

Interview with Sofía Marroquin, representative of Oxfam Intermón

1.- On a global level and also locally, in the Basque Country, what is the evolution of inequality and its consequences?

The coronavirus pandemic has the potential to aggravate inequality in practically every country in the world at the same time, a situation unprecedented since records began. The virus has exposed and exacerbated economic, gender and racial inequalities, while feeding on them.

More than two million people have lost their lives, and hundreds of millions are being driven into poverty, while most of the world's richest people and companies continue to grow richer. The fortunes of billionaires have returned to pre-pandemic levels in just nine months, while for the world's poorest people this recovery could take more than a decade.

The current crisis has exposed our collective fragility, as well as the failure of our deeply unequal economy to benefit society as a whole. But it has also taught us that government action is vital to protect our health and livelihoods.

Before the onset of the pandemic crisis, Spain was already one of the most unequal countries in Europe, being the fifth most unequal country behind only Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

Spain reached this situation after having experienced a stagnation in the reduction of its inequality levels, which grew significantly during the previous economic crisis and which, however, have shown much resistance to reduction during the years of economic recovery, between 2014 and 2017, mainly due to the structure of our labour market, the unequal distribution of income between capital and labour in the exit of the crisis, and the scarce redistributive component of our public spending.

The pandemic, therefore, has not treated all people equally, but has had a more virulent impact on the most vulnerable population. This inequality relates to living conditions, access to public and private health services, living conditions, use of public transport, working conditions and teleworking, among others, so that in each of them, the most vulnerable population has experienced a greater risk of contagion than people belonging to more favoured sectors.

Access to employment has been the main factor generating inequality throughout the pandemic, mainly affecting people with temporary and precarious contracts who have not been able to take advantage of measures such as ERTE, a problem that mainly affects young people under the age of 30, women and migrants.

The pandemic has particularly affected the most vulnerable women, reproducing the impact of gender inequality. There are several factors that explain this greater impact. On the one hand, women are over-represented in the socio-health and cleaning sectors, as well as in commerce, food and hospitality, sectors that have suffered the greatest work overload during this crisis.

They have taken on more care work, both paid and unpaid, reducing their working hours to take on this increased responsibility for care. It is also women who suffer the greatest precariousness and in-work poverty, accounting for 57% of all underemployed people, 73% of those working part-time, and 50% of those on temporary contracts. To this must be added the increased risk of suffering gender-based violence as a consequence of situations of home confinement.

Another of the groups with the greatest impact has been migrants, particularly those in an irregular administrative situation, who have been more unprotected during the crisis. The evolution of unemployment during 2020 has amplified the differences between migrant workers and nationals. While unemployment among Spaniards has grown by 1.66 points between the third quarter of 2019 and the third quarter of 2020, unemployment among foreigners has risen by more than five points to 25.65, one of the groups most affected by the adjustments.

The pandemic has therefore increased inequalities, also in the Basque Country, where the same situation is reproduced as in other contexts: the wealthy have seen their wealth increase during the pandemic and have recovered more quickly from its onslaught, while the most vulnerable people (young people, migrants and women) have suffered more acutely from the consequences of the crisis.

The Basque Country has an income level above the national average and the highest in the country in recent years, so its poverty and vulnerability indicators are quite good, at a great distance from the national average values.

Despite these good figures, 13.9% of the Basque population is at risk of poverty and/or exclusion, some 304,000 people, of whom almost 62% are women.

Moreover, there are two particularly vulnerable groups. On the one hand, 27.3% of pensioners in the Basque Country receive a pension below the poverty threshold (33% if we are referring to widows' and widowers' pensions) and in many cases their income is supplemented by the RGI through the social protection system.

On the other hand, children. With a child poverty rate of 11.7%, the highest since 2008, single-parent and large families, and especially migrant families, are the worst offenders, highlighting the inadequacy of the guaranteed income system for these groups.

2.- What is Oxfam Intermón doing and what are you asking to be done?

Oxfam Intermón is raising evidence of the impact of inequalities in our country, and we denounce this situation in order to promote political and social changes. We do this sometimes alone and often together with other social organisations and grassroots organisations of the most vulnerable groups, especially young people, migrants and domestic and care workers.

Among the demands we push for are:

A fair and progressive tax system. The tax system, understood as the combination of how much and how it is collected and how and where these resources are invested, has a lot of room for improvement if we compare ourselves with other European countries. The gap lies mainly in how much we collect (4 points less tax burden than the European Union), and in how much we reduce poverty thanks to our social protection system (4.5 points less than the European average). The eminently contributory nature of our benefits is inconsistent with the reality of a highly precarious labour market, replicates gender inequalities and ignores the changes that the future of employment must bring.

A social protection system that is adequately funded and designed to reduce poverty. Our social protection system is fundamentally contributory, which leaves those who do not have access to decent work, especially young people and migrants, particularly vulnerable. The approval and implementation of the minimum living income, despite all the limitations it presented, especially in its first year of implementation, has meant guaranteeing a minimum income floor throughout Spain. In addition to the improvement in its deployment, it is necessary that the regional income guarantees contribute to reinforcing this minimum floor and allow the needs of more people living in poverty to be covered.

The ratification of ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers, and the initiation of an ambitious process of transposition that does not stop at the formal recognition of rights, but involves proactive policies that make these rights possible.

A new organisation of care. How men and women divide their time between paid work within companies and care work in the home has been a determining factor in the configuration of a care model that relies on domestic workers. If men and companies were more supportive, it would not be necessary to have an oversized sector, nor would it be necessary to deny workers their labour rights in order to make their work affordable for families who lack the time to care for them.

Measures recently adopted in Spain such as the equalisation of equal and non-transferable paternity and maternity leave -16 weeks-, in force since January 2021 (RD-Law 6/2019) or the regulation of teleworking (RD-Law 28/2020) are on the right track. However, much remains to be done. An ambitious transposition of Directive 2019/1158 on the reconciliation of family, professional and personal life, the approval of a Co-responsible Time Act -included in the coalition agreement- or a possible reduction of the working day, as a result of the growing debate on the 4-day working week, are essential measures to reorganise care in our society.

3.- What is Oxfam Intermón's assessment of the Popular Legislative Initiative for an Unconditional Basic Income in the Basque Country - <https://rentabasica.eus/es/> -?

Although we have not taken up this proposal as an institution, we consider that a measure aimed at guaranteeing minimum income conditions for all people is a proposal that will

contribute to reducing inequalities and the vulnerability of those on the margins of our society. The challenge of funding cannot be the excuse for not pushing it forward.