

Impact of the Cuna Más Program on the Labor Insertion of Beneficiary Women in the Province of Cusco Perú, 2019–2022

Incidencia del Programa Cuna Más en la inserción laboral de mujeres beneficiarias de la provincia del Cusco Perú, periodo 2019-2022

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Resumen

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El presente artículo analiza la incidencia del Programa Nacional Cuna Más, a través del Servicio de Cuidado Diurno, en la inserción laboral de mujeres beneficiarias en la provincia del Cusco, Perú, durante el periodo 2019–2022. El objetivo fue determinar el impacto del programa en la empleabilidad y la estabilidad económica de las participantes. La población estuvo conformada por 845 mujeres en edad laboral, de las cuales se seleccionó una muestra probabilística de 206 beneficiarias. Se aplicaron encuestas estructuradas y se complementó la información con datos secundarios del MIDIS. La investigación empleó una metodología aplicada, con enfoque cuantitativo y diseño no experimental, descriptivo-correlacional. Los resultados evidencian que el desempleo femenino se redujo de 21% en 2019 a 12% en 2022; además, el 79% de las mujeres accedió a un empleo tras ingresar al programa y el 93% indicó no haber podido trabajar previamente. También se observó un incremento en los ingresos y una mayor permanencia en empleos de tiempo completo, aunque predominan ocupaciones de corta duración. Se concluye que el programa tuvo un efecto positivo en la inserción laboral y en la mejora del ingreso económico; sin embargo, persisten limitaciones asociadas a la informalidad y la sostenibilidad del empleo. Estos hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de fortalecer políticas públicas orientadas a la conciliación trabajo–cuidado infantil y a la formalización del empleo femenino.

Palabras clave: Programa Cuna Más, inserción laboral

Código JEL: H53 Gasto público de la administración y programas de bienestar

Abstract

This article analyzes the impact of the National Program Cuna Más, through its Daycare Service, on the labor insertion of beneficiary women in the province of Cusco, Peru, during the 2019–2022 period. The objective was to determine the program's influence on employability and the economic stability of participants. The population consisted of 845 working-age women, from which a probabilistic sample of 206 beneficiaries was selected. Structured surveys were applied, complemented by secondary data from MIDIS. The research followed an applied methodology with a quantitative approach and a non-experimental, descriptive-correlational design. Results show that female unemployment decreased from 21% in 2019 to 12% in 2022; also, 79% of women gained employment after joining the program, and 93% reported they were unable to work before participating. An increase in income and greater access to full-time jobs were observed, although employment remains largely short-term. The study concludes that the program positively affected labor insertion and income generation, but limitations related to informality and job sustainability persist. These findings highlight the need to strengthen public policies aimed at work–childcare reconciliation and female employment formalization.

Keywords: Cuna Más Program, labor insertion

JEL Code: H53 – Government Expenditures and Welfare Programs

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Introduction

The female labor insertion in Peru has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, linked to greater access to education, reduced fertility rates, and the increasing participation of women in productive activities. However, structural problems persist, such as high levels of informality, the gender pay gap, and the difficulty in reconciling paid work with family responsibilities (National Institute of Statistics, 2018). These conditions particularly affect women in the Cusco region of Peru, where 87.2% of female workers are in the informal sector, reflecting precarious employment and a lack of social protection (Ministry of Labor and Employment Promotion, 2022).

In Latin America, the labor insertion situation for women has been further complicated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the region experienced a 9.1% contraction in GDP, with adverse effects on female employment (Central Reserve Bank of Peru, 2021). Women's labor force participation fell from 52% in 2019 to 46% in 2020, while unemployment rose to 12%, and would reach 22.2% if the previous participation rate were maintained (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). Many women left the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the direct link between paid work and the availability of childcare services. In Peru, the state of emergency and strict quarantines drastically reduced labor force participation, especially in households with children under six years of age, where female employment fell by 61.7% during the second quarter of 2020 (National Household Survey, 2022).

In this context, the Cuna Más National Program, created in 2012 under Supreme Decree No. 003-2012-MIDIS, emerged as a social strategy focused on early childhood development and, indirectly, on the labor market integration of beneficiary mothers (Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, 2012). Its most in-demand modality, the Day Care Service (SCD), serves children from 6 to 36 months old in Comprehensive Child Care Centers, providing care, nutrition, early stimulation, and protection in safe environments, thus freeing up time for mothers to enter the labor insertion (Arrunategui & Giesecke, 2019). In Cusco, the suspension of these services during the pandemic highlighted their importance, as many women stopped working due to the lack of childcare support, leading to a drop in family income and increased economic vulnerability, as noted by (Nina, 2022; Hinojosa, 2018).

The research problem focuses on determining the extent to which the Cuna Más Childcare Service (SCD) influences the employability, income, type of

employment, and job retention of female beneficiaries in the province of Cusco during the period 2019-2022. The hypothesis posits that participation in the program significantly improves employability by facilitating full-time employment, increasing income, and promoting retention in the labor insertion.

The study is justified by the need to provide empirical evidence on the link between childcare policies and gender equity in employment in contexts of high informality. Previous research in Peru and Latin America highlights the positive relationship between access to childcare services and female employability (Canencia Yanacallo et al., 2017; Musante, 2017; Acosta et al., 2007).

Theoretically, the analysis is based on the theory of labor supply and demand (Marshall, 1890), Becker's (1981) contributions on the economics of time and the division of domestic labor, and Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, which highlights the importance of social policies in expanding people's real freedoms.

The contribution of this study lies in offering localized evidence on how a social program impacts the labor market of women in vulnerable situations, complementing existing literature and strengthening the discussion on work-life balance policies. Among the main limitations are the use of a non-experimental design, the reliance on secondary data, and the focus on a single province, which restricts the generalizability of the results at the national level.

In summary, the research allows us to understand how a childcare service like Cuna Más contributes to the labor insertion integration of female beneficiaries in Cusco, and its results offer valuable inputs for the design of public policies that promote the formalization of female employment, the reduction of gender gaps and inclusive social development (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019).

Materials and Methods

This applied research employed a quantitative approach and a non-experimental, descriptive-correlational design. The population consisted of 845 women beneficiaries of the Cuna Más National Program from the districts of Cusco, Santiago, San Sebastián, Poroy, and Saylla in Peru. The sample comprised 206 women, selected using probabilistic sampling. The primary data collection technique was a survey, administered via questionnaire, supplemented by secondary data analysis from the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS). The data were processed using descriptive and

inferential statistics, with hypothesis testing to examine the relationships between variables. Data collection took place during 2024, as part of a study on the relationship between childcare policies and gender equity in employment. The instrument used was a structured questionnaire, developed based on the variables of the proposed theoretical model. This included closed-ended and multiple-choice questions, organized into sections addressing sociodemographic aspects, access to childcare services, and working conditions. The questionnaire was validated through expert review and administered both in person and online to a representative sample of women of working age. The instrument's reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, ensuring the internal consistency of the scales used.

Results

The results obtained, validated using the Chi-square hypothesis test, show a significant impact of the Cuna Más National Program on women's labor insertion integration in the province of Cusco, Peru.

Regarding employability, a significant relationship was confirmed between participation in the program and the reduction in unemployment ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the unemployment rate of beneficiaries decreased from 21% in 2019 to 12% in 2022, even during a period marked by the effects of the pandemic.

With respect to income, the hypothesis tests revealed significant differences in salary distribution ($p < 0.05$). By 2022, 35% of women reported earning between 1,501 and 2,000 soles per month, compared to 18% in 2019. However, their ability to save remains limited: only 26% reported being able to save regularly, due to the high cost of basic necessities.

Regarding job stability, an increase in full-time employment was observed, rising from 61% in 2019 to 85% in 2022. However, 80% of these jobs remain short-term, reflecting persistent job insecurity.

Finally, the chi-square test applied to labor availability yielded highly significant results ($p < 0.01$). Before accessing the daily care service, 93% of the beneficiaries were unable to enter the labor insertion; subsequently, 79% were able to find employment.

Overall, the values obtained in the Pearson chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 103.513$; $p = 0.000$) and in Fisher's exact test ($p = 0.000$) allowed us to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This confirms the general hypothesis: the Cuna Más National Program has a significant impact on the labor insertion integration of beneficiary women in the province of Cusco in Peru, validating the positive effect observed in employability, income, permanence and labor availability.

Table 1
Chi-square tests

	Value	Df	Asymptotic significance (two-tailed)	Exact significance (two-tailed)	Exact significance (one-tailed)
Pearson's chi-squared test	103,513 ^a	1	,000		
Continuity correction	99,068	1	,000		
Likelihood ratio	88,952	1	,000		
Fisher's exact test				,000	,000
Linear-by-linear association	103,015	1	,000		
Number of valid cases	208				

Note: Values are presented as calculated by the statistical software.

a. 0 cells (0.0%) had an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.96.

b. Calculated only for a 2x2 table.

Significance level < 0.05

Discussion

The results obtained in the province of Cusco, Peru, confirm that access to childcare services, such as those offered by the Cuna Más Program, has a significant effect on women's labor insertion participation. The evidence shows that, after joining the program, most women obtained full-time, salaried jobs and experienced increases in their income. These findings are consistent with the general hypothesis, which states that the program has a positive impact on female employability during the period 2019–2022.

When compared with the literature, the results are consistent with previous studies in Peru and Latin America that highlight the relationship between childcare and female labor force participation (Acosta, Perticara, & Ramos Ziscke, 2007). Based on the household economics theory proposed by Becker (1981), the availability of childcare services reduces the time spent on domestic work and allows for a more efficient reallocation of time toward paid employment. In addition, from the capabilities approach of (Sen, 1999) programs such as Cuna Más expand the real freedoms of women, by offering them greater opportunities for choice and economic autonomy.

International evidence reinforces these findings. Perticará & Martínez (2017) found that the provision of childcare services in Chile increased female labor insertion participation by 7% and formal employment by 5%, confirming that the availability of reliable care is a crucial determinant of access to stable employment. Similarly, Attanasio et al. (2022), based on an experiment in Brazil, found that access to public daycare centers for children aged 0–3 years generated a significant increase in family income during the first year of attendance, with persistent effects over time, demonstrating the transformative potential of care policies in vulnerable contexts. Similarly, a study published in *Review of Economics of the Household* (Berthelon, Kruger, & Oyarzún, 2022) on the extension of school hours in Chile showed that extending the full school day increased the hours worked and the stability of maternal employment, a finding that aligns with the results obtained in Cusco regarding the improvement in the job continuity of the beneficiaries of Cuna Más.

However, structural limitations persist, consistent with warnings in the literature. Although beneficiaries' incomes increased, a large portion of it is spent on basic necessities, restricting their savings capacity and hindering the consolidation of sustainable financial stability. This is linked to the persistence of informality and precarious employment for women, as noted by the

Ministry of Labor and Employment Promotion (2022), which identifies Cusco as one of the regions with the largest formalization gaps. Similarly, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2019) emphasizes that gender inequalities in the labor insertion are not resolved solely through job placement, but also through improvements in the quality and sustainability of employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these inequalities. According to the Central Reserve Bank of Peru (2021), the disruption of care services disproportionately affected women, especially those who relied on institutional support to balance their work and family lives. In Cusco, the temporary suspension of the Cuna Más program forced many beneficiaries to leave their jobs, confirming Nina's (2022) observations regarding the vulnerability of households dependent on these programs. This situation demonstrated that care services not only facilitate labor insertion integration but also act as a social safety net during times of crisis.

In broader terms, the study's results reaffirm that childcare programs like Cuna Más have a dual effect: they promote early childhood development and strengthen mothers' economic autonomy. However, to maximize their impact, these policies must be accompanied by strategies for formalizing employment, accessing training, and improving the quality of women's jobs. In line with Sen (1999), strengthening women's economic and social freedom requires comprehensive public policies that expand not only access to work but also their actual capabilities to choose, develop, and sustain decent livelihoods.

In summary, the empirical results not only support the initial hypothesis but also contribute to the regional debate on the effectiveness of care policies as tools for economic inclusion. Thus, Cuna Más is consolidated as a strategic public policy that, by alleviating the domestic burden and strengthening women's labor force participation, contributes to equal opportunities and sustainable development in the Peruvian context.

Conclusions

The results of the study allow us to conclude that the Cuna Más Program had a positive impact on the labor insertion integration of female beneficiaries in the province of Cusco, Peru, during the period 2019–2022, thus fulfilling the overall objective.

Regarding the specific objectives, it is evident that the program contributed to a reduction in unemployment and greater access to full-time, salaried employment,

demonstrating its favorable effect on the type of employment available to the beneficiaries. Furthermore, an increase in monetary income was observed, reflecting an improvement in their economic capacity; however, the high cost of the basic food basket still limits savings and the full financial stability of households.

Regarding job retention, a positive trend was identified, as more women managed to maintain formal and more continuous employment. However, challenges associated with temporary and informal employment persist, hindering the consolidation of progress made in women's employment.

Overall, the findings confirm that Cuna Más is an effective public policy for promoting women's economic autonomy, although complementary strategies are needed to strengthen job quality, reduce informality gaps, and improve the sustainability of family income.

Finally, the study acknowledges limitations such as the availability of secondary data and the limited timeframe of the analysis, restricted to the period 2019–2022. Therefore, it is recommended that future research broaden the time frame, incorporate longitudinal methodologies, and consider comparisons with other regions of the country to deepen the understanding of the program's impact on gender equality and local economic development.

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