

The Food Security of Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Families with Children and Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ecuador

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Key Points

- This research brief examines the structural challenges faced by Venezuelan migrant families with children and adolescents in accessing food in Quito, Ecuador.
- Our survey of 788 migrant and refugee families found that the prevalence of informal employment, the unequal distribution of household chores between genders, the breakdown of community and family support networks, as well as the lack of access to health and education, are all impacting their rates of malnutrition and food insecurity, especially families with children.
- This report underscores the urgency of developing comprehensive food security policies that prioritize the nutritional well-being of children, that also address gender disparities and structural factors impacting migrants and refugees in Ecuador.

Introduction

The Venezuelan migration crisis has transformed the socio-political landscape in Latin America. According to official data, by November 2023, Ecuador had the fourth highest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, at more than 474,000 people (Working Group for Refugees and Migrants, 2024). In this context, food insecurity has been a major factor impacting Venezuelan families' decision to migrate. According to data from the Foreign Agricultural Service (2023), average monthly income in Venezuela in July 2022 was only USD161, which barely covered one-third of the cost of the basic food basket, making food security a major driver of migration in the region. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, an estimated one in three people in Venezuela (32.3%) were facing food insecurity (World Food Programme, 2019). In addition, the UNHCR reports



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that 40% of the people arriving in Ecuador are women and girls, and 20% of women are accompanied by children (Ripoll & Navas-Alemán, 2018).

Migration crises and their relation to food security has become more complex in recent years in Ecuador. Severe socio-economic and political upheaval has been accompanied by a major security crisis, increasing the vulnerability of migrant and refugee families within the country.

To examine the context of food insecurity, dietary diversity, and its impact on migrant and refugee families with children, it is important to consider the relationship to labour precarity in Ecuador. Labour precariousness manifests in long working hours and minimal income for caregivers, especially mothers. According to a World Bank Group report in 2020, most workers in Ecuador work in the informal sector (52%), with the proportion being even higher for Venezuelans (at 57%).

The school dropout rate for Venezuelan children and adolescents in Ecuador is a latent problem, deepening the exposure of minors to exploitation and child labour dynamics. The Ministry of Education (2024) indicates that between the school year 2021/22 and 2023, there was a 50% reduction in the enrolment rate of Venezuelan students, representing the highest dropout rate ever recorded. This report points out that these data are partly the result of the return of some Venezuelans to their home country but are also due to the economic impossibility of supporting their studies for those who remain. This situation was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the government built a regulatory framework which supported more than 64,000 children and adolescents in a situation of human mobility, the impact of COVID-19 reduced the economic income of a large part of the population which, in turn, increased school dropout rates (Arbolea, 2021). In a situation of human mobility, conditions such as economic instability, lack of care networks, and difficulty accessing early medical care all contribute to malnutrition and food insecurity early childhood.

In this context, there is a need to generate evidence that invites the formulation of regulations promoting food security programs for migrant and refugee families, and ensures that the needs of children are at the centre of the policy debate. The findings reported here are part of a survey conducted with migrant and refugee households from Venezuela, as part of a study within the Migration and Food Security (MiFOOD) Network. This research brief focuses specifically on the factors impacting food security of migrant and refugee families with children and adolescents in Ecuador.

Methodology

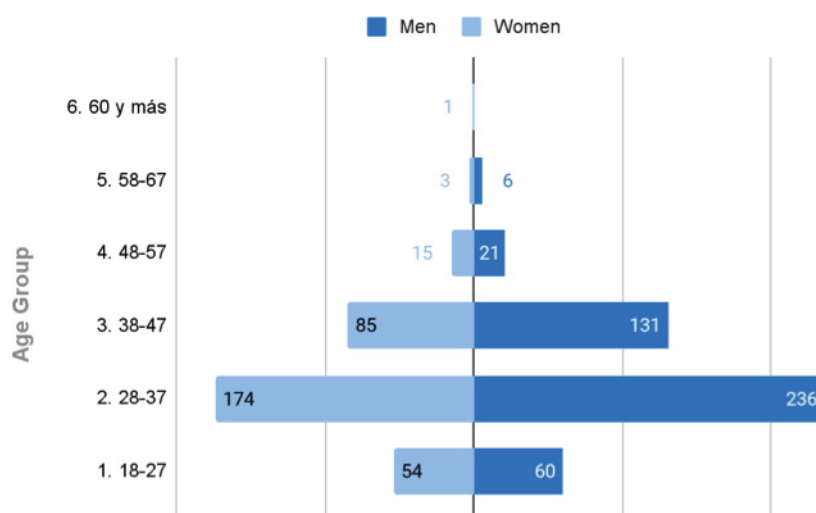
To evaluate migrant and refugee food insecurity in the context of COVID-19, we conducted a household survey of 788 migrant households in Quito between May and September 2023. The surveyed households belong to the canton of Quito and were distributed throughout the city of Quito. Criteria for inclusion in the survey were (a) that the respondents needed to be able to answer questions on food purchase and preparation and (b) could confirm their residence in Quito during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey draws on the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), a tool used to measure the perception and experience of access to sufficient and nutritious food. In the case of Quito, seven of the standard nine HFIAS questions were translated into Spanish and used in the survey. The team decided to eliminate two questions to avoid respondent fatigue and the revictimization of participants. The survey also incorporated questions from the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), a measure used to evaluate the variety and diversity of foods consumed in a household during a specific period by determining the food groups included in the household diet.

Findings

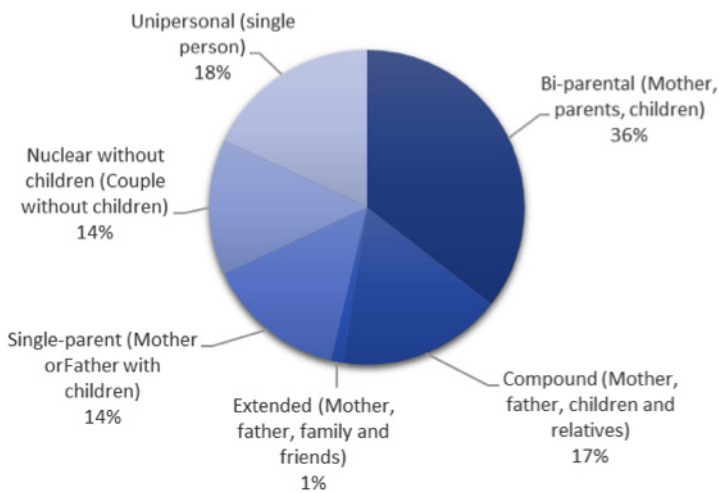
The survey included 788 migrant and refugee respondents, 39% of whom were in an irregular situation in the country, meaning they do not have immigration documents. Of the heads of household, 58% were male and 42% female. The prevailing age ranges were 28-37 (52%), 38-47 (27%), and 18-27 (14%) (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Age Group of Migrants



Regarding family type, nuclear or two-parent families prevailed (36%). The families surveyed also included single person families (18%), compound families (composed of several generations of the same family) (17%), and single-parent families (14%), most of whom were families with mother exclusively in charge of other family members (98%). Finally, the least common type in the survey sample was the extended family (mother, father, other relatives and friends) with only 1% of the total sample. Overall, 68% of surveyed families had children. On average, the families surveyed had between one and two children, accounting for 1,687 people in total. Of these, 38% were minors (up to 17 years of age), and 11% were between 1 and 24 months old. Six percent of the families reported the presence of at least one pregnant mother and 84% of the women respondents said that they were the ones who dedicated the most time to household and childcare tasks.

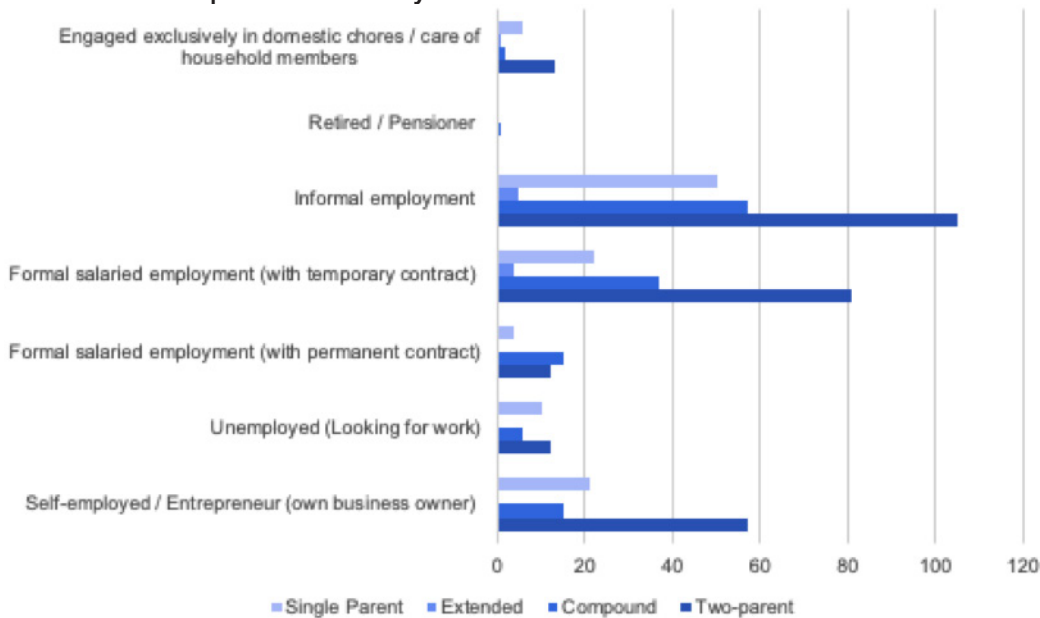
FIGURE 2: Family Type



Obstacles to Socioeconomic Integration

According to the participants, a main obstacle to accessing the formal labour market is the lack of documentation, followed by discrimination related to nationality. The occupational data of the heads of families with children and adolescents are shown below (Figure 3). Although most respondents (91%) reported working in the previous six months, the majority were engaged in informal work and temporary contract work. This was particularly true of compound and two-parent families with children. Economic instability in households, because of precarious employment and underemployment of adults, is thus a factor that limits investment in the welfare of children (Hernandez et al., 2008).

FIGURE 3: Occupations of Family Heads



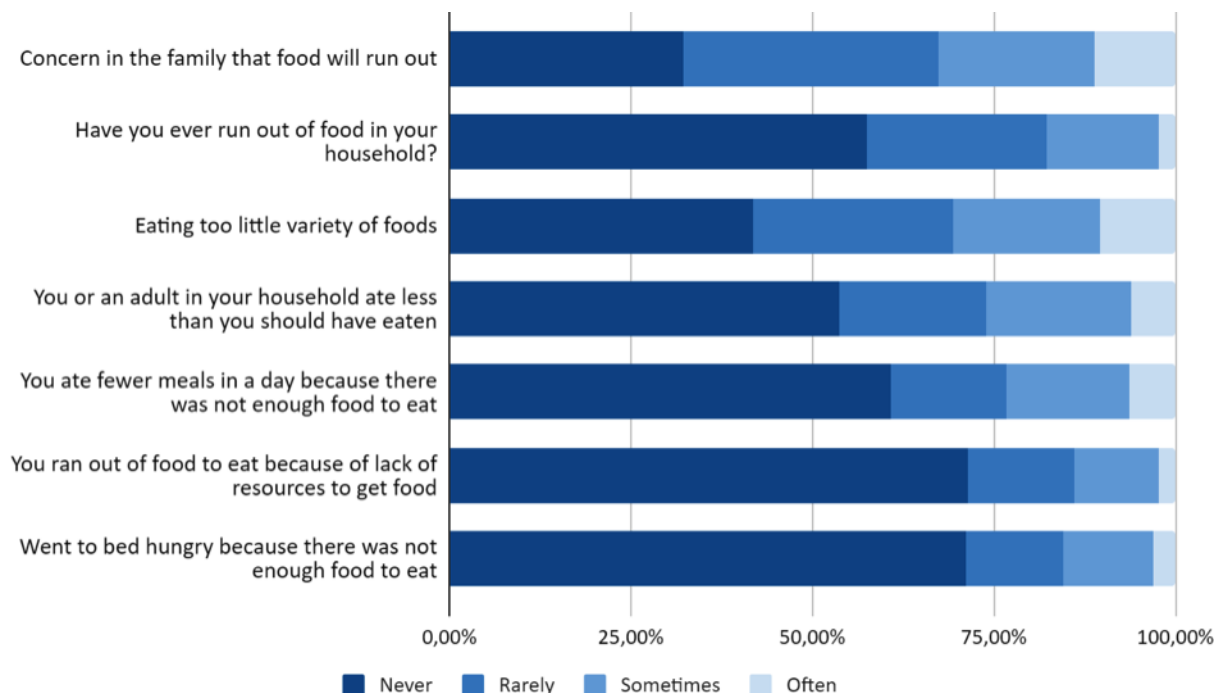
Gender and Household Responsibilities

The decision to migrate can make it difficult to access a family support system to care for children. Many women respondents said that they faced greater inequality in the distribution of tasks compared to the situation in their home country. As many as 39% reported that their household chores increased significantly after they arrived in Quito. This unequal distribution of household responsibilities intensifies the vulnerability for women and their co-dependents. Almost half (48%) of the women respondents also reported stopping work outside the home during COVID-19, performing unpaid domestic work, and caring for children, the elderly, and family members with special needs.

Food Security Before and After Migrating

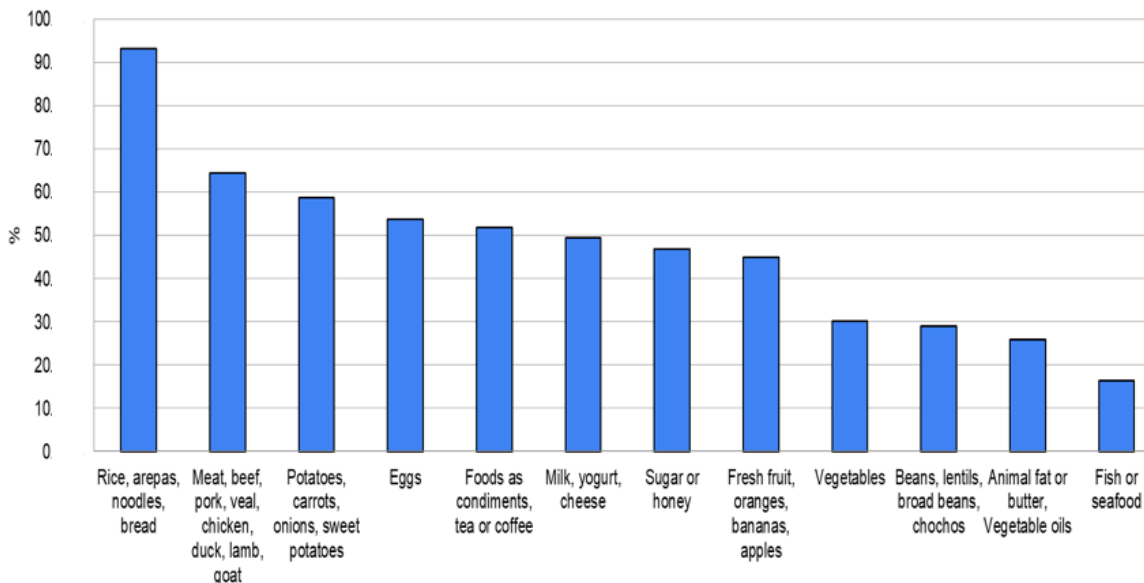
Almost 90% of the respondents said that the influence of migration on family food security had been positive or very positive. However, five out of ten households had experienced some type of food insecurity event in the four weeks before the survey (Figure 4). As a result, families deployed various food resilience coping strategies, including consuming less food (mentioned by 46%) and reducing the frequency of meals during the day because there was not enough food (39%). It is also common for parents to deprive themselves of food and prioritize their children's meals. Mothers who generally make decisions about food in the home, are most exposed to malnutrition by prioritizing their children's food needs (Milán and Martens, 2023).

FIGURE 4: Responses to HFIAS Questions



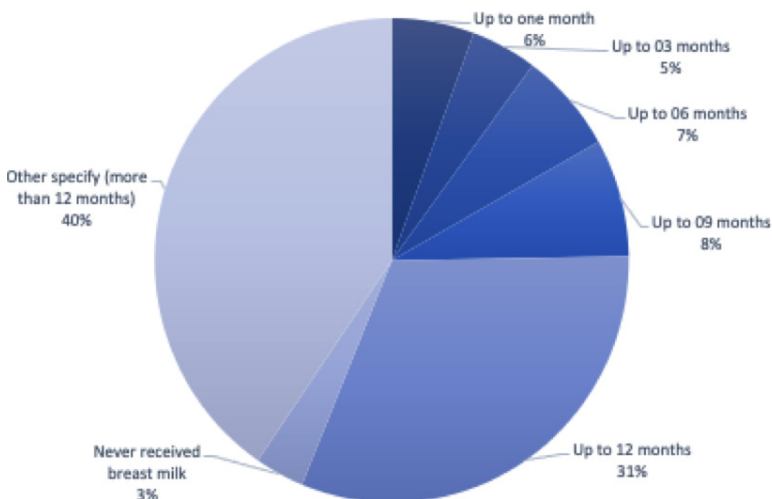
Another critical survey result impacting children and adolescents is the high intake of carbohydrates in migrant households. Figure 5 shows that over 90% of households had consumed carbohydrates in the previous 24 hours, while high-protein food groups such as legumes and fish and seafood were only consumed by 29% and 16% respectively. The low consumption of micronutrients and fibre in the form of fruits and vegetables is also striking.

FIGURE 5: Household Consumption of Different Food Groups



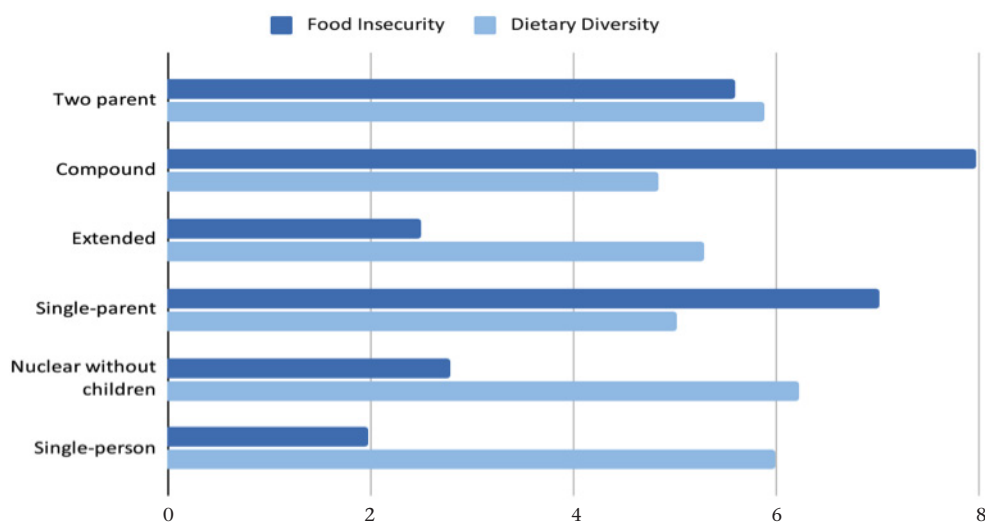
Regarding early childhood nutritional health, access to breast milk and diversification of foods with high nutritional content is essential to ensure healthy growth and development (UNICEF, 2024). Figure 6 shows that 57% of the children between 1 and 24 months were breastfed for up to one year. While only 3% did not have any access to breast milk, 40% received breast milk for more than 12 months. These findings indicate that there was an important effort by mothers to maintain the nutritional health of infants through breastfeeding.

FIGURE 6: Duration of Breastfeeding



Both food security and dietary diversity varied with family structure. The family groups with the highest levels of food insecurity were single-parent and composite families, followed by families with both parents and children, while single-parent, extended, and nuclear families without children show much lower levels of food insecurity (Figure 7). Food consumption diversified as the number of household members decreased. Both composite and single-parent families had the lowest indices of dietary diversity. Economic and social dynamics within larger families may limit access to a varied diet. Factors such as economic burden, availability of time and resources, and job stability can also influence this outcome. Families with children are also more exposed to food insecurity events and less dietary diversity than those with less dependents. In this sense, the need for children to diversify their diet from the age of six months for optimal development may be threatened by the absence of healthy, diverse, and sustainable food options (ASPCAT, 2022). Balistreri (2018) shows that in single-mother families, children are more likely to experience food insecurity events than in two-parent families. This study confirmed that single-parent families, mostly composed of single mothers and their children, face greater food security challenges. Thus, gendered food insecurity is aggravated by economic inequalities, burden of care, and lack of support networks.

FIGURE 7: Relationship between Family Type, Food Insecurity, and Dietary Diversity



A significant factor in the attendance and performance of children in educational institutions is access from an early age to quality food to maintain adequate levels of nutrition. UNESCO (2024) reports that access to nutritious food during the school years improves educational outcomes and is critical to addressing the global learning crisis by improving school attendance and retention. Likewise, schools are spaces that should be prepared to identify and meet the needs of students, including their food security. Children’s enrollment and active presence in the school system is crucial to access to food security. Of the 470 households surveyed in Quito with children and adolescents, 86% of children attended educational centres and the rest mostly attended daycare centres. However, attendance at educational institutions generally requires children to bring their own food.

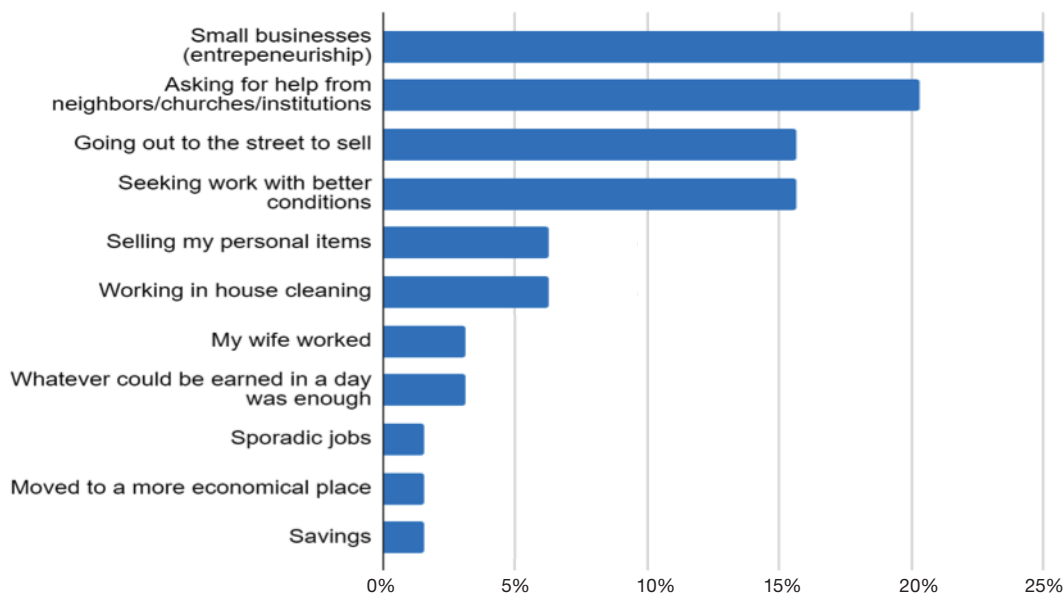
In this context, it is worth reflecting on the role and impact of government food security programs on migrant families. The participation of migrant populations in governmental programs that support nutritional supplementation should focus on the prenatal dietary needs of mothers and early childhood, which is related to improved dietary quality, child weight, and immunization rates (Hartline-Grafton and Hassink, 2021). In Quito, the migrant population’s access to government programs that facilitate food security remains insufficient.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Food Security

All of the risk factors identified above were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when exposure to deteriorating health and the contraction of employment and household income threatened household food security. Forty-five percent of the surveyed population (425 families) lost jobs at some point during the COVID pandemic, affecting their coping capacities. Of the families that lost employment, 96% had children.

In this crisis scenario, families deployed various strategies to acquire resources to ensure the well-being of their members (Figure 8). The most common strategy (used by 25% of households) was starting a small informal retail business. However, this transformation in the occupational and economic reality of the household could directly affect the accompaniment and care of the children, as well as their exposure to the dynamics of exploitation related to labour informality.

FIGURE 8: Strategies for Coping with Job Loss during the Pandemic



A second key strategy used by migrants and refugees was to seek help from neighbours, churches, and humanitarian aid organizations. This raises the issue of the reception and support provided to migrant children through the country’s social protection programs. The ILO notes that the most common barriers impeding migrant populations from benefiting from

these programs include the lack of mainstreaming of human mobility within public policy, weakness in information management (especially regarding the actual number of migrants within the country and their characteristics), lack of knowledge of the rights of migrants and refugees on the part of public servants and citizens, and discrimination and xenophobia (Eguiguren et al, 2022). All of these obstacles were exacerbated due to deteriorated health conditions and lack of income during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The survey invites us to reflect on initiatives that facilitate the labour integration of migrant parents, particularly migrant women, and improve household economies. It also prompts consideration from a gender and human mobility perspective, of access to employment, and the increased household responsibilities following migration. Women demonstrate autonomy through responsibilities for decision-making in managing household food security, and this role needs to be strengthened further. However, without access to formal work or initiatives to alleviate the double burden faced by women especially during times of confinement, income inequality, exposure to violence, and stereotypes based on gender and migratory status remain major barriers for women (UNHCR, 2020).

The survey results highlight the risks faced by migrant and refugee families in Ecuador in terms of access to food, highlighting the need for a comprehensive and inter-institutional response that addresses the social, economic, educational, and health challenges facing migrant families. Families with children and adolescents face significant difficulties in accessing food due to the intersection of multiple factors, including job insecurity, lack of social security coverage, child malnutrition, limited support networks, gender inequalities, and difficulties in accessing the education system, all of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to ensure that migrant families can navigate and access food through urban food systems that reinforce their food security, which is of particular benefit to children. For this to occur, local government investment in programs of diversity and inclusion are crucial.

Recommendations include programs for the generation of food system resilience and food autonomy initiatives at the local level, through engaging with intersectoral actors such as decentralized autonomous governments, health centres, markets, neighbourhood fairs, school nutrition and child development programs, social protection programs, health and nutrition campaigns, urban community gardens, and community kitchens.

Guaranteeing the right to education and the right to health were also challenges for the well-being of children. Inter-institutional work to eliminate barriers that impede access to educational centres and early childhood care institutions need to connect health responses within the same system. In this sense, the data invite us to reflect on the need to expand the capacity of initiatives such as National School Food Programs, to strengthen the services of the Comprehensive Child Development initiative, and to promote other projects of this nature, all of which are essential to ensure food security and protection of children and infants.

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