

Beyond Informality and Ethnic Food: Gender, Foodwork Pathways, and Local Networks in Venezuelan Women's Incorporation into Quito's Popular Economy

Mercedes Eguiguren, Yolanda Alfaro, and María Natalia Yépez Martínez



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Abstract

This paper examines how Venezuelan migrant women become incorporated into Quito's urban food economy through small-scale food businesses. Drawing on 21 semi-structured interviews in the Carapungo neighbourhood of Quito, Ecuador, we adopt a trajectory-based approach informed by scholarship on the popular economy, gender, and migration. We argue that these businesses cannot be understood solely as products of informal labour-market structures or as strategies of cultural reproduction. Our findings show how they emerge at the intersection of women's migration and labour trajectories and care responsibilities, and how they are built and sustained through the mobilisation of food-related knowledge and skills and social and institutional networks. Our study also questions reified associations between migration, ethnic food, and culture. Rather than simply reproducing a fixed culinary heritage through ethnic food, women draw on and develop varied culinary repertoires before and after migration, adapting them to local conditions and tastes. The study contributes to research on the contemporary shaping of informal urban economies in Latin America by revealing situated processes of migrant incorporation into urban popular economies.

Keywords

Venezuelan migration; migrant women; foodwork; micro-entrepreneurship; popular economy; South–South migration

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Authors

Mercedes Eguiguren, Balsillie School of International Affairs and Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada: meguiguren@balsillieschool.ca

Yolanda Alfaro, Institute for Advanced Studies in Inequalities, Universidad San Francisco de Quito and Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, FLACSO Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador: yalfaro.aramayo@gmail.com

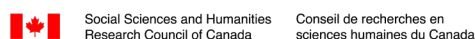
María Natalia Yépez Martínez, Independent Researcher, Quito, Ecuador: nataliaym@gmail.com

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Food businesses in Carapungo, Quito. Photo credit: Mercedes Eguiguren

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, South America's migration landscape has grown increasingly complex as intra- and extraregional movements overlap. Venezuelan migration, now the largest South–South movement in Latin America, epitomises this transformation: its scale, geographic dispersion, and complexity defy monocausal explanations (Gandini et al., 2019). Ecuador, one of its main destinations, is also a central hub in South American migration systems, characterised by sustained yet fluctuating out-migration and immigration primarily from the Andean region (Herrera & Gómez, 2022). These regional migration dynamics have unfolded amid economic decline, the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing political, social, and economic instability in countries such as Ecuador (Bonilla Mena, 2024; Herrera & Gómez, 2022), intensifying precarious living conditions alongside accelerating transformations in the organisation of work.

These dynamics are particularly evident in cities, where migrant settlement is concentrated. Predominantly urban in origin and diverse across social classes, Venezuelan migration has transformed South American cities, including Quito (Gandini et al., 2019; Santillán Cornejo & Ramón, 2021). There, migrants enter labour markets marked by informality and precarity, and they become part of local spaces and economies historically shaped by mobility, popular commerce, and social heterogeneity.

This study focuses on Carapungo, a neighbourhood located in the parish of Carcelén in northern Quito. It is a rapidly growing urban area and home to several generations of internal migrants, long-term local residents, and international migrants, primarily Colombians and Venezuelans. Carcelén is one of the four areas of Quito with the highest concentrations of international migrants (Álvarez Rodríguez, 2024). Carapungo is also marked by intense commercial activity spanning the formal–informal continuum and serves as a link between Quito and northern Ecuador.

Drawing on a qualitative study of self-employed Venezuelan women in the food sector, we ask how migrant women become incorporated into urban dynamics through small-scale food businesses. We argue that these businesses cannot be understood solely as products of labour-market informality or as cultural expressions. Rather, they emerge and are sustained through the interplay of women's migration and labour trajectories, gender structures and care responsibilities, food-related knowledge and skills, institutional interventions, and local social networks. To illuminate this process, we retrospectively reconstruct women's migration, labour, and family trajectories to examine how individual experiences and circumstances interact with broader social and economic conditions over time. By connecting experiences before and after migration, this approach helps explain how women become migrants and enter foodwork and micro-entrepreneurship under particular, changing conditions, rather than treating these positions as fixed identities or self-explanatory categories. Within this

approach, foodwork offers a productive lens because it connects income generation with everyday social reproduction and reveals subjectivities and forms of agency expressed through knowledge, creativity, social relationships, and the development of local belonging.

The paper opens with a review of the literature on Venezuelan migration, urban incorporation, and informal work. It then develops a conceptual framework linking informality, precarity, popular economies, gender, and migrant entrepreneurship, followed by a description of the methods and participant profiles. The findings trace women's migration and labour trajectories and examine their pathways into food entrepreneurship, the relationships between paid work and care, the development of their food-related knowledge and skills, and the interplay between their economic activity and neighbourhood-based relationships. The conclusion discusses the study's contributions to understanding migrant food micro-businesses and urban incorporation in South–South migration contexts.

Venezuelan Migration in South America, Urban Incorporation, and Informal Work

Recent research on migration in South America has focused on prolonged mobility or 'transit', a distinctive feature of Venezuelan migration whose scale had no precedent in the region. Forced departure, discrimination and abuse in receiving contexts, hostile migration policies, the Venezuelan government's failure to provide protection, and the pandemic have produced patterns of mobility characterised by geographic dispersion and alternation between periods of settlement and movement (Bonilla Mena, 2024; Herrera & Bonilla Mena, 2026; Herrera & Cabezas, 2019).

Shifting the analytical focus from transit to everyday processes of settlement and urban incorporation, research has increasingly examined the incorporation of migrants from the Global South into Latin American cities, particularly those with longer histories of international immigration, such as Santiago and Buenos Aires (Hayden et al., 2025). In Ecuador, urban and migration studies have converged less often, though research has addressed the incorporation of Colombian, Cuban, and Haitian migrants (Correa, 2014; Ortega & Ospina, 2012). More recent studies examine Venezuelan migrants' economic and social incorporation and social relationships in Quito, as well as migrants' urban imaginaries and those of local residents concerning Venezuelan migrants' presence in the city (Álvarez Rodríguez, 2024; Célleri, 2019; Rojas-Galindo et al., 2024; Santillán Cornejo & Ramón, 2021; Sarzosa Ramírez, 2025).

This literature shows that Venezuelan settlement in Ecuadorian cities occurs amid economic, social, and legal precarity. Employment opportunities are often limited to street vending, digitally mediated platform work, and other informal, unstable, or poorly paid activities in commerce and services (Célleri, 2019; Herrera & Cabezas, 2019). Researchers have documented employment insecurity, limited

labour protections, workplace abuse, and occupational downgrading. However, less attention has been paid to the concrete and heterogeneous processes by which migrants enter particular forms of work or to the characteristics of specific sectors within the urban economy.

The food economy is one such understudied sector, despite its historical importance within urban popular economies and the growing participation of international migrants. Research on migrant food businesses in Ecuador has relied mainly on the concepts of 'ethnic' economies or businesses, emphasising the reproduction of identities and culinary traditions associated with migrants' countries of origin (Álvarez Rodríguez, 2024; Pastor, 2018). More recent work has begun to examine migrants' participation in Quito's changing foodscape more broadly (Martens, 2025).

In this paper, we situate food microenterprises within conditions of informality and precarity and examine the knowledge, relationships, and forms of urban belonging they produce and transform, thereby contributing to research on migrant incorporation in urban economies and local social structures in Ecuador and the Global South.

Migration, Informality, Precarity, and Popular Economies in the Global South

Informality and precarity gained prominence in debates about global economic restructuring as neoliberalism intensified labour deregulation, income stagnation, and deteriorating working conditions. Although contemporary discussions of precarity originated in the 1970s, subsequent scholarship has treated it as a defining condition of contemporary capitalism, even proposing the emergence of a precariat class (Amézquita et al., 2023; Standing, 2012; Tawodzera & Crush, 2022). These debates have taken on renewed relevance with the expansion of the gig economy, financialisation, and transformations associated with global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic (Amézquita et al., 2023; Tawodzera & Crush, 2022).

Scholarship from Latin America and elsewhere in the Global South, however, has challenged linear and universal accounts of these transformations. Beyond the Global North, informality and precarity have long constituted structural features of economies and labour markets (Amézquita et al., 2023; Tawodzera & Crush, 2022; Vega Solís & Bermúdez Lenis, 2019). Economic sociology, urban studies, and development studies in the region have shown that urbanisation has historically incorporated large segments of the population into poorly paid, 'precarious and artisanal' activities (Vega Solís & Bermúdez Lenis, 2019, p. 347). These activities provide means of survival where salaried employment is insufficient while intersecting with and complementing the formal sector (De Oliveira & Roberts, 1993; Kirshner, 2010).

Social history and anthropology offer a distinct perspective on these economic activities and their place in urban life, approaching them through the lens of the popular. This

scholarship focuses on economic practices and social relations that blur the boundaries between the formal and the informal, particularly in urban peripheries. The popular economy is understood not as a residual or isolated sector but as a heterogeneous set of practices, relationships, and spaces constitutive of the urban economy. Food systems occupy an important place in these studies because they depend on markets, fairs, street vending, and other practices and relationships that make the dynamics of popular economies visible (Barragán, 2009; Kingman, 2014).

Although informality, precarity, and popular economies have long shaped Latin American urban development, the large-scale incorporation of international migrants into these economies is relatively recent in countries such as Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. In Quito, informal work now brings together long-term residents and migrants from diverse international and internal backgrounds. These longstanding dynamics coexist with a newer form of labour precarisation: promoting entrepreneurship as work. Under neoliberalism, entrepreneurial logics have shifted the responsibility for managing employment and its risks to workers through discourses of autonomy and self-reliance. Self-employed and increasingly salaried workers are thus recast as 'entrepreneurs' (Amézquita et al., 2023; Vega Solís & Bermúdez Lenis, 2019).

By challenging the separation between productive and reproductive labour, feminist economics questions narratives that cast precarity as a recent phenomenon. It shows that precarious labour has been central to the reproductive sphere under modern capitalism, as paid employment relies on the organisation and provision of care. This work is essential to accumulation and social reproduction, yet it has been devalued, exploited, and often not recognised as work (Pérez Orozco, 2014). Feminist economics also identifies a contemporary 'feminisation of work': the incorporation into paid employment of capacities historically associated with women and care, including affective and relational skills, multitasking, and the ability to improvise and adapt (Pérez Orozco, 2014). From this standpoint, promoting entrepreneurship converges with the feminisation of labour.

These considerations are especially relevant to foodwork, which has remained marginal to debates about the future of work and the platform economy, largely centred on male-dominated occupations. In contrast, the association of foodwork with everyday reproduction contributes to its devaluation and limited conceptualisation (Swan & Perrier, 2019). Foodwork makes the relationship between production and reproduction particularly visible: it mobilises knowledge acquired in domestic settings, is often organised around care, and relies on affective and relational skills.

Beginning in the 1990s, research on migrant economic activities highlighted businesses linked to countries of origin and sustained by transnational and ethnic networks, marking a breakthrough in migration and development thought (Portes & Guarnizo, 1991). Although this scholarship challenged deterministic accounts of migration in the global economy, it also helped consolidate the image of migrants as entrepre-

neurs, which later entered migration-governance agendas. More critical approaches argued that entrepreneurship can mask substantial economic, social, and personal costs, including unpaid family labour. They also asserted that programmes promoting migrant entrepreneurship may serve as palliative responses to the inequalities that condition migrants' economic incorporation and can operate as instruments of migration governance and control (Vega Solís, 2016).

Nevertheless, both celebratory accounts and interpretations that cast entrepreneurship as an artifact of labour precarisation risk overlooking individuals' motivations, aspirations, and understandings of their activities (Sandoz et al., 2024). They can also leave unexplained the specific processes by which particular individuals become self-employed, as well as the relationships between entrepreneurship, individual trajectories, family dynamics, and local contexts (Sandoz et al., 2024; Vega Solís & Bermúdez Lenis, 2019).

To address these gaps, we examine how migration, employment, family circumstances, and care arrangements intersect and change over time. Retrospectively reconstructing women's trajectories connects experiences before departure with those of migration and settlement, situating them within the distinct social and economic contexts of origin and destination. This allows us to examine how personal and family circumstances interact with broader conditions over time, and how knowledge, relationships, and occupational experiences developed in one context acquire new significance in another (Pizarro & Ciarallo, 2021; Rivera Sánchez, 2012; Zenteno Torres & Salazar, 2023). Rather than taking 'migrant', 'informal worker' or 'food entrepreneur' as given positions, we examine the circumstances and transitions through which women enter, sustain, and reshape particular forms of work. Our contribution, therefore, is to explain how food microenterprises emerge and are sustained through the interplay of women's subjective experiences, individual and family trajectories, and the structural conditions of particular social and territorial contexts.

Methods

Over three weeks in August 2024, we conducted fieldwork in Carapungo, in northern Quito. We carried out ethnographic observation in commercial areas, including the Carapungo market and surrounding streets, as well as areas near supermarkets, bakeries, and street-vending sites. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 women and seven men working in the food sector and held exploratory conversations with other local food workers, including market workers and informal vendors.

We coded and organised interview transcripts thematically using an analytical strategy that combined thematic analysis with coding procedures drawn from grounded theory. Although the findings presented in this paper draw primarily on interviews with women participants, our interpretation is also informed by a longer-term research relationship with a group of women involved in several community initiatives in the area. The research team has maintained links with

Venezuelan migrants living in Carapungo since 2023, when we conducted an earlier study on migration and food security during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant profile

The women who participated in the study ranged in age from 22 to 50, with most in their early thirties to mid-forties. All had completed secondary education. Thirteen held university degrees, while two others had undertaken but not completed university studies. Only four were single and without a partner at the time of the interview; the remainder were married or in stable partnerships, and most had at least one minor child. Although the participants came from different regions of Venezuela, all had an urban background. Most had lived in Quito for five or six years, arriving between 2018 and 2019, when Venezuelan migration to Ecuador peaked. A smaller number had lived in Quito for seven or eight years, while only one participant had arrived as recently as three years before the study.

Mobilities and Transformations of Quito's Foodscape

The provision and circulation of food in Quito, as in other Andean cities, have historically been shaped by mobility and rural–urban connections. Markets and fairs are central to the city's foodscape and have served as sites of convergence for rural migrants, itinerant traders, and other urban residents, giving rise to diverse forms of social organisation, networks, and identities (Kingman, 2014). International migrants are not entirely new to this landscape. Although Ecuadorian cities received smaller immigration flows than cities such as Buenos Aires, São Paulo, or Caracas, food businesses facilitated the economic and social incorporation of families arriving from Europe, the Middle East, and China throughout the twentieth century (Carrillo, 2012; Moscoso, 2012; Pagnotta, 2012).

The scale and diversity of this international presence have expanded since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Colombian bakeries and shawarma restaurants have proliferated, followed in the late 2010s by street stalls and other establishments selling Venezuelan food, especially *arepas* (Álvarez Rodríguez, 2024; Hayden et al., 2025; Martens, 2025; Pastor, 2018). Quito's prepared-food offerings have also diversified within a socially stratified foodscape.

Restaurants serving national and international cuisines coexist with popular eateries, fast-food franchises, street vendors, and businesses that adapt traditional Ecuadorian food to commercial-chain formats. This diversification is linked with urban growth and gentrification, the neoliberalisation of food systems and public space, changes in household organisation and consumption, and increased daily mobility. Reduced time for food preparation and more time spent outside the home have increased demand for prepared food and reshaped urban food practices (Hayden & Villagómez Ornelas, 2023; Martens, 2025; Pérez Martín & Hayden, 2025).

These historical processes have produced foodscapes in which residential and commercial uses are closely intermingled. Homes, grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants, supermarkets, and street stalls often share the same streets or buildings. Shaped by social inequality and spatial heterogeneity, these configurations of space, commerce, work, and sociability provide the local context in which Venezuelan women's food microenterprises emerge and become embedded.

Migration Trajectories: The Shock of Crisis, Downward Mobility, and Precarisation

The immediate context of Venezuelan mass migration was a severe crisis that, from 2015, rapidly eroded living conditions across the country. Out-migration had begun to rise in the 2010s, reversing Venezuela's historical role as a major destination for transatlantic and regional migration. The collapse of oil prices in 2014 severely affected its oil-dependent economy, while US sanctions compounded the crisis, creating shortages of food and medicine, hyperinflation, and rising poverty (Arciniegas Herrera, 2026; Weitzman & Huss, 2024). Alongside growing insecurity and political conflict, these conditions prompted departures in search of better living conditions, safer environments, or simply to survive. In several studies, food scarcity and hunger, in particular, appear among the main drivers of migration to an unprecedented extent in contemporary South American migration (Arciniegas Herrera, 2026). Their prominence is nevertheless understandable given the severity of food insecurity in Venezuela, which reached nearly 96% by 2021 (Arciniegas Herrera, 2026).

The literature commonly distinguishes between migration before 2015, associated with upper- and upper-middle-class Venezuelans seeking economic opportunities in wealthier countries such as the United States and Spain, and subsequent departures involving less affluent populations travelling primarily within South America (Pirovino & Papyrakis, 2023). The contrast between those leaving by airplane and those travelling by bus or on foot—the latter known as *caminantes*¹—often illustrates this distinction (Weitzman & Huss, 2024). However, critical approaches question a neat separation between economic and forced migration, arguing that economic deterioration, political instability, insecurity, and foreclosed life prospects interact in complex ways to shape departure (Gómez & Herrera, 2022; Herrera, 2023; Weitzman & Huss, 2024). Studies have also highlighted the importance of accounting for agency and examining decision-making in forced migration contexts: even under crisis conditions, families strategically consider specific perceived threats, changing living circumstances, household composition, transnational connections, and perceptions of potential destinations when deciding whether, how, and where to migrate (Weitzman & Huss, 2024).

We also caution against treating migration waves, destinations, or modes of travel as straightforward indicators of

class (see Pirovino & Papyrakis, 2023). In our research, we found a diversity of pre-migration socioeconomic situations, ranging from professional, middle-class households to individuals and families already experiencing hardship before migration.

For most participants, the decision to leave Venezuela followed a rapid deterioration in their immediate living conditions. Although many had long perceived the worsening economic and social situation, departure became necessary when the crisis affected basic aspects of daily life: declining purchasing power, deteriorating employment conditions for themselves or their partners, food shortages, electricity and water outages, and growing instability and insecurity. This deterioration disrupted personal circumstances that the women described as previously stable in occupational and economic terms. Several had held formal, skilled positions, sometimes directly related to their university education, and valued both their professional trajectories and the living conditions they had achieved. Atir, for example, described her position before migrating:

In Venezuela, I was a sales executive and a designer. [...] I designed home interiors and furniture. [...] The clients at those offices had money, and I made really good money from commissions. If my air conditioner broke, I didn't have it repaired; I bought a new one. [...] I had a good life, the kind of life you dream of after your parents make so many sacrifices for you to study. When I went grocery shopping, I used to buy two sets of groceries: one for my mother and one for myself (Interview with Atir, 7 August 2024).

Anita similarly recalled her circumstances in Venezuela: 'I worked in a clothing store. My life was very stable because I earned very good money' (Interview with Anita, 8 August 2024).

In other cases, the crisis interrupted women's occupational trajectories from the outset. Some had completed university degrees or hoped to continue their education but could no longer afford to pursue those aspirations or work in their chosen profession. Before leaving Venezuela, Tata had qualified as an information technology (IT) technician and subsequently began studying financial administration and human resources while working to pay her tuition. At one point, she held five jobs, yet her combined income eventually fell short of covering even basic expenses. She then asked an aunt living in Quito to help her migrate (Interview with Tata, 15 August 2024).

Other participants continued working in their professions but took on multiple jobs, only to see their salaries lose value amid hyperinflation, which still failed to meet their families' basic needs. Jenny, who held a degree in education, had worked first at a health centre and later at a school. Her husband also worked at the health centre and operated a small pizza business. Recalling the food shortages that prompted the family to migrate, she contrasted the crisis with an earlier period of relative security:

In Venezuela, we really did have times of abundance. I would say that we lived well. My husband worked, I worked, we all worked. My children studied. But when the crisis came, both the rich and those who weren't rich went without food. (Interview with Jenny, 14 August 2024).

In these narratives, signs of deteriorating living conditions and foreclosed futures accumulated rapidly until a specific moment prompted the decision to leave. Migration was often already under discussion within the family. Although husbands frequently proposed it and travelled first, women described themselves as making the final decision and completing the practical arrangements necessary to migrate and later reunite with them.

In almost every case, Ecuador was the intended destination because participants or their partners had relatives or personal contacts there. They travelled overland, some with passports, identity cards, and apostilles, while others lacked the necessary documentation. Nevertheless, all entered Ecuador in legally precarious circumstances: none arrived with authorisation to settle or with sufficient financial resources to obtain legal residence. For some, this resulted in prolonged precarious status and incomplete documentation.

Unlike Venezuelan migrants who reached Ecuador after prolonged journeys through the region, most participants travelled directly to Quito and, in some cases, to Carapungo. From the earliest stages of settlement, their migration and labour trajectories became closely intertwined. Most arrived prepared to accept any available work, aware that they were unlikely to find employment matching their education or experience. Even so, many struggled to enter the labour market. Some had been promised jobs by relatives or acquaintances, only to have the offers withdrawn or to discover upon arrival that the promises were misleading. Others had little information or few contacts, or applied repeatedly for positions without success.

Two common pathways into the labour market emerged from their accounts. The first was informal employment in commerce and services, characterised by extremely low wages, long hours, and work at the bottom of occupational hierarchies. After arriving in Quito, for example, Tere worked for a company that produced dehydrated foods and distributed supplies. However, because she lacked documentation and a cellphone, she could not keep the position. The owner then offered her piecework packaging supplies for a pizzeria, which she performed at home:

She also worked for a pizzeria folding napkins and packaging condiments in little sachets, so she brought bundles of napkins to my house. My mother, my husband, and I would stay up all night folding them. [...] She brought us 25 packages, which we had to finish in one week. [...] It was a lot of work (Interview with Tere, 8 August 2024).

Yis described how her employer's initial assistance became a mechanism of indebtedness and control. The owner of the pharmacy where she worked lent her USD 200 for rent, permitted her to take products from the store, and helped her mother establish an *arepa* stall. However, the employer failed to clearly define Yis's wages or schedule and deducted this 'assistance' from her pay. Yis received between USD 5 and USD 15 per week while working six hours a day at the pharmacy and another three at the stall, which she took over after her mother was injured. Her working day soon became even longer: "After about two weeks, she said, 'Let's do this: work from nine in the morning until ten at night, between the two jobs.' And she never raised my salary" (Interview with Yis, 8 August 2024).

In addition to low wages and long hours, participants reported hostility, degrading treatment, withheld or unpaid wages, and sexual harassment. These conditions created considerable instability, repeatedly pushing women to leave one position and seek another with more tolerable conditions. Their downward occupational mobility therefore involved more than accepting jobs below their education and experience levels. It also exposed them to profoundly unequal labour relations, precarious employment, and forms of violence and exploitation.

The second common pathway was self-employment through street vending or the provision of goods and services on request. For most participants, these activities involved food from the outset. Women's initial street-vending experiences included selling products supplied on consignment by distributors, foods prepared by others, and items they made themselves. Although this work was precarious and exposed them to fluctuating income and other risks, several women considered it preferable to their previous employment. The ability to exercise some control over their work and respond more autonomously to violence or mistreatment marked an important difference from their previous salaried employment. Previous studies have also documented this sense of autonomy and agency in street vending (Álvarez Rodríguez, 2019).

Starting a Small Food Business in Quito

Next, we trace how food business initiatives emerged across women's migration, employment, and family trajectories. This study considered two forms of employment in the food sector: salaried work and self-employment through a microenterprise or small business. Because most participants sold food independently, our analysis focuses on the latter. These businesses primarily involved baked goods and fast food, although some women also prepared Venezuelan or Ecuadorian dishes, finger food, lunches, and food for celebrations and events. In every case, the food was prepared at home. Food was marketed in two main ways: preparing for orders and selling in public spaces, either itinerantly or from a street stall.

These activities generally operated informally. Formalising a food business requires tax documentation, regulatory permits, certifications, and investments of both time and money. Some of these requirements also depend on having legal authorisation to reside in Ecuador. Unable to meet them, the women relied on home-based production and sales practices that required low investment and could be maintained on a small scale.

We identified two main pathways through which participants conceived of and started their businesses. The first was a relatively spontaneous decision to sell food in response to immediate economic need. Women chose one or more accessible products, such as cakes, sandwiches, or *arepas*, because these required little initial capital and basic culinary skills. They initially framed the activity as ‘trying their luck’ or as a way to earn enough to meet that day’s needs, rather than as a business. Lina, who had held several jobs since arriving in Quito, began selling *arepas* after her son’s birth made it difficult to continue working outside the home:

I could see that my husband was struggling, and I wondered how I could help him. When both of us worked, things were easier (...). But I didn’t want to leave the baby (...) anywhere. Then one day I said, “What if I make some arepas and go out to see how it goes?” He said, “And the baby?” and I said, “It’s fine, I’ll carry him in the sling.” And that’s how I started (Interview with Lina, 8 August 2024).

Although such activities are commonly described as ‘entrepreneurship’, they often begin as survival strategies in the absence of employment alternatives and amid an urgent need for income. This does not necessarily mean they remain confined to subsistence. Some women establish a regular clientele, expand their production or product range, and invest in supplies and equipment. However, these processes vary considerably and do not eliminate the economic instability that characterises their work. The second pathway involved training programmes offered by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), international agencies, and public institutions. Often organised around a ‘livelihoods’ approach, these programmes targeted migrants seeking ways to generate income amid scarce employment opportunities.

However, institutional intervention did not necessarily spark participants’ initial interest in foodwork. Several women had already prepared or sold food before enrolling in courses. Training nevertheless enabled them to acquire or refine technical knowledge, become familiar with local ingredients and production conditions, and, in some cases, obtain certifications or funding to purchase supplies and equipment. It could therefore help transform an improvised income-generating activity into a more specialised initiative. Daya’s trajectory illustrates this process. After unsuccessfully searching for employment and occasionally performing cleaning work, she began selling desserts prepared at home. Although she already had experience making sweets, Quito’s climate and altitude, as well as her unfamiliarity with some locally available ingredients, posed new challenges:

I have always liked sweets and always made them. But the climate and altitude were also a shock. Sometimes things just wouldn’t come out right, they’d sink, and I didn’t know, for example, which butter was not recommended. [...] During the pandemic, I would prepare desserts to sell. [...] And that’s when it started coming together a bit more, I met many people and organisations, and they would tell me, “Daya, there’s this opportunity here; let’s apply. This organisation is offering entrepreneurship courses, even cooking, baking, and pastry-making classes (Interview with Daya, 7 August 2024).

In Daya’s case, institutional programmes became part of an existing trajectory of domestic baking knowledge and previous attempts to produce food for sale, while also providing resources to develop and specialise the activity. The two pathways are therefore not mutually exclusive: an initiative that begins in response to an immediate need may later be reshaped through training, certification, or material support. For many women, care responsibilities crucially shape both pathways. The ability to prepare food at home and exercise some control over production and sales schedules were central reasons women started and continued these activities. We examine these aspects in the following section.

‘Something That Would Allow Me to be with My Children’: Gender, Care, and Migrant Women’s Work

A central reason women started and continued their food businesses was that these activities allowed them to earn income while caring for their children. Ecuador’s school system meets childcare needs only partially, with few public options for preschool-aged children or for the hours after the school day ends. Families must therefore address these needs privately, either through paid services or through support from other family members. Both alternatives are often inaccessible to migrant women, who cannot afford private childcare and usually lack an extended family network. Consequently, care falls primarily to mothers, including in nuclear households where men’s employment tends to take priority because it is more stable or better paid. Small-scale production enabled them to prepare food and receive orders at home, schedule deliveries around school schedules, and combine the business with cooking for their families and other domestic tasks. This does not mean, however, that entrepreneurship resolved their care needs. Instead, it produced variable and often precarious arrangements in which paid and reproductive work overlapped across the same tasks, times, and spaces.

Atir’s trajectory illustrates how care constraints intersect with unexpected changes in household circumstances, prompting women to pursue home-based income-generating activities. Her husband arrived in Quito a year and a half before she and their two children, obtained recognition of his professional qualifications, and found skilled employment. Atir initially worked in childcare and domestic service but had to leave because of a high-risk pregnancy. The

pandemic began a few months after her daughter was born, and both public health restrictions and caring for the baby prevented her from returning to work. When her husband's salary was reduced, she began making desserts to supplement the household income. By the time of the interview, she had run her business for more than three years, but sales remained unstable, and the household still depended primarily on her husband's fixed salary (Interview with Atir, 7 August 2024).

For Daya, her inability to find employment entailed a significant loss of economic autonomy. In Venezuela, she had built a successful career in human resources and was accustomed to earning her own income:

That was also a shock for me because I wasn't used to it. [...] I never found a job, and my husband said, "I'll work myself to the bone outside the home, but you stay with the children." I did keep looking, and this even created conflict between us because I wasn't accustomed to depending completely on my partner. Here, I had to depend on him even for a sanitary pad, mouthwash, or deodorant. Not to complain, my husband was always making sure we had what we needed, but on a personal level, it was tough. Later, I adapted, and then I began producing more and earning something myself (Interview with Daya, 7 August 2024).

Entrepreneurship enabled Daya to regain some capacity to earn income, but it did not change her primary responsibility for care, which reflects a common pattern in nuclear households. By contrast, care was distributed more evenly in two households composed of adult women. Alfa and her younger daughter shared two small businesses and the responsibility for caring for her older daughter's children. Nany and Dani, two friends who lived together and operated, respectively, a baking business and a street hamburger stall, alternated caring for Nany's son with work in both businesses.

Although atypical among our participants, Liz's trajectory clearly demonstrates the changing and reversible nature of care arrangements and their effects on women's employment. In Venezuela, she worked as an administrator for a baking-supply distributor while also contributing to a family business. When she decided to migrate, she asked her mother to accompany her and care for her daughter. This arrangement allowed Liz to seek employment immediately and remain in the same job niche. She later accepted a position in Ambato, while her mother stayed with her daughter in Quito and was eventually transferred back to the capital. During this period, her earnings enabled her to cover household expenses comfortably and to invest with her husband in a fast-food cart. This arrangement unravelled after Liz resigned because her supervisor was sexually harassing her. The resulting decline in household income led to her mother's return to Venezuela, ending the care arrangement that had sustained Liz's occupational trajectory. Liz then had to prioritise caring for her daughter. Rather than seeking

another salaried position, she continued working in fast-food sales (Interview with Liz, 7 August 2024).

Finally, combining entrepreneurship with domestic and care work blurred the boundaries of the workday and created substantial workloads. Nany worked on her business 'almost all day': she baked in the morning, decorated products in the afternoon, prepared orders at night, and sometimes baked in the early morning (Interview with Nany, 7 August 2024). Yet the income generated was minimal relative to the time and labour invested. As Alfa explained:

It is important to say this so that people understand: it's not like you end up with 500 dollars. Sometimes, after an entire day's work, you may be left with five or ten dollars. You might work from six in the morning until two in the afternoon, when you make the delivery. For the customer, it is simply about receiving a meal, but those of us doing the work have to get up early or begin cooking the day before (Interview with Alfa, 15 August 2024).

The resulting exhaustion and physical strain reflect the workload arising from women's structural position across the productive and reproductive spheres. They also reveal the labour-intensive character of food micro-entrepreneurship, in which the apparent flexibility that makes paid work possible alongside care is sustained by long hours, overlapping responsibilities, and very low returns.

Beyond 'Ethnic' Food: Entrepreneurship and Foodwork

Studies of migrant food businesses, particularly in Ecuador, have focused on the sale of traditional dishes from migrants' countries or regions of origin, generally categorised as 'ethnic' or 'typical' food. This perspective highlights how culinary knowledge and traditions shape both migration experiences and local foodscapes and tastes. Álvarez Rodríguez (2024), for example, examines Venezuelan food businesses in Solanda, Quito, as ethnic economies: strategies for economic incorporation sustained through family labour and local and transnational networks, but also spaces where memories, culinary traditions, and forms of belonging associated with the country of origin are recreated. However, migrants' food production does not necessarily entail specialisation in the cuisine of their place of origin. In the same neighbourhood, Santillán Cornejo and Ramón (2021, p. 159) found that Venezuelan vendors prioritised local preferences over any intention to 'capitalise on Venezuelan cuisine.'

We likewise found no systematic specialisation in Venezuelan cuisine. We therefore shift attention away from the 'ethnic' character of migrant food businesses to examine them as forms of foodwork, emerging through microsocial processes and trajectories. From this perspective, the knowledge and skills used to prepare and sell food are not treated as a pre-existing cultural repertoire. Instead, they are understood as knowledge, practical experience, and skills acquired and mobilised at different moments and under

different circumstances. To trace this process, we distinguish between experiences and knowledge developed before and after migration.

For some participants, culinary knowledge acquired within the family before migration later became a resource for generating income. Nany, for example, connected her baking business directly to something she had learned as a child:

Interviewer: So how did you decide to get into food, into making desserts?

Nany: Because I've been doing it since I was little. I mean, it's something that runs in the family. [...] My mom always wanted to make her breads and her things, but health-wise, she couldn't. So, well, when I had to migrate, I said, "I'll do it." [...] I made all the sweets for my First Communion. The cakes for my birthdays, I made all of them. [...] It was always like that. Because I like doing it (Interview with Nany, 8 August 2024).

In other cases, women had previously used this knowledge to earn occasional income or contribute to family businesses, though they did not necessarily recognise it as work experience. Lina, who had been a teacher in Valencia and had combined street-food vending with paid domestic work in Quito, recalled cooking as something she used to do to 'help' at her mother's restaurant:

Cooking, like, making the filling for the arepas and all that, we always did that. Because my mom had a restaurant in Venezuela too. So [...] we always did it, but...to help my mom out, right? And that knowledge I had back there, I had to... kind of bring it back out here (Interview with Lina, 8 August 2024).

Other participants had formal training or previous employment in the sector. Dani, for example, studied gastronomy in Venezuela and worked as a café manager and restaurant kitchen assistant. She later drew on this experience when she opened a street hamburger stall in Quito.

In other trajectories, food-related knowledge developed primarily after migration. Some women acquired it while working in restaurants, cafés, or bakeries. Others learned local recipes and tastes through paid domestic work that involved cooking for Ecuadorian families. Lina's trajectory combines several of these processes. She first worked in a Quito restaurant preparing *empanadas de viento*² then began selling *arepas*³ and other foods on the street and to people she knew in the neighbourhood. At the same time, she adapted to the preferences of the Ecuadorian family for whom she performed domestic work and learned local recipes: "That's also how I've learned a little about the food here, because they tell me, 'No, do it this way, like this and this'" (Interview with Lina, 8 August 2024).

Cooking and baking courses offered by organisations provided another setting to acquire and refine knowledge. Participants who completed these courses developed

products based on the techniques they learned and, in some cases, continued researching ingredients and recipes independently. Atir, for example, described experimentation as central to her baking business:

I'm always coming up with things. I want to mix traditional sweets from Ecuador with Venezuelan ones. [...] I want to use ingredients from here and mix them with things from back home. That's the project I'm working on. Once I made a filling with guayusa [...] from the Amazon region, right? I made a chocolate ganache, but instead of water, I used guayusa tea,⁴ and it came out really good. [...] I also made little chocolates filled with it (Interview with Atir, 7 August 2024).

Participants' accounts also reveal ongoing processes of specialisation and practical learning. While explaining the different coatings she uses for cakes, Daya moved between detailed technical knowledge and practical solutions she had learned through experience:

There's this cream called buttercream [...] made with a butter base. [...] It's firm, it holds up well and everything, but now I work more with whipped cream and ganache. [...] I do want to take a course because chocolate is something you have to work with really fast. If you don't, it dries up on you, and then you have to get out the heat gun to soften it a little and roll it out again. [...] And with whipped cream, I've figured out that you can add a few spoonfuls of Enco powdered meringue, which is a really good brand. [...] Those are all things I've learned along the way (Interview with Daya, 7 August 2024).

Foodwork was therefore sustained not by a fixed body of knowledge transported from Venezuela but by skills and knowledge recovered, acquired, combined, and refined over the course of women's trajectories. This process also required continuous adaptation to local conditions and customer preferences. Dani and Eli, both operating street hamburger stalls, chose this product after noticing its popularity in the neighbourhood. For women selling prepared meals on the street, adaptation meant varying their offerings and learning Ecuadorian recipes, such as *seco de pollo*⁵ and *encebollado*.⁶ As Anita explained, referring to the weekly planning of her lunch menus:

People don't like eating the same thing all the time. [...] I've always tried to make something that people here will like. [...] Because if we make food from back home, obviously people are like, "Oh, what's that? I don't like it," or "I'm not buying it because that's not food from here." [...] So if I see that people here make broad bean soup, then I'll figure out how to make broad bean soup. [...] If they make seco de pollo, then let's make it the way they make it here. I even met this girl from Manabí, and she taught me how to make encebollado [...] So sometimes I make encebollado too (Interview with Anita, 7 August 2024).

Attentiveness to people's tastes and what could be sold led women to incorporate new recipes, techniques, and ingredients into repertoires that continued to evolve through experimentation and everyday experience.

Participants also frequently described foodwork as something they enjoyed and as a space to express creativity and receive recognition for what they produced. This is particularly evident in Anita's trajectory. When she arrived in Quito, she initially worked in hair salons and hoped to continue in that occupation because it was also her mother's profession. She began selling food only later, first as a street *empanada* vendor and then as a partner in a small café that eventually closed. With the resources she had left, she continued independently, selling lunches on the street. At the time of the interview, she hoped to eventually operate another restaurant:

Interviewer: So you ended up liking foodwork even more than hairdressing?

Anita: Yes, yes, yes. I really did.

Interviewer: That's great.

Anita: Honestly, yes. Cooking is something that... it comes from inside you, because you make it with love. Like, for my husband's birthday, I made Chinese food, and everyone was like, "Whoa! You made this?" And I was like, "Obviously!" So, I like it when people tell me, "Wow, this is so good!" That makes me feel so good (...) when people say, "This is delicious!" and all that.

Interviewer: You feel appreciated, like your work is valued?

Anita: Yes. Valued, more than anything (Interview with Anita, 7 August 2024).

Foodwork Networks and Neighbourhood Sociability

Focusing on neighbourhood sociability, Santillán Cornejo and Ramón (2021) observe that food can forge social ties without requiring an explicit interest in exploring or representing national cuisines. They describe a Venezuelan woman who regularly buys noodles at a neighbourhood shop. When the shopkeeper asks how she prepares them, a routine transaction becomes an everyday conversation about food practices. Such exchanges, embedded in ordinary neighbourhood life, contribute to what the authors call the "invisible work of bringing the two populations closer together" (Santillán Cornejo & Ramón, 2021, p. 159). Our research likewise underscores the importance of relationships formed in everyday spaces of arrival and settlement. Participants described how people they met in the neighbourhood helped them find employment or housing, lent or gave them money, or became regular customers. These cordial and sometimes solidaristic interactions coexisted with experiences of rejection and tensions arising from

inequalities based on nationality, class, gender, and race. We contend that both are part of the subtle and uneven processes of urban incorporation that unfold through neighbourhood sociability.

We are particularly interested in how some of these relationships are activated, expanded, or deliberately cultivated around foodwork. Ties formed in other spaces of sociability become resources for starting and sustaining food sales, forming networks that cannot be reduced to either personal relationships or professional or entrepreneurial 'networking'. At the same time, foodwork itself creates new ties and expands existing ones. Lina's trajectory illustrates the first process. As discussed earlier, she began selling *arepas* on the street after her son's birth. Her previous involvement in the neighbourhood made it easier to start: "Since I'd already worked at that variety store that I told you about, people around there knew me. So, I started going out to sell with my little boy. And, well, that's how I got started." (Interview with Lina, 8 August 2024).

This pattern also appears in women's everyday marketing practices. Those who prepared food to order frequently advertised on WhatsApp Status, circulating products among their existing contacts. Although some used social media platforms such as Instagram, they felt these required greater specialisation and constant attention. WhatsApp Status, by contrast, relied on established relationships and word-of-mouth promotion. Neighbours, friends, fellow members of organisations, contacts from their partners' workplaces and their children's schools, and fellow vendors met at fairs and workshops all became part of these commercial circuits. Recommendations from existing networks enabled women to reach new customers. Some customers, in turn, became regular contacts. Relationships built through everyday sociability therefore sustain foodwork, while foodwork helps maintain and expand those same relationships.

Organisations provided another avenue for extending these circuits. As discussed earlier, entrepreneurship-support programmes offered training and, in some cases, resources such as seed funding. Their effects could continue after the programme through further training, new contacts and orders, and access to spaces where participants could sell their products. Daya, for example, combined social media promotion and personal contacts with participation in municipal fairs and occasional orders from NGOs. Her involvement in the fairs emerged through a programme run by ConQuito, the municipality's agency for development promotion:

The first seed funding I ever won was through the people at ConQuito. [...] We took an entrepreneurship course where you had to present a business plan. [...] It was a long process—it went on for months. And, well, in the end they selected the people who would receive the seed funding. They kept that database, and they're the ones who are always inviting us to the fairs (Interview with Daya, 7 August 2024).

Foodwork was therefore sustained by relationships formed through women's everyday socialisation practices in the neighbourhood, while also maintaining and expanding those relationships. Repeated interactions with customers, suppliers, and other local actors deepened women's practical familiarity with the neighbourhood, the city, and its foodscape. Over time, these relationships contributed to everyday forms of belonging grounded in women's ongoing presence and participation in neighbourhood life through their foodwork activity.

Conclusion

This paper examines how Venezuelan migrant women are incorporated into Quito's urban food economy through small-scale food businesses. We argue that although the informality and precarity of Ecuador's labour market shape the field of possibilities in which these businesses emerge, they do not fully explain why women enter foodwork, the forms their activities take, or how they are sustained. By reconstructing women's trajectories, the paper shows how food microenterprises emerge at the intersection of migration and labour trajectories, care responsibilities, food-related knowledge, and social and institutional relationships.

Migrant women's occupational decisions were closely intertwined with care, but care responsibilities did not function as a fixed 'barrier to employment'. Their effects shifted across women's trajectories: at times, they restricted access to particular jobs; at others, they encouraged women to seek work that could be performed from home or that offered greater control over schedules. Food micro-entrepreneurship therefore emerged through changing negotiations between productive and reproductive labour. Reconstructing these key processes helps explain how gendered dynamics shape how individuals occupy particular positions within the informal labour market, rather than treating 'informal worker' or 'micro-entrepreneur' as given categories.

Moreover, the study participants did not necessarily specialise in Venezuelan cuisine, and the knowledge mobilised in their businesses followed varied trajectories. It originated in family practices, previous income-generating activities or employment, and post-migration experiences, such as training, experimentation, and everyday learning. Examining the diverse ways culinary knowledge is incorporated into these women's trajectories, without restricting it to a function of traditional reproduction, avoids naturalising migrants' relationship with food preparation by gender or national origin and helps explain how businesses start and are maintained.

These businesses were also sustained through networks that were neither simply pre-existing personal ties nor conventional entrepreneurial networks. Relationships formed through neighbourhood sociability entered commercial circuits and expanded through interactions with customers, suppliers, and institutional actors. Foodwork therefore sustained social relationships while also producing practical knowledge, social connections, and local belonging.

Organisations focused on migrant populations also shaped some women's economic incorporation trajectories. For these participants, programmes that provided training, resources, networks, and access to commercial spaces helped transform food-related knowledge into a business. The presence of these programmes suggests that migration governance can influence migrants' modes of integration into urban economies. Further research is needed to examine how these interventions affect informality and self-employment more broadly across urban economies.

This case study demonstrates the value of linking structural explanations of informality and labour precarity with meso- and microsocial perspectives that reconstruct economic trajectories. Venezuelan women's food businesses constitute a mode of incorporation into Quito's economy and foodscape, shaped by economic and gender structures, yet enabled by specific migration and labour trajectories and by social relationships embedded in the urban popular economy. Viewed through the lens of the popular economy, these businesses enable women to negotiate their positions within precarious urban contexts while creating and strengthening social connections at the local scale.

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Endnotes

1. *Caminantes* literally means "walkers," but can also convey the meanings of "travellers," "wanderers," or "pilgrims." In this context, it refers to Venezuelan migrants who undertake all or part of their migration journey on foot.
2. *Empanadas de viento* is an Ecuadorian deep-fried wheat-flour *empanada*, filled with cheese
3. An *arepa* is a type of flatbread made from maize meal or maize flour. *Arepas* can be grilled, baked, fried, or steamed and are often served with fillings such as cheese, eggs, beans, avocado, shredded chicken, or beef. Although eaten in many countries across Central and South America, they are particularly associated with Venezuela and Colombia, where they are an everyday staple.
4. *Guayusa (Ilex guayusa)* is an evergreen tree native to the Andean Amazon region. Its leaves are traditionally brewed into a tea that has stimulant properties due to its caffeine content (Noriega et al., 2025).
5. Chicken stew.
6. *Encebollado* is a fish soup made with cassava and topped with red onion, originally from the coast of Ecuador. It is very popular as a street food to have for breakfast or lunch. In the Highland Region, it has been popularised in the past 20 years.

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