

MAKING ENDS MEET ("REBUSQUE") AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

'We are the orchestra family'

PROJECT

INFORMALITY IN TIMES
OF COVID-19

Life History 1

RUPTURES 21
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-precariities in moments of crisis such as COVID-19.

This first life history highlights the co-dependencies and relationships within informal economies, and between formal and informal economies. In times of public health crisis, these co-dependencies and relationships can be affected in such a way that they can put at risk social reproduction and survival mechanisms which are crucial for low-income families. This life history also highlights the mechanisms of “rebusque”, or making ends meet, which informal workers and their families constantly use to ensure their subsistence, even when their precarities have turned into ultra-precariities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Ruptures21 gathered the information for this history through semi-structured interviews (in person and through various means of communication), following the guidelines provided by the Ethics Committee, Universidad del Rosario.

Funding bodies and partnerships:



University of Essex



Universidad del Rosario

ALIANZA EFI

economía formal e inclusiva



OEM

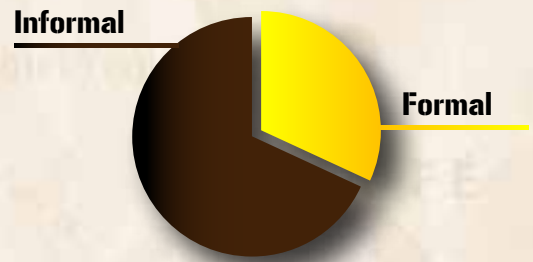
OBSERVATORIO PARA LA EQUIDAD DE LAS MUJERES

LaboUR

Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario

*Translator's note: The term “rebusque” can be compared to the concept of making ends meet. “In Colombian popular jargon, this term refers to a way of life that entails struggling for survival through multiple mechanisms.” Mendoza, P. (2011). “Del arte de “rebuscar” o del nuevo rostro de los trabajadores”, Revista Colombiana de Sociología Vol. 34 No. 2, 121

1. 68.2% of workers in Colombia are informal, with informality understood as the lack of employment stability and/or the lack of minimum wage, and/or the non-contribution to the health system and/or the pension system.



2. The informal economy employs around 14 million citizens in Colombia.



3. Self-employed workers represent **86.9%** of the informal labour.

4. The persons described in this story are in precarious employment. They have incomes lower than two minimum wages, do not have contracts, and carry out low-skilled work. According to the Ruptures21 aggregated data, in Colombia there are more than

8 million workers in such conditions

5. 27% of workers in Colombia are over 50 years of age



6. Around **41 million informal workers**

work in the water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities sector.

7. 7.36%

of informal workers work in an exposed site in the street, as is the case for the recyclers (collectors of reusable and recyclable materials) in this story.

“ First, we recycled, we sorted and sold it in large warehouses. Because of the pandemic, we began to sell groceries, [and then] that was when in wholesale markets there were infected people, so we decided not to return because of this. So we established our own warehouse [to buy recyclable material] and here we are (...). ”

(Interview fragment)



Ana Rosario Guzmán

Born 26th June 1963 in Bogotá.

Recycler and other trades.

Lives in the Bosa Brasilia neighbourhood, Bogotá.

Lives with her sons Diego Rodríguez who is 33 years old, Giovanni Rodríguez who is 32, and her husband Fernando Rodríguez who is 61 years old, although her whole family is larger than this.

Lives on the second floor of a rented house. Herself and her husband, and each of her children have their own room. They share a living room, bathroom, and kitchen.



“Rebusque” and family

The first time that we spoke with Doña Rosario by phone we asked her about her work. She listed a series of activities that herself and her family have carried out to earn a living during the pandemic. She ended by telling us, amidst laughter, “we are the orchestra family”.

Rosario is a 57-year-old woman, and has been a recycler, the same as her family, for more than 15 years. She has always lived in the Brasília neighbourhood, on the south-western border of Bogotá. Her parents, also from Bogotá, settled down temporarily in the Bosa area and that is why she decided to live here since she was young. Even though Rosario calls herself a recycler, she alternates this work with paid domestic work in a neighbour’s house.

[I work in] recycling, but when I get the opportunity to go out to clean apartments, I go and make the most of whatever work comes my way (...)

A large proportion of recyclers in Bogotá carry out their activities as part of first or second level organisations. Thanks to the perseverance of their struggles and the recognition of their rights through various Constitutional Court cases, recyclers are today recognised as the recycling component of the sanitation service

providers. This means that they have responsibilities for the collection of reusable materials, and a contribution for this work is acknowledged in the sanitation bill paid by users. For many, however, the formalisation obligation imposed by the Government constitutes an obstacle because of the associated costs to this process, including registering with the Chamber of Commerce, statutory registration, and opening of a bank account. These costs demand significant economic spending relative to the income which they receive.

Many recyclers claim to be third or fourth generation in the trade, meaning that they inherited this activity from their parents. Rosario, however, began recycling through the initiative of her two sons. Today the whole family, including her oldest daughter and husband, work as recyclers. Being new in the trade means being confronted with very precarious conditions, which has led them and many in their situation to create organisational processes in search of recognition of their labour rights. Today their conditions are not the best, but they have improved in many ways.

Despite these successes, a large proportion of recycling workers continue to be completely informal and are not even part of community-based organisations. Many alternate between recycling work and other activities,

because the income which they receive is uncertain and has decreased in the last few years. Rosario and her family are part of an organisation of recyclers, of which she is president. Her and her daughter have attended

many training workshops provided by the National Training Service (SENA) to better carry out their work in the streets.



Covid-19 and working conditions

Rosario and her family secure their livelihood by combining different jobs, working hours and agreements amongst themselves. But what happened with the arrival of COVID-19?

Tentatively, Rosario mentioned some modifications to their routine, while insisting on the value of life itself and on her optimistic view of the situation. Despite this, there were clearly dramatic changes in the way her work was carried out and the number of hours worked to maintain an income level comparable to that which they had as a family before the pandemic.

In the first weeks of quarantine, many commercial centres had to close, and only those that worked in food provision remained open. Because of this, and as a consequence of the decrease of income coming from selling recyclable material collected in the street, the family decided to lease a shop near their house to sell “líchigo”, namely retail-priced fruit and

vegetables bought in Corabastos (the biggest wholesale market in Bogotá) in the Kennedy area, relatively close to their residence.

Thanks to God selling groceries went well, in this sense honestly we didn't feel despair. Why would we complain, right? So in this matter and thanks to God it went well for us, because my family bought groceries from us, the friends of my sons too. A woman whose apartment I clean every week also gave me money for buying groceries. So, you see? It has not been as bad in this sense. The truth is that in this regard I haven't been affected.

The sale of food, as well as the family's livelihood, had to be supported by new intra-family arrangements and neighbourhood networks. For example, friends began visiting Rosario's shop not only to buy food, but also to support the family.

After two or three weeks, positive cases of COVID-19 began appearing in Corabastos. Because of this, the directors of the building complex and the Bogotá administration started to restrict trade.

As a consequence of these events and only two weeks after they began selling food, the family had to close the business, because they could no longer access supplies for it. They then decided to use the same space as a warehouse to

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buy recyclable material, which generated funds for surrounding recyclers. This decision was nevertheless accompanied with a considerable challenge in terms of trading with medium-sized intermediaries, and the need for funds to buy and store the material.

Adaptation and new normality

As the pandemic progressed, the family carried out this new economic activity alongside recycling tasks, which, according to Rosario, have also changed. This has happened because the

educational, caring, recreational, production, and consuming activities have affected the existence and whereabouts of the waste produced.

This has meant an increase in working hours for recyclers to be able to obtain the material from the recycling points which guarantee a relatively fixed income. Rosario noted this in describing the new recycling routes that they carry out at night in the hope of reaching the minimum collection quota. Consequently, they

have not been able to access the resources that they previously used to pay the rent on their home. This generates new debts, which at the time of the interview amounted to three months of rent, some 550 USD, and which may extend for more months.

What has changed is that we couldn't go to the sites where they gave us recycling, which are restaurants, cafeterias, bars. Why? Because the problem is that for us when there wasn't the quarantine, well everything was better because there was a lot of business, now seeing as there are deliveries, that people order everything to their houses, so in the sites there is nothing to collect (...). I [used to collect] the recycling from the garden in Compensar, [but] due to the pandemic, well seeing as there are no children, there is no recycling (...) With the money from this recycling that they gave us (...) we used to cover the rent for the house so, because of this, we noticed the inability to make ends meet due to the pandemic.

We have the shop, but even so we go out to recycle, we go out to get all the recycling possible. We take turns, I worked at night, and now I am here in the house, now I am going out again and then I am coming back to rest because today my daughter is working at night. Yesterday we worked day and night, because as we are just starting here, well, we work together in this way, but we are rotating the working hours. In the family we rotate the recycling work.

My daughter and my son they work by day and by night, my son comes and sleeps a bit and goes back to return to his shift, so while he is resting I go and I or my husband are there, but we are always, always, rotating.

Have you been able to pay the bills?

Yes, because thanks to God when the bills arrive, we have the money and we are able to pay, so we do not have to pay in instalments because that would make it more expensive.

Do you have debts?

(Laughing) Oh many! Well the main one here in the house is the debt from the rent. Debts, like those which torment people, do not torment me. [But] the truth [is that] we owe 3 months of rent... six hundred thousand multiplied by three... but no, right now this week we are starting to make the payments (...) let's see what God has in store for me...

Conclusions

- The academic literature has called attention to the relevance of family and neighbourhood networks for the survival of “informal” workers. This was highlighted by Larisa Alder de Lomnitz in her famous work: *How the Marginalised survive (Cómo sobreviven los Marginados)* (Siglo XXI Editors, 15th ed, 2003). Lomnitz and many other authors have insisted on the central role of the family in contexts of very low circulation of money.
- However, in a scenario of restricted economic activities and social contact, the family and neighbourhood relationships are put at risk, and in many cases shattered. Measures to control the pandemic force people to limit their usual forms of socialisation and, with this, of minimum subsistence. This need for close relationships is evident in Rosario’s experience, who describes her family and neighbourhood as an articulated whole.
- Recycling activity has changed in a very positive way for recyclers in the last few years. The struggles by the organisations of recyclers have ensured their recognition. Despite this, many factors exist which hinder a secure development of the trade. First of all, the costs (economic, social, and organisational) of formalisation are very high, meaning that they need to invest using not only economic resources, but also cultural and social capital to reach the

providers' formalisation process. Another obstacle, especially in times of Covid-19, are all the labour risks to which the recycling population is exposed: these are risks of contagion through direct contact with household waste, and risks associated to working days which surpass many times 12 hours of work.

- As the results of this research demonstrate, in times of crisis the co-dependencies and relationships in informal economies are much more perceptible. In this case, when the commercial, educational, and all other centres that produce waste are affected, the work of the recycler is directly affected, as they will not receive the materials from their usual sources. Consequently, they disproportionately increase the time and area covered in order to obtain the necessary income, thus increasing the effort and risk involved in recycling work.



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 Covid-19 Times: 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.

Informality in Times of Covid-19 is supported by the University of Kent, the University of Essex, the University of Warwick, and Rosario University. It has been conducted in alliance with the Observatory for Women’s Equity (ICESI University, Colombia), the Labour Observatory of Rosario University (Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario (LaboUR)), the Research Group on Public Health and Epidemiology (Rosario University) and AlianzaEFI.

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