseau and Tap, 1998^[51]; OECD, 2012^[41]). For example, even though girls have gained near-equal access to schooling to boys in many countries, curricula and school materials have not followed through, implying that the representation of gender roles remains the same, using old archetypes. Country initiatives to address this include the introduction of a more inclusive language in the textbooks and improving the balance between numbers of men and women represented in textbooks (UNESCO, 2020^[50]). In many countries, including across the LAC region, the textbooks continue to function as an important driver of the reproduction of traditional gender roles. Research has shown that in textbooks, men often appear in a wide variety of professional (paid) roles and women in domestic (unpaid) roles (EU, 2012^[52]). A stereotype-free educational approach can significantly help addressing these gaps and their transmission between generations.
- The second concept assumes that the potential for teachers to support students' self-esteem, confidence and life paths currently remains underused. Studies reveal that the attitude of the teachers affects students' interest in school subjects, which, in turn, influence career orientations (OECD, 2012^[41]; OECD, 2015^[46]). If teachers do not trust girls' scientific abilities and provide them with less encouraging feedbacks, for example, girls' success and interest in these subjects can diminish (OXFAM, 2005^[53]; OXFAM, 2007^[54]). In Australia, Norway and Hong Kong (China), the influence of gender norms on teachers' beliefs are already apparent at the pre-primary level and manifest through a stronger engagement of boys in games that develop scientific understanding (UNESCO, 2020^[55]). Female teachers in science and mathematics have a potentially significant role to play in addressing these biases and in reorienting girls' interests and choices towards STEM disciplines (OECD, 2019^[56]; Breda et al., 2020^[57]; Ahmed and Mudrey, 2019^[58]). For Chile, a study by the Ministry of Women and the National Women's Service (SERNAM, 2009^[59]) showed that teachers often address classes using masculine forms. When giving examples, they tend to confine female characters to the "private world" spheres, namely the domestic, maternal and care settings, with male characters placed in the "public world" settings where fully-fledged economic activities take place.

Gender biases of parents can also influence girls' expectations and career choices. As mentioned in Chapter 1, access to higher education in STEM disciplines for girls represents a worldwide problem, even though these disciplines generate higher returns to education and higher employability levels. Data from the OECD's PISA assessments suggest that girls do not seem to be getting much encouragement from their parents. In all countries and economies surveyed on this question in 2012, parents were more likely to expect their sons, rather than their daughters, to work in a STEM field – even when they performed equally well in mathematics and science. In Costa Rica, women only represent 35% of those graduated from STEM careers (Encinas-Martín and Cherian, 2023^[60]; Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos, 2022^[61]).

As part of its broader policies to promote equal opportunities for all, the Government of Costa Rica has introduced important measures to address discriminatory practices in the educational sector. The section on education in the 1990s *Ley de promoción de la igualdad social para la mujer* (Law for the promotion of social equality for women, nr. 7142) includes the “prohibition of incorporating content, pedagogical methods or educational instruments that promote or impose men and women’s roles that harm social equality or that keep the woman in a subordinate condition” and mentions “textbooks, educational programmes and teaching methods should contain the values of gender equality and contribute to the elimination of discriminatory practices due to gender” (UNEP Law and Environment Assistance Platform, 1990^[62]; Rojas Blanco, 2015^[63]). The 2018-30 *Política Nacional para la Igualdad Efectiva entre Mujeres y Hombres* (National Policy for Effective Equality between Women and Men) includes the goal of increasing training and educational services for the empowerment, self-care, and well-being of women (Goal 19 of axis 4) (INAMU, 2018). In 2014, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP), as other public institutions in the country, established within its regular structure the Office for the Promotion of Gender Equality with the objective of ensuring that a gender perspective is incorporated in the Ministry’s guidelines, activities, and the whole educational process (UNESCO, 2021^[64]; Escalante Rivera, 2022^[65]).

The MEP’s *Política de Equidad e Igualdad de Género y su Plan de Acción* (Gender equity and equality policy and its action plan), published in 2014, was prepared with the objective of “promoting the incorporation of a gender equity and equality approach in the work of the Ministry of Public Education” (MEP, 2014^[66]). It includes five axes:

- i. gender mainstreaming by strengthening the co-operation between the MEP and other institutions on gender-related challenges;
- ii. ensuring equal opportunities for women and men working at the MEP;
- iii. promoting equity and gender equality in all modalities, levels and competences of the Costa Rican Educational System for the elimination of cultural patterns associated to violence against women;
- iv. supporting a gender inclusive labour environment; and
- v. supporting an administrative management with a gender approach.

One specific objective of the third axis is the implementation of awareness and training processes for teachers on the prevention of discrimination and violence due to gender or sexual orientation and the establishment of criteria to select and edit educational materials to support the elimination of traditional patterns of sexism in educational curricula. Research also shows that when gender equality is integrated in the curricula on sexual education, it fosters more gender equitable behaviours and attitudes (OECD, 2023^[67]). Policies for comprehensive sexuality education in Costa Rica are featured in the second part of this chapter.

A 2022 report on gender in the educational system in Costa Rica finds that no significant progress has been made in achieving the goals of MEP’s *Plan de Acción* (Escalante Rivera, 2022^[65]). Interviews with representatives from the MEP mentioned that the curriculum for classes such as Math and Spanish have not been revised with a gender approach and that teachers have no clear guidelines on how to incorporate

it in their work. The report recommends strengthening the role of the Office for the Promotion of Gender Equality to prepare an action plan for reinforcing the monitoring and evaluation of progress in the achievement of the gender-related indicators.

Policy insights

Mainstream training to help teachers becoming more mindful about the importance of gender attitudes and stereotypes at school. One lesson from the international experience is that the efforts to create a culture conducive to gender equality should start from early education and with the support of the teachers (OECD, 2012^[41]). Specific training is important to help the teachers adapting their pedagogical approaches to the age group of the children (UNESCO, 2017^[68]). In the Flanders (Belgium), for example, teachers have played a pivotal role in the initiatives undertaken by the government to raise awareness about gender roles in Flemish schools. They were trained to detect the presence of gender attitudes and stereotypes in the curriculum material and were encouraged to propose solutions to improve the situation. There is evidence of teachers having subsequently become more mindful of the importance to avert the use of a spoken language with the children that could favour the development of stereotyped gender roles. Assignments that could reinforce the development of identity aspects (girls to conduct organisational and support roles such as taking notes, planning events, co-ordinating group work, and so on) have gradually diminished. These outcomes were helped by limiting the splitting of boys and girls within the classroom and facilitating the recourse to mixed groups activities (Council of Europe, 2014^[69]). The lessons from this experience provide a potentially useful benchmark against which to assess the pedagogical guides issued by the Government of Costa Rica and progress with implementation.

Strengthen the engagement of families in the process of creating gender-sensitive education. Although the schools play a key role in the education of future citizens, involving parents is essential when introducing a new educational approach aimed at strengthening gender-sensitive education. The family often acts as “spokesperson” of entrenched prejudices and parents could view the new initiatives to change course with suspicion. Although the MEP has published guidelines to strengthen families’ contributions to the educational processes of children in school, such as *Familias Transformadoras* (Transformative Families) and *Centros Educativos y Familias, educando juntos para la vida* (Educational Centres and Families, educating together for life), these initiatives do not foresee modules or activities to promote gender-sensitive education (MEP, 2020^[70]; 2021^[71]).

International experience can serve as inspiration to incorporate gender issues in programmes supporting joint activities between families and schools. In Peru, the Ministry of Education launched a national campaign in 2019 to inform parents about the importance of mainstreaming gender-sensitive practices in education and their interactions with the curriculum. Some 140 information centres were opened to explain families how and why the gender approach is implemented in the education curriculum (MINEDUC, 2019^[72]). In Ireland, as part of the gender mainstreaming strategy, the Ministry of Education and Science developed guidelines, for use by the whole school community, including parents. The guidelines for primary and secondary schools provide parents with information about school obligations in relation to equality legislation, explanation of gender mainstreaming and what it entails, and suggestions for actions that parents can undertake at schools (Council of Europe, 2011^[73]; EIGE, 2020^[74]). The pedagogical guidelines implemented by the Chilean Government encourage schools to take a more proactive role to engage the families by exploring options for co-operation with parents’ associations (OECD, 2021^[75]). The guidelines include a video that parents can watch for their background ahead of participating in a discussion meeting. Another example of engaging families is the Spanish *Irene* programme that informs and trains parents as part of a wider initiative aimed at preventing sexual violence committed by young cohorts in secondary education (Council of Europe, 2014^[69]).

Continue the efforts to increase the interest of girls in STEM disciplines while promoting role models. As part of the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo e Inversión Pública 2019-22* (National Development

and Public Investment Plan 2019-22), the MEP launched in 2017 the *Estrategia Nacional STEAM* (National Strategy STEAM- science, technology, engineering, arts and math), which included a goal of 101 educational centres implementing the STEAM strategy by 2022 (MIDEPLAN, 2018^[76]). The strategy aims at “promoting in educational centres the development of 21st century skills and competencies, from a gender perspective, so that girls explore and value STEAM areas as part of their potential careers” (MEP, 2017^[77]). There are no evaluations available for the strategy but as part of its implementation the MEP has developed promotional videos, infographics and annual discussions called *Chicas STEAM* (MEP, 2023^[78]). In parallel, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Telecommunications (MICITT) launched the *Política Nacional para la igualdad entre mujeres y hombres en la formación, el empleo y el disfrute de los productos de la Ciencia, Tecnología, las Telecomunicaciones y la Innovación 2018-27* (National Policy for equality between women and men in training, employment and enjoyment of the products of Science, Technology, Telecommunications and Innovation 2018-27) with the objective of “promoting equality in the participation of women in training, access to jobs and research opportunities in the different fields of science, technology and innovation” (MICITT, 2017^[79]). As with the MEP’s strategy, there are no evaluations on the progress of the MICITT strategy. In the last year, this ministry has implemented scholarship programmes to enhance access to technical careers in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics by girls with a high school degree (MICITT, 2022^[80]).

Peru provides an interesting example of continued efforts to promote STEM disciplines among girls. Eureka is a long-standing nationwide programme on science and technology that dates to the mid-1980s. It aims at stimulating the curiosity of Peruvian children in primary and secondary education for STEM disciplines. Teachers and students work together to develop a scientific culture using pedagogical approaches adapted to the age of the children. Between 2012 and 2022, the National Council for Science, Technology, and Technological Innovation (CONCYTEC), in partnership with private donors implemented the programme MaCTec Peru (Mini Academy for Sciences & Technology). The programme aimed at reducing the gender gap in STEM fields and targeted young Peruvian girls (between 8 and 11 years old) from urban and rural areas. The main activity of the programme consisted of a workshop that involved established scientists and in which girls from different backgrounds learned, created and experimented. Upon returning home, they shared their experience and applied their learning with their peers and more widely with their communities. MaCTec Peru received UNESCO’s Prize for Girls’ and Women’s Education for its “Mobile MaCTec Bus Labs” project (UNESCO, 2023^[81]). Mentoring and role models have shown to have concrete positive results in stimulating girls’ interest in STEM fields (UNESCO, 2017^[82]).

Similar to the MacTEC initiative, in 2017 the OECD and the Government of Mexico jointly launched the *NinaSTEM Pueden* programme, aimed at stimulating the interest of Mexican girls in STEM subjects through attending educational meetings outside the classroom with women mentors who have excelled in these fields (OECD, 2020^[83]). Another Mexican programme, *Código X*, promotes the inclusion of girls and women in the ICT sector by organizing workshops, conferences and hackathons for girls and young women on digital literacy, robotics, and programming, while showing them the different opportunities they have in technology (OECD, 2018^[84]).

To further strengthen ongoing initiatives, the Government of Costa Rica could expand teacher trainings to tackle gender biases in STEM educations (Corbett and Hill, 2015^[85]; OECD, 2017^[48]). These efforts could include equipping the teachers with appropriate pedagogical tools to help children, and particularly girls overcome the anxiety about mathematics and their lack of confidence in their own science and mathematics abilities. Initiatives such as the one implemented by VHTO – the Dutch National Expert Organization on Girls/Women and Science/Technology – train teachers to help the young generation become aware of their talents and how to use them in STEM professions (VHTO, (Dutch) National Expert Organisation Girls/ Women and Science/Technology, 2014^[86]).

The Alianza STEAM por el talento femenino (STEM Alliance for female talent), created by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training aims to promote STEM occupations for girls and young women. The platform bundles several initiatives across Spain and in its regions that are

implemented through a network of organisations and companies that have joined the Alliance (Gobierno de España, 2024^[87]).

Keeping the momentum for change is essential, given that fighting gender stereotypes through the education system is a long-term process. Given that enhancing gender equality in education requires continuous efforts to improve the effectiveness of policies, monitoring is an important part of the process. As part of a defined long-term strategy, Costa Rica could set out intermediate targets and standards regularly monitored by an independent body in charge of assessing progress and disseminating success stories at school.

Box 2.1. Summary of policy options for reducing barriers to sharing paid and unpaid work equally in Costa Rica

Institutional, legal and cultural constraints lie in the way of reducing the barriers to achieving a more equitable sharing of unpaid work activities in Costa Rica. The OECD suggests to:

Create a more comprehensive care system

- **Sustain the effort to ensure availability and affordability of early childcare.** The 2018-22 strategic plan for expanding the *Red Nacional de Cuido y Desarrollo Infantil* (REDCUDI) identified the main challenges that need to be overcome, including an unequal geographical distribution of care centres, a lack of capacity to reach vulnerable children, and a lack of formal co-ordination and standardisation of services.
- **Professionalise community-based programmes.** Beyond the focus on availability and affordability, it is important to invest in improving the quality of REDCUDI. Service quality can be improved through training programmes in combination with incentives to formalise care workers, especially in community-based programmes. Professionalising care services can strengthen the attractiveness of the sector to qualified men and women, increasing employment opportunities and impact. Continuous and flexible training programmes for childcare workers could particularly suit the workforce needs of rural areas in Costa Rica.
- **Keep the investments in care alternatives for the elderly.** This would require expanding the *Red Progresiva de Cuido Integral para las Personas Adultas Mayores* and the *Sistema Apoyo a los Cuidados y Atención a la Dependencia*, both geographically and across income groups. Easing access to information about locally available services through a community-led website – such as, in the case of La Plata, Argentina, for example – is a first step. Public oversight is a key to ensure the enforcement of care and labour standards. To keep costs in check, the eligibility and benefit criteria can initially be quite restrictive, paying only in cases where the family is not able to finance the care for severely ill or disabled family members.

Expand parental leave in the formal and informal economy

- **Promote joint care responsibilities by facilitating take-up among fathers and shared leave between parents.** Although Costa Rica has introduced a paternity leave of 8 days, the system could be made more flexible by allowing mothers to share their longer maternity leave of 17 weeks with the fathers as a way to encourage joint caring during the first months of life of the child. Additional measures might be needed to incentivise the take-up of leave by fathers, such as reserving a certain share of the total leave for fathers only, which has been introduced in several European countries including Iceland and Sweden.
- **Extend parental protection to informal workers.** The experience of the OECD economies shows that having the government administer maternity benefits financed by public fund makes

it less likely that employers will discriminate against women of childbearing age. In Latin America, Argentina and Ecuador have introduced allowances to support particularly vulnerable women during pregnancy and after childbirth. Building on this, Costa Rica could consider introducing non-contributory benefits targeted to the most vulnerable groups.

Reduce the transmission of gender stereotypes through the education system

- **Mainstream trainings to help teachers becoming more mindful about the importance of gender attitudes and stereotypes at school.** This could require stepping up the implementation of the 2018-30 *Política Nacional para la Igualdad Efectiva entre Mujeres y Hombres* (National Policy for Effective Equality between Women and Men). International experience shows that the efforts to create a culture conducive to gender equality should start from early education and require the pedagogical support of teachers. The Ministry of Public Education (MEP), and its Office for the Promotion of Gender Equality are in charge of incorporating a gender perspective in the Ministry's guidelines, activities, and the whole educational process.
- **Strengthen the engagement of families in the process of creating gender-sensitive education.** Although the schools play a key role in educating future citizens, getting parents on board is essential. In Peru, for example, the Ministry of Education launched a national campaign in 2019 to inform parents about the importance of mainstreaming gender-sensitive practices in education and their interactions with the curriculum. Although there are initiatives in Costa Rica to strengthen families' contributions to the educational processes of children in school, to date they do not include activities to promote gender-sensitive education.
- **Continue the efforts to increase the interest of girls in STEM disciplines while promoting role models.** Several initiatives have been launched over the past years in Costa Rica to strengthen the development of 21st century skills and competencies from a gender perspective, including supporting girls' potential careers in STEM disciplines. However, there are currently no evaluations of the progress achieved by these strategies, whether undertaken by the MEP or the MICITT.

Making women's paid work pay more

Ensuring access to quality education for all

Giving all children and youth access to quality education remains essential to support well-being and to create the conditions for economic independence. Poor children and young people who drop out of the school system prematurely are more likely to find themselves in situations of vulnerability that expose them to risky behaviours and violence. In Costa Rica, women who completed secondary school and those who completed tertiary education were 22% and 44% more likely respectively to be in the labour force than women who did not complete primary school (World Bank, 2018^[88]). Adolescent girls and young women from the poorest households are more likely than girls and young women from wealthier households to become pregnant or give birth before the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2013^[89]).

As discussed in Chapter 1, in Costa Rica educational outcomes are highly heterogeneous. Attendance of primary schools is close to universal (99.1% for 2021), regardless of gender, area of residence (rural or urban) and quintile of income (SEDLAC, 2023^[90]). However, enrolment rates decline if the children live in areas considered "indigenous territory" (90%) and with age especially during adolescence between 12 and 14 years of age (92.1%) and 15 to 16 (87.7%) (Fernández Aráuz, 2018^[91]; MEP, 2021^[92]). Data from the Centro de Estudios Distributivos, Laborales y Sociales (CEDLAC) and the World Bank confirms this trend; enrolment declines in secondary school (93% for men vs. 95% for women), for those in the poorest quintile

(88.9% vs. 99.5% for the richest quintile) and for those living in rural areas (92.8% vs. 94.5% for urban areas) (SEDLAC, 2023^[90]). In the same vein, the average number of years of education vary significantly across socio-economic groups; while an adult aged 25 to 65 years of age from the richest quintile has on average 12.9 years of formal education, an adult of the same age in the poorest quintile has only 6.6 (SEDLAC, 2023^[90]).

Work activities outside school influence educational attainment. In Costa Rica, about 30 369 or 3.1% of children between 5 and 17 years of age work (INEC and MTSS, 2017^[93]). The prevalence of child labour is higher among boys (4.6%) than girls (1.5%) and increases with age, showing a bigger burden among teenagers between 15 and 17 years of age (8.9%), compared to smaller children between 5 and 14 years of age (1.1%). On average, a child that is working spends 20.5 hours a week in this activity. Working hours are higher for boys (0.7 hours more than for girls) and adolescents (9.5 hours more than children between 5 and 14 years of age). The sector with the biggest concentration of child labour is agriculture (33.2%). Child labour affects educational outcomes: the educational lag is higher among working children (64.7% compared to 22.3% among those not working) and school attendance is lower (61.1% among working children compared to 95% among those not working) (INEC and MTSS, 2017^[93]).

Like all countries in the LAC region, Costa Rica has undergone rapid demographic and social changes in the past decades. A testimony of these changes, the adolescent fertility rate has decreased over the last two decades in Costa Rica. However, the number of births per 1 000 women between 15 and 19 years of age remains one of the highest among OECD countries. By 2020, the adolescent fertility rate in Costa Rica equalled 31.8 births per 1 000 women aged 15 to 19, significantly higher than the OECD average of 9.4 (OECD, 2023^[94]). Recent work by Sanhueza et al. (2023^[95]) analyses time trends in adolescent fertility rates, measured as the proportion of women having a first livebirth before 18 years of age. The results show that adolescent childbearing continues to be a major issue in Costa Rica – much alike the LAC region, more generally – even though there has been a decrease in the proportion of adolescents who become mothers.

Teenage pregnancy negatively impacts the educational attainment of adolescent girls. Teenage mothers are less educated than their peers, since adolescence motherhood is associated with a high probability of attending classes irregularly, repeating school grades and leaving formal education prematurely (OECD, 2018^[96]). A study for six countries in Latin America (Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay) concludes that women who became early mothers were 3 times less likely to get a university degree as adults and that on average, early mothers earn 24% less than those who became mothers as adults (UNFPA, 2020^[97]).

As in other LAC countries, teenage pregnancy is also strongly associated with poverty and other socio-economic indicators, such as the lack of educational opportunities and poor labour market outcomes for women. Accordingly, in 2021 Talamanca, the country's poorest region in economic terms, had the highest adolescent birth rate, 52 per 1 000 adolescents, followed by Los Chiles, Dota, Turrialba and Limón with rates between 48 and 45 (UNFPA, 2022^[98]). Adolescent girls from households in the lowest income groups, living in rural areas, and from indigenous and Afro-descendant groups are disproportionately affected by adolescent motherhood. For example, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy is five times higher among indigenous teenagers in Costa Rica than among non-indigenous teens (PAHO, 2023^[99]). In 2017, 61.5% of teenage mothers between 12 and 19 had not finished secondary school and 27.6% had not finished primary school; 62.6% reported as their main activity working at the household and only 34.6% mentioned they were attending school (INAMU, 2019^[100]).

There is evidence suggesting that the higher proportion of adolescent births to poorer mothers might in part be the consequence of relationships with large age differences, which frequently result in adolescents living with their partners, or getting married. In Costa Rica, the age gap between mothers and fathers is much higher for children born from adolescent girls than from women 20 years of age or older (INAMU, 2019^[100]). However, having sexual relations with a minor 12 years of age or younger is illegal and

sentenced by penal law; for girls of 13 and 14 years of age, sexual relations are also illegal if the partner is 5 or more years older (INAMU, 2019_[100]). That such relationships are nevertheless a reality, even if only for a minority of girls, points at the need for a better protection of girls in Costa Rica from sexual exploitation and abuse (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016_[101]). More comprehensive gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health policies as well as sexuality education for adolescents is critical to prevent unwanted teenage pregnancies.

Teenage pregnancies are also associated to relatively high numbers of girls who are subject to child marriage in Costa Rica. In 2023, according to OECD data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), almost 10% of girls aged 15 to 19 years were already married or in a union (compared to 2% of boys), and 17% of girls aged 20 to 24 had been married before the age of 18 (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023_[102]). In comparison, the average in the LAC region is 14% and 23% respectively, 5% and 15% in the OECD, respectively. Adolescent girls who become pregnant may be forced to get married to avoid social stigma, a practice that in turn increases the likelihood of adolescent pregnancies. The consequences of child marriage for the education and labour market prospect of young brides are grave, and likely aggravate the burden of unpaid care and domestic work taken on by girls. In Costa Rica, the dynamic of early marriages for girls persists, even though the legal age of marriage is 18 years of age, without any legal exceptions. This suggests the importance to tackle the strong and persisting influence of social norms and customary behaviour.

Policy insights

Continue the efforts to reward poor families for their engagement in children’s education. The time children spend in school reduces the contribution they can make to the income of the family through domestic labour, care work, or other tasks such as looking after livestock. To do without the labour contribution of children may be especially difficult in poor, rural, agrarian households, where the immediate benefits from schooling may be lower than the benefits from child labour. In certain contexts, the issue is of greater concern for girls than for boys, reflecting the gendered distribution of household chores, marriage customs, and the lack of employment opportunities for girls after schooling. Boys may be responsible for livestock or other farming activities in the family.

In principle, by providing regular transfer benefits to parents of poor background who chose to keep their children at school, conditional cash transfers (CCTs) should lower the opportunity cost. In Costa Rica, the programme *Avancemos* (Let’s move forward) provides conditional benefits to poor households (identified by a proxy means test) with children in school age. Until 2021, the programme targeted households with children in secondary schools only, but in 2022, it absorbed other programmes to incorporate all households with children of school age starting at pre-school (IMAS, 2022_[103]). The amount of the cash transfer increases by level of education: for those in pre-school and primary school the monthly transfer is of 18 000 *colones* (about USD 32); for those in the first three grades of secondary school 30 000 *colones* (USD 53); and for those in the last 3 grades of secondary 40 000 *colones* (USD 71) (IMAS, 2022_[103]; Lentini Gilli, 2022_[104]).

In 2021, an impact evaluation from the *Instituto de Investigacion de Ciencias Economicas* (Economics’ Research Centre) of the University of Costa Rica found that *Avancemos* positively influences school retention and reintegration for individuals in secondary school (Lentini Gilli, 2022_[104]). The evaluation estimated that of every 100 students in secondary school that received the transfer, 16 of them would have dropped out if they had not received this economic benefit. The effects were significantly higher for young men in rural areas. The analysis found no effect of the programme on school retention for students in primary or pre-school, and no additional effect of variations in the benefit amount on school attendance at any level of school. The evaluation provided three main recommendations to boost the impacts of *Avancemos*. First, increase the support to children of secondary school age who are not enrolled in school or at risk of dropping out since the only significant effect was found for school retention at the secondary

school level. Second, since the amount of the transfer does not seem to have a significant effect to promote school attendance, the programme should aim at expanding coverage without necessarily increasing the generosity of the benefit. Third, the evaluation estimated that, without the program, poverty will increase by 4.1% and extreme poverty by 17%. However, to maintain this impact the amounts of the transfers should be evaluated each year to consider increases in the cost of living due to inflation (Lentini Gilli, 2022^[104]).

Communicate the benefits of completing studies. Students from low-income families are often ill-informed about the monetary and social returns of education and the wider range of job opportunities studies can open the door to. Influenced by the perception that education does not affect their future well-being, students may drop out of school prematurely to support the income of their families. In 2018, the Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica created a new unit inside its regular structure – the *Unidad para la Permanencia, Reincorporación y Éxito Educativo* (Unit for Permanence, Reintegration and Educational Success) – with the mandate to co-ordinate efforts to keep children and youth in school (MEP, 2023^[105]). As part of its activities this Unit launched in 2022 the campaign *Más estudiantes en las aulas* (More students in the classrooms) which produced and disseminated through social media videos to motivate students' retention in school (MEP, 2023^[105]).

International experience has proven the potential of communication and awareness raising campaigns, as a rapid and inexpensive way to inform students about the benefits of education. In Peru, the programme *Decidiendo para un futuro mejor* (Deciding for a better future) implemented by an innovation lab inside the Ministry of Education (MineduLAB) consisted of a campaign to transmit information on the monetary and social returns of basic and higher education through videos and infographics sent to educational institutions (MineduLAB, 2018^[106]). The videos showed students reflecting on the importance to study and have goals, based on their personal experience and family environment. They also provided information on funding opportunities to higher education, such as via scholarships and educational credits. The results of a randomised experiment to evaluate the pilot programme show a significant decrease in the number of dropouts (MineduLAB, 2018^[106]). The observed progress of student performances was particularly strong among girls, which reveals that an important achievement of the programme resides in the ability to tackle the gender gap in education.

School mentoring and student counselling are also a key to making girls and young women stay in the education system. The private sector can play a leading role in these initiatives. One example is The Girls' Network (www.thegirlsnetwork.org.uk/), which is a UK national charity aiming to inspire and empower girls aged 14 to 19 from disadvantaged communities by connecting them to a peer mentor, and a network of professional women acting as role models. The initiative involves partnerships with schools and colleges. All mentors are women who have received a yearlong training in mentoring, after having undergone an application process. More than 500 trained mentors give practical advice on how to identify and access opportunities and how to develop the confidence to seize them.

Ensure access to comprehensive sexuality education and information at school and out-of-school.

International guidelines from UNESCO (2018^[107]) and analysis from the OECD (2023^[67]) points to the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. CSE addresses sexual and reproductive health challenges – reproduction, modern contraception, pregnancy, and childbirth, along with sexually transmissible infections (STIs). As far as it uses a human-rights-based approach, CSE involves raising awareness among young people about their own rights and the respect of the rights of others, including the right to safe, responsible, and respectful sexual choices free of coercion and violence. The goal is to equip young people with the tools that they need to achieve healthy lives and relationships. Awareness about the importance of this objective is particularly important, given the growing exposure of young people to scientifically incorrect, conflicting, and confusing information about sexuality and gender. The case of Finland, which represents an advanced model of comprehensive sex education in Europe, points to the effectiveness of the co-operation between school and health authorities on sexuality education for the young as one key strength of the Finnish model (Kontula, 2010^[108]). Peru launched in 2012 the

Multisector Plan for the Prevention of Pregnancy in Adolescents 2013-21. This plan sets out five main objectives: 1. Postpone the start of sexual activity in adolescence; 2. Increase the percentage of adolescents who complete secondary education; 3. Ensure the inclusion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in the National Curricular Framework; 4. Increase the use of modern contraceptive methods among teenagers; and 5. Reduce sexual violence against girls and teenagers (MINSA, 2012^[109]). As part of the implementation of the plan the ministries of Health and Education launched initiatives that include: (i) the creation of adolescent-friendly spaces in primary health centres; (ii) development and dissemination of guidelines and virtual courses for teachers on comprehensive sexual education at all levels of education; and (iii) campaigns to assist girls and teenagers who are victims of violence.

In Costa Rica, several laws and national plans have ratified CSE as a key element of formal education. In 2001 sexual education became mandatory and incorporated as a cross-cutting issue in the education curriculum with approval of the *Políticas de Educación Integral de la Expresión de la Sexualidad Humana* (Comprehensive Education Policies for the Expression of Sexuality) in the *Consejo Superior de Educación* (Superior Council of Education) (Preinfalk Fernández, 2022^[110]). By 2012, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) revised the approach and implemented the *Programa de Educación Sexual y Afectividad Integral* (Program for Comprehensive Sexual and Affective Education, PAYS) switching from a cross-cutting approach to the development of specific courses for students in the third cycle of basic general education (of 14 years of age or older). These courses were opposed by some civil society groups who requested the Supreme Court to declare the PAYS unconstitutional. The court ruled that the courses were optional, parents had the right to oppose when they considered the content was contrary to their religious beliefs or values (Preinfalk Fernández, 2022^[110]).

In 2017, backed by information from surveys showing lack of knowledge of basic sexual education among teenagers and slow progress in the reduction of adolescent pregnancy, the MEP decided to launch a revised PAYS programme for the third cycle of basic general education and students of Diversified Education (additional secondary education for 2 or 3 years that is not considered mandatory but is offered free for those preparing for tertiary education, it typically starts when a student is 16 years of age) (UNESCO, 2022^[111]). Since 2018, the PAYS is implemented as a mandatory course for students in the third cycle of basic general education and as optional for those in Diversified Education in public schools. The programme is not mandatory in private schools (Preinfalk Fernández, 2022^[110]). According to an article from the think tank *Estado de la Nación* (State of the Nation), the implementation of the PAYS since 2012 has contributed to Costa Rica's significant reduction in teen pregnancy in the past decade (Román Vega, 2022^[112]). The article highlights three characteristics of the program. First, it addresses different dimensions of the sexual experience (physical, biological, and affective) with an emphasis on the respect of human dignity. Second, it has opened the opportunity for young people to have a formal and adequate space to discuss these issues, helping them to identify potential sexual abuse or improper sexual intercourse. Finally, the PAYS incorporates a Gender Approach by addressing problems of inequality and power in society.

The above measures are complemented by the *Salud Mesoamerica* Initiative, which brings together participating Latin American Governments, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carlos Slim Foundation, and the Government of Canada with the goal of reducing the number of teen pregnancies in the country (IDB, 2021^[113]). Since 2012, the Government of Costa Rica and *Salud Mesoamerica* partners have focussed their efforts on 11 health areas in the regions of Brunca and Huétar Caribe. By 2018, the initiative had reached 75% of the adolescent population in the regions with the intention being to scale the model up to other parts of the country.

With the average years of education varying significantly across socio-economic groups in Costa Rica, it is essential that CSE programmes reach out-of-school young people and children, who are often most vulnerable to misinformation, coercion, and exploitation. The UNFPA's guideline on out-of-school CSE complements the initially provided guideline of UNESCO by providing evidence and informed insights to address this specific dimension (UNFPA, 2020^[114]). It recommends a more informal and flexible setting

than may be possible in school, involving smaller learning groups, adaptable class times, more varied and creative delivery of the curriculum, and more interaction among learners. One important aspect relates to the question of who should deliver the information. Facilitators can encourage learners to share questions and perspectives that they may be reluctant to voice within a learning environment that they perceive as excessively formalistic. Of essence is ensuring that both girls and boys feel that they can safely and comfortably raise questions, clarify, doubts and address concerns. Trained young individuals who students can identify as peers can help the creation of a supportive information setting.

Provide medical and financial support to vulnerable girls and teenage mothers. Early motherhood is often associated with girls being out of school and having limited access to key resources such as medical, psychological and income for basic needs. The *Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social* (Costa Rican Social Security Administration) provides free medical care to pregnant teenagers or adolescent mothers even if they are not affiliated to the *Caja* (MEP, 2019^[115]). The national *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (Childhood and Adolescent Code) mandates that children and youth up to 24 years of age receive free medical care, regardless of their nationality. Financial support to adolescents' mothers in poverty is also available through IMAS' programme *Avancemos*, which provides a cash transfer conditional to school attendance. Girls are provided free childcare alternatives that allow them spending time at school to acquire competences that they can use in the labour market. International experience shows the importance of this type of interventions. In Uruguay, a specialised programme aims at promoting educational projects for mothers under the age of 23. It provides mothers with financial support for childcare, alongside with social support for training and the acquisition of skills.

Promoting women in non-traditional careers and leadership positions

Only 15.4% of Costa Rican companies have women in senior management positions, compared to 20.8% in the LAC region and 19.6% in middle income countries (UCCAEP and ENRED Panamá, 2019^[116]). According to OECD data (2023^[102]), the share of women among managers stood at 40% in 2023, which is a very high share even in OECD comparison. In the same year, however, the share of firms with women as a top manager was much lower, at 15%. This data suggests the presence of a strong “leaky pipeline” effect, which describes the notion that despite interest and ability to succeed in leadership positions, many women are unable to achieve them. In addition, the share of women in senior management positions seems to decrease with firm size. The share of women on the boards of the largest publicly listed companies in 2020 was 24% (PODER, 2021^[117]), below the OECD average of close to 30% (OECD, 2022^[118]), but higher than the latest estimate for countries in Latin America with available data of 13% (PODER, 2021^[117]),

Several barriers prevent Costa Rican women from attaining leadership positions. As in many other countries, in Latin America and around the world, a key obstacle relates to the influence of gender stereotyping about leadership figures and prejudices that women must overcome to rise in their careers (Nathan Associates, 2016^[119]). Managers are more likely to hire candidates whose characteristics are like theirs but since most hiring managers are men, women applications are less likely to be retained. This discourages women from submitting their candidacy for senior management positions. Moreover, career interruptions due to maternity further reduce opportunities for promotion (PNUD, 2010^[120]). Furthermore, corporate, academic, or political leadership positions require long work hours, a high degree of flexibility and a disposition to travel. These characteristics are difficult to reconcile with the fact that women in Costa Rica already spend significantly more time on family and domestic obligations than men do.

Balancing work and life responsibilities is very difficult for women in scientific academic fields. This means particularly high risks of career slowdowns, if not exits. In Costa Rica, the percentage of women among researchers is 45.2%, which is one of the highest in OECD countries (only surpassed by Latvia with 50%, Lithuania 49.1% and Iceland 46.4%) (OECD, 2023b). Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement, as only 25.9% of women between 25 and 65 years of age have tertiary education (a key prerequisite to

participate and lead research projects) and of them only 1.9% have a degree in natural sciences, mathematics or statistics, among the lowest share in the OECD (OECD, 2023_[121])

Regarding the representation of women in congressional electoral lists, Costa Rica established a statutory share of 50% in 2009 (law 8765). In the 2022 election, the country elected 27 women for congress. This represents the highest historical number of women in congress and is a step closer to parity, as women now represent 47% of the overall number of 57 elected representatives (IDEA, 2023_[122]; OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023_[102]). Costa Rica is thus above the average for women's participation in parliaments globally (27%), in the Americas region (34%) and even in the OECD area (33%) (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023_[102]).

Costa Rica is also showing important progress in the representation of women in the executive branch of the government. The last three administrations had a woman as one of the two vice-presidents and in 2018 and 2022 ministerial cabinet positions were equally split between men and women (CEPAL, 2023_[123]; INAMU, 2019_[100]; Presidencia Costa Rica, 2023_[124]). Worldwide only 22% of cabinet positions are held by women (DANE, 2022_[125]). Representation of women at other levels of the executive branch has shown less progress. By the end of the last administration, for example, the share of women in the presidency of autonomous institutions and among vice-ministers was only 33.3% and 37.1% respectively (INAMU, 2019_[100]). At the local level the situation is less positive, in the 2020 election only 9 of the 81 elected mayors were female (11%) which represents a decrease from the previous election in which women represent 15% of the mayors (INAMU, 2019_[100]). Some of the progress in the political representation of women may be due to 2009 Electoral Act (Law No. 8765), which made it a legal obligation to have gender parity in electoral lists, party membership and party leadership at national and subnational level (Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, 2009_[126]).

Policy insights

Create targets for women's representation in private companies. Companies with above average representation of women on their boards throughout the world tend to be rated higher for corporate social responsibility, financial performance and to have a higher survival rate than those with male-dominated management (World Bank, 2019_[127]). In Costa Rica gender quotas are established for state-owned companies, while figures on women representation in private companies' boards is not regularly produced (OECD, 2021_[128]). International experience provides examples of practices to promote women representation in private companies. Gender quotas or targets have been adopted by more than half of OECD and G20 countries, and evidence indicates that progress has been more rapid in these countries (OECD, 2023_[1]). In Germany, the 2015 Act on equal participation of women and men in executive positions in private and public sectors set a 30% gender diversity quota for supervisory boards and required listed and co-determined companies (where workers can vote for representatives on the board) to establish targets for gender equality at the top two levels of management. Israeli state-owned enterprises have a legal target of appropriate representation for both genders on the board of directors – usually 50% unless there is a sound reason why such representation is not achievable. Until reaching the goal, preference shall be given to directors of the under-represented gender. Enterprises that do not comply can be sanctioned.

Although measures such as binding quotas and voluntary targets can help strengthening the representation of women on the boards of listed companies in the short term, international experience also suggests that other complementary measures are needed to sustain progress overtime. For example, business associations and networks can play a strong role in implementing diversity objectives, using better designed disclosure requirements, fostering transparency and accountability. Cases of success can be disseminated by creating occasions for women who are in leadership positions to disseminate their experience and act as role models (OECD, 2023_[1]; OECD, 2017_[48]). Within the companies, the creation

of mentorships programmes or networking spaces can also help strengthening the interest of women to participate in governance and decision-making bodies.

Promote an academic culture that integrates female faculty members and supports them to excel.

Particularly in the STEM fields, finding qualified candidates for academic positions starts with creating an inclusive learning environment for all students (Nathan Associates, 2016^[119]). To this end, mentoring for junior faculty members and nurturing a culture that promotes work-life balance for all faculty members will help ensuring that women are more satisfied with their careers and can excel. Women who chose to stay in academia are more likely to have opportunities for training and career development, support from co-workers or supervisors, and a balance between work and non-work roles than were women who left the profession (Corbett and Hill, 2015^[85]).

Continue the efforts to strengthen women’s representation in public leadership. Although the quota system in the Costa Rican Congress has provided positive results, more actions remain needed to address women’s persisting under-representation in public leadership, especially at the sub-national level. Changes to the law and policy reform are important to ensure that men and women have equal access to political representation in election practices and public office, in civil service recruitment and promotion, and in human resources management in general within the public sector.

Tackling the mind-sets of incumbent male leaders and managers and changing institutional cultures still embedding gender bias in both public and private sectors is also key (OECD, 2023^[11]). The Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica is currently discussing an important bill that aims to eradicate the factors that discourage women from getting actively involved into politics and still lead many of them to interrupt their participation once involved because they feel threatened. The provisions of the bill include strengthening prevention and the sanction of acts of violence against women in politics.

Implement specific targets, monitoring and evaluation systems. Tracking progress in gender balanced leadership and addressing remaining challenges with tangible reforms might require the support of gender-disaggregated data, in both private and public sectors. Monitoring is important to evaluate whether goals for women’s representation in different professions and at the leadership level are met. A way of measuring these achievements could be by increasing Costa Rican companies’ participation in the *Iniciativa de Paridad de Género* (Gender Parity Initiative, IPG) which has the objective of closing gender gaps in participation, remuneration, and leadership in the Costa Rican labour market (IPG, 2023^[129]). The IPG also co-ordinates with the programme *Sello de Igualdad de Género* (Gender Equality Certification) by the *Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres* (National Women Institute, INAMU) which aims at providing tools to private and public companies to monitor progress toward gender equality. By 2019, the programme certified 3 companies and 136 started using its tools to monitor progress and get the certification (PNUD, 2020^[130]). International experience can be useful to inspire ways to mainstream these efforts. For example, in Australia the Workplace Gender Equality Act requires non-public sector employers with 100 or more employees to disclose their Gender Equality Indicators in annual filings with the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

Supporting women’s entrepreneurship

As discussed in Chapter 1, women in Costa Rica are less likely to be entrepreneurs than men. The gap in the proportion of men and women who are own-account workers approximates 5 percentage points (28.5% vs. 23.6% for men and women, respectively). In addition, the share of those who are employers is about twice as large among men than women (4.1% for men vs. 2.1% for women) (World Bank, 2023^[131]). Such a significant difference is reconcilable with the fact that women’s businesses are more likely to be informal and to take the judicial form of natural persons whose businesses are individually owned, rather than having a corporate structure.

Most women-led businesses take the form of micro or small enterprises. The share of female CEOs declines the bigger the size of the enterprise: 23.3% for micro enterprises (with 1 to 5 employees), 14.9% for small (6 to 30 employees), 13.9% for medium (31 to 100 employees) and 5.9% for big (more than 100 employees) (UCCAEP and ENRED Panamá, 2019^[116]). In addition to the likelihood of operating in the informal sector, these companies tend to be created out of necessity, rather than an innovative entrepreneurial opportunity and the prospect of a regular, possibly growing, income. As a result, many women-led businesses do not develop enough to become an established business that drives further job creation. In Costa Rica, only 1 of 3 micro enterprises survive after 4 years (Presidencia Costa Rica, 2023^[124]) and in general, the survival rate of firms decreases the smaller the size of the company (Jiménez Fontana, 2019^[132]).

Several interdependent forces explain these patterns. As discussed in other parts of this report, women in Costa Rica often do not have the same educational opportunities as men, even if more women have university education than men. Additionally, long hours devoted to care and household chores mean less time for income-generating activities, not to mention for the design and the development of innovative businesses. Furthermore, barriers of access to financial services – such as saving accounts and credit loans – appear often compounded by gender differences in financial literacy. In 2017, 60.9% of women and 75.5% of men in Costa Rica had an account at a financial institution or at a mobile-money-service provider; female access to an account is higher than the regional average for LAC (52%) and lower to the one for upper-middle income countries (69%) (World Bank, 2023^[133]).

Tackling these barriers is a key to ensuring that Costa Rican women can engage in new businesses and subsequently expand their activities. Since the approval of Law 8262 *Fortalecimiento de las Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas* (Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion) in 2002, support was provided by many ministries and public agencies (MEIC, 2020^[134]; Ubieta, 2014^[135]). In 2020, the government launched a comprehensive national policy to co-ordinate these efforts, the *Política Nacional de Empresariedad* (National Policy for Entrepreneurship), led by the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Commerce (MEIC). The goal of this policy is to promote an enabling environment for the success of small and medium firms (MEIC, 2020^[134]). While this policy is not directly targeted to women, as mentioned above, women-led businesses are overrepresented among micro and small firms. The *Política Nacional* is organised in seven main axes (MEIC, 2020^[134]):

- **Strengthening institutional co-ordination for the support of small and medium enterprises.** The objective of this axis is to enhance the role of MEIC as co-ordinator of the policy to support small and medium enterprises. Main activities under this axis include: (i) preparing studies to profile entrepreneurs in the country and the business environment for small and medium firms; (ii) developing a platform that gathers relevant resources and information for entrepreneurs; (iii) maintaining a registry of business incubators and accelerators, as well as of private services targeted to small and medium enterprises; and, (iv) developing territorial strategies that recognise municipalities' efforts to support business success and facilitate knowledge sharing.
- **Improving business' environment.** The goal of this axis is to promote a business environment that facilitates the incubation, start up, and development of business. Main activities under this axis include: (i) simplifying procedures to start a formal business, updates in the regulatory framework to allow this simplification and improvements to the digital platform *Tramites Costa Rica* (Procedures Costa Rica) to guide investors on necessary procedures to start a business; and (ii) developing digital one-stop-shops at the municipality level for business in different sectors.
- **Promoting of an entrepreneurial culture and mindset.** The objective of the axis is to promote attitudes, values, and beliefs to strengthen the capacity of individuals to develop successful business ideas. Main activities under this axis include: (i) strengthening capacities of technical and public schools to support the development of students' skills for entrepreneurship; and (ii) developing and implementing relevant educational courses and programmes for entrepreneurship with the *Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje* (National Institute for Learning, INA).

- **Building capacity for business management.** The goal of this axis is to develop and strengthen entrepreneurial and business capacities through the provision of a comprehensive supply of specialised services. The main expected results of this axis are: (i) opening of business development centres in key regions of the country to provide support, in one place, to small and medium enterprises; and (ii) developing a programme to improve the quality of business incubators.
- **Promoting the development and access to relevant financial products.** The goal of this axis is to promote, in public and private financial institutions, the development of financial products and services adjusted to the needs of small and medium business. Main activities include: (i) developing and strengthening seed funds programmes; (ii) promoting the access of small and medium enterprises to existing financial products and services provided by public and private institutions that adjust to their needs; and (iii) supporting accompaniment processes and financial support to subsistence entrepreneurs, including the *Fondo de Fomento de Actividades productivas y de organización de mujeres* (Fund to Promote women’s productive activities, FOMUJER) which finances women’s ideas to start a business or its early development.
- **Promoting innovation and the reduction of technological gaps.** The goal of this axis is to promote the adoption of new technologies and strengthen innovation’s processes to add value and improve competitiveness of businesses. Main expected results include the strengthening of quality standards in businesses processes and their capacities for innovation.
- **Productive co-ordination and access to markets.** The objective of this axis is to strengthen the productive co-ordination of companies by promoting business networks, clusters, value chains and sectoral strategies and their access to national and international markets. Main activities include promoting of activities for the association of companies and strengthening their capacities to export.

As part of the implementation of the National Policy for Entrepreneurship, the MEIC launched the platform *Nación Emprendedora* (Entrepreneur Nation) that compiles resources for small and medium enterprises including information on different public programmes and private services and on the network of business incubators and accelerators (MEIC, 2023^[136]). Among the programmes listed in the platform, the *Programa Nacional de Mujeres Empresarias, “Mujer & Negocios”* (National Program for Women Entrepreneurs, “Women & Entrepreneurship”) – implemented by INAMU, INA and MEIC – targets women entrepreneurship directly. Its objective is to empower women entrepreneurs and businesswomen through personalised advice and training for market-based ventures or companies that are sustainable and competitive. The programme lasts 7 months and is implemented in hybrid way with in-person classes and virtual sessions. Participants receive 12 weekly hours of specialised training and coaching in different business areas to support their entrepreneurial activity (MEIC, INA and INAMU, 2024^[137]).

The World Bank “doing business” index ranks Costa Rica as an average economy to start a business in the LAC region (World Bank, 2021^[138]). The country’s score for this category is 79.9 compared to 79.6 for the region (the maximum score, representing ideal conditions to start a business is 100). On the positive side, the score shows that Costa Rica has no minimum capital requirements and, lower than the regional average, time and cost required to start a business. Nevertheless, the index shows space for improvement in the number of procedures to legally start and formally operate a company (10 in comparison with an average of 8.1 in LAC and 4.9 in OECD’s high-income countries) (World Bank, 2021^[138]). While common to men and women, the adverse effects of the barrier of complex procedures may be particularly important for women whose time is typically more limited, given existing norms and the dominant division of caring obligations in Costa Rica.

A further pre-requisite to bolster women’s entrepreneurship is the equal treatment of men and women about the rights on the property and the use of land. In Costa Rica, while women have the same legal right as men to own, use and make decisions over their land and nonland assets, irrespective of marital status, fewer and smaller farms are owned by women (World Bank, 2019^[139]). More than half the country’s

farmland is owned by men (50.3%), 45.3% by companies, and only 4.4% by women. International evidence shows that women with secure land and property rights earn 4 times more income and save 35% more than women without access to land and property; their children are 10% less likely to be sick, 33% less likely to be underweight, and twice as likely to complete secondary school (USAID, 2016^[140]).

Policy insights

Strengthen the use of bundled approaches to support women’s entrepreneurship. A growing body of work explores the interplay between finance and women’s entrepreneurship development in contexts of high informality (ILO, 2014^[141]; ILO-WED, 2018^[142]). Measures to strengthen financial literacy and ease the access to formal financial services – e.g. opening a bank account in a women’s names – can reinforce the determination of women to withstand the pressures to share the money with relatives putting the money aside for business uses. More flexible debt repayment conditions – such as a grace period on loans, for example – help women’s business activities and increase the likelihood of their survival.

Another important conclusion is that reaching a strong level of financial inclusion requires more than just the opportunity to open a banking account and to access loans. This reflects the complex nature of the gender financial divide, which involves the coexistence of many layers of structural and individual barriers. For Costa Rica, therefore, it is important to continue fostering programmes that combine access to financial services with other dimensions of entrepreneurship development, such as markets and business training, for example, alongside financial education and the acquisition of digital skills (Alliance for Financial Inclusion, 2021^[143]). The *Programa Nacional de Mujeres Empresarias, “Mujer & Negocios”* (National Program for Women Entrepreneur, “Women & Entrepreneurship”) is a step in the right direction.

A review of existing programmes to support entrepreneurship in low- and middle-income countries confirms that training can play a powerful role in strengthening individuals’ business competences with positive feedback effects on job creation. However, to be successful, training programmes must meet certain requirements, such as targeting early entrepreneurs and being offered in combination with financial support (Grimm and Paffhausen, 2015^[144]). Work by the OECD also shows that the adoption of gender-sensitive approaches in the design of training programmes is key to broadening access, thus expanding the pool of potentially interested women. These approaches should put especial attention to: (i) adapt to women’s schedules and time restrictions for transportation and participation in courses (short courses, online courses, and training videos, could be preferable to long training programmes); (ii) focus on tasks and contents that women perceive as their prerogative. For example, in Peru, a research initiative to improve potato farming showed very limited participation of women (less than 15% of all participants) because potato is perceived as a “male” crop. For sessions on planting, harvesting and evaluating potato clones, however, women’s participation peaked to 60%, because these are tasks traditionally associated to female work (FAO, 2011^[145]); and, (iii) particularly for women in low-income households, trainings should pay attention to certain day-to-day needs, such as women’s care responsibilities of children and elderly during the time spent in training (OECD, 2019^[146]).

Networking and mentoring guidance – via the creation of women’s associations and forums, for example – are also an important catalysts of market information and can greatly facilitate knowledge sharing among peers. Experience from European countries also suggests that mentorship between experienced and new entrepreneurs can enhance business skills if the mentor and mentee match well. Using interviews to figure out which mentor to match to which mentee is hence worthwhile. In addition, business accelerators or incubators can also provide opportunities for further training and networking in combination with business, financial and legal advice (OECD/EU, 2017^[147]). Such accelerators could be run by the public sector itself or operated by the private or non-profit sector, with potential public funding (OECD/EU, 2017^[147]).

Finally, Costa Rica should continue efforts to simplify the administrative procedures to formally register companies. While the number of days to start a business has significantly declined since 2004 (from 90 days in 2004 to 23 in 2020), a reduction on the number of procedures has not shown the same progress

(the reduction is only from 12 in 2004 to 10 in 2020) (World Bank, 2021^[138]; World Bank, 2023^[148]). Administrative simplification efforts should include the creation of online one-stop shops for firm registration. This would also help reducing the dependence on notaries and municipalities in the registration process, which could limit, in turn, the risks of fraudulent and anti-competitive conducts.

Increase the support to female entrepreneurship in rural areas. Initiatives to revamp land-titling programmes play an essential role in supporting the entrepreneurial activities of rural women. At the same time, the conclusions of recent work on the impact of land-titling programmes on farm investment suggest that policy makers should be wary of overemphasising the impact of tenure security on agrarian investment (Navarro-Catañeda et al., 2021^[149]). This is because land titling programmes typically work as a complement – without substituting for – other programmes aimed at fostering women economic empowerment. According to the ILO, such complementary programmes should include technical trainings to improve the economic performance of women businesses (ILO, 2016^[150]), ranging from improving seeds, for example, to the acquisition of managerial and financial skills, alongside other skills related to identifying potential markets. The creation of networks of school ambassadors could help overcoming the lack of role models that women entrepreneurs from rural communities typically suffer. The *Frauen unternehmen* initiative in Germany provides a potentially interesting example of how the programme could be organised. The ambassadors are selected by a jury, which increases legitimacy. However, once chosen the ambassadors are expected to attend a limited number of events with peers so to keep the required commitment relatively light (OECD/EU, 2017^[147]).

Monitor the effects of policies. Systematic review of the wide-ranging effects of entrepreneurship programmes in low- and middle-income countries points to the complexities of evaluating outcomes both in terms of job- and firm-creation (Grimm and Paffhausen, 2015^[144]). This reflects the fact that many conditions must be met before interventions in favour of individual enterprises improve business performance and lead to the decision to create a new business or to hire additional employees. In other words, it likely takes a long chain of intermediate results before policy interventions materialise into a sustainable expansion of employment, which is also linked to improving and increasingly secure working conditions.

It is also important to consider that many of the policy measures implemented do not primarily aim to create employment but rather to improve management practices, to achieve more stable income flows and reduce poverty. For example, the benefits of mentorship and access to role models tend to materialise in changed practices regarding the way existing resources are utilised, without necessarily delivering more jobs (ILO, 2014^[141]). Similarly, the evidence available seems to suggest that although finance and training programmes have positive effects on business outcomes such as improved knowledge and practice, wider effects on labour market activities and practices are generally weaker and sometimes insignificant (Grimm and Paffhausen, 2015^[144]). These findings highlight that it may be more desirable to seize the effects of interventions on sales, revenues and income levels than to quantify employment outcomes, which may depend on other drivers. The availability of disaggregated indicators by gender deserves attention to identify possible unintended inequalities of outcomes (Trivelli Ávila and Caballero Calle, 2018^[151]).

Fighting violence against women

Safety plays a key role in women economic empowerment. In all countries, women are victims/survivors of different forms of gender-based violence (GBV), not only at home – perpetrated by their partners or family members – but also in public spaces, public transport, school, universities and at work. Adding to physical and mental suffering, harassment, sexual or physical abuse and rape undermine educational and economic opportunities of girls and women, ultimately affecting their participation in labour markets (ILO, 2018^[152]). For instance, the victims/survivors of domestic violence are less likely to be economically active, and when active, less likely to be productive, a consequence of physical and mental suffering (ECLAC, 2016^[153]).

To limit the exposure to GBV in public spaces, at school and at work (ECLAC, 2016^[153]), many girls and women restrict their movements, which potentially limits their educational and work opportunities, alongside to enjoy life (OCAC, 2020^[154]). Violence at work may lead to quit a potentially good job opportunity; if the woman chooses to stay, she does so at a cost to her well-being (ILO, 2018^[152]). A high percentage of girls who have experienced a traumatic episode at school have to change school or leave the educational system altogether (OCAC, 2020^[154]).

Costa Rica's rate of intimate partner violence against women is relatively high. Twenty-seven percent of women between 15 and 49 years of age in the country reported experiencing physical violence from an intimate partner at least once in their life, compared to an estimated average of 24% on average in OECD countries. Only in Canada, Türkiye and Colombia rates of intimate partner violence were even higher in 2023 (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023^[102]). In the last 12 months, 6% of women in Costa Rica report intimate partner violence, compared to 5% on average in the OECD but 7% across Latin America and the Caribbean (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023^[102]).

Outside the home, women often experience sexual harassment on the streets, in transport and at the workplace. According to the 2015 *Encuesta Nacional sobre Salud Sexual y Reproductiva* (National Survey of Sexual and Reproductive Health) 3 out of 4 women above the age of 18 have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces in their lifetime. This harassment takes the form of unwanted compliments (73%), comments about their body or way of dressing (56%) and insinuating looks (65%). Another survey from the University of Costa Rica shows that because of this harassment, 25% of women declared to have made changes in their routines, including avoiding going out at night (6.1%), going to "dangerous" places (5.2%), walking by themselves (4.8%) and using public transportation (4.2%) (Universidad de Costa Rica, 2015^[155]). A report of the Ministry of Transport shows that when travelling by transports or getting around on foot, between 70% and 75% of women have suffered at least one type of street sexual harassment (MiTransporte, 2021^[156]). A lack of security also arises from having to walk in poorly maintained and badly lit areas and having to wait for long times at bus stops in isolated locations (Dominguez Gonzalez et al., 2020^[157]). At the workplace women are also more prone to experience sexual harassment. Estimates from the 2015 National Survey of Sexual and Reproductive Health show that 73% of adult women (18 years of age or older) reported to have experienced in the workplace unwanted compliments, 65% suggestive looks, 57% sexist jokes and 57% comments about their body or way of dressing (INAMU, 2019^[100]; Ministerio de Salud and UNFPA, 2016^[158]).

Costa Rica registered 19 cases of feminicides in 2021, which represents a rate of 0.7 per 100 000 women, showing an improvement from 2020 (when the rate was 1.1) but no progress from 2019 (0.7) (CEPAL, 2022^[159]; Poder Judicial, 2023^[160]). The average age of femicide victims was 31 years, 53% of them were mothers, 11% foreigners and about 50% of these deaths were perpetrated by the woman's current or ex intimate partners (CEPAL, 2022^[159]; Poder Judicial, 2023^[160]). In recent years, public mobilisations against feminicides have increased across Latin America and the Caribbean, the region which has the highest rate of feminicides in the world. After the murder of a young Argentine woman, the #Niunamenos collective launched an awareness campaign that resonated throughout the region focusing on violence against women.

Nevertheless, between 2013 and 2017, only 31% of the 121 feminicides registered in the Costa Rican Judiciary data base received a conviction; and in 2017 only 14% of pregnancies among girls below 13 years of age, which constitutes statutory rape by law, were followed by a criminal complaint (INAMU, 2019^[100]). This underreporting of crimes against women could be associated to cultural beliefs about criminal complaints and the law. A 2017 survey shows that while 91% of adults in Costa Rica consider that violence against women is a serious social problem, about 30% believe that most reports of domestic violence are false (33% among men and 26.4% among women) and 68% that women use the law to their advantage and to punish men (71.6% among men and 64.3% among women (INAMU, 2019^[100]). Such mistrust in the accounts of survivors of gender-based violence and widespread beliefs that

victims will abuse legal systems are an important barrier to effective policies against gender-based violence and their deterring function.

Costa Rica has several laws and accompanying measures against different forms of violence towards women. The main country laws on GBV include the 1995 law against sexual harassment in the workplace and school (law 7476), the 1996 law against domestic violence (law 7586), the 2007 law penalizing violence against women and criminalizing femicide (law 8589), the 2020 law against street sexual harassment (law 9877) and the 2022 law for reparations of survivors of femicides (law 22872) (ECLAC, 2023^[161]; Gretzinger, 2022^[162]). The main policy that accompanies these laws is the *Sistema Nacional para la Atención y la Prevención de la Violencia contra las Mujeres y la Violencia Intrafamiliar* (National System for the Care and Prevention of Violence against Women and Intrafamily Violence) which was created in 2008 under the INAMU. The system has two main objectives; the first one is the establishment of national, local, and sectoral public policies to guarantee women's human rights; and the second one is the co-ordination of public and private actors' efforts to provide comprehensive care services to women who are victims/survivors of violence and their families (INAMU, 2019^[100]). In 2017, the system brought forth the *Política nacional para la atención y la prevención de la violencia contra las mujeres de todas las edades 2017-32* (National policy for care and the prevention of violence against women of all ages 2017-32). The aim of the policy is to promote a non-sexist culture, breaking cycles of social and intergenerational transmission of violence against women and strengthening the commitment of the government to due diligence in the response to crimes against women (INAMU, 2017^[163]). The policy structures actions around six axes that focus on the promotion of a non-sexist culture; masculinities for equality and non-violence; the co-ordination of public and private initiatives to reduce the association between poverty and violence against women; an effective protection, due diligence, sanction and non-revictimisation of those experiencing gender-based violence; prevention and comprehensive care for victims/survivors of sexual violence; and the prevention of femicides (INAMU, 2019^[100]).

In response to challenges for disadvantaged women laid bare during the pandemic, community support initiatives were built at the local level focussing on prevention, care and monitoring of GBV. One example is the leading project launched by the *Fundación Centro de Derechos Sociales de la Persona Migrante* (CENDEROS, Centre for Social Rights of Migrants) in the districts of the Upala province aiming to support Nicaraguan refugee women and girls at risk of gender-based violence (UN Women, 2020^[164]).

Costa Rica has also invested in data improvement through the *Sistema Unificado de Medición Estadística de la Violencia de Género* (Unified System to Monitor Gender-based Violence) (World Bank, 2018^[88]). This system was created in 2008 to harmonise the definition of key indicators to monitor violence against women in administrative data. It integrates information from the Judiciary, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Justice and Peace, the Ombudsman's Office, the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, the Emergency System 911 and the INAMU, who co-ordinates it (INAMU, 2023^[165]).

Policy insights

Lower barriers restricting access to the justice system by survivors/victims of violence and harassment. Survivors of violence often hesitate to report the crime for fear of high risks re-victimisation amid lengthy procedural requirements. Key challenges that persist across OECD countries are that not all forms of gender-based violence are recognised and prosecuted, there is often a lack of co-ordination across government agencies and institutions, and effective access to justice for victims/survivors is limited (OECD, 2023^[166]). To tackle violence against women, it is key that barriers of access to the justice system are removed, and that service providers and government authorities take a victim/survivor-centred approach (OECD, 2023^[167]).

In 2019 the Ministry of Public Security published the *Protocolo policial para la atención de casos de violencia intrafamiliar y de pareja* (Police protocol for domestic violence and couple's relationships) to guide police work in the detection of risks in cases of domestic violence (Ministerio de Seguridad Pública, 2019_[168]). As part of the protocols, high-risk cases in which a woman's life is in danger, are referred to the *Comités Locales para la Atención Inmediata y el Seguimiento de casos de alto riesgo por Violencia contra las Mujeres* (Local Committees for Immediate Care and Follow-up of high-risk cases of Violence against Women, CLAIS) which are inter-institutional working groups composed by representatives from the judiciary, police officers and local staff from INAMU (INAMU, 2023_[169]).

International experience shows the critical importance that training of police and justice officers play enforcing the law on gender-based violence. A qualitative study in Ghana and Nigeria concluded that masculinised police occupational culture manifests in the personal, structural, and operational aspects of police intervention in domestic violence cases, impeding the success of these interventions and recommend that police training and curriculum should be revised to include gender sensitivity (Yalley and Olutayo, 2020_[170]). In Argentina, a study on women's police stations (*Comisaría de la Mujer*) conclude that specialised women's police stations increased access to justice, empowered women and prevented gender-based violence (Carrington et al., 2020_[171]). In 2021, Colombia enacted specific legislation on the creation and role of the family commissioners to provide women, adolescents and girls with better access to justice and protection mechanisms in the context of domestic violence (Colombian Ministry of Law and Justice, 2021_[172]).

Encourage and guarantee safe complaint processes for women who experience sexual harassment at the workplace. At workplaces and in schools, women may be reluctant to report harassment or violence, reflecting the fact the perpetrators are often in a superior hierarchical position, such as that of a teacher or a boss (ILO, 2018_[152]). Accordingly, the Costa Rican Government could consider devoting more efforts to implementing safe complaint mechanisms to facilitate the reporting of these situations. International experience suggests that the policy initiatives to encourage companies to adopt complaint mechanisms can rely on different tools, such as collective agreements, Occupational Health and Safety regulations, or employment legislation (Eurofound, 2015_[173]).

In the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, for example, the employers' obligation to set out procedures or measures to tackle violence and harassment in the workplace is part of the approach to safeguard employees' mental and physical health. As such, it pertains to the regulations for improving well-being and health issues at work. Legislation in Belgium and France has introduced a specific duty on the employer to prevent violence and harassment. Ireland advises employers to introduce a code of conduct to signal a commitment to tackling abusive behaviour. It is equally important that the regulatory framework encourages the adoption of preventive practices, by setting out principles and guidelines to enable employers to adopt more proactive initiatives. In compliance with these guidelines, some private employers have workshops and trainings in place to explain the law against sexual abuse at work and to raise awareness about the different manifestations of sexual abuse at work, along with how to report them. The role of social partners can also be important to scale up preventive actions drawing from their expertise, including by helping the design of individual support, such as the presence of confidential counsellors.

Educate young people about different aspects of sexual violence and harassment. INAMU's awareness campaigns to reduce sexual violence do not target teenagers, even though young women are often victims/survivors. To develop these campaigns, the country should build from INAMU's own experience in the campaign to reduce teen pregnancy *¿Es en serio?* (Seriously?) and published guides such as the *Guía Metodológica: Por una adolescencia sin violencia contra las mujeres* (Methodological Guide: For an adolescence without violence against women) (Fundación PANIAMOR, 2016_[174]). Concerning international examples, in 2019 Spain launched the campaign *#MeGustaComoEres* (#IlikeHowYouAre), which aims at preventing gender-based violence among young people through the promotion of respect, acceptance and autonomy. A completely digitally supported campaign, it is

disseminated through social networks. Other campaigns target street sexual harassment. In Argentina, the campaign #Cambiáeltrato, which showed a young man explaining to another that his behaviour with women on the street was not appropriate, went viral.

Improve transport security. The lack of secure transport can lead women to restrict their movements as a way of reducing the exposure to risky behaviours. This response may discourage women from participating in labour markets, with potentially important adverse effects on incomes of households, particularly in remote areas. In Costa Rica, as mentioned above, a 2015 survey showed that 4.2% of women that experienced sexual harassment avoid using public transportation. With this issue in mind, in 2016 INAMU in co-ordination with the Ministry of Transport and the Ombudsman's Office launched the campaign *Actuamos en contra del acoso sexual* (Let's act against sexual harassment) with the goal improving the understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment in public spaces and informing on ways to formalise a complaint (Presidencia de la Republica, 2016_[175]). The campaign was launched on social media and on 450 electronic screens in 200 buses working in the capital, San Jose. Two years after the campaign, an online survey prepared to evaluate progress showed no significant improvements (Cob, 2018_[176]). The study indicated that the main way of transportation for women is buses and that a bigger proportion of them remained concerned about the risk of sexual harassment (54.2% of women vs. 33.3% of men). In addition, not all areas of the country are equipped to implement effective monitoring. Lack of data acts as a barrier to identify hotspots and assess the effectiveness of policies.

Box 2.2. Summary of policy options for making women's paid work pay more in Costa Rica

A range of interdependent policies can reduce the gender gap in labour income, thus leading to strengthen the incentive for women to spend more hours on paid work. The OECD suggests to:

Ensure access to quality education for all

- **Continue the efforts to reward poor families for their engagement in children's education.** An evaluation of *Avancemos* suggests that the programme plays a positive role in supporting school retention for students in secondary school, but not for those in primary or pre-primary schools. To boost *Avancemos*' impact, the evaluation recommends supporting youth that are not enrolled in school or at risk of dropping out, to expand coverage without necessarily increasing the generosity of the benefit, and to re-evaluate the amount of transfers yearly against inflation to maintain impact.
- **Communicate the benefits of completing studies.** Students from low-income families are often ill-informed about the monetary and social returns of education, and are more likely to drop out of school. The 2022 awareness-raising campaign *Más estudiantes en las aulas* (More students in the classrooms) by the Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica disseminated social media messages to motivate students' retention in school, in line with international good practice.
- **Ensure access to comprehensive sexuality education and information in school and out-of-school.** International guidelines from UNESCO point to the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). In Costa Rica, the *Programa de Educación Sexual y Afectividad Integral* (Program for Comprehensive Sexual and Affective Education, PAYS), a mandatory course for third-cycle students, by the complemented by the *Salud Mesoamerica* Initiative, have significantly reduced teen pregnancy over time. These efforts should be further expanded to reach out-of-school young people and children, who are often most vulnerable to misinformation, coercion, and exploitation.

- **Provide medical and financial support to vulnerable girls and teenage mothers.** Early motherhood is often associated with girls being out of school and having limited access to medical and psychological support as well as income for basic needs. In line with international experience, the *Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social* (Costa Rican Social Security Administration), *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (Childhood and Adolescent Code), and the programme *Avancemos* support young people and particularly adolescent mothers with free medical care and financial assistance. In addition, international experience points to the importance of providing free childcare alternatives to these girls so to allow them spending time at school to acquire competences that they can use in the labour market.

Promote women in non-traditional careers and leadership positions

- **Create targets for women’s representation in private companies.** Gender quotas or targets have been adopted by more than half of OECD and G20 countries, and evidence indicates that progress has been more rapid in these countries. However, international experience suggest that although measures such as binding quotas and voluntary targets can help strengthening the representation of women on the boards of listed companies in the short term, other complementary measures are needed to sustain progress overtime. For example, business associations and networks can play a strong role in implementing diversity objectives, using better designed disclosure requirements, fostering transparency and accountability. Cases of success can be disseminated by creating occasions for women who are in leadership positions to disseminate their experience and act as role models. Within the companies, the creation of mentorships programmes or networking spaces can also help strengthening the interest of women to participate in governance and decision-making bodies.
- **Promote an academic culture that integrates female faculty members and supports them to excel.** Particularly in the STEM fields, finding qualified candidates for academic positions starts with creating an inclusive learning environment for all students. To this end, mentoring for junior faculty members and nurturing a culture that promotes work-life balance for all faculty members will help ensuring that women are more satisfied with their careers and have the opportunity to excel.
- **Continue the efforts to strengthen women’s representation in public leadership.** Although the quota system in the Costa Rican Congress has provided positive results, more actions are needed to address women’s persisting under-representation in public leadership, especially at the sub-national level. The Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica is currently discussing an important bill that could help eradicating the factors that discourage women from getting actively involved into politics and still lead many women to interrupt participating once involved because they feel threatened. The provisions of the bill include strengthening prevention and the sanction of acts of violence against women in politics.
- **Implement specific targets to support monitoring and evaluation.** Tracking progress towards gender balanced leadership positions requires the support of measurable targets and the collection of gender-disaggregated data to tack progress. A way of measuring these achievements could be by increasing companies’ participation in the “PAR” Ranking, that aims at measuring gender equality and diversity in private companies, public entities, and SMEs in Latin America.

Support women’s entrepreneurship

- **Promote the use of bundled approaches to strengthen women’s entrepreneurship.** More opportunities of access to formal financial services and more flexible debt repayment conditions could combine with other non-financial measures, such as education and training on markets financial literacy and digital skills. The *Programa Nacional de Mujeres Empresarias*, “*Mujer &*

Negocios” (National Program for Women Entrepreneur, “Women & Entrepreneurship”) constitutes a step in the right direction. At the same time, Costa Rica should continue efforts to simplify the administrative procedures to formally register companies.

- **Increase the support to female entrepreneurship in rural areas.** Initiatives to revamp land-titling programmes play an essential role in supporting the entrepreneurial activities of rural women. These initiatives typically complement other programmes aimed at fostering women economic empowerment such as technical trainings to improve the economic performance of women businesses, including on improving seeds, acquiring managerial skills, or developing business skills.
- **Monitor the effects of policies.** The effect of the policies to support female entrepreneurs on employment is complex to measure and may take long to materialise. As a result, Costa Rica may rather focus on monitoring the impact on sales, revenues, and income levels of entrepreneurship policies. Gender disaggregated indicators are necessary to capture possible unintended inequalities of outcomes that emerge on the way to financial inclusion.

Fight violence against women

- **Lower barriers restricting access to the justice system by survivors/victims of violence and harassment.** Women who experience violence often hesitate to report the crime for fear of high risks re-victimisation amid lengthy procedural requirements. In 2019 the Ministry of Public Security published the *Protocolo policial para la atención de casos de violencia intrafamiliar y relaciones de pareja* (Police protocol for domestic violence and couple’s relationships) to guide police work in the detection of risks in cases of domestic violence (Ministerio de Seguridad Pública, 2019^[168]). International experience shows the critical importance that training of police and justice officers play in enforcement provided that such training and curriculum effectively addresses the impact of a masculinised police occupational culture on the personal and operational aspects of police intervention.
- **Encourage and guarantee safe complaint processes for women who experience sexual harassment at the workplace.** At workplaces and in schools, women may be reluctant to report harassment or violence if the perpetrators are in a superior hierarchical position. The Costa Rican Government could consider devoting more efforts to implementing safe complaint mechanisms to facilitate the reporting of these situations at the workplace. Other countries have relied on collective agreements, Occupational Health and Safety regulations, or employment legislation to encourage companies to adopt complaint mechanisms.
- **Educate young people about different aspects of sexual violence and harassment.** INAMU’s awareness campaigns to reduce sexual violence campaigns do not target teenagers, even though young women are often victims/survivors. Costa Rica could build on INAMU’s experience in the campaign to reduce teen pregnancy and international experiences, to prevent gender violence among young people, that rely on the promotion of mutual respect, acceptance and autonomy.
- **Monitor transport security.** The campaign *Actuamos en contra del acoso sexual* (Let’s act against sexual harassment) aimed to raise awareness about sexual harassment in public spaces, however, there are indications that the issue persists. The lack of data in some areas of the country is a barrier to identify hotspots and assess the effectiveness of policies.

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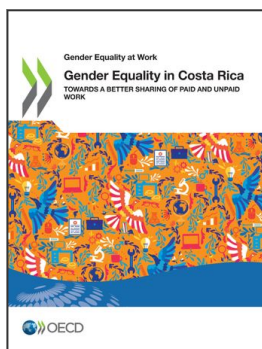
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