



International trade as an opportunity to promote women's economic autonomy

Contributions for reflection in Latin America and the Caribbean

Contents

Introduction	Page 1
I. Questions and dimensions for analysing the impacts of international trade from a gender perspective	Page 3
II. Characteristics of women's participation in export-related employment in Latin American and Caribbean countries	Page 9
III. The role of international trade in fostering sustainable development with equality	Page 20
Bibliography	Page 23
Annex A1	Page 27

Introduction

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean face structural challenges related to the region's pattern of productive and trade specialization; and these are compounded by persistent gender inequalities, both in labour markets and in the social organization of care. Poorly diversified production and vulnerability to external shocks make it more difficult to achieve gender equality. These factors detract from labour market dynamism, restrict the exploitation of capacities and lead to an unequal distribution of the benefits of growth and the costs of economic adjustments. Moreover, violence against women, the excessive burden of unpaid work and the gender wage gap are barriers to women's full participation in economies. These factors serve to perpetuate structural gaps; and they inhibit innovation, the creation of more diverse work environments and more complex and equal production structures (ECLAC, 2019).

The social impacts of the pandemic differed from those of previous crises, since in this case there were widespread job losses, especially among women. These stemmed from mobility restrictions, the contraction of sectors that employ large numbers of women, and the closure of schools and care centres. All of this contributed to an increase in the burden of unpaid care and domestic work, especially for women (ECLAC, 2021b and 2022b; Bidegain, Scuro and Vaca-Trigo, 2020).

The region's economic structure has been weakened, particularly in terms of investment and the development of human and technological capacities. Projections by ECLAC envisage gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 1.7% regionwide in 2023. Nonetheless, all of the subregions are expected to grow more slowly than in the previous year: South America is set to expand by 1.2%, down from 3.7% in 2022, Central America and Mexico by 3%, following growth of 3.4%, and the Caribbean (excluding Guyana) by 4.2%, compared the year-earlier 6.3% (ECLAC, 2023a).



Between 2020 and 2022, the impacts on the region's international trade have been relatively negative, especially for the Caribbean economies. The initial quarters of 2022 saw an intensification of trends that had been visible since 2021: higher commodity prices, rising transport costs and disruptions to international supply chains (ECLAC, 2022a and 2022c). Paid female workers and women entrepreneurs involved in export activities have been particularly affected, owing to their concentration in areas that were initially hard hit by the crisis, such as tourism and the textiles and apparel sector (ECLAC, 2021d).

Trade volumes in Latin America and the Caribbean are expected to shrink in 2023, and the average terms of trade are set to decline. The contraction of global trade has been attributed to several factors, such as rising trade and technology frictions between the United States and China, geopolitical tensions, increased application of trade restrictions, and policies adopted by some large economies aimed at protecting domestic production of key supplies, to the detriment of production through global value chains (ECLAC, 2023a).

Goods exports are expected to decline by 1% in value terms in 2023, owing mainly to falling prices, while volumes should continue to grow, albeit more slowly than in 2022. Meanwhile, the value of imports is expected to retreat by 2% following two years of growth, reflecting slacker economic activity in the region (ECLAC, 2023a).

On average, the region's terms of trade are expected to deteriorate by 2% in 2023, albeit with variations across the different subregions. Hydrocarbon exporting countries are facing a 14% drop in their terms of trade owing to lower energy product prices. For countries that export agro-industrial products, the terms of trade are projected to fall by 3%, also mainly because of lower prices among some of the products in question. In contrast, fuel importers, such as several Caribbean and Central American countries, will benefit from the lower energy prices, which will boost their terms of trade (ECLAC, 2023a).

In macroeconomic and trade terms, among other aspects, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic caused ruptures in various manufacturing production chains;¹ and this called into question the globalization model based on production chains that operate with just-in-time production and delivery methods and low inventory levels. Globalization has faced difficulties in boosting economic growth. With the war in Ukraine, disruptions spread to the commodity-producing sectors (oil, gas, aluminium and cereals) and to industries that produce agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers. Disruptions in the maritime transport system (port saturation, long vessel waiting times and rising freight charges) had major effects on the logistics of global and regional value chains and their operating costs. These factors strengthened trends towards regionalization, involving strategies of reshoring, nearshoring, and multi-shoring, as well as relocation to countries that are considered friendly (friend-shoring) (ECLAC, 2022a).

In addition, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have hastened the reconfiguration of global value chains. Current national and regional policies aim to make value chains shorter, more robust and resilient, prioritizing the location of investments in geographically less distant economies (ECLAC, 2023c).

Although the various cascading crises of recent years and emerging geopolitical tensions have weighed on the dynamics of international trade, they can also create new opportunities. Accordingly, there is an urgent need to look anew at international trade that fosters opportunities for productive diversification and for women's economic autonomy. To this end, it is crucial to promote policy options that contribute to unravelling the structural challenges of unequal power relations between women and men, as outlined in the Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030 (ECLAC, 2017).

¹ For example, the development of the microprocessor industry affected numerous activities, ranging from the production of computing hardware to manufacturing of automobiles and industrial machinery (ECLAC, 2022a).

The labour market impacts of international trade policies and trends need to be analysed from a gender perspective. This entails exploring whether the trade specialization of countries in the region contributes to the creation of economic opportunities and quality employment for women; and the conditions under which the expansion of the current trade pattern can drive progress towards substantive equality and the promotion of women's economic autonomy.

With these objectives in mind, the following section presents a number of dimensions and questions for analysing the labour market impacts of international trade from a gender perspective. This is followed by a description of the characteristics of women's participation in export-related employment in the countries of the region; and, lastly, thoughts are shared on the role of international trade in advancing towards sustainable development with equality.

I. Questions and dimensions for analysing the impacts of international trade from a gender perspective

A. Gender inequalities and international trade

International trade is not neutral with respect to gender inequalities; in fact there is a two-way relationship between them (van Staveren and others, 2007; Fontana 2016). While gender inequalities can influence a country's trade performance, changes in trade specialization, whether in the profile or the volume of exports and imports, can accentuate or diminish the gender inequalities prevailing in the labour market in terms of access to markets by women entrepreneurs and producers.

In the first case, women can be viewed as a "source of competitive advantage" if their participation in international trade is concentrated in more precarious jobs, associated with lower pay and low levels of social security (Elson, Grown and Çağatay, 2007). Moreover, the persistence of gender wage gaps in an economy can be interpreted as a strategy to increase spurious competitiveness;² in other words, instead of exporting firms becoming more competitive through factors such as innovation and dissemination of technology (authentic competitiveness), they do so by cutting labour costs (Seguino, 2000; Standing, 1989 and 1999; Fontana, 2016; Tejani and Milberg, 2016). Moreover, women's unequal access to productive resources, and to financing and information networks and markets, prevent them from taking advantage of the potential opportunities provided by international trade.

In the second case, women and men can also be impacted positively or negatively by changes in the dynamics of international trade, including variations in the prices and volume of traded goods and services. In the case of paid workers, for example, an increase (decrease) in exports may increase (decrease) employment opportunities in a given sector. Equally, an increase (decrease) in imports may increase (decrease) the amount of employment that is threatened by international trade (ECLAC, 2019a, 2021d; Fontana, 2009; UNCTAD, 2023).³

² Fajnzylber (1983) associates spurious competitiveness with the maintenance of low wages, subsidies and a devalued exchange rate, whereas authentic competitiveness is gained through increased productivity and the incorporation of technical progress.

³ Following trade liberalization, countries start to specialize in sectors that have (Ricardian) comparative advantages. This culminates in an expansion of export-oriented sectors that can create additional jobs, and a shrinking of sectors that are more sensitive to competition from imports, which can put the associated jobs at risk (Fontana, 2020; ECLAC, 2021d).

Other differentiated impacts between men and women can be distinguished by analysing the unequal positions they occupy as workers, consumers⁴ and entrepreneurs, and also as persons responsible (or not) for unpaid domestic and care work. In short, the significance and intensity of these impacts will depend on the role that individuals play in the economy and how these intersect with other factors such as age, ethnic-racial status, socioeconomic level, the presence of children or dependent persons in the household, among others (ECLAC, 2019a, 2021d; Fontana, 2009; UNCTAD, 2023).

B. Questions and dimensions for analysing the impacts of international trade on gender relations

The multiple channels of interaction that exist between gender inequalities, international trade, the heterogeneity of countries and their production structures, mean that empirical studies are needed to analyse the different contexts.

The production of gender-specific statistics and the gender analysis of data from official sources are crucial for answering the questions that arise on the gender impacts of international trade and the corresponding policies. The information in question affords insight into the situation of women, their participation and leadership in trade, gender relations, and their evolution with respect to international trade, financing, business dynamics, employment, access to resources and the use of time. In particular, this type of information and analysis are necessary conditions for ex ante and ex post evaluation of trade policies and the corresponding gender impacts.

In addition to breaking down the data, gender analysis needs an intersectional approach. This requires information disaggregated by age, ethnic-racial status, educational level, labour income and total household income, and territorial characteristics, for example.

Table 1 contains questions to characterize the situation of women in international trade and gender relations, focusing on three areas: (a) paid work, (b) women's participation in enterprises, and (c) unpaid care and domestic work.

Considering these questions, gender issues can be analysed in a variety of dimensions (see diagram 1).

In the case of paid female workers, it is possible to analyse their participation in export-related sectors. In doing so, it is crucial not only to consider the quantity of employment but also the quality of the jobs in question. Accordingly, indicators that measure income level, education, work experience, formality and working hours are relevant when studying the type of labour market participation.

In the case of women entrepreneurs, it is possible to identify the specific obstacles and barriers they face in export-oriented activities. Indicators associated with access to financing, productive resources, training, technology, information networks and business fairs are key in this regard. It is also necessary to analyse women's participation in leadership and senior positions within firms, and by firm size; and to compare the situation between firms that participate in international trade and those that target the domestic market.

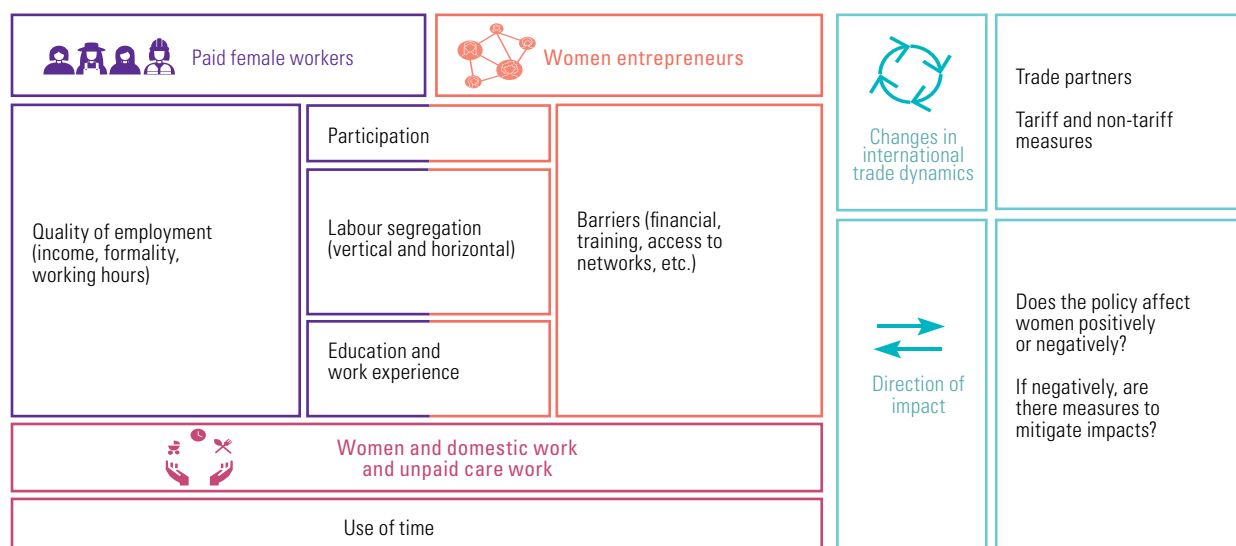
⁴ An example of how this category, which is largely unexamined in this bulletin, can be affected is evidenced by the inflationary pressures on food and energy products caused by the supply shocks resulting from the war in Ukraine and other factors. Women in households headed by single mothers have been particularly affected by this phenomenon, since they spend much of their income on daily family consumption (ECLAC, 2022a).

Table 1
Women's economic autonomy and international trade: questions for analysis

Paid work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does trade specialization lead to improvement or deterioration in women's labour participation, job quality and labour income? Does it reproduce or diminish gender segregation in the labour market? • In which sectors and links of global and regional value chains are women the most active in Latin American and Caribbean countries? Which sectors and value chains offer the best conditions in terms of employment, pay and access to senior positions? • Does trade openness exacerbate, reproduce or diminish gender gaps in terms of labour participation, pay and job quality? • How do gender inequalities in paid work in exporting sectors intersect with other factors such as age, ethnic-racial status, sexual orientation and gender identity, socioeconomic and income status, or the excessive care burden?
Firms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the specific barriers that prevent women entrepreneurs from participating fully in international trade? • Do women entrepreneurs have access to technological assistance and training in export-oriented activities? • How are the opportunities and risks of international trade distributed between men and women in firms? • Do women entrepreneurs have equal access to financing and credit for their export ventures? • Are gender gaps in terms of training, information networks and access to markets widening or narrowing? • Do firms involved in international trade have a greater or better presence of women in management and leadership positions than firms that target the domestic market?
Unpaid domestic and care work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there sufficient information on the link between paid work in the export sector and the time spent on unpaid work? • Do women who are economically engaged in exporting sectors have a heavier or lighter total workload than those who are employed in non-tradable sectors? • How does the tension between paid and unpaid work unfold among women involved in international trade activities? • What are the key measures adopted by countries, in Latin America and the Caribbean and elsewhere, to close gender gaps and reduce the barriers that unpaid work imposes on women's participation in exporting sectors?

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Diagram 1
Women's economic autonomy and international trade: selected dimensions for analysis



Source: Prepared by the authors.

For both paid female workers and women entrepreneurs, it is possible to analyse the dimensions of economic participation in sectors related to international trade; and to identify whether international trade opportunities demand participation by women with a higher level of education and work experience than those who participate in non-tradable sectors. It is also possible to analyse indicators on gender-based labour market segregation (both vertical and horizontal). Does international trade contribute to overcoming the labour segregation present in the region's labour markets or tend to reproduce it?

The time distribution of unpaid domestic and care work among men and women participating in international trade can be analysed using time-use indicators. The type of economic participation by women, taking account of the presence (or absence) of persons who require care in the home (children, older persons, persons with disabilities, among others) is another key dimension.

Although gender inequalities are a structural feature of labour markets in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are differences between countries and subregions –for example when analysing vertical and horizontal gender-based labour segregation and access to resources and power. In addition, patterns of productive and trade specialization, socioeconomic and political contexts, and the policies that are adopted, or not, to address gender inequalities, or whether they have industrial policies, also vary between countries.

There are also differences in how the countries of the region participate in global and regional value chains, in their links with different trading partners and in the trade agreements to which they subscribe. Changes in these elements, such as the existence of new trading partners, or variations in the volume and prices of exported and imported goods and services, can affect women and men in different ways.⁵ Moreover, government actions and initiatives can influence the final direction of the gender impacts, since it is possible to promote policies that mitigate the negative impacts of a change in the trade pattern and maximize the potential positive impacts. These can be either positive or negative, long-lasting or short-lived; and they can materialize in the short, medium or long terms (see diagram 1).

In the case of paid female workers, an expansion or contraction in international trade flows, or changes in trade partners and in tariff and non-tariff measures, can affect the quantity and quality of employment available to them. In the case of women entrepreneurs, these factors can affect their business performance directly and generate greater obstacles than those faced by men, owing to the additional barriers that stand in their way. These include greater difficulties in accessing sources of financing and information networks on export opportunities. Changes in the dynamics of international trade may also affect the tensions between time dedicated to paid employment and time spent on unpaid work.

⁵ A study on the impacts on paid employment in Brazil of the Mercosur–European Union Agreement, for example, finds that, in bilateral trade between Brazil and the European Union, the job content of Brazilian exports is less than that threatened by imports. Moreover, the jobs that are threatened by imports are of better quality than those associated with exports. It is also expected that, with tariff liberalization and the other disciplines proposed in the Agreement, European exports to Brazil will grow by more than Brazilian exports to the European Union. The Agreement is also likely to reinforce Brazilian trade specialization vis-à-vis this trading partner and to intensify the characteristics of female employment associated with its trade flows. (Castilho and Ferreira, 2022). In addition, Castilho, (2010) reports that the female employment content of exports can vary, depending on the trading partner included in the analysis. In Brazil, female employment was greater in intraregional exports with its South American neighbors. Similarly, given the country's specialization pattern vis-à-vis China and the European Union, based on agricultural and mining products, more than 65% of female employment associated with exports to them was in low-skilled jobs, whereas in bilateral trade with South America and Mexico the proportion of women in low-skilled positions was 50%.

▪ Box 1

Reflections on the tensions that exist between unpaid domestic and care work and international trade

The interdependence between paid and unpaid work and changes in the use of time between men and women related to the dynamics of international trade is a dimension to be explored from a gender perspective.

The excessive burden of unpaid work constitutes an obstacle to women's economic participation, including in occupations related to international trade (ECLAC, 2022b). The time constraints faced by women may reduce their opportunities in jobs that are more time-consuming. This hinders and restricts their participation in certain export industries (Coche, Kotschwar and Salazar-Xirinachs, 2006).

The same phenomenon has been detected in the case of female workers in seasonal agro-export activities in Chile. As the harvesting and packing season coincides with school vacation months, women face a dilemma: supplying labour for these tasks means reducing child-care time. As women are the primary care-givers, they have to rely on kinship, neighbourhood or informal paid care networks to deal with the tension between paid and unpaid and care work (Willson and Caro, 2010).

In the case of Uruguay, Azar, Espino and Salvador (2008) argue that, although the expansion of trade following trade liberalization between 2003 and 2005 boosted job creation for women and men in the dairy sector, this process was not accompanied by a redistribution of unpaid work between the sexes; so women faced an excessive work burden.

In the case of women entrepreneurs, the excessive burden of unpaid and care work is one of the main obstacles to the internationalization of female entrepreneurship. A study by the "Mujer Exporta en Chile" programme, on gender gaps and barriers to exporting in Chilean firms led by women, found that one in every two exporting businesswomen considers that making business work compatible with unpaid activities hinders their firms' internationalization process (DIRECON-ProChile, 2019).

These studies show that, while trade policies may expand internationalization opportunities for firms led by female entrepreneurs and create additional jobs for women, they will not promote gender equality and women's economic autonomy unless they take account of the domain of unpaid work and the care economy (Bidegain, 2009). Moreover, the increase in opportunities for women entrepreneurs and in labour demand in export sectors, linked to the dynamics of international markets, which often follow a "just-in-time" logic, could aggravate the tensions between the time allocated to paid and unpaid work.

Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *The care society: a horizon for sustainable recovery with gender equality* (LC/CRM.15/3), Santiago, 2022; I. Coche, B. Kotschwar and J. M. Salazar-Xirinachs, "Gender Issues in Trade Policy-Making", *OAS Trade Series*, June, 2006; A. Willson and P. Caro, "Temporeras de la agroexportación en Chile: tensiones y desafíos asociados a la relación entre vida laboral y familiar", *Mujer y Desarrollo series*, No. 94 (LC/L.3117-P/Rev.1), Santiago, ECLAC; General Directorate of International Economic Relations (DIRECON)-ProChile, *Estudio de brechas y barreras de género para la exportación en empresas lideradas por mujeres*, Santiago, May 2019; N. Bidegain Ponte, *Comercio y cuidados en Uruguay: propuestas de políticas públicas*, Montevideo, Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre el Desarrollo, Uruguay (CIEDUR), Red Internacional de Género y Comercio, Capítulo Latinoamericano, enero 2009.

C. Progress and challenges in producing information on women's participation in international trade

Responding to the questions posed above entails combining quantitative approaches with qualitative studies and impact analyses in exporting sectors, compared to sectors that are sensitive to import competition. This makes it possible to understand the multidimensional nature of the impacts of international trade, and to promote evidence-based public-policy recommendations to guarantee women's rights and their economic autonomy.

A gender analysis of international trade requires an approach that links the macro, meso and micro dimensions of the economy, drawing on a variety of data sources such as household and business surveys, censuses, administrative records (taxes, customs and social security), production supply and use tables or input-output matrices, time-use surveys and satellite accounts of unpaid household work.

To achieve this comprehensive approach, as noted in the Montevideo Strategy (ECLAC, 2017) and in the document on implementing its information systems pillar (ECLAC, 2022d), it is vital to achieve coordination between agencies that produce and use information, such as national statistical offices, trade promotion organizations, ministries and machineries for the advancement of women, and sectoral ministries with mandates for the production, updating and dissemination of data on a regular basis.

▪ **Box 2**

ECLAC support for the region's governments in the production of information and in regional cooperation initiatives to promote a comprehensive approach towards the gender analysis of international trade

Through the coordinated work of the Division for Gender Affairs and the International Trade and Integration Division, ECLAC provides technical assistance to governments in Latin America and the Caribbean for the production of information on women's participation in international trade and incorporation of the gender perspective in trade policies.

ECLAC has collaborated with Chile and Uruguay in identifying available statistical information to characterize women's participation in international trade, and to define indicators to measure the potential gender impacts of implementing the gender chapter of the free trade agreement between the two countries. It should be noted that this agreement, signed in 2016, is the first in the region to contain a chapter on gender and trade.

Through technical assistance provided to the Government of El Salvador, ECLAC has contributed to strengthening the capacities of various government agencies responsible for trade policy and for gender equality policy, to incorporate a gender perspective in the country's trade policies and agreements. In particular, ECLAC has worked with the Export and Investment Promotion Agency of El Salvador (PROESA), the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women (ISDEMU), the General Directorate of Statistics and Censuses (DIGESTYC), the Central Reserve Bank of El Salvador (BCR) and the Ministry of Economy (MINEC). It has also helped to strengthen inter-agency work on gender equality in international trade (ECLAC, 2021b).

As part of the assistance provided to El Salvador, the "[First meeting on trade and gender statistics in El Salvador, 2021](#)" was organized by DIGESTYC in collaboration with PROESA and ECLAC. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the measurement and analysis of international trade from a gender perspective and to share examples of good practices in the region. Another of the activities included in the assistance to El Salvador was the virtual seminar titled "[International trade and incorporation of the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination in trade agreements](#)", organized jointly by MINEC, PROESA and ECLAC. The seminar aimed to strengthen the capacities of government officials, particularly in MINEC and PROESA, to mainstream gender equality in trade policies. In 2022, ECLAC participated in the [launch of the "Mujer Exporta SV" Programme](#), organized by PROESA, which aims to provide women entrepreneurs with export training to facilitate their entry into the foreign market. In the same year, ECLAC also participated in the [economic autonomy module of the workshop, "Strategy for the empowerment and leadership of women exporters: global trade from a gender perspective"](#), organized by the Mujer Exporta SV programme to provide at training for women exporters and others wishing to export.

Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "The economic autonomy of women in a sustainable recovery with equality", *COVID-19 Special Report*, No. 9, Santiago, February.

Drawing on the available information, the following section makes an analysis of the participation and employment conditions of women employed in export-related sectors in Latin American and Caribbean countries.⁶

II. Characteristics of women's participation in export-related employment in Latin American and Caribbean countries

A. Structural heterogeneity and gender segregation in employment

Gender segregation in employment –both vertical and horizontal– persists and is linked to the productive structures of the region's countries, which are economically and productively heterogeneous. This process has an adverse impact on the conditions for achieving gender equality, by detracting from labour market dynamism, restricting the dissemination of capacities and resulting in an unequal distribution of costs and benefits (ECLAC, 2019).

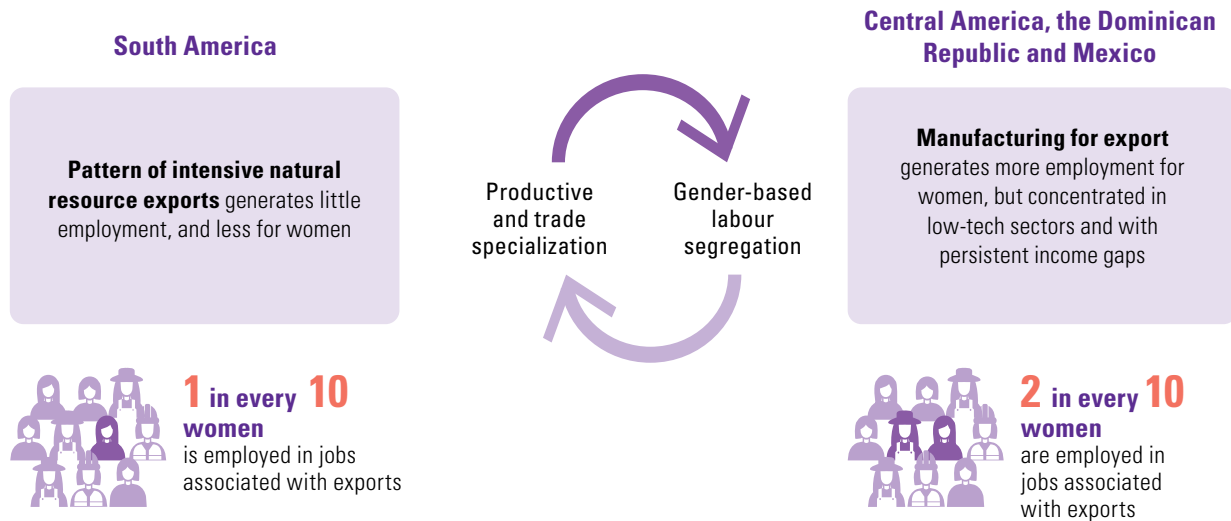
Women who are employed in the region tend to be concentrated in economic sectors of low technological and innovative intensity, in jobs that lack access to social protection, in lower-ranking positions, and in smaller firms than men. This is compounded by an export pattern specialized in primary products, natural resource-intensive manufactures, or labour based on static comparative advantages (Bidegain, Scuro and Vaca-Trigo, 2020; ECLAC, 2016, 2019 and 2022b).

The current pattern of trade specialization in the region begs the question as to whether the expansion of international trade in Latin American and Caribbean countries can help overcome some of the challenges of gender inequality. Answering this question is crucial because of the two-way nature of the relationship between gender and trade. Drawing on the data available for each of the subregions of Latin America and the Caribbean, the following paragraphs provide inputs for consideration in seeking potential answers.

Structural heterogeneity, gender-based segregation of employment and the rigid sexual division of labour in Latin America and the Caribbean have specific effects on the type of paid work that women undertake in the region's countries. Moreover, the patterns of productive and export specialization have an effect on employment for both women and men (ECLAC, 2021d). This is reflected in the low job content of the region's exports, mainly in the case of jobs for women. In South American countries, only one in 10 women are employed in export-related jobs. In Central American countries, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, the equivalent rate is double, but with jobs concentrated in low-tech sectors and with persistent income gaps (see diagram 2).

⁶ The employment content of exports is calculated using input-output matrices for different Latin American and Caribbean countries and information from ECLAC's Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG), according to the methodology and assumptions specified in Durán Lima and Castresana (2016) and Durán Lima and Banacloche (2021). Direct jobs are those generated in the export sector itself, while indirect jobs are created in activities that supply inputs used in the export of goods and services. The estimations that result from this methodology serve as a proxy for understanding the contribution of a country's exports to job creation. However, it does not make it possible to compare the employment characteristics of exporting and non-exporting firms in the same sector. In other words, what is analysed are the characteristics of jobs in high- and low-exporting sectors. High (low) exporting sectors are those in which the share of exports in the gross value of production is higher (lower) than the average of all sectors. The accommodation and food services sector (a proxy for tourism) is considered export-intensive if it accounts for more than 5% of the country's total exports, based on data from the World Travel and Tourism Council, and World Bank, World Development Indicators, available [online] at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>. The absence of administrative data on gender-specific employment in firms according to export intensity limits the scope of the analysis.

- **Diagram 2**
Gender inequality is reinforced by the region’s structural heterogeneity



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Subregional heterogeneity is explained partly by differences in the subregions’ participation in global and regional value chains. In the countries of South America, natural resource abundance is reflected in a strong primary export specialization, associated largely with Chinese demand for commodities and infrastructure deficits. The subregion’s reliance on extractive activities hinders structural change and reinforces a vicious circle in these economies, which, as price takers, are exposed to price fluctuations on international markets. These factors restrict possibilities for building dense industrial production networks in the subregion, incorporating higher value-added links in exports and promoting value chains in the manufacturing and services sectors (ECLAC, 2013 and 2022c).

In contrast, in Central America, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, manufacturing has greater prominence, albeit associated mainly with the assembly of final goods. The subregion has a growth model oriented towards, and linked to, large export platforms of multinational companies that have set up business there. This model focuses on the reduction and elimination of restrictions on international trade, policies to attract foreign direct investment (through tax incentive regimes, such as maquila and free trade zones) and export promotion. This generates exports that contain a large component of extraregional inputs and low levels of domestic value-added, especially in the case of extraregional exports, where the export effort does not boost the growth of economic activity. There is also no evidence that long and deep intraregional production chains exist in the subregion (ECLAC, 2022c).

In 2018, women accounted for 36.5% of jobs associated with the export sector in Latin America and the Caribbean, corresponding to 12.7% of total female employment in the region.⁷ In South American countries, this underrepresentation is even more pronounced, with women accounting for just 36% of export-related jobs, which corresponds to 9.7% of total female employment (4.9 percentage points of which consist of

⁷ Prepared by the authors, on the basis of information from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices of the countries. Latin America includes Argentina, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

jobs generated directly and 4.8 points are indirect jobs).⁸ In the case of men, the employment content of exports provides 13.1% of their total employment, of which 7.3 percentage points represents direct jobs (see figure 1A). As noted in ECLAC (2021e), the smaller gender gap in indirect employment in international trade is explained by women's participation in service activities which tend generally to be more feminized.

The export-related share of total employment in the economy varies across the countries of this subregion. While in Ecuador, 20.7% of female employment is associated with the export sector, in Argentina, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Brazil the figure is below the average for the subregion, with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela displaying the lowest export-related female employment content, at just 3.1% (see figure 1A).

In the Central American countries, along with the Dominican Republic and Mexico, women accounted for 37.2% of persons employed in the export sector in 2018, and this represented 22.1% of total female employment.⁹ In the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Panama, women's participation in export-related jobs is higher than in total employment. In contrast to the case of South America, women's export-related employment is more heavily concentrated in direct jobs (14.2 percentage points) than in indirect jobs (7.9 points). For men, export-related jobs represent 23.9% of their total employment with a breakdown similar to women's (see figure 1B).

As shown in diagram 2, the larger share of export-related employment reflects this subregion's export specialization in labour-intensive and highly feminized activities.¹⁰ These include the textile-apparel export manufacturing industries, or maquilas, which are centred mainly in Honduras but also present in Guatemala and El Salvador (Orozco and Torres González, 2021), along with the automotive and vehicle parts industry in Mexico (ECLAC, 2022c), among other low- and medium-tech manufacturing. All of these have scant linkage to the rest of the local market (Padilla and others, 2008). In Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, the services sector also plays a major role—especially tourism and transportation in the Dominican Republic, and business services and other services in the tertiary sector in Costa Rica (Orozco and Minzer, 2020).

This subregion also displays a disparity in the employment content of exports, albeit less pronounced than in South America. For women, Guatemala and Honduras are at the two extremes: Guatemala has the lowest female employment content associated with exports (19%) while Honduras has the highest (28.3%). Moreover, in most of the countries, more than 50% of export-related employment consists of jobs generated directly in the sectors in question (see figure 1B).

⁸ Among the South American countries analysed, the only exception is the Plurinational State of Bolivia, where women account for 43.7% of export-related jobs and 43.1% of total employment.

⁹ Source: Prepared by the authors, on the basis of information from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices of the countries. Latin America and the Caribbean includes Argentina, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

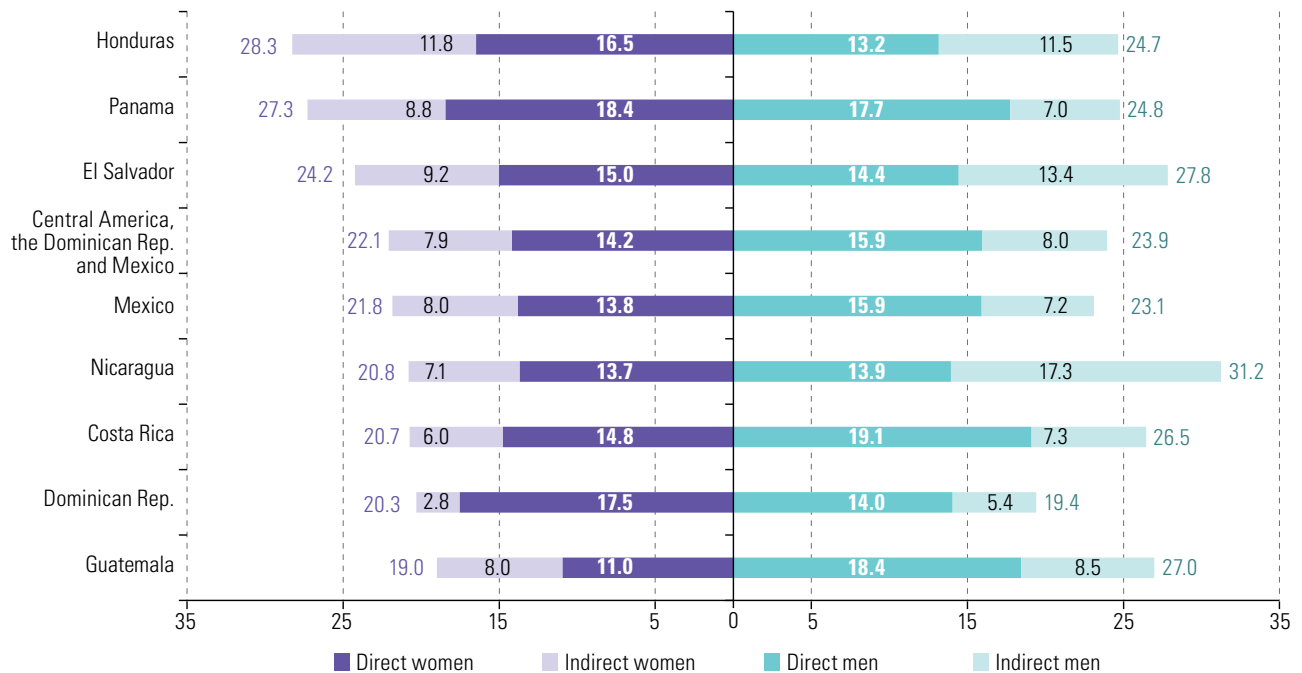
¹⁰ This type of activity is highly feminized owing to the (stereotypical) association of women's work with greater manual dexterity and relatively lower cost (Barrientos, 2001; Elson and Pearson, 1981). Thus, there is a strong presence of women working in precarious conditions, with low levels of social security and in less skilled segments. They are subject to great external vulnerability, since they are the first to be laid off when the flow of manufacturing trade slackens (Fernández-Pacheco and others, 2001).

Figure 1
 Latin America and the Caribbean (18 countries): export-related employment (direct and indirect) as a share of total employment, by gender, around 2018
 (Percentages)

A. South America (10 countries)



B. Central America (6 countries), the Dominican Republic and Mexico



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

B. Export specialization and gender inequalities

In general, the smaller proportion of women employed in export-related activities reproduces the gender segregation prevailing in the region's labour markets. Men dominate employment in most export sectors, except for textiles and apparel. Moreover, in sectors considered capable of diversifying and energizing economies and trade, such as chemicals and pharmaceuticals, machinery and electrical appliances and vehicles, the jobs held by women represent a very small share of total female employment (see table 2).

■ **Table 2**
Latin America (18 countries):^a export-related employment in selected sectors, by gender, 2018
(Percentages)

	Sector	Proportion of women in the sector	Distribution of the employed population by sector	
			Men	Women
South America (10 countries)	Agriculture	29.3	25.4	18.7
	Agribusiness	34.8	19.6	18.6
	Textiles and apparel	61.8	2.0	5.7
	Chemicals and pharmaceuticals	39.7	3.9	4.5
	Machinery and electrical appliances	37.9	0.9	1.0
	Vehicles	34.7	3.0	2.8
	Services	47.0	16.2	25.5
Central America (6 countries) and Dominican Republic	Agriculture	17.8	28.2	11.3
	Agribusiness	31.5	22.5	19.2
	Textiles and apparel	50.7	11.1	21.0
	Chemicals and pharmaceuticals	40.5	2.4	3.0
	Machinery and electrical appliances	32.7	1.9	1.7
	Vehicles	18.6	0.2	0.1
	Services	45.2	23.3	35.5
Mexico	Agriculture	28.5	10.7	6.8
	Agribusiness	39.0	4.9	5.0
	Textiles and apparel	58.2	3.9	8.7
	Chemicals and pharmaceuticals	36.9	3.6	3.3
	Machinery and electrical appliances	43.2	17.5	21.3
	Vehicles	42.5	12.5	14.7
	Services	48.1	8.3	12.3

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices, data from 2018.

^a Argentina, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

Note: This table reports seven out of a total of 14 sectors, selected on the basis of their importance for women's export-related employment in any of the subregions or countries considered (sectors that account for more than 3% of women's export-related employment in any of the subregions or in Mexico are eligible), and also on the proportion of women employed in those sectors (sectors in which more than 35% of those employed are women in any of the subregions or in Mexico are eligible). The only exception to this categorization is the petroleum and mining sector, which was excluded from the analysis to prioritize sectors that have potential to energize the economies, such as vehicles, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, or the machinery and electrical appliances sector.

Although global trends towards outsourcing have increased employment in the services sector for both men and women since the early 2000s, this sector is considerably more important for female employment (Coche, Kotschwar and Salazar-Xirinachs, 2006). In recent years, the structure of regional employment has shifted towards jobs in the services sector, while employment in construction, agriculture and manufacturing has declined (ILO, 2020). In 2018, for example, the tertiary sector generated the largest number of jobs (net), particularly in community, social and personal services, and in commerce and restaurants and hotels (ECLAC/ILO, 2019).

The services sector was one of the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, accommodation and food services (associated with tourism), a highly feminized sector, was severely impacted by the isolation measures that were adopted in response to the health crisis. In this context, the economic and social effects on tourism were particularly crucial in Caribbean countries, a subregion in which this sector accounted for 11.9% of female employment and 5.7% of male employment before the pandemic (ECLAC, 2021b). Nonetheless, the services sector was still the largest job creator in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021.¹¹ Community, social and personal services, which encompass the subsectors comprising the care economy, could be a driving sector. Development policies should emphasize the inclusion of technologies and innovation, together with employment regulation, to increase women's labour market participation and also provide care services that break down barriers, so that more women can be employed in exporting sectors.

In the first half of 2022, employment in the tertiary sector continued to grow, although job creation in manufacturing also revived (ECLAC/ILO, 2022). Commerce was one of the service segments that registered growth in the first six months of the year, generating almost half of total employment in the countries of the region with high rates of informality and concentration of women (ECLAC/ILO, 2022).

An analysis of the sectoral distribution of women's employment in the region reveals the services sector as accounting for the largest share, except in Mexico where it is the third largest (see table 2). The high participation rates of Latin American and Caribbean women in tourism are a key factor explaining this;¹² while the strong feminization of this sector's activities also contributes to its prominence in female export-related employment. However, as the feminization of labour is concentrated in lower value-added activities, women are employed less when services become more complex (ECLAC, 2021d). Costa Rica is an exception, however. According to Hernández, Marín and Rodríguez (2022) this country is a regional success story in terms of exports of knowledge-based services. Since the late 1990s, the number of information technology and computer service multinationals has grown in Costa Rica, which has boosted female employment and also raised the quality of the corresponding jobs (Torres and Zaclicever). The modern services sector is currently one of the most dynamic and fastest growing in the country; and women's participation in firms providing modern services has been growing. In 2020, their share exceeded the economy-wide average, with high female representation even at the top of the sector's occupational pyramid. In the same year, approximately 49.7% of women employed in modern services were in relatively high-skill jobs. Nonetheless, the presence of horizontal segregation in the sector cannot be ignored: 75% of women in the sector were working in the business processes segment and only 25% were in information technology (Ortiz and Couto, 2023).

In the case of South America, the services sector is followed by agriculture and agro-industry, which jointly account for almost 19% of women's export-related employment (see table 2).

¹¹ Prepared by the authors, on the basis of information from the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

¹² In 2018, Latin America was one of the regions of the world with the largest share of women (59%) employed in the accommodation and food services sector, which is a proxy for their share in the tourism sector (ECLAC, 2021d p. 159).

Textiles and apparel is the only sector in which the proportion of women employed in export-related activities surpasses that of men. Women account for 61.8% of the total in South America, 50.7% in Central America and the Dominican Republic, and 58.2% in Mexico. In all three cases, the corresponding shares of total female employment (5.7%, 21.0% and 8.7%) are higher than those of men (2.0%, 11.1% and 3.9%). Nonetheless, the sector is clearly more important for the countries of Central America, and for the Dominican Republic and Mexico, given their pattern of productive and commercial specialization (see table 2).

In Mexico, two other export-oriented manufacturing sectors are important for female export-related employment: machinery and electrical appliances and vehicles, where women account for more than 40% of jobs (see table 2). Nonetheless, Mexico's exports in these sectors result mainly from the assembly activities component, based on a growth model that depends essentially on still inadequate employment conditions with few linkages to the local economy (Moreno-Brid and Ros, 2010).¹³ While the development of the manufacturing-maquila industry has generated economic benefits for the country, such as increased production, this has not translated into higher salaries for workers. Between 2007 and 2016, for example, real wages decreased. Although both the value of production and hours worked have increased steadily since 2008, wages declined relative to company profits between 2009 and 2016,¹⁴ indicating an inefficient and unequal distribution of income in the Mexican maquila industry (Osorio Novela, Mungaray Lagarda and Jiménez López, 2020). Increasingly precarious employment conditions, associated specifically with a constant reduction of workers' share in the distribution of income, is one of the main factors underlying economic inequality in the country (Ros, 2015).

In short, while, in South America, women's participation in international merchandise trade is concentrated mainly in low-tech occupations, such as agriculture, in Central America, the Dominican Republic and Mexico a similar situation prevails in the textile and apparel sector. However, in Mexico the machinery and electrical appliances and vehicles sectors are also important (see table 2).

The chemical and pharmaceutical sector, which can serve as a proxy for the health industry,¹⁵ only accounts for between 3.0% (Central America and the Dominican Republic) and 4.5% (South America) of women's export-related employment. This is a heavily male-dominated sector in all subregions (see table 2). Health-care manufacturing is considered a driving sector of the economy by ECLAC, as will be analysed in the following subsection. The health-care industries play a key role in a strategy to boost the sustainability of life, since they jointly provide goods and services that improve people's living conditions and health. They also generate productive chains that can strengthen technical progress, with major knowledge externalities, generating high-quality jobs for both women and men (ECLAC, 2020a).

In short, the region's export specialization tends to reproduce and reinforce gender-based segregation in the labour market. The vast majority of sectors are male dominated (including those that generate most export-related employment, such as agriculture). Only the services sector has an equal distribution between men and women, and the textiles and apparel sector is the only one that is feminized.

¹³ A large proportion of Mexican national manufacturing industry inputs are imported. Mexico's Monthly Manufacturing Survey (EMIM) reports that, in 2017, only 25% of the inputs consumed by the maquila manufacturing industry were domestic. In other words, maquila activities fail to establish effective linkages with local Mexican firms, resulting in scant development of endogenous capacities in domestic enterprises and weak technology transfer to local firms. Currently, the firms generated by the opening of factories in Mexico not only assemble, but also design, research and develop new ideas and products. However, it remains difficult to integrate more fully into the national production fabric (Osorio Novela, Mungaray Lagarda and Jiménez López, 2020).

¹⁴ The indicator was 52% in 2009 and 28% in 2016 (Osorio Novela, Mungaray Lagarda and Jiménez López, 2020).

¹⁵ This sector includes productive activities that apply biology and technology to improve health, such as chemical and pharmaceutical inputs and medical devices.

At the same time, the trade matrix displays a clear predominance of primary or manufacturing sectors with low value-added, and a scarcer presence of dynamic technology-intensive sectors. Although technology-intensive sectors have become more important in certain countries –Uruguay and Costa Rica are among the main exporters of software, for example– there is a persistent regionwide trend towards the primarization of trade. This reduces the opportunities that exports can generate for women’s employment, as discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Services provided online (modern services) have been the most dynamic category of world trade in recent years, owing to the digital revolution. This innovation has facilitated cross-border trade in a number of services that were previously considered essentially non-tradable, such as business, financial, engineering, design, educational and medical services (ECLAC, 2023c). Occupational segregation means that women are concentrated in some of these services. For trade to contribute to generating economic opportunities for women under equal conditions, it is vital to promote affirmative actions to increase women’s full participation in the digital ecosystem both regionally and globally.

C. Quality of employment in the exporting sectors that are most important for women

As can be inferred from the previous sections, the region’s exporting sector makes a relatively small contribution to job creation compared to the rest of the economy, especially in the case of women. It also tends to reproduce the gender segregation of the labour market.

In terms of job quality, both in South America and in the subregion comprising Central America, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, access to social security is lower in the export-intensive sectors,¹⁶ (especially in South America), and in-work poverty levels are higher (particularly among women). In addition, income inequalities between men and women are more accentuated than in sectors that are not export-intensive (see figure 2).

Understanding why the export-intensive sectors have not contributed to better labour conditions needs to be analysed at the sector level. In South America and in the subregion comprising Central America, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, the three most important sectors for women’s export-related employment in the region (agriculture, textiles and apparel, and tourism) are subject to more precarious labour conditions, especially for women, both in terms of social security and access to highly skilled jobs.¹⁷ At the same time, the income gaps between women and men are larger in these sectors, especially in agriculture and in the textiles and apparel sector (see diagram 3).

In contrast, there are other sectors, such as chemicals and pharmaceuticals, which are highly exporting in some South and Central American countries,¹⁸ where women have a relatively small share of employment but greater access to both social security and high-skilled jobs. Income inequalities between women and men are also smaller in this sector (see diagram 3).

¹⁶ For further information on each country’s highly exporting sectors, see annex A1.

¹⁷ The exception is the case of agriculture in Central America, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, where a slightly larger proportion of women are employed in highly skilled jobs. Nonetheless, higher-level jobs in this sector are scarce generally, with no more than 2% of jobs for highly skilled workers, whether men or women.

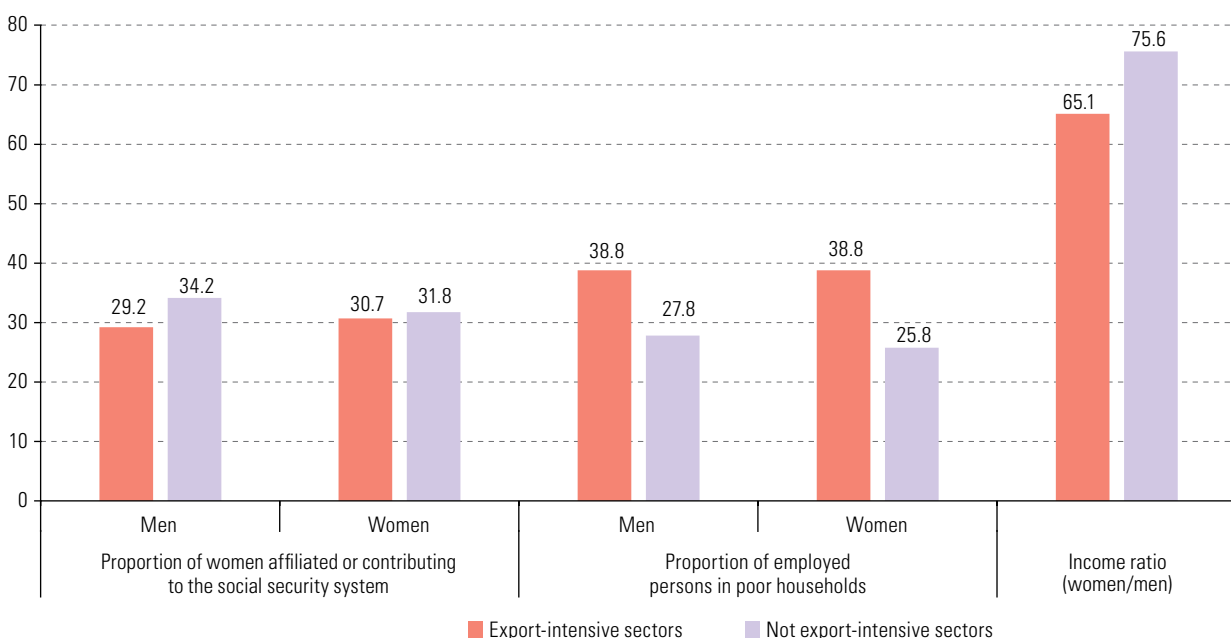
¹⁸ See annex A1 for further details on countries in which the chemical and pharmaceutical sector is export-intensive.

▪ **Figure 2**
Latin America (12 countries): characteristics of persons employed in high- and low-exporting sectors, by gender, weighted average, around 2020
(Percentages)

A. South America (7 countries)^a



B. Central America (3 countries), the Dominican Republic and Mexico^b



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices, data from 2018.

Note: The analysis of each sector considered only countries in which each sector is export-intensive.

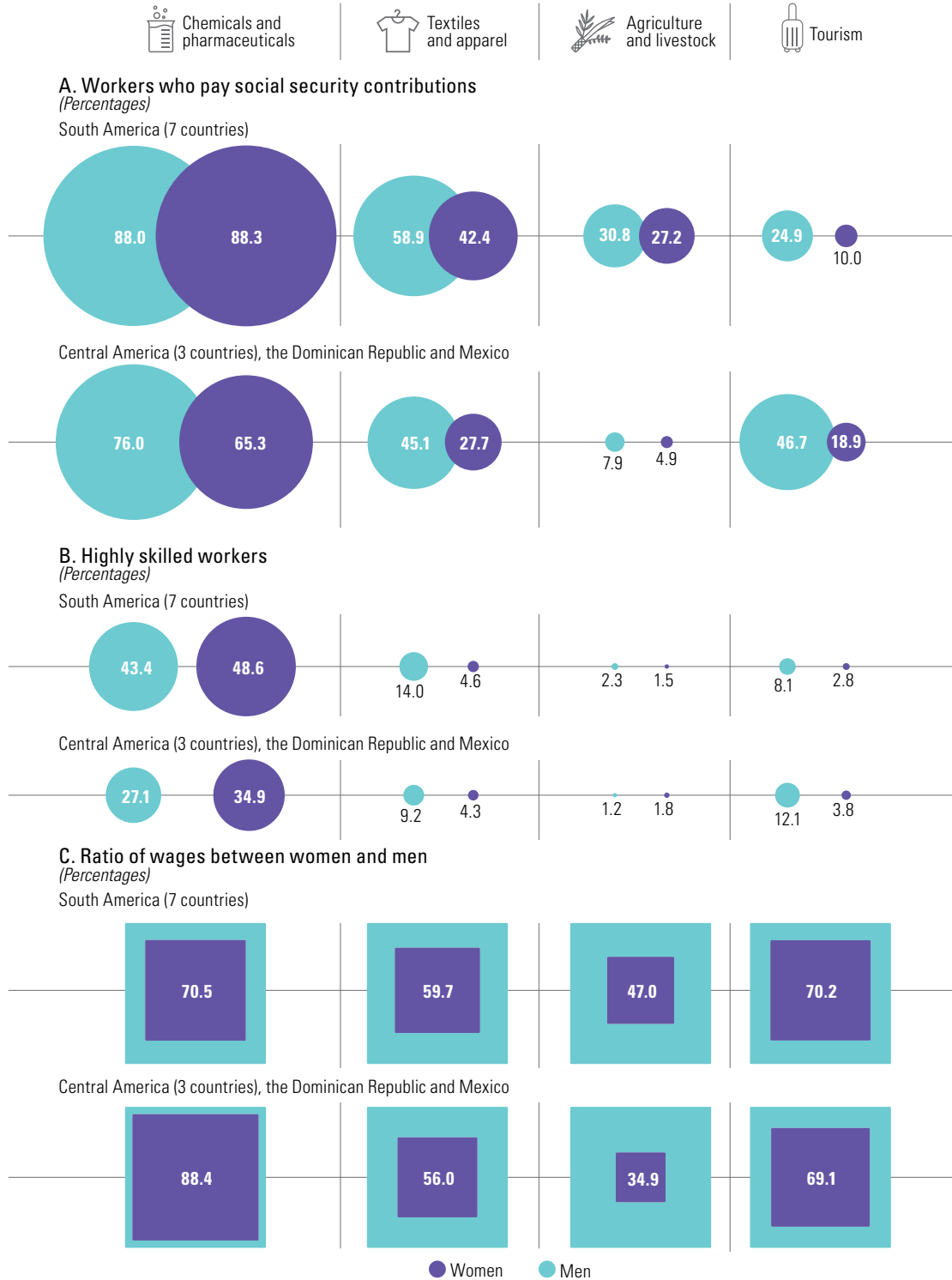
^a Countries included in agriculture: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Uruguay. Countries included in chemicals and pharmaceuticals: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay.

^b Countries included in textiles and apparel: Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico. Countries included in chemicals and pharmaceuticals: Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico.

■ **Diagram 3**

Latin America (13 countries):^a labour characteristics in selected export-intensive sectors, by gender, weighted average, around 2020

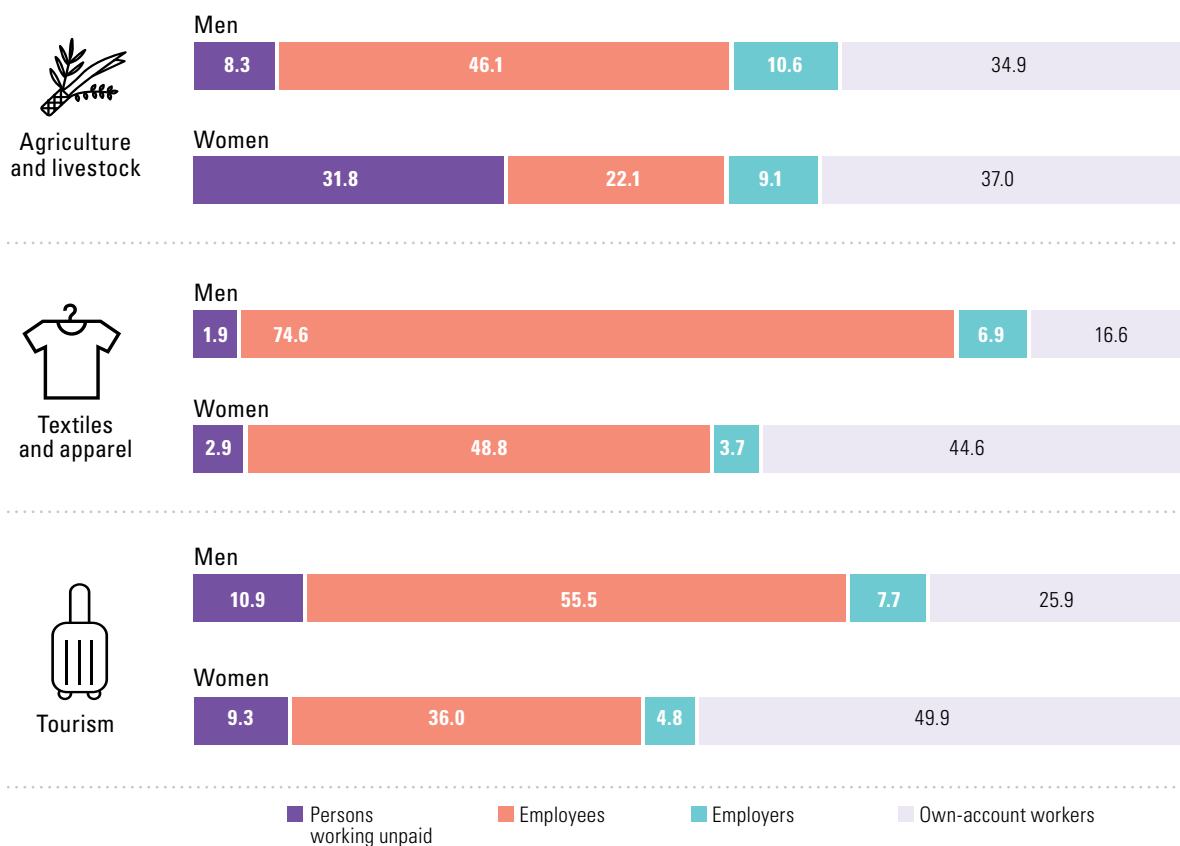
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).
^a Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. The analysis of each sector considered only countries in which each of the sectors is export-intensive.

The forms of work performed by women in export-intensive sectors reveal the barriers that restrict their access to jobs with better conditions. For example, in the agriculture sector, 31.8% of women work unpaid, which shows that women's work in agriculture is often considered an extension of the unpaid work they perform in the home (see figure 3).

▪ **Figure 3**
Latin America (13 countries):^a occupational distribution of the employed population in export-intensive sectors, by gender, weighted average, around 2020
(Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices, data from 2018.

^a Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. The analysis of each sector considered only countries in which each sector is export-intensive.

Moreover, in all sectors, a larger proportion of women work on an own-account basis (the most extreme case being the tourism sector, where 50% of employed women are in this category), while men are more likely to be employees or employers (see figure 3). This highlights the barriers that women face in being hired and employed, and also in managing larger firms.

The foregoing analysis shows that export-intensive employment has not contributed to better working conditions for women in the labour market, measured as the proportion of women who are employed but live in poverty, their access to social security and wage levels; nor has it reduced gender wage gaps.

These results are explained largely by the trade pattern of the region's countries and how this interacts with the sexual division of labour. Women are overrepresented in sectors and occupations with worse working conditions, and thus less likely to have highly skilled jobs; and they are overrepresented in both own-account and unpaid work.

It can be concluded that for international trade to contribute to women's economic autonomy and the sustainability of life, structural changes need to be made to the region's production and trade matrix. This means prioritizing sectors that boost the economy and generate quality jobs for both men and women in the corresponding production chains, while also taking into account the time needed for the reproduction of life. This would make it possible not only to transform the countries' production matrix, but also to move toward greater economic autonomy, sustainable living conditions and gender equality for women. In short, transformations in the production and trade matrix could be an opportunity to generate a positive impact on women's lives and on society as a whole.

Although Latin America and the Caribbean faces structural challenges and persistent inequalities, the region has the potential to transform this complex scenario into new opportunities that combine development with equality and sustainability. The next section sets forth proposals for steering international trade towards promoting women's economic autonomy and sustainable development with equality.

III. The role of international trade in fostering sustainable development with equality

In the current context, international trade can play a key role in strategies to address the cascading crises in Latin America and the Caribbean and serve as a means to promote sustainable development with gender equality.

Intraregional trade is more manufacturing-intensive and has a heavy presence of small and medium-sized enterprises. This trade can thus contribute to the densification of the productive fabric, being more employment-intensive and helping to reduce dependence on raw material exports. Strengthening regional integration and productive complementation would make it possible to redirect international trade towards a transformative socioeconomic recovery with gender equality (ECLAC, 2021d). Moreover, in a context in which the major economic powers are seeking to advance their own regionalization processes, the need for regional economic integration has acquired special relevance (ECLAC, 2023b).

In short, the region's characteristic structural heterogeneity, associated with persistent gender labour segregation in the individual economies and the current prevailing pattern of trade specialization—based on low-sophistication or export-oriented manufactures, natural resources and raw materials—underscore the challenges of gender inequality. This is reflected in the low employment content of exports, mainly in respect of jobs for women, centred on sectors that are not very knowledge- or technology-intensive and have few productive linkages.

The international engagement strategies adopted in the region have not generated more diversified patterns of production and trade. As a result, employment opportunities for women in the export sector are confined to a handful of sectors: seven sectors account for more than 70% of female export-related employment in South America, Central America and the Dominican Republic and Mexico—76.9%, 91.9% and 72.1%, respectively.

The region's pattern of productive and trade specialization also creates few jobs in more knowledge-intensive sectors, especially for women: the chemical and pharmaceutical sector generates the third smallest amount

of export-related employment for women in South America and in Central America and the Dominican Republic, and the fewest export-related jobs for women in Mexico.

International trade can play a key role in strategies to address the cascading crises that are currently afflicting Latin America and the Caribbean; and it constitutes a vehicle for sustainable development with gender equality. However, if an expansion of international trade is to benefit women, it must help to create favourable conditions for greater economic autonomy, overcoming the various forms of discrimination and labour segregation. This entails modifying extractivist growth strategies based on activities that exploit natural resources intensively and generate limited value added or employment, especially for women.

As stated in the Santiago Commitment approved at the fourteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean held in 2020, countries need to act in a coordinated manner at the regional level, avoiding harmful competition, in order to prevent variables such as wages and gender inequalities from being used to enhance export competitiveness and attract investment. In addition, the Commitment states that it is essential to implement policies and mechanisms to promote, strengthen and increase production and international trade, with a gender approach, as a pillar of countries' economic development, and pursue programmes to foster the creation of quality employment for women and female-led enterprise in international trade, conducting assessments of the impact on human rights of trade and investment policies and agreements from a gender equality perspective (ECLAC, 2020b, paragraph 30).

It is crucial to invest in the energy transition, electromobility, the circular economy, the bioeconomy, the health manufacturing industry and the digital economy –sectors that are at the heart of the most sophisticated innovation processes. It is also essential to invest in the care economy, sustainable tourism, and in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which are important sectors for job creation and operate with more complex technologies. These sectors are drivers of production, inclusion and sustainability, serving as engines of sustainable development in the region. The care economy is identified as a key economic sector for boosting the dynamics of growth, reducing gender inequalities and facilitating the incorporation of women into the labour market (ECLAC, 2022c).

It is necessary to ensure that women can contribute on an equal footing with men in these sectors, and move towards distributive equality in opportunities, jobs and income. However, as established in the Buenos Aires Commitment, approved by ECLAC member States at the fifteenth session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is necessary to “advance recovery plans with proactive measures to achieve substantive equality that foster comprehensive care systems, decent work and the full, significant and equal participation of women in positions of leadership in strategic sectors of the economy for a transformative recovery with gender equality aimed at the sustainability of life and for the transition to a care society” (ECLAC, 2023d).

Promoting the processes of women's economic autonomy makes it possible to develop equal and sustainable economies. This depends heavily on the capacity of women to gain employment in the country's productive sectors, especially in those that drive the economy and are export-intensive, which display the greatest asymmetries in female participation (Bidegain Ponte and Espino, 2023).

Although integration and moving up in global and regional value chains are currently among the key objectives of trade policy (ECLAC, 2021a), the region's participation in such chains is weak and concentrated in the initial stages of production. This poses challenges in terms of improving the working conditions generated by international trade.

Regional markets could provide an opportunity to achieve a virtuous process of integration in these chains (ECLAC, 2014). A territorial approach is needed that takes advantage of local potential, creating links

between the population and value chains with business potential and investments, seeking to improve basic infrastructure and achieve greater connectivity (Arencibia, 2021). In this regard, the importance of the health-care manufacturing industry, one of the driving sectors of the economy, is highlighted for its potential to stimulate greater regional productive integration in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ensuring the full participation of women entrepreneurs and female workers in the production chains linked to the most dynamic sectors is key to ensuring that this major stimulus for sustainability exploits synergies with gender equality.

The transition to a new style of sustainable development can only be achieved through greater diversification of exports in the region; the search for a more value-added-, knowledge- and technology-intensive productive and export basket; the promotion of MSME participation in international trade, and gender equality in both paid and unpaid care and domestic work.

Greater regional integration and the creation of a robust regional market is the key strategy for generating structural change to achieve these objectives, since intraregional trade is more manufacturing-intensive and has a large presence of small and medium-sized enterprises. This trade can contribute to increasing the density of the productive fabric, by being more employment-intensive and helping to reduce dependence on raw material exports. Strengthening regional integration and productive complementation would make it possible to redirect international trade towards a transformative socioeconomic recovery with gender equality (ECLAC, 2021e). Moreover, in a context in which the major economic powers are seeking to further their own regionalization processes, the need for regional economic integration has become crucial (ECLAC, 2023b).

Lastly, gender mainstreaming in trade policies contributes to a more complete understanding of the distributive impacts of exports and imports on societies; and it provides new avenues for designing policies to foster sustainable development with equality. One of the requirements is that public policy on international trade should be evidence-based, by identifying the differential impacts on members of the labour force, business leaders, persons responsible for care work, and women in their diversity. Moreover, the implementation of affirmative measures boosts the participation of female workers and women entrepreneurs in the production chains of knowledge-intensive sectors that drive the economy, and in more senior positions.

Bibliography

- Arencibia, M. S. (2021), "Inserción en cadenas globales de valor y desarrollo local: complejidades recientes tras la COVID-19", vol. 8.
- Azar, P., Espino, A. y S. Salvador (2008), «Cambia el comercio, la producción y el trabajo: ¿Cambian las relaciones de género? El caso del sector lácteo uruguayo», 1 de diciembre.
- Barrientos, S. (2001), "Gender, flexibility and global value chains", *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 32, No. 3, May.
- Bidegain, N., L. Scuro and I. Vaca-Trigo (2020), "Women's economic autonomy during the COVID-19 pandemic", *CEPAL Review*, No.132 (LC/PUB.2021/4-P), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), December.
- Bidegain Ponte, N. (2009), "Comercio y cuidados en Uruguay: propuestas de políticas públicas», Montevideo, Uruguay, Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre el Desarrollo, Uruguay (CIEDUR), Red Internacional de Género y Comercio, Capítulo Latinoamericano, enero.
- Bidegain Ponte, N. and A. Espino (2023), "Iniciativas de gobiernos de América Latina y el Caribe para mitigar los impactos de la crisis del Covid-19 en la autonomía de las mujeres en sectores exportadores", *Brechas de género en las cadenas globales de valor en América Latina y el Caribe: nuevos y viejos retos en un escenario de incertidumbre* (LC/TS.2023/17), N. Bidegain Ponte y otros (eds.), Santiago.
- Castilho, M. (2010), "Impactos de mudanças no comércio exterior sobre o emprego feminino", *Análise Econômica*, vol. 28, No. 53, 24 September.
- Castilho, M. and K. Ferreira (2022), "Impactos del acuerdo Mercosur-Unión Europea para el empleo de las mujeres en Brasil", *Serie Documentos*, No. 5, Brazilian Network for the Integration of Peoples (REBRIP).
- Coche, I., B. Kotschwar, and J. M. Salazar-Xirinachs (2006), "Gender Issues in Trade Policy-Making", *OAS Trade Series*, June.
- Durán Lima, J. and S. Banacloche (2021), "Análisis económicos a partir de matrices de insumo-producto: definiciones, indicadores y aplicaciones para América Latina", *Project Documents* (LC/TS.2021/177), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Durán Lima, J. and S. Castresana (2016), "Estimación del empleo directo e indirecto asociado a las exportaciones del Ecuador a la Unión Europea", *International Trade series*, No. 127 (LC/L.4264), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), December.
- ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) (2023a), *Economic Survey of Latin America and the Caribbean 2023* (LC/PUB.2023/11-P/Rev.1), Santiago.
- (2023b), *International Trade Outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* (LC/PUB.2022/23-P), Santiago.
- (2023c), *Iberoamérica: espacio de oportunidades para el crecimiento, la colaboración y el desarrollo sostenible* (LC/TS.2023/33), Santiago.
- (2023d), *Buenos Aires Commitment* (LC/CRM.15/6/Rev.1), Santiago.
- (2022a), *Repercussions in Latin America and the Caribbean of the war in Ukraine: how should the region face this new crisis?*, Santiago, 6 June [online] <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/47913-repercussions-latin-america-and-caribbean-war-ukraine-how-should-region-face-new>.
- (2022b), *The care society: a horizon for sustainable recovery with gender equality* (LC/CRM.15/3), Santiago.
- (2022c), *Towards transformation of the development model in Latin America and the Caribbean: production, inclusion and sustainability* (LC/SES.39/3-P), Santiago.
- (2022d), *Breaking the statistical silence to achieve gender equality by 2030: implementing the information systems pillar of the Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030* (LC/CRM.15/4), Santiago.
- (2021a), "CEPAL organiza Conferencia Digital sobre las Cadenas Globales de Valor y su impacto en las brechas de género en América Latina y el Caribe", December [online] <https://www.cepal.org/es/notas/cepal-organiza-conferencia-digital-cadenas-globales-valor-su-impacto-brechas-genero-america>.
- (2021b), "The economic autonomy of women in a sustainable recovery with equality", *COVID-19 Special Report*, No. 9, Santiago, February.

- (2021c), “CEPAL aporta a la reflexión sobre el diseño de políticas comerciales desde un enfoque de género en El Salvador en el seminario ‘Comercio Internacional e incorporación del principio de igualdad de género y no discriminación en los tratados comerciales’” [online] <https://www.cepal.org/es/notas/cepal-aporta-la-reflexion-diseno-politicas-comerciales-un-enfoque-genero-salvador-seminario>.
- (2021d), *International Trade Outlook for Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2020 (LC/PUB.2020/21-P), Santiago.
- (2020a), *Building a New Future: Transformative Recovery with Equality and Sustainability* (LC/SES.38/3-P/Rev.1), Santiago.
- (2020b), *Santiago Commitment* (LC/CRM.14/6), Santiago.
- (2019), *Women’s autonomy in changing economic scenarios* (LC/CRM.14/3), Santiago.
- (2017), *Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030* (LC/CRM.13/5), Santiago.
- (2016), *Equality and Women’s Autonomy in the Sustainable Development Agenda* (LC/G.2686/Rev.1), Santiago.
- (2014), *Regional integration: Towards a strategy for inclusive value chains* (LC/G.2594(SES.35/11)), Santiago.
- (2013), “América Latina y el Caribe en las cadenas internacionales de valor”, *International Trade series*, No. 124 (LC/L. 3767), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), December.
- ECLAC/ILO (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/International Labour Organization) (2022), “Labour productivity in Latin America”, *Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean*, No. 27 (LC/TS.2022/213), Santiago.
- (2019), “The future of work in Latin America and the Caribbean: old and new forms of employment and challenges for labour regulation”, *Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean*, No. 20 (LC/TS.2019/31), Santiago.
- Elson, D., C. Grown and N. Çağatay (2007), “Chapter 3. Mainstream, heterodox, and feminist trade theory”, *The Feminist Economics of Trade*, IAFFE Advances in Feminist Economics, Routledge.
- Elson, D. and R. Pearson (1981), “Nimble fingers make cheap workers’: an analysis of women’s employment in third world export manufacturing”, *Feminist Review*, vol. 7, No. 1, March.
- Fajnzylber, F. (1983), *La industrialización trunca de América Latina*, Mexico City, Nueva Imagen.
- Fernández-Pacheco, J. and others (2001), *Enhebrando el hilo: mujeres trabajadoras de la maquila en América Central. Contexto económico y social del empleo en la maquila textil y de vestuario*, San Jose, Gossesstra.
- Fontana, M. (2020), “Guidance note on data analysis for gender and trade assessments”, *Gender, Social Inclusion and Trade Knowledge Product Series*.
- (2016), “Hearing on Gender Equality in EU Trade Agreements”, paper presented at the Joint Intra-FEMM Meeting, European Parliament, 11 May.
- (2009), “The gender effects of trade liberalization in developing countries: a review of the literature”, *Gender Aspects of the Trade and Poverty Nexus. A macro-micro approach*, Palgrave Macmillan/World Bank.
- Hernández, S. Z., K. L. Marín and R. T. Rodríguez (2022), “Relación entre la participación laboral femenina y las exportaciones de servicios basados en el conocimiento en costa rica: evidencia empírica a nivel de firmas”, *Logos: Revista académica de Lead University*.
- ILO (International Labour Organization) (2020), *Panorama Laboral 2019: América Latina y el Caribe*, Lima, January.
- Moreno-Brid, J. C. and J. Ros (2010), *Desarrollo y crecimiento en la economía mexicana. Una perspectiva histórica*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Orozco, R. C. and L. D. Torres González (2021), “Redes intersectoriales de comercio entre Centroamérica, México y la República Dominicana: un análisis desde la perspectiva de la teoría de redes sociales”, *Project Documents* (LC/MEX/TS.2021/1), Mexico City, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Orozco, R. and R. Minzer (2020), “Integración productiva a través del comercio intrarregional de insumos intermedios en Centroamérica, México y la República Dominicana: un análisis basado en indicadores de especialización vertical”, *Project Documents* (LC/MEX/TS.2020/23), Mexico City, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

- Ortiz, L. and V. Couto (2023), "Cadenas Globales de Valor y su impacto en las brechas de género en América Latina y el Caribe", *Brechas de género en las zonas francas de América Latina: el caso de Costa Rica* (LC/TS.2023/17), N. Bidegain Ponte and others (eds.), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Osorio Novela, G., A. Mungaray Lagarda and E. Jiménez López (2020), "The manufacturing industry in Mexico: a history of production without distribution", *CEPAL Review*, No. 131, Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Padilla, R. and others (2008), "Evolución reciente y retos de la industria manufacturera de exportación en Centroamérica, México y República Dominicana: una perspectiva regional y sectorial", *Studies and Perspectives series-ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean* (LC/MEX/L.839/Rev.1), Mexico City, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- Ros, J. (2015), *¿Cómo salir de la trampa del lento crecimiento y alta desigualdad?*, Mexico City, El Colegio de México (COLMEX)/ National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).
- Seguino, S. (2000), "Gender inequality and economic growth: a cross-country analysis", *World Development*, vol. 28, No. 7, 1 July.
- Standing, G. (1999), "Global feminization through flexible labor: a theme revisited", *World Development*, vol. 27, No. 3, Geneva, International Labour Organization (ILO).
- (1989), "Global Feminization through Flexible Labor", *World Development*, vol. 17, No. 7, Geneva, International Labour Organization (ILO), July.
- Tejani, S. and W. Milberg (2016), "Global defeminization? Industrial upgrading and manufacturing employment in developing countries", *Feminist Economics*.
- Torres, R. and D. Zaclicever (2022), "Brecha salarial de género en Costa Rica: una desigualdad persistente", *International Trade series*, No. 169 (LC/TS.2022/93), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
- UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) (2023), *Linking Trade and Gender towards Sustainable Development: An Analytical and Policy Framework* (UNCTAD/DITC/2022/1), New York.
- van Staveren, I. and others (eds.) (2007), "The feminist economics of trade", *IAFFE Advances in Feminist Economics*, Routledge.
- Willson, A. & Caro, P. (2010), "Temporeras de la agroexportación en Chile: tensiones y desafíos asociados a la relación entre la vida laboral y familiar", *serie Mujer y Desarrollo*, No. 94 (LC/L.3117-P/Rev.1), Santiago, CEPAL, junio.

Annex A1

▪ **Table A1.1**
Latin America (13 countries): export-intensive sectors by country, around 2018

Sectors	Argentina	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Ecuador	El Salvador	Honduras	Mexico	Peru	Dominican Republic	Uruguay
Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing													
Oil and mining													
Food, beverages and tobacco													
Textiles, apparel and footwear													
Wood, pulp and paper													
Chemicals and pharmaceuticals													
Rubber and plastic													
Non-metallic minerals													
Metals and metal products													
Machinery and equipment (excluding electrical appliances)													
Machinery and electrical appliances													
Automobiles and automobile parts and components													
Other manufactures													
Electricity, gas and water													
Construction													
Transport and storage													
Post and telecommunications													
Financial intermediation													
Business services													
Other services													
Accommodation activities and food services													

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) and input-output matrices, data from 2018.

This *Bulletin* was prepared by Nicole Bidegain, Social Affairs Officer of the Gender Affairs Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), together with Alma Espino, Fernanda Moscoso and Kethelyn Ferreira, consultants in the same division. It was produced for the project “Promoting transformative recovery with equality in Latin America and the Caribbean by advancing feminist principles to move towards fairer care economies and societies”, which forms part of the Cooperation Programme between ECLAC and the Open Society Foundations (OSF). For comments on drafts of this document, thanks are owed to Ana Gúezmes, Chief, Division for Gender Affairs of ECLAC, Lucía Scuro, Senior Social Affairs Officer of the Division for Gender Affairs, José Duran, Chief, Regional Integration Unit, Division of International Trade and Integration and Alicia Frohmann, consultant in the same Division.

The United Nations and the countries it represents assume no responsibility for the content of links to external sites in this publication.

Mention of any firm names and commercial products or services does not imply endorsement by the United Nations or the countries it represents.

The views expressed in this document, a translation of a Spanish original which did not undergo formal editing, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Organization or the countries it represents.

This publication should be cited as: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), “International trade as an opportunity to promote women’s economic autonomy: contributions for reflection in Latin America and the Caribbean”, *Gender Equality Bulletin*, No. 3, Santiago, 2024.

Copyright © United Nations, 2024

S.2301223[E]



Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL)