

## Labour Precarity, Gender, and Food Insecurity of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees in Ecuador During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Introduction

Globally, labour migration represents the predominant segment of international migration. The ILO (2021) estimated the global population of migrant workers at 169 million. This figure comprises 62% of the total international migrant population of 272 million and 4.9% of the worldwide workforce (ILO, 2021). Despite the substantial number of migrant workers and their significant role in labour markets, numerous scholars underscore the precariousness of their working conditions. Koseoglu Ornek et al. (2022) assert that migrant workers frequently enter the workforce in host countries through precarious employment characterized by substandard conditions, including job insecurity, inadequate wages, limited rights and protections, and inequitable treatment. Furthermore, deskilling means the underutilization or erosion of migrants' skills in destination countries (ILO, n.d.). Job precarity exacerbates food insecurity among migrants as financial strain intensifies difficulties in accessing sufficient food resources and aggravates health disparities (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Latin America has witnessed increasing migration flows, significantly influenced by the ongoing economic and political challenges in Venezuela leading to a substantial outflow of its population to neighbouring nations. Between 2014 and 2024, the exodus of over 7.7 million Venezuelan refugees and displaced persons was recorded. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified Venezuela's already critical economic and humanitarian crisis, prompting additional emigration to other countries (Arena et al., 2022). According to projections by the International Monetary Fund, the Venezuelan migrant population is expected to reach approximately 8.4 million by 2025, representing over 25% of the 2015 population (Arena et al., 2022). Most of these migrants have sought asylum in other countries within Latin America and the Caribbean (UNHCR, 2024). Since 2015, there has been a substantial increase in the Venezuelan population



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residing in Ecuador, which now accommodates nearly half a million Venezuelans; this increase is further attributed to the worsening economic conditions in Venezuela following the COVID-19 pandemic (Céleri, 2023; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

While the primary impetus for their migration to Ecuador and the foremost necessity within the country is stable employment (GTRM, 2023), substandard working conditions and job instability in Ecuador's labour market have significantly exacerbated migrant food insecurity. This research brief is based on a survey of almost 800 migrants and refugees residing in Quito, and seeks to systematically analyse the experiences of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador by focusing on three main areas:

- Identification of labour conditions affecting Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador during and following the pandemic;
- Evaluation of food insecurity among the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population, as a primary consequence of employment precariousness; and
- Analysis of both the consequences and root causes of job precarity and food insecurity.

## Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of original survey data that assesses food insecurity among migrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Quito, Ecuador. The survey encompassed 788 valid responses. Among these respondents, all of whom are heads of households, 58% are male, and 42% are female. The predominant age groups are 28-37 years (52%), 38-47 years (27%), and 18-27 years (14%), with a mere 6% aged 48-80. Concerning marital status, 50% are single, 24% are cohabiting, 23% are married, 3% are divorced, and 0.3% are widowed. In terms of educational attainment, 52% have completed high school, 35% are university graduates, 5% have obtained postgraduate degrees, and 5% have only completed secondary education. A significant majority of the families (88%) have resided in Ecuador for 2-5 years, suggesting a stable settlement pattern; 9% have been in Quito for over six years, while 3% have been there for less than a year.

To measure food insecurity, the research drew on the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) to analyse access to nutritious food in Quito, using seven of the standard nine questions and translated into Spanish. In this study, the scale was adjusted to range from 0 to 21 points due to the omission of questions on food preferences and frequency of deprivation.

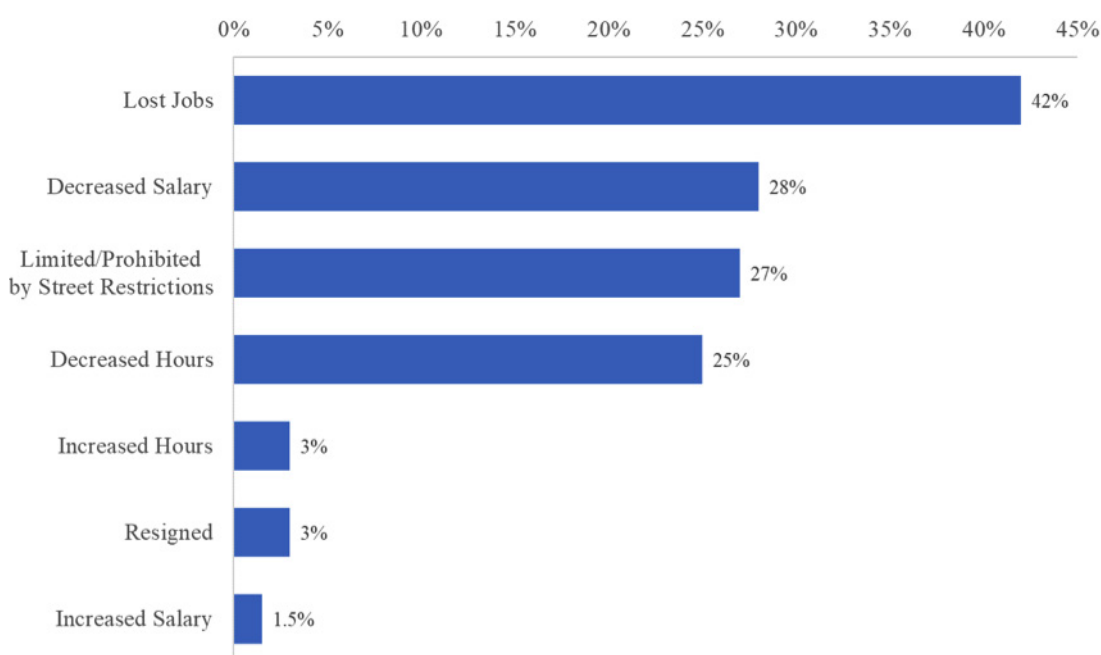
In the qualitative phase of the study, a participatory Photovoice methodology was employed to conduct an in-depth investigation of the living conditions of migrant and refugee populations in Quito. The methodological framework was structured into three discussion groups: (1) migrants and refugees identifying as LGBTQ+; (2) women, mothers, and leaders; and (3) a heterogeneous group of adults. The participant cohort comprised 11 women and 6 men, ages ranging from 26 to 68 years. This group included nine Venezuelan migrants possessing regular migration status and two refugees. All participants had dependent children, with six women acting as heads of their households. Approximately half of the participants were engaged in

self-employment within informal commerce or managed microenterprises, while others were involved in periodic service work. This distribution underscores the diverse socioeconomic realities present within the migrant community.

## Labour Conditions of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees During the Pandemic

The pandemic's impact on employment appears to have deteriorated the working conditions for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Ecuador. Prior to the pandemic, 78% of respondents were employed, whereas during the crisis, incomes declined dramatically by 91%. The most pronounced decline in household income was observed both at the onset and midpoint of the pandemic. For 95% of respondents, the pandemic considerably exacerbated their economic situation, with 75% reporting an impact on their employment, 13% already unemployed, and 12% indicating that their employment status remained unchanged (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: Effects of the Pandemic on Employment Conditions**



The contraction of employment and household income during the pandemic significantly affected working conditions:

- **Lost Jobs (42%) and Resigned (3%):** The most common outcome is job loss, affecting 42% of individuals, highlighting severe employment insecurity. Additionally, 3% resigned due to pandemic-related challenges.
- **Decreased Salary (28%) and Decreased Hours (25%):** A substantial number of people experienced reduced wages and working hours, which could contribute to economic strain and likely impact their ability to afford essentials.

- **Increased Salary (1.5%) and Increased Hours (3%):** Only a small percentage saw an increase in hours or salary, showing that wage increases were extremely rare.
- **Limited/Prohibited by Street Restrictions (27%):** Over a quarter of the population faced difficulties or were unable to work on the street due to pandemic-related restrictions. These restrictions indicate that informal economic activities, especially street work, are increasingly limited.

Consequently, a substantial proportion of households employed a variety of coping mechanisms. According to the survey conducted with individuals who experienced job displacement, 42% reported the utilization of diverse coping strategies, which included the establishment of small enterprises (25%), solicitation of assistance from neighbours, religious institutions, or organizations (20%), participation in street vending (16%), seeking employment with enhanced conditions (16%), liquidation of personal assets (6%), and engagement in domestic cleaning activities (6%). Twenty-five percent of household heads depended on support from their social networks, including friends and family, to obtain new employment opportunities following the pandemic. Only 32% of the households received assistance from governmental or non-governmental organizations to alleviate the impact of income reduction on their ability to procure food. The predominant form of institutional support was the provision of food supplies and financial aid. Furthermore, the adverse impact of COVID-19 on labour precarity was particularly significant for female participants. Of the women surveyed, 48% ceased employment outside the home during the COVID-19 pandemic, while assuming unpaid domestic duties and caregiving responsibilities for children, the elderly, and family members with special needs.

The predominant form of employment among migrants is informal, constituting 43.7% of the total (42.2% for men and 45.6% for women) (Table 1). Next is formal salaried employment with temporary contracts, comprising 27% overall (31.6% for men and 20.7% for women), and self-employment, accounting for 15.6% (17.1% for men and 13.5% for women). Formal salaried employment with a permanent contract is limited to 6.4% for men and 6.6% for women.

**TABLE 1: Employment Status of the Head of Household**

Employment status of the head of household		Sex		Total (%)
		Men (%)	Women (%)	
Self-employed/business owner		17.1	13.5	15.6
Unemployed (looking for work)		2.0	6.6	3.9
Employed	Formal salaried employment (with permanent contract)	6.4	6.6	6.5
	Formal salaried employment (with temporary contract)	31.6	20.7	27.0
	Informal employment	42.2	45.6	43.7
Retired/pensioned		0.2	0.0	0.1
Others*		0.4	6.9	3.2

\* Individuals exclusively dedicated to care and household chores

Although the rate of informal employment is lower among Venezuelan refugees and migrants in comparison to the global average of 57.8% (International Labour Organisation, 2024), it nevertheless provokes considerable apprehension among migrants concerning job security, as informal employment typically lacks benefits and legal protections. Moreover, according to World Bank data, wage and salaried workers represented approximately 52% of total employment on a global scale, whereas Ecuador's rate was 46.7% in 2022 (World Bank Open Data, n.d.). Contrastingly, the proportion of salaried employment among the respondents in this study was notably lower at 33.5%.

The data reveal a significant gender disparity in employment status. Women have a marginally higher proportion in formal salaried occupations with a permanent contract, constituting 6.6% as opposed to 6.4% for men. When all forms of employment are considered—including formal salaried roles with either permanent or temporary contracts alongside informal employment—the gender gap is more pronounced, with 80.2% of men employed in these classifications compared to 72.9% of women (a 7.3% gap). The gap further expands when incorporating self-employment to 97.3% of men employed versus 86.4% of women. Furthermore, informal employment is more prevalent among women (45.6%) than men (42.2%), underscoring disparities in job security.

Similarly, female respondents face a heightened degree of inequality in task allocation compared with their previous place of residence. Almost 40% of the women said that their household duties had increased significantly on relocation to Quito. This inequitable distribution of domestic responsibilities exacerbates the vulnerability of the women and their dependents.

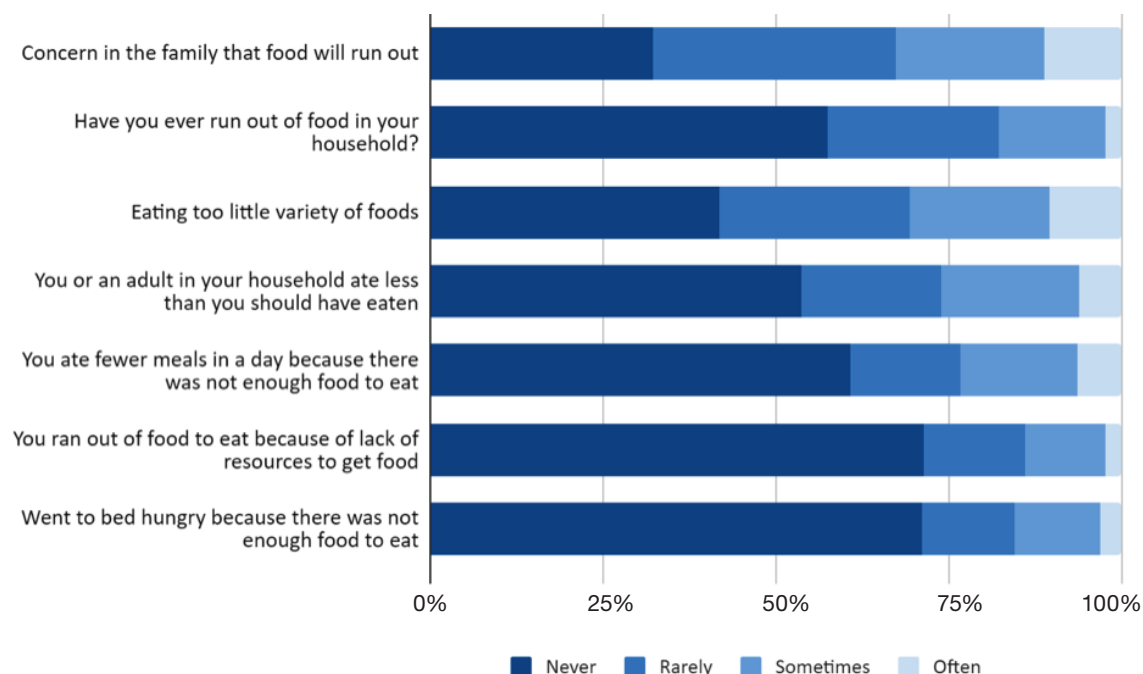
## Migrant Food Insecurity as a Consequence of Job Precarity

The unstable nature of employment, coupled with escalating food prices during the pandemic, has exacerbated food insecurity among Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Quito. The primary dimensions explored in the survey included inquiries related to apprehensions about food scarcity, challenges in consuming balanced meals, reductions in portion sizes, and experiences of hunger over the preceding four weeks (Figure 2).

The findings from the survey indicate a substantial prevalence of food insecurity among households, with approximately 50% reporting instances of food deprivation. The most pronounced concern pertained to the potential for food shortages, affecting 68% of respondents. This situation is linked to the instability of income, which arises from structural barriers impeding access to the labour market, and migrants predominantly securing informal employment.

In terms of food intake:

- 58% reported facing a poorly diversified diet.
- 46% reported eating less than needed.
- 39% reduced meal frequency due to insufficient food.
- 28% went without food on one or more occasions in the previous month, while 29% went to bed hungry.

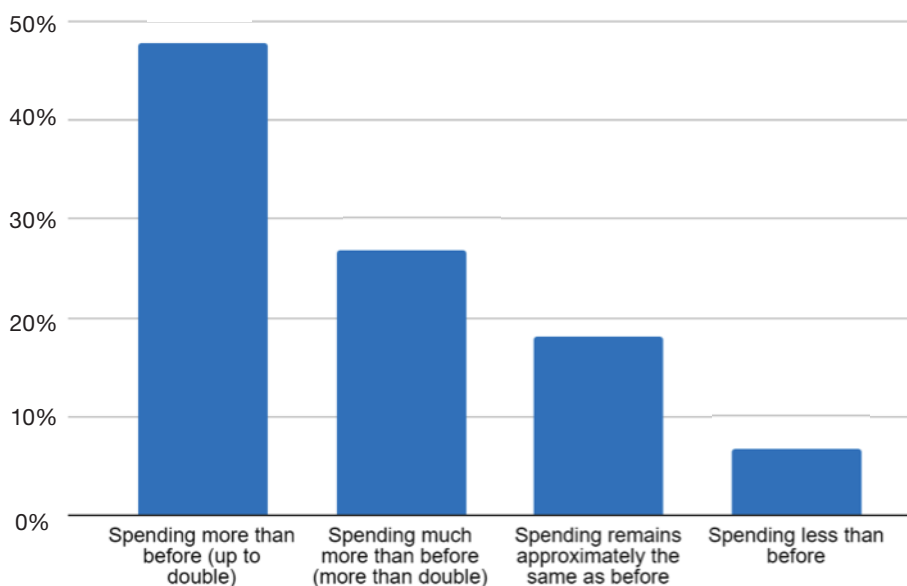
**FIGURE 2: Survey Results on Food Insecurity and Dietary Quality**

The Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) functions as a tool for assessing food insecurity by measuring the frequency of particular conditions that relate to food access (Coates et al., 2007). In the survey, the modified seven-question version of the HFIAS produced a mean score of 5.19, suggesting that the typical experiences of food insecurity range from moderate to severe.

In response to food insecurity, 57% of respondents sought assistance in procuring food. Of those who requested aid, 32% obtained support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while 10% sought assistance from neighbours. Additionally, 6% approached friends for help, irrespective of their location in or outside of Quito, and another 6% depended on relatives residing in Quito. Moreover, 3% sought aid from relatives residing outside of the capital, and 1% received support from state agencies.

The pandemic has further intensified the situation by leading to an increase in food prices. Figure 3 compares household food expenditures pre- and post-pandemic. Most respondents felt that food costs have escalated substantially compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Specifically, 75% said that they had doubled or more than doubled. Conversely, only 7% asserted that they were spending less than they did before 2020.

**FIGURE 3: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Household Food Expenditures**



## Causes and Consequences of Job Precarity and Food Insecurity

Job precarity and the lack of reliable access to adequate food are detrimental to both physical and mental health. Koseoglu Ornek et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of the correlation between employment circumstances and the quality of life experienced by workers, revealing that employment characterized by challenges and instability can have an adverse impact on well-being, leading to diverse health problems. This correlation is of particular significance for Venezuelan migrants and refugees, who frequently encounter precarious employment conditions.

In the context of food security and physical health, malnutrition and inadequate dietary intake exert a profound influence on overall well-being, compromising the immune system and increasing vulnerability to diseases (UNHCR, n.d.). Particularly at risk are vulnerable populations, including children, pregnant women, and individuals with chronic illnesses, who face delayed developmental milestones in childhood and enduring health repercussions.

Our research, employing a mixed-methods approach including both surveys and Photovoice, indicates that employment precariousness and food insecurity are contributing factors to the mental health difficulties faced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees. One participant, Emma, articulated the effect of food insecurity on her family's daily experiences:

At home, we would get up late for breakfast, because there was my nephew, my partner, and my daughter, [the children] were about 9 years old, so we would go to bed very late to get up very late in the morning and eliminate breakfast. Just lunch and dinner (Emma, 26 October 2023)



Another interview with a Venezuelan migrant, Eduardo, illustrates the heightened anxiety resulting from the pandemic's impact on employment. The uncertainty regarding work opportunities and the persistent concern over food availability precipitated depressive states, particularly among household heads who experienced pressure to provide for their families. Eduardo recounted the daily fear he endured, even opting to reduce his own meal consumption to ensure sufficient food for his family. These interviews underscore the interconnected challenges of job insecurity and food scarcity confronting Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Quito. The findings indicate that unstable employment and escalating food prices impose significant physical and mental health burdens.

The precarious employment conditions experienced by migrants in Ecuador arise from multiple determinants. Notably, the absence of regularization represents a significant factor contributing to the instability of Venezuelan migrants and refugees' labour conditions. Within the surveyed demographic, 39% lacked an authorized migratory status, whereas 61% possessed valid visas. Among those without authorized status, 63% have participated in regularisation programmes. Reasons for not pursuing regularisation include a lack of necessary documentation (58%), cost (26%), and lack of knowledge on how to access regularization programmes (26%). In a situation where they lack proper legal status, Venezuelan migrants and refugees encounter challenges such as accessing financial services, and having their professional certifications recognised (R4V, n.d.). Thus, the precarious labour conditions faced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador are closely linked to the challenges of regularising their migratory status.

## Conclusion

The study ascertained a decline in labour conditions and a rise in food insecurity among Venezuelan migrants and refugees residing in Quito during the pandemic. The pandemic's impact on employment conditions was primarily job loss (42%), followed by salary reduction (28%), and diminished working hours (25%). Presently, a noteworthy segment of the respondents is engaged in informal employment (44%), with a mere 6.5% occupying formal salaried positions with permanent contracts. These precarious labour conditions have exacerbated food insecurity. A significant proportion of the migrant population face moderate or severe food security challenges. Furthermore, three-quarters of the respondents reported spending more on food compared to the pre-pandemic period, illustrating the impact of rising food prices in conjunction with job precarity.

The relationship between employment instability and food insecurity adversely impacts the mental and physical well-being of this demographic. This is particularly evident as it compels household heads to secure sufficient nutrition for their dependents. The findings of our study reveal a significant association between employment instability and irregular migratory status, with 39% of respondents identified as lacking authorised migratory status. The numerous obstacles encountered in obtaining authorised status underscore the pressing need for policy interventions or reforms.



In summary, the labour conditions and increased food insecurity encountered during the pandemic significantly impacted the well-being of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Quito, Ecuador. This scenario highlights the imperative for a comprehensive strategy to address the challenges encountered, focusing on the enhancement of labour rights, access to employment opportunities, and food security to improve overall social welfare. Policies directed at refugees and migrants should also facilitate the acquisition of necessary documentation, decrease the costs associated with accessing regularization programmes, and improve the accessibility of information regarding these programmes. Such measures would increase their prospects of obtaining legal status, thereby enabling greater access to employment opportunities and enhancing food security.

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