



Women's Access to Higher Education and Labour Markets in Latin America and the European Union

*by J. A. Garrido Ardila**

The *Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)*, published in 2015 by the World Economic Forum, measures the degree of gender equality, and has found that some Latin American countries are on similar levels of equality to those in the European Union. The Latin American country with the highest level of equality is Nicaragua, which, according to the GGGI, places 12th in the world. Next comes Bolivia in 22nd place and Cuba in 29th. Similarly, Germany takes 11th place, France 15th and the United Kingdom, 18th. Nonetheless, while Finland and Sweden occupy the third and fourth positions respectively, some Latin American countries register equality levels that are considerably lower. For example, Mexico is 71st and Chile 73rd.

One of the most interesting themes in this topic is that related to the access women have to higher education, given that a university education is crucial for gaining access to the labour market. I would like to start by giving a brief reflection on the GGGI data in respect of this, using Sweden and Mexico as examples. Sweden, because it is, according to the GGGI, the best country in the world for women's access to higher education; and Mexico, because it has achieved equal access to university.

The GGGI indicates that the female:male ratio amongst Mexican university students is 0.96, in other words, just 0.04 points from full equality. Nonetheless, the ratio in the Mexican labour market is only 0.58. In "technical and professional" positions, this number marginally increases to 0.67. Neither is equal access to university reflected in the sphere of legislative power, where the ratio in the number of government ministers is but 0.21. From this, it is possible to conclude that equal access to higher education does not at all guarantee equal access to the labour market and, for example, to participation in the government of a nation.

The case with Sweden in the data given by the GGGI is an intriguing one. The ratios here are 0.94 for access to the labour market; 1.08 in "technical and professional" positions; 1.09 in the number of ministers in government. That is to say that Sweden has attained equal access to the labour market, where women even surpass men in both "professional" jobs as well as in government. In terms of access to university, Sweden occupies first place according to the GGGI, with a ratio of 1.56.



Apart from the many complex reasons which could explain these levels of inequality in Mexico, a first reading suggests that, in order to achieve or even get close to equality in the labour market, Sweden has determined –amongst other things– that the access women have to higher education should considerably exceed that of men. (This phenomenon is observable in the majority of countries with equal access to the labour market.) The most obvious conclusion is that equal access to university does not guarantee equal access to the labour market.

These areas of inequality signalled in the GGGI may be correct with a range of initiatives. First, logically, one can aspire to a ratio similar to that of Sweden regarding access to university. But, above all, some factors not registered by the GGGI should be considered. An example of this is the enormous and existing differences in maternity leave in both countries, differences that can help us to comprehend the conditions of the conciliation between family and professional life, and therefore the feasibility for women to achieve equality in their professional career. The International Labour Organisation, in their Convention 183/2000, recommends a maternity leave of at least 98 days. Mexico only allows 84 days, as opposed Sweden's 240. After those 240 days, Swedish mothers (and fathers) with children under the age of 12 may reduce their job load by up to 25%. Until the age of 8, the state subsidises that wage percentage. We can observe that the Swedish policies relating to maternity leave are oriented towards effectively avoiding maternity becoming an obstacle for the professional development of women.

In 2014, Mexican Parliament unanimously approved the reform of Article 101 in the Social Security Law in order to enable women, who so wish, to take the whole 84 days to which that they are entitled, post-partum (when before, they had to take 14 days before labour). This is undoubtedly a very positive step forward, but it could also be complemented in the future with a move towards the maternity policies in place in countries with higher levels of gender equality in the job market.

The GGGI data shows that equal access to higher education does not ensure equal access to the labour market. There should be legislations and measurements that facilitate family conciliation, starting with those related to maternity. The GGGI data on the job market suggest that longer maternity leave may have a considerable impact on the levels of equality in the job market.

In terms of collaborations between Latin America and the European Union, it would be of great interest for countries such as Sweden (with the majority of women in higher education and with equal access to labour opportunities) to share their experience in



gender equality policies with other countries. This could be done throughout collaborations at a governmental level (fundamentally, with exchanges between ministerial departments with competencies in education and equality) to facilitate the exchange of information on policy making and the application of policies. Additionally, the subject deserves comparative analytical studies that examine the equality policies in order to show their benefits and pitfalls. Either way, undoubtedly, it is necessary to understand the benefits of the Swedish ratio for women's access to university as well as the access to other post-educational services, which are instrumental to the improvement of women's access to the labour market.

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