

3 The compounding effects of COVID-19

This chapter provides an overview of the health social and economic well-being impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Peru. It finds that COVID-19 and the lockdown have dramatically exacerbated gender inequalities at least temporarily. The chapter starts with a discussion of the educational effects of school closures and a review of labour market developments. The pandemic has led many Peruvian women to stop working without searching for re-employment because they took on additional caring work. In addition to higher labour market inactivity, the pandemic also led to an exacerbation of stress and mental health problems and an upsurge of episodes of violence against women. The chapter then reviews the measures that the Peruvian Government has taken to mitigate these adverse consequences and advances a set of policy insights for continued government efforts to support women, particularly the most vulnerable.

The policy responses to counter the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic have varied considerably across Latin American countries. While some countries implemented prompt and decisive countering measures, others, in an attempt to perform a balance between economic expansion and citizens' health, opted in favour of milder actions. Within such a diverse regional landscape, the Government of Peru chose to side the more resolute approach involving as rapid and firm responses as possible.

In the aftermath of the first confirmed COVID-19 cases in early March 2020, this approach materialised in the introduction of severe restrictions to mobility, including stay-at-home requirements, alongside an evening curfew, a strict and prolonged quarantine, the ban of crowd-gatherings and the temporary closure of borders. Implementing these measures required the support of the closure of schools, universities and public meeting places. As a result, Peru was widely credited internationally for being the first country in Latin America to take actions against the pandemic. Nevertheless, despite the adoption of early and stark measures, the effects of the pandemic in Peru have been devastating. Having reached the milestone of 200 000 deaths, in a population of 34 million, Peru stands out for being the country with the highest COVID-19 death rate per head worldwide.

Such a significant disproportion between efforts displayed and outcomes has inevitably unveiled a number of endemic economic and social challenges. For example, the difficulties of reconciling paid employment with family responsibilities in an altered setting for education and care services – due to social distancing measures and school closures – led many Peruvian women with young children to abandon the labour market. They have sparked stress and mental health problems and an upsurge of episodes of violence against women. These adverse labour and social effects have been stronger among women of indigenous groups and Afro-descendants women.

This chapter provides an account of the health, social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Peru. It reveals that the COVID-19 and the lockdown have dramatically exacerbated gender inequalities and reviews the steps that the Peruvian Government has taken to mitigate these consequences.

Women and COVID-19 in Peru: Review of impacts and challenges

Almost two years since the outbreak of the pandemic, Peru stands out in the international context as the country with the highest number of deaths worldwide, measured per million of inhabitants (Our World in Data, 2021^[1]). Adding to these direct effects, the indirect scarring effects of the pandemic on the Peruvian population have become increasingly apparent. Particularly, the data reveal that high numbers of adult deaths have translated into high numbers of children having lost their parents and caregivers to COVID-19. Indeed, Peru has suffered one of the highest rate worldwide of children orphaned or bereft of their primary caregivers (Hillis et al., 2021^[2]). Children and adolescents bereft of parents or caregivers are exposed to increased risks of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Under the circumstances, these consequences appear further compounded by mitigation-related isolation measures and school closures.

Poor outcomes have sparked scholarly discussions to explain the reasons behind the observed wide gap between efforts and achievements. From an health care perspective, the most frequently mentioned explanations include a fragmented and already overwhelmed public health sector, lack of infrastructure and specialised personnel to tackle the pandemic, governance problems and the lack of leadership from health authorities (Schwalb and Seas, 2021^[3]). These problems are seen to have also contributed to slow down the vaccination process. By mid-December 2021, in Peru the share of people fully and partially vaccinated equalled 58.8% and 69.4%, respectively, which compares with 84.4% and 88.0% in Chile, 50.8% and 76.8% in Colombia and 63.8% and 76% in Costa Rica.

In addition, the pandemic unveiled the impact of underlying structural fragilities, both economic and social (Vázquez-Rowe and Gandolfi, 2020^[4]). For example, a rampant informal labour market and a limited social protection system have meant that the mobility restrictions were very difficult to enforce among the many

workers who could not afford to stay at home, off work. This problem materialised in erratically implemented distancing measures in a number of typically crowded activities, such as street food markets and public transports, for example. As one example of the limited effects on the most vulnerable groups, distancing measures were particularly difficult to implement among Venezuelan migrants to Peru, many of whom have yet to finalise their migratory regularisation process. Other examples of important socio-economic groups, which experienced strong difficulties at enforcing self-isolation, are domestic workers, among whom many acted as care workers, and people in indigenous communities.

School closures

Learners around the world have undergone extended periods of educational disruption due to school closures following the outbreak of COVID-19. By the end of 2021, ten countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region had schools fully open, four countries still had schools fully closed, and 20-three had their school partially closed (UNICEF, 2021^[5]). The latter group also included Peru. Specifically, out of a total 111 640 schools and educational services only 11 627 (10.6% of total providers) were open and offering semi-face-to-face services. Correspondingly, the percentage share of students benefitting from face-to-face classes equalled 6.5%, which is very low in the regional comparison. For example, in Argentina, Colombia and Chile, the same students' share equalled 94%, 71% and 52%, respectively. In Costa Rica, all students were back to face-to-face classes.

As a way of replacing in-person classes, the government launched the *Aprendo en casa* (I learn at home) programme. A nation-wide online portal, *Aprendo en casa* spanned across different subject and grades, with plans to translate the learning materials into different languages so to reach out to the indigenous populations. In addition, radio and TV stations offered educational programs aligned with the national curriculum. Moreover, telecommunication providers were exempting usage of the *Aprendo en Casa* website from data charges (Lechleiter and Vidarte, 2020^[6]).

Available analysis for the OECD countries suggests that the educational disruptive effects of school closures can have far-reaching consequences. The immediate ones take the form of learning losses and school dropouts. Research from the United States projects that on average and depending on the subject, students may learn one to two-thirds less than in a normal school year. Learning losses are even stronger in lower-income areas and for academically weaker students (Kuhfeld et al., 2020^[7]; Opportunity Insights, 2020^[8]; Chetty et al., 2020^[9]). An unknown number of pupils lost complete contact with their teachers and may not have engaged in any distance learning: different national administrations and school districts in OECD countries have reported ranges of 5-10% of students with whom there was no contact (franceinfo, 2020^[10]; Hildebrandt, 2020^[11]; Kohli, 2020^[12]). Students who were already struggling prior to the pandemic and who fall too far behind academically were at particularly high risk of dropping out of school altogether.

In Peru, these effects have likely been more dramatic. A marked divide emerged in the country between, on the one hand, the well-connected children who could access remote learning – generally residing in the wealthier regions and districts – and, on the other hand, the poor children who don't have the same access and often live in the rural areas (Chauvin Lucien O. and Faiola Anthony, 2020^[13]). With less than 40% of household nationwide and 5% in rural areas having access to the internet, distance learning is more difficult to implement in Peru than in most OECD countries.

As part of the measures adopted by the Peruvian Government to limit risks of educational disruptions for students in rural areas and disadvantaged students, 50 000 students of low-income families received meals that replaced the usual school meals. Starting from July 2020, there was a distribution of tablets, giving priority to low-income students in rural areas. From July 2020 onwards, the partial reopening of schools in the rural regions with no COVID-19 cases and where teachers live locally also helped (Gestión, 2020^[14]). Despite the efforts displayed, lower-income students are less likely to have used a computer and to have enjoyed a quiet place where to study (OECD, 2020^[15]).

There is no clear-cut evidence as to how the effects of the closures vary between boys and girls. Yet in families in which girls already had more unpaid care obligations than their brothers, the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated the divide, since increasingly girls had to look after their younger siblings no longer at (pre-) school. As a result, girls' educational outcomes may suffer even more than boys' outcomes and more girls are at risk of dropping out from school (UNESCO, 2021^[16]).

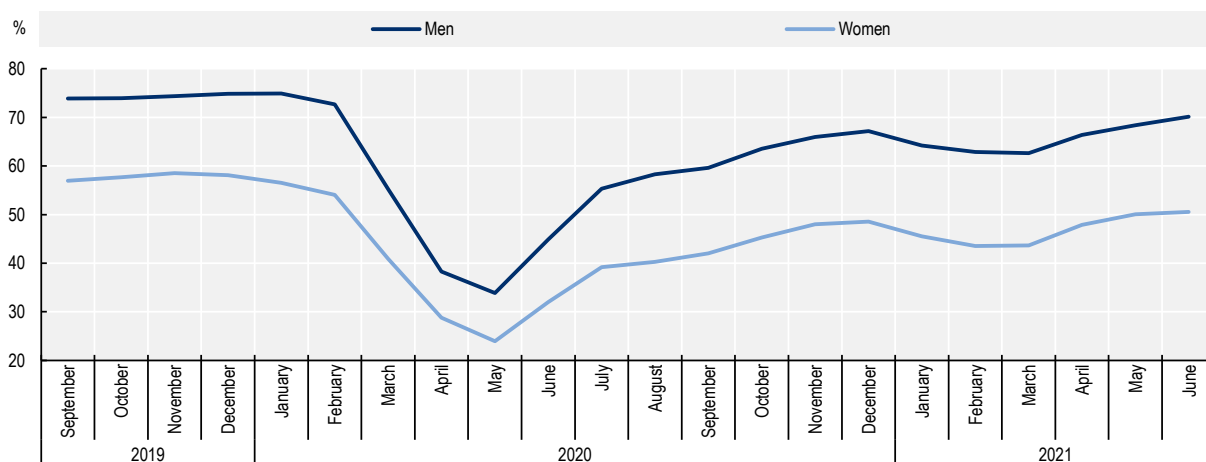
Labour market developments

The temporary closure of schools and day care centres have exacerbated the burden of unpaid work activities on Peruvian families, with a disproportionate share of this extra workload falling on women. As a counterpart, the number of hours that women could devote to paid employment activities declined sharply (OECD, 2020^[17]). In addition, many structural characteristics of the Peruvian economy imply that the lingering effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the employment of women will be more severe and protracted than for men. For example, more female than male workers are employed in restaurant and hotel services (12.3% of female, as opposed to 3.5% of the male workforce) or in private households as domestic carers (4.9% compared to 0.2%). The activities in which women are overrepresented in the labour market underwent a sharp cut of work hours at the height of the pandemic restrictions.

Aggregate labour market figures show that in Peru the employment rate dropped sharply between January and May 2020, both among men and women but particularly the latter (by 54% and 57%, respectively) (Figure 3.1). Given that the subsequent job recovery has been stronger for men than women, the resulting level of the gender gap in employment has widened compared with the level existing before the outbreak of the pandemic.

Figure 3.1. Employment fell sharply following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis and the gender gap widened during the subsequent job recovery

Employment-to-population ratio by sex in Peru, 2019-21



Note: Data refer to population aged 15+.

Source: ILO, ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat ilo.org/topics/employment/>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/f8u3lq>

One particular reason for concerns that the ILO has pointed out relates to the fact that the labour force participation declined significantly more sharply among women than among men during the pandemic, suggesting a higher rate of labour market exit (ILO, 2021^[18]). Peru is not the only country in Latin America where women have experienced a higher rate of labour market exit. As elsewhere in the region, this

reflected the growing difficulties of reconciling paid employment with family responsibilities in an altered setting for education and care services, due to social distancing measures and school closures. Some women were able to take advantage of the increased opportunities for flexible work arrangements to increase the time spent working from home. However, in a country where most women are unable to take advantage of this option, because they do not have the facilities to engage in digital teleworking, for example, or they lack digital skills, the responsibilities for domestic care took precedence over paid work (Murray Christine and Elliott Lucinda, 2021^[19]).

The contraction of employment has been particularly severe for the women who were working in the informal sector or as own-account workers. These two groups of workers were lying at the bottom of the wage scale well before the crisis. In Peru, around half of women lost their informal employment between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, exceeding the decline in informal employment among men by 20 percentage points (ILO, 2021^[18]). One important explanation behind this outcome is that Peru underwent one of the longest school closures in the world – a total of 75 weeks according to the UNESCO. While somewhat shorter than experienced by Chile and Argentina (77 and 79 weeks, respectively), for example, this length is considerably longer than the average of the European countries.

Unsurprisingly, the group of women that have fared the worst is that of the mothers with young children (Murray Christine and Elliott Lucinda, 2021^[19]). Namely, in Peru 57% of women heading households with young children lost their jobs (UNDP, 2020^[20]), making for the highest rate in Latin America and about 20% above the regional average. As background, in Peru the number of female-headed households increased by 127% between 2001 and 2018 – compared to an increase of male-headed households of 35%. As a result, in 2018 almost 3 million households were women-headed.

An analysis by Peruvian researchers points to the strong intersectional nature of these developments, which implies that some groups of women experienced particularly high risk of increased economic and social precariousness (Jaramillo and Ñopo, 2020^[21]). This work finds that the adverse labour markets effects induced by the pandemic have been stronger among women of indigenous groups and Afro-descendants women than they have been among the general population.

Overall, the review of labour market developments in Peru during the pandemic suggests that women remain particularly exposed to the risks of possible new waves of contagion and the introduction of confinement measures. If economic activity and employment falls in the sectors characterised by a greater female representation, it will be more difficult to recover women's employment and gender labour gap will continue to widen.

Mental health

Changes in routines, forced isolation and the anxiety of losing income have fuelled stress and fear. Studies of the effects that COVID-19 had on citizens in Peru find that the perception that well-being and mental health conditions are getting worse disproportionately affected women and the younger population (Antiporta et al., 2021^[22]; Ruiz-Frutos et al., 2021^[23]; Ministerio de salud, 2021^[24]). One possible explanation of the observed differences between age and gender relates to the fact that, for many girls, the halting of classes at schools and universities has meant a rise in the time spent on the care of their siblings. These works also show substantial disparities by key socio-economic variables with risk factors being lower among those with higher household income, education, and employment. By contrast, living in the Andes, and having comorbidities increased the probability of depressive symptoms.

Violence against women

Since the introduction of mobility restriction measures in mid-March 2020, female disappearances have risen dramatically in Peru (The Organisation for World Peace, 2020^[25]). In 2021, more than 5 900 women

reported missing, three-quarters of whom were girls and teenagers. The number of cases doubled in the jungle and Amazonian regions.

In addition, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led the levels of gender-based violence and crimes against women and girls, such as rape and sexual assault, to increase significantly. A randomised research analysis assessing the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on physical domestic violence in Peru, using a sample of young people aged 18-26, finds that 8.3% of the sample experienced an increase in physical violence during the lockdown (Porter et al., 2021^[26]). In 2020, the number of calls to Line 100 of the Ministry for Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP) registered an increase of 97% increase (MIMP, 2021^[27]). As a result, the overall number of calls related to domestic violence against women, family members and sexual violence was close to 236 000.

It is likelihood that these figures imply a lower bound. While data from sources such as police reports, helplines, health centres, and shelters provide essential insights, they are unlikely to reflect the true situation since many victims were confined with the perpetrator. In addition, the victims of violence often do not report episodes for fear of shame, stigma, or retaliation and because they have emotional linkages with the person imparting mental and or physical violence on them. This under-reporting may be even greater during a period of pandemic because mobility restrictions and the risk of contagion may hinder the capacity to seek help in person. Telephone or internet reporting may also be limited, given that victims have fewer opportunities to reach out secretly when confined at home with their abuser.

Gender sensitive policy responses to support economic security

The COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, produced by the UNDP and UN Women, provides regularly updated information about the policy responses taken by governments worldwide to tackle the pandemic, highlighting those that have integrated a gender lens. The tracker's section devoted to Peru reveals that the Peruvian Government introduced numerous gender sensitive policy measures to counter the economics and social effects of the pandemic (UNDP and UN Women, 2021^[28]).

Measures to support SMEs and employment

With an eye to the responses most likely to support the economic security of women, the government introduced the *suspension perfecta*, which foresees the temporary suspension of a dependent work relation without terminating a contract. As part of this, a new wage subsidy was created to support the firms that reported a fall in sales of at least 30% during the April-May period of 2020. The subsidy covered between 35% and 55% of the wage bill and was expected to benefit some 350 000 people.

In addition, the government provided a three-month extension of the income tax declaration for SMEs and granted some flexibility to enterprises and households in the repayment of tax liabilities. The programme *Reactiva Peru* aimed at guaranteeing loans in local currency with a view to ensuring payments in the supply chain and short-term debts of SMEs.

Tailored measures to support employment included strengthening the protection of the social and labour rights of domestic workers, such as mandating the stipulation of a written contract, for example, along with enforcing the principle of fair and equitable remuneration. Specific measures also involved the introduction of cash benefit to health care workers in the Intensive Care Units. Economic support also extended to cultural workers and enterprises, as well as transport workers.

All public and private companies were encouraged to implement remote work. The government also increased the amount of resources destined to public works, while at the same time easing the conditions for budget execution at the local government level. The launch of the programme *Todos Conectados* aimed at accelerating the efforts to bring free internet to local and rural areas, as a way of reducing digital infrastructure gaps.

The Ministry of Women launched a new facility, the Regional Networks of Women Entrepreneurs, to strengthen the capacity of women entrepreneurs to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Networks constitute a partnership between the Ministry of Women, the regional and local governments, and the local association of women entrepreneurs. Information were provided to women entrepreneurs on how to access economic support programmes, such as the Business Support Fund (FAE) for SMEs, and similar programmes for specific sectors – e.g. tourism (*FAE Turismo*) and agriculture (*FAE Agro*) (Ministerio de la Mujer, 2020^[29]).

Protecting incomes

Cash transfers to the least favoured populations included the advanced monthly payments of the social programmes – *Juntos*, *Pensión 65* and *Contigo*. The *Bono Rural*, a new cash transfers for people in extreme poverty in rural area, targeted 980 000 households. The *Bono Familiar Universal* targeted those households whose members did not receive any income during the state of emergency. The measure aimed to benefit 75% of the country's households, corresponding to some 6.8 million families. The *Bono Trabajador Independiente* (Independent Worker Grant) targeted 800 000 self-employed households to help them facing the economic impact of the pandemic.

The government authorised the partial withdrawal from private pension fund accounts by members who had not contributed for six consecutive months. It also introduced measures to ease employees' conditions of access to their individual severance payment accounts – the *Compensation de tiempo de servicio*. The payment of overdue bills for electricity, natural gas and telecommunications of households was split into several instalments, without interest charges, late payment charges, or service cuts.

The fight against gender-based violence

The government undertook numerous measures to prevent and/or respond to violence against women and girls (UNDP and UN Women, 2021^[28]). Some of these measures focussed on the improvement of the information system about state services for survivors of violence, for example through SMS and WhatsApp messages about helplines 100 and chat 100. Preventive actions in rural communities included the broadcast of radio programs to inform women in these areas about how to report an event of violence and ask for help. The creation of a mobile care team allowed addressing urgent cases of violence against women and girls in areas where there is no *Servicio de Atención Urgente* (emergency care service) for psychological, legal and social services assistance.

Decreto Legislativo No. 1 470 established the reinforcement of emergency health care for all women and members of the family group who are survivors of violence. This included by relying on the Mental Health Centres, of which there are 175 in Peru and in charge of services to survivors of violence through multidisciplinary services. The municipality of Lima created two new shelters for women survivors of violence. These services can be accessed via telephone or online and are available 7 days a week.

Dissemination campaigns ensure that people are aware of the existence of assistance services for women in need. The Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, in partnership with the UNDP, the Spanish Agency for International Development Co-operation (AECID) and local governments have reached out to more than 300 commercial establishments (supermarkets, markets, pharmacies) to launch the campaign *No estás sola* (You are not alone). The aim is the dissemination of messages promoting non-violence, respectful relations at home, and the sharing of household and domestic responsibilities. The campaign *Mascarilla Violeta* (Purple mask) encourages the use of purple masks to show solidarity and commitment to end violence against women.

The Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Population, through the National Aurora Program launched the radio programme: "Aurora accompanies you". The initiative promotes messages aimed at reducing social tolerance of GBV. The programme duration is 30 minutes once per week, with the goal of expanding time

coverage and radio spaces by location. “Aurora accompanies you” airtime will give priority to the following topics: prevention of GBV, good treatment, self-esteem, economic empowerment, new masculinities, decision-making, and services providing attention and prevention to VAW.

Policy insights

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the real extent of pre-existing labour market and well-being challenges facing Peruvian women. It has magnified labour market inactivity, along with exacerbating symptoms of acute stress and mental health and an upsurge of episodes of violence against women.

The significant increase in labour market inactivity heightens the importance of continued government efforts to support the most vulnerable women. Even before the pandemic, only about 57% of all women in a working age were employed in Peru, compared with 74% for men. Compounding this situation, the closure of early childcare institutions and schools, in combination with the increased vulnerability of the elderly, led to a surge in the demand for care within the households, at a point in time when the health system was operating at maximum capacity. The evidence of large increases in inactivity underscores the importance to facilitate the access to benefits of low-income families -- in particular single parents, who are predominantly female --, as well as to social security programmes, which support families as a whole and allow women return to formal employment.

In anticipation of possible new waves of infections, Peru should step-up the efforts to prepare firms to use emergency measures against the increase of women’s labour market inactivity and exclusion. This support includes actively informing firms about how to reduce working hours, provide relief for workers, and manage redundancy payments related to temporary lay-offs and sick leave. It also includes ensuring that the self-employed can access emergency measures, especially those who do not qualify for employment insurance. The effects of more forward looking support measures with a potential to strengthen the resilience of women’s employment and support gender equality in the future, deserve close assessment. This includes by monitoring the outcomes of the Regional Networks of Women Entrepreneurs, the programme *Todos Conectados* and the new measures to encourage remote working, alongside the stepped up regulation to protect the social and labour rights of domestic workers.

Any further recourse to the closures of education institutions should remain as limited as possible and based on an assessment of area specific infection conditions. Available analysis for OECD and Latin American countries shows that the disruptive effects of school closures have far-reaching consequences in terms of learning losses and school dropouts. Such losses are even stronger in lower-income areas and for academically weaker student. With less than 40% of household nationwide and 5% in rural areas having access to the internet, distance learning is particularly difficult to implement in Peru. Indeed, a marked divide has emerged in the country during the pandemic between, on the one hand, well-connected children who access remote learning – generally residing in the wealthier regions and districts – and, on the other hand, poor children who lack access and often live in the rural areas. This evidence suggests the importance of, to the extent possible, keeping children at school both to ensure the continuity of educational programmes and to help women staying at work or actively searching for a new job.

Continue the efforts to push back on social acceptance of domestic violence. Following the introduction of mobility restriction measures in mid-March 2020, female disappearances have risen dramatically in Peru. In addition, levels of gender-based violence and crimes against women and girls, such as rape and sexual assault, have also increased significantly. Recent actions taken to foster the introduction of more electronic-based modes of communication should be complemented by measures to ensure that service delivery for victims is integrated across relevant spheres. This will ensure that all relevant public agencies involved in the spheres of health, social services, education, employment and justice can work in a closely co-ordinated manner so to provide timely and survivor/victim-centred access to justice. In the short-term, this is essential to face possible new waves of the crisis.

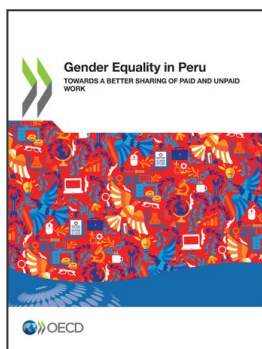
More fundamentally, all of the above economic and social policy measures must be embedded in broader efforts to mainstream gender in governments' responses. In the short term, it means, wherever possible, applying a gender lens to emergency policy measures. In the longer term, it means that the government implements a well-functioning system of gender mainstreaming, relying on ready access to gender-disaggregated evidence in all sectors so that differential effects on women and men can be promptly assessed.

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