

A NEW SOCIAL ECONOMY

Strengths and Precarities of Informality

PROJECT INFORMALITY IN TIMES OF COVID 19

Report 2



RUPTURES21
TOWARDS NEW ECONOMIES
SOCIETIES AND LEGALITIES
THE IEL COLLECTIVE





INFORMALITY IN TIMES OF COVID-19 is a project of RUPTURES21: TOWARDS NEW ECONOMIES, SOCIETIES AND LEGALITIES of THE IEL COLLECTIVE. The project explores challenges posed by the pandemic to informal workers, their families, and public policies in general. By highlighting the contributions made by the informal economy to the general economy and wellbeing, and using Colombia as a case study, the project calls for attention to be paid to the precarities that accompany informal work and how these turn into ultra-precarities in moments of public health crisis such as COVID-19.

This second report recommends the creation of a new social economy model based as much on the close relation between the formal and informal economy, as on the informal economy's dynamism. Taking into account these realities and the precarities that accompany the informal economy, the aim is to support localised economic processes which recognise the generation of value throughout society.

The figures in this report are from the database on the informal economy in Colombia produced by the RUPTURES21 team. Sources of information include the Large Integrated Household Survey (Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares - GEIH), including information from the regions of Amazonía and Orinoquía and additional modules related to migration and ethnic population, the Special Register of Health Service Providers (Registro Especial de Prestadores de Servicios de Salud – REPS), information from the National Institute of Health (Instituto Nacional Salud (INS)), the Integrated Social Protection Information System (Sistema Integrado de Información de la Protección Social (SISPRO)), the Single National Registry of Human Talent in Health (Registro Único Nacional del Talento Humano en Salud (ReTHUS)) and the Unique Affiliates Database (Base de

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Summary

Even though many disciplines (including economics, law, political science, and social sciences) still consider informality to be an isolated component of economic and social reality, this report analyses how informality is a fundamental part of national production structures.

Far from common conceptions of the term, informality is not uniform. Different commercial, social, political, and territorial relationships are consolidated within informality.

Moreover, informality is not expressed in the margins of the formal economy, nor is it of residual character. Contrary to traditional assumptions, the interrelation, co-dependence, and co-constitution between formality and informality is becoming increasingly clear.

Nevertheless, the formal and informal economies differ in their structure, their functioning, the size of their production units, and in their occurrence and recognition in the different economic sectors.

In particular, informality is characterised by its easy access, due to the fact that it is predominated by activities and procedures which usually

require little capital, low technological levels, and non-specialised labour (Tokman, 2001).

In addition to the contribution made by informality to the formal economy, the great strengths of informality lie in its capacity to offer employment and facilitate diverse and versatile economic processes. This is especially true in Colombia where there are high levels of unemployment, low support for specialised training, and de-industrialisation processes which have been prevalent since the 90s.

Nevertheless, the strengths of informality are in many cases sustained by precarities which must be resolved in order to generate a new social economy.

A new social economy would support the localised economic processes which recognize value generation through non-formal economies as well as through social reproduction and care processes.¹ This would contribute to strengthening the national economy and general wellbeing.

¹ By "social reproduction" we understand "a multi-dimensional character [which] contemplates the phenomena tied to daily work within and outside of the home, and events related to demographic reproduction (...) this includes three dimensions: biological (how life is reproduced); material (how resources necessary for the upkeep and feeding of the household members are procured); and social (which are the social relationships, the values, the norms and cultural rules which guide and give meaning to daily life in the home)" (Eguía & Ortale, 2004).



New economic policies to consider

- A new economic policy should start from recognising the contribution made by informality to the national economy and to sustaining livelihoods in general.
- When considering economic reactivation measures, in addition to the social policy recommendations from Report 1, the recognition of these informal sector contributions should mean that informal workers are included in state support packages for the lower income population and those most affected by the pandemic containment measures, as much at the national level (such as Más Familias en Acción, Ingreso Solidario and Devolución del IVA), as at the local level (Bogotá Solidaria, Soacha Ayuda, etc.).
- It is important to note that these support programmes which were set up during the pandemic were based on targeting schemes (particularly on the Sisbén score). This ends up excluding vast sectors of low-income informal workers, because they have never been classified by the targeting systems or because their incomes are slightly higher than the baselines used by the beneficiary selection processes.²

- Additionally, the state support packages should be linked to social and solidarity economy initiatives and promote local economies. They should support already existing organisational procedures and promote schemes which enable informal rural workers to distribute their products, establish networks of solidarity exchange, and create their own market. It is equally crucial to establish mechanisms of financing and financial advising so that local economy associations can expand their market and improve their competitiveness (Murillo & Lacroix, 2014; Álvarez Rodríguez, 2017).
- More information on the connection between formality and informality in value chains is needed. The ways in which global production networks are designed mean that certain groups of persons are necessarily integrated into the economy through informality (Phillips, 2017). In this way, formal production networks establish conditions which lead workers to informality. The current data systems do not recognise these connections between formality and informality, nor do they quantify the contribution of informal workers to value generation at the national or global level (Portes et. al., 1989).

² Targeting is a mechanism for assigning goods and services on behalf of the state, based on classifying potential beneficiaries according to their level of poverty. The aim is to target state assistance for persons in situations of highest socio-economic vulnerability. This mechanism requires potential beneficiaries to fulfil certain State procedures – a bureaucratization – (Jaramillo Salazar, 2019), which sometimes imposes access barriers to the social programmes operating under this scheme. In Colombia, the most widespread targeting mechanism is the System for the Identification of Potential Social Programme Beneficiaries (Sistema de Identificación de Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales (Sisbén)).

- Given the informal workers' low savings capacity, it is imperative to protect their income, whether this be through unemployment benefits, extending paid sick leave, or through direct transfers.

- A public and equitable system of care should be created which allows workers to reconcile their productive and reproductive work and participate in the labour market in an equitable manner. Other important measures are the modification of maternity and paternity leave to make them universal and more equitable, and to qualify care workers.³

- Credit programmes for informal workers are needed. Because of the precarious working conditions in the informal sector, informal workers struggle to access the financial system (for example, lack of products designed for the specificities of their labour activity, and difficulty in providing payment guarantees), leaving them at the mercy of informal credit schemes with high interest rates and high risk levels (Hernández & Oviedo, 2016).

- Suggestions such as the public-popular agreements (Grupo de Socioeconomía Instituciones y Desarrollo, 2020), that promote the State's association with community-based organisations for the provision of goods and services, are another way of promoting reacti-

vation from a bottom-up approach. These agreements would help to mobilise resources towards popular economy organisations and would also respond to social needs in an effective and dynamic way, thanks to the knowledge which these organisations have of local circumstances. This approach helps to overcome the limited perception of informality and places the contribution of popular economies to general society at the centre of the discussion (Grupo de Socioeconomía Instituciones y Desarrollo, 2020).

³ In Uruguay, similar measures have contributed to an increase in the labour insertion rates of women (Filgueira & Martínez-Franzoni, 2019). In Colombia, the recognition of care work has until now only been symbolic and has not generated any distribution, nor have the costs ceased being externalised (Buchely, 2012).

1. The interdependence of formality and informality in the labour market

In conditions of high unemployment and underemployment, as is the case in Colombia, the informal economy enables a large part of the population to participate in the labour market (Portes et. al., 1989). As indicated in **Report 1**, 61.2% of workers in Colombia are informal.

Additionally, in a context such as Colombia where formal employment does not necessarily bring about adequate income, contractual stability, or levels of qualification, formal workers often share the same precarious conditions faced by most informal workers. For this reason, many formal workers turn to informality as a strategy to complement their income. Furthermore, given the instability of formal labour relationships, an important proportion of workers constantly move between formality and informality.

Graph 1 – which we began to analyse in **Report 1** – schematizes the different relationships between the formal and informal economy from the labour market perspective, using stability in employment and income as variables.

In **Graph 1** we see how there is a percentage of formal and informal workers within each of the quadrants which we have catalogued as 1) precarious employment, 2) low income stable employment, 3) short-term qualified employment, and 4) stable qualified employment. Nevertheless, the proportion of formal and informal workers in each of these quadrants varies according to the level of income, level of qualification, education, and type of contract. As was explained in **Report 1**, informality understood as the non-contribution to the health and pension systems is prevalent for example amongst low-income stable employment, short-term qualified employment, and even qualified and stable employment, when employers do not fulfil their respective contribution obligations to the social security system.

The first quadrant shows precarious employment, characterised by unstable, low income, and low qualification work, and includes 36.8% of the national active population. 93.5% of these workers are informal (7,762,262) and 6.5% are formal (535,766).

The second quadrant shows all workers with low-income stable employment, characterised by an income lower than two minimum wages, having a fixed-term or permanent contract, having low levels of qualification, and occupations with skills associated to routine or manual tasks. The proportion of workers in this category is 44.3% (9,981,376), of which 44% are informal (4,388,107) and 56% are formal (5,593,269).

The third quadrant denotes workers in short-term qualified employment with high income. They are characterised by an income higher than two minimum wages, high levels of qualification and education, occupations related to cognitive skills, and fixed-term contracts. Generally, these workers are employed by the government or private companies, or are self-employed workers, managers, or employers. The proportion of workers in this category is of 8.8% (1,995,692), of which 64.7% are informal (1,291,757) and 35.3% are formal (703,935).

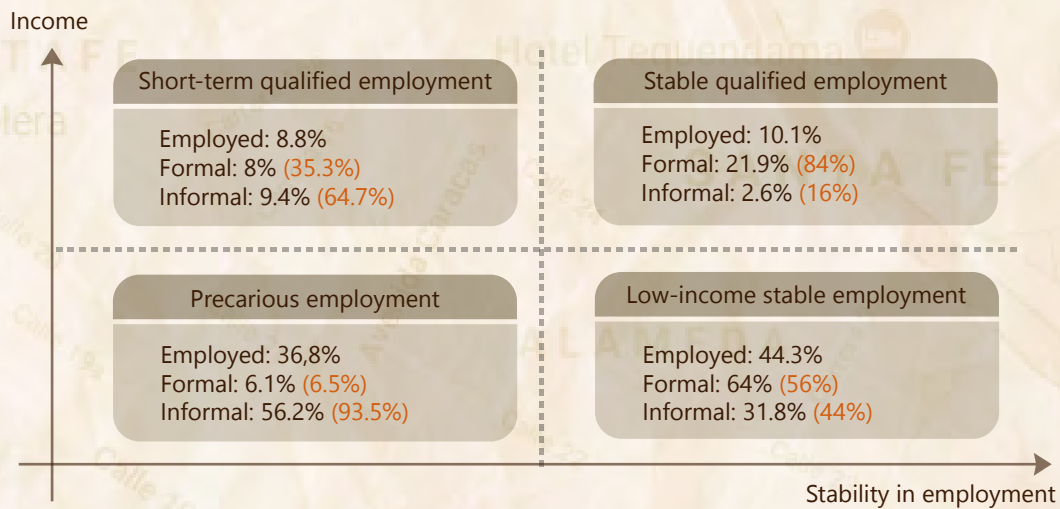
In the fourth quadrant are workers with stable qualified employment, who are characterised by an income higher than two monthly minimum wages, high levels of qualification and education, occupations related to cognitive skills, and permanent contracts. The proportion of workers in this category is 10.1% (2,273,801), of which 16% are informal (363,470) and 84% are formal (1,910,331).

of workers in this category is 10.1% (2,273,801), of which 16% are informal (363,470) and 84% are formal (1,910,331).

Graph 1 illustrates the existence of a very significant population group of formal and informal workers in precarious conditions, a precarity which extends further than to those who would traditionally be identified as precarious, and which is manifested even in legally formalised work spaces.⁴ These figures speak thus of the phenomenon of “workers in poverty”, namely, formal workers whose income is not sufficient to secure their and their household’s minimum living conditions. This phenomenon is in turn related to previous observations about how workers often combine formal and informal work as a survival strategy.

⁴ “Precarity” is a disputed concept. Some authors use it only within the context of labour relations. Others, including Ruptures21, consider that it is a broader concept, which can relate to labour relations (particularly the lack of social protection), but which speaks more generally to inequalities and systemic vulnerabilities and their mechanisms of reproduction. Nevertheless, it is impossible to think of labour precarity without analysing what is understood by employment or work (Vejar, 2016). Of course, “employment” is also an open category. By “employment”, some understand only bilateral relations considered as such by labour law, which in Colombia (unlike in other countries, particularly in the global north) is not representative. Others, including Ruptures21, consider that “employment” is a broader concept, which includes all persons that use their labour to generate resources necessary to live, even when they are self-employed (Porras, 2018).

Graph 1. Labour market and blurred boundaries between formality and informality



Source: own production

2. Formality and informality in the economic sectors

Formality and informality constantly interact in the value chains. The value chains created by the formal market frequently integrate informal workers. Nevertheless, these informal workers are often not adequately paid, and are not recognised as an element which contributes to production processes or wealth generation. This means that informal work ends up subsidising production through the means of low compensation (Portes y Schauffler, 1989, 1993; Mezzadri, 2019).

These links between formal and informal work become evident when one studies the sectoral structure. The productive activity of industries

requires, for example, intensive use of primary goods produced by the agricultural sector. This sector is characterised by the generation of highly seasonal and informal employment, conditions which reduce the cost of the workforce.

Similar situations are found all along the supply chain, demonstrating the interrelation between formality and informality not only in terms of labour, but also within other economic relations such as through transactions or supplier payments (Kedir et. al., 2018).

In recent years, the relationship between

formality and informality has become increasingly evident through digital platforms in the tourism services (for example AirBnB), and through the discussion around the legality of transport service mediation platforms (for example Uber). In this context, the co-existence of formality and informality is explained, amongst other factors, by the distinctive characteristics of different economic sectors, the challenges posed by new technologies to the labour protection systems, and the decrease in income in formal activities which creates incentives to seek complementary income through informal work (Malin & Chandler, 2017; Del Bono, 2019; Suess et. al., 2020).

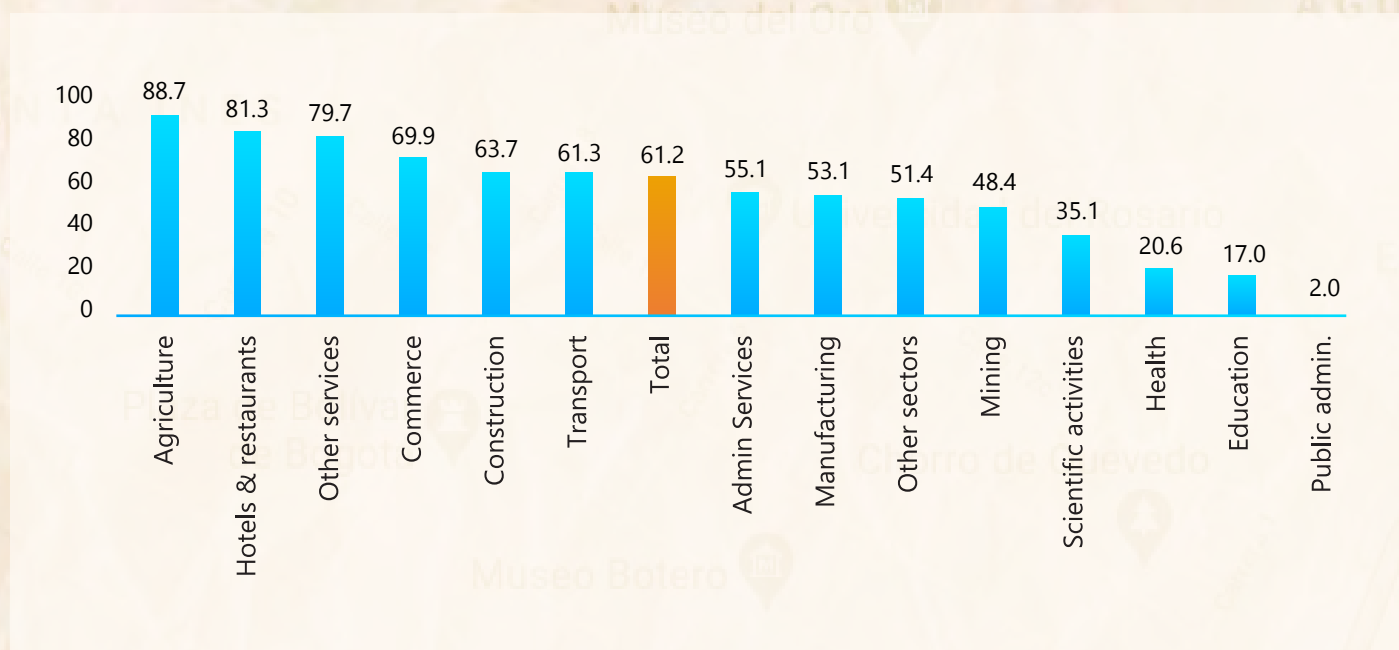
The commerce, transport, and construction sectors systematically present the highest rates of informality in Colombia's main metropolitan areas (LaboUR, 2018). In the case of the commerce sector, the rates of informality in 2017

were higher than 60%, and reached levels of 85% in cities such as Cúcuta. Meanwhile, sectors such as financial intermediation and manufacturing present relatively low rates of informality (see **Graph 2**).

The agricultural sector has the highest level of informality, followed by the hotel and restaurant sector, services sector, and construction sector. All these are sectors with low fixed costs and require low investment in capital goods for their configuration.

The public administration sector (2%), education sector (17%), and health sector (21%) are those which have the lowest percentage of informal workers. This can be explained by the very nature of these sectors, which require qualified personnel and in some cases investment in technology, thus increasing the entry costs.

Graph 2. Participation of the informal sector in employment and National GDP



Source: GEIH, 2019

3. Achilles heel: savings, vulnerability, age, education, gender, and economic sectors

Of the total workers in Colombia in 2019, 61.2% worked in the informal economy. This population is characterized by having limited protection of their rights to health and pension social security, and cannot substitute their income if they stop working, which makes them especially vulnerable to economic shocks (OIT, 2020).

Furthermore, a large proportion of informal workers do not have effective savings. They usually live from daily work and activities which mostly require manual skills. If they cannot work for prolonged periods of time, their family's income is at risk. It is almost impossible for them to generate savings.

Because they do not contribute to the health and pension systems, informal workers often turn to low quality private health services (if they are not enrolled in the subsidiary health regime). For their pensions, they frequently rely on tacit community agreements to protect themselves in a collective manner when confronted with contingencies such as serious health issues or death (Sierra, 2017).

Furthermore, a trend towards informality can be observed for people over 50 years of age (27% in contrast to 19% in the formal sector).

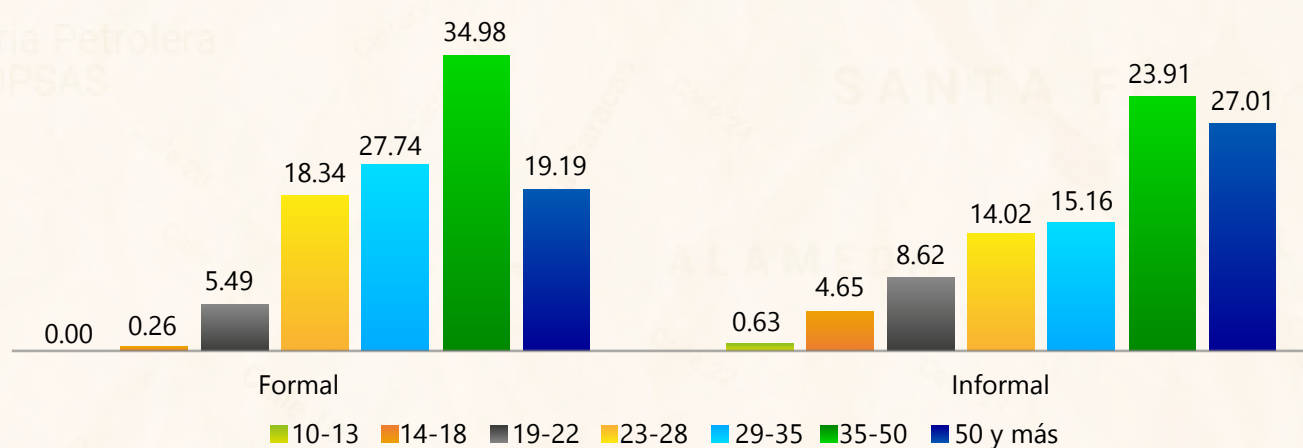
This group is more vulnerable to adverse shocks such as climate change, vector-borne diseases or epidemics, and other health contingencies.

High levels of informality can also be observed in young people between the ages of 14 and 18 (5% in contrast to 0.3% in the formal sector), and young people between the ages of 19 and 22 (9% in contrast to 5% in the formal sector). This shows the lack of opportunities for young people in the formal economy and the limitations of existing public policies for this population (Ariza & Cedano, 2017; Serna Gómez et al., 2018) (see **Graph 3**).

Informal workers have much lower levels of education than formal workers; on average 8.5 years of education versus 12.8 years of education for formal workers (see **Graph 4**).

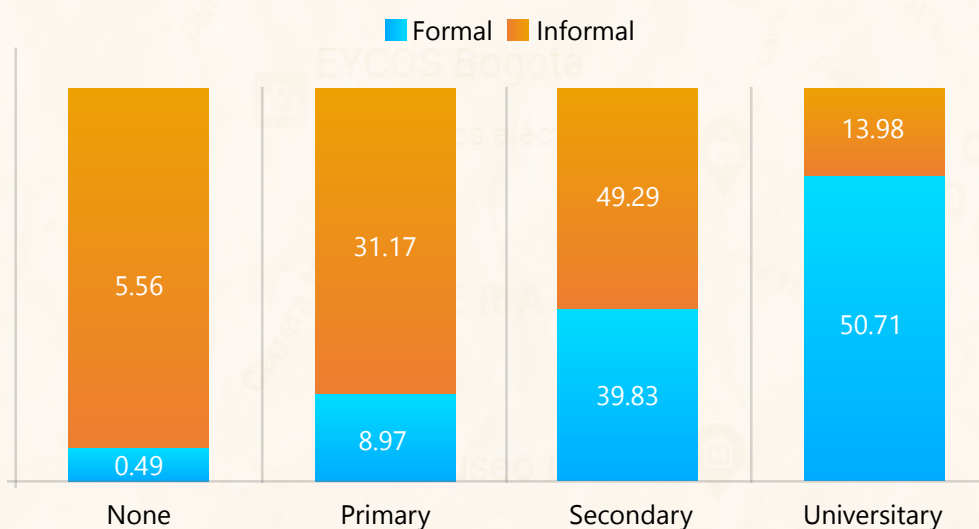
In terms of secondary education, of the total of informal workers, 86% have low levels of qualification, whereas this percentage amongst formal workers is less than 50%.

Graph 3. Age distribution for formal and informal workers



Source: GEIH, 2019

Graph 4. Education level distribution for formal and informal workers



Source: GEIH, 2019

Within the informal economy almost 6% of workers report not having any level of schooling; this rate is reduced to 1% in the case of formal works. In a similar way, it is shown that 50% of formal workers report having higher education, whereas this proportion is only 14% amongst informal workers.

Graph 5 documents the patterns associated to the level of training and skills by economic sector, divided according to the formal or informal economy.

In general terms, all sectors tend to formalise labour relations with their qualified workers and, if **Graph 2** is taken into account, it can be

observed that the higher level of qualification required, the less levels of informality are present in the sectors.

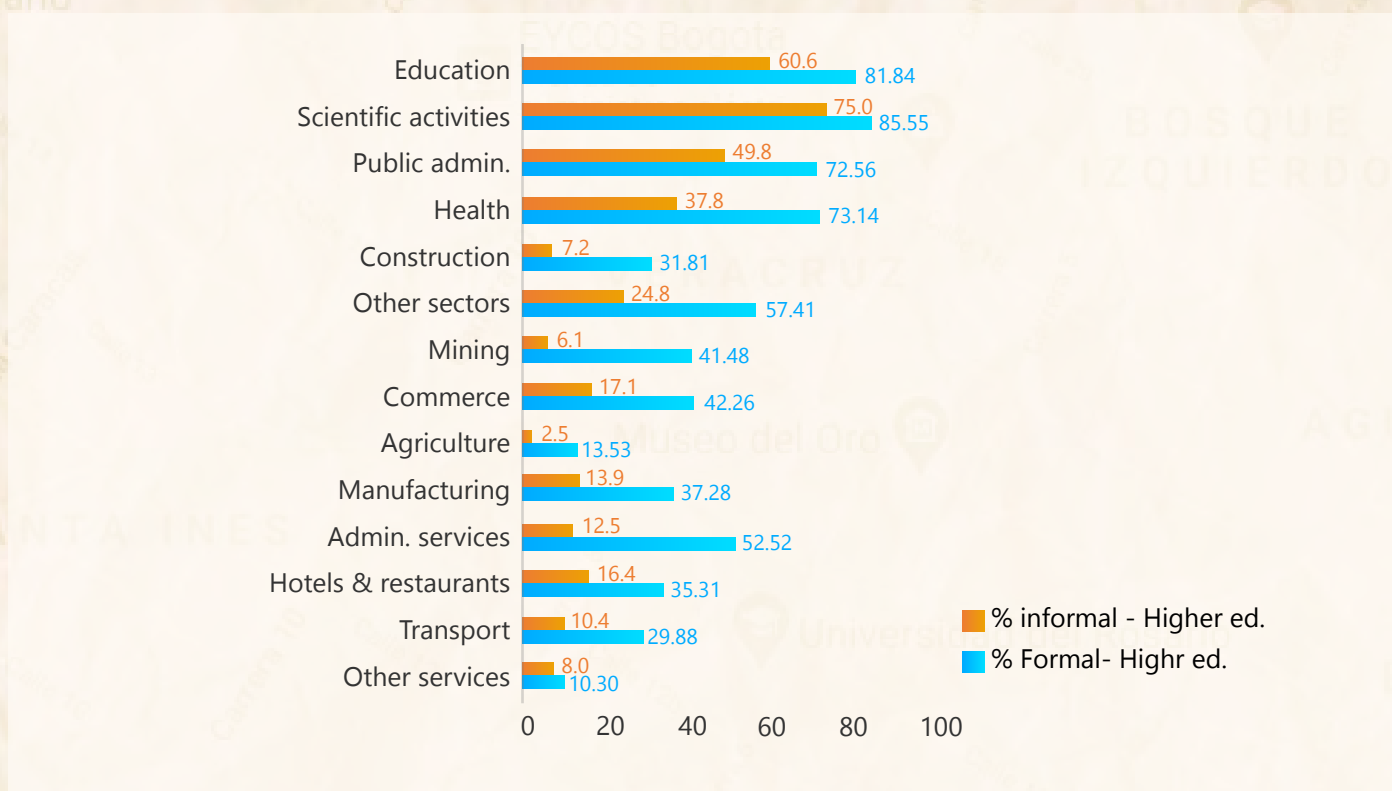
At the sectoral level, for example in the commerce sector, 2.4 formal qualified workers can be found for every qualified informal worker. For sectors with a significant level of employment such as mining, agriculture, and construction, this level reaches 6.8, 5.5, and 4.4, respectively.

Sectors such as agriculture, hotels and restau-

rants, and commerce employ less than 16% of qualified workers, and present rates of informality higher than 80% (see **Graph 2**).

The education, scientific activities, administration, and health sectors have some of the largest proportion of formal qualified workers. Moreover, these sectors employ informal workers the majority of whom are qualified (except in the health sector). In the scientific activities sector, for example, 75% of informal workers have higher levels of education.

Graph 5. Percentage of qualified workers per sector ⁵



Source: GEIH, 2019

The evidence suggests that informality aggravates the existing gender divide in the labour market. Even though a higher proportion of

men work in both the informal (58.65% vs. 41.35%) and formal sector (58.37% vs. 41.63%) (see Table 1 – **Report 1**), women are concentrated in lower income sectors and the jobs and

⁵ Qualified workers are defined as those who have levels of higher education.

tasks which they carry out have less stability and require lower levels of education (Valenzuela, 2005; Perazzi & Merli, 2017) (see **Graph 8**).

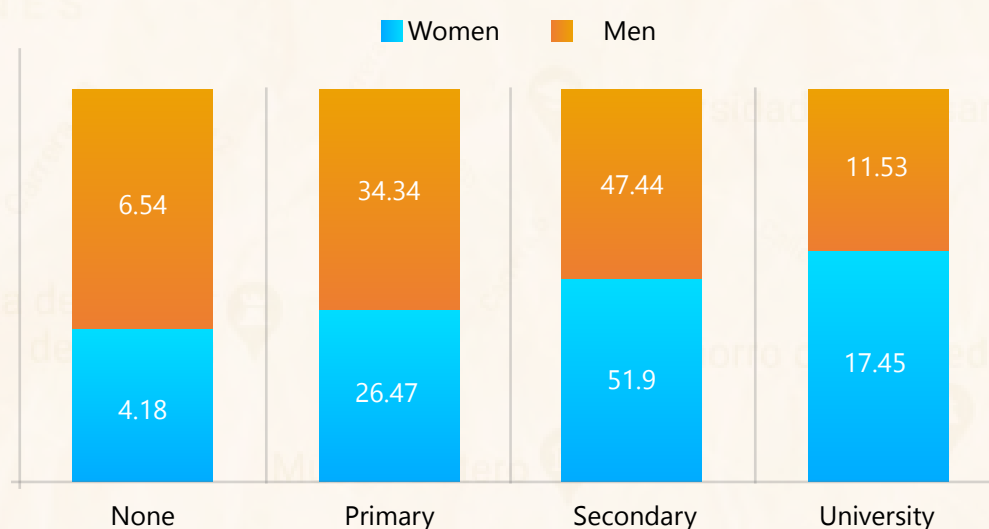
The proportion of women in the informal economy is due to the gender divide in terms of access to the formal labour market, the caring responsibilities which continue to be principally the responsibility of women (Arango & Posada, 2007; Olarte & Peña, 2010; Tribín Uribe et. al. 2019; Porras-Santanilla & Rodríguez-Morales, 2019), and the lack of recognition of their qualifications and skills (which continue largely to be associated to social reproduction labours and therefore often devalued in the economy) (Mezzadri, 2019). In addition, some studies show that the gender pay gap is also present in informal work (Tomal & Johnson, 2008; Pineda Duque, 2008).

Analysing the education levels of the informal

population disaggregated by gender, it can be observed that there are more men than women without any type of education (6.54% vs. 4.18%), and with only primary education (34.48% vs 26.47%). Women, on the other hand, report higher rates of secondary education (51.9% vs 47.44%) and higher rates of university education (17.45% vs 11.53%) (see **Graph 6** and **Table 1**). This means that many better qualified women end up working in the informal sector.

Furthermore, the formal sector provides a higher proportion of men with no levels of education or only primary and secondary education. This tendency is only reversed in the case of university education, where women with this level of education exceed men (62.04% vs. 42.63%). This means that formality is more open to women with higher levels of qualification than those with lower levels (see **Graph 7** and **Table 2**).

Graph 6. Informality, gender, and levels of education



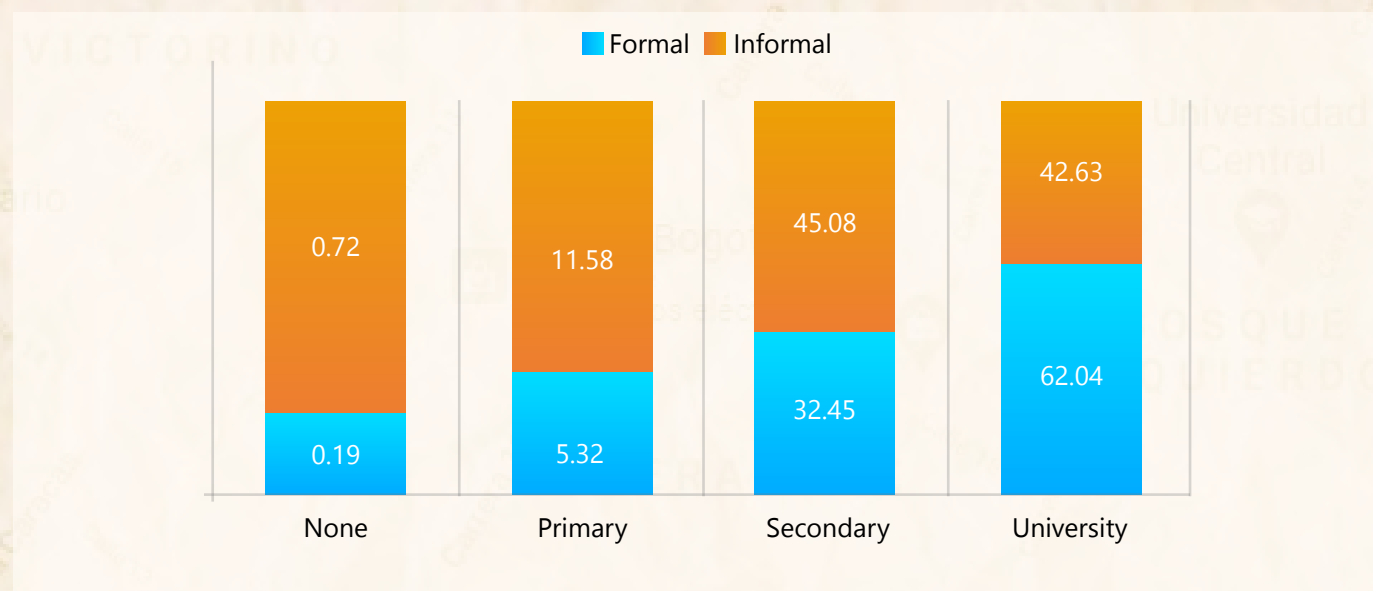
Source: GEIH, 2019

Table 1. Informality, gender, and levels of education

Sex	None	Primary	Secondary	University	Total
Women	238,488 4.18%	1,511,100 26.47%	2,963,038 51.9%	996,150 17.45%	5,708,777 100%
Men	530,128 6.54%	2,791,665 34.48%	3,841,507 47.44%	933,521 11.53%	8,096,820 100%
Total	768,616 5.57%	4,320,765 31.17%	6,804,545 49.29%	1,929,671 13.98%	13,805,597 100%

Source: GEIH, 2019

Graph 7. Formality, gender, and levels of education



Source: GEIH, 2019

Table 2. Formality, gender, and levels of education

Sex	None	Primary	Secondary	University	Total
Women	6,974 0.19%	193,473 5.32%	1,181,108 32.45%	2,257,948 62.04%	3,639,503 100%
Men	36,392 0.72%	590,896 11.58%	2,300,992 45.08%	2,175,519 42.63%	5,103,799 100%
Total	43,367 0.49%	784,368,77 8.97%	3,482,100 39.83%	4,433,466 50.71%	8,743,302 100%

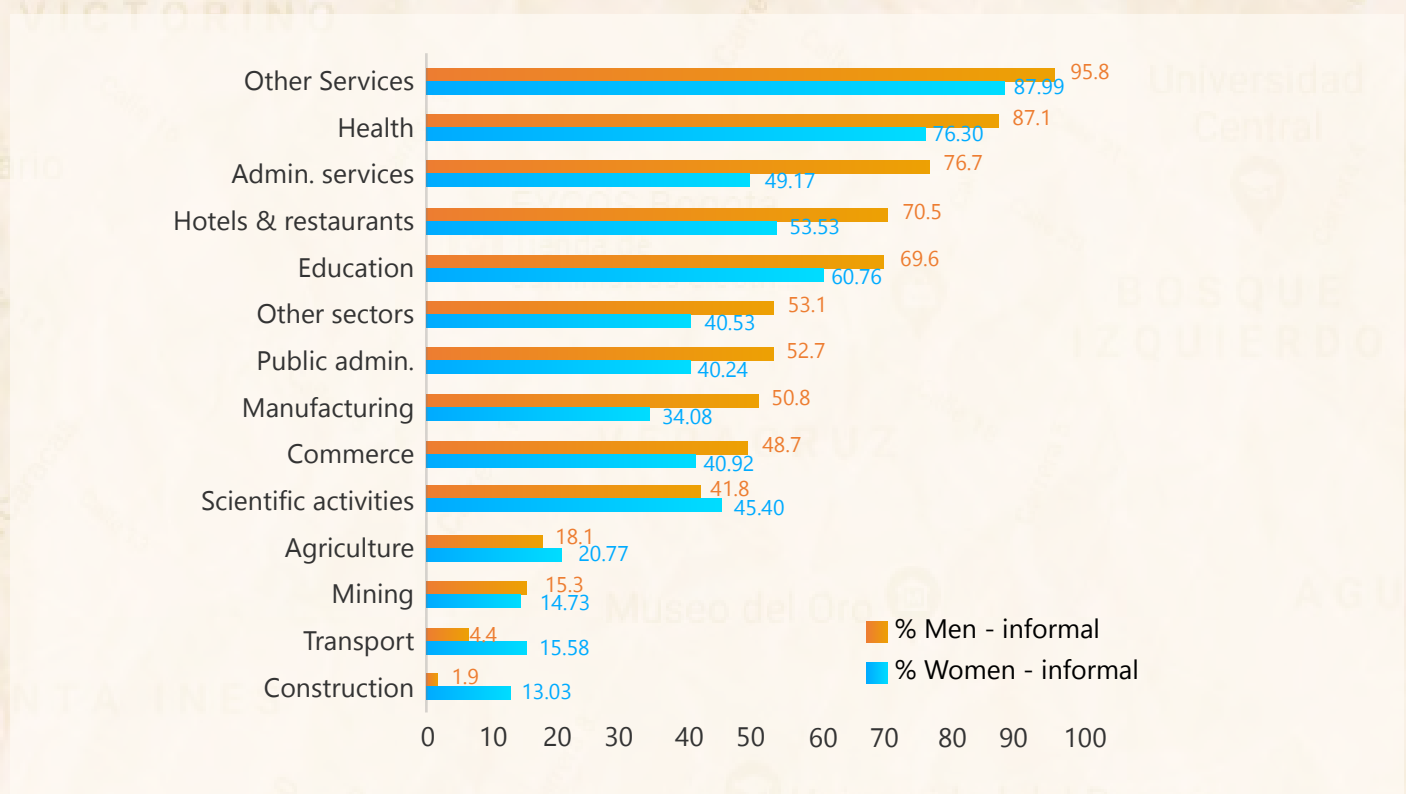
Source: GEIH, 2019

In Colombia it can be further observed that in most sectors the participation of women in the informal sector is higher than in the formal sector. Important differences in this sense are evident in the administrative services (77% informal and 49% formal), hotels and restaurants (70% informal and 54% formal) and manufacturing (51% informal and 34% formal). In these sectors, the occupations with the highest levels of women in informality are:

cooks; shop demonstrators; street vendors; office, hotel and other establishment cleaners; tailors; and food manufacturers.

On the other hand, there are sectors in which the workforce is mainly male such as construction and transport. For these sectors, despite the rate of informality being very high, the percentage of women in the formal sector is higher than in the informal sector (see **Graph 8**).

Graph 8. Percentage of women in formal and informal work per sector



Source: GEIH, 2019

The aggregated statistics show that 60.4% of informal workers are self-employed, which implies that their activities are carried out in small scale production units. On the other hand, 40% of formal workers work in micro and small businesses, whereas for informal workers

this percentage is 97%. Staying on the topic of economic activity, 72.5% of formal workers carry out their activities in fixed places or premises, whereas the level is only 26.52% for informal workers. In general, informal workers work in a wider spectrum of spaces, such as the

home or the street, and present higher levels of mobility (see **Table 3**).

Graph 9 presents formal and informal production units from a productivity perspective based on the size of the firm, percentage of

workers in fixed work, income generation capacity, and level of qualification within the different sectors. The scale is organised in a decreasing manner, so that all the dimensions enable a measurement of the different components of precarity in employment.

Table 3. Formal vs informal places of work

Place of work	% Formal	% Informal
In own home	3.12	15.72
In other homes	2.94	13.47
At a kiosk - stand	0.07	0.39
In a vehicle	6.46	6.06
Door to door	4.26	4.81
Open site in the street (mobile and stationary)	1.98	7.36
Fixed premise, office, factory, etc.	72.54	26.52
In fields or rural area, sea, or river	4.34	22.86
On a construction site	3.60	2.56
In a mine or quarry	0.58	0.19
Other location	0.10	0.06

Source: GEIH, 2019

Analysing the sectors with high levels of informality, we can observe a convergence of precarity factors, added to high rates of vulnerability in health and pension. Nevertheless, some divergences can also be observed. For example, the hotel and restaurant sector and commerce sector present high levels of informality yet offer relatively high average incomes. These are therefore sectors with workers in precarious labour relationships, but with average incomes

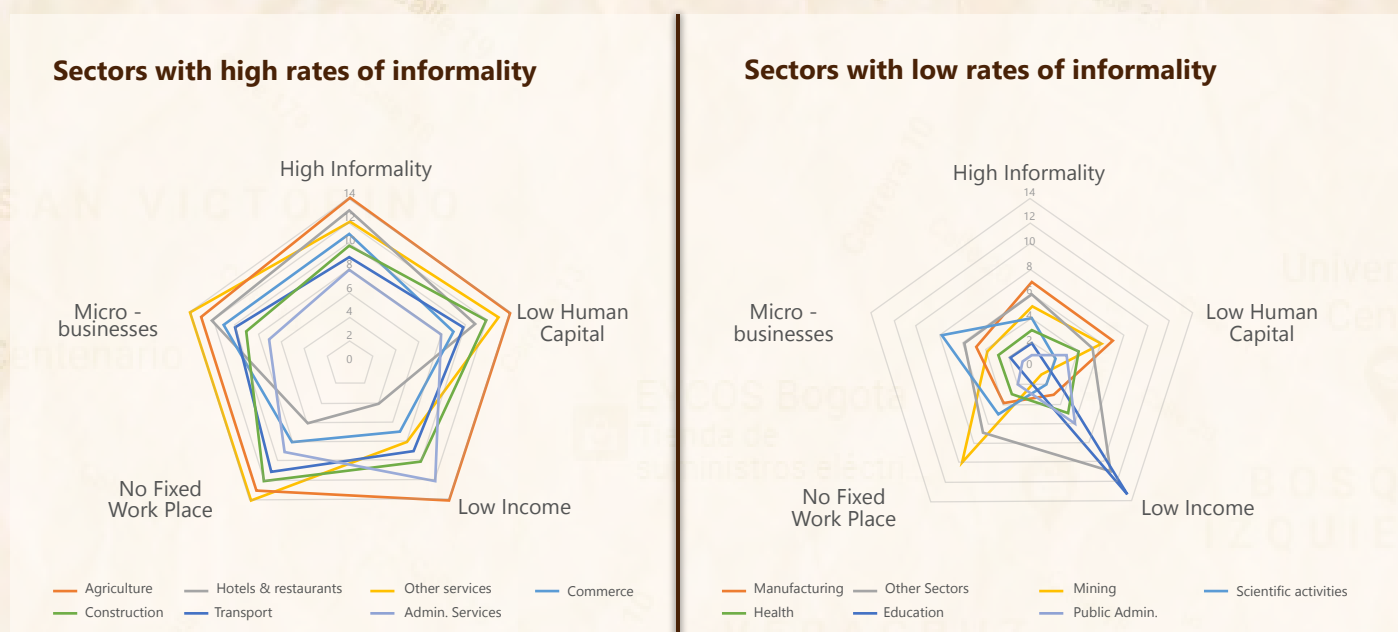
in comparison to other sectors such as agriculture and construction.

Comparing sectors with (relatively) low rates of informality produces the same overlap between factors associated to the productive structure and the rate of informality, showing that these correspond to economic activities with lower levels of vulnerability. The education sector component stands out in this group.

Although it presents relatively favourable values in the dimensions being compared, from an income perspective it shows a high percentage of workers with low income levels, which means that jobs in the education sector can be characterised as being stable (more formal), but of low income.

Graph 9 reveals the heterogeneity of informality and its presence across all sectors of the economy. Additionally, it shows how, given the links between the sectors, there exists a strict relation between formality and informality.

Graph 9. Radar diagrams for different characteristics of the economic sector



Source: GEIH, 2019

Ruptures21: Towards New Economies, Societies and Legalities: Ruptures21 responds to the challenges posed by old and current economic, social, and legal dynamics and their impact on the human and non-human world. Through international interdisciplinary and institutional collaborations, Ruptures21 advances novel ways to understand and address global issues. The ruptures which we see today at the international level require a break from set approaches and new ways of acting and being. Ruptures21 is an initiative of The IEL Collective.

Informality in Times of Covid-19: The Ruptures21 project “Informality in Times of Covid-19” brings together socio-legal academics, labour economists, public health experts, anthropologists, cinematographers, graphic designers, web-designers and public policy makers in order to study the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on informal workers and their economies, using Colombia as its main case study. Mixing different means of communication and blurring the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and between practice and academia, outcomes of this project include multilingual reports, life histories, documentaries, online outreach platforms and interventions, and the first comprehensive aggregated database on informality in Colombia. Highlighting both the large yet often forgotten contribution of informal workers to general national economies, as well as the ultra-precarities they face in moments of public health crises, the outcomes of this project make an urgent call for a new set of new social, economic, and health policies in Colombia and similar countries.

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