MIGRATION & FOOD SECURITY NETWORK

Disruptions and Daily Survival: COVID-19 Crisis, Gender, Informality and Food Security in Mexico

MiFOOD POLICY AUDIT NO. 5

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Adwoa Konadu-Yiadom, Sujata Ramachandran, Guenola Capron, and Tiana Bakić Hayden

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Cover photo: A seller of *sopes* and *tlacoyos* at the Xochimilco Market in Mexico City in March 2021. The notices on the wall display COVID-19 alerts and preventive measures enforced by the Xochimilco Municipality (Credit: Gerardo Vieyra/NurPhoto SRL/Alamy).

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Executive Summary

This policy audit examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, gender, and informality in Mexico. The COVID-19 crisis exposed the deep interconnections between health governance, economic precarity, and gendered labour inequalities. Mexico experienced one of the highest global death tolls and infection rates, compounded by weak institutional and fragmented government response, limited testing, and uneven social protection measures. The resulting socioeconomic fallout was severe: widespread job losses, increased household vulnerability, and a sharp rise in food insecurity, particularly among informal and self-employed workers.

Lockdowns, market and school closures, and restrictions on public spaces led to the collapse of daily livelihoods for millions of informal workers, particularly women in food vending and service sectors. As family incomes declined, care responsibilities expanded, and food prices rose. Women faced the brunt of the crisis as both income earners and household food providers. Federal relief measures were fragmented, small in scale, and poorly targeted toward informal workers. The recovery that followed was uneven and slow, leaving structural inequalities largely intact.

Key Findings

1. **High Public Health Impact and Weak Management**: Mexico experienced severe public health and economic consequences during COVID-19, recording over six million infections and more than 320,000 deaths by 2022. The government's limited testing capacity, delayed lockdowns, and fragmented public health response intensified both the human and economic costs of the pandemic.
2. **Severe Economic Contraction**: Mexico's economy shrank by 8.0% in 2020, marking its deepest decline in decades. The steep losses in employment and output were concentrated in informal urban sectors such as street vending, retail, and domestic work, where job security and savings are minimal, revealing the vulnerability of households reliant on daily income.
3. **Gendered Labour Market Inequalities**: Women's participation in the labour force fell sharply during the pandemic, reflecting their overrepresentation in low-paid and informal occupations. This contraction had lasting effects on income security and deepened gender gaps in employment recovery, as many women struggled to re-enter the labour market while managing unpaid domestic and caregiving duties.
4. **Rising Food Insecurity and Price Inflation**: Disruptions to supply chains and higher transport and input costs contributed to persistent food price

inflation, which reached double-digit levels in 2021. The erosion of purchasing power forced many low-income households to reduce both the quantity and quality of their diets, aggravating pre-existing nutritional inequalities.

5. **Policy Response Gaps and Uneven Recovery**: Although national recovery frameworks referenced social inclusion, few measures directly targeted informal or self-employed workers. Temporary cash transfers and food aid were not institutionalized, and the economic recovery from 2022 onward was marked by widening inequality between formal and informal labour segments.
6. **Persistent Structural Inequalities**: The pandemic magnified long-standing gender and class disparities. Women vendors' economic recovery remains constrained by limited access to capital, formal recognition, and institutional support, reinforcing cycles of informality and precarity.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Inclusive Social Protection**: Expand social safety nets and cash transfers to informal and self-employed workers, with streamlined procedures and gender-sensitive eligibility criteria.
2. **Gender-Responsive Recovery**: Incorporate women's informal work and unpaid care into national and municipal recovery planning; prioritize microgrants and training for women food vendors.
3. **Support Informal Urban Food System**: Invest in safe, accessible, and regulated public vending spaces and local market infrastructure to stabilize informal food economies.
4. **Food Price Monitoring**: Establish transparent systems to track staple-food prices and intervene against food inflation.
5. **Institutional Recognition of Informal Workers**: Create participatory mechanisms for informal worker organizations to engage in food policy and disaster preparedness.
6. **Accessible Health and Care Services**: Expand public healthcare and childcare coverage for women in precarious employment.
7. **Data and Gender Analysis**: Improve collection of sex-disaggregated and sector-specific data on informal livelihoods and food insecurity to inform future policy design.
8. **Regional Policy Learning**: Facilitate exchange among Global South cities on best practices for protecting women informal food vendors during crises.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted Mexico's economy and food systems, exposing deep structural inequalities in labour, gender, and access to food. With over 55% of the labour force employed informally, Mexico entered the pandemic with high levels of employment precarity, weak income protection, and limited health and social coverage for self-employed workers. The economic contraction of 2020 resulted in extensive job losses, particularly in sectors dependent on face-to-face interaction, such as retail, hospitality, and food vending. Women bore the brunt of these shocks. As significant providers of household food and the predominant participants in informal food trade, women faced simultaneous pressures from lost income, rising household costs, and increased care work due to school and daycare closures. The crisis revealed how deeply women's livelihoods and family food security are embedded in the informal economy.

This report situates Mexico's pandemic experience within the broader themes of gender, informality, and food security. It draws on government data, official surveys, and policy reviews to analyze the socioeconomic and food security effects of COVID-19 in Mexico; examine the policy measures introduced to mitigate economic hardship and food insecurity; and identify the gendered dimensions of informality and policy exclusion during and after the pandemic. Through this analysis, the audit contributes to understanding how intersecting vulnerabilities of gender, class, informality, and regional inequality shaped both exposure to risk and access to relief during the COVID-19 crisis.

Country-Level Analysis

Mexico reported its first COVID-19 case on 27th February 2020, involving a patient who had returned from Italy. By 4th March 2020, there were 80 confirmed cases, indicating that community transmission was already underway (Loza et al., 2023; Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). The country soon experienced a surge in coronavirus cases and deaths. By 1st December 2020, Mexico's pandemic death toll had risen to 105,940, making it the fourth highest in the world, along with 1.1 million new confirmed COVID-19 cases (Associated Press, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Tedros Ghebreyesus, described the situation in Mexico as "very worrisome" (Associated Press, 2020). By January 2021, about 1,300 people were dying each day due to COVID-19 infections (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). These numbers had declined by August 2021, with the daily death toll around 400 (Martinez Valle &

Knaul, 2021). High mortality rates remained a constant concern throughout the pandemic. With 192 deaths per 100,000 people in 2021, Mexico's COVID-19 mortality rate was among the highest in Latin America. It is believed that Mexico experienced the worst observed case mortality ratio globally (Cortes-Telles et al., 2023). WHO's COVID-19 dashboard data shows that, in Latin America, Mexico had the second-highest death rate on a cumulative basis after Brazil and the third-highest number of cases after Brazil and Argentina, respectively (Table 1). Globally, Mexico ranked fifth among countries with the highest total COVID-19 fatalities (Table 2).

TABLE 1: COVID-19 Cumulative Cases and Deaths in Latin America

Country	Deaths	Cases
Brazil	702,116	37,519,960
Mexico	335,011	7,709,747
Peru	220,831	4,524,748
Colombia	142,727	6,385,740
Argentina	130,861	10,132,270
Source: WHO (2024)		

TABLE 2: Top Countries by COVID-19 Mortality on a Cumulative Scale

Country	Total deaths
USA	1,188,195
Brazil	702,116
India	533,612
Russia	402,926
Mexico	335,011
Peru	220,831
Indonesia	162,058
Colombia	142,727
Argentina	130,861
Source: WHO (2024)	

These high death rates were linked to the Mexican government's inconsistent response strategies to contain the virus and its failure to take an active preventive approach (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021; Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). The government's epidemiological strategies, especially during the early stages of the pandemic, faced criticism for being "inconsistent and ineffective" (Ibarrola-Pena et al., 2022). In the initial months, authorities did not enforce quarantines and relied heavily on modelling from sentinel surveillance (monitoring respiratory disease across 475 sites nationwide) rather than on widespread testing (Agren, 2020). Non-compliance and pre-existing weaknesses in the national health system put the Mexican population at significant risk of infection, given the rapid

spread of the virus. Official epidemiological reports from the Health Ministry indicated that Mexico had over 5.7 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 324,000 deaths by 19th March 2022 (Loza et al., 2023). Between 3rd January 2020, and 30th August 2023, there were 7,633,355 confirmed cases and 334,336 deaths. A total of 680,063 individuals were hospitalized. Male residents faced a higher risk of death and hospitalization, and infection severity increased with age.

Mexico's COVID-19 vaccination campaign began on 24th December 2020, starting with healthcare workers, followed by adults over 60, and then the rest of the population from February 2021 (Bello-Chavolla et al., 2023). About 75% of the population was willing to get vaccinated, although some communities doubted the federal government's vaccination efforts, believing that the available vaccines were inferior in quality (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). By 27th September 2021, 44.63 million adults had completed their full vaccination course, and 18.85 million had received partial vaccination, representing 49% of the population (Bello-Chavolla et al., 2023). Booster shots were introduced in December 2021, as the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant spread across the country (Bello-Chavolla et al., 2023). As of September 2021, 793,487 vaccinated individuals aged 18 or older had been assessed for suspected SARS-CoV-2 infection, of whom 437,968 were fully vaccinated and 355,519 were partially vaccinated (Bello-Chavolla et al., 2023).

Waves of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mexico experienced five waves of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 3). While the waves driven by the Omicron variant recorded the highest number of cases, there was a decline in hospitalizations and intubations, along with a shorter average hospital stay. The in-hospital fatality rate varied across these waves, reaching its highest during the second wave in winter 2020 (Ascencio-Montiel et al., 2022). Throughout these five pandemic waves, the total number of cases increased, while severity metrics gradually decreased. The high in-hospital fatality rate during the first three waves was linked to hospitalization practices for critical patients with co-morbidities (Ascencio-Montiel et al., 2022). The five waves reported 8,783,565 suspected COVID-19 cases, with 7,502,195 tested (85.4%) and 3,396,375 laboratory-confirmed (Ascencio-Montiel et al., 2022). Hospitalization rates were highest during the second wave, followed by the first, then gradually declined from the third to the fifth wave. Men and people aged 60 and older exhibited higher hospitalization rates than women and younger age groups (Ascencio-Montiel et al., 2022).

TABLE 3: COVID-19 Waves in Mexico

Waves	Duration
Wave 1	29 March 2020 to 3 October 2020
Wave 2	4 October 2020 to 29 May 2021
Wave 3	30 May 2021 to 18 December 2021
Wave 4	19 May 2021 to 30 April 2022
Wave 5	1 May 2022 to 27 August 2022
Source: Loza et al. (2023)	

Containment and Public Health Measures

On 23rd March 2020, the Mexican government launched the National Distancing Campaign to control the pandemic, which included measures such as school closures and reduced economic activities, with these restrictions exempting only essential services. A rapid testing program was also introduced to increase daily testing capacity and monitor the pandemic. Alongside the use of antiretrovirals and steroids, this helped lower hospitalizations and deaths, especially among older adults at the highest risk (Loza et al., 2023). In June 2020, Mexico implemented a four-colour epidemiological coding system to track the pandemic nationwide, aimed at informing residents about COVID-19 risks and providing guidance on restrictions for certain activities in each state (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). However, its implementation varied significantly across states (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021; Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Conflicts between state and federal authorities also hampered the enforcement of some public health measures, such as hand-washing campaigns (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Alternative measures, like temporary COVID-19 units, were established in Mexico City, treating over 7,100 patients (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021).

The severe impact of the pandemic in Mexico, characterized by high infection and mortality rates, mainly stemmed from systemic flaws in the federal government's messaging and poor judgement by senior political leaders (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021; Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Authorities downplayed the threat and failed to communicate these risks effectively to the public (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Additionally, the lack of coordination among different levels of government led to mixed messages and increased polarization (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). The Mexican government did not implement a robust, evidence-based public health strategy to manage the pandemic (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). The pandemic overwhelmed public and private hospitals, resulting in bed shortages and delayed care. Private-sector hospitals collaborated to offer non-complex hospitalization services at reduced rates. Communication campaigns focused on physical distancing rather than proactive infection-control measures. No policies were introduced to alleviate the economic burden on households with confirmed positive cases or close contacts, which contributed to high transmission rates within families (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021).

Contact tracing, quarantines, and isolation programs were considered essential for managing the outbreak and preventing painful and costly national shutdowns. However, these measures were limited and further hampered by testing levels that were notably low compared to those in other Latin American countries (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). Mexico was one of the few Latin American countries that did not adopt a pandemic containment-focused international border-crossing policy. Travellers were allowed to enter and exit the country without proof of a negative test, vaccination, or a recently resolved infection (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). While the United States and Mexico agreed to limit cross-border movement to essential travel as early as March 2020, flights between the two countries were not suspended and restrictions for American citizens were loosely enforced. By November 2020, half a million people had travelled to Mexico, contributing to a full-blown health crisis (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021).

Socioeconomic hierarchies in healthcare access were exposed and worsened. Sanchez-Talanquer et al. (2021) argue that the pandemic's health impacts varied across social groups, highlighting significant inequalities in access to COVID-19 testing, diagnosis, and appropriate care. Bojorquez-Chapela et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of pandemic-focused public health policies implemented by the Mexican government concerning the inclusion of transit migrants and asylum seekers. They noted that these policies primarily targeted the general population and failed to adequately address the specific needs and rights of this group. Another study showed that over 90% of vulnerable migrants living in shelters or temporary accommodations in Tijuana experienced severe socioeconomic impacts from the pandemic (Bojorquez-Chapela et al., 2022). However, Vázquez-Vela & Capron (2025) showed that migrant shelters in Mexico City and its metropolitan area developed coping strategies to navigate this crisis and provide much-needed assistance with food, health and safety to marginal communities, including migrants. Other research indicated that indigenous populations in Mexico were more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to long-standing marginalization, poverty, limited access to healthcare services, and a lack of basic resources such as education and sanitation facilities (Cohen & Mata-Sanchez, 2021; De León-Martínez et al., 2020; Ibarra-Nava et al., 2021). Cultural and linguistic barriers also hindered communication and implementation of preventive measures and health protocols among indigenous communities.

While poverty (Molina-Torres et al., 2021) and inequality (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021) may have limited the active implementation of public health requirements, the politicization of health communication and irresponsible behaviour of political leaders further eroded trust among the Mexican population and reduced their adherence to public health measures (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Top officials initially underestimated the threat of COVID-19 and failed to follow safety protocols, leading to flawed policy responses (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Although the Mexican government established clear communication

channels with the public, lack of leadership and weak adherence to public health guidelines led to numerous political leaders contracting the virus. The then-president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and the top health official repeatedly appeared at public gatherings without face coverings (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). However, in December 2020, nine state governors from opposition parties reaffirmed their support for mandatory masking in public spaces. Due to misleading and politicized messaging, mask usage among residents varied across states (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). As of February 2021, 27 of 32 states had adopted mask mandates despite the federal government's inconsistent stance. Surveys indicate that mask-wearing increased after the second pandemic peak, with 66% of respondents reporting they always wore a mask in public spaces by February 2021, up from 45% in August 2020 (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021).

Lockdowns and Re-Openings

Mexico implemented a national lockdown on 23rd March 2020, which ended on 30th May of the same year (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). Lockdown measures were poorly coordinated and varied in form across cities and states. There was no rigorous national response to the pandemic. On 1st June, a phased reopening began, but restrictions remained in place. Schools were closed, and classes were conducted through distance learning. The government imposed restrictions on both formal and informal dining establishments, but enforcement was less stringent for informal food stands and vendors. There were few policies restricting gatherings, and gatherings of medium and small sizes were allowed (Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021). From March 2021 to July 2021, Mexican cities and states gradually relaxed virus-containment policies, such as mask-wearing and travel restrictions, as infections and deaths decreased. However, when the number of both infections and deaths began to rise in late July, stricter public health measures were reintroduced. For example, in March 2021, the government allowed gatherings of up to 1,000 people, but by July, gatherings were restricted to 10 people or fewer (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021). Mexico adopted a four-colored epidemiological system to track the pandemic nationally, determining which activities were safe to resume (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021; Staulino-Rodriguez et al., 2022). Seven of the country's 32 states were in red status by August 2021, meaning only essential activities were permitted. Nine states were in yellow status, indicating moderate restrictions, while 15 were in orange status, imposing stricter limitations on commercial and social activities. Only the southern state of Chiapas was in green status, allowing residents to return to normal activities.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Mexico City

Mexico City is among North America's largest financial hubs and one of the world's most densely populated metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, it was also one of the urban regions worst affected by COVID-19. A study investigating the links between urban development, economic conditions, and COVID-19 case numbers in the 16 municipalities of Mexico City found that population density, per capita income, and dwelling occupancy rates were key factors driving virus transmission (Molina-Torres et al., 2021). These municipalities exhibit notable disparities in economic and urban development, which increased residents' vulnerability to COVID-19 (Molina-Torres et al., 2021). Another study showed that COVID-19 hit lower-income neighbourhoods in Mexico City more severely than wealthier areas (Jaramillo-Molina, 2021). In 2020, the highest reported numbers of confirmed cases were in neighbourhoods such as Iztapalapa, Gustavo A. Madero, and Álvaro Obregón. Conversely, Milpa Alta, Magdalena Contreras, and Iztacalco had the highest per-capita infection rates.

At the neighbourhood level, areas with high levels of socio-economic deprivation, such as San Bartolo Ameyalco (Álvaro Obregón municipality), San Francisco Tlaltenco, San Pedro (both in Tláhuac), San Salvador Cuauhtenco (Milpa Alta), and Santa María Nativitas (Xochimilco), had the highest number of cases between July and November 2020 (Jaramillo Molina, 2021). Piloto Adolfo López Mateos (Álvaro Obregón), Barrio de San Agustín (Milpa Alta), Ex Hacienda Coapa (in Tlalpan), La Martinica (Álvaro Obregón), and El Arenal IV Sección (Venustiano Carranza) are among the neighbourhoods with high poverty levels and low social development that recorded the highest infection rates (Jaramillo Molina, 2021). Some neighbourhoods are also geographically close but socio-economically very different. For example, Santa Fe hosts some of the city's wealthiest communities, including Lomas de Chapultepec, Lomas de Reforma, Corredor Santa Fe, and Portal del Sol, where the COVID-19 infection rate was nearly zero in 2020. In contrast, the towns of Santa Fe and Santa Lucía, along with other marginalized neighbourhoods, experienced some of the highest infection rates (Jaramillo Molina, 2021). Furthermore, factors such as education level, age, gender, social and sociodemographic conditions, housing quality, and even psychological and emotional factors influenced the population's vulnerability to infections (Venancio-Guzmán et al., 2022). Poor living conditions and weak availability of essential services, including electricity, gas, water, healthcare facilities, and education, significantly affected health outcomes and contributed to the rapid spread of the coronavirus.

COVID-19 and Gender

The pandemic triggered a domestic economic crisis in Mexico, characterized by a significant contraction in its labour market, especially within the informal sector, during the second half of 2020 (Alfaro & Correa, 2021; Levya & Urrutia, 2021). A study funded by Mexico's central bank compared the sharp financial decline following the pandemic's start to previous national economic crises, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the 1995 Tequila crisis (Carillo & Garcia, 2021). It argued that the pandemic's economic shocks were shorter in length and recovery was faster. The severe economic hardships caused by the pandemic were estimated to last 51 weeks, three times shorter than past crises. Others have argued that Mexico's limited fiscal measures to fight the pandemic, aimed at avoiding increased debt through government spending, worsened the 2020 recession, which was further impacted by spillover effects from the US and sluggish economic recovery (Hannan et al., 2022).

During the second-quarter lockdown in 2020, 10.3 million workers (19% of the total employed population) were unemployed, and two-thirds of these losses occurred in urban areas, mainly in Mexico City (Chen & Vanek, 2023). Although the pandemic significantly reduced economic participation across sectors for both men and women, several studies highlight disproportionate impacts on working women (Chen & Vanek, 2023; Ramirez & Vanek, 2023). Gender-based inequalities have been a persistent challenge in the domestic labour market, well before the pandemic (OECD, 2019). While women aged 20 to 64 increased their labour force participation from 41% to 47% between 2011 and 2017, it remained considerably lower than the 82% rate for men (OECD, 2019). Women also earned about 16% less than men, and this gender wage gap was even wider among the self-employed, at 44%.

Although COVID-19 infection and mortality rates were higher among men, economic and social repercussions were more severe for women. More women than men lost their jobs, closed their businesses, or reduced their working hours. Women also faced an increasing burden of domestic work and caregiving due to social distancing measures, such as school and daycare closures (UN Women & INMUJERES, 2021). Another study noted that the labour market experienced a significant collapse during the pandemic, with differential gendered consequences (Bolio et al., 2022). Between the first quarter of 2020 and the same period in 2021, approximately 1.7 million people exited the labour market, of whom 84% were women. Men's participation in the labour market recovered more quickly than women's. Women with children faced the most severe economic impacts of the pandemic (Juarez & Villaseñor, 2024). It is estimated that 90% of the women who left the workforce were mothers. Another study found that, while the COVID-19 recession caused severe economic shocks for many

Mexican households, the male working-age population regained employment earlier than the female working-age population (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2020). Women experienced prolonged job losses, and women's work in the informal sector was profoundly affected during the first year of the pandemic (Alfaro & Correa, 2021). It is estimated that, by the end of the first year of the pandemic, there were 1.4 million fewer women working informally in the country compared to 0.5 million fewer male informal workers.

TABLE 4: Gender and Employment Rates in Mexico, Q1 2020-2023 (%)

Location	2020		2021		2022		2023	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Mexico City	45.9	68.6	39.0	62.0	44.9	68.5	47.3	70.1
Urban Mexico	46.5	71.0	42.1	66.5	45.5	70.3	47.7	71.5
Mexico	43.5	73.8	39.9	70.9	42.2	73.1	44.7	74.3
Compiled from Ramirez & Vanek, 2023								

Data from Mexico's National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE) illustrate the broad pattern of employment losses by gender in the first quarters of 2020 to 2023, with losses beginning to reverse by early 2022 (Table 4). Between the first quarters of 2020 and 2021, 1.3 million jobs were lost in urban areas and 900,000 in Mexico City. These losses were notably higher for women: 751,000 in urban areas, compared to 564,000 for men; and 501,000 in Mexico City, compared to 399,000 for men. By the first quarter of 2022, 3.1 million jobs had been created nationally, with 1.9 million in urban areas and 1.1 million in Mexico City. Women gained more jobs than men during this period: 1.8 million for women versus 1.3 million for men across Mexico, 950,000 jobs for women versus 916,000 for men in urban areas, and 581,000 jobs for women versus 533,000 for men in Mexico City. Employment recovery continued in the following year, and here too, women gained more jobs at the national level, in urban areas, and in Mexico City. The pandemic's adverse effects on labour market conditions were significantly greater in urban areas, especially in Mexico City.

Using cross-sectional data from five monthly nationally representative surveys conducted between April and August 2020, another study concluded that the negative well-being impacts of the pandemic, in terms of income, employment, anxiety, and food security, were significantly worse for women and households with children (Vilar-Compte et al., 2022). A longitudinal study involving women in Mexico City documented a sharp increase in their food insecurity, rising from 41.6% before the pandemic to 53.8% in 2020 (Bautista-Arredondo et al., 2024). The increase was especially pronounced in the combined severe-moderate food insecurity level, which rose from 1.6% pre-pandemic to 16.8% during the pandemic. The likelihood of food insecurity increased 3.4 times during the pandemic, with weak socioeconomic status, limited access to social security, and low levels of education identified as significant predictors.

Women also saw a significant increase in their domestic workload, mainly due to school closures and stay-at-home directives. A study showed that 40% of women with children took on all household and childcare duties, compared to only 6% of men with children (Vilar-Compte et al., 2022). As schools and daycare centres shut down, domestic care tasks grew while support services decreased, creating an imbalance that affected women more than men. Additional caregiving responsibilities, combined with the demands of remote work and their impact on mental health, led women who stayed in the workforce, especially mothers, to report notably higher levels of stress, burnout, and anxiety. The pandemic also led to a rise in domestic violence cases. Results from a comprehensive remote survey showed that the rate of violence against women, which was initially at 11.5%, decreased to 7.8% in July 2020 but then climbed to 16.3% in December 2020, indicating a monthly increase of 15% (Rivera Rivera et al., 2023). Women who were unemployed, socially isolated, caring for children, or looking after an elderly or chronically ill person were more likely to experience violence than older women, with this risk rising from September 2020 onwards. Pandemic measures to contain the virus intensified gender inequalities, increased workloads, and created economic hardships, all of which directly contributed to gender-based violence. Isolation and confinement at home raised serious safety concerns for women (De Lara & Medina Arellano, 2020; Nieto, 2020). There was a 7.7% rise in femicides from January to June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (Nieto, 2020).

Pandemic and Food Security

Food insecurity has become an increasing concern in Mexico since at least 2012 (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023; Monroy-Torres et al., 2021). The 2008 global recession also significantly impacted food security in Mexican households, particularly among those with lower incomes, who were already at risk before the pandemic (Gaitán-Rossi et al., 2021). According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL, cited in Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023), only 57.8% of the Mexican population could afford to secure food for consumption, while 42.2% (around 53.5 million residents) experienced food insecurity before the pandemic. Severe levels of food insecurity – when individuals go without food for a day or more – affected 8.1% of the population, or nearly 10.2 million people. Between 2016 and 2020, food insecurity levels rose further due to the country's difficult macroeconomic conditions, including rising unemployment and poverty rates, significant inequality, and inflation (CONEVAL, cited in Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023).

In Mexico, severe economic crises have harmed food security, especially for lower-income households. An analysis by Jaramillo Molina (2021) highlighted

that cities such as Mexico City faced high poverty rates before the pandemic. According to CONEVAL, cited in the analysis, nearly half of Mexico's population was living in poverty. The pandemic worsened the situation, with approximately 63% of households experiencing income declines during the most challenging months in 2020. Furthermore, 57% of the poorest families in the city did not receive any social protection payments, pushing them further into poverty. The pandemic thus exacerbated socioeconomic shocks, leaving vulnerable groups and households at much higher risk of food insecurity.

Several works have shown that socio-economic shocks contributed to a decline in food security, while disruptions in food supply chains during the pandemic and deteriorating consumption patterns increased the risk of malnutrition, including obesity (Beerman, 2023; Chicoma, 2020; Gaitán-Rossi et al., 2021). Additionally, income losses from lockdowns and rising food prices due to supply chain disruptions worsened conditions for marginal households with weak socio-economic backgrounds (Gaitán-Rossi et al., 2021). Mota et al. (2024) surveyed 630 households to identify the main factors contributing to or increasing the risk of food insecurity during the pandemic. The study found that 60% of participants experienced some degree of food insecurity, with 30.32% experiencing low, 16.67% moderate, and 12.86% severe forms. The lower prevalence of severe food insecurity compared to moderate forms suggests that government policies and other interventions aimed at controlling COVID-19 may have had differential impacts on food security. Another study also observed notable shifts in food insecurity rates among adults and youth across multiple countries, including Mexico, before and during the pandemic (Beerman, 2023). Food insecurity was more common among households with lower educational attainment, lower income, insecure employment, or unemployment. COVID-19 worsened the difficulties already faced by these vulnerable groups. The incidence of food insecurity rose in Mexico, especially among adults, driven by public health restrictions, disruptions to food supply chains, and inadequate social protection measures.

The food security of different regions was unevenly affected. Rural areas faced higher transportation costs for grocery purchases due to geographic isolation, while urban areas benefitted from easy access to supermarkets and other stores through urban infrastructure (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023). Semi-urban regions, on the other hand, often experienced food insecurity due to their distance from urban centres. Furthermore, household food insecurity worsened when children and older people were present. As a result, households prioritized certain members over others and used various coping strategies, such as sharing smaller food portions, borrowing money and adjusting diets. People also stopped buying non-essential items, ate expired or spoiled food, bought lower-quality fruits and vegetables, or sought donations and accessed programs set up by religious and community groups, often with government support, to meet their

daily needs. The severity of these coping strategies grew as food access became more difficult (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023).

A recent study on the prevalence of food insecurity and its link to mental health among older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico found that more than 60% of older adults experienced some level of food insecurity (Alan et al., 2023). Thirty percent of participants had to stop eating meat, while 20% could not afford fruits, vegetables, or dairy products. Additionally, higher levels of food insecurity were associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety among participants. Nadal & Nazar-Beutelspacher (2023) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on food security in the Mayan indigenous region of south-southeast Mexico and discovered that the pandemic severely affected an area already struggling with poverty, malnutrition, and extreme weather events. According to the National Survey of Population Characteristics cited by the researchers, one in three Mexicans experienced mild to moderate food insecurity due to a loss of resources or income during the pandemic. The states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatán, where many indigenous Mayan people live, were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic and its adverse effects. This region reported 103,707 confirmed COVID-19 cases between 1st March and 31st December 2020, making it one of the hardest-hit areas in the country (Nadal & Nazar-Beutelspacher, 2023). CONEVAL estimated that 8.19 million people in the country faced severe food insecurity in 2022 (Duran, 2023). The State of Mexico had the highest number of food-insecure individuals, followed by Veracruz, Michoacán, Puebla, Tabasco, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Oaxaca, and Mexico City. These 10 states accounted for 60% of Mexico's food-insecure population. The CONEVAL report also noted that the main barriers faced by these individuals were economic or time-related factors (Duran, 2023).

Pandemic and the Informal Sector

Profile of the Informal Sector in Mexico

In Mexico, the informal sector encompasses economic activities undertaken by individuals without a formal legal or institutional framework. In the Federal District, 1.2 million people were employed in this sector during the third quarter of 2015, accounting for 29% of total employment. The workforce consisted of 58% men and 42% women, with 51% of jobs being informal. A total of 844,000 people were own-account workers, 117,000 were unpaid workers, and 60% of the workers were women (Capron et al., 2017). Mexico's informal sector showcases the resilience of its firms and workers. These entities, which are unregistered and do not comply with business and tax regulations, are generally small-

scale and have limited access to government services, such as property rights protection and training. This situation highlights limited development and low productivity but also underscores the persistence and adaptability of the informal economy. The informal economy results from the need to survive, a desire for independence and flexibility, the casualization of the labour market, and the aspiration to earn more than the wages offered in the formal sector (Sánchez-Castañeda, 2017).

Data from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (INEGI) indicate that the informal employment sector in Mexico encompassed 29.5 million people across all forms of informal work before the pandemic (Sánchez-Castañeda, 2017). This sector includes individuals working in non-agricultural economic units that lack formal accounting and depend on household or personal resources, as well as those engaged in domestic work, unprotected agricultural labour, and employees in formal economic units without social security coverage. Women constitute a significant part of the informal economy, often holding lower-level positions and facing regular discrimination. It is estimated that around 58% of Mexico's informal workforce lacks social security or pension coverage. This situation contributes to increased inequality, social exclusion, reduced productivity, and hindered economic growth. Informal workers generally have less job security, fewer training opportunities, and limited access to social benefits (OECD, 2019).

The challenges faced by informal workers in Mexico before the pandemic are significant, as highlighted in a WIEGO research brief (Salazar & Vanek, 2020). Although they make up a large part of the country's workforce, they earn low and irregular incomes, lack social security and labour rights, are constantly exposed to workplace hazards, and have limited representation. In 2012, the government amended the Labour Act to address informal employment. This policy change introduced short-term training contracts and six-month probationary periods, making it easier for companies to hire seasonal, temporary, and part-time workers. To encourage more formal employment, the government launched the "Go Formal" initiative in 2014, aiming to raise awareness of the benefits of formal employment and improve oversight through formal government inspections of companies. Since these reforms, the rate of informal employment has slightly decreased from 60% to 58% (OECD, 2019).

In response, some states have implemented programs to formalize employment. Sánchez-Castañeda (2017) notes that Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Chihuahua have made progress in formalizing self-employed workers in the public transport sector. In Hidalgo, around 400 workers have been formalized, and plans are underway to regularize the status of 1,534 informal municipal workers. Other formalization programs include Let's Grow Together (PS) and the Employment Formalization Program (PFE). Let's Grow Together is a Mexican initiative that offers social and tax benefits, as well as access to property loans, for self-employed

workers and small informal enterprises. Beneficiaries can access consumer credit, business financing, entrepreneurial support, social security, and property loans. The Employment Formalization Program helps informal workers register with the mandatory Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and promotes voluntary insurance for self-employed workers with IMSS. Despite these programs, employment formalization in Mexico remains inadequate, and might not be an easy fix. The FORLAC program, launched by the ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, aimed to formalize the status of 200,000 informal workers by the second half of 2014. The program works through agreements designed to ensure that all workplaces comply with federal employment and social security laws. This aims to protect workers' rights to receive all social security benefits. Additionally, it seeks to affiliate workers with the mandatory social security system managed by the IMSS and encourage voluntary affiliation of other workers, including domestic workers, non-wage workers, cooperative members, communal landowners, and small-scale landowners, to the mandatory IMSS system (ILO, 2014).

Informal Sector During the COVID-19 Crisis

Employment levels and labour market informality vary greatly in Mexico, with very high rates in the central and southern states of Oaxaca (82%), Chiapas (78%), and Guerrero (78%), compared to much lower figures in the northern states of Nuevo León (34%), Chihuahua (37%), and Coahuila (37%) (OECD, 2019). Informality accounted for 56.2% of the economically active population (EAP) in the last quarter of 2019, just before the onset of COVID-19 (Moreno & Cuellar, 2021). During this period, 57.6% of women and 55.3% of men were employed informally. Informal labour contracted sharply during the first year of the pandemic due to the "brutal impact" of the COVID-19 crisis on the Mexican economy (Alfaro & Correa, 2021, p. 271). Between March and April 2020, informal labour shrank from 55.7% to 47.7%, resulting in 10.4 million informal workers losing their jobs. While the informality/formality ratio of the Mexican economy did not change significantly from the first quarter of 2020 (56% and 43.9%) to the first quarter of the following year (55% and 44.9%), a noticeable shift was evident in absolute numbers. There were 2 million fewer informal workers and 0.5 million fewer formal workers during this period. Informal work decreased substantially for individuals with the two lowest levels of education: those with no formal education and those with only elementary education.

Other studies have confirmed that informal employment in Mexico was significantly affected by the pandemic, with a decrease of 0.53 percentage points in employment among men and 4.44 percentage points among women (Moreno & Cuellar, 2021). Although men lost 163,700 formal jobs in the first quarter of 2020 due to COVID-19, informal employment gained 115,074 jobs, nearly off-

setting these losses. However, this increase was unsustainable, and by the second quarter of 2020, informal employment among men had plummeted by 43%, marking the most significant decrease ever recorded. This decline was caused by the supply effect resulting from the pandemic's confinement measures, which forced many businesses to close. The service sector was particularly affected because it has a higher proportion of informal employment. For women, the decline in informal employment was almost as severe as for men (minus 42.9%), an unexpected result. Despite substantial job losses across both groups, employment began to recover from the third quarter of 2020 onward. Moreno & Cuellar (2021) predicted that informal employment for men would start to recover by early 2022, reaching its pre-COVID-19 level. Women's employment was expected to reach the level seen at the end of 2018 (about 5 million jobs) by the first quarter of 2022.

The *COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study* by Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) examined how containment measures in Mexico City (among other locations) affected four types of informal workers, including street vendors (Reed & Skinner, 2023). It found that half of the street vendors in Mexico City kept their businesses open despite city regulations requiring tianguis (temporary open-air markets) to close. These regulations were not enforced. When the city was in the "red" zone in December 2020, vendors faced new trading restrictions (Reed & Skinner, 2023). Food vendors were allowed to operate, and many continued during the pandemic due to lax enforcement, with their economic situation remaining relatively stable. By mid-2021, male street vendors' earnings had recovered to 70% of pre-COVID levels, whereas female vendors' earnings were only 55% of pre-COVID levels. The gender gaps in income widened across different waves of the pandemic. A separate study argued that the informal urban sector in Mexico was severely affected by government policies such as stay-at-home orders (Cantú et al., 2023). Informal workers and their households depend greatly on daily income, as their informal status denies them job stability and steady earnings. This reliance on daily work makes it hard for them to remain unemployed for long, mainly because many of these jobs cannot be done from home. This situation threatened their daily survival during the pandemic lockdowns.

Selected data from Mexico's ENOE highlights changes in employment among market traders and street vendors across Mexico City, urban areas, and the entire country between 2020 and 2022 (Table 5). Women made up a larger proportion of market traders and street vendors nationwide in the first quarter of 2020: 531,500 women among market traders and 1039,900 women among street vendors, compared with 480,700 men among market traders and 859,300 men among street vendors. Both groups had experienced job losses among women and men across all three geographical levels by the end of the first quarter of 2021. More male market traders lost their jobs in Mexico City and other urban

areas a year into the pandemic, with approximately 39,000 and 55,000 job losses in these locations, respectively. However, by early 2021, over 100,000 female market traders had lost their livelihoods across Mexico, compared to around 63,000 male market traders.

TABLE 5: Gender and Employment of Market Traders and Street Vendors in Mexico, Q1 2020-2022 (in thousands and absolute change)

Market traders						
Year	Mexico City		Urban Mexico		Mexico	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
2020	180.6	227.8	317.2	351	531.5	480.7
2021	157.7 (-22.9)	189.3 (-38.5)	263.4 (-53.8)	295.8 (-55.2)	430.8 (-100.7)	417.3 (-63.4)
2022	169.9 (+12.2)	232.3 (+43)	290.9 (+27.5)	343.2 (+47.4)	448.2 (+17.4)	469.6 (+52.3)
Street vendors						
2020	232.1	180.5	438.5	367.8	1039.9	859.3
2021	187.0 (-45.1)	160.6 (-19.9)	379.9 (-58.6)	333.9 (-33.9)	831.7 (-208.2)	702.5 (-156.8)
2022	219.2 (+32.2)	174.1 (+13.5)	425.3 (+45.4)	368.1 (+34.2)	939.4 (+107.7)	778.6 (+76.1)
Compiled from Ramirez & Vanek, 2023						

Furthermore, fewer women market traders had recovered from these losses by 2022 across all three scales, gaining around 12,200, 27,500, and 17,400 jobs in Mexico City, urban areas, and the country overall, respectively. In contrast, male market traders experienced significantly higher gains: 43,000, 47,400, and 52,300 jobs, respectively. It is also clear that women street vendors faced much higher job losses by 2021, 45,100 in Mexico City and 58,600 in urban areas, compared to 19,900 and 33,900 among male street vendors. By early 2021, 208,200 female and 156,800 male street vendors had lost their jobs nationwide. A positive development was the notable recovery in women's employment among street vendors by 2022, with a 107,700 increase for women compared with 76,100 for men. On the downside, the overall number of market traders and street vendors remained lower than in 2020.

Pandemic and the Informal Urban Food Sector

Marchiori & Prandini Assis' (2021) comprehensive study on the impact of COVID-19 laws and regulations on informal vendors in 16 Latin American countries, including Mexico, highlights the dynamic and prominent nature of the urban informal vending sector, describing it as a vital component of the region's informal economy. According to the 2019 statistical snapshot of informal workers in Mexico, informal employment is both significant and essential, encompassing groups such as domestic workers, home-based workers, market traders, and street vendors (Salazar & Vanek, 2020). Collectively, these groups form a substantial part of the workforce in urban centres, accounting for 31% of total

employment in Mexico City, 27% in urban Mexico, and 27% nationally. They also play vital roles in the urban informal food sector. Women are more likely to work in these groups, representing 32% of women's employment nationwide, compared to 24% for men in 2020 (Salazar & Vanek, 2020). However, in urban Mexico and Mexico City, the differences between women and men are less pronounced, with these groups comprising 28% of women's employment and 26% of men's in urban Mexico, and 31% of women's employment and 30% of men's in Mexico City.

Notably, this sector bore the full impact of COVID-19 laws and regulations, such as lockdowns and Mexico's stay-home policy, which mainly aimed to restrict vendors' and customers' access to streets and markets. While governments aimed to balance the need to control the spread of COVID-19 with support for individuals' livelihoods and their countries' economies, the combined impact of economic and public health laws and regulations significantly affected the lives of informal vendors. Restrictions and rules designed to manage gatherings and limit vehicular and pedestrian movement became central in public spaces (Marchiori & Prandini Assis, 2021; Sánchez, 2021). In response, urban informal vendors faced survival challenges due to stay-at-home orders, fear of infection, and arbitrary enforcement of lockdowns by authorities. The effects of COVID-19 laws and regulations on informal vendors in Latin America, including Mexico, varied depending on the severity of lockdowns, whether informal vending was deemed an essential service, the health and safety rules applied to market and street vending, and the specific support measures introduced during the pandemic. In Mexico, regulations that heavily restrict access to public space indirectly prohibited informal vending (Marchiori & Prandini Assis, 2021).

The informal economy also plays a significant role in the economic growth of many cities in the country, including Mexico City. Informal street trade is widespread in this city, with vendors offering a diverse range of goods, including food, groceries, and prepared meals. Tianguis have existed for over 500 years, with the largest one involving approximately 17,000 vendors. The Central de Abasto is the world's largest food terminal, employing 70,000 people and connecting agricultural producers to commercial food channels (Capron et al., 2017). However, local authorities often fail to recognize informal workers' rights to access public spaces, worsening their situation during the pandemic. Analyzing Mexico City's food system, Capron et al. (2017) argue that policies have been implemented to restrict or eliminate urban informal vendors, especially those selling food in central and wealthier areas. These measures include restrictions on public spaces, amendments to land-use regulations, upzoning, and area-specific plans. In some cases, authorities took actions that negatively impacted the livelihoods of informal workers, such as confiscating their carts (Sánchez, 2021). The pandemic also significantly affected the number of working days for informal sector workers. In February 2020, informal workers in Mexico City worked an average of 5 days

per week, which nearly halved to 2.6 days per week in April 2020. This resulted in a 45-80% decline in their earnings. Additionally, only 24% of the workers surveyed for this report received government economic support (Sánchez, 2021).

Data from Mexico's ENOE illustrates changes in employment in the first quarter (Q1) between 2020 and 2022 among food and beverage market traders and street vendors across Mexico City, urban areas, and nationally (Table 6). In Mexico, the number of women and men selling food and beverages as market traders decreased, though the decline was sharper for male traders, resulting in a loss of 12,600 jobs compared to 6,900 for women. In Mexico City and across the country's urban regions, the number of women working as market traders increased, while the number of men declined. However, this was a temporary development, with women traders facing job losses by 2022, while men gained positions across Mexico City, urban areas, and the entire country. Women made up the larger share of street food vendors in early 2020, with 237,100 female vendors compared to 199,800 male vendors. The number of women and men street food vendors increased a year into the pandemic in Mexico City and other urban areas, and this increase was significantly higher for women, with an addition of 15,100 jobs, compared with 7,500 for men. In the urban areas, these increases were similar, 14,000 for women and 13,300 for men. It is possible that retrenched female and male workers opted to sell food to support their livelihoods in these urban areas. Across the country, however, jobs for both women and men working as street food vendors declined, with the loss being higher for women at 34,400. These numbers declined further across all three locations for both women and men by 2022, indicating poor recovery and weak longevity in this type of work.

TABLE 6: Gender and Employment of Food and Beverages Market Traders and Street Vendors in Mexico, Q1 2020-2022 (in thousands and absolute change)

Market food traders						
Year	Mexico City		Urban Mexico		Mexico	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
2020	28.9	58.9	45.7	79.8	92.3	101.3
2021	43.0 (+14)	45.9 (-13)	53.6 (+7.9)	64.7 (-15.1)	85.4 (-6.9)	88.7 (-12.6)
2022	32.8 (-10.2)	70.3 (+24.4)	45.5 (-8.1)	89.6 (+24.9)	69.2 (-16.2)	113.2 (+24.5)
Street food vendors						
2020	37.2	24.5	75.8	62.9	237.1	199.8
2021	52.3 (+15.1)	32.0 (+7.5)	89.8 (+14)	76.2 (+13.3)	202.7 (-34.4)	191.0 (-8.8)
2022	33.5	20.2	61.6	61.2	178.6	185.4
Compiled from Ramirez & Vanek, 2023						

Pandemic, Women, and the Informal Urban Food Sector in Mexico

The informal food sector is a key part of Mexico's urban informal economy, providing vital services, jobs, and income, especially for lower-income women and their families. González Arellano & Capron's (2020) study of 1,000 informal food vending enterprises explored their socio-demographic traits, business setups, types of food sold, dependence on informal vending income, challenges, and other aspects in Mexico City. The vendors' main reasons for starting a food business were financial, particularly to improve their family's economic security (González Arellano & Capron, 2020). However, only a small percentage of the vendors surveyed said their motivation was to run their own businesses. Owners and managers of food-selling enterprises often had previous experience in food preparation and sales, domestic work, and manual labour. Most informal businesses sold foods not prepared by the workers or owners, such as bottled soft drinks, sweets, fruits, vegetables, and fried foods. The vendors offered a broad variety of food items, including fried foods, soft drinks, candies, *tacos*, *flautas*, *tacos de canasta, huaraches, gorditas, memelas*, and *chilaquiles*, with only 12% of vendors selling fruits. Most food items for resale or cooking and sale were sourced from six to eight suppliers. Wholesalers and formal markets were the two most important sources for nearly all products. The main locational factors for 80% of respondents were proximity to potential customers, followed by traffic and proximity to home (González Arellano & Capron, 2020).

A WIEGO statistical brief shows that informal employment accounted for a slightly larger share of women's work than of men's in Mexico City, urban Mexico, and across the country during the first quarter of 2020 (Ramirez & Vanek, 2023). Although this share decreased slightly from 2020 to 2021, it started rising again in 2022. These jobs included domestic work, home-based work, market trade, and street vending (often involving preparing and selling food and drinks). Collectively, they accounted for 24% of total employment nationwide and 27% of employment among women. The pandemic worsened conditions for many vendors who had previously operated from fixed stalls. They had to move constantly to avoid police detection throughout the city centre and in public parks and plazas, which were targeted by the local state's crackdown on informal vending (González-Arellano & Capron, 2020). The lack of recognition by local authorities of their right to use public space intensified the challenges faced by informal workers during the pandemic (Espinosa Sánchez, 2021). Authorities also introduced the *régimen simplificado de confianza* with the intention of widening their tax base by incorporating informal-sector workers (Reed & Skinner, 2023). The city has been increasingly enacting policies that restrict or eliminate urban informal vendors, mostly those selling food in central and wealthier areas. These vendor-averse policies include restrictions on public spaces, amendments to land-use regulations, upzoning, and area-specific plans (Capron et al., 2017).

Pandemic Relief Measures and Responses

The Mexican government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was criticized for being minimal and austerity-driven (Martinez Valle & Knaul, 2021; Sanchez-Talanquer et al., 2021; Velázquez Leyer, 2021). Only nine pieces of new legislation were issued to address the health, social, and economic effects of the pandemic (Velázquez Leyer, 2021). While the government introduced some measures based on existing programs, the legislative branch introduced no additional relevant legislation. At the subnational level, however, state governments introduced over 600 policy instruments to respond to the pandemic, despite the varied effectiveness of these measures across the country and among different socioeconomic cohorts (Velázquez Leyer, 2021).

Despite over 75,000 COVID-19 cases in the country by early June 2020, the Mexican government remained hesitant to introduce broad-based financial relief, tax relief measures, or stimulus initiatives. It was observed that a stimulus package would benefit only certain parts of the taxpayer population and that such measures resembled a tax amnesty, which conflicted with the government's anti-corruption stance (Violante & Gonzales Orta, 2020). However, many Mexican states went ahead with tax stimulus measures covering one or more local taxes. These measures included extending deadlines for paying local taxes, offering tax exemptions, and reducing local taxes. While these initiatives provided some relief to taxpayers at all levels, they did not tackle the most significant tax burden: the federal income tax (Violante & Gonzales Orta, 2020).

The healthcare sector was notably active, implementing measures such as converting public hospitals for COVID-19 treatment and forming agreements with private hospitals. However, it faced challenges. Initially, the Mexican government prioritized healthcare infrastructure and services to control the spread of the coronavirus and provide care for those infected. The government worked to increase hospital capacity, procure medical equipment, and enhance testing and contact tracing capabilities. Nonetheless, there were issues related to the quality of personal protective equipment and the neglect of other illnesses. Before the pandemic, the healthcare system was already facing difficulties, and public spending had been cut (Velázquez-Leyer, 2021). In efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, vaccination and stay-at-home campaigns were launched nationwide (Bautista-Reyes et al., 2023). Unlike countries such as Italy and Spain, Mexico had the advantage of foresight as it became clear that a global pandemic was unfolding (Bautista-Reyes et al., 2023). Despite the urgency, the Mexican government delayed acting for several weeks, resulting in a reactive response to COVID-19. This left key state institutions unprepared, and it was not until

the first peak of infections that clinical response policies were implemented. As a result, numerous policy changes occurred, reducing their effectiveness, as medical staff had insufficient time to understand and adopt them before further changes were needed. (Bautista-Reyes et al., 2023).

Regarding economic policies, the Mexican government supported businesses and individuals affected by the pandemic-induced economic downturn. One of the primary measures was the introduction of financial aid programs aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises, which constitute a significant part of Mexico's economy. These programs offered grants, loans, and tax incentives to help businesses stay afloat, retain employees, and adapt to changing market conditions (Leon Hoyos, 2020). Additionally, income support measures were introduced to assist particularly vulnerable groups. The Bienestar Program, a cash transfer initiative, was expanded to reach more low-income families and provide them with financial aid to cover their basic needs during the pandemic (Sevilla Nunez, 2023). Food assistance programs were also launched to ensure that marginalized communities facing food shortages or reduced access to affordable groceries experienced food security. For example, Nadal & Nazar-Beutelspacher (2023) identified 53 citizen-led food initiatives in a sample studied in southeastern Mexico.

Other economic measures included a hiring freeze for government workers to prevent layoffs, extended wage payments for those unable to work due to lockdown measures, and salary reductions for high-ranking government officials by up to 25%. Each government agency was limited to using only 25% of its allocated budget for general services, materials, and supplies, and government spending was deferred. The elimination of 10 Under Secretaries was also announced. However, employees of these Under Secretaries were allowed to continue receiving their government employment with the same income (Leon Hoyos, 2020). Pension payments were made two months early to over eight million older citizens and 744,000 young people with disabilities, totalling USD2 billion. Additionally, the government, through the Ministry of Economy and various national social institutions, provided housing loans and issued four million credits of up to USD1,100 each to small businesses and workers in both the formal and informal sectors (Leon Hoyos, 2020).

In terms of education, teaching was delivered through television, online platforms, and distance learning. The government also introduced two new programs: scholarships and financial transfers, as well as conditional cash transfers and a network of childcare centres. However, concerns were raised that these initiatives might not fully address previous criticisms and could have lower coverage levels (Velázquez Leyer, 2021). Regarding housing, the government took measures to protect beneficiaries of social insurance housing institutes, including delaying mortgage payments for workers and increasing the number of loans

available to civil servants (Velázquez Leyer, 2021). As of 12th July, the government had granted over 1.4 million credits. Other measures included unemployment insurance for three months for workers with a mortgage through Infonavit, a federal institute for workers' housing, and the creation of two million jobs through major infrastructure projects such as the "Maya" train in the Yucatán Peninsula, an oil refinery in the state of Tabasco, and a new airport in Mexico City-Santa Lucía.

Gender-Responsive Measures

The UNDP and UN Women's COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker shows that Mexico implemented 32 pandemic mitigation measures, of which 18 (56%) were gender-responsive (Table 7). Nine measures focused on women's economic security, and one addressed unpaid care work for women. Special attention was given to gender-based violence, with eight measures introduced to address it.

TABLE 7: COVID-19 and Gender-Responsive Measures in Mexico

Category	Number of measures (and % share)
Total number of COVID-19 measures	32 (100%)
Number of gender-sensitive measures	18 (56.25%)
Women's economic security	9
Women's unpaid care work	1
Violence against women	8
Source: UNDP (2022)	

The Mexican government launched the *No estás sola, seguimos contigo* (You're not alone, we are still with you) program in collaboration with the Citizens Council and the Women's Secretariat to tackle the rise in gender-based and family violence during the quarantine. It included measures such as a "trusted chat" for confidentially sharing videos, photos, and messages, support via video call, and referral to centres providing psychological and legal assistance for medium- and high-risk cases (Nieto, 2020). The federal government and the National Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women (CONAVIM) established a directory to promote Justice Centres for Women across the country. This led to the hashtag #ContingencyWithoutViolence (ContingenciaSinViolencia in Spanish), which was promoted on social media platforms. The shelter network played a vital role in supporting women and children affected by violence (Nieto, 2020). However, the National Network of Shelters lacked sufficient funding and space to operate effectively and was under significant strain during the pandemic. Civil society organizations and journalists called on the government to reduce the usual 30-working-day period for allocating funds to these centres (Nieto, 2020).

The Spotlight Initiative, a high-impact UN project carried out in partnership with OXFAM Mexico and the municipal shelters CONAVIM, INDESOL, and SIPINNA, provided emergency financial support to women and girls experiencing violence. Efforts focused on supporting shelters and offering financial help to women and girls facing abuse (León et al., 2022). The program assisted over 100 women in Chihuahua, the State of Mexico, and Guerrero, and helped cover vital living expenses – housing, food, transportation, medicine, and clothing – to ease the hardships caused by the pandemic.

Measures for the Informal Sector

In March 2020, the government announced a USD7.7 billion fund, roughly 0.7% of Mexico's GDP, to provide additional resources for managing the COVID-19 crisis (Leon Hoyos, 2020). However, the President stressed an austerity approach to address the economic impact without increasing public debt, involving reallocating resources and cutting public expenditures for non-priority programs (Rocha, 2020). The government also redirected funds from non-strategic federal public trusts to tackle the health and economic emergency caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, adjustments were made to social programs to enhance their effectiveness during the pandemic, as socioeconomic disparities worsened (Leon Hoyos, 2020).

These measures did not specifically target informal workers. However, at least one study showed that 24% of the surveyed informal workers received government economic support during the pandemic (Sanchez, 2021). It is reasonable to believe that some informal or unregistered workers may have benefitted from the government's pandemic support measures for businesses and individuals. For example, the government introduced financial aid programs for small and medium-sized enterprises, offering grants, loans, and tax incentives (Leon Hoyos, 2020). There were also income-support measures for vulnerable groups disproportionately affected by the crisis, which may have included women workers in the informal sector. Additionally, the Bienestar cash transfer program aimed to assist low-income families with financial support to meet their basic needs during the pandemic (Sevilla Nunez, 2023).

Despite the significant challenges faced by informal workers, no specific measures targeted the informal sector in urban areas. As Bojorquez-Chapela et al. (2022) contend, the Mexican government policies primarily focused on the general population and did not adequately address the specific needs and rights of diverse groups. Other studies have highlighted disparities in government COVID-19 measures and programs, which replicated and reinforced existing hierarchies linked to historical marginalization and poverty, among other factors (Cohen & Mata-Sanchez, 2021; León-Martínez et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a profound test of Mexico's health, social, and economic systems. It exposed the fragility of institutions that were already strained by structural inequality, widespread informality, and underinvestment in public welfare. With one of the highest global mortality rates, Mexico's pandemic experience underscored how delayed and fragmented crisis management can deepen both human and economic losses. The combined effects of public health strain, economic contraction, and food insecurity revealed systemic gaps in governance, social protection, and gender equity. Yet the crisis also offers critical lessons for building a more inclusive and resilient future. The pandemic made visible the essential role of informal workers – particularly women food vendors – in sustaining local economies and food access under conditions of extreme disruption. Recognizing and integrating these workers into national and local policy frameworks must be prioritized. Informality should not be treated as an obstacle to policy, but as a fundamental component of Mexico's economic reality requiring deliberate institutional engagement.

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This policy audit examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, gender, and informality in Mexico. The crisis exposed the interconnections between health governance, economic precarity, and gendered labour inequalities. Mexico's extremely high COVID-19 infection rate was compounded by weak institutional and fragmented government response, limited testing, and uneven social protection measures. The socioeconomic fallout was severe: widespread job losses, increased household vulnerability, and a sharp rise in food insecurity, particularly among informal and self-employed workers. Women faced the brunt of the crisis as both income earners and household food providers. Federal relief measures were fragmented, small in scale, and poorly targeted toward informal workers. The recovery that followed was slow and left structural inequalities largely intact. Among the report's recommendations are that social safety nets and cash transfers are extended to informal and self-employed workers, with simplified procedures and gender-sensitive eligibility; that investments are made in public vending spaces and local market infrastructure to stabilize informal food economies; and that transparent systems are set up to track food prices and intervene against speculative inflation.

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