



SUMMARY

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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**LATIN AMERICAN BISHOPS' COUNCIL
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**WORLD UNION OF CATHOLIC WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS
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Foreword

“In Latin America, hope has a woman’s face”.
(Pope Francis, 7 September 2017)

We have recently lived an unprecedented experience: the First Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean. An arduous process of listening, dialogue and discernment, which sought to involve the People of God who walk on our continent. This process brought us closer together, showed us that we are more united than we thought and that we share common challenges to face together. For this reason, we are filled with joy and gratitude for the synodal power of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of a society that generally does not listen, it is significant that a women’s organisation is dedicated to listening to the women of our region. In line with the Ecclesial Assembly process, the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations (WUCWO) with its World Women’s Observatory, in alliance with the Pastoral Socio-Anthropological Observatory of CELAM’s Knowledge Management Centre, produced this study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of women in Latin America and the Caribbean, their families, communities and villages.

Pope Francis in *Querida Amazonia*, in describing the ecclesial dream, aspires “that women have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood” (QA 103).

As I read through the pages of this report, passages from the Gospel came to mind, such as Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, or the one who was caught in adultery and He delivers her from her persecutors and makes her dignity reappear in her, or the women running to the tomb looking for the body of Jesus, or Mary standing near her Son on the cross... in short, so many echoes of these Gospel examples embodied in the sufferings and resilience of the women of our region.

That is why we are publishing this report which, developed with scientific seriousness, presents the feelings and concrete proposals of thousands of women. At the same time, we renew our commitment to work to **promote the active participation of women in the life of the Church, as well as their irreplaceable role in society**, challenges that we have assumed in the Ecclesial Assembly, among others.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe help us, following this “listening”, to produce the “overflow” at the impulse of the Spirit, in order to generate on our continent, pastoral proposals that overcome the current crisis and promote creative responses to the cries of the most vulnerable and of the planet.

P. O. Jorge Eduardo Lozano
Archbishop of San Juan de Cuyo, Argentina
Secretary General of CELAM

General introduction

The gaze of the World Women's Observatory

Just as we can hear without listening, we can also see without looking. An Observatory, on the other hand, consists of an attentive gaze that stops before what it sees and hears and delves into that reality as if it were focusing on the eyes of the person in front of it. If we broaden “our gaze, starting from the eyes of the poor person in front of us (...) we are looking at reality in a different way from our own mentality” (Pope Francis, 26 June 2021).

The World Women's Observatory (WWO) tries to listen to and look at women from various regions of the planet, particularly the most vulnerable, who do not have the power to speak out or, if they do, it may be that no one notices it and their expressions are diluted in the sea of globalisation of indifference.

The objective of the WWO is to give visibility to women, especially the most vulnerable, who seem “invisible”, both in terms of their suffering and their potential, in order to inspire and generate pastoral strategies on the part of the Church, synergies on the part of civil society NGOs, public policies on the part of States and contributions to the international agenda, which favour the integral human development of women and that of their families, communities and peoples.

The World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO) is dedicated to the promotion of women in order to foster their co-responsibility in evangelisation and integral human development; with its 8 million women it extends - through its almost 100 member organisations - to all continents¹. It is an existential observatory of women in the world.

In June 2021, WUCWO created, on an experimental basis, the WWO, with the encouragement of the Holy See's Dicasteries for the Laity, Family and Life and for Promoting Integral Human Development. In order to proceed with the scientific rigour that would enhance its methodology and results, it sought links with academic centres that shared the human and Christian values that characterise its theoretical framework.

In alliance with CELAM's Knowledge Management Centre and its Pastoral Socio-Anthropological Observatory, the WWO carried out the work: ***Impact of Covid-19 on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean***, whose main, but not exclusive, value is qualitative. Carried out between June and December 2021, it aims to be the **first stage of a journey to be made together with the women of the continent**.

This presentation consists of three parts. In the ***State of the Art***, data published by international agencies (UN, ECLAC, etc.) and by complementary sources are collected to show the state of the theme from the quantitative perspective of these agencies. The ***Experts Report*** offers the result of the dialogue established with 25 female experts from 14 countries in the region, with different profiles, languages and roles. They are “experts” because of their experience of concrete insertion in the community they lead and/or in which they serve. The ***Survey Report*** reflects the representations of a non-statistical sample of women from 23 Latin American and Caribbean

¹ WUCWO is the only international public association of the faithful dedicated to women, recognised as such by the Holy See of the Catholic Church; it was founded in 1910 and has international representation at UNESCO, FAO, ECOSOC, the UN Human Rights Council and the Council of Europe (www.wucwo.org).

countries, with testimonies collected through open-ended questions about their experiences during the pandemic. Each part concludes with a theological-pastoral contribution.

The 1st Ecclesial Assembly for Latin America and the Caribbean (November 2021), a historic event in which more than 70,000 believers participated, included some of the results of this research in its working documents. Throughout this report there are notable coincidences with the Narrative Synthesis of the listening process that preceded the Assembly, even though this research includes women who do not consider themselves to be Catholics.

Executive Summary

“MAGNIFYING GLASS” EFFECT: this could be called the holistic and principal effect of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 on the situation of women in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), since the studies collected, the experts consulted and the surveys report the “deepening”, “aggravation” and “worsening” of structural and pre-existing social, economic and cultural iniquities in the continent.

Main findings

➤ Notable absences

- Women in LAC as a whole have not been the subject of the extensive studies conducted by international agencies in researching the impact of Covid-19 and state measures to contain and prevent its spread. The findings presented below refer only to a few countries in the region or to particular studies.
- At the conclusion of the State of the Art, in August 2021, no figures were found on femicides in the LAC region as a whole in 2020 that would make it possible to establish the difference with 2019. However, some cities and countries provided official statistics noting their increase during the pandemic (in Bogotá, Colombia, they increased by 8.6% over the previous year and in Argentina, in the first 9 months of 2020, they rose to one every 32 hours, leaving 231 children without a mother).
- The findings referring to particularly vulnerable population groups, such as migrant women, indigenous women, victims of trafficking, women in prisons, women in peripheral or poor rural areas, and mothers or carers of children with disabilities, come from the experience of “expert” women, inserted and serving in these contexts, because no studies by regional public entities were found aimed at these sectors.

➤ Gender-based violence

- Reporting increased in several countries, both through dedicated hotlines and by neighbours and family members rather than by the victims locked up in their homes. In other countries, during lockdown, the number of reports decreased because the victims were living with their aggressor and did not have a place of refuge to avoid further aggression or femicide.
- During the period of restriction of movement and quarantine, the lack of state presence in the territory made it difficult for women in situations of domestic violence to flee. Psychological and social assistance was also weakened by the impossibility of accessing such services.

- With the closure of schools, churches and public and private help centres, women - old, adult and young - lost spaces for expression, listening, help and support. Not being able to develop their spiritual dimension in such settings contributed to increased pain and anguish.
- The reports cover physical, psychological, economic and symbolic violence, as well as violence by the State in failing to fulfil its obligations and violence in the workplace.
- Specifically during the first year of the pandemic: in Brazil, 25% of women over the age of 16 suffered some kind of aggression (35.2% increase), 5 out of 10 Brazilians have seen a woman suffer violence, 46.7% of the victims also lost their jobs and began to consume more alcohol; in the indigenous peoples of Guatemala, since the beginning of the pandemic, pregnancies among girls from the age of 10 have increased; in Venezuela, although statistics are lacking, it is estimated that femicide has increased fivefold.

➤ **Deterioration of economic autonomy**

- A large percentage of women in LAC tend to be employed in the sectors that have suffered the greatest negative effects in terms of employment and income, such as tourism, manufacturing, commerce, health and education, in addition to their severe structural inclusion in the informal economy. The fall in employment levels and the increase in unemployment added to the pre-existing wage gap between men and women that characterises the gender segregation of labour.
- According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 70.4 per cent of domestic workers were affected by the quarantine measures, through reduced economic activity, unemployment, reduced hours or loss of wages.
- In countries where the government provided time-limited subsidies to the poorest, who were unable to do their temporary jobs, the economy of women and their families temporarily improved, but when the income was withdrawn and inflation rose, the economic emergency worsened compared to the pre-pandemic period.

➤ **Worsening of the feminisation of poverty**

- Impoverishment placed a superlative burden on the situation of women whose households are deprived of safe drinking water and who spend 5-12 hours a week more on unpaid domestic and care work than women living without such deprivation.
- The deterioration was accentuated among rural, indigenous, migrant and peripheral women, due to barriers to selling their food and handicraft products in markets or on the streets, and obstacles to accessing productive resources such as drinking water, agricultural inputs, fuel for transport, etc.
- Indigenous entrepreneurs have seen their community production, on which hundreds of families depend for their livelihoods, affected and a high percentage of their small and large enterprises are disappearing.
- Migrant women denounced further discrimination during the emergency, with the closure of day care centres forcing them to leave their jobs to care for their children and/or the reduction of their jobs as caregivers or domestic workers in family homes.

➤ **Physical and mental health impairment**

- The prioritisation of health services to combat the effect of the virus led to a 40% decrease in pregnancy check-ups in 11 countries in the region, according to Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). This led to maternal distress and an increase in maternal and infant mortality in childbirths.

- The telemedicine implemented did not allow the most vulnerable women to be attended to, as they often do not know how to use mobile technologies for this type of practice. The electronic mental health system became almost inaccessible to them as they did not have a reserved space in their homes or had to share their mobile phones with the rest of their families.
- The lack of treatment of the sick in health centres meant that women generally took care of them at home, with the obvious risk of increased transmission of the virus.
- Access to vaccination has been hindered for indigenous women's families, as priority is given to cities and they do not receive adequate information regarding the effects of vaccines in their territories.
- A number of studies from different countries have found high levels of fear, distress and depression in women, as well as psychological and emotional burnout in those who faced intensified pace and higher productivity demands in remote work.

➤ **Increased care work**

- The structural inequality affecting women in terms of unequal distribution of care work was accentuated due to the permanence of children and adolescents in households with access to remote classrooms, the disruption of other care networks and resources, and the limited coverage of the health system that shifted the burden of care to households. Responsibilities tripled.
- In general, remote work increased the burden of care and domestic work. Only some groups of professional women or women with university or graduate education expressed that remote work brought them closer to their husbands and children and gave them more time for physical activity and leisure.
- UNICEF reports reveal a 51% higher burden of care work for women. In many of the responses to the survey, indicators of stereotypes and traditional mandates for the roles of men and women within the household can still be detected, as if the roles assigned to each could not be transformed over the centuries.

➤ **Difficulties in education and social inequalities**

- The closure of the schools exacerbated multiple social inequalities such as the digital divide in knowledge and access to the use of information and communication technologies, as well as the lack of policies for the reconciliation of family life and work for women, among others.
- Many mothers were unable to understand school instructions and explain them to their children, nor were they able to access virtual classes due to lack of Internet connection. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the cost of broadband service for the poorest sectors is on average 13% of their income, and 39.1% of women in households in this sector have no income of their own.
- The problems of having to share a mobile phone in vulnerable families with insufficient technology to store homework, resulted in many of the pupils subjected to the remote system not achieving their educational goals and the consequent distress of their mothers.
- For teachers, distance education meant an extraordinary effort, particularly for teachers in rural areas. Not only did they not have the required support, but the work material was often developed for virtual teaching in cities and not in rural or multicultural contexts.
- The “collapse” of education in the region due to the pandemic has not yet been strictly estimated, but a negative effect of “simulated education” and school dropout due to lack of

encouragement is estimated. For example, in the midst of the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, 50% of children were not re-enrolled in school in 2021.

- On the other hand, the survey responses from highly educated women in charge of accompanying children reflect a positive experience, even though adapting to the distance learning system was not always easy and a certain percentage reported fatigue and stress.
- These women said they had taken advantage of the emergency to take virtual courses, or to continue or resume their studies and training in communication technologies (ICTs).

➤ **Rise of organised crime for trafficking in women**

- When the borders of countries in the region remained closed, migrants and/or refugees needed irregular and/or informal ways to move, which increased their exposure to organised crime with a high impact on the commodification of women.
- The pandemic did not stop trafficking networks but, on the contrary, trafficking increased due to absent or prostituted governments and collusion or inactivity of law enforcement and police forces. Traffickers and demanders of services have established new strategies of recruiting
- and “marketing” victims through social networks and by transporting victims to clients and returning them to their homes.
- Families made destitute by hunger and poverty during the pandemic accepted that their daughters, girl children or adolescents, would provide sexual services to bring home money. Seventy-six per cent of trafficked and sexually exploited persons are women. Of every 10 persons trafficked, 6 are minors.
- There was also an increase in the number of marriages of indigenous children, exchanged for money or animals. In addition, many girls and adolescents living in extreme poverty began to work as domestic servants, suffering abuse and exploitation.
- The pandemic has even had a strong impact on the lives of women living “on” or “off” the street. There is a cultural, moral and religious stigma that considers them as drug addicts, crazy or prostitutes. To survive during the crisis, they risked prostitution, violence and becoming “mules” transporting drugs. With the curfew, many women ended up being arrested by the police for not having documents - a very common situation for people on the streets. The police are often very violent and brutal towards them.

➤ **Increased xenophobia and racism towards women**

- Migrants often arouse xenophobia and racism, but women even more so if they fall into the hands of “coyotes”, who smuggle illegal immigrants across the border, particularly between Mexico and the United States. Millions of Venezuelan women have crossed other countries in the region, such as Colombia, to reach the north of the continent, suffering discrimination and abuse. Lately there has been a growing influx of Haitian men and women.
- The crisis, among its negative effects, led to an increase in xenophobia in fundamentally welcoming peoples such as Brazil. Women from the LGBTQIA+ community were seriously assaulted or raped.
- Many women as migrants and others as indigenous migrants - recognised as refugees in destination countries, but not as members of indigenous communities or indigenous peoples - were denied certain government benefits during the pandemic and continue to struggle to maintain their culture and identity.

➤ **Death in solitude and deepening of grief**

- Death was the worst experience according to the women who responded to the survey: the loss of loved ones, the impossibility of saying goodbye and the prohibition of funerals and religious rites due to contagion.
- Particularly acute was the suffering of mothers, wives and children of prisoners in Peru, who died during riots demanding health and medical care in the first three months of the pandemic.
- The experts affirm that the deaths of those close to them have left a deep mark on women because of the mourning processes that have not been accompanied or ritualised during the pandemic.

➤ **Support and lacks**

- The survey responses indicate that among the categories of family, friends, church, neighbours, NGOs and government, women felt the most support from family, secondly from friends and church, and lastly from government.
- Coexistence within the home, according to the women surveyed, improved or remained the same, with better communication and dialogue between family members, being able to get to know and/or value the children or the partner more. In a smaller percentage, it was conflictive and risky due to the aggressions and violence to which the women were subjected.
- In terms of deprivation, the most felt need was for health, followed by education, psychological aspects and care.

➤ **Lights and shadows in the woman-Church relationship**

- The bond with God is what most often characterises the experience of women during the pandemic, both Catholic and of other Christian faiths, equally. It was an opportunity to find strength and encouragement to live in the midst of the chaos of the pandemic.
- During the emergency, different ways of living the faith, of receiving formation from the Church through virtual means and of developing listening and spiritual guidance, as well as spaces for help and assistance, where to offer support to others, were re-evaluated. Everything helped to deepen personal and community spirituality.
- The increase in social action and solidarity through the organisation of women's networks for the particular care of others in times of pandemics is especially highlighted. Most of them consider that the Church was creative in strategies to serve its faithful.
- Most of the women said they had grown closer to God and the Church. They also highlighted online celebrations and prayers as a very positive point. What they regret most is the ban on face-to-face celebrations and the consequent impossibility of receiving communion and the sacraments.
- The women also witnessed the importance of the online formation meetings and the expansion of study possibilities, both personally and in groups. They perceive that the Church has sought ways to accompany; it has become closer and more committed to reality.
- They acknowledged the special service that the Church provided to those sick and affected by Covid-19. However, some felt loneliness and lack of fraternity or lack of care and closeness in their illness.
- Women lost their spaces and their important roles in prayer groups, catechesis, etc. The virtual Masses reinforced the role of the clergy and made the role of women in the communities invisible, relegating them only to a rather passive participation.

- The interruption of the activities of religious groups and some activities was frustrating, resulting in the paralysis of the attention to people and the service provided by the pastoral care centres.

Proposals made

➤ **Where to go from here**

- Towards the eradication of all forms of violence and discrimination against women in order to establish equal rights for men and women in practice.
- Towards the application and promotion of the principle of solidarity and the cultivation of community ties where the role of women is highlighted.
- Towards the generation of a culture of care, in which female leadership is historically notorious, as a new form of exercising citizenship.

➤ **How to proceed**

- Developing the spiritual-ecclesial dimension: with trust in God, the support of family and faith community, the hope that comes from prayer and perseverance in the teachings of Jesus.
- Empowering women's resilience: living the pandemic as an opportunity to "reinvent" oneself, without letting oneself be discouraged, facing the crisis with creativity in order to emerge stronger.
- Organising in solidarity networks: joining together to help others, establishing alliances with cooperation agencies, fostering synergies between groups and growing a collective conscience.

➤ **What needs to be done**

- Research and dissemination on structural and symbolic violence.
- Reflection on gender theories and prioritisation of gender "permeating" pastoral efforts and actions.
- Creation of spaces for accompaniment, listening and support, where women feel safe when they need help.
- Formation for women's leadership, intensifying pastoral and theological education, strengthening their training as pastoral agents, instituting ministries that legitimise and strengthen their mission.
- Representation of women in public spaces, focusing on collaboration rather than competition and austerity in the lifestyles of public policy decision-makers.
- Intervention to humanise relationships through intergenerational conversation circles, including the elderly so that older people can collaborate with the new generations.
- Creation of mourning spaces to share experiences and pray together, adding popular religiosity as a healing factor.
- Preventing violence by working, from childhood onwards, for equal rights for men and women, which implies strategies to reverse the problems of access to education - including digital education - and overcoming poverty.
- Reform of the justice delivery system in order to provide a comprehensive and effective response to the serious problem of violence against women. Its complexity requires a multi-sectoral approach and the professionalisation of justice system operators.

General conclusions

In the six-month process of drafting this document, an attempt has been made to “listen” to three different types of “voices”: in the *State of the Art*, the first part, what is expressed in the main technical reports and research published on ***The Impact of Covid-19 on women in Latin America and the Caribbean***; in the *Experts Report*, the second part, the voices of the experience of women who are leading projects in favour of integral human development in their respective communities; and in the third part, the *Survey Report*, the experiences, testimonies, opinions, sufferings, achievements and dreams of those who have voluntarily responded on that same subject.

It was an active, attentive and receptive listening carried out by members of CELAM's Knowledge Management Centre, through its Pastoral Socio-anthropological Observatory and WUCWO's World Women's Observatory, who worked as a team from different countries and in different languages. Within the team itself, they worked collaboratively, with parrhesia in dialogue and shared discernment, in order to make decisions that made it possible to systematise and reflect the “voices” heard in these lines.

Two coordinates framed the project: the pandemic and synodality. The fluctuations of Covid-19, preventive measures or those aimed at reducing contagion and its consequences, and the many uncertainties of 2021 and 2022 were reflected in the work. The 1st Latin American Ecclesial Assembly and the launch of the Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission”, to which Pope Francis is calling the entire Catholic Church, contextualised, inspired and invigorated the work.

In the message sent by the Holy Father to the participants in the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean, Francis underlined two words: **“listening”** and **“overflow”**. In our case, the present contribution corresponds to the “listening” stage. We are aware that we still have a long way to go in terms of listening in order to give visibility to the most vulnerable women in the region. However, with the voices already collected, we intend to begin the second stage, the “overflow” one, disseminating the voices contained in the report, in order to find paths that will lead us to realise the fraternal humanity of which the Pope invites us to dream. In *Fratelli tutti*, he shares and makes explicit this dream of universal brotherhood for believers and non-believers.

If we consider, together with the “voices” of the present document, those of the Ecclesial Assembly expressed in the challenges resulting from the November 2021 meeting, such as, for example: to “accompany the victims of social and ecclesial injustices with processes of recognition and reparation”, to “encourage the active participation of women in ministries, government, discernment and ecclesial decision-making”, to “promote and defend the dignity of life and of the human person from conception to natural death”, to “increase formation in synodality in order to eradicate clericalism”, to “promote the participation of the laity in areas of cultural, political, social and ecclesial transformation” and to “listen to the cry of the poor, the excluded and the discarded”, we will appreciate a consonant harmony.

We hope with faith that those responsible in our countries, in international organisations and in the media, as well as leaders in social networks, leaders and members of civil society organisations, Presidents of Episcopal Commissions, Bishops of our dioceses, our pastors and every member of the People of God will find their sphere of action and responsibility to join forces and generate synergies that will allow us women too to develop fully and to exercise our co-responsibility, with competence, creativity and resilience.

We wish to conclude by thanking the Holy Father for his commitment to Latin American and Caribbean women. “We have a grave obligation to understand, respect, appreciate and promote the ecclesial and social impact of all that women do”, Pope Francis told the CELAM Committee in Bogota (7 September 2017). “Please, do not let them be reduced to servants of our ingrained clericalism. For they are on the front lines of the Latin American Church, in their setting out with Jesus, in their persevering amid the sufferings of their people, in their clinging to the hope that conquers death, and in their joyful way of proclaiming to the world that Christ is alive and risen”.