

Employability and gender in Ecuador: main challenges in terms of equity

Empleabilidad y género en Ecuador: principales retos en materia de equidad

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes labor inequalities between men and women in Ecuador, with the aim of understanding how gaps in employment, underemployment, and income relate to persistent social and economic structures. The study applies a quantitative-descriptive approach based on data from the INEC's National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment (ENEMDU) for the period 2019–2024. It examines rates of adequate employment, underemployment, unemployment, informality, and the wage gap. The analysis is complemented by a review of the literature on gender segregation in the labor market and the impact of unpaid work on female participation. The results show substantial gaps. In 2024, adequate male employment was 41.4%, while female employment reached only 28.4%. The wage gap remains at 16.65%, with lower average incomes for women despite having equal or higher levels of education. Women are concentrated in feminized activities—education, health, domestic service, lodging, and food—characterized by lower pay and high informality. In addition, unpaid work falls disproportionately on them, limiting their time available for formal employment and restricting their labor mobility. The discussion points out that these inequalities respond to structural factors that transcend current labor policies. Care responsibilities create a "sticky floor" that keeps women in precarious jobs, while the low presence of women in leadership positions confirms the existence

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of "glass ceilings." Public policies have advanced, but they have not yet transformed the cultural conditions that sustain inequality.

Keywords: Women, gender, employment, gaps, sex

RESUMEN

Esta investigación analiza las desigualdades laborales entre hombres y mujeres en Ecuador, con el objetivo de comprender cómo las brechas en el empleo, el subempleo y los ingresos se relacionan con las estructuras sociales y económicas persistentes. El estudio aplica un enfoque cuantitativo-descriptivo basado en datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Empleo, Desempleo y Subempleo (ENEMDU) del INEC para el período 2019-2024. Examina las tasas de empleo adecuado, subempleo, desempleo, informalidad y la brecha salarial. El análisis se complementa con una revisión de la literatura sobre la segregación de género en el mercado laboral y el impacto del trabajo no remunerado en la participación femenina. Los resultados muestran brechas sustanciales. En 2024, el empleo adecuado masculino era del 41,4 %, mientras que el empleo femenino solo alcanzaba el 28,4 %. La brecha salarial se mantiene en el 16,65 %, con ingresos medios más bajos para las mujeres a pesar de tener niveles de educación iguales o superiores. Las mujeres se concentran en actividades feminizadas —educación, salud, servicio doméstico, alojamiento y alimentación— que se caracterizan por salarios más bajos y un alto grado de informalidad. Además, el trabajo no remunerado recae de manera desproporcionada sobre ellas, lo que limita su tiempo disponible para el empleo formal y restringe su movilidad laboral. El debate señala que estas desigualdades responden a factores estructurales que trascienden las políticas laborales actuales. Las responsabilidades de cuidado crean un «suelo pegajoso» que mantiene a las mujeres en empleos precarios, mientras que la escasa presencia de mujeres en puestos de liderazgo confirma la existencia de «techos de cristal». Las políticas públicas han avanzado, pero aún no han transformado las condiciones culturales que sustentan la desigualdad.

Palabras clave: Mujeres, género, empleo, brechas, sexo

INTRODUCTION

Ecuador ranks 25th among 146 countries in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index. Progress has been made in health and education; however, inequalities persist in economic participation, especially in access to employment (Primicias, 2025). Progress in gender equality regulations led by the Ministry of Women and Human Rights, in coordination with the Ministry of Labor, includes:

2018—Comprehensive Organic Law to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women: Comprehensive measures for prevention, protection, and redress for victims. Specialized judicial units to address gender-based violence. Intersectoral coordination of care protocols is required (National Assembly of Ecuador, 2021).

2019 Reform of the Democracy Code: 50% gender parity in the lists of candidates for the Assembly by 2025. Presidential tickets must be composed of both men and women. Sanctions against political gender violence.

2023- Violet Economy Law: Plans for the prevention of sexual harassment and equality in companies. Flexible working hours, equal pay, shared parental leave, and childcare services. Mandatory inclusion of women on boards of directors and tax incentives for hiring (National Assembly, 2023).

2023—Organic Law on the Right to Human Care: Maternity, paternity, and care leave that supports both genders equally. Provides care centers and breastfeeding rooms in workplaces. Promotes shared responsibility for care and protects against discrimination in care (National Assembly of Ecuador, 2023).

2024- Organic Law on Equal Pay for Women and Men: Requires equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender. Establishes a system to monitor and enforce equal pay. Establishes penalties for non-compliance (National Assembly, n.d.). As evidenced, there have been significant regulatory advances; however, employability in the country in real terms is still a concern, with significant gender gaps persisting, the barriers of which cause women to continue to suffer discrimination in employment, pay, and occupation. As indicated by Urquidi et al. (2023), in many cases women's professional profiles are superior to those of men, but their income levels do not reflect this better job profile, suggesting the existence of gender bias. It is also considered that the total gap exists between workers in the informal sector, in rural areas, and among the self-employed, with a heterogeneous income difference being perceived, but in favor of men in most occupations.

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MATERIAL Y METHOD

The results of the employment, underemployment, and unemployment indicators differentiated by gender from the National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment (ENEMDU) for the last six years (2019-2024) were taken as a reference. Theoretical information on employability from a gender perspective was compiled, followed by a search for quantitative information on these variables in Ecuador (from 2019-2024), using information from INEC (National Survey of Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment-ENEMDU) as a reference framework. The information was reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted from a gender perspective in order to identify possible opportunities for improvement in the application of policies related to the differentiated employability of men and women in Ecuador. The results provided by the ENEMDU 2024 survey, as well as its

methodology and census data, are available to the public free of charge on the INEC website.

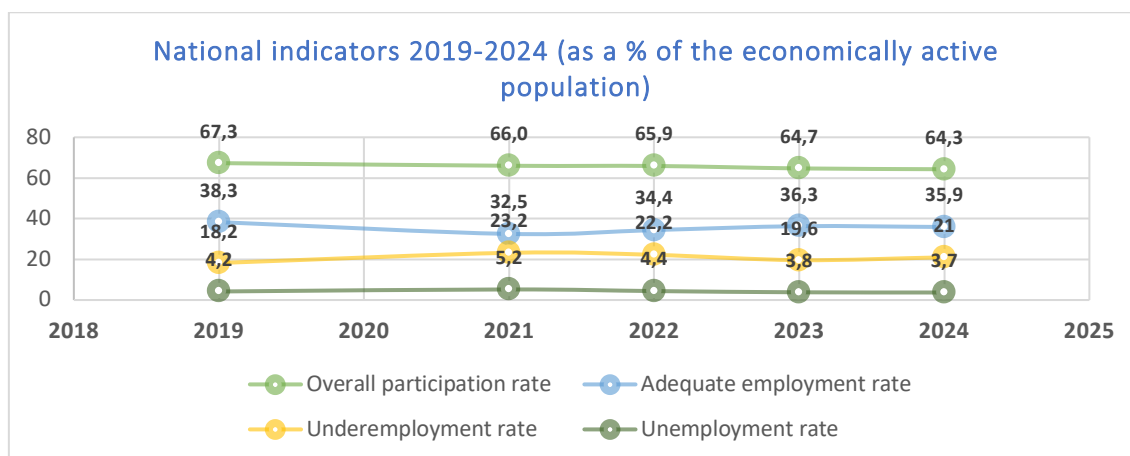
RESULT

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 Employment, unemployment, and underemployment 2019-2020 4

National indicators	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
(as a % of the economically active population)					
Overall participation rate	67.3	66	65.9	64.7	64.3
Adequate employment rate	38.3	32.5	34.4	36.3	35.9
Underemployment rate	18.2	23.2	22.2	19.6	21
Unemployment rate	4.2	5.2	4.4	3.8	3.7

Note: Comparison of indicators from the 2019-2024 EAP. Adapted from the 2024 National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment, by (INEC, 2024a)

Figure I National indicators 2019-2024 with respect to the EAP



Note: Comparison of indicators from the 2019-2024 EAP. Adapted from the 2024 National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment, by (INEC, 2024a)

As can be seen in Figure N.I, 2024 was the period with the lowest overall unemployment rate of 3.7%, in contrast to the previous five years. When comparing the indicators for 2024 with those for 2019, the reality is much more striking: adequate employment fell by 2.4 points, while the underemployment rate rose by 2.8 points. 2019 was the year with the highest adequate employment rate, and this figure

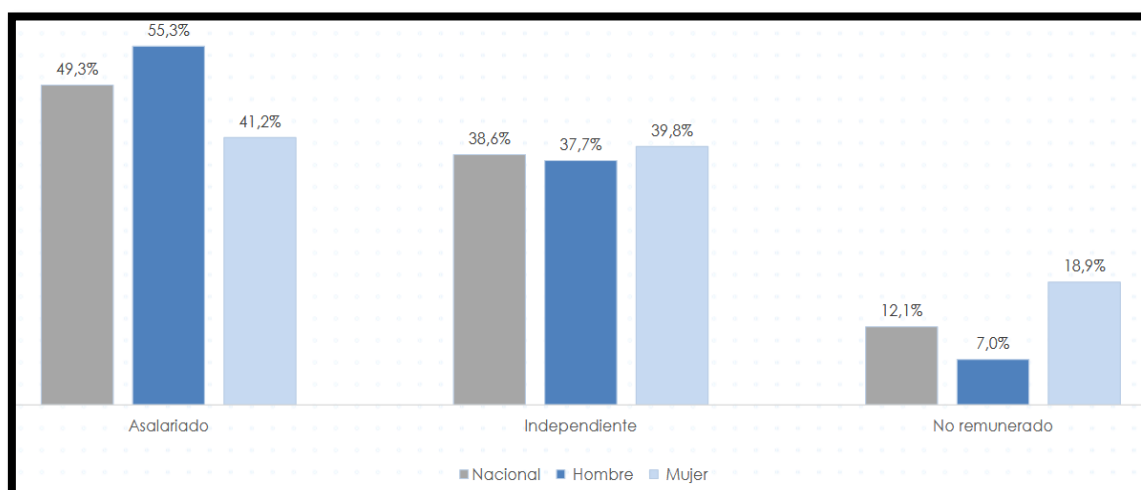
of 38.3 has not been recovered. The underemployment rate has a direct correlation with this behavior. It is important to mention that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the years 2021-2022 had the greatest impact on the creation of adequate sources of employment and, therefore, affected people's economies.

According to the main results of the 2024 Annual Labor Market and Poverty Report (INEC, 2024a), the adequate employment rate in 2024, by gender, was 41.4% for men and 28.4% for women, with a gap of 13 percentage points, concentrated in the 30-44 age group. In terms of income, there is a notable gap of 16.65%, with men earning an average income of \$507.50 and women \$423, a wage inequality that persists over time and continues to be part of an economic structure that benefits men.

As explained by Cacciamali et al. (2013), analysis of the process of women's social and labor inclusion in Ecuador reveals that sociocultural factors continue to affect female employability. Women encounter barriers to accessing better-paid productive sectors, which translates into lower participation in highly skilled occupations and organizational leadership. The study highlights that even though women have increased their level of education, this does not automatically translate into equal employment opportunities due to the persistence of visible and invisible discriminatory mechanisms in selection and promotion processes.

In Ecuador, the employed population falls into three categories: salaried, self-employed, and unpaid. As indicated in the Report on the Main Results of the Labor Market and Annual Poverty 2024 (INEC, 2024a) for this period, at the national level, 49.3% of employed persons were salaried, 38.6% were self-employed, and 12.1% were unpaid. Men represent 55.3% of the salaried employed population, compared to 41.2% of women. Women's participation in the self-employed group is higher than that of men, as detailed below:

Figure 2 Employed population by sex according to occupation category 202 4



Note: Figure 2 shows the employed population by sex according to occupation. Adapted from Main results of the National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment-Annual 2024, by (INEC, 2024c).

Employed population by sex and branch of activity

Table 2. Distribution of employed population by branch of activity, by sex 2024

Branch of activity	National	Male	Women	Difference Gender (p.p)
Agriculture, livestock, and fishing	30.6	32.5	28.1	4.4
Oil and mining	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.5
Manufacturing	10.1	10.7	9.3	1.4
Electricity and water supply	0.6	0.8	0.3	0.5
Construction	6.3	10.6	0.4	10.2
Trade	17.3	15.0	20.4	-5.4
Accommodation and food services	6.8	3.8	10.9	-7.1
Transport	5.9	9.4	1.2	8.2
Postal and Communications	0.8	1.1	0.6	0.5
Financial services activities	0.7	0.5	0.9%	-0.4%
Professional and administrative activities	5.2	4.8	5.6	-0.8
Education and social and health services	6.1	3.5	9.7	-6.2
Public administration and defense	2.9	3.3	2.3	1.0
Domestic service	2.5	0.2	5.7	-5.5
Other services	3.7	3.1	4.6	-1.5
Total	100	100	100	

Note: Table 2 shows the distribution of the employed population by sector of activity in percentages. Adapted from Main results of the National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment—Annual 2024, by (INEC, 2024c).

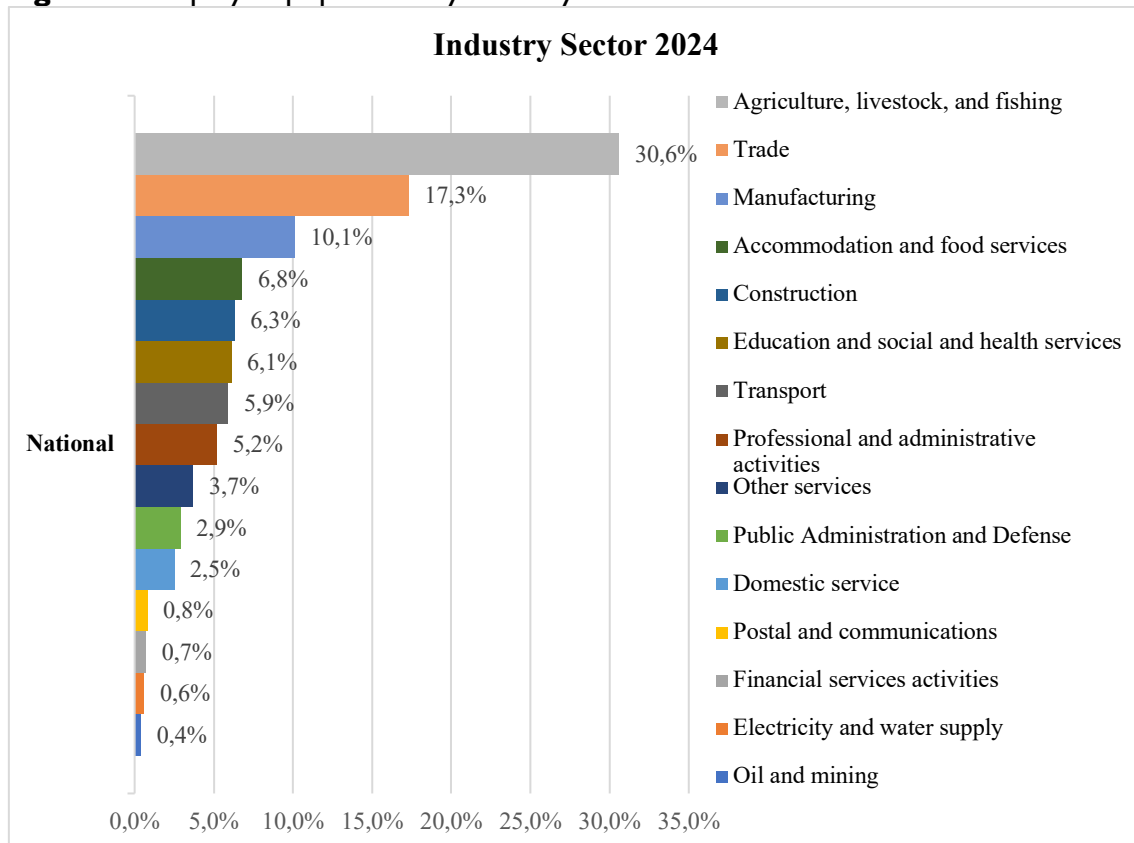
As shown in Table 2 (INEC, 2024b), in 2024 the employed population is distributed across 15 sectors of activity, broken down nationally and by gender, with two important activities standing out: in Agriculture, livestock, and fishing, which is mainly represented by 32.5% of men versus 28.1% of women; in Commerce, 20.4% of women work in this activity, and 15.0% of men. In sectors such as education and social and health services, domestic service, accommodation and food services, and other services, the gaps favor

women. It is clear that in activities with a social component, such as education and health, female participation is higher than male participation. However, these activities are often not the most lucrative in terms of remuneration, with wage gaps identified that depend not only on the sector in which they work but also on the type of remuneration they receive. For example, in the field of accommodation and food services, there is a predominant factor, which is the type of contract for many of these job opportunities and the duration of the contract, as many of these jobs are generated on an hourly basis and not on a fixed contract or fixed salary basis. This has a direct impact on women's economy and well-being. At the national level, of the 15 branches of activity, 7 were led by women and 8 by men.

Table 3. *Industry - Variation 2023-2024*

Industry	2023	2024	Variation
Agriculture, livestock, and fishing	2,432,717	2,504,766	72,049
Trade	1,434,886	1,416,044	-18,842
Manufacturing	816,388	827,405	11,017
Accommodation and food services	560,574	555,862	-4,712
Construction	515,039	515,874	835
Education and social and health services	518,500	500,868	-17,632
Transport	467,319	484,359	17,040
Professional and administrative activities	405,970	421,418	15,448
Other services	318,144	305,377	-12,767
Public administration and defense	226,431	233,882	7,451
Domestic service	201,629	206,779	5,150
Postal and communications	72,284	68,829	-3,455
Financial Services Activities	54,705	56,371	1,666
Electricity and water supply	48,776	47,363	-1,413
Oil and mining	36,285	30,617	-5,668

Figure 3. Employed population by industry 2023-2024



Note: Figure 3 shows the employed population by sector of activity. Adapted from Main results of the National Survey of Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment—Annual 2024, by (INEC, 2024c).

When analyzing these 15 activities, it is determined that the main source of employment in the agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing sector between 2023 and 2024 showed a variation of 11,017 points. While the population employed in the manufacturing sector increased by 1.1 points, this represents an increase in the number of people employed compared to 2023. Agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing is the activity that generates the most value within these 15 activities, demonstrating that the country's productive context is characterized by being one of the world's leading producers and exporters of cocoa, bananas, roses, shrimp, and oil, among other products. In terms of variation between 2023 and 2024, the three main branches of activity that registered a decrease were: Trade, Education, and Social and Health Services and Other Services. As indicated by (Dillon Pérez & Espinosa Fuentes, 2018), there is a demand for more competent professionals with an appropriate professional profile that meets the employment needs of different sectors;

however, the reproduction of gender stereotypes in the differentiated incorporation of men and women into the labor market has not allowed for the real incorporation of policies associated with gender non-discrimination to become visible. As mentioned by Enríquez et al. (2023) regarding the Ecuadorian textile industry, gender influences levels of corporate governance and decision-making processes, highlighting that organizational structures continue to reproduce inequalities and limit female participation in strategic areas of the country's textile sector. Additionally, (García & Gómez, 2020) offer an important perspective in which they mention that greater diversity on boards tends to improve transparency and favor more long-term oriented decisions.

According to (INEC, 2025), Unpaid Work (TNR) measures the time spent on three main groups of activities: caring for household members, domestic work for one's own household, and work for other households in the community and volunteer work, which were not financially recognized. Measuring these activities allows us to assign an economic value to them and highlight the contribution they make, especially women, to the country's development. INEC data show the magnitude of this inequality. For every 100 hours of TNR, women perform 75, or almost three times more than men. In weekly terms, women spend an average of 28.7 hours on these activities, compared to 11.4 hours for men, which shows a deeply asymmetrical distribution of domestic and care responsibilities. If TNR were incorporated into official economic accounts, its contribution would be significant. As mentioned by Aguiar et al. (2025), in Ecuador in 2023, the production of TNR reached \$24.964 billion, of which 78.4% corresponded to unpaid domestic work for the household itself. The gross value added of TNR represented 21.0% of GDP, with women contributing 15.6% compared to 5.4% for men.

Among the activities carried out for the household itself, food preparation and service accounted for 41.4% (84.7% women and 15.3% men).

- With regard to caregiving activities, caring for household members accounts for 88.9% (72.7% women and 27.3% men).
- Within activities for other households and the community, volunteer work in non-profit institutions accounts for 73.5%, with greater female participation (59.3%).

The savings generated by TNR are significant: for every \$100 of household consumption expenditure, households save \$35 due to the lack of economic recognition of TNR.

On the other hand, TNR also constitutes a social problem that affects most women. As pointed out by Guanán Hernández & Lorente Campos (2019), the assignment of this type of task corresponds to traditional gender roles, which reinforces structural inequality in access to rights such as social security affiliation. The Constitution of Ecuador recognizes this right, but in practice it is not enforced. TNR has significant economic value, but it remains outside the scope of National Accounts production,

which perpetuates its undervaluation and the precariousness of those who perform it. (Roldán-García et al., 2012) show that, during the pandemic, teleworking intensified the unpaid workload and revealed weak patterns of shared responsibility. Unemployment in Ecuador is one of the most critical indicators. When reviewing the national unemployment rate in 2024, it was 3.7% , while in 2023 it was 3.8%, a decrease of only 0.1%. In the urban sector, , this rate stood at 5.0%, and in the rural sector at 1.4%; On the other hand, when considering the characterization of the unemployed population by gender in 2024, at the national level, it represented 4.7% for women and 3.0% for men, with a gap of 1.7% . Women, for the most part, have higher unemployment rates in: areas (rural and urban), ethnicity (indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, mestizo, white, and montuvia), and age group. As Urquidi et al. (2023) rightly point out, in structural terms, this reality not only expresses distributive injustice, but also creates a "sticky floor": the concentration of women in unpaid domestic and care work limits their time for formal employment, training, and occupational advancement, keeping them in low-paying, highly informal, or precarious jobs. Recent studies on the wage gap in Ecuador show that women face disadvantages especially in the lower segments of the income distribution, which is consistent with this "sticky floor" effect. At the same time, the combination of unpaid work and discrimination in the labor market maintains a "glass ceiling" that prevents women from occupying managerial or hierarchical positions at the highest levels, as mentioned by Franco (2018), who points out that stereotypes in everyday life, often turned into prejudices, to the field of business management, the result is a predisposition toward men when selecting a person for a management position. Analysis of the wage gap by occupation and professional level indicates that, although the simple average might suggest reduced gaps, in management and professional positions the wage difference greatly favors men, even when women have equal or greater training. The studies analyzed show that gender inequality continues to be a structural feature of the Ecuadorian labor market, both in terms of occupational segmentation and income gaps, as well as difficulties in women's social and labor market integration. From a quantitative perspective, (Dillon Pérez & Espinosa Fuentes, 2018) analyze the Structural Business Survey (ENESEM) between 2007 and 2018 and show that employability indicators reveal clear differences between men and women. Differential hiring, wage gaps, and the limited presence of women in decision-making positions reveal that, despite institutional reforms, equality in employability remains incomplete. The authors conclude that the patriarchal structure of the Ecuadorian labor market restricts women's access to full opportunities for professional integration and advancement. The study by (Vieyna & Ortega, 2021), focused on the city of Guayaquil, delves into the obstacles to women's social and labor inclusion. Its results show that, although there are government and municipal programs aimed at promoting equity, women continue to face greater difficulties in accessing formal employment due to the prevalence of gender stereotypes that assign productive tasks according to sex.

Likewise, there is evidence of marked occupational segregation that relegates women to traditionally feminized activities, limiting their potential for development and recognition in strategic productive sectors. For its part, the Inter-American Development Bank (Urquidi et al., 2023) provides evidence on the evolution of the labor income gap between 2000 and 2021. The econometric analysis based on Blinder-Oaxaca and Nopo shows that, although the total gap has narrowed, an unexplained gap persists, attributable to gender biases.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenges associated with the persistence of gender gaps in the workplace lead us to examine and analyze the following:

Despite regulatory advances, traditional and patriarchal beliefs still exist that associate women with caregiving roles and men with leadership and decision-making functions, which directly influence career choices, limit female labor mobility, and tend to place women in less valued or lower-paid sectors. This cultural challenge hinders the effective implementation of equality policies and requires long-term educational and communication interventions.

In many productive sectors in Ecuador, unjustified wage differences between men and women persist, even when they hold similar positions or have equivalent levels of education. The absence of mandatory wage audit mechanisms, together with opaque business practices, makes it difficult to identify and correct these inequalities. Without reliable and comparable data, it becomes complex to implement corrective actions that guarantee equitable wages.

Women continue to be underrepresented in senior positions, on boards of directors, and in senior management. Barriers to access are related to male-dominated labor networks, non-explicit selection criteria, and a lack of gender-focused promotion policies. This gap affects policy design and strategic decisions, as institutions lose the diversity of perspectives and skills that are essential for equitable governance.

Ecuadorian women devote more hours to unpaid domestic and care work, which reduces their available time to participate fully in the labor market. Insufficient provision of public care services, low male participation in domestic tasks, and the lack of robust policies on shared responsibility create direct obstacles to women's retention, professional growth, and wage mobility.

Although Ecuador has regulatory frameworks that promote gender equality, the practical application of these instruments is uneven. The lack of sustained state oversight, poor compliance by the private sector, and limited institutional capacity to monitor equity indicators affect the effectiveness of policies. Without robust and coordinated monitoring systems, measures are diluted and fail to transform the dynamics of labor discrimination.

As a country, we need to generate new ways to balance employment opportunities, because we are not asking for exceptions, we are asking for justice and equity, valuing

gender parity with a gender perspective, promoting teamwork, and improving the living conditions of those who for decades have been primarily responsible for shaping society and fulfilling multiple roles, many of which remain invisible but necessary. Taken together, these results agree that Ecuadorian women actively participate in the labor market but face systematic barriers that limit their employability, effective integration, and equitable access to income and leadership positions.

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