

3 **The compounding effects of COVID-19**

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the health social and economic well-being impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile. It finds that COVID-19 and the lockdown have dramatically exacerbated gender inequalities at least temporarily. The chapter starts with a review of labour market developments. The pandemic has exacerbated the main breadwinner role of men. Conversely, Chilean women who stopped working did not search for re-employment because they took on additional caring work. In addition to higher labour market inactivity, the pandemic also led to an exacerbation of stress and mental health problems and an upsurge of episodes of violence against women. The chapter then reviews the early steps that the Chilean Government has taken to mitigate these adverse consequences and advances a set of policy insights for continued government efforts to support women, particularly the most vulnerable.

On 8 March 2020, just before countries throughout the world introduced lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of Chilean women of different ages and backgrounds took part in a Women's Day march that many commentators designated as historical. What made this march unique was a sentiment that Chile was right at a turning point in the fight for gender equality and that the soon to come constitutional referendum would open the way to a brighter future of stronger female representation and equality in law-making (Escobar, 2020^[1]). The referendum's adoption establishing that half of the members of the constitutional convention will be women supported the general confidence in the role that Chilean women can play as actors for change. The approach is indeed unprecedented, making Chile the first country to write its constitution under conditions of gender parity.

However, the labour market and well-being situation of Chilean women has deteriorated dramatically since the onset of the pandemic, leading to the exacerbation of stress and mental health problems and to an upsurge of episodes of violence against women. These sudden developments have brought to light, in an unprecedented way, a number of fundamental pre-existing challenges and that there is still a way to go before the policies to account for gender inequalities in Chile meet women's unique needs, responsibilities and perspectives.

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the health, social and economic well-being impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile. It finds that the COVID-19 and the lockdown have dramatically exacerbated gender inequalities and reviews the early steps that the Chilean Government has taken to mitigate these consequences.

Women and COVID-19 in Chile: Review of impacts and challenges

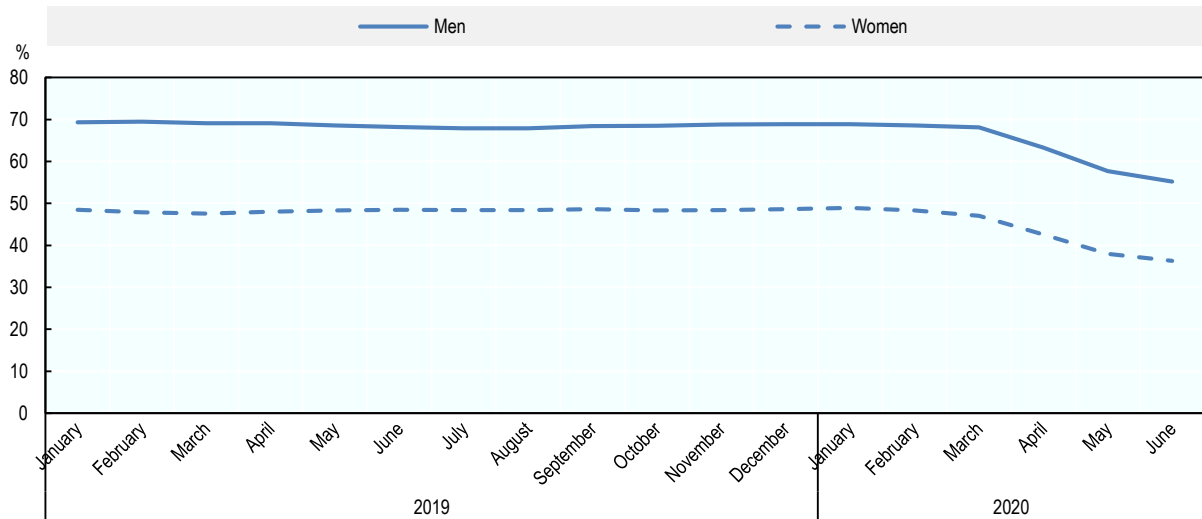
The pandemic hit Chile hard, with the country suffering one of the highest numbers of deaths per million inhabitants (OECD, 2020^[2]). Most cases are concentrated in the Santiago metropolitan area, with scattered outbreaks in other regions of the country. The government responded by applying local quarantine requirements, combined with mobility restrictions and night curfews. By May 2020, the city of Santiago and other large cities were under a strict lockdown, with most containment measures lifted progressively in mid-July, when infections started declining. A state of emergency, declared in March to impose containment measures, lasted until the end of 2020.

Labour market developments

The *status quo ante* in Chile was one whereby only about 50% of women participated in the labour market before the pandemic, compared with 70% of men (Figure 1.6, Chapter 1). Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, Chile recorded a sharp drop in employment rates during the first half of 2020, in excess of 10 percentage points among both men and women. Since the respective rates fell by approximately the same extent, the crisis hit male and female workers to similar degrees (Figure 3.1). One reason for this resemblance is that the most-hit sectors include those in which women are over-represented, such as retail and hotel and food services, as well as those where men are over-represented, such as construction (INE, 2020^[3]).

Figure 3.1. The employment-to-population ratio of Chilean women fell by a quarter between January and June 2020

Employment-to-population ratio of 15-64 year-olds

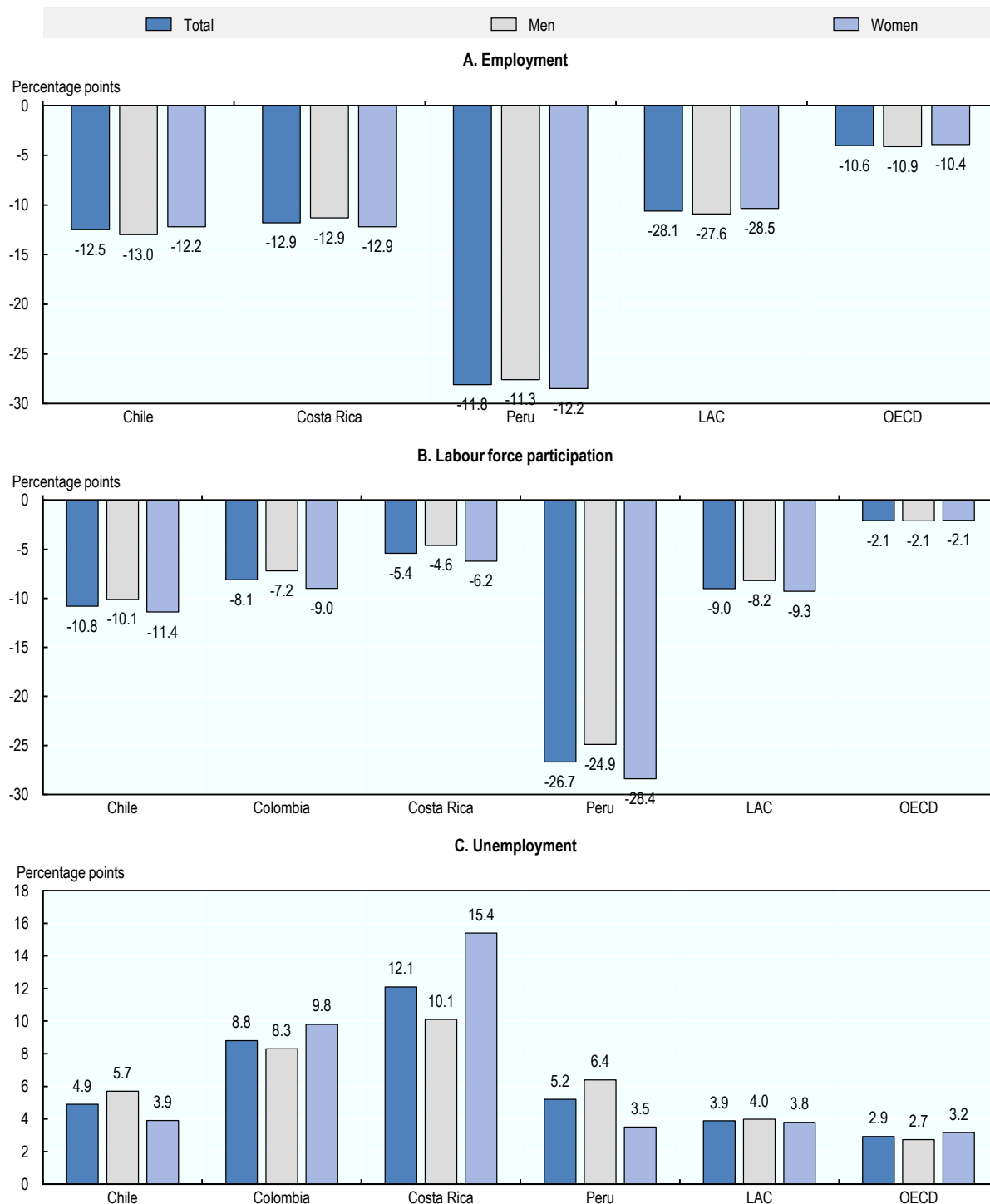


Note: The statistics refer to rolling quarterly figures. For example, the value for June 2020 refers to the average for April to June 2020.
 Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2020^[4]), *Banco de datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Empleo*, <http://bancodatosene.ine.cl/>.

Figure 3.2 compares the fall in employment across 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries with available data. In Chile, the employment rate fell by a larger extent than the regional average (Panel A). Importantly, many employees who lost their job did not search for a new one, either because they believed the probability of finding one was too low given the restrictions imposed on economic activities, or out of caution regarding the risk of infection (ECLAC and ILO, 2020^[5]). For example, many self-employed people decided to wait for better conditions before resuming their activities. As these workers abandoned the labour market, they no longer met the requirements for unemployment classification – i.e. they became inactive – and accordingly, the fall in employment resulted in a sharp contraction of participation rates. The extent of the combined contraction between men and women approximates 10 percentage points in Chile, which compares with 8 percentage points for the average of the regional countries with available data (Figure 3.2, Panel B).

Figure 3.2. Labour market developments in the aftermath of the pandemic

Year-on-year changes using differences between second quarter rates of 2020 and 2019, in percentage points



Note: LAC simple average of 12 countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

Source: OECD: <http://dotstat.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=103557>; LAC: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/International Labour Organization (ILO), "Employment trends in an unprecedented crisis: policy challenges", Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, No. 23 (LC/TS.2020/128), Santiago, 2020.

For the average of the LAC countries listed above, the massive fall of labour market participation rates mitigated, in turn, the impact on the unemployment rate. In Chile, however, the extent of the increase of the unemployment rate amongst men was almost 2 percentage points bigger than observed in the average of the LAC countries (+5.7%, compared to +4.0%; Figure 3.2, Panel C). This contrasts starkly with the increase of the unemployment rate amongst women, which in Chile remained well aligned to the regional average (+3.9%, compared to +3.8%).

Gender differences in unemployment patterns mask important differences in the way Chilean men and women have responded to the pandemic. Particularly, it seems likely that the role that men play as the main breadwinners of the household strengthened even more in the aftermath of the pandemic. Accordingly, the marked increase of the male unemployment rate reflects the fact that they have continued to look for new jobs (ECLAC and ILO, 2020^[5]). Other regional countries have behaved similarly, but the stronger than average increase of the male unemployment rate in Chile suggests that the “men as breadwinner” effect could have been particularly pronounced in the country.

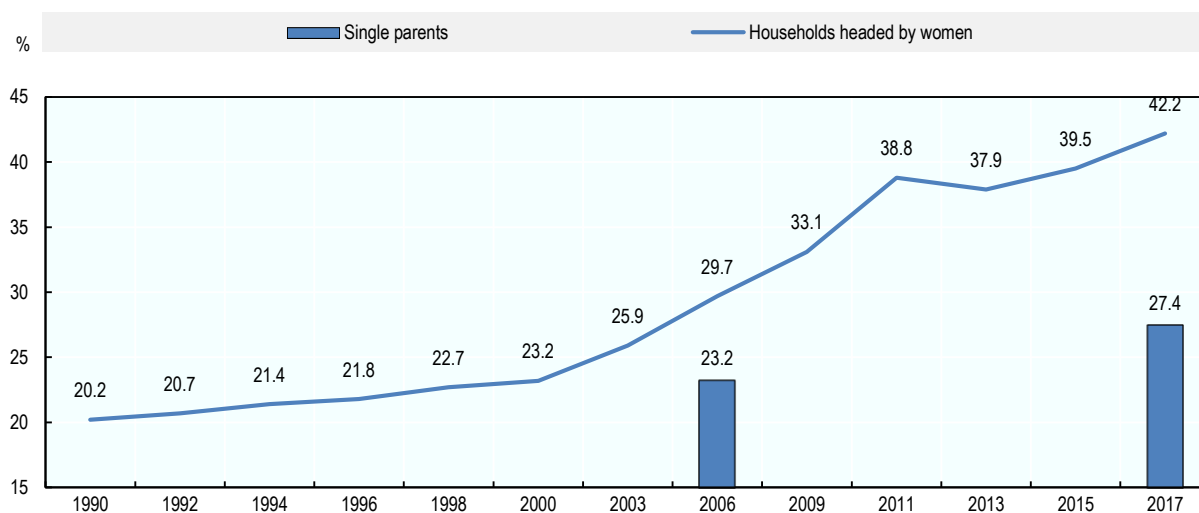
Conversely, as many as 80% of all Chilean women who stopped working during the pandemic did not search for re-employment – with 30% of these women being the head of household in 2020 (Escobar, 2020^[11]). This large withdrawal of women from the labour market is the mirror image of the fact that women assumed additional caring work during the pandemic. If the women’s unemployment rate increased less than that of men, it was because they stopped actively looking for a new job in the paid labour market.

Low-income women

The high inactivity rates experienced by women workers have likely led to substantial losses of households’ incomes. To help to shine a light on this particular issue, Figure 3.3 depicts the evolution of female head of households in Chile, measured as the percentage share of the total number of households over a period of almost three decades. It shows that this share underwent a significant increase during the period, particularly dramatic since the turn of the century, from 23.2% of all country’s households in 2000 to 42.4% in 2017. At the same time, the structure of households also changed significantly in Chile, with single households having almost doubled (from 8.7% of total households in 2006 to 15.4% in 2017). During the same period, two-parent households decreased from 67.6% to 56.6%, while single-parent households increased by 3 percentage points, reaching 27.4%. Recent analysis shows that, during the pandemic, 52% of low-income women in Chile (first income decile) were unable to work reflecting the pandemic, which is 5 percentage points higher than observed for low-income men (Gutierrez, Martin and Nopo, 2020^[6]).

Figure 3.3. Evolution of households headed by women in Chile

Percentage shares of total households



Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, Encuesta Casen 1990-2017.

Table 3.1 illustrates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on specific occupational categories. It highlights that the health crisis hit particularly strongly work categories that are typically characterised by the over-representation of women workers from low-income households. It is revealing, for example, that the number of dependent employed people working in households as care or house workers fell by almost 48% in Chile during the second quarter of 2020. This contraction was significantly stronger than experienced by the average of Latin America countries with available figures (32%).

Another category that deserves mention is own-account work/self-employment. As foreshadowed during the discussion about women's labour market developments in Chile, this is an important source of female work in the country. Employment in this category contracted by close to 35% in Chile, which compares with a regional average of about 21%. Many own-account activities rely on face-to-face contact relations, especially when they occur in the informal sector, and are therefore not adapted to teleworking. This meant that distancing measures resulted in their interruption (ECLAC and ILO, 2020^[5]).

Possibly related to the sharp contraction in own-account work, Chile also underwent a considerable decline in the number of people carrying out unpaid work activities in the context of a family-owned business. As often happens, these are own-account activities, with women the main carriers. Across the Latin American countries unpaid workers constitute the second most affected category by the pandemic – after wage earners working in households – with the related contraction having averaged 24.2%. In Chile, the fall of unpaid workers was significantly stronger than the regional average (42%). One explanation of the more marked contraction of own-account and unpaid workers in Chile than other regional comparators (Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Bolivia, for example), could be that in the latter countries own-account workers continue to account for a significant part of the agricultural sector. These activities are likely to have suffered less the introduction of containment measures (ECLAC and ILO, 2020^[5]).

Table 3.1. Employment patterns by occupational categories in selected Latin American countries

Year-on-year percentage changes of employed persons, second quarter of 2020

	Wage earners in companies and institutions			Wage earners in households	Employers	Own-Account workers	Unpaid workers
	Private	Public	Total				
Argentina	-21.1	+8.9	-15.6	-38.2	-39.5	-28.2	-7.8
Bolivia	...	...	-17.4	-26.6	-39.8	+0.3	-8.0
Brazil	-13.2	+6.0	-9.3	-24.6	-9.5	-10.3	-15.5
Chile	-15.5	-0.6	-12.9	-47.7	-34.6	-34.7	-41.7
Colombia	-24.2	-3.6	-22.6	-44.7	-30.2	-17.9	-29.1
Costa Rica	-17.5	-4.4	-14.8	-44.0	-33.8	-25.1	-27.9
Dominican Republic	-11.2	+3.9	-7.3	-31.1	-9.4	-6.8	-23.2
Ecuador	-19.7	-5.6	-17.5	...	...	-10.2	-31.2
Mexico	-13.6	+4.0	-12.5	...	-17.5	-30.9	-35.7
Paraguay	-11.7	+2.2	-8.7	-15.5	-48.4	+12.7	+5.0
Peru	...	...	-48.3	-68.8	...	-63.4	-69.0
Latin America, weighted average	-14.7	+4.2	-14.2	-32.2	-17.9	-20.5	-24.3
Latin America, Median	-15.5	+2.2	-14.8	-38.2	-33.8	-17.9	-2.0

Source: OECD: <http://dotstat.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=103557>; LAC: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/C/International Labour Organization (ILO), "Employment trends in an unprecedented crisis: policy challenges", Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, No. 23 (LC/TS.2020/128), Santiago, 2020.

Unpaid caring responsibilities

Confinement and social distancing measures have led to an abrupt reduction not only of formal care activities by childcare and education centres, but also informal care arrangements to support families and neighbours (Women, UN; ECLAC, 2020^[7]). In mid-March, the Chilean Government decided to close schools, with the Ministry of Education implementing new measures focussed on virtual-learning, to allow students to continue their school programmes from home. The *Aprendo en Línea* platform gives students and teachers access to a variety of on-line learning materials and pedagogical tools, as part of the prioritised school curriculum adopted in response to the crisis (MINEDUC, 2020^[8]). Moreover, new educational television programmes are now in use to support teachers and parents in the organisation of home-schooling activities.

However, limited access to the internet implies that distance learning is more difficult for many Chilean students, particularly those from low-income households, who are less connected, or whose parents are unable to help them. In Chile, although only 12% of households indicate that they have no access to the internet, the proportion of those who have a stable connection remains small (46%) (Brújula, 2017^[9]). Among children from poor families, the proportion of those who have adequate access to the internet – i.e. enough stable to allow them following school from home – is even smaller (30%) (Escobar, 2020^[11]).

Given that the health system operated at maximum capacity during the pandemic, much of the health care burden shifted to households. This exacerbated the complexity of the organisation of health care and the core role that women played in the care of family members' health even more (ECLAC, 2020^[10]). A recent survey by the Ministry of Social Development shows that in Chile 70% of care-dependent older people receive help from family members to carry out activities of daily living, with women representing 72% of caregivers (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2017^[11]). These activities involve, among other tasks, purchasing medicines, engaging services and providing direct care for sick people. Out of the total number of care-dependent older people who receive assistance from outside the family, only 10% remunerate the

caregiver. In addition, 71% of Chilean men dedicated zero hours to domestic and parental work during the week of realisation of the survey in July 2020 (Escobar, 2020_[11]).

Overall, the combination of temporary closure of care and education centres with the extra pressure on the health systems, significantly added to the time already spent by women on chore activities at home. This led to exacerbate an already unbalanced allocation of paid and unpaid work activities between men and women within the family. According to a recent survey jointly launched in Chile by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality and UN Women to assess the effects of COVID-19, half of women declared that the time doing unpaid care and domestic work increased significantly (MinMujEG, 2021_[12]).

Mental health

Changes in routines, forced isolation and the anxiety of losing income have resulted in stress and fear. A survey by the University of Chile (University of Chile and IMIIMPP, 2020_[13]) argues that living in the pandemic crisis has involved a mix of generational and gender consequences. The proportion of people expressing concern about the economic effects of the crisis is higher among the young generations (in the 15-29 years age bracket) than among older age groups. The perception that well-being and mental health conditions are getting worse is also more widespread among the young. These sentiments appear to be more common among women and manifest in fatigue, feelings of sadness and distress. The findings of the University of Chile corroborate the results of another survey that UNICEF has carried out in nine Latin America and Caribbean countries. According to the latter, 27% of young people aged between 13 and 29 reported a sense of anxiety during the seven days prior to the survey and 15% a feeling of depression (UNICEF, 2020_[14]). One possible explanation of the observed differences between age and gender effects relates to the fact that, for many girls, the halting of classes at schools and universities has meant a rise in the time spent on the care of their siblings.

Domestic violence

Although confinement measures helped to keep people safe from the virus, for women they inadvertently widened the exposure to other risks (OEA, 2020_[15]; PAHO, 2020_[16]; UN WOMEN, 2020_[17]). Adding to the stress induced by a heavier workload at home, one prominent risk stems from the danger of domestic violence (UNDP, 2020_[18]). In Latin America and the Caribbean, where gender-based violence was already widespread prior to the pandemic, this issue is particularly concerning.

While data from sources such as police reports, helplines, health centres, and shelters provide essential insights, they are unlikely to reflect the true situation, since the victims of violence often do not report episodes for reasons relating to shame, stigma, or fear of retaliation. This under-reporting may be even greater during the pandemic, since mobility restrictions and fear of contagion may hinder the capacity to seek help in person. Telephone or internet reporting may also be limited, given that victims have fewer opportunities to reach out secretly when confined at home with their abuser.

These caveats withstanding, the UNDP has collected data on calls to helplines in a selected number of Latin American countries – Argentina (Línea 137 in Buenos Aires and Línea 144), Brazil (Ligue 180), Colombia (Línea 155), Guatemala (Línea 1 572), Mexico (Línea Mujeres in Mexico City), Paraguay (Línea 137), and Peru (Línea 100 and Chat 100). In all these countries, the volume of calls to helplines has increased following the introduction of mobility restrictions. These patterns appear supported by emerging evidence from other regional studies using helpline data for several countries (UNDP, 2020_[18]). Evidence gathered by *Infosegura*, which regularly collects data on citizen security in Central American countries, shows increased levels of gender-based violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica during the first trimester of 2020 (Infoseguras, 2020_[19]).

In Chile, calls made to “1455”, the hotline of the National Service of Women and Gender Equality, have increased by 229% between March and June (Fernandez and Lopez, 2020_[20]). Data from the National

Service of Women and Gender Equality (SernamEG) for the period January to May shows a similarly sharp increase (Gandara, 2020^[21]). The police reported an increase of 119% in calls regarding physical intra-family violence against women during the four weeks that followed the introduction of mobility restrictions (149 assistance number) (MINMUJERYEG, 2020^[22]). However, the formal filing of legal denunciations has decreased (CEAD, 2020^[23]). Since the restrictions have made the police stations less accessible to victims than help centres, this evidence may only be indicative of reduced reporting through the legal channel, rather than pointing to a reduction in violence.

Gender sensitive policy responses to support economic security

Measures to support SMEs and employment

The Chilean Government has introduced numerous gender sensitive policy responses to counter the economics and social effects of the pandemic (OECD, 2020^[21]). The measures most likely to have supported women's economic security included a focus on entrepreneurship and loan subsidies. One key initiative consisted of the launch of a USD 5.5 billion emergency package to save jobs and help small businesses. As a complement to this, the government also decided to defer various taxes on SMEs and to accelerate the income tax refund for SMEs (to April 2020 instead of May, which is set to benefit 500.000 small companies). In addition, the capital of the guarantee fund for SMEs (Fogape) was increased by USD 3 000 million, with 150 000 loans granted by the beginning of July. In parallel, the increased capitalisation of *Banco Estado* (by USD 500 million, leading the Banco's credit capacity to increase by USD 4.4 billion) should result in more financing opportunities to individuals and SMEs.

One key measure to tackle the large increase of labour market inactivity has been the concession of a temporary hiring subsidy to companies, which applies to all new employees and primarily the expansion of women employment. The subsidy extends over a period of six months, covering 60% and 50% of the gross salary for each women hire and men hire, respectively. In order for the hiring subsidy to trigger more job searches by women, it needs the support of certain complementary measures, such as those aimed at securing the safe return of children to educational establishments. It also needs the support of measures to extend access to digital services, from virtual trainings and financial education, to home delivery and marketing platforms.

Facilitating more flexible work hours and arrangements is another policy option. The COVID-19 has played a role in accelerating the adoption of the Act on Distance Work and Teleworking to broaden the use of teleworking. In addition, the Act for the Protection of Work aims at protecting labour incomes and reducing working hours, or allowing for the temporary suspension of the contractual relationship when teleworking is not possible. In the latter cases, the unemployment insurance intervenes to protect the salaries of concerned workers, while also ensuring the continuation of social security and health contributions.

Protecting incomes

A range of measures falls into the social protection category. A special subsidy (COVID bonus) targets 1.5 million vulnerable households, most of them without formal income. The programme *Alimentos para Chile* (Food for Chile) provides food baskets and hygiene products to vulnerable and middle-class families across Chilean regions. A new fund to protect the income of the 80% most vulnerable households aims to provide cash transfers to vulnerable households (Emergency Family Income). It should reach out to 4.9 million beneficiaries, depending on personal circumstances, including by providing support to independent workers.

In July 2020 and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chile enacted measures for parents on parental leave and for parents and caregivers of children born in or after 2013 (i.e. seven years of age or younger). The law provides parents with an extension of up to 90 days of additional parental leave benefits and

allows eligible parents and caregivers to suspend their employment contract with employers in order to provide childcare and receive unemployment benefits. Furthermore, 240 000 primary and lower secondary students in isolated areas received learning materials, and students who would normally qualify for free breakfast and lunch at school are entitled to receive food packages (MINEDUC, 2020^[8]).

The fight against gender-based violence

A number of measures focus on preventing and/or responding to violence against women and girls, with the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality playing a leading role in efforts to strengthen the digital networks available to the victims of domestic violence (OECD, 2020^[24]). April 2020 saw the launch of two platforms aimed at providing help to women who are victims and survivors of violence, “Chat 1455” and “WhatsApp Mujer” (WhatsApp for Women), the latter provided by the National Service for Women and Gender Equity (SernamEG). Both platforms are available 24/7 and are confidential, with the objective of providing information, guidance, and emotional support to victims of violence. In May, the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality announced a third initiative, *Mascarilla 19* (Facemask 19), which is a code word that women can use in pharmacies to report a dangerous home situation without having to call the police, which could risk alerting the abuser. If a woman asks for a *Mascarilla 19*, the pharmacy staff know it is a case of violence and will proceed to write down the victim’s details and pass the information on to Chat 1455, or the police.

Supportive dissemination campaigns ensure that people are aware of the existence of the services so that women in need feel encouraged to call for guidance. These campaigns rely on television broadcasts but also, and predominantly, on social networks, which significantly limits the capacity to reach out to the areas least equipped with fixed internet connection. Coincidentally, these are also the places known for having the highest rates of domestic violence within the Santiago Metropolitan area – La Pintana, Cerro Navia, Lo Prado, La Granja, Renca and San Ramón.

In addition to orientation services, SernamEG’s protection programmes for victims of domestic violence encompass 111 nationwide Women’s Centres, which provide legal advice and psychological support to women in situations of violence. They also include 44 Shelters in the country, which receive women in situations of risk and extreme violence. Although the approved and budgeted construction of four additional shelters dates to prior to the onset of the pandemic, the actual construction remains pending.

Policy insights

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the extent of existing labour market and well-being challenges facing Chilean women. The outbreak of the pandemic has led to higher labour market inactivity, associated with an exacerbation of stress and mental health problems and an upsurge of episodes of violence against women.

The significant increase in labour market inactivity heightens the importance of continued government efforts to support the most vulnerable women. Even before the pandemic, only about 50% of women participated in the Chilean labour market, compared with 70% of men. Compounding this situation, the closure of early childcare institutions and schools, in combination with the increased vulnerability of the elderly, led to a surge in the demand for care within the households, at a point in time when the health system was operating at maximum capacity. The evidence of large increases in inactivity underscores the importance to facilitate access to benefits targeted at low-income families – in particular single parents, who are predominantly female – and targeted programmes to support women’s return to employment.

Provide support to gender-sensitive measures that can help prevent inactivity from increasing further. This includes actively informing firms about how to reduce working hours, provide relief for

workers, and manage redundancy payments related to temporary lay-offs and sick leave. Importantly, it also includes ensuring that the self-employed can access emergency measures, especially those who do not qualify for employment insurance. The effects of more forward looking support measures with a potential to strengthen the resilience of women's employment and support gender equality in the future, deserve close assessment. This includes by monitoring the outcomes of the adoption of the Act on Distant Work and Teleworking and of the new measures for employees on parental leave.

Consider authorising local re-openings of education institutions, based on the assessment of area-specific infection conditions. By allowing families in the least affected areas to put their children back into in-person education, targeted openings would encourage more women to actively search for a job, thus countering the rise of labour market inactivity, which is a first priority. In addition, targeted openings could help to alleviate the financial grief suffered by many education establishments during the school closures.¹

Continue efforts to push back on social acceptance of domestic violence by drawing attention to how the issue affects women in confinement. The important actions to foster the introduction of more electronically-based modes of communication should be complemented by measures to ensure that service delivery for victims is integrated across relevant spheres so that all public agencies engaged in this issue work in a closely co-ordinated manner and ensure that timely access to justice is strengthened during the crisis. These include the spheres of health, social services, education, employment and justice.

More fundamentally, all of the above economic and social policy measures must be embedded in broader efforts to mainstream gender in governments' responses to the crisis. In the short term, it means, wherever possible, applying a gender lens to emergency policy measures. In the longer term, it means that the government implements a well-functioning system of gender mainstreaming, relying on ready access to gender-disaggregated evidence in all sectors so that differential effects on women and men can be readily assessed.

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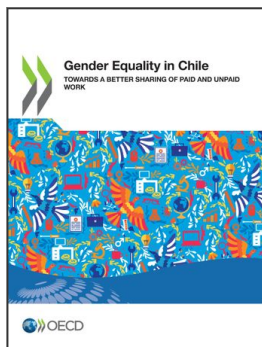
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