

Migration and Food (In)security During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Quito, Ecuador: A Photovoice Study with Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees

by Yolanda Alfaro and Cheryl Martens*

Introduction

Since 2015, Venezuela's economic and political crisis has led to an accelerated deterioration of the population's living conditions and large-scale out-migration to other countries in Latin America (Landaeta-Jiménez & Herrera, 2020). Scarcity of food and medicine are the main drivers of Venezuelan migration, which is often irregular in nature (Gandini et al., 2019). Despite the challenges, Venezuelan migrants and refugees demonstrate both resilience and adaptability in responding to crisis (Martin et al., 2013). Although all types of food may be available, the ability to acquire food is restricted due to a lack of access to the formal job market, to social services, and to government support.

The global health crisis of COVID-19 not only deepened the social and economic exclusion of Venezuelan migrants, it has also widened the gaps in their access to food, increasing levels of food insecurity, making them even more dependent on the support of international organizations and informal networks (Eguiguren et al., 2022; Milan & Martens, 2023; Pérez et al., 2021).

This research brief discusses the interrelationship of these factors, focusing on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the food security of Venezuelan migrants in Quito, Ecuador. This qualitative Photovoice study uses an intersectional perspective and photovoice methodology to address the experiences of migrants in three temporalities: before, during, and after the pandemic (Antias, 2006).

Based on principles of participatory research, Photovoice provided an analytical tool to order, systematize, and interpret the experiences of participants, linking them to socioeconomic, historical, and political contexts (Rivera Sánchez, 2012; Simmonds et al., 2015). This participative methodology made it possible to identify a range of life experiences and to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges migrants and refugees face in relation to their food insecure conditions.

* Institute for Advanced Studies in Inequalities, Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ)



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Balsillie School of International
Affairs, 67 Erb St West, Waterloo,
Ontario, Canada N2L 6C2

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Methodology

Photovoice is a technique aligned with action research, allowing for a deeper discussion and analysis of the living conditions of a specific community and the generation of intervention proposals for after the pandemic (Jarldorn, 2019). This approach was used to document the impact of the pandemic and understand the changes and continuities in the participants' food insecurity conditions.

Drawing on the migratory trajectories and views of the participants, the study had four main objectives: (a) to identify and reflect on the conditions of daily food consumption; (b) to examine changes in diet based on migratory trajectory and residence (temporary or permanent) in Quito; (c) to understand food access conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (d) to explore with participants the actions taken during and post the pandemic to address food insecurity.

The photovoice sessions were structured into three groups of participants with diverse social profiles:

- LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees;
- Women migrants and refugees
- A mixed group(a)of adults migrants and refugees.

In total, eleven women and six men participated in the photovoice discussion groups, four of whom self-identified as LGBTQ+. This diverse set of profiles enriched the discussion groups by including heterogeneity of life experiences and the complex realities of the migrant population.

Based on the participants' narratives, and using a grounded theory approach, we identified patterns and trends that facilitated the construction of a collective narrative on food insecurity around five themes:

- The conditions of daily food and the type of food consumption;
- The conditions of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Changes in food consumption due to migration and settlement (temporary or permanent) in Quito
- Actions that can be taken to address food insecurity.

The findings are presented according to the main themes in each of three photovoice groups. These include daily consumption patterns and experiences before migration, changes in diet caused by cultural adaptation and responses to difficulties in food access during the pandemic, and challenges faced and the strategies adopted by migrants to manage food insecurity in their new context.

Results

Analysis of the Photovoice data makes it possible to unravel various dimensions of the food insecurity experienced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Quito. Photographic and testimonial accounts of the participants reveal how Venezuela's economic and political crisis was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and significantly impacted the food security of all participants.

Food Scarcity as a Driver of Migration

The economic and social crisis in Venezuela has had a devastating impact on the lives of the participants. Their photos and stories demonstrate that the scarcity of food and medicine was one of the main reasons they decided to migrate. Most agreed that food shortages were a daily reality during their last year in Venezuela. Many remember going hungry, eating less food, and going more than a day without eating.

Access to food in Venezuela prior to migrating was reported as more difficult than during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador. Food scarcity and poverty had serious repercussions for their physical, mental, and emotional health. The participants reported consuming carbohydrate-heavy diets and recalled losing weight and experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety. These mental health issues have affected their ability to perform everyday activities, such as working or studying. Recognizing the impact of scarcity and poverty on the mental health of migrants and refugees and the need for psychological support and resources to improve their overall well-being is crucial.

Grains of Strength



"In Venezuela, before I came, there was already a lack of chicken and meat. Grains were our way of fortifying ourselves, of strengthening ourselves, of feeding our children. We didn't have a balanced diet, there was always rice and grains, but no vegetables because getting them was impossible" (Ida, October 18, 2023)

Food Consumption in Everyday Life: Filling Up on Carbohydrates and Reducing Portions

The participants' reported daily food intake was characterized by the consumption of basic carbohydrates such as rice, bread, beans, and bananas, while the consumption of other vegetables and fruits is low. Although animal protein is considered a central component in Venezuelan food, its daily consumption in Quito is minimal due to its inaccessibility. Economic constraints force migrants to prioritize cheaper, carbohydrate-heavy, "filling" foods such as bread. One participant described the preparation of a dish made with missing ingredients in Photo 2.

We Fill It with Our Hearts



"This was last night. I managed to share dinner with some friends. If you notice, something is missing. Although it was a very humble dinner, what was missing was filled with heart and joy. You have to wrap yourself up as far as the blanket reaches" (Gimy, October 15, 2023)

In both the women's group and the mixed gender group, the women demonstrated that they play a crucial role in family nutrition and identified themselves as responsible for the acquisition and preparation of food. Their role as caregivers places them in a situation of greater vulnerability, since their health and well-being are affected by the prioritization of the needs of their loved ones, especially in situations of scarcity. One mother reported how she addressed food insecurity by reducing her own portions and how she responded when questioned by her children:

Last week, I found myself in a tricky situation. In our pantry there were only two loaves of bread, an egg and a piece of cheese. I invented an omelette with what was available. When my eldest son noticed that I barely ate, I told him that I was satisfied, although deep down I prayed that there would be a little more left over. Sometimes, creativity in the kitchen becomes a blessing (Lennis, October 25, 2023).

In the LGBTQ+ group, the precarity and vulnerability of transgender women was particularly evident. Participants reported both systemic and structural violence and the lack of access to stable employment opportunities and family networks to draw on to support their food security.

Changes in Diet and Access to Food as a Result of the Migration Experience

Although migrating to Ecuador allowed the participants to improve their living conditions, adaptation to the local environment has been marked by cultural tensions with Ecuadorians. However, social and cultural integration through food can increase dietary diversity (Photo No. 3).

Encounter of Two Cultures



“For breakfast, Venezuelans eat huevos perico, an arepa and coffee with milk or orange juice, but since I didn’t have milk or juice, I made máchica (a traditional Andean food product made from barley, particularly popular in Ecuador). It is a food that sustains you. You can have it for breakfast at 7 a.m. and at 2 p.m. you still don’t feel like eating” (Marco, October 19, 2023)

Adjusting to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the living conditions of Venezuelan migrants in Quito. Despite the accessibility of basic foodstuffs, COVID-19 exacerbated food insecurity for migrants and refugees. The pandemic widened gaps in food access and pre-existing social and economic inequalities. Many participants reported losing their jobs and being forced to rely on the assistance of international organizations and informal networks to meet their basic needs for food and lodging. Most noted that job loss and decreased income negatively impacted their food security, with a reduction in the quantity and quality of the food they consumed.

Pandemic job loss also forced them to rely more on informal organizations and networks. The men said this was particularly difficult, given that they were accustomed to assuming the role of breadwinners and were not used to relying on informal organizations and networks. So, when employment opportunities disappeared, they had greater difficulty than women in adapting to the new circumstances.

Some migrants developed new skills to make use of the limited resources available. For example, one participant mentioned how she learned to make bread in the pandemic (Photo No. 4).

Divine Bread



“I put divine bread on it because this photo reminded me that in the pandemic we had nothing to eat. That day, we hadn’t eaten, and as a matter of God, a lady came with about five pounds of flour and told me: ‘Take, María Laura, do something with it.’ I thought, what do I do with so much flour? And I started to invent bread because I had never made bread. I remember my daughter was super happy as if I had given her the best food in the world. I made about 30 loaves of bread and we ate for about two days in a row” (María Laura, October 25, 2023)

Resilience in the Face of Food Insecurity

Several actions in the post-pandemic period have helped migrants and refugees to address food insecurity. These include: (1) strengthening support and solidarity networks between migrants and the local population; (2) creating community gardens and food production at the local level; (3) promoting education and training in cooking techniques and nutrition; and (4) facilitating of access to food assistance programs and government resources.

Roots of My Land



“This photo is called the roots of my land because in the pandemic we began to see how to plant for ourselves, because we believe that, if you can produce your own product, if you do it yourself, it will always taste better. Yesterday, in fact, I cooked with the things I planted myself in my garden” (Johana, October 25, 2023)

Conclusions

Migrants and refugees to Quito in all three photovoice groups said that their food security and diversity did improve after migrating from Venezuela. However, while dietary diversification and the perception of greater food affordability suggest that they are better off in Ecuador, they also experienced greater food insecurity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Solidarity networks and support from non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic, a finding which aligns with those from other studies conducted during the pandemic (Milan & Martens, 2023).

Food insecurity remains a pressing issue for women and families, with transgender women being amongst the most affected. Nevertheless, women in this Photovoice study demonstrated greater levels of resilience and lower levels of stress compared to men, who expressed great personal difficulty adapting to the lockdown and being unable to work.

Job insecurity, low incomes, and limited economic integration in Quito perpetuate the vulnerability of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Despite the challenges, migrants demonstrated resilience, drawing on family strategies, urban gardens, and community networks to improve their food security. These experiences underscore the importance of considering economic and cultural factors and integrating multiple actors in formulating policies and support programs.

To overcome adversity, participants played an active role in transforming their eating habits through strategies, such as planting their own food and participating in community life. The persistent reports of food insecurity, however, also highlight the urgent need for interventions that address both the structural causes and the immediate effects of the Venezuelan migration, including addressing issues such as the mental health of migrants and refugees in the context of a major health crisis such as COVID-19.

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