



## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECTS ON CONVIVIALITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

A comparative study in Latin America

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[1] Mecila is an academic consortium composed of three German institutions: Freie Universität Berlin (coordination), Universität zu Köln, and Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz); and four Latin American institutions: Universidade de São Paulo, Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento, El Colegio de México, and Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (CONICET/Universidad Nacional de La Plata). It is one of five international centers for advanced studies in the humanities and social sciences financed by the German Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research) in cooperation with local institutions and funding agencies.

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In 2021, Mecila (Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America)<sup>1</sup> began an international investigation<sup>2</sup> to explore the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in three large urban agglomerates in Europe and Latin America: Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City. Later, this comparative research expanded its scope, adding to the analysis the cities of Asunción, Ciudad del Este and Encarnación, in Paraguay.<sup>3</sup> In this case, besides the largest city in the country, Asunción, it was decided to investigate the second and third largest cities, Encarnación and Ciudad del Este, due to their status as border cities, in which cross-border circulation, before the pandemic, was central to the daily life, economic activities — especially those in the informal sector —, and the provision of medical care.

The pandemic has had a major impact on the two complementary dimensions of social life addressed by Mecila's research program: conviviality and inequality (Mecila, 2017; Nobre; Costa, 2019). Although the effects of Covid-19 have been far-reaching in the four countries where Mecila member institutions are based — Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Mexico — and in Paraguay, they have been diverse in each society. The main question guiding this comparative inquiry was how the nexus between inequality and conviviality was redefined due to the pandemic and the measures adopted by governments to contain it. This nexus operates at different levels and comprises four sub-questions:

- How has unequally distributed access to protection against the virus generated a hierarchy — structured by gender, class, ethnicity and neighborhood of residence — of both infection and disease trajectory among different social groups?
- How have containment measures — contact and mobility restrictions and state aid — affected income, educational opportunities and general well-being?

- How have containment measures changed ways of conviviality at the micro level of households, neighborhoods, friendships and extended families: changes in family and gender arrangements, shared care work, reorganization of leisure, etc.?
- How have virtual interaction and media use changed during “social distancing”?

To carry out the research, a cross-national survey was implemented. Complementarily, we conducted focus groups with individuals of special interest, due to their social profiles, and in relation to the analysis of the consequences of the pandemic and the containment measures: mothers of young children from vulnerable sectors, workers in the informal economy and university students, among others.

During the pandemic, countless surveys were carried out, with questionnaires administered mainly online, due to restrictions on face-to-face fieldwork. Very often, these surveys were based on self-selected samples, a fact that does not diminish their exploratory relevance, but seriously limits the possibility of establishing generalizations or making comparisons between social groups. The advantage of Mecila’s cross-national surveys is that they were based on large probabilistic samples, and this contributes to giving their results a level of reliability and validity that is atypical for most empirical social studies conducted during the pandemic. Indeed, our research used stratified samples with proportional allocation of approximately 2500 cases in each of the urban agglomerates studied. To define the strata, the neighborhood of residence, gender, age and educational level were taken into account. The main goal was for the sample to reflect the population distribution across all these variables, but using a random selection of cases within each stratum. As mobility restrictions were still in force, the survey was conducted by telephone, using both landlines and mobile phones.

The questionnaire was designed by a group of Mecila researchers from the member countries. The key challenge was to produce a broad set of questions that would allow comparisons between different cities in diverse contexts and, at the same time, respect the specificities of each city. As consistently noted in the specialized literature, the problem of equivalence is particularly relevant in international comparative research, since it substantially affects validity and reliability (Piovani; Baranger, 2023). Therefore, special attention was paid to the selection and definition of indicators, to ensure their validity in each context, but also across contexts. On the other hand, we faced the problem of establishing reliable operational definitions and their linguistic equivalence, deciding on wording and translation,

attentive to the fact that individuals in dissimilar settings may understand the same question in different ways (Brady, 1985). As noted by Gal Ariely and Eldad Davidov (2012) “linguistic and cultural differences that are fundamental for comparative analyses are a source of threat to the validity of measurements in any comparative analysis”. The questionnaire included modules on the sociodemographic profile of both the respondent and the main household breadwinner; household composition, use of digital media and access to information, political participation, opinions about government measures related to the pandemic, the occurrence of diseases and access to health services, support networks, state aid, perception of government performance, pandemic impacts on household finances, social relationships, leisure and well-being, housework and care, schooling, occupational status of the respondent and the main breadwinner, and personal and total household income.

In this dossier we include three articles based on the analysis of the results of this cross-national survey for five of the six cities originally considered: Asunción, Buenos Aires, Ciudad del Este, Encarnacion, and Mexico City. All the articles have elements in common, but they also address different issues. A shared approach relates to the impacts of the pandemic at the micro level of households, which are conceived as spaces of conviviality. Framed within Mecila’s tradition, we define conviviality as interactions that unfold in contexts of inequality and diversity, from a standpoint that integrates the micro level of everyday human relationships with structural inequalities. The household is a specific convivial configuration, characterized by cohesiveness but also by conflict, in which inequalities are experienced and negotiated on a daily basis (Rojas et al, 2024). Within this framework, the articles explore family arrangements and gender relations, to determine how resolved the overload of routine household chores, care work and educational support. In some cases, the effects of the pandemic on paid work and income are also analyzed, with special emphasis on the situation of people in the informal economy. Other areas of interest are the impacts of the pandemic and containment measures on social relations and the use of digital technologies for information and communication.

The articles illustrate how the pandemic has unequally affected social groups according to their neighborhood of residence, social class, gender, educational attainment, and ethnicity. The results show that in these Latin American cities, with state interventions different in scope and intensity, there was an increase in poverty and social inequalities (Rojas et al, 2024). But the results also highlight that women and mothers, in the case of families with children, took on most of the caregiving tasks that arose with the Covid-19 crisis

(Arza, 2020), particularly at times when more restrictive measures, such as the closure of schools and childcare centers, were in force. At the microsocial level, it stands out that mothers from vulnerable sectors, especially those with small children, were the ones who experienced the greatest entanglements of inequalities inside and outside their homes (Rojas et al, 2024). In the extra-domestic domain, the most serious consequences were generally experienced by workers in the informal economy (Actis Di Pasquale et al. 2021).

In short, the main contribution of this dossier is that the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, particularly for two groups: first, for women, as they experienced the majority of job and income losses and were disadvantaged in the distribution of care work and school support. Second, for people with less social protection: the elderly, workers in the popular or informal economy, and women with children, low-skilled jobs and low incomes.

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