

The Burden of Daily Life: Why Women are More Vulnerable in Times of Crisis

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Women in everyday life, social expectations

When discussing women, we delve into the fabric of their daily existence and the roles they embrace following societal expectations, which often entail adaptability, empathy, education, and the romanticization of motherhood.

This is an undeniable reality, and the intention of this article is not to challenge these societal norms but rather shed light on how these gender roles and stereotypes, prevalent in daily life, have distinct repercussions on girls, adolescents, and women in crisis situations.

A typical woman juggles her job and household duties, including shopping, cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Additionally, she ensures that her children eat, bathe, and do their homework, and it's upon her to find medication and take them to the doctor when ill, among many other responsibilities.

They manage all this while enduring menstruation, a biological process that spans a significant portion of their lives (approximately 40 years). This places a substantial and often overlooked burden on them. Each month, women contend with

pre-menstrual symptoms, including headaches, abdominal pain, potentially debilitating migraines, mood swings stemming from hormonal changes, general discomfort, nausea, dizziness, and more. It's worth noting that all of these challenges are considered part of the norm, and managing household and childcare duties while experiencing cramps and bleeding is widely accepted.

An attempt is made to enumerate aspects that, in one way or another, are universally understood but often overlooked or not critically examined. These responsibilities and burdens have become so ingrained in women's lives that they are seldom scrutinized. This normalization of daily burdens questions whether it renders them more vulnerable when crises unfold.

When crises unfold: women as caregivers

Venezuela has grappled with a multifaceted humanitarian crisis since 2015, marked by its intricate origins and wide-reaching consequences that impact every facet of people's lives. These crises intensify existing issues and place vulnerable populations in even more precarious circumstances, with women being a notable case in point.

Culturally, societies establish social constructs that delineate the roles and stereotypes assigned to women. One of the most prominent roles is caregivers, whether it involves looking after children, adolescents, older adults, individuals with disabilities, or those with health conditions. Ultimately, there exists a societal expectation that women shoulder the responsibility of nurturing and tending to the fundamental needs of these various groups.

In and of itself, this isn't an issue. The problem is that these responsibilities typically go unpaid and, in most instances, are

not socially recognized or valued. They are often viewed as duties or even obligations, resulting in a substantial burden for women, affecting them physically, emotionally, financially, and in terms of their time.

In crisis situations, this burden becomes even more pronounced. In Venezuela, studies suggest that, for a household to avoid poverty, two out of three members must be part of the labor force¹. This implies that even if a woman has a partner contributing economically, that income is often insufficient, making her entry into the workforce necessary. However, it's not just any job that can be pursued; it must offer the flexibility to continue fulfilling her roles as a mother and caregiver. Interestingly, in Venezuela, 71% of the responsibility for supporting children's education falls on mothers². Due to these and numerous other factors, women frequently find themselves compelled to enter the informal labor market, often the least favorable option.

According to UNWomen, women predominantly occupy informal jobs, with an estimated 59% of total employment in Latin America and the Caribbean falling within this category. Moreover, these jobs often come with more precarious conditions, featuring low wages, lacking protection under labor laws, social benefits, or health insurance, and, in many cases, exposing women to gender-based violence. A telling example is found in the report *Ser Mujer en Venezuela*³, which indicates that 19.7% of the discrimination

1 ENCOVI, "Condiciones De Vida De Los Venezolanos ENCOVI 2022" Proyecto Encovi. Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, (November, 2022). https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/636d0009b0c59ebfd2f24acd_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202022%20completa.pdf

2 ENCOVI, "Condiciones..."

3 Alianza ConEllas, *Ser Mujer en Venezuela: Diagnóstico Comunitario y Propuestas para la Acción Humanitaria*, Acción Solidaria. Acción Solidaria, Cepaz,

faced by women occurs in work-related contexts. Additionally, these roles frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes, such as those related to home maintenance or caregiving, as seen in positions like nurses or nannies.

The outcome? Exhausted women often work the equivalent of two or even three shifts in a day due to the ramifications of gender inequality. As Saavedra⁴ aptly articulates, the double or triple workday leads to a neglect of self-care in women, who most of the time prioritize the care of others. Furthermore, they must do so under unfavorable conditions and earn, at least in Venezuela, 21.79% less than their male counterparts. This wage gap represents the average disparity between 2013 and 2021, as estimated by an analysis conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)⁵.

In challenging contexts like Venezuela, the crisis has exacerbated the daily struggles. In 2021, a staggering 63.60% of women used their entire family budget to purchase food, as reported in *Ser Mujer en Venezuela 2022*. This paints a clear picture: there's not enough money, and when it is sufficient, it's mainly allocated for sustenance. Consequently, the available

Funcamama, Prepara Familia, Uniandes y Unión Afirmativa (Octubre, 2022). <https://accionesolidaria.info/project/ser-mujer-en-venezuela/>

- 4 Lucía Saavedra, "Género y Salud: Estudio sobre la doble jornada laboral en las mujeres y su relación con el autocuidado de su salud," *Acta Académica* (Octubre, 2017). <https://www.aacademica.org/000-067/714>
- 5 Omar Zambrano, Hugo Hernández, Albani Granado, Gabriel Quiroz, José G. Gómez & Ricardo Benzecry. *Brechas de género en el mercado laboral venezolano: un análisis a través de los microdatos de encuestas de hogares*, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, Banco Interamericano De Desarrollo (December, 2022). <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/viewer/Brechas-de-genero-en-el-mercado-laboral-venezolano-un-analisis-a-traves-de-los-microdatos-de-encuestas-de-hogares.pdf>

food is often prioritized for children, adolescents, older adults, individuals with disabilities, or those with health conditions. Women make this sacrifice for others' well-being, highlighting yet another reason for their heightened vulnerability in crises when compared to their counterparts. Their maternal, empathetic, self-sacrificing, and caring roles lead them to act this way, or at least society expects them to do so.

Period poverty as a great daily challenge

Continuing to unpack the burden of everyday life, we've illustrated how unpaid household chores and caregiving roles stem from cultural norms, contributing to women's increased vulnerability. Additionally, it's important to note that, from a biological standpoint, women undergo menstruation and can become pregnant.

Menstrual poverty pertains to the primarily economic struggle that women face when it comes to affording the necessary products for their menstruation. This includes not only menstrual supplies like sanitary pads but also other essential items like soap, underwear, and even pain relievers. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), this issue results in girls, adolescents, and women missing school and work days, which has significant repercussions on their educational and professional advancement. It impacts their economic prospects and can even drive some to resort to risky survival strategies, such as transactional sex⁶.

6 UNFPA, *La Menstruación y Derechos Humanos - Preguntas frecuentes*, Fondo de Población de Las Naciones Unidas (May, 2022). <https://www.unfpa.org/es/menstruacion-preguntas-frecuentes#%C2%BFQu%C3%A9%20es%20la%20pobreza%20del%20per%C3%ADodo?>

This issue is of such significance that in certain parts of the world, governments have implemented what some might deem as drastic measures to ensure women's access to these essential supplies. For instance, in Scotland, menstrual hygiene products have been provided free of charge since August 2022⁷, while in countries like Canada and Australia, they are, at the very least, exempt from taxation⁸.

The economic burden may not appear significant to some, but for many Venezuelans, purchasing a month's supply of disposable sanitary pads equates to spending almost their monthly minimum wage. This can make the difference between having a meal or going without one for a day. When individuals are faced with the dilemma of buying menstrual hygiene products or purchasing essential food items like pasta, it highlights menstrual poverty.

The humanitarian crisis has exacerbated this issue in Venezuela, with 1 in 4 Venezuelans reporting that they "never" or "only sometimes" have access to disposable sanitary pads, representing 25% of women, as revealed in the *Ser Mujer en Venezuela 2022* report. This challenge is further compounded by the ongoing deficiencies in public services like access to clean water, which is essential for proper menstrual hygiene.

Furthermore, menstruation itself doesn't inherently cause health issues, but using supplies that are not designed for that

7 MyGov, *Free Period Products*, MyGov.Scot, (January 13, 2023). <https://www.mygov.scot/free-period-products#:~:text=You%20can%20get%20free%20period,yourself%20or%20for%20someone%20else>

8 María Melo, "La gestión menstrual sin impuestos en el mundo," *Statista* (mayo 24, 2023). <https://es.statista.com/grafico/30064/paises-que-redujeron-o-eliminaron-impuestos-para-productos-de-gestion-menstrual/>

purpose can cause infections and complications⁹. When women lack access to proper menstrual hygiene supplies, they often resort to makeshift items like old clothes, cardboard, toilet paper, or newspapers, as highlighted by civil society organizations like Cepaz. Using these improvised materials can pose health risks. In a country with a strained healthcare system and medication costs beyond the reach of the majority, a vaginal infection can become a serious complication and even a life-threatening threat to a woman's well-being.

Women's goal in life: To be a mother?

On the other hand, women's capacity to become pregnant is perhaps the most iconic and emphasized aspect of being a woman. From the outset, we discussed how motherhood has been idealized to the extent that in many cultures, the potential for motherhood is often considered the primary and almost sole purpose of a woman's life.

In Venezuela, it's still common to hear remarks like, "She ended up alone; she doesn't have children," or "She should have settled down and had children; at least she would have had kids." The societal pressure to have children persists, but what this entails is often overlooked. The impact of becoming a mother and how it can restrict a woman's opportunities, particularly if it's not a desired choice or happens during adolescence, deserves attention.

9 Ayechew Ademas, Metadel Adane, Tadesse Sisay, Helmut Kloos, Betelhiem Eneyew, Awoke Keleb, Mistir Lingerew, Atimen Derso, Kassahun Alemu. *Does menstrual hygiene management and water, sanitation, and hygiene predict reproductive tract infections among reproductive women in urban areas in Ethiopia?* National Library of Medicine, Plos One, (August 21, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237696>

The issue of teenage pregnancy is self-evident, with a profound and lifelong impact on young women. It constrains their educational and professional opportunities, subjects them to societal stigmatization for becoming pregnant, holds them accountable, and criticizes them, as there's a prevailing notion that women should remain pure and chaste until marriage. This compounds the emotional toll on young mothers, who are already facing the substantial challenge of becoming parents at a young age.

Moreover, the bodies of adolescent girls are not fully developed to bear children, rendering them more vulnerable to health complications during pregnancy and increasing the risk of premature births. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that teenage pregnancy contributes to the perpetuation of intergenerational cycles of poor health and poverty (2020).

Regrettably, in Venezuela, UNFPA estimates the rate of teenage pregnancy stands at 96 per 1,000 among women aged 15 to 19¹⁰. In perspective, the Latin American average for 2020 was 60.7 per 1,000 live births¹¹. This figure is notably high, deeply discouraging, and illustrates the absence of effective public policies addressing this issue.

10 Héctor Pereira, *Venezuela, a la cabeza de sudamérica en embarazos adolescentes*, Swissinfo.Ch. EFE, (Julio 19, 2022). https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/venezuela-poblaci%C3%B3n_venezuela--a-la-cabeza-de-sudam%C3%A9rica-en-embarazos-adolescentes/47765014#:~:text=%22El%20embarazo%20adolescente%2C%20decimos%20que,duplica%20el%20promedio%20de%20Latinoam%C3%A9rica

11 OPS, *El embarazo en la adolescencia en América Latina y El Caribe*, Organización Panamericana De La Salud (Agosto, 2020). https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/53134/OPSFPLHL200019_spa.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Indeed, pregnancy is an extraordinary event, yet when it occurs, it dramatically alters the course of a woman's life. It represents one of the factors that significantly widens the gender gap.

Unfortunately, if we persist on this trajectory, a teenage woman who becomes pregnant will never have the same life opportunities as a teenage man, even if he becomes a father. This issue is a manifestation of various interconnected factors, including the absence of timely information, comprehensive sexual education, and access to contraceptive methods, among others, all of which contribute to heightening women's vulnerability.

The issue of pregnancy is not exclusive to adolescents, as demonstrated in the report *Mujeres que resisten* from the *Red de Mujeres Constructoras de Paz*¹². This report indicates that over 70% of the women surveyed in 13 states of Venezuela do not use contraceptive methods. The analysis concludes that the lack of economic resources and comprehensive sexual education restricts the utilization of these resources for family planning.

It's important to recognize that even when a pregnancy is desired, women are not exempt from the challenges discussed throughout this article. There exists a genuine societal expectation that they will bear at least a significant portion of the responsibility for child-rearing, and in doing so, they will face repercussions in other aspects of their lives.

An intriguing example can be found in a study conducted in Denmark, a country with strong socioeconomic indicators,

12 IPYS, *Mujeres que resisten: sobrevivir a una Venezuela en crisis*, IPYS Venezuela (Julio 10, 2023). <https://ipysvenezuela.org/tejiendo-redes/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Informe-Final.pdf>.

ranked 23rd out of 146 on the World Economic Forum's gender parity index¹³. In a study, Henrik, Ladais & Egholt identified what they referred to as "Child penalties" to describe how the arrival of the first child in a household creates a persistent gender gap in income between men and women, in this case, roughly around 20%¹⁴. This is primarily attributed to women losing out on future career opportunities as they must allocate more time to household chores and childcare than men, causing them to miss potential promotions or performance bonuses, among other factors.

The intention here is not to discourage motherhood; quite the opposite. It's aimed at highlighting the challenges women encounter in their daily lives compared to men. The arrival of a baby will invariably disrupt the household, even when it's a desired event. However, the ultimate goal should be a cultural shift where men and women no longer perpetuate rigid gender roles and stereotypes that hinder shared parenting and motherhood responsibilities, as well as household chores and caregiving for others. This shift is commonly referred to as "co-responsibility."

Gender equality as a human right and smart investment

The historic adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, by the UN General Assembly was also a milestone in the struggle for gender equality. The document unequivocally asserts that all human beings are born "free and

13 IPYS, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, World Economic Forum (June 1, 2023). https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf?_gl=1*1yjfkd*_up*MQ..&gclid=Cj0KCQjwkqSIBhDaARIsAFJANKiY2omyQsZg4ChL3ATYHqOunDQWi88hfZ0mKstAal9gO1NU93xYHbQaAvqbEALw_wcB

14 Henrik Kleven, Camille Landais and Jakob Egholt Sogaard, "Children and Gender Inequality: Evidence from Denmark." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 11 (4): 181-209..

equal in dignity and rights,” irrespective of race, color, sex, language, and other factors.

This work continued to progress, and in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted. CEDAW’s objective is to ensure that the world eliminates the beliefs, traditions, and oppressive cultural norms that restrict the rights and freedoms that women should enjoy.

More recently, the United Nations developed the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of its 2030 agenda, where gender equality and women empowerment are recognized as integral components, particularly within Goal 5. Gender equality is a key part of the solution for many of the challenges addressed in these goals.

Investing in women is not just a smart choice; it should be considered essential, and a gender focus should not be optional. Numerous studies have established a clear link between gender equality and positive indicators for the well-being of countries. For instance, when a woman has sexual and reproductive rights, can make informed decisions, and has a higher income, she is better positioned to provide her children with improved educational, healthcare, and recreational opportunities. This, in turn, helps children grow into active, productive, and independent individuals who contribute positively to society.

Furthermore, having women in leadership positions within organizations has enhanced overall productivity, positively impacting the economy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has emphasized that reducing gender disparities goes hand in

hand with greater economic growth, enhanced economic stability and resilience, and decreased income inequality¹⁵.

The connection between women and peace is another compelling example, and research has demonstrated that gender equality is a more dependable predictor of peace than a country's GDP or even its level of democracy¹⁶.

In crises like the protracted humanitarian emergency that has gripped Venezuela for nearly a decade, it becomes increasingly important to adopt a comprehensive gender perspective when developing solutions.

To start, we should advocate for the release of official data and ensure the incorporation of a gender-based approach. This will allow us to access crucial information to identify and prioritize the primary challenges that Venezuelan women confront, many of which are deeply embedded in their daily lives.

It's not merely an option; it's an absolute necessity. The overwhelming evidence suggests that when solutions are crafted to address women's issues, when they are included in decision-making processes and when they are empowered for active and civic participation, the impact on a country's development is undeniably positive. This holds particularly true for reconstructing a nation that has endured years of suffering.

15 IMF, *GENDER*, International Monetary Fund, (January 1), 1. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/Gender#:~:text=capacity%20development%20work.-,What%20is%20the%20IMF's%20Strategy%20for%20Gender%3F,resilience%2C%20and%20lower%20income%20inequality>

16 Valerie Hudson et al., *Sex & World Politics*. Columbia University Press (2014).

While this assertion may seem bold, it remains a fact: investing in women is investing in the future of Venezuela.