

## ENSAYO CIENTÍFICO

# The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on labor force participation of women working in the tourism sector for small businesses in Costa Rica

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### Abstract

Women's employment has been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why this study sought to understand the effects of said pandemic on female labor force participation in Costa Rica's tourism industry. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews and surveys. Results indicate that travel restrictions have negatively affected different sectors within the tourism industry, leading to higher unemployment levels that fundamentally affect women's finances. Also, women's mental health was affected by these conditions, particularly at the onset of the health crisis. While women's employment was severely affected, findings show that many of them found alternative sources of income to sustain themselves and their families. Moreover, as supported by existing literature, this study demonstrates that unpaid work has intensified, especially for women with school-aged children, because of school closures. In 2021, tourism numbers improved, resulting in an increase in women's paid work. Along with this, unpaid work was restored to pre-pandemic levels, and these developments improved women's mental health. Also, this study discovered that policies, such as social protection schemes that safeguard gender equality in the workplace, are still lacking. This is because small businesses are not financially viable to hire their employees formally. As a result, employees at these micro and small businesses (which were less financially resilient before the pandemic) are even more susceptible to job losses during crises. This leaves them without income and without a safety net. Lastly, given these results, the study provides recommendations targeting to combat long-standing issues that hamper achieving gender equality.

### Key words:

COVID-19, female labour force, gender, women's rights, tourism

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## Introduction

There has been an increase in the literature regarding the differences in labor market consequences due to the COVID-19 pandemic in gender (Bluedorn et al., 2021). Various studies label the COVID-19 pandemic as a “she-cession”, as studies have illustrated that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities (Bluedorn et al., 2021). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2021), globally, between 2019 and 2020, women lost 54 million jobs, representing 4.2% of the job losses, compared to 60 million representing 3% of job losses for men. In previous recessions, men experienced higher job losses, as they were employed in more cyclical sectors (Stevenson, 2020). With the pandemic, women are disproportionately affected because the measures implemented to contain the virus have hit feminized sectors of the labor market, which include tourism, retail, food, and hospitality sectors, all industries where working from home is hardly possible (Stevenson, 2020). Data by the United Nations (2020) illustrates that, on average, women lost 60% of their income as they mainly depend on social interactions to sustain themselves.

Besides looking at employment levels, the labor force participation rate (LFPR) is also a key indicator. The number of women and men participating in the labor force is not included in the unemployment rate, since to be counted as being unemployed, you need to actively seek employment. Therefore, these job losses have been considered inactive since the COVID-19 confinement measures, and, for women, the increasing burden of unpaid work made job searches difficult, resulting in shrinking the global labor force (Queisser, 2021). The latest report by the ILO (2021a) estimates that around 40 million people will no longer participate in the global labor force. According to the ILO Department of Statistics (n.d.), female labor force participation (FLFP) measures the proportion of a country’s working-age population who are employed or seeking employment, indicating the size of the supply of labor available. The data on labor force participation shows that both men and women were severely impacted by the pandemic. However, FLFP reduced at a faster rate than men at the beginning of the pandemic (The World Economic Forum, 2021).

## Vulnerability of women’s employment in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a development success story and has one of the highest rankings on the Human Development Index (HDI) for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Also, the country is ranked 13th out of 156 countries globally and second in LAC on the World Economic Forum’s Gender Equality Index. However, when looking at one of the dimensions, economic participation, and opportunity, the country is ranked 110th globally (World Economic Forum, 2021). Supporting data also shows that it ranks the fourth lowest regarding FLFP in the LAC (Jiménez-Fontana, 2018).

As highlighted earlier, women's labor market opportunities are hit the hardest. These job losses among women vary between regions, and Latin America was severely affected by the economic fallout of COVID-19. This region has undergone a shocking decline in FLFP after decades of steady growth (ILO, 2021b). The World Bank (2020) conducted a survey study in thirteen countries in LAC investigating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on labor. The findings illustrated that women were 44% more likely than men to lose their jobs at the beginning of the crisis, and the differences in job losses among men and women persist (World Bank, 2020). The study also found that 56% of all job losses were in highly female-intensive sectors and having school-age children at home was linked to higher job losses among women, yet not among men (World Bank, 2020). The highest gender gaps are found in Costa Rica and Honduras, where women were 25 percentage points more likely than men to be unemployed (World Bank, 2020).

These findings highlight that the pandemic has deepened pre-existing inequalities women face due to the division of household labor. According to Profeta (2021), work-life balance has been severely affected during the pandemic for women because of the school closures resulting in increasing housework and childcare. The asymmetric division of housework and childcare affects women's labor outcomes. Globally, FLFP is 47%, and for men, it is 72%. Another issue is that, when women work, they are employed in low-quality jobs, subjecting them to low pay, temporary work contracts, poor working conditions, and lack of social protection (ILO, 2021a). This illustrates that women are limited in their choice to work and from having the same opportunities to access the labor market compared to men.

Furthermore, mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (2022) as "an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in". When mental health is not taken care of, countries face higher rates of suicide and mental health illnesses. Regarding the scope of the present investigation, it is important to mention the national suicide rates from 2019 to 2022. As per INEC's data of deaths by suicide and homicide between 1950 and 2020, Costa Rica faced 384 suicides in 2019 and 356 in 2020. In addition, in 2021 there were 200 deaths by suicide nationwide (INEC, 2022). Lastly, until August 2022, the same data showed 95 deaths by suicide. With the exposed data, it can be observed that there has been a constant decrease of suicides in the past years, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the data from 1950 to 2020 shows an inclination in which women tend to commit suicide less frequently than men, even though women are exposed to more vulnerable jobs and to a more disproportionate care of unpaid labor compared to men.

Concerning FLFP in Costa Rica, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), the net participation rate of women in the labor force was reduced from 52.1% to 44.6% during the first and second quarters of 2020 (The Joint SDG Fund, 2020). This illustrates that women's labor market opportunities were severely affected by the pandemic, and therefore, this paper focuses on the

effects of COVID-19 on FLFP in Costa Rica. The issues addressed are closely related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) established by the United Nations, precisely SDG number 5 “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, and 8 “promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all”. Also, the data collected from this report will contribute to the data storage of a project designed by the Faculty of Social Sciences of ULACIT, called The Observatory of SDG.

One of the hardest hit sectors by COVID-19 is the tourism industry. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020 was the worst year in history for the tourism sector, with an approximate loss of \$1.3 trillion in export revenues. This loss is more than 11 times higher than the 2009 economic crisis (UNWTO, 2021). Also, the pandemic has put between 100 to 120 million jobs directly linked to tourism at risk, many of which are small and medium-sized enterprises (UNWTO, 2021). This sector is a fundamental part of the Costa Rican economy as it contributes 13.2% of the country’s GDP and created 12.9% of the total jobs in 2019 (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Regarding women’s employment globally, this sector employs a high share of women, providing flexible working hours and part-time jobs (UNWTO, 2010). In Costa Rica, 58.4% of the women work in the tourism sector (Cole et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 measures have caused a remarkable drop in tourism activity. In 2020, the country received the fewest international tourists as only a third of the international travelers visited, accounting for over a million foreign tourists (Reuters, 2021). According to Gutiérrez et al. (2020), the largest decline in 2020 was in the third quarter of the year, when there was a reduction of 98.7% of international tourists visiting Costa Rica, leading to many job losses in this sector (Goretti et al., 2021). This deteriorated the country’s economy, witnessing a 4.1% drop in GDP, which is the largest in the last four decades (World Bank, 2020).

The tourism sector is one of the sectors that suffered the most from the COVID-19 pandemic, and this sector plays a pivotal part in enhancing employment opportunities for women, contributing to Sustainable Development Goal number five. Hence, this study will investigate: What effect does the COVID-19 pandemic have on women’s labor force participation in the tourism sector in Costa Rica for micro, small, and medium enterprises?

The SDG framework was adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and consists of 17 interconnected goals targeting key areas on which various stakeholders should take urgent action. These include climate and planet, poverty and inequality, and justice and human rights (UNDP, n.d.). This study is related to goal number five, gender equality, which also encompasses many other goals. Therefore, working towards this goal plays a crucial role in accelerating sustainable development. For the success of the SDG, collecting, analyzing and sharing data is needed to monitor the progress; and one of the issues with

the SDG is that there are serious data gaps in assessing country-level progress towards them (Kitzmueller et al., 2021). According to the United Nations Statistics Division (2020), from the 17 goals, less than half of 194 countries have internationally comparable data. Especially for SDG 5, there are huge data gaps, as none of the regions have all the data on the SDG indicators making it challenging to monitor progress and identify trends. This makes it impossible to bring about change and persuade policy makers to act (UN Women, 2021). In the case of Costa Rica, only 54.1% of data on the SDG 5 indicators were available (UNwomen, n.d.).

The lack of data makes it relevant to collect data on SDG five, since the pandemic has caused widespread setbacks in gender equality. Hence, this research paper aims to collect primary data on SDG 5 (Gender Equality), to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on FLFP working for micro, small and medium-sized businesses in the tourism sector in Costa Rica. Accumulating data will be beneficial to identify the main changes caused by the pandemic.

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, a detailed explanation of the design choices to examine the research question including the limitations of the study. Secondly, a results section is subdivided into paid work, unpaid work, mental health, and the implementation of SDG 5 in the tourism sector. Lastly, a discussion, recommendations and a conclusion are outlined.

## Methodology

Primary and secondary research were used to collect data. For primary research a mixed method using both qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilized to investigate the research question. However, there was a greater emphasis on qualitative research, because the nature of the research question, which is intertwined with the research objective intended to gain in-depth insights. This provided a better understanding of the complex phenomenon studied, rather than employing a single method. Methods used to collect data were interviews and questionnaires. A semi-structured interview was selected because of the flexible nature of this method, which facilitated a natural dialogue between the interviewee and the interviewer. It also helped enabling to build a more personal relationship with the participants compared to a structured interview. Additionally, this method was not limited to predetermined questions, and this was important to consider because the demographic being studied is not homogeneous. Thus, having the autonomy to tailor the questions to the women's circumstances was crucial.

The depth of the information gathered using interviews allowed to understand new developments regarding women's labor force participation. However, it was also valuable to understand these issues in a broader sense. Therefore, a quantitative approach was chosen using survey research as a data collection method. This method allowed to collect data from a larger sample size in a shorter time frame, enhancing the generalizability of the study.

Besides interviews and survey research, desk research was carried out. This was necessary for outlining the subject's background and complementing the research findings. The latter was substantial due to the relatively small size of the sample, and this existing data facilitates safeguarding the research's validity and reliability.

## Data collection

As previously mentioned, desk research was conducted prior to the field research. Mainly, data was collected from international organizations such as UNwomen, ILO, OECD, and existing studies conducted on COVID-19 concerning FLFP. These sources were used because it was the only available information found in English. After conducting desk research, interview and survey questions were designed. The survey questions were very similar to the interview questions, but this had to be modified to fit the data collection method.

The first part of the interview and survey concentrated on gathering information on factors that drive female labor supply, such as the number of children per woman and their age, marital status, and educational level (Tzvetkov & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). The second section of the interview examined participants' experiences working in tourism during 2020 and the previous year (2019), and the current situation was included to outline the differences. The topics for this section contained paid and unpaid work, mental health, and governmental support. Also, a section about new developments in the tourism sector was incorporated to comprehend the context of the study. The last component examined the implementation of SDG in the tourism sector, as this was necessary to comprehend whether there are policies in place that ensure fair and sound working conditions, such as social protection schemes that impacted FLFP.

## Sampling

The study's goal was not to test a hypothesis about a broad population but to develop an initial understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women working in the tourism sector. Therefore, non-probability sampling was used, as well as the snowball method to select the interview participants and survey participants. This was through the network of people from ULACIT. For distributing survey participants, the researcher visited various touristic areas to gather participants that met the sample criteria. This includes women who have worked in the tourism sector before the pandemic for micro or small businesses. These participants were requested to also share the survey with women that met these criteria.

To reach a more varied sample profile, a purposive method was applied to distribute surveys to areas where the researcher did not visit. This was achieved by using social media groups such as Grupo

Coalición Costa Rica, Puerto Viejo Foro Abierto and Empresarios y Trabajadores de Turismo en Costa Rica, as well as WhatsApp groups where the likelihood of the target audience would be high. Another way the survey was distributed was by reaching out to organizations, including Essential Costa and CANATUR; however, these channels were unsuccessful.

## Sample characteristics

### Interviews.

From the sample size, four women worked for micro-businesses located on the South Caribbean coast of Costa Rica and one for a medium-sized business. Three women were owners of the business, and two were employees. The Costa Rican National Survey on PYMES identified the size of business by the number of employees, and included micro:  $e \leq 15$ , small:  $15 < e \leq 30$  and medium:  $30 < e \leq 100$  (Villalobos, 2017). This definition was used to classify the size of the businesses for this study. Most of the women owned and worked for a micro business, and most of them worked irregular hours with no contract. One woman worked for a medium-sized business as a sales manager, operating in different regions.

There were differences in the type of tourism sector these women were working in. Two women worked in the accommodation sector, one as the owner of the first glamping company, and the other focused on renting out cabins. Furthermore, one woman was the owner of a travel agency offering tours to help maintain the Bribri culture in Talamanca. Lastly, another one she was the first female owner and instructor of a surf company, while the remaining interviewees worked for another travel agency.

The demographic of the interviewed women was as follows: all the interviewed women are from single-headed households, and four out of five of them have children. The age of the interviewed women ranged between 33 and 45 years old; two of the women were 33, one was 36, and two were 45. Lastly, concerning the women's education, three women held an university degree, and two women had secondary education.

### Survey.

For the survey, a total of 20 people filled out the survey, of which 50% of the respondents worked for micro-enterprises, 25% for small enterprises, and 25% for medium enterprises in 2020. Also, 85% of the survey respondents were employees, while the remaining 15% were owners. Furthermore, 10% were employed in the accommodation sector, 30% in adventure and outdoor recreation, 10% in food and beverage, and 50% selected others. Regarding the employment status of women in 2020, 50% were employed, and 50% were unemployed.

Looking at the demographic of the respondents, based on the participants' responses, their ages varied as follows: 25% of the sample aged between 18 to 24, another 25% between 25 to 34, 40% between 35 to 44, and both 5% for age ranged from 45 to 54, and 55 to 65 years. Also, the marital status of women differed, with the highest percentage representing single-headed female households with 65%, followed by a 25% of married women and 10% living in free union. In addition, 50% of the women had children and/or dependents living with them. Lastly, the education level of the respondents indicated that 50% of the women had a university degree, 40% had a secondary degree, 5% Ph.D., and 5% answered the other.

## Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, these were transcribed with the help of the recordings and the transcripts. The researcher used thematic content analysis to uncover themes from the data gathered by identifying differences, similarities and relationships between the sample size. To analyze the data of the the survey research, Excel was used.

## Limitations

Lack of existing literature and limited access to information and literature

One of the challenges encountered when investigating this research topic was the lack of existing research. This is explained by the research objective to understand the effects of the most recent phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and as earlier mentioned, there was a lack of data on the SDG, especially with SDG 5. Hence, investigating a topic that lacks a foundation of comprehensive data could provide lackluster research findings. Additionally, this study could not use the available data optimally due to language barriers and limited access to resources. As a result, the researcher depended mainly on primary research to collect data in a relatively short time frame. However, the absence of literature was viewed as an opportunity rather than a limitation, as this research intended to map the general literacy on the subject contributing to gender data gaps and lay a foundation for further research.

## Sample size and representativeness

The sample size was relatively small compared to the general criteria of both qualitative and quantitative research. This could potentially affect the results, especially with the survey research, as the insufficient sample size made it harder to draw valid conclusions. A larger sample size could not be achieved due to a low response rate and a limited time frame, which resulted in a less comprehensive picture of the issue studied. Another shortcoming was the sample profile. Both the interviews and the survey research

demonstrated a high percentage of single-headed women and women with higher education levels. These sample characteristics may not be representative of women with different backgrounds. All this points to the missing data which illustrated that there were obstacles for reaching a varied sample size that is representative of the population, especially marginalized women.

Memory

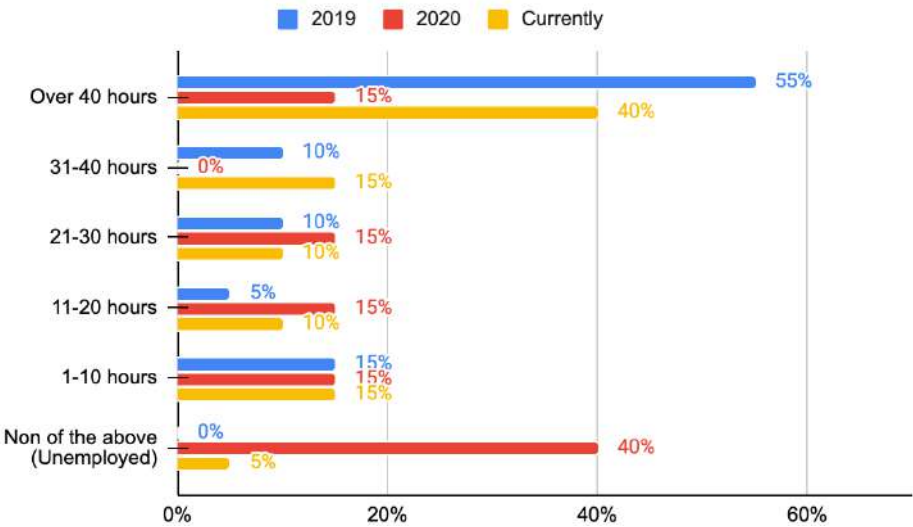
Memory seems to have a significant impact on the results because participants were required in both the interviews and surveys to recall events from the past and compare these to the present.

Results

Employment (paid work)

The pandemic caused a significant halt in the tourism sector resulting in the closure of its international borders, businesses, and tourist destinations such as beaches and Protected Wild Areas (Lucas, 2020). According to Gutiérrez et al. (2020), this sector experienced a complete disruption due to the pandemic in the LAC. For instance, on April 15th, 25,085 direct workers experienced either layoffs, temporary suspension of contracts or reduction of working hours fundamentally affecting their incomes (Zúñiga, 2020).

Figure 1  
Paid work from 2019 till date



Note. Source: author’s creation.

The findings indicate that in 2020 women worked the least in paid employment in comparison to 2019 and 2021. The reduction in paid work is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and this is shown in Figure 1, which demonstrates the number of hours women engaged in paid work from 2019 to “currently”, referring to the time women filled out the survey, which was from January to March 2022. Results also underline that women participated the least in paid work in 2020, as 40% were unemployed. Also, the interviews showcase increasing unemployment due to many companies needing to shut down roughly around March 18th, when Costa Rica declared a State of Emergency and shut down its borders to international tourists (Al Jazeera, 2020). The length of business closure ranged from six months, being the shortest, to a year being the longest. One of the women described this period as “scary and uncertain” (N. Montejo, personal communication, December 6, 2021). This is supported by other interviews, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when booking numbers dropped drastically and negatively affected their revenues.

Only one woman remained employed: she works as the Sales and Marketing manager for a medium-sized company. The reason why she remained employed was due to her position being crucial for the maintenance of the company. Yet, the number of hours she was working changed compared to 2019. In 2020 and in 2021, she was still working on reduced working hours which was made possible for many workers as the Costa Rican government approved Law N° 9.832 on the Reduction of Working Hours (Reducción de Jornadas de Trabajo) (Hacienda, 2020). This law authorized businesses to have a reduction in working hours with the main purpose of avoiding dismissals, preserving jobs and contributing to the whole country’s economic and social stability.

Besides women dedicating less time to paid work than before the pandemic, their responsibilities changed. The findings demonstrate that one of the main differences in duties carried out at work between 2019 and 2020 was the implementation of COVID-19 protocols that protect the health and safety of tourists (ICT, n.d.-c). The government required companies operating in the tourism industry to implement the protocols that were aligned with the “Safe Travel” protocols established by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) concerning COVID-19 and similar outbreaks (WTTC, n.d.). The purpose of establishing these protocols was for travelers to recognize companies that have adopted the Safe Travels health and hygiene global protocol (WTTC, n.d.). The interviewees who dedicated their time to designing and implementing sanitary measures reported that this occupied much of their time.

Moreover, findings show that most of the women dedicated more time to paid work during 2021 and during January to February 2022 in comparison to 2020. Figure 1 reveals that 40% of the women were working full time from December of 2021 and January to February 2022, while in 2020, this only represented 15%. The interviewees report that one of the reasons for the increase in paid work in 2021 is due to lenient COVID-19 measures and travel restrictions that have encouraged tourists to visit Costa Rica. For example, one of the interviewees noted “I think this has worked in increasing the number

of people that are coming to Costa Rica compared to our competitors in Asia” (E. Jurado, personal communication, December 21, 2021).

For the women operating and working in the South Caribbean, the number of reservations was higher than in 2019. For example, one of the women experienced having the same day check-in and out and stated, “I was never doing that in 2019, especially not in 2020” (D. Bryan, personal communication, January 26, 2022). Also, another woman said, “I have more business now than since I opened in 2017 because more foreign tourists are having their eyes on Costa Rica because it is one of the few countries that you can actually go in the world with no restrictions, no vaccination right now” (A. Sanchez, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This shows that the increase in tourism in 2021 was due to lifting COVID-19 measures for international tourism.

Besides this, there was an increase in domestic tourism as the owner of the glamping company stated, “my business thrived and survived thanks to the Costa Rican citizens” (A. Sanchez, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This is reinforced by the Government implementing measures such as a national campaign encouraging Costa Ricans to support national tourism by exploring their own country by offering affordable deals (ICT, n.d.-a). Another action the Costa Rican government took was approving Law. No.9875, authorizing transferring national holidays that fall on weekdays to Mondays to create longer weekends from 2020 to 2024 (UNWTO, 2020). This has boosted the tourism inflow in the Caribbean Coast which before the pandemic was less touristy than the Pacific Coast. One of the interviewees commented that “before it was a lot of people during certain times like Christmas or New Year’s or things like that, but not so often” (N. Montejo, personal communication, December 9, 2021).

The increasing domestic tourism benefited many businesses, but on the other hand, the sudden influx of tourism also brought undesirable effects to this region, such as waste issues, the uncontrolled building of tourist facilities without rules and structure as well as noise pollution, all of which have detrimental environmental impacts. For example, one interviewee mentioned that the rise in tourism numbers “created something good in a way that is economically, but not in the environmental part, because there is no control” (N. Montejo, personal communication, December 6, 2021). Additionally, women mentioned that this inflow of tourists created more competition since new businesses emerged.

## An alternative source of income

To alleviate the effects of COVID-19, the government of Costa Rica provided financial grants to assist those affected most by the pandemic. The financial support was called “Programa Proteger”, which was active in 2020 from April to December. In those months, said project reached over 700,000 people whose jobs were affected due to the pandemic, investing more than 250 thousand million Costa Rican colones on behalf of the Costa Rican government. According to the 2020 National Household Survey, done by the

INEC, this aid prevented poverty levels from increasing between 4 and 6 percentage points (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2020). On the other hand, according to a report from Social Panorama of Latin America of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the money invested could only reach one of every five people in poverty, and two of every five people in extreme poverty (Bolaños, E. 2022).

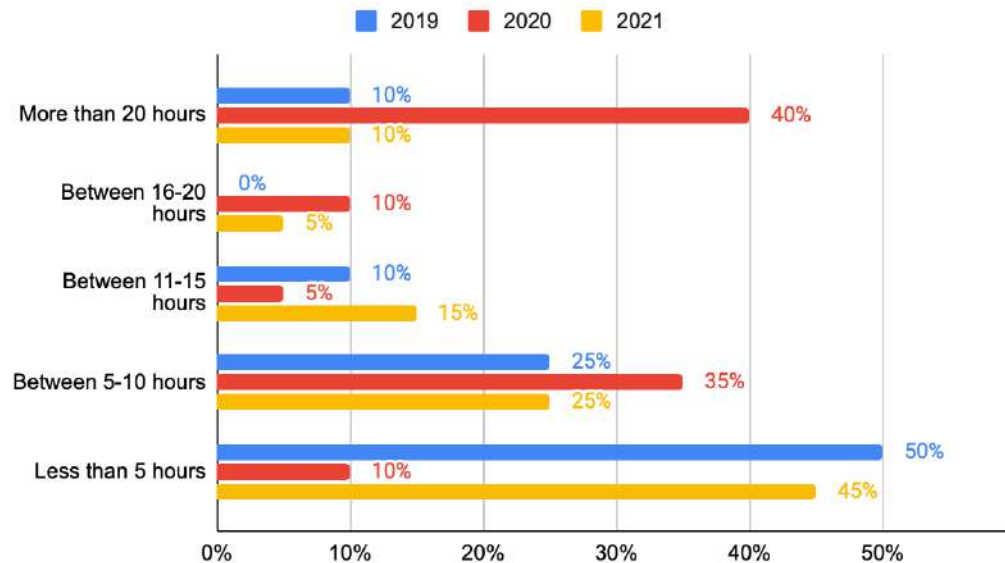
Four out of five women received this financial aid, and one of the women did not acquire this because she was not eligible. Most of the women expressed that the amount was insufficient. One conveyed “the government offers a little support check for those who lose their income, so you can apply. It was not too much. It was \$200. But for a life in Costa Rica is not too much” (A. Sanchez, personal communication, December 9, 2021). As the grants were not enough to support them and their families, many people sought alternative sources of income including the women interviewed. One of the women said, “I had to find new extra work like many other workers because your commitments did not change with the reduced salaries, your daily payments were still kept” (E. Jurado, personal communication, December 21, 2021). These women used the extra time to develop entrepreneurial opportunities that were often related to their hobbies, and others found jobs that were accessible. These include a woman operating as a taxi driver and another one starting a small business selling personalized gifts for special occasions targeting women, since she believed that this pandemic affected them more severely, particularly women staying at home. Another woman’s project aimed to generate income for the indigenous community in Talamanca by helping the indigenous communities to sell their extra fruits and vegetables at a market.

## Unpaid work

Besides the number of hours women engaged in paid work, the time women dedicate to unpaid work should not be disregarded. Unpaid work refers to the time dedicated to meeting the basic physical and emotional needs of individuals, families and communities (ILO Department of Statistics, n.d.). This type of work has no direct remuneration like paid work and includes care work for children and the elderly, as well as household work such as cleaning and cooking (ILO Department of Statistics, n.d.).

Target 5.4 of the SDG 5 focuses on recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work, which is prominent in tackling gender inequality. Before the pandemic, compared to men, women globally did three times more of unpaid work (UNWomen, n.d.). In Costa Rica, women tend to spend on average 6 hours per day on non-remunerated activities, while men devote only 3.5 (OECD, 2016). The unpaid care and domestic work have been amplified during the crisis placing a disproportionate burden on women.

**Figure 2**  
**Unpaid work from 2019 to currently**



Note. Source: author's creation.

Figure 2 shows that overall unpaid work has increased between 2019 and 2020, as 50% of the women in 2019 were engaged in less than 5 hours of unpaid work, and 10% spent more than 20 hours on unpaid work. In 2020, 10% devoted less than 5 hours, and 40% spent more than 20 hours, demonstrating a significant increase in unpaid work. Followed by the latter statement, the interviews show varying results for which –mainly for women with school-aged children– unpaid care work has changed the most due to school closures, leading to a new form of unpaid care that included the move from in-person to virtual and homeschooling. In this respect, these women are single mothers, and before the pandemic, all the unpaid care activities were performed generally by them. Meanwhile, during the pandemic, this only increased due to the added burden of assisting their children with virtual and homeschooling.

Moreover, an interviewee emphasizes the unequal division of unpaid care work in Costa Rica expressing that “women have much more responsibility. In general, we are supposed to know how to cook, how to wash the clothes, how to do all of that when the husband is not supposed to know those things, so in this respect, there is still much work that needs to be done. But this is more of an upbringing thing” (E. Jurado, personal communication, December 21, 2021). This is supported by another interviewee who said, “it’s still a Latin American country, and the machismo, I guess sexism you could call it in English, is very, very real, very alive” (D. Bryan, personal communication, January 26, 2022). She explained one reason which referred to upbringing, where women also play a role in upholding traditional gender norms which leads to women being solely responsible for unpaid care work. Also, the data gathered from

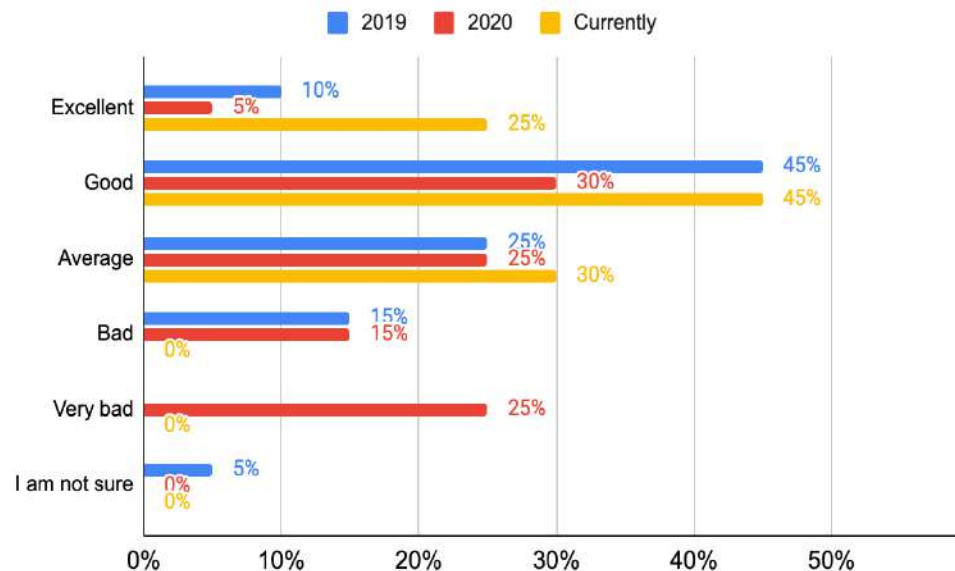
the interviews show that these gender norms are reflected in the job positions women take on. Among all the women interviewed, they expressed that “there is a very marked difference between certain jobs that are performed by men and women” (E. Jurado, personal communication, December 21, 2021). She and other women highlighted that they are employed more as domestic workers and receptionists, whereas men are employed mainly in positions that are more physically demanding, such as in maintenance work or as tour guides.

For the other two women with children (one of the children is three and the other one is eighteen years old), there was no significant difference in unpaid care during the pandemic. In the case of the owner of the surfing company, household activities were divided equally in 2020, as her daughter was more at home due to school closures, while, before the pandemic, she was more engaged in household work as her daughter was in school. For the woman with a 3-year-old daughter, unpaid work only changed in 2021 due to increased bookings resulting in her registering her child in maternity school as reconciling work and childcare was more difficult than in the previous years. Also, Figure 2 shows that women were engaged less in unpaid care work in 2021-2022, indicating the number of times spent on unpaid work is returning to pre-pandemic levels, as 45% of the women spent less than five hours on unpaid work, in comparison to 2019, when this was 50%. Lastly, the only woman with no children’s unpaid care work remained the same.

## Mental health

The survey results showcase that, in 2020, COVID-19 had a toll on women’s mental health. Figure 3 below demonstrates that 25% of the survey respondents selected “very bad” compared to the year 2019, and “currently” no one selected this, which implies that during 2020 women struggled the most. Still, 30% of the women selected the option “good” and 25% “average”. Also, data suggests that mental health has improved in 2021 and 2022, as 45% and 25% of the women selected to have “good” and “excellent” emotional well-being.

**Figure 3**  
**Mental well-being from 2019 to currently**

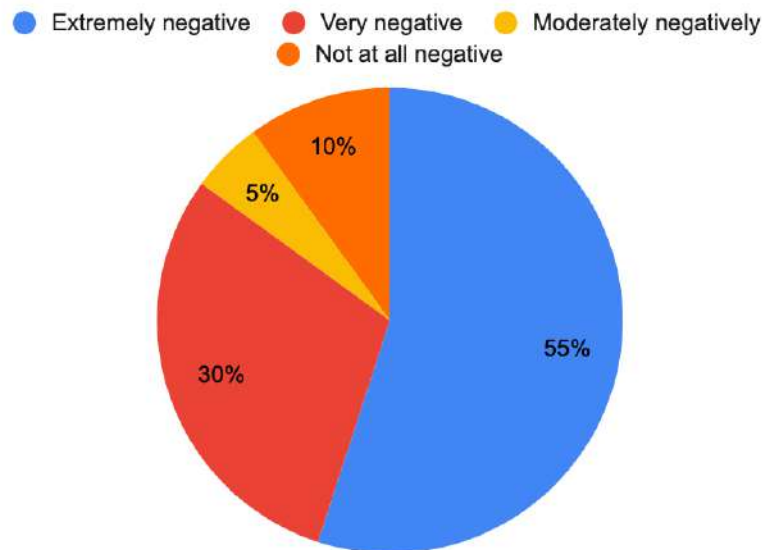


Note. Source: author's creation.

The results from the interview show that the well-being of the women varied depending on their situation. All the interviewees reported that their mental state was at its worst at the start of the pandemic. One of the main reasons was the uncertainty that the crisis brought, as an interviewee mentioned that “this was very difficult during this period because of the uncertainty and so many changes” (E. Jurado, personal communication, December 21, 2021). The main factor contributing to the feeling of uncertainty is high-stress levels regarding their economic well-being. For example, the owner of the glamping enterprise reported that, overall, her mental health was normal in 2020.

However, she said, “financially, the pandemic had a huge impact on her because her business generated zero income while still having the same fixed costs” (A. Sanchez, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This statement was supported by other women too. Additionally, Figure 4 demonstrates that the pandemic had a negative impact on women’s finances. This Figure suggests that 55% selected that the pandemic has had an “extremely negative” effect on their finances, 30% selected “very negative”, 5% “moderately negative”, 0% “slightly negative” and 10% “not at all negative”. However, this was not the only concern, since one woman stressed that the psychological impact of the COVID-19 on her children also added to her concerns.

**Figure 4**  
**Impact of COVID-19 on finances**



Note. Source: author's creation.

Besides these challenges, many also shared the positive impacts COVID-19 brought to their lives, and these were all related to having more free time. Before the pandemic, these women did not have considerable free time, and this extra time transformed different aspects of their lives. For one woman, this happened because she was more available for her children due to the reduced working hours and working virtually. The owner of the surfing company expressed that “the extra time allowed me to analyze and see things clearly, that I could not do before” (N. Montejo, personal communication, 6 December 2021). The woman who has a glamping company said, “I used the time to learn new skills such as advertising for my business through social media” (A. Sanchez, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This showcases that the slower pace of life that the lockdown has brought them was favorable in some ways.

A year later, there were improvements in business revenues due to the easing of travel restrictions and increasing domestic tourism, which also resulted in a direct improvement in women's mental health.

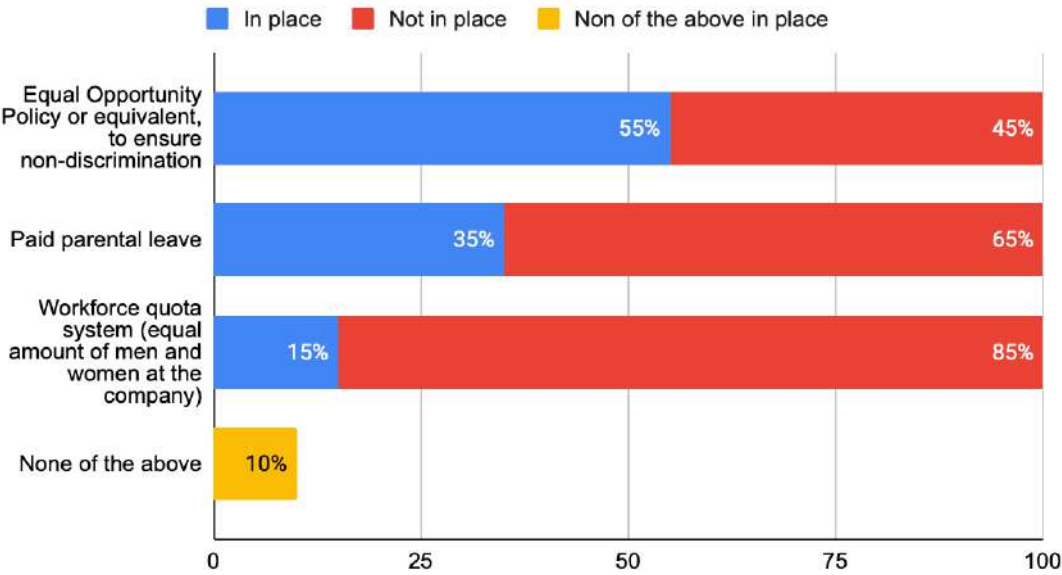
## Sustainable Development Goal 5: in the tourism sector

The 2030 agenda is not only an ambitious goal to attain, but an even more significant challenge to achieving the SDG (specifically with SDG number five), which is the insufficiency of gender-sensitive data tied with the inadequate data on trends in the implementation of this SDG (Cázares-Grageda & Zougbede, 2019). The private sector is one of the primary stakeholders in accelerating the SDG implementation

process, because this sector encompasses the greatest part of the economy. Hence, making it a crucial sector to make modifications and develop strategies to contribute to achieving the SDG (Rashed & Shah, 2020). Regarding the implementation of SDG 5, the private sector has an influential role in advancing gender equality in the application of policies that foster economic participation, such as providing access to parental leave, childcare and legislation protecting employees from sexual harassment (Sherwin & Mathew, 2021).

The interviews and survey research raised questions related to the implementation of policies in the tourism sector that aim to protect their rights at work, which include non-discriminatory policies, social protection schemes and workforce quotas. Figure 5 demonstrates whether the company they are working for has explicit and well-publicized policies that safeguard women’s rights in the workplace and shows that the implementation of these policies differs between companies. The policy mostly in place across businesses is the anti-discrimination policy, which represents 55%. Furthermore, 35% of the women have access to paid maternity/paternity leave, 15% have a workforce quota in place, and 10% noted that none of the three policies are in place at their work.

**Figure 5**  
**Which of the following policies are in place at the company you are working for?**



Note. Source: author’s creation.

The latter corresponds with the conclusion drawn from the interviewees, as these have disclosed that there are no written documents that support gender equality in the workplace. Most of these women mentioned this is because their companies are too small to have these in place. Although no explicit policies are currently in place, most of these women mentioned their workspace does not discriminate

against women. Two women also conveyed that their business directly supports women. For example, one company aims to provide economic and social development by giving employees the respect and pay they deserve and helping indigenous women's groups. Another woman expressed that her company helps other women-led enterprises as she sells arts and crafts made by females from single-headed households in the indigenous area. In addition, she is part of the program RED Sophia, which aims to promote gender equality in the tourism sector by preventing violence against women for solo female travelers by providing training for companies and staff (ICT, n.d.-b).

Like the two women above, the woman working for a medium-sized business expressed that there are no formal policies guaranteeing gender equality in the workplace. Yet, she mentions that family values have been at the forefront of the firm, and these values support fair and equal working conditions for everyone regardless of their gender. Also, her company received a seal for Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), a Public and Private Partnership program developed by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute that identifies companies in the tourism sector for their sustainable tourism practices (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, or GSTC, 2021). To receive and retain the certification, companies in the tourism sector need to demonstrate that sound environmental and social practices are enforced. Thus, although there are no explicit policies regarding gender equality, she said: "to be certified, good working conditions for everyone need to be in place" (E. Jurado, personal communication, 21 December 2021).

Additionally, interviewees highlighted issues regarding unequal pay and mentioned that women are subject to getting underpaid. As the sales manager noted, "It does not matter how well studied and professional you are. If there is a comparison between a man and a woman in the same position, a man will always have a better salary. Also, women have to work harder to be recognized and to be respected in whatever line of work" (E. Jurado, personal communication, 21 December 2021).

Delving deeper into the implementation of SDG five for women employed in the tourism sector, the survey and interview results reveal a high degree of informality in the way companies in the tourism sector operate. Survey results suggest that 50% of the women do not have a written contract with the company they are working for. From the interviews, most women are employers, and most of them do not hire an employee on a contract and salary basis. One of the women elaborated that she employs her personnel through "Servicios Profesionales" which is like freelance work, because these employees do not have a fixed schedule and are not working for just one company. This way of working is more financially feasible for her, especially being a small company, and she added, "most people without a big business do it this way because to hire an employee on a salary basis, you are responsible for the social charges requested by the Carga Social which is everything that involves having an employee in Costa Rica, and this system is expensive" (A. Sánchez, personal communication, 9 December 2021). The high cost of hiring employees makes it unsustainable for small businesses and another interviewee agreed with this. She said: "not being hired on a contract basis implies that the employer is not obligated

to provide social protection such as health insurance, maternity leave, sick, and paid leave” (D. Bryan, personal communication, January 26, 2022). On the contrary, the medium enterprise employee did have a contract with the company she was working for, and she emphasized that the laws in Costa Rica benefit employees as it includes health care and paid maternity leave. In her case, working conditions are good, and she has access to social security benefits. Yet, she reported “there’s a lot of informality still in general in the small country” (E. Jurado, personal communication, 21 December 2021).

## Discussion

The findings illustrate that the COVID-19 measures led to the closure of tourism facilities and have severely impacted women working in the tourism sector. Existing studies have established that women are disproportionately affected by job losses during the pandemic than men. However, the scope of this study only assesses the effects of the pandemic on women’s LFPR, which makes it difficult to make comparisons between the two groups. The data gathered from interviews and surveys reveal that in 2020, FLFP significantly reduced as, during that year, women employed in the tourism sector experienced immediate job losses, changing their lives in various ways. The women interviewed noted that they were concerned about their finances due to instant closures of business, leaving them with zero income, and affecting women’s emotional well-being. Despite 2020 being a rough year, interviewees shared that COVID-19 brought surprisingly positive changes to their lives, with the most recurring being having more free time for themselves and their families.

In contrast to paid work, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing gender inequality regarding the division of labor of unpaid work, particularly the case for women with school-aged children. As the pandemic receded, the industry adjusted by implementing COVID-19 safety and health protocols established by the WTTC to reactivate the tourism sector. Also, the Costa Rican government enforced measures to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic, such as providing financial aid to the most affected and enabling the companies to keep workers on reduced hours to lessen job losses. Additionally, to boost national tourists, the Government made various efforts, and to encourage international tourists, COVID-19 measures were more lenient compared to 2020.

In 2021, a rebound of tourism was witnessed, especially in South Caribbean tourism numbers were even higher than before the pandemic, resulting in women’s hours in paid work gradually recovering to pre-pandemic levels. Along with this progress in paid work, women’s time dedicated to unpaid work, specifically childcare, recovered close to pre-pandemic levels.

Finally, the study examined the implementation of the SDG in the tourism sector, specifically focusing on the accessibility of social protection for women. The findings indicate that women lack access to social protection due to a high degree of informality in the sector, resulting in little or no access to social

protection for women working for micro and small businesses. These businesses underlined that they are not financially viable to hire employees on a contract basis.

The previous paragraph outlines the primary findings of the study. The subsequent section will delve deeper into understanding these key results. One of the core findings is that the hours women dedicate to paid work have reduced, and the Global and Cross-National OECD also supports this (OECD, 2021). An explanation for this reduction in hours of paid work is that the tourism sector employs a large share of women globally, around 54% of the labor force in this sector (UNWTO, 2010). Also, this sector is one of the most affected by the health crisis, consequently impacting livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women (OECD, 2021).

Besides, the sector has suffered tremendous losses of FLFP due to the vulnerability of SMEs in crises compared to larger businesses which are more equipped with resources to handle unprecedented periods like the COVID-19 pandemic. Added to the economic downturn threatening jobs for workers in the tourism sector, especially for small businesses, a factor that plays a role in these disproportionate job losses is the informality in how these businesses operate, making these workers more inclined to job losses. The findings suggest that particularly micro and small businesses hire employees who work irregular hours without an official contract. The OECD (2021) suggests that these jobs were more prone to being terminated or furloughed in the early months of the pandemic.

The employee working for a medium-sized business is the only one who remained employed as her position was crucial for the company during the pandemic. The fact that she was the only interviewee not being unemployed is explained by the previous statement about larger businesses being less financially fragile than micro and small businesses in economic downturns. Yet, she was the only woman interviewed working for a medium-sized business, and participants from the survey consisted of a small proportion of medium-sized businesses, making it difficult to see a direct correlation between the size of the company and the likelihood of being unemployed. Nevertheless, one significant difference that the study indicates is the vulnerability of micro and small businesses, which had limited resources to sustain themselves before the pandemic, making it nearly impossible in times of crisis to survive. In turn, this affects their employees who are, in this case, not hired on a contract basis, leaving them with no access to social protection schemes. In addition, Figure 1 also reveals that before the pandemic, not all women worked the same number of hours. A reason for varied working hours is that the tourism sector mainly employs seasonal, part-time and temporary workers (OECD, 2020). For the interviewees, the hours they engage in paid work are less varied, and this is because three out of five women are self-employed and carried out most of the responsibilities at work before the pandemic.

Moreover, another reason explaining the disproportionate job losses among women is the closure of schools and daycare centers, resulting in additional unpaid work impacting mothers (OECD, 2021).

The additional non-remunerated activities included helping their children with remote learning and homeschooling, resulting in increasing hours spent on childcare (OECD, 2021). This study suggests that women engaged in unpaid work in 2020, and the amount spent differs between women due to the changes in marital status, household type and presence and age of children (UN Women & ILO, 2020). First, according to the UN Women & ILO (2020), women who are married with children, in general, are less likely to participate in the labor market than single mothers. Also, the division in unpaid work solely falls on women, especially in countries where FLFP is lower, such as in Costa Rica. Hence, the increase in non-remunerated work during the pandemic is related to the cultural perception of women being mainly responsible for childcare and household tasks. During the pandemic, lockdowns resulted in more people being at home, and women typically took on more additional childcare obligations than men, intensifying unpaid work for women.

For single women (who make up most of the sample size) a distinction is made between single women with and without children. Data from the interviews suggest women with children's unpaid work increased more significantly than women without children because they take on most of the additional unpaid care work as their children are home due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, the child's age plays a role in the hours spent on childcare and household duties. The data shows that women with older children engage less in household duties as they can assist more compared to younger children, which increases the intensity of hours spent on unpaid care work by women.

The outcomes of the pandemic on unpaid care work are highlighted and show that there is an overall increase in unpaid work. However, unlike other studies, the data gathered from this study did not indicate that the additional non-remunerated activities have forced women to leave the workforce entirely. This is explained by the fact that this sector was severely affected by immediate job losses or reductions in working hours, which gave women more time than before the pandemic. Also, tied to this, this industry enables them to combine paid work with child-rearing before the pandemic. Ferrant et al. (2014) support this and establish the relationship between the care responsibilities and the quality of female employment, suggesting that when an unequal amount of time is dedicated to unpaid care work, the likelihood of engaging in part-time and vulnerable employment increases. Thus, women's choices in job opportunities that enable flexible working hours intertwined with the reduced working hours and additional free time explain that all the women interviewed did not need to quit the labor market because of increased unpaid care work.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are suggested for the Costa Rican government.

1) The pandemic has shed light on the fragility of SMEs, notably in micro and small businesses in the tourism sector. Also, this study has emphasized that women-owned enterprises lack the financial resources to hire employees on a contract basis due to the fees requested by the Carga Social being not economically feasible for these women-owned businesses. As a result, the employees do not have access to social protection, which puts them in a vulnerable position (particularly in a crisis), leaving them with zero income and without a safety net. Therefore, the Government must modify the current regulation for hiring an employee on a contract basis. Currently, employers take on considerable weight in paying fees for granting social security to their employees, and therefore, smaller businesses choose to operate informally to survive. A reduction in taxes and contributions to social security for SME owners should be considered to tackle this issue. Lowering fees will encourage owners to distance themselves from informality and strive for more formal business while also granting employees better working conditions.

2) Also, results indicate that it has been a challenging period for women working in the tourism sector. Although 2021 has shown promising outcomes concerning employment and unpaid work, still businesses that were hit the hardest by the pandemic are recovering from the crisis. While measures have been taken to lift the economic impacts of COVID-19, the data from interviews have not indicated that government responses directly targeted meeting women's needs in the process of recovery and in working toward the 2030 global agenda. Hence, it is also necessary for the Costa Rican government to conduct studies on women-owned companies in neglected and vulnerable areas, such as the Limón region. This is to understand their condition and needs as well as to develop a strategy that tackles their issues. Accessing the community's needs in underdeveloped areas, enables the governments to distribute resources efficiently, design policies and develop programs that can help small businesses and women who lost their employment contracts and income due to a crisis.

3) A more long-term-oriented proposition strives to combat social norms that remain prevalent in Costa Rica since this has diminished women from having equal opportunities. The study discussed some of them, including the fact that women face strong traditional societal expectations to be responsible for unpaid work, as well as uneven distribution limits for women's opportunities and choices. Also, this explains why women are employed in low-skilled, low-income and insecure employment even though they may have a good education, making them prone to job losses in crises such as COVID-19. These gender roles are still key in shaping women's role in society, hindering achieving gender equality. To leave behind deeply rooted gender roles, efforts should be made through education. For example, renewing the current curriculum in public schools to raise awareness of issues mentioned before. Another way can be through workplace training. This new

information encourages men and women to change longstanding values and behaviors that foster traditional gender roles.

## Conclusion

This paper answered the research question by providing insight into the impact of COVID-19 on women working in the tourism sector in Costa Rica, predominantly focusing on small businesses. It has shown that this pandemic has drastically transformed how the tourism sector operates. The measures implemented to contain the virus have instantly disrupted the tourism industry, leading to many closures of businesses for a certain period, and, as a direct result, disproportionately affected female employment.

In addition, this study highlighted that small businesses are more vulnerable due to companies being less financially resilient before the pandemic and, with the effects of the crisis, they are more likely to suffer. On top of that, businesses employ workers without official contracts due to the significant weight of social security contributions, which falls mainly on the employer. As a result, this affects employees of small businesses who are not granted these benefits, making them even more susceptible to job losses and no safety net.

Yet, further research needs to be conducted to understand the impacts on these employees, since interview participants are composed mainly of the employers (owners) of the companies rather than the employees who are working informally. Also, more research on these issues should be carried out to fully comprehend the effects of the pandemic on FLFP, as this study lacked a representative sample size. However, this study does lay a solid foundation for further research, contributing to data gaps on the SDG and the databases of the Observatory of the SDG.

While employment levels decreased among women working in the tourism industry, women's non-remunerated activities increased. As it was described in this article, this is because COVID-19's restrictions led to more people being at home, multiplying the need for household chores and care. Especially women with school-aged children noticed a significant increase in unpaid work. However, this increase has not resulted in forcing them out of the labor force, which has been concluded by existing studies.

To deal with the economic impact of COVID-19, the Costa Rican government introduced a broad range of policy measures to alleviate the impact of plummeting tourism revenues on households and businesses. Yet, the women interviewed did inform that measures were taken by the government that specifically targeted them to facilitate coping with the changes. Therefore, based on these research findings, recommendations are proposed to the Costa Rican government, focusing on meeting women's needs, and tackling these pre-existing inequalities which are exacerbated. To reverse the setback made in the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals and strengthen women's position in Costa Rica,

the Government must implement policies that fundamentally assist in empowering women-owned businesses which not only improve the lives of women but also their families, benefitting society at large.

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