Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) in LAC

The Center for Women’s Economic Empowerment (CWEE) and the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) team at CIPE advance gender equality in emerging markets to build more inclusive, thriving economies and democracies that deliver for all citizens. This briefer outlines CIPE’s approach to promoting women’s economic empowerment (WEE) in Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC) and provides examples of CIPE programming across the region.

The Status of Women in Latin America

Women across Latin America face acute barriers that block full political and economic participation in society. Factors such as unequal caregiving responsibilities, economic inequality, inadequate political representation, and gender-based violence undermine gender equality in the region. Though there has been progress in the incorporation of women in some labor markets, there are still significant obstacles, inequality, and segregation that result in pervasive unemployment, wage gaps, and labor informality. Women, as compared to men, are more likely to participate in the informal economy and, as such, are subjected to lower wages, long hours, and poor working conditions that are highly vulnerable to demand shocks and climate disasters. This situation, already alarming, was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the existence of these ongoing hardships, there are notable forces in the region pushing for gender equity. The Social Institutions and Gender Index 2020 Regional Report for Latin America highlights that in recent years, strong social movements supporting gender equality and women’s empowerment have surged across the region. Many countries have taken measures to recognize, redistribute, and reduce women’s unpaid domestic work. To better protect women’s rights in the workplace, there have been shifts in many countries to introduce and/or extend maternity and paternity leave. Several countries have strengthened their legal frameworks to promote women’s political participation at the local and national levels. Yet the continued existence of discriminatory institutions, embedded social norms, and unequal laws demonstrates that more must be done to elevate women as full participants in political and economic life in Latin America.

Discrimination in intra-household and professional dynamics between men and women has a profound impact on women’s economic opportunities and engagement. More than half of the population in Latin America believes that children suffer when a mother is employed. Not only do many Latin American women shoulder a disproportionate amount of household responsibilities, but they also face stereotypes and barriers when they seek to progress in their careers. Cultural norms regarding the types of fields and positions that are “proper” for women to take on hinders the advancements of women in their personal and professional pursuits. Women in the region are less likely than men to establish businesses due to human and social capital limitations, lack of access to finance, and other institutional barriers. In a reality where women report being excluded from male-dominated business environments, it is critical to create supportive spaces for women to create networks, gain skills, and unite their voices.

CIPE’s Role in Advancing Latin American & Caribbean Women’s Economic Empowerment

To advance women’s economic empowerment, CIPE manages diverse and far-ranging programs across Latin America and the Caribbean. CIPE works with women’s chambers of commerce, business associations, universities, and other civil society groups to provide technical skills workshops, mentorship opportunities, and advocacy trainings to women entrepreneurs and business owners. CIPE prioritizes providing support for women in rural and indigenous communities, where women face the most challenges to improving their business acumen, developing soft skills, and fostering leadership characteristics. CIPE’s goal is to empower women across the region in both their business and personal lives.
Guatemala: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs

In Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, CIPE and its partner, the Red Nacional de Grupos Gestores (RNGG), launched a pilot Women’s Business Resource Center (“WBRC”) in 2021. The WBRC, referred to as “Corali,” is a centralized, physical space where women of all socioeconomic backgrounds have access to essential business resources and are provided opportunities to gain confidence to fulfill their economic aspirations. Corali’s activities focus on addressing self-esteem and self-confidence issues faced by women entrepreneurs and business owners that stem from the discrimination and institutional barriers they face in their communities and homes. Corali’s offerings include three business training courses, “Know Your Rights” trainings, psychological support services, a computer lab, business advisory services, and a daycare facility.

Central America: Fostering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

In Central America, CIPE and its partner, the Asociación Red Empresarias y Emprendedoras para el desarrollo sostenible (AREED), address the unique challenges that women entrepreneurs and business owners face. CIPE and its partner provide capacity-building workshops and advocacy trainings for nascent women’s business associations to improve their abilities to provide membership services and create networking opportunities that connect women business owners across Central America.

Colombia: Monitoring Women’s Equity in Companies

In Colombia, CIPE and its partner, EAFIT University, monitor women’s equity within companies in the Antioquia region, as part of the Antioquia Business Alliance for Gender Equality. The project builds upon a baseline assessment conducted in 2021 of gender equity practices among the region’s micro, medium, and small enterprises (MSMEs). The assessment revealed a significant gap in the distribution of work, personal, and family responsibilities among women compared to men. As a result, CIPE and EAFIT University are developing an actionable guide for SMEs to adopt gender inclusive practices and make local and national level recommendations for policy reform. The goal is to build a community of trained professionals and business owners to work in unison towards economic, social, cultural, and technological development in Colombia.

Ecuador: Inclusion of Marginalized Populations

In Ecuador, CIPE and its partner, Fundación Haciendo Ecuador (FHE) connect women across the region to advocate for democratic reforms that promote women’s leadership, technological transformation, and a private sector response to gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Past activities focused on supporting women’s economic empowerment in business through the inclusion of marginalized groups such as disabled persons, ethnic and religious minorities, and the LGBTQ+ population to address challenges to democracy and barriers to economic recovery. In collaboration with CIPE and its partner in Colombia, EAFIT University, FHE is developing a baseline assessment of the economic status of women in Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca, and Manta with the goal of ending cycles of discrimination and violence.

1 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2014/03/challenges-latin-american-women/
3 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/cb7d45d1-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/cb7d45d1-en
5 https://www.csis.org/analysis/economic-opportunity-northern-triangle

Authored by Morgan King, Melissa Velasquez, Camila Cepeda, Natalia Prieto and Selena Bridges