



# Inclusive growth for continued economic prosperity

## Empowering the Youth and Women in Costa Rica

SOT86200: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

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## Executive Summary

Costa Rica has shown impressive economic growth over the past 25 years. During this time, its policies have resulted in strong performance in human development indices, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation. Yet, this development has not been inclusive. As of today, **the youth and women** face multiple barriers to participating in Costa Rica's economy. This policy brief outlines the steps needed to unlock **inclusive economic growth in Costa Rica**.

### ► Focus Point 1: Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment in Costa Rica was 24.1% in 2023, well above its peers. One of the main reasons is a skills mismatch, in part due to an education system that lacks a practical component. In addition, low enrollment and high dropout rates in secondary schools are contributing to a poorly trained workforce. The poor are particularly vulnerable to missing out on a quality education, which has trickle down effects on their future career prospects.

#### Evidence-informed policies for economic empowerment of youth:

- Expand subsidized vocational education and training programs
- Implement conditional cash transfers for school enrollment and attendance
- Increase spending on teacher training, recruitment, technological resources
- Fund extracurricular and tutoring services for at-risk youth

### ► Focus Point 2: Labour force participation by women

Less than 45% of working age women are working or looking for a job. This is among the lowest rates in all Latin America. Women in Costa Rica continue to face barriers to employment, including gendered expectations at home, lack of childcare, and rigid labour markets. Young women and single mothers are the most vulnerable to exclusion for the job market.

#### Evidence-informed policies for economic empowerment of women:

- Increase childcare coverage by expanding the *Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social*
- Legislate the right for parents to flexible work arrangements and schedules
- Provide public employment services, training programs and wage subsidies to employers to hire more women
- Ban discrimination based on gender when applying for a business loan

***“The youth and women continue to face barriers to employment”***

# Background

## 1. Youth Unemployment

A major challenge to Costa Rica's economic growth is **youth unemployment**, which stood at **24.1% in 2023**, **well above peers** in Latin America and upper middle-income countries (Figure 1). This is not a new trend, as youth unemployment has been rising for several decades (Figure 2). This can at least partially be explained by the **skills mismatch**, especially in technical and scientific positions. In 2022, two thirds of employers faced difficulties in finding the right talent, a near doubling since 2012 (ManpowerGroup, 2022).

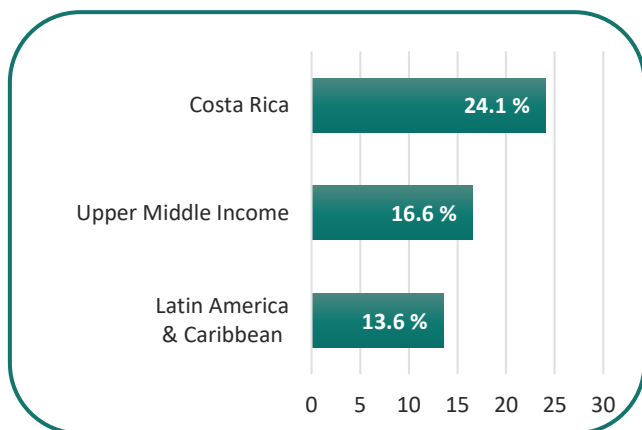


Figure 1: Youth Unemployment (2023), % of labour force ages 15-24 (International Labor Organization, 2024)

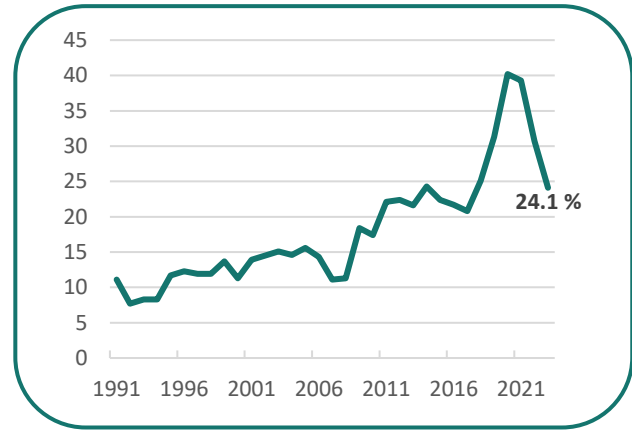


Figure 2: Youth Unemployment, % of labour force ages 15-24 (International Labor Organization, 2024)

High youth unemployment tends to hit the poor the hardest (Imbusch et al., 2011). Even when they do manage to secure work, it tends to be **temporary, informal, and poorly paid** (Colegio de Ciencias Económicas, 2023). This economic uncertainty leaves them trapped in poverty and vulnerable to **mental health problems** (Benjet, C. et al., 2012), **social unrest, drug abuse, crime, and violence**. Recently, it was reported that the number one cause for death among the youth are homicides, and that drug trafficking was infiltrating communities (Murillo, 2023). On a societal level, high youth unemployment poses challenges to Costa Rica's future **macroeconomic stability** as the population continues to age. It also increases **voter apathy and disengagement** from the democratic process (Solis, 2024).

One of the main causes of the skills mismatching behind youth unemployment is Costa Rica's **education system**. In this area Costa Rica lags its OECD peers. Per Table 1, youth are **less likely to enroll** in secondary and tertiary education, while some areas of the country face **dropout rates** of up to 58% (Garneir-Rimolo et al., 2010). Further, **students' performance** in OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) trails those of their peers in all key assessment areas (Table 2). Low PISA scores may be one of the reasons for Costa Rica's productivity and economic growth having been lower compared to East Asia (Hanushek and Woessman, 2012). **These education gaps call for reform to the education system. Left unchecked, these shortcomings could worsen the talent shortage, and by extent, Costa Rica's international competitiveness.**

*Close to 1 in 4 youth (ages 15-24) are unemployed, almost double the Latin American average (ILO, 2024)*

	Costa Rica	OECD Average
General Upper Secondary	28 %	37 %
Vocational Upper Secondary	14 %	23 %
Lower Secondary Programmes	16 %	12 %
Tertiary Programmes	5 %	12 %

Table 2: PISA Scores, 15-year olds (OECD, 2022)

	Costa Rica	OECD Average
Mathematics	385	472
Reading	415	476
Science	411	485

*Note: PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. (OECD)*

## 2. Female Labour Force Participation

The second key to unlocking higher economic growth in Costa Rica is addressing the gender gaps in the labour market. As per Figure 3 below, participation in the labour force among women is **5.4% lower** in Costa Rica than the Latin American average, **11.2% lower** than middle income economies, and **4% lower** than the world average (World Bank, 2024). According to the OECD (2023d), closing this gender labour gap in Costa Rica would add upwards of **0.40 percentage points of additional GDP growth** per year. Factoring in high life expectancy and low fertility, which will put ever greater pressure on a **shrinking working population**, it is all the more imperative to **ensure women have equal access to job opportunities**.

Turning to causes, women in Costa Rica spend 2.6 times as much time on **unpaid domestic and care work** as men (World Bank, 2024). Further, **motherhood** affects career prospects, as women are placed in an impossible double bind of having to balance family and professional duties. This is reflected in the statistics, as the employment gap between women and men is only 10 percentage points in the age group 15-24, which widens to **27 percentage points** for the age group 25-44 (the average age of mothers at the time of their first child is 24). The mothers that do manage to find work tend to opt for more flexible informal work, but this tends to be less paid and more precarious (Gindling and Oviedo, 2008). Nowhere is this more obvious than among **single mothers**, of which **more than half live in poverty** (De Hoop and Arakaki, 2022). In the legislative field, Costa Rica lacks provisions mandating the **right to a paid parental leave**. The difficult situation mothers find themselves in point to the need for **improved support mechanisms and workplace reform**.

Turning to **pre-motherhood age groups**, young women are also more likely than young men to be NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). **More than 1 in 4 young women are NEET**, double the OECD average, while young women are **1.7 times more likely to be NEET** than their male counterparts (OECD, 2024). Living in **rural areas** is an additional risk factor, where over 50% of employed women work in the **informal sector** (OECD, 2024). These dynamics pose risk of social exclusion to young women, worsen the poverty trap and leave them without the skills to better their living conditions. Therefore, policies to curb youth NEET rates should also have **special provisions** for young women.

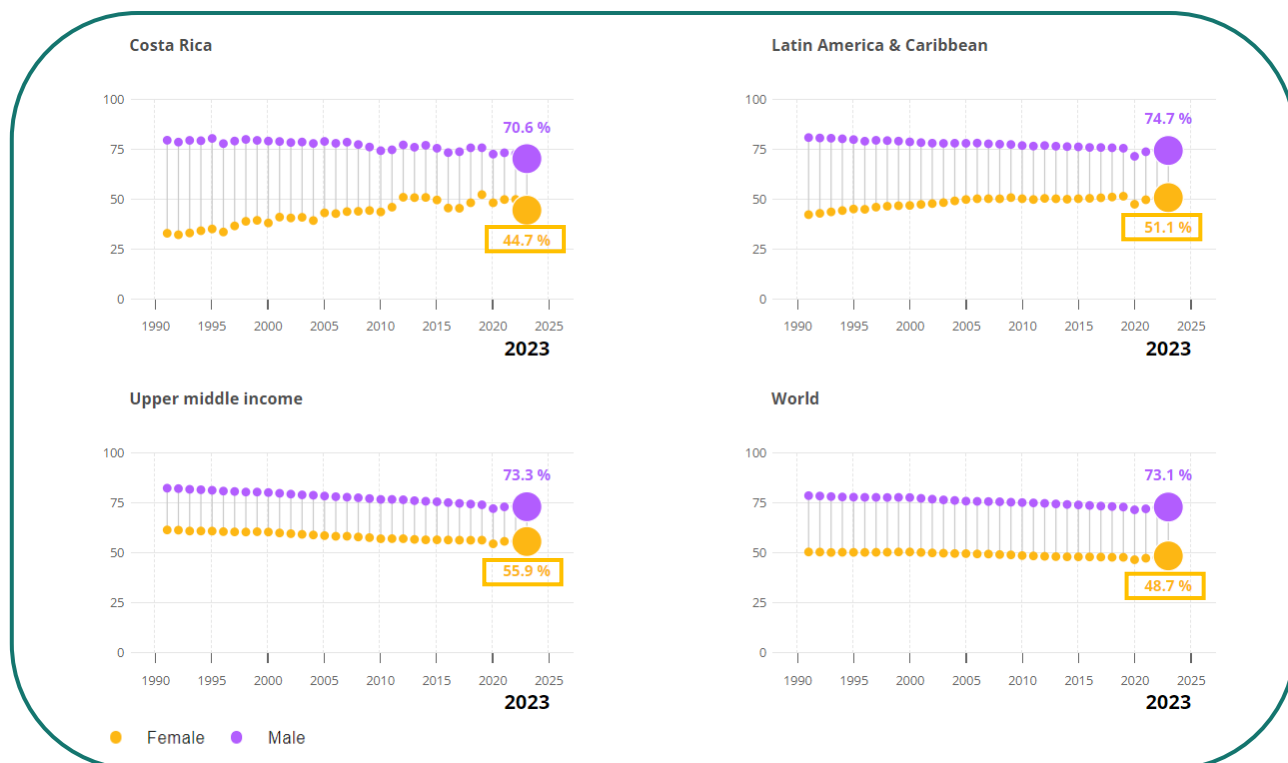


Figure 3: Labour force participation rates (World Bank)

Finally, women also face **barriers to starting their own business**. They are 15 percentage points **less likely to own their own bank account** than men, and 21 percentage points less likely when compared to women in upper middle-income countries (Sardon et al, 2023). Additionally, women are likelier than men to cite **‘necessity’ as the motive** for starting their business, while men are more likely than women to inherit the family business (INEC, 2023). Women’s businesses also tend to focus in **less profitable sectors**, such as domestic services, further exacerbating divides and gender norms (OEAP, 2018). Finally, some **legislative barriers** remain regarding **credit access**, as the law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender.

*More than 1 in 4 young women are NEET (not in employment, education or training), double the OECD average (OECD, 2024).*

## Data & Methods

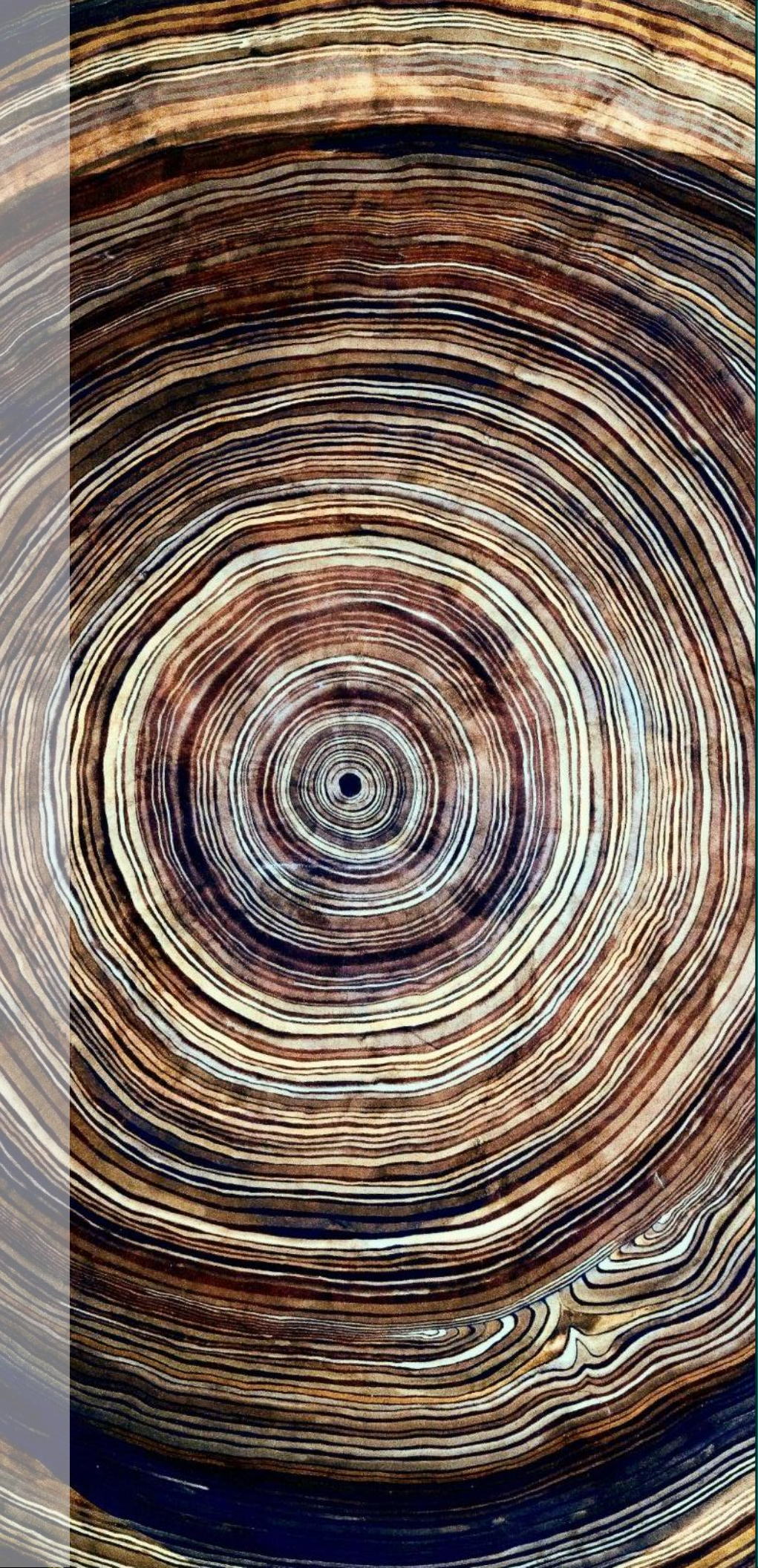
In preparation of this brief, various data sources and academic publications were reviewed. Country-level data was extracted from reputable sources such as the OECD, World Bank, and International Labor Organization. These figures were used to compare Costa Rica to its peers in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to other upper middle-income countries and the OECD as a whole. What emerged are glaring gaps in youth unemployment and participation in the labour market by women between Costa Rica and its peers. Addressing these challenges would open significant opportunities for continued prosperity of the Costa Rican model of socioeconomic development.

Once the challenges were identified, policy reports and academic literature were reviewed for possible policy solutions. As Costa Rica is a member of the OECD, substantial macro-level information is readily available. However, studies that quantify the impacts of relevant policies in the Costa Rican context are few and far in between. Therefore, studies focusing on similar countries (in order of preference: Latin American > upper middle income > developed) were used as supporting evidence to inform policy recommendations. This approach maximized the applicability of policy solutions in the Costa Rican context. Additionally, preference was given to quantitative studies, and when those were unavailable, recommendations were based on qualitative analyses of experts, academics, and insiders. The process resulted in several actionable, evidence-informed policy recommendations with great potential to economically empower the youth and women in Costa Rica.

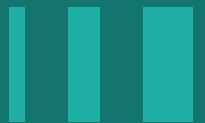


Source: OpenArt MDXL (<https://openart.ai/create>)





# POLICY SOLUTIONS





# 1. Youth Unemployment

## ► Teaching relevant skills

As mentioned previously, one cause of the persistent youth unemployment is that their **skills** do not match those required by the private sector (ManpowerGroup, 2022). Indeed, greater **collaboration** between the public and private sectors is needed to ensure educational programs are aligned with labour market and societal needs (Artavia et al., 2024). One policy solution would be to provide **subsidized VET (vocational education and training)**, where Costa Rica lags 9 percentage points behind the OECD average (Table 1). These programs provide practical training while allowing the companies to test a new hire before committing to a full-time offer. Importantly, VET programs **reduce unemployment**, as in Costa Rica only 8.5% of 25–34-year-olds with VET qualifications are out of a job, compared to 15.9% of those without (OECD, 2023c). As another example, in 2005 Colombia introduced Jóvenes en Acción, a program aimed at disadvantaged and unemployed youth, where they received 6 months of vocational training (3 months in-classroom + 3 months on-the-job). The program **raised employment** and salaries for women, helped men secure **more stable jobs**, and the **benefits outweighed program costs** (Attanasio et al., 2011).

## ► Increasing secondary enrollment

A better educated workforce is **more likely to be employed and better paid** (OECD, 2019). As of 2023, only half of those aged 25–34 have completed upper secondary education, compared to 85% in the OECD (OECD, 2023b). To address this gap, one policy solution would be to incentivize academic attendance through **conditional cash transfers**. These tools have been used for more than 20 years in Latin America and have successfully **increased school attendance**, especially among the poor (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009; Galiani and McEwan, 2013). Under the program, students are paid for meeting minimum attendance requirements (usually 80% of class time), re-enrolling, and graduating from studies. In Colombia, these transfers **significantly increased attendance and enrollment** in secondary and tertiary levels (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2011). Additional attendance incentives would be to **provide targeted, early tutoring support**, especially to underperforming students, who tend to be poor and most at risk of dropping out (OECD, 2023b).

## ► Improving education quality

To further motivate students to enroll and stay in school, the government should **improve the quality of education**. For some time now, students in Costa Rica have ranked **near the bottom in PISA scores** among their OECD peers (OECD, 2024). As a result, well-off parents are losing confidence in the public system, and now almost a fifth of all children attend private school at some point (Artavia et al., 2024). This is contributing to the growing outcomes gap between the rich and the poor. This can be rectified by **increasing spending per student**, which is currently at only 50% compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2023c). Specifically, **increasing spending on teacher training** and **hiring more teachers** to reduce class sizes have the highest potential to increase learning outcomes, a finding consistent among developing countries (McEwan, 2015). Funding should also be targeted toward reducing the gaps in outcomes, especially in impoverished **rural areas**, through **infrastructure development and technological access** (Artavia et al., 2024). Further policy recommendations would be to provide **funding for extracurricular activities** (and facilities) to keep youth away from crime and improve their mental health, and thus their motivation to stay in school.



## 2. Female Labour Force Participation

### ► Access to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC)

As per the OECD (2024), lack of daycare options is one of the main drivers of low participation of women in the labour market. In Costa Rica, **90% of children under the age of 3 do not attend ECEC**, as well as **37% of 3–5-year-olds**. This is well below the OECD average and other Latin American states (Figure 4). Further, this access is even lower among **disadvantaged households** (OECD, 2023a). The evidence from other Latin American countries has shown that **affordable daycare increases employment of women**, and that they are **up to 22% more likely to be employed** (Mateo Díaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy, 2016). Important factors for the success of the program (and increasing female employment) are the **quality** of daycare services, **distance** to the daycare center, and **operation during** working hours (Contreras et al., 2012). The benefits of ECEC programs potentially **far outweigh the costs**, especially among the most vulnerable. For example, ECEC programs in the US focusing on high-risk children delivered economic **rates of return of 7-16%**. In addition to **boosting GDP** by allowing more women to enter the workforce, they could lead to **better labor market outcomes** for parents, **reductions in crime**, and **better health**.

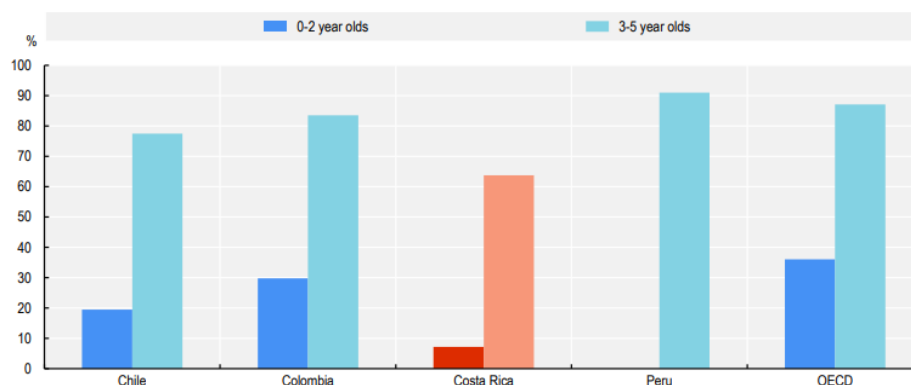


Figure 4: Child enrollment in early childhood education and care services (OECD, 2024). Note: data not available for Peru 0–2-year-olds.

In Costa Rica, there are two main childcare programs- the CENCINAI and IMAS. A study by Mata (2018) has evaluated the effect of these programs on female participation in the labour market, education attendance, and time spent on unpaid domestic works. She found that **IMAS has a positive effect on both job seeking and time spent in school**, while the results of CENCINAI are less favorable, possibly due to different incentive structures. One recommendation would be for the government to **expand IMAS**, given the benefits to female employment and training. A second recommendation would be to **cancel CENCINAI and reinvest the savings into IMAS**, as it seems to be leading to undesired outcomes. This would also simplify the landscape of childcare programs, streamlining the process for both beneficiaries and the government. Nevertheless, given the large enrollment gap **supplemental measures** should be considered. In addition to the centralized formal daycare approach, Costa Rica could also test the approach by Colombia, which tapped into **existing networks of informal care**. Through their “Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar” program, Colombia **regulates and financially supports** unpaid care workers. This program now covers over 1.7 million children ages 0-4 and is largest of its kind in the region (Rauls and Simon, 2020). It has also **increased the odds of mothers working outside the home by 25%**. This strategy may be worth pursuing in Costa Rica, although care should be taken to **avoid a two-tiered system**. This brief’s author considers it more of a **stop-gap solution** for communities while they await the expansion of IMAS-compliant trained personnel and facilities, and not a substitute.

### ► Removing labour market rigidities

As mentioned, women are often compelled to seek flexible work arrangements that allow them to fulfill their duties at home. These positions tend to be part-time or in the informal sector and as such, they do not have access to **social protection** including unemployment insurance, sick leave, maternity leave, and pensions. This leaves them at a disadvantage compared to men, and at **risk of poverty and social exclusion**. Here the recommendation would be to legislate **more flexible** work arrangements, such as **telecommuting** and **flexible or compressed work schedules**. These measures **help women enter and stay in the formal labour market**, as shown in both developed and developing countries (Golden, 2012; Subramaniam et al., 2015). Costa Rica could look to the European Union on this front, which has legislated that working parents of children up to at 8 years old have **the right to request** flexible working arrangements, which may include reduced or flexible hours and remote work (European Parliament, 2019). The same directive also strengthens rights to parental leave and legal protections. However, it is **important to work on changing gender norms** toward more egalitarian ones in parallel, lest the flexible arrangements reinforce gender stereotypes (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2020). The state could **increase the time of paternal leave** or replace maternal/paternal leave with a **neutral parental leave**. It can also **set an example** for the private sector to follow, by legislating flexible arrangements in the public sector and encouraging its male employees to use them for family reasons.

### ► Active labour market policies

There are additional ways in which the government can improve the prospects of women to join the labour force. This can be done through providing **public employment services** that connect women to employers, offering **training programs** in partnership with businesses to ensure they acquire the required skills, and granting **wage subsidies** to employers to hire more women. These services also reduce barriers for employers, providing them with information about an untapped labour pool and their abilities. Studies have shown that **skills training and wage subsidies have been effective in increasing female employment** (Mateo Díaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy, 2016). It is recommended to invest **extra resources per capita** in rural and impoverished areas, as vulnerable women tend to come from this socioeconomic background. It is also recommended to target **young women** with these programs as domestic inequalities start early and they tend to be disproportionately NEET (not in employment, education, or training). Finally, a special set of policies should be aimed at supporting female **entrepreneurs**, especially related to financial asset control (OECD, 2023b). Costa Rica should provide **financial literacy workshops** to boost bank account ownership and **ban gender discrimination** when applying for credit.

*Closing the gender labour gap in Costa Rica would boost GDP growth by at least 0.40 % per year (OECD, 2023d)*

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