

# Women facing Covid-19 in the fishing communities of Guatemala.

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Fundación Mundo Azul



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# Introduction

Due to the health emergency developed worldwide by the Covid-19 outbreak, confinement measures have been implemented to protect life and preserve public health, trying to avoid the collapse of health services. However, the implementation of these measures has generated different effects to the gender-based perspective. Currently, homes have become the place where daily activities are centered such as: childcare and education, socialization among family members, even a large part of the productive work, which has increased what it is known as the *care giving crisis*. This increase of work and attention required by the members of the family in the different phases of life should be carried out jointly, meaning, both genders should participate equally. However, these responsibilities fall mainly on women, all the roles and activities they perform are not recognized and they are not remunerated economically.<sup>1</sup>

This emergency has shown that women in rural areas, in addition to facing the challenges of being the fundamental base of the family, also face extreme poverty, lack of access to basic services and supplies, economic and gender violence, lack of education, deprivation of reproductive rights, additionally in some cases their children show signs of malnutrition. The spread of Covid-19 has also come to interrupt the production chain in which many women participate, mainly as small-scale food producers, fishery being one of them.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, Fundación Mundo Azul wanted to contribute to generate information about the conditions that women experience in the fishing communities of Guatemala. The data collection was performed in 5 fishing communities: El Quetzalito and Sarstún in the Caribbean; Las Lisas, Sipacate and Buena Vista in the Pacific Coast. This research was conducted to find out how this health emergency has affected women, access to information and education of children in these communities.

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<sup>1</sup> OAS - Inter-American Commission of Women. COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts

<sup>2</sup> OAS - CIM. Rural women, Agriculture and Sustainable Development in the Americas in the context of COVID-19.

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# Methodology

This initiative executed by the organization *Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI)*, they established a methodology to learn about different approaches on how the Covid-19 emergency has affected the fishing sector in Mexico. This methodology was shared with Fundación Mundo Azul to replicate it and generate its own analysis for Guatemala. During the month of July 2020, telephone interviews were conducted with 32 women involved in artisanal fishing in five communities, two on the Caribbean coast and three on the Pacific coast.

The people interviewed are between 24 to 61 years old. Most of the participants had access to education, mainly in public schools. However, 53% of women have only received elementary education. 19% have completed middle school and only 28% had access to high school. The number of children they have varies from 0 to 7 children for each woman, being the most frequent: two children (35%), three children (22%) and four children (22%); followed by families with five children (9%), one child (6%) and lastly with seven children (3%) and no children (3%). 51% of the women interviewed are married, 34% of them are in common-law marriage, 9% are single, widowed and divorced represent the smallest group with 3% each.

## Women's role at home and their situation facing Covid-19

Women play an important role in society. However, since the beginning of the construction of society, this role has been limited to the strictly family environment, that include taking care of children, carrying out household chores, preparing food, among others, without having financial compensation for their work at home.

Currently, the role of women has been changing progressively over time. In modern society, women have managed to join the educational, labor and political fields, among others. Despite these great advances in relation to gender, a large part of women, mainly in rural areas, are subordinated to housework.

The main role that women, from the coastal areas of Guatemala (Pacific and Caribbean), have at home according to the interviews conducted, is to be a housewife (94%) and only a small group mentioned being the head of the household ( 6%), mainly because

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they are single mothers or divorced. However, being a housewife or head of the family implies performing the same tasks at home (cleaning, taking care of children, preparing food, laundering, among others). Despite taking care of activities that are not financially remunerated, 69% of them contribute to the monthly household expenses, through their own businesses promoted by them. The economic activities they carry out range from their own small businesses (stores), teaching, sewing, catalog sales and other larger businesses, including the collaboration before and after fishing. Most of them (91%) continue to develop their economic activity despite the pandemic.

On the other hand, the administration of the household economy is varied within the communities. 55% of the women mentioned that the main person in charge of managing the money and expenses of the family is the man (husband), 14% mentioned that it is the woman (wife) who manage the resources, while 28% indicate that it is a work that they carry together. Only 3% indicated that this work is carried out by adult children living at home.

Throughout the pandemic, due to of the monitoring of social distancing and mobility restrictions, and the permanence of children at home, chores in most households have increased, mainly because women have assumed the role of teachers and in addition, they take care of their children at home 24/7 and, in many cases, they take care of the elderly. Despite this, the distribution of household chores remains the same for most of the women (69%); while in some cases they now receive help from their children and / or spouses since they stay at home longer (31%).

When talking about the responsibility of taking care of children now that they spend more time at home, 63% of cases, mothers are in charge of taking care of them and 37% mentioned that it is a shared task between the mother and the father of the children. Some women also mentioned that they are in charge of taking care of elderly relatives (13%), this responsibility not only falls on them, but also on their daughters or sisters.

Due to the health emergency caused by COVID-19, one of the measures adopted was home confinement and the closure of schools to prevent the virus from spreading. These measures led to an increase in family coexistence within households. 78% of women from both coasts of the country (Pacific and Caribbean) mentioned that the family relationship at home has remained the same, 19% mentioned that the relationship in

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the family has improved by staying together longer and 3% mentioned that coexistence has been complicated during the pandemic, mainly due to the economic crisis that impacted the households.

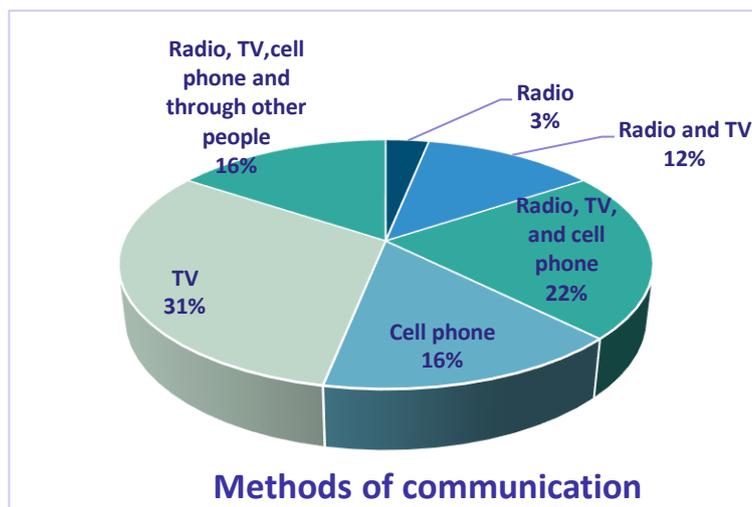
## **Access to Covid-19 information by women**

The health emergency caused by the coronavirus has changed the world's population way of life, at an accelerated speed. The population at a global and national level has had access to the information that goes around this pandemic, through the publications made by the media, social networks and government programs.

Given that situation, women were consulted if they know what the coronavirus is, having a positive response, also if they know how to detect the symptoms that this virus causes. When asked about the preventive measures they know to avoid contagion, 80 different responses were received from the 32 women interviewed. The most known measures were maintaining personal hygiene (29%) in relation to washing hands or bathing after being away from home; social distancing (27%), the use of masks (27%), and the use of hand sanitizer (13%). The least common responses were sneezing into the elbow (3%) and the use of home-made medicines, such as the infusion of lemon leaf, eucalyptus and ginger (1%). Women are aware that not complying with these measures can cause infections and promote contagion to other people. On the other hand, women from the El Quetzalito community mentioned that no municipal or government institution has approached to them to talk about preventive and protective measures for COVI-19.

The personal protective equipment that the Government of Guatemala has suggested to avoid contagion by the virus is mainly the use of masks. However, the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance -MSPAS- proposes the use of gloves, glasses, face shields and the use of hand sanitizer. Regarding the equipment that women have in their homes to prevent the spread of the virus, most have masks and hand sanitizer (84%), others have masks only (13%) and to a lesser extent, they have complete equipment (3%) such as masks, hand sanitizer, gloves, and face shields.

The main methods of communication used by women to be informed about the situation of the coronavirus is through television, radio and cell phones using social networks (Facebook); Some of the interviewees also indicated finding out through other people (relatives who reside in Guatemala City). Regarding internet



access, 91% of women mentioned having this service at home, although it is not permanent in all cases, while 9% do not have this service.

In the Caribbean communities of Guatemala, 92% of women have access to the internet through prepaid credit on their cell phones, 4% have access through a contract on their cell phones and 4% do not have internet access. The community of El Quetzalito has difficulties to access this service because of poor reception in the area; they have to use a Honduran provider or need to be located at strategic locations within the community to connect to a Guatemalan tower. This situation makes it even more difficult to communicate or obtain information.

In the Pacific region, 79% mentioned that they have internet access through prepaid credit on their cell phones, 5% have internet through a cell phone contract, 5% have internet service installed at home and 11% do not have internet access.

On the other hand, women have primary health care through public clinics. However, this service has deficiencies, due to the lack of medicines, doctors and medical equipment. In El Quetzalito community, there is only one clinic for 5 communities, with a lack of medicines and with one nurse only. Sarstún, has a clinic installed by an international organization. Both communities are far from the municipal seat, which makes it difficult to access a better health service. This situation happens also in the Pacific communities, that have clinics, but underserved and with a lack of personnel to attend to the inhabitants. These health care deficiencies make communities more vulnerable to the COVID-19 infection. From the interviewed women, only 19% have access to the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security *IGSS*, since their husbands work in state institutions.

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## Access to support and benefits

Regarding the support that the government has promised to help mitigate the economic effects that the pandemic has produced to the economy of the families, such as food supplies and the *Family Bonus*, only 41% mentioned that they have received any of these benefits. In the Caribbean region of Guatemala, 33% mentioned having received food supplies, 13% received the *Family Bonus* through the electricity bill and 54% did not receive any of the support offered by the government. In the Pacific region, 22% received food supplies, 11% received the *Family Bonus* and 67% did not receive any of the support offered by the government.

## Home Activities for children during the pandemic

Since schools were closed as part of the restrictions enforced by the Government to avoid contagion by COVID-19, children now stay at home. Most of the children in the interviewed households continue to receive education from schools in coastal communities.

In the Caribbean region, 73% of children continue to receive classes, while 27% are not receiving classes. 65% of the children, mainly in the elementary level, continue their education through the “Self-learning worksheets” provided by the Ministry of Education –*MINEDUC*–, here the parents acted as teachers of the children. While 29% are learning at distance, this method is used mainly by students in middle school and high school. However, this method of education has only been by phone, using WhatsApp. One person indicated that they continue to receive face-to-face classes for only 2 hours a week at the teacher's home, taking preventive measures (use of a mask and distancing).

In the Pacific region, 78% of children continue to receive classes, while 22% have not received classes during this period. In this area, the *MINEDUC* self-learning worksheets are the most widely used (70%) and remote classes are taught to a small extent (30%). In this area they also mentioned that teachers use apps such as WhatsApp to assign homework to the children.

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When asking mothers what their children do in their free time, in addition to continuing their education, they mentioned that their children mainly do three activities: Collaborate with house chores (cleaning, run errands, organizing house's common areas, and even taking care of their young siblings), recreational activities (playing, watching television, fishing for fun) and contributing to economic tasks (daily wages, fishing activities and helping their parents with their work tasks), usually they are over 15 years old. In most cases, they carry out more than one activity at home. In 59% of households, children collaborate at home and carry out recreational activities. 17% mentioned that they help in household activities and contribute to economic activities. 17% mention that their children only carry out recreational activities and 7% mention that they carry out the three activities (help at home, contribution with economic tasks and recreation).

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## Recommendations:

- Women represent a value for the well-being and the upkeep of the family not always recognized or remunerated, that is why it is necessary to recognize their work at home, as well as the importance of their participation in the fishery value chain, that must be recognized and remunerated.
- The creation of an environment of equality, where household tasks and economic obligations are distributed among the family without affecting its effectiveness.
- Create educational programs, emphasizing what should be the role of the women in our society, to generate a positive shift in traditional attitudes regarding this issue, this way women will be encouraged to participate actively in the social development of the country, leaving behind the passivity in which they been kept.
- When creating regulations to contain the pandemic and for the reactivation of the economy, the environmental social, and economic effects of the entire population must be taken into consideration, with a gender-based approach that allows recovery to occur at all levels according to the needs of each sector.
- Promote strategies for empowerment and economic recovery specifically for women (access to credit, financial services, technology, and new markets).
- Promote the creation of organized groups of women in the communities.
- Urge government institutions to strengthen the health system within the communities in fishing areas.
- Build access to digital technology in the coastal areas of the country.