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## **A look at educational and gender equality in the public policies of Costa Rica and Spain**

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### **Abstract**

Education as a fundamental human right and the foundation of a more just and egalitarian society has traditionally been the object of attention of public policies of various kinds. The promotion of equal opportunities between men and women in different social spheres has been a principle, intended by all nations, materialized in inclusive education and social justice as guarantors for a society built upon the foundations of equity and equality. Accordingly, an approach to public policies in Costa Rica and Spain has been made to analyze their treatment of equal educational and gender opportunities. Both countries have historically developed educational and social policies aimed at guaranteeing education for all, preventing segregation and social exclusion, and empowering and strengthening the role of women in all spheres of life. Despite this historical trajectory in pursuit of a just, democratic, and egalitarian society, the new world scenario brought about by COVID-19 forces us to rethink crucial

educational and social aspects to overcome the current crisis we are facing. The traditional educational and social challenges are today, more than ever, of significant importance for society as a whole. The world needs new political, economic, labor, and social approaches to address this present situation, and education is the fundamental weapon capable of offering productive answers in the current scenario.

**Key words:** educational equality; gender; public policy; educational quality; challenges.

## **[es] Una mirada hacia la igualdad educativa y de género en las políticas públicas de Costa Rica y España**

### **Resumen**

La educación como derecho humano fundamental y sustento de una sociedad más justa e igualitaria ha sido objeto de atención tradicional de políticas públicas de diversa índole. La promoción de la igualdad de oportunidades entre hombres y mujeres de diversas esferas sociales ha sido una máxima, pretendida por todas las naciones, que se ha visto materializada en la educación inclusiva y en la justicia social como garantes para una sociedad formada bajo los principios de equidad e igualdad. En consonancia, se ha realizado una aproximación a las políticas públicas de Costa Rica y España a fin de analizar el tratamiento que estas hacen sobre la igualdad de oportunidades educativas y de género. Ambos países han venido desarrollando, históricamente, políticas educativas y sociales destinadas a garantizar una educación para todos, evitar la segregación y exclusión social, así como potenciar y fortalecer la figura de la mujer en todas las esferas de la vida. A pesar de esta trayectoria histórica en pos de una sociedad justa, democrática e igualitaria, el nuevo escenario mundial provocado por la COVID-19 nos obliga a repensar aspectos educativos y sociales cruciales para superar la nueva crisis a la que nos estamos viendo abocados. Los tradicionales desafíos educativos y sociales adquieren hoy, más que nunca, una importancia preponderante para el conjunto de la sociedad. El mundo necesita nuevos planteamientos políticos, económicos, laborales y sociales con los que abordar esta nueva situación y la educación se erige como la principal arma capaz de ofrecer respuestas efectivas en el panorama actual.

**Palabras clave:** igualdad educativa; género; políticas públicas; calidad educativa; desafíos.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Public policies in Costa Rica and Spain: an approach to education and equality as rights. 3. Gender equality: the great challenge of our time. 4. By way of conclusion: major challenges in current times. 5. References.

### **1. Introduction**

For years we have been witnessing an active search for educational, social, and economic approaches that emphasize values associated with equality as a human right and equity as an expectation of justice in all social spheres (Resa, 2021). Thus, public policies as tools of the State to fulfill its obligation to promote a better quality of life for citizens and thereby strengthen the democratic promise are the guarantees that, together with the existing rules, feed and legitimize citizens' demands for their effective compliance.

Thus, systematically, the social pact, in the Rousseauian scope, can only survive if meeting the needs of the people is the priority of those who hold political power (regardless of party). Therefore, active and perennial citizen participation is in the first row of enforceability and preservation of

democracy as citizens are called to contribute and actively participate in a society that assumes democratic values and advances towards equality with particular emphasis on social justice.

Certainly, the difficult situation of the global economic crisis suffered for years raises the need to review which aspects of national public policies deal with educational and gender equality in all social sectors, as well as the need to identify the different mechanisms used and the most urgent challenges to be addressed (Resa y Rabazas, 2021).

Equality as a right and the expectation of justice that equity addresses (as opposed to equality) are central elements in the national educational policies of all countries. Their inclusion in laws, decrees, and legislative programs has been a constant since the 1980s, gaining special relevance in the 1990s, and currently being a vital need of societies (Buxarrais, 2021).

The materialization of these political and legislative claims in education comes with the so-called inclusive education (Pedraza, 2021). Inclusive education conveys an essential general principle around which the primary educational policies and practices should revolve, assuming education is a fundamental human right for the cultivation of an egalitarian society, with the exercise of social justice (Ortega, Hurtado and González, 2018). UNESCO reflects on this in the conferences held in recent years. There, inclusive education is understood as a global priority to avoid exclusion, vulnerability, segregation processes, and the commitment to an effective inclusion where equal opportunities are a reality for society (Shaeffer, 2008; Padilla, 2021).

Moreover, considering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), inclusive education, social equity, and equality of opportunities and gender stand as epicenters on which to sustain the democratic progress of today's societies (Galdames, 2019).

It is in this assumption of values and democratic progress where education acquires a crucial role, fostering the strengthening of relationships between equals, favoring the integral development of the individual, and enhancing the empowerment of women; in short, wielding and fulfilling a vital right for all people: the right to education (UNESCO, 2008).

The issue at hand has been the subject of worldwide attention in research and studies which, in recent times, have taken center stage on the political and educational scene. We have witnessed a greater awareness at the political, social, and educational levels, which has been reflected in various agreements, laws, and action plans whose priority objective has been equal opportunities for all and the mitigation of educational exclusion in vulnerable groups (Pérez, Gargallo, Burguet & López, 2015).

Certainly, several authors have referred to the importance of addressing educational inclusion considering the paradigms of educational quality, equal opportunities, and universal accessibility throughout life (CERMI, 2010; Arnaiz, 2012; Pérez, Gargallo, Burguet & López, 2015).

Thus, public policies, wielded in different national contexts, must stand as a guarantor of true equality of opportunities, educationally and socially. The construction of egalitarian and just societies, where it is possible to appeal to Delors' "living together" entails a political and social commitment that points to the SDGs as the utopian scenario in which societies should move (Delors, 1996).

In this educational, political, and social scenario, which seeks inclusion and the avoidance of segregation, education emerges as an element of social integration, where participation, social responsibility, democracy, the emancipation of the individual, and dignity of the person emerge as essential aspirations of the citizen (Vega, López & Garín, 2013). One of the main challenges to which we must currently respond is the idea of human development.

To this end, educational inclusion and equal opportunities imply an educational aspiration of a humanizing nature. The great challenge of education in our time is to provide quality attention to all people, regardless of their gender, social status, or ethnicity (Bernal and Donoso, 2015).

## **2. Public policies in Costa Rica and Spain: an approach to education and equality as rights**

Despite the existence of contexts as diverse as their latitudes and location on the world map, the truth is that Costa Rica and Spain share many factors in common when talking about education and

equality. In other words, they share the constant need to promote learning and teaching models according to the capabilities of each country, to reach more and more people so that they have the opportunity to study and thus have a better quality of life. They also aim to meet the needs of each region, adapt to new demands, and use new technologies as tools for learning.

As UNESCO has stated, education transforms lives and is a tool for consolidating peace, eradicating poverty, and promoting sustainable development, which implies that we advance as humanity towards greater equality. These aspirations are working objectives in our countries; therefore, this joint contribution is valuable (Pepler-Barry & Fiske, 2000).

Furthermore, the right to education itself is enforceable by all persons regardless of their age. Therefore, it must be an individual guarantee, whose maximum expression is the person in full exercise of his/her citizenship.

In addition, the formulation of public policies on education and gender is based on international legal instruments that constitute the platform for progressive change on specific topics. Particularly relevant regarding gender equality and education is the Protocol of San Salvador (1988), additional to the American Convention on Human Rights on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Protocol stipulates the elimination of all stereotyped concepts of male and female roles at all levels and in all forms of teaching. It also states that appropriate measures should be taken to eliminate discrimination against women to ensure their equal rights with men in the field of education and, specifically, to ensure conditions of equality between men and women.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing (1995), which defines the goals of equality, development, and peace for women, also mentions that non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and thus ultimately leads to more equal relations between women and men. It stipulates equal access to education and the attainment of education necessary for more women to become agents of change.

The World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action, Thailand (1990), recognizes the need to offer present and future generations an expanded vision of basic education and a renewed commitment in its favor, as well as the need to universalize access to education and promote equity, give priority attention to learning, expand the means and scope of basic education, improve the learning environment, and strengthen the coordination of actions.

Furthermore, at the World Education Forum, Dakar (2000), the participating States undertook to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education from 2000 to 2005 and to achieve gender equality by 2015, making sure that little and teenage girls have equal and unrestricted access to quality elementary education. Participants also contemplated the need to implement integrated strategies for gender equality in education, recognizing the need for a change in attitudes, values, and practices.

The construction of an inclusive society in all areas of life is one of the principles on which Costa Rican democracy is based. It occupies the attention of the citizens, as well as of the social actors legitimized for decision-making. As prescribed by the Political Constitution of Costa Rica: "Every person is equal before the law and no discrimination contrary to human dignity may be applied" (Political Constitution, 1949). This principle is the basis for the development of Law No. 2160, Fundamental Law of Education of 1957. For this reason, "Education is the main tool chosen by the Costa Rican society to progress and realize its most ambitious projects and dreams" (Seventh State of Education Report, 2019, p. 30).

The fundamental principles of relevance, pertinence, and equity are conceived as inherent to the concept of quality education and as *sine qua non* conditions for its achievement. Therefore, rather than reiterating the right to education, the satisfaction of the right of all people to quality education is proclaimed as a challenge (Higher Council of Education, 2008, p. 7).

For the last 15 years, Costa Rica has made significant achievements in education. These include growing investment in education, an increase in the coverage rate and comprehensive and sustained curricular reforms, increased training and salary improvements for in-service teachers, investment in infrastructure, support for the vulnerable student population, and an increase in teacher qualifications (Inter-American Dialogue and State of the Nation Program, 2018).

This has yielded relevant quantitative results, such as the increase in coverage and attendance of the population in kindergartens, grammar schools, and high schools. However, structurally social and educational inequality are deepened and reproduced intergenerationally.

Thus, the Fifth State of Education Report (State of the Nation Program, 2015) presents data that ponder the impact of education on inequalities. For example, it is evident in the higher salary of people with higher education and the minimal changes in the distribution by educational levels. In addition, in the last decade, due to heavy public investment in education, there was a relative increase of more qualified workers, which, being higher than the relative demand, generated a reduction in salaries.

In that same report, the section on inequality in the distribution of education in Costa Rica over the last 25 years studies the fully active age population, that is between 25 and 65, a population group that reflects the country's stock of available human capital, even though the estimates include all persons of that age, not only those who are effectively incorporated into the labor market. Some of the conclusions obtained reveal that:

- in the case of men, there is not much difference in relation to the level of education and their employability, but there is among women, because their labor participation is strongly conditioned by their level of education,
- when comparing the evolution of inequality in the years of education for the population between 21 and 30 years of age with the countries of Latin America, a loss of position of the country is noted over time. In the 1990s, Costa Rica was one of the countries with the greatest equality in education. A decade later, it moved to an intermediate position and twenty years later it was placed -together with the rest of the Central American countries- in the most unequal group,
- the distribution of years of education among the population is one of the main factors explaining the increase in income inequality in Costa Rica over the last 15 years. The results indicate that there has been little progress in overcoming inequality in years of schooling and that the same is true for the educational level of the population. The comparison with Latin America shows that most of the countries have achieved greater improvements in average education in recent decades, so that all except the four Central American countries show a more favorable situation than Costa Rica.

By way of example, in the case of higher education, according to the Seventh State of Education Report (2019), there is stagnation in coverage at this educational level in Costa Rica in this decade. The percentage of the population aged 25 to 34 with higher education is similar to that of 2009 and as of 2014, the number of degrees delivered per year has decreased.

Based on the data and analysis in this report, higher education presents structural problems that threaten with setbacks in terms of the training needs of professionals who can be successfully inserted into the confusion of the globalized world and its demands in terms of educational soundness and current majors. The country faces many challenges in terms of higher education. It will be difficult for Costa Rica to move towards sustainable development if the correct investments and adjustments are not made to the budget, the training of professionals, and the inclusion of majors that bet on the constant technological innovations of the world.

The coverage gap relative to OECD countries grew from 6 % in the late 1990s to 16.5 percentage points in 2017. In past decades, coverage at the tertiary level improved as the economy grew and could invest in education. There was inertia in those improvements such that investment continued

even if growth slowed, but now it is different. Inertia is no longer sufficient to improve university coverage indicators, especially if one aspires to high-quality education (State of the Nation Program, 2019).

On the other hand, according to this report, the human resources that the country must prepare to successfully participate in "the knowledge society and the fourth industrial revolution" are still lacking, thus causing a gap in terms of equality. As can be seen, several factors point to the growing inequality in Costa Rican higher education; and we say that it is increasing because public policy decisions in this area, although they are being taken, are still weak, insufficient, and slow.

That is, following this report, expectations in terms of higher education are not very optimistic, precisely at a time when competitiveness and productivity are so necessary for countries that aspire to continue advancing in the direction of development, and that also aspire to achieve and implement the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

In 2018, for example, 37% of university educational opportunities corresponded to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and in them; moreover, there are still significant gender gaps in enrollment and graduation (PEN, 2019). This situation must change. For this to happen, robust public policies are needed, sustained over time and with sufficient resources to invest in the educational training that the globalized world demands to insert us with a better position in it and its dynamics.

According to the State of Education report (2019), public higher education in Costa Rica has a reasonable efficiency in the sectors where it can be measured and also has an acceptable quality "with great opportunities for improvement" (PEN, 2019).

In this regard, it is indicated that the "[...] graduation rate of each cohort of new entrants to public universities in the on-site class modality (50% on average) exceeds the OECD results and is similar to that of countries such as Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, Chile, and Mexico" (PEN, 2019). The terminal efficiency of the cohort rises to 62% when we add those who graduate but switch universities to the indicator.

In the case of Spain, the first approach we should make is around the Spanish Constitution of 1978, which in its article 27, refers directly to the right to education of all Spaniards, freedom of education, and free elementary and compulsory education.

In addition, the Constitution states the purpose of education for all Spaniards: "the full development of the human personality, respectful of the democratic principles of coexistence and the fundamental rights and freedoms" (1978, 8). These issues regarding the right to education were materialized at the legislative level in the Organic Law 8/1985 of July 3 and reinforced in the educational law, Organic Law 8/2013, of December 9, for the Improvement of Educational Quality.

In Section III of the Preamble, the latter endorses again what the Constitution and previous education laws have already mentioned, i.e., the importance of adapting the current educational system to social demands and needs. It directly alludes to the need to create optimal educational conditions allowing the complete personal and professional development of students, respecting educational inclusion, and providing equal opportunities between men and women as determining axes for equity and social welfare (LOMCE, 2013, 4).

Certainly, educational and, therefore, social exclusion is forged in what LOMCE calls the "knowledge divide"; that is, the existing gap between those children who have access to quality education and who acquire, throughout the various educational stages, the competencies, skills, and knowledge that will help them in their subsequent labor integration and those who subscribe to high rates of early school dropout and who live in conditions of vulnerability.

The search for quality education for all whose utopia is social justice and welfare is the backbone of the educational law in Spain, eliminating any hint of inequality. The purposes contained in the education law are supported by the data that both the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training and the OECD present on the educational situation in Spain. Namely:

- In 2019, early dropout from education and training in Spain stood at 17.3%, a decrease of 0.66 points compared to the previous year (17.9% in 2018), and continues to mark minimum values in the historical series. Compared to 2009 (30.9%), there has been a drop of 13.6 points, representing a decrease of 44% (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2019, 2). Despite the positivity of the data compared to previous years, Spain is still far from the EU average, making it one of the countries with the highest dropout rate.
- The differences between boy and girl students in the same school and between different schools indicate that Spain has a more homogeneous education system than the average, which translates into an equity index higher than the OECD average (LOMCE, 4, 6).
- State spending on education continues to increase compared to previous years, reaching €2,722 million in 2019, of which €1,780 million would be allocated to scholarships and grants for the training of students in situations of economic and social vulnerability.

With all that has been stated so far, it seems inevitable to ask ourselves what concrete measures are being adopted by Spain to validate the premises of its educational law.

In recent years, numerous and diverse measures have been adopted by different ministerial sectors (economic, educational, social, etc.) to continue improving the quality of education for the entire Spanish population, regardless of gender, social status, etc.

Thus, some of the main measures adopted have been:

- Decrease in the teacher-student ratio, being the lowest average in the OECD (MEFP, 2019).
- Individualized attention and flexibility of trajectories: aims to mitigate social differences and early school dropout by offering diversification of training itineraries adjusted to the social and professional needs of the students.
- Modernization of Vocational Training to facilitate labor market insertion and improve business network in Spain.
- New configuration of the curriculum: with special emphasis on crosscutting and professional life skill subjects.
- Standardized evaluations: focusing on the clarification of objectives to be met at the end of each stage.
- Increased autonomy of educational centers.
- New teaching-learning methodologies aimed at the development of the key competencies pursued in the curriculum: special attention to language immersion, the use of ICT, the reinforcement of STEM subjects, etc.

Those measures represent a new thrust to improve the quality of education, as well as to mitigate inequalities and promote equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their sex, family, economic background, etc.

### **3. Gender equality: the great challenge of our time**

Sustainable Development Goal number 5 is Gender Equality. But no coincidence that greater justice and equality for women and girls worldwide should exist to aspire to the development of peoples. We are talking about patriarchal practices and historical exclusion, which have relegated the presence and contribution of women in conditions of total inequality. In other words, throughout history, no less than half (approximately) of the world's population has been relegated to the background of human protagonism. This scenario must change if we want to move towards sustainable development. Such is the premise on which the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for their implementation are based. This mission has no borders or nationalities; it is a human and ethical mandate to which all countries should genuinely aspire.

Indeed, as stated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP): "Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it is also crucial for sustainable development. It has been proven time and again that empowering women and girls has a multiplier effect and helps promote economic growth and development globally" (UNDP, 2015).

In the case of Costa Rica, since the beginning of the 20th century, the organization of women was manifested in the initial workers' movements and in the teachers' organization of women educators, which constituted the first system of women's lobbying before the government. As in the rest of Latin America, the process of change was the result of the achievements of women's struggles, which have gradually managed to penetrate institutional, religious, and cultural traditions. It is worth mentioning the recognition of women's labor rights in the Labor Code, the modernization of family regulations to guarantee non-discrimination between sons and daughters, and the creation of the National Child Welfare Agency in 1942, among other social conquests.

On June 20, 1949, the Constituent Assembly of Costa Rica granted the right to vote to women, so the Costa Rican State, from the Constitution of 1949, has sought an institutional design that allows the achievement of human rights regarding individual, social, economic, and environmental aspects. The focus is on essential protection, health, welfare, gender equality and equity, strengthening citizenship, capacity building, employability, work, support for entrepreneurship, habitat in the territory, and access to and practice of new technologies (Bridge to Development Strategy: national strategy for poverty reduction 2014-2018).

In 1974, the Office of Women and Family Programs was created within the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. In 1986 it became the National Center for the Development of Women and the Family, responsible for national policies in favor of women. In March 1990, the Law for the Promotion of Social Equality of Women (Law No. 7142) was enacted to promote and guarantee equal rights between men and women in the political, economic, social, and cultural fields. In the labor field, the Law Against Sexual Harassment at Work and Teaching (Law No. 7476, 1995) prohibits and punishes sexual harassment as a discriminatory practice based on gender that goes against the dignity of women and men in work and teaching environments.

In 1998, the National Center for the Development of Women and the Family was transformed into the National Women's Institute (INAMU) by Republic Act No. 7801. It is constituted as an autonomous and decentralized entity with broad functions and attributions that include the protection of women's rights, the development and execution of the national policy for gender equality and equity, and the promotion of the social, political, cultural, and economic participation of women with complete enjoyment of their human rights, in conditions of equality and equity with men. In addition, the rank of Minister for the Condition of Women was created, who in turn assumes the Executive Presidency of the Institute.

However, despite all these efforts, the cultural, political, and economic background still places Costa Rica far from equity and equality. For this reason, in the Bridge to Development Strategy (2014-2018), it is urgent to develop public policies from a gender equity and equality approach, without which it is not possible to comply with the rights of women, who have always been at a disadvantage given

[...] their placement in high-productivity jobs, opportunities for successful entrepreneurship, income corresponding to their years of study, a labor market capable of meeting women's willingness and need to work according to the time available between paid and unpaid household activities, equity in education, access to social security, co-responsibility in care and household work, and access to social or community support. (p. 25)

In this same sense, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) points out that gender inequalities are accentuated in lower-income households, with greater demand for care, since they have a higher number of dependents per household (ECLAC, 2020).

In Costa Rica, the data provided by the *Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social* [Social Aid Institute] (IMAS) identify heads of households according to sex; reference is made to female heads of



household, as the feminization of poverty is notable. Therefore, for this population, in 2019, IMAS gave economic support to a total of 215,373 families; thus, the total beneficiary population was 339,193 families (IMAS, 2020). Almost 64% of the beneficiary families have women as head of household in charge of sons and daughters and, in many cases, also of relatives who are older adults.

The United Nations (UN) established the concept of feminization of poverty. In the case of Costa Rica, female-headed families in poverty are 36% higher than non-poor families. In addition, of the families in poverty or extreme poverty, 66% (36,263) are headed by women, while 34% (18,337) are headed by men. According to the information analyzed, most female heads of household in poverty or extreme poverty are between 19 and 39, 62% of them in this range (National Institute of Statistics and Census-INEC- 2014).

Likewise, gender gaps show that the greatest workload falls on women, as indicated by surveys on unpaid work, in which it is estimated that, regardless of the percentage of income they contribute to their households, women perform a minimum of 60% of the total unpaid workload of the couple. (National Institute of Statistics and Census-INEC- 2014).

Regarding violence against women, the National Policy for the Attention and Prevention of Violence against Women of all ages was designed, expanding from 2017 to 2032. It was agreed upon at the inter-institutional and intersectoral level, from a human rights approach, as established by the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (known as the Convention of Belém do Pará).

Furthermore, about education, gender stereotypes shape professional preferences, and the demands are directly related to the permanence of women in education and professional training. These become critical factors to reverse and achieve a considerable equality between men and women. The situation is much more serious for women from the most economically disadvantaged social strata, given that educational inequalities in the population living in poverty or extreme poverty, which as we saw earlier, is headed by women (66%); only 23.3% have completed elementary school, 26.6% have incomplete grammar school, and of this group, 17.3% are over 13 years of age. Only 2.1% have completed high school, of which 2% are over 18 years of age. Technical and higher education in this population reaches only 3.1% (IMAS/Target Population Information System, 2015).

New efforts towards equality are reflected in the National Policy for equality between women and men in training, employment, and enjoyment of the products of Science, Technology, Telecommunications and Innovation 2018-2027 (MICITT, 2017), projected for the decade 2018 - 2027 and in the National Policy for Effective Equality between Men and Women (PIEG) 2018-2030, a tool for decision making, the definition of strategies and the articulation of institutional actions between the Costa Rican State, Civil Society and private entities, key actors for cultural change and the achievement of measures in favor of effective equality between women and men.

In the Spain context, the principles and guidelines governing the educational law implicitly include the preservation of women's right to the incorporation of a quality and prolonged educational life along its different stages.

Certainly, the aforementioned Spanish Constitution of 1978 promulgates the recognition of equality between men and women, which serves as a basis and inspiration for all educational laws to consider this foundation and to be committed to an egalitarian and inclusive education, as we have been discussing.

Moreover, the LOMCE makes a direct reference to the promotion of values and practices aimed at consolidating effective equality between men and women, considering equal opportunity, non-discrimination, and the prevention of gender violence as an essential core on which to work from education (LOMCE, 2013). This need to continue to legislatively endorse an egalitarian education between men and women arises after the publication of different population analyses that still today show clear indicators of the differences between men and women in access to and maintenance of education.

Thus, completion of elementary education is still the "ceiling" for a higher percentage of the population that is female (52.43%). Similarly, of the total illiterate population, 66.82% are women.

These data lead us to think that, despite the massive incorporation of girls and women into the educational system during the last decades, a considerable percentage still sees their education progression slowed down at a very early age (MEFP, 2019). Their position is still being relegated to the care of the home. In contrast, women who manage to advance in the educational system do so until they reach, in high quotas, university studies, where we see a significantly higher number than men.

Although the data lure us to be optimistic about the advancement of women in the educational system, there are still two areas where male superiority is evident. The first is Vocational Training, where the male population is significantly predominant. The other is the doctorate, where men also outnumber women in terms of enrollment and degrees. Furthermore, traditionally this differentiation between men and women in education and work has also caused a clear distinction between the remuneration received between men and women who have the same job performance. This aspect has been conveniently regulated in the Spanish context since its RD 902/2020, of October 13, on Equal Remuneration between women and men.

#### **4. By way of conclusion: major challenges in current times**

With a short and medium-term outlook, the current context demands, from citizens and government authorities, the need to make decisions and generate effective and appropriate public and private policies to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 global crisis. According to ECLAC (2020), the dynamics of the coronavirus pandemic brought a combination of external and internal shocks, which foresees a vast economic and social crisis worldwide, with utterly adverse effects on employment, the fight against poverty, and the reduction of inequality. The pandemic will negatively impact the dynamics of poverty and inequality, and it will delay the commitments of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The condition of inequality in which thousands of people live has a social-historic content that determines and characterizes it and refers to social groups in all their diversity. They do not achieve the exercise of their rights in their daily lives. These social groups suffer the effects of an inequality gap related to economic, social, and political conditions, that are normal and recognized either legally or in practice by the rest of the people who make up the society where they are immersed.

The strenuous economic structure of women, especially women in poverty and informal conditions, should be a priority in strategic decisions and measures for the integral and inclusive recovery of societies. The decision-making process should give way to a "new reality" guided by a style of development centered on social justice, inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

The challenges of Costa Rica and Spain advancing towards full compliance with the human right to education, with the characteristics and needs that it poses in different national environments (greater inclusion, equity, justice, and scope, for example), transcend both countries by far. Perhaps that is why those challenges also unite us in making visible all the work that our States have in the range of achieving a complete, robust, and democratic education in terms of access and possibilities.

The truth is that, if we think about the requirements for the sustainable development of the peoples of the world, systematized in the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, we have drawn a thin line in only one of these goals, aware, however, that education is an invaluable tool to achieve other goals and certainly for people to have a better quality of life and the possibility of designing their happiness projects. This, lastly, is a mandate of all States and part of our duty as institutions of higher education is to raise our voice to accomplish such design sooner rather than later.

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