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# COVID-19 and its impact on inequality in adulthood





## BOX VII.1

## COVID-19 and its impact on the adult population

Virtually all the Latin American and Caribbean countries were forced to implement social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world of work was particularly impacted by these measures. ILO (2020) estimates that, compared with pre-COVID-19 levels, working hours in the region fell by 1.7% in the first quarter of 2020, and by 13.3% in the second quarter. These data were equivalent to 4 million lost jobs in the first quarter (calculated on the basis of a 48-hour working week) and 26 million jobs in the second quarter of 2020. This scenario was worse in countries where the services sector has grown in importance, as this sector was the worst affected in this regard. Among the adult population, women are worse affected by job losses, partly because they are overrepresented in the services sector—in all the countries, over two thirds of employed women work in the services economy, a much higher proportion than men.

The labour-market responses to the COVID-19 pandemic included an accelerated trend towards teleworking, especially in large and medium-sized companies and corporations. This transition to teleworking showed up the gap in access to technology and technological knowledge, which is more obvious in the lower-income population. Given the heterogeneity of the region, teleworking is not an option for small firms and for the informal economy, which make up most of the region's economy.

In this scenario, a high proportion of adults are at risk of losing (or have already lost) their source of income and, given the limited access to social protection, have no possibility of receiving social protection assistance. This has further widened the equality gaps between those who can and those who cannot easily make the shift to teleworking.

The trends of job generation, transformation and destruction seen before the pandemic are expected to continue and even increase from now on. Online sales, goods delivery and remote digital services, among other activities that have increased their share of the economy, are expected to continue to expand.

One group that has experienced mixed repercussions (with both positive and negative effects) from the pandemic is that of people engaged in areas of employment that have emerged recently as a result of the technological revolution, in (often poorly paid) work linked to the digital economy, such as those engaged in private passenger transport (for example, Uber, Cabify, DiDi and others) or home delivery of food or packages (for example, Rappi, SinDelantal and others). The increase in these activities as a result of the pandemic may reduce the risk of job loss for those involved, but it also increases other types of risk insofar as they are unlikely to have access to medical insurance—but they also have the greatest exposure to risk of contagion after doctors, nurses and other health workers, and they have thus been one of the groups most affected both directly and indirectly by COVID-19.

COVID-19 has had a differentiated impact on adult women, who form a majority in the front line of direct response, as doctors and nurses in the health sector most exposed to risk, or as teachers facing the challenges of adapting to communications technologies with little opportunity for training and reskilling (ECLAC/UN-Women, 2020).

The measures taken by most of the countries in the region in response to the COVID-19 crisis have been geared chiefly towards benefiting the adult population group and particularly towards avoiding harm that would prevent them from performing their dual role as providers of income and co-guarantors of other rights within the family. These measures have included the introduction of benefits for workers and/or dependants, the increase of credits or other budget allocations, the flexibilization or suspension of eligibility criteria or conditionalities, the expansion of coverage, the increase of assistance amounts, the introduction of wage subsidies, access or administration improvements, and the introduction of new entitlements or increase of existing ones.

Given the scale of the effects of the pandemic, which have made informality unviable as an option, the measures that continue to be implemented in the recovery phase must include support for the informal sector, which has tended to fall outside the scope of public policy.

**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work, Fifth Edition*, 30 June 2020 [online] [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_749399.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf); Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/International Labour Organization (ILO), "Employment trends in an unprecedented crisis: policy challenges", *Employment Situation in Latin America and the Caribbean*, No. 23 (LC/TS.2020/128), Santiago, November 2020; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "Universalizing access to digital technologies to address the consequences of COVID-19", *COVID-19 Special Report*, No. 7, Santiago, 26 August 2020; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Care in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19: towards comprehensive systems to strengthen response and recovery", Santiago, 2020 [online] <https://www.cepal.org/en/publications/45917-care-latin-america-and-caribbean-during-covid-19-towards-comprehensive-systems>; J. Weller, "La pandemia del COVID-19 y su efecto en las tendencias de los mercados laborales", *Project Documents* (LC/TS.2020/67), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2020.

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