

# Economic autonomy in Uruguay



Insights from a gender equality, disability and social inclusion analysis

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## Key messages

Women spend nearly three times more of their time on unpaid care and domestic work than men, which significantly restricts their participation in the economy and exacerbates social inequalities. While the gender disparity in care work is much more pronounced in lower-income households, women who lack their own income outnumber men across every income quintile.

Key policies to address gender barriers in Uruguay's labour market include protected employment initiatives, the incorporation of gender clauses in wage councils, and the establishment of the National Integrated Care System.

While the care system has successfully reduced the amount of care work carried out within households – predominantly by women – its coverage is not keeping up with demand. There is also a pressing need to emphasise cultural and norm change policies that promote a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities within families.



# About the author

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# About this publication

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The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) has awarded ODI Global a regional project to conduct a gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) analysis to inform FCDO's ambition to support women, girls and other minority groups in the Latin American region. This brief is part of the project which focuses on Uruguay, Chile, Guatemala and Panama, providing high-quality and updated evidence on issues such as gender-based violence, women in politics, women's economic empowerment, feminist foreign policy, LGBTQ+ rights, children in alternative care, online violence, and bioeconomy. For each country, the analysis provides:

- an overview of up-to-date data on gender equality, disability and social inclusion issues
- 'deep dives' analysis into two/three topics of national relevance
- recommendations for relevant stakeholders at different levels to support action at national level and potential collaborations with international partners.

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# Introduction

This brief analyses women's economic autonomy and empowerment in Uruguay and is part of a broader analysis of gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI). It is based on a review of secondary literature (including journal articles and reports) and four interviews with key stakeholders working on this topic.

## Key statistics

### GEDSI in Uruguay

- In 2023, poverty was concentrated among women and children, with 8.8% of women and 19% of children and adolescents living below the poverty line, compared to 4.4% of men (ONU, 2025).
- The adolescent fertility rate fell from 42% in 2017 to 29% in 2020 as a result of a series of public policies implemented in recent years (ONU, 2025).
- Primary school completion is nearly universal (98%), but only 58% of women and 41% of men complete secondary school, less than the Latin American average (71% and 65%, respectively) (CEPALSTAT, 2023).
- The percentage of young people not in education, employment or training has decreased in the last 10 years but is still 15% for women and 13% for men. The main reasons for not being in school are unpaid care work for women, and looking for a job for men (CEPALSTAT, 2023).

### Economic autonomy in Uruguay

- Gender disparities are more pronounced in lower-income groups, particularly households in the lowest income quintile (quintile 1). Women's labour force participation rate is alarmingly low – especially in rural areas – at merely 48.6%, indicating a 20 percentage point gap compared to their male counterparts (68.3%). Among women whose highest level of education is high school (complete or incomplete), 43% are employed as cleaners in homes, buildings or hospitals, while 40.3% work as saleswomen, shopkeepers or caregivers (CEPALSTAT, 2024).
- On average, women spend 33.6 hours each week on unpaid care work, while men spend 18.1 hours (CEPALSTAT, 2024).
- The care sector represents 3.5% of the total number of employed persons and is highly feminised, with women accounting for 94.5% of its employees (MIDES, 2020).

# Key findings

## Key barriers that affect women's economic empowerment: inequalities in care work and job segregation

- Women across all income quintiles, especially the lowest income groups, spend more time on unpaid care work, which limits their opportunities to enter the labour market.
- As the number of children in a household increases, women's activity rates decline while men's remain stable. The highest employment rate for men is observed in households with children aged 0–4 years, while women in these households experience the lowest employment rates (66% for women, compared to 93% for men) (CEPALSTAT, 2024). Furthermore, 10 years after having their first child, women earn 42% less than their childless counterparts (Banco Mundial, 2020). This disparity is attributed to the unequal distribution of care work and gender stereotypes, as highlighted by interviewees and secondary sources (Banco Mundial, 2020; ONU Mujeres Uruguay, 2024).
- Gender stereotypes result in women being relegated to less dynamic economic sectors that offer lower salaries. Despite outperforming men academically, women encounter significant barriers in the labour market, resulting in pronounced gender disparities across various sectors. Fields such as construction, transportation, agriculture and mining are predominantly male, while women are largely found in household services, social and health sectors, and education. Their representation in science and technology remains limited, with only 23% of engineering students being women. These disparities are influenced by deep-rooted gender norms that associate caregiving primarily with women, creating conflicts with employer demands for full-time availability in higher-paying jobs. In addition, abilities typically associated with men, like leadership and constant availability, are often preferred for high-value positions, further disadvantaging women in the workforce (Banco Mundial, 2020; UN Women, 2024).
- The combination of gender stereotypes and the burden of care responsibilities creates challenges for women who pursue managerial positions in employment. Women own only 12% of businesses and hold just 11% of managerial positions (Banco Mundial, 2020). This reflects the persistence of gender norms regarding women's leadership capacity and their participation in paid work.

## Main policies to address gender inequalities in the labour market

The following public policies have proven to be particularly relevant in terms of promoting women's employment and economic autonomy in Uruguay:

- **The country's wage councils**, particularly through their inclusion of gender clauses, play a crucial role in promoting gender equality in the workplace by establishing fair wage agreements and ensuring equal treatment. This policy approach has made it possible to integrate very relevant care arrangements, such as care leave days and the implementation of care centres (Villegas Plá, 2025).
- **The National Integrated Care System** (Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidados, SNIC) further supports women's economic autonomy and gender equality by providing a structured approach to caregiving, allowing women to balance work and family responsibilities more effectively.
- **Protected labour policies** provide women with their first work experiences or help them reintegrate into the market, enabling them to gain qualifications at the same time. One example of this is the 'Uruguay Trabaja' initiative, which offers first-time work experiences and facilitates the reintegration of long-excluded sectors such as women from socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds into the labour market.

## The role of the National Integrated Care System

- The SNIC care system offers services and benefits that help reduce the time spent on care work at home. It includes services (care centres for children, older people and people with disabilities), benefits (companion services and financial subsidies), as well as laws and regulations concerning care workers. This has played a crucial role in decreasing the time spent on care work in households, particularly by lower-income households that rely heavily on state support because of their limited access to market solutions.
- By 2020, Uruguay had distinguished itself as the country with the highest coverage of education and care services for children aged 0–3 years in the region, experiencing an estimated 53% growth in supply since 2015 (Piñeiro and Cossani, 2024). According to Piñeiro and Cossani (2024), this increase was driven primarily by substantial investments in infrastructure, particularly in traditional childcare services such as Child and Family Care Centres (Centros de Atención a la Infancia y la Familia) and kindergartens run by the National Public Education Administration (Administración Nacional de Educación Pública).

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- Despite this progress, coverage remains insufficient. Data on the total number of children under three years old in 2022, as well as projections of the number of older people with severe dependency and the total number of caregivers in the country, show that only: 58% of children under three; 17.8% of people with severe dependency; and 8.6% of caregivers, are covered by the system (Villalobos Dintrans, 2025).
- The current coverage of services and policies of the care system is insufficient, particularly in relation to care centres for children and older people, which do not meet the population's demand for these services.
- The care system needs the further enhancement of cultural and norm change strategies to ensure the effective promotion of the redistribution of care responsibilities between men and women within households.

## Knowledge gaps

- There is insufficient research on the impact of Uruguay's key economic empowerment policies that target specific population groups, particularly the incorporation of gender clauses in wage councils and protected work policies.
- There is a need for empirical evidence on how the care system affects women's economic empowerment, as current studies are limited. It is crucial to enhance this research by isolating the effects of other contextual variables (e.g. education level, geographical location, etc.).
- The lack of data on gendered economic inequalities by geographic area highlights the need for targeted efforts to strengthen data collection, particularly in small towns and rural areas. Existing data cannot be disaggregated sufficiently to shed light on gendered divisions of labour in paid work and unpaid care, which are often more stark in these areas.

## Recommendations

- **Close the gender pay gap.** Approve and implement the law regarding wage gap data reporting, systematisation and transparency, which is currently being reintroduced for debate in Parliament (Folder 1185/2023).
- **Improve parental leave policies.** Establish joint working between MIDES and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to develop co-responsible parental leave policies as well as other care agreements in collective bargaining to promote the equitable sharing of care responsibilities between parents.
- **Promote a better work-life balance.** Support the development of policies for the effective integration of paid work and family responsibilities. The Uruguayan Government could draw on successful examples from the UK and other relevant contexts to inform best practices.
- **Implement awareness campaigns.** Advocate for initiatives that educate the public on the significance of sharing care responsibilities, emphasising its positive impact on women's economic independence and overall family well-being.

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