Women in LAC have made huge strides in labor participation and access to education and health over the past three decades. Female development outcomes in LAC have even surpassed men in many sectors and rank well above many other regions in the world. Girls are more likely than boys to be enrolled in and complete secondary and tertiary school. Seventy million women have entered the LAC labor force since 1980, marking unprecedented global growth in female labor participation. Women currently make up about 40 percent of the region’s labor force. Women’s increased professional engagement has also translated into larger participation rates in formal politics. The share of parliamentary seats held by women in Latin America is 24 percent, the highest in the world and exceeds high-income OECD countries (23 percent). Maternal mortality and fertility rates have also dropped significantly across the region. But, as gender parity gaps are closing, women also facing new challenges to simultaneously succeed as mothers and working professionals.

Women often face a lack of flexibility in their professional life, whether in the provision of childcare services or the formalization of part-time work arrangements. Given this precarious situation, women often have to make lower salaries or work in the informal sector. However, females display heterogeneous outcomes in terms of labor market entry, participation, and economic behavior on account of social and economic characteristics. The relationship between economic development and female economic participation is complex. Therefore, it is unwise to take an inflexible view on the relationship between equal access to and outcomes of labor markets.

Social norms have been changing in LAC since the 1960s. Discriminatory views regarding women in the workplace have decreased and it is now common for women to think of having both a career and a family. However, being a mother in a family also comes with certain expectations, requirements, and interactions and the family is often a mediator of a women’s ability or desire to partake in the labor market. For example, married women participate less in the labor market than single women and having children influences the occupation that the mother takes (public versus private sector or informal arrangements).

Previous policies to eliminate gender discrimination and improve women’s access to education and other services have helped women get ahead in LAC. However, the study concludes that a new set of policies are needed to help women balance demands of professional careers and family life.

“Legislation that acknowledges the pressures of motherhood and of the day-to-day demands on households’ time, can generate important results by enabling women to fulfill their identities as mothers and workers, raising the quality of their economic participation, thereby increasing their well-being, as well as that of the entire household.”

- Laura Chioda