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## Research question: How has the government in Bogota implemented policies to reduce the gender gap? A study of the city's "Care Blocks."

### Introduction

In Bogota, the unpaid care burden disproportionately falls on women, particularly those with low income and limited education, leading to significant negative effects on their well-being and perpetuating gender inequalities. To address this issue, the city has launched the innovative "Care Block", providing essential services to female caregivers to alleviate their burden and reduce gender-based violence. This initiative presents a promising model to redistribute reproductive labor, empower marginalized communities, and promote gender equality, demonstrating the potential for local governments to tackle complex gender issues and promote social justice. This policy has enabled women to participate more fully in education, employment, and other activities, while also providing them with the support they need to balance their various roles and responsibilities. By providing women with access to affordable childcare services, as well as other forms of support and assistance, the "Care Blocks" policy has helped to promote gender equality and empower women in Bogota.

### Gender Equality Efforts in Colombia: Progress, Challenges, and Remaining Inequalities

The Colombian government has strongly made efforts in reducing its gender gaps and the consequences that it implies. The OECD highlights Colombia's important strides in gender

equality over the past two decades. As mentioned by the OECD “the country rose to a ranking of 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum’s 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, up from 40<sup>th</sup> out of 149 countries in 2018” (OECD,2020). Gender equality is now recognized in Colombian law and public institutions, and progress has been made in women's agencies. The OECD mentions that in 2010, Colombia became the first country formally to acknowledge the economic contribution of unpaid care work with the passage of a law (Law 1413 of 2010) mandating time-use surveys to account for the care economy and women’s invisible contribution to national accounts (OECD, 2020). Similarly, according to the 2019 Colombia’s World Bank Gender Assessment, Changes to national legislation have resulted in one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks for women's rights and gender parity in Latin America and the Caribbean. Women are gaining decision-making power in households, particularly in urban areas with higher levels of education. Women's health in Colombia has improved, with fewer deaths during pregnancy or childbirth and better access to maternal health services. Adolescent fertility rates have decreased, allowing young women to stay in school and improve their prospects. Moreover, Gender gaps in education have also decreased, with more girls enrolled in secondary and tertiary education than boys. Employment opportunities for women have increased, leading to a decrease in income inequality between men and women. Lastly, the World Bank acknowledges that women played a central role in the peace process and continue to contribute to discussions about the country's post-conflict future (World Bank, 2019)

As the capital city of the country, Bogota is a reflection of national policies. However, it has also taken remarkable efforts to go beyond and combat the gender gap. The city created the Secretary of Women in 2013 which is responsible for creating and overseeing policies that promote gender

equality in the Capital District. They work to make sure that women's rights are included in all government plans and programs. The Secretary of Women has emphasized that “the ultimate objective is to safeguard the human rights of women and empower them to achieve equality and independence as citizens” (Secretaria de la Mujer,2021). Similarly, in 2019, the city elected its first openly gay female mayor through a democratic process, which demonstrates the city's commitment to building a more inclusive society. Since taking office, the mayor has prioritized the care of women as one of her main objectives.

Despite all the efforts, the country and Bogota, still face a huge historical problem of gender inequality. In 2022, the Statista Research Department reported an alarming number of 612 women in Colombia who were murdered because of their gender. In September 2020 alone, 85 women in Colombia were victims of femicide (Statista Research Department,2023). The issue gets worse with minority communities, for example, the UN Women for the Americas and the Caribbean, reports that indigenous and Afro-Colombia women were disproportionately victims of sexual violence and internal displacement during the armed conflict. They were also disproportionately killed: out of 3,445 cases of murder of indigenous and Afro-Colombian individuals, 65.5% of the victims were women (UN Women, 2018).

In Bogota in particular, according to the local newspaper El Tiempo, 13.4% of women live in poverty, and 7.6% lack access to basic rights such as education, work, health, and housing. These figures highlight just some of the inequitable conditions faced by women in Bogota daily (Montoya Zorro,2020). Additionally, 44% of women in the city do not contribute to health or pension schemes. Moreover, there is a 17% wage gap, with women earning almost \$300,000 pesos (\$67 dollars) less than men in the capital. Tragically, in 2019 alone, 18,897 women in Bogota were victims of domestic violence, averaging 52 cases every day. (Montoya Zorro, 2020)

The current administration faces the critical challenge of ensuring that the 1.2 million low-income and 700,000 poverty-stricken women in Bogotá, who are predominantly relegated to unpaid domestic care work, can access vital services that liberate them from this situation of inequality. (Montoya Zorro, 2020). These women experience continuous cycles of economic and emotional dependence, sometimes from their own abusers, and are often trapped in a vicious cycle of patriarchy that they themselves perpetuate. As Ramirez, a columnist for Pares Foundation, points out, “Women genuinely believe that being a good mother and woman means staying at home to care for others at the expense of their own lives. This challenge involves providing services that women are not actively seeking. Unlike other populations, women do not typically take to the streets to demand the necessary conditions for breaking free from this cycle of care, as young people do for their own causes” (Ramírez,2022)

#### Bogota’s Government Strategy to Address the Issue: Implementing Care Blocks

*“To reduce gender gaps, women need to have a greater voice and greater participation, and that is what we are doing here in Bogotá with the Manzanas del Cuidado (Care Blocks); rethinking our social services and infrastructures, to place women at the center, alleviate their burdens of unpaid care so they can have greater opportunities”* Claudia López, Mayor of Bogota, 2021

To mitigate the undesired effects of unpaid work and lack of opportunities for women, the city of Bogotá has launched the “Care Block” initiative to centralize key services for female caregivers to improve their well-being and to reduce the time women dedicate to unpaid jobs/tasks. According to Bogota’s Secretariat of Women, Care Blocks, or “Manzanas del Cuidado” in Spanish, is a pioneering strategy for urban planning and services in Latin America. The care blocks are part of

the District Care System, an institutional integration model created to alleviate and redistribute the care burdens, historically delivered to women (Secretaria de la Mujer, 2021).

The Care Blocks serve as spaces designed to cater to the needs of both caregivers and care recipients, providing them with a supportive environment to receive and offer care. Among the services offered are educational or training services, which consist of offering courses and certification processes for caregivers aimed at strengthening their abilities and competencies for life skills development. Additionally, recreational services are provided to offer spaces for relaxation and enjoyment of physical and recreational activities. Another important service is Care Pedagogy, which involves cultural change sessions to promote co-responsibility in the performance of care work in homes and communities, in order to redistribute this work between men and women and promote the development of new masculinities. This initiative is a valuable tool to address the problem of care in Bogotá and improve the quality of life of women caregivers in the city (Secretaria de la Mujer, 2021). (See Table 1.1 of some of the services provided)

*Table 1.1 list of some services provided by Care Blocks by category.*

<b>Education</b>	<b>Personal wellness</b>	<b>Services for people who require care</b>
Flexible education to complete high school or primary school.	Individual psychosocial care  Legal and psychological care	Schooling support and tutoring for girls, boys and adolescents between 6 and 14 years of age.

<p>Complementary training in alliance with Public in universities</p>	<p>Therapeutic gymnastics and natural yoga.</p>	<p>School “You Can Also Learn How to Care School”</p> <p>Practical workshops to learn how to redistribute care work among everyone.</p>
<p>Courses to create and manage your own business: workshops on financial skills and personal finance.</p> <p>Entrepreneurship and formalization route.</p>	<p>Bike School: Learn to ride a bike.</p>	<p>Therapeutic gymnastics and natural yoga (seniors and people with disabilities).</p>
<p>Certification of knowledge of care.</p>	<p>Physical activity.</p>	<p>Community-Based Rehabilitation (people with disabilities).</p>
<p>Home buying workshops</p>	<p>Listening centers for women.</p>	<p>Physical activity (older people).</p>
	<p>Urban agriculture for caregivers.</p>	<p>Free community laundry for caregivers and their families.</p>

	Wildlife sighting tours.	
	Healthy eating classes	

*Source: Secretaria Distrital de Gobierno De Bogotá (District Secretary of Government of Bogotá)*

Finally, it is important to note that the Care System, which oversees the Care Blocks program, has been associated with the City's newly implemented Land Management Plan, commonly referred to as POT (its acronym in Spanish). The importance of the inclusion of this program into the future development plan of the city is because it consolidates a network that articulates the facilities and social services to recognize, redistribute and reduce the time dedicated, especially by women, to unpaid care work (Zambrano, 2023). *Semana*, a well-known newspaper, states that “unanimously, the Bogotá Council approved the draft agreement that institutionalizes the District Care System and gives it continuity and permanence over time and in the following administrations. This is a historic decision that recognizes the demands of women in the city”. With the approval of this agreement, Bogota will now have 45 Care Blocks through the implementation of the Land Management Plan. At the end of the current administration, 20 of these Care Blocks will be operational, while the following administrations must continue working to strengthen and

consolidate the system, contributing to the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of care work. (Vásquez Ardila,2022) (See Figure 1.2)

Figure 1.2- Map of Bogota with the distribution of the 45 Care Blocks projects by 2035



Source: Bogota City Hall Website/ Ramirez,2023

### The Care Blocks as a Manifestation of Feminism

Based on the definition of Encyclopedia Britannica feminism is “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). The Care Blocks program can be seen as a manifestation of feminism, as it seeks to address the social, economic, and political inequalities faced by women in Bogotá, particularly those who are low-income, living in poverty, or have been impacted by the internal armed conflict. By providing access to education, job training, financial literacy, and support for victims of gender-based violence, the Care Blocks



program is working towards promoting women's rights and interests and improving their overall well-being. Thus, the Care Blocks program can be seen as a local institution committed to feminist activity and promoting gender equality in Bogota.

Bogota's struggles with gender inequality, are rooted in many factors including in its post-colonial history. Applying a post-colonial feminist framework to this issue can help us understand the complex ways in which gender inequality is intertwined with the city's colonial past. Iregui-Borhes et al explain that "post-colonial feminism highlights how colonialism has contributed to the oppression of women in Colombia by perpetuating patriarchal structures that prioritize the interests of men over women (Iregui -Borhes et al,2021,4). In the case of Bogotá, colonialism has led to the erasure of indigenous women's voices and experiences, as well as the marginalization of Afro-Colombian women (Iregui-Borhes et al,2021,39). Therefore, any solution to the city's gender inequality problem must consider the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which colonialism has impacted them differently. Furthermore, a post-colonial feminist approach would also demand that we question the dominant narratives that have been constructed around women in Bogotá and challenge the stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality. Applying a post-colonial feminist framework to Bogotá's gender inequality problem can help us understand the historical and structural factors that have contributed to this issue and provide a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of women in the city.

The Care Blocks aim to permanently dismantle the privileges that men have been given by the patriarchal system that founded the country. This includes repaying the debt that the city owes to all women in Bogota, particularly as emphasized previously, those who have been impacted by the internal armed conflict and have been forced to migrate from rural areas to the city. These women, who tend to be women of color or indigenous, have been disproportionately affected and require

special attention and support to overcome the challenges they face in the city. In fact, Claudia Lopez, has stated “This administration made a commitment to bring itself up to date with the debts that the city has historically had with women, which is why to date, more than 332,000 people have received care in the Manzanas del Cuidado” (Referring to the Care Blocks) (Claudia Lopez,2023 as quoted by Barrero,2023)

### Distribution of Reproductive Labor / Care labor

Reproductive labor is an essential part of our daily lives, yet it is often undervalued and underappreciated in society. It involves the unpaid work that goes into maintaining households and caring for children, the elderly, and those who are sick or disabled. Duffy explains that the concept of reproductive labor was originally framed as a way of bringing women’s unpaid work into the discourse of Marxist economists. She discusses how there are various definitions of what can be considered as reproductive labor, for instance, she mentions that Johana Brenner defines reproductive labor as “various kinds of work- mental, manual and emotional -aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation” (Brenner 1989, 383 as cited by Duffy, 2005,70). One final definition that Duffy came up with was reproductive labor as “tasks necessary for the daily maintenance of individuals and households, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, and emotional labor”, these tasks are predominantly carried out by women and are often undervalued and underpaid. Reproductive labor is necessary for the functioning of society as a whole, yet it is not recognized as work and is not compensated accordingly. This is due, in part, to the fact that it is viewed as “women's work” and therefore not as important as paid labor in the public sphere. (Duffy, 2005,70)

In Colombia, reproductive labor follows the global trend of being disproportionately given to women. This is due to the fact that women, being socially responsible for the care and maintenance of the home and its members, cannot participate in the labor market in the same way as men, so they must opt for part-time, informal, or work at home to earn income while taking care of your family (Tunarrosa Padilla,2017). In Bogota in particular, the gaps in unemployment and unequal distribution of work rates are not as large as in the rest of the country according to Tunarrosa Padilla, despite this, they are very significant (Tunarrosa Padilla,2017,6). According to the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) “women in Colombia participate in unpaid work, including housework and family care, at greater rates than men do – 7.23 hours per day on average, compared to 3.10 hours per day for men – and these hours in unpaid work restrict the time that can be spent in the labor market” (DANE, 2020). La Republica mentions that the same study done by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics revealed that 90.8% of women over 10 years of age in the country participate in unpaid work activities, while only 63.8% of men dedicate time to these tasks. (Ortiz, 2021)

Perhaps more than any other issue of gender inequality, the Care Blocks aggressively tackle the issues of care labor from its roots. Claudia Lopez, the mayor of Bogota, stated in a tweet that “the unpaid work of women is the care economy, which represents between 15% and 20% of GDP, and what we did in Bogotá was to recognize it and create ManzanasDelCuidado (Care Blocks) to recognize women's work, redistribute household chores, and reduce overload” (Claudia Lopez, 2023).

A defining characteristic of the Care Blocks is their recognition of the primary responsibilities undertaken by women in the household. Using this knowledge, the program has been designed to assume these tasks and duties, thus easing the burden of domestic responsibilities for women. In

one interview for El Espectador, Emma Patricia Quintero, 42years old, single mom with two disabled kids, one of the hundreds of women who dedicate full time to care work in Bogota, says:

*“Having people with disabilities in charge means being available to them all the time and it is very easy to forget about one. Nor is there the possibility of having a formal job for the time it takes to take them to medical appointments, check-ups, and therapies, and being aware of any eventuality or crisis they may have. When I came to this Manzana del Cuidado (Care Block) I received help in so many ways, they send two people to my house to take care of my two disabled kids who cannot come with me every day. I have seen ways to earn money and contribute to the economic part of my family, I have already had classes on how to create a logo, a mission, and a catalog and now I am making dolls for the season”. They even do my laundry here I, just have to bring it and they will do it for free” ...she continues “ If I don't have someone to watch, if I don't have someone to take care of my children, and if I don't have the motivation to manage my time and my emotions, I couldn't come every day” (Impacto Mujer, by El Espectador, 2022)*

The legal recognition of unpaid care work and the dismantling of the gendered stereotype that assigns this work solely to women represent important steps toward gender equality. The Care Blocks are a significant solution to the challenges posed by care labor, as it addresses the problem at its core by redistributing household responsibilities that have been imposed on women. As Emma Quintero attests, the relief offered by this program is immeasurable, and its potential impact extends not only to women but also to their dependents, including the youth and the elderly.

## Further Impacts in the Political Economy

Care Blocks respond to the impacts of unpaid labor on the economy. Failing to recognize and compensate for unpaid labor can have significant economic impacts, such as perpetuating poverty, decreasing investment in public services, and lowering economic growth. The absence of policies and support systems to address unpaid care work can have significant implications for social justice and human rights. For instance, the burden of care work can negatively impact women's health and well-being, as well as their ability to access education and participate in civic activities (Ferrant, 2014). Therefore, addressing the issue of unpaid labor is essential for achieving gender equality, promoting social justice, and building a sustainable economy. The IMF has reported that "Unpaid work can be reduced by providing children and elderly care. Controlling for the level of economic development, countries where more young children are enrolled in formal care and where there is higher public spending on families and on early education exhibit lower unpaid work by women". (IMF, 2019) Similarly, they state that efficient labor markets contribute to reducing female unpaid work, and active labor market programs can facilitate job matching and retain women in the labor market. (IMF, 2019)

Care Blocks implement economically sustainable and circular economy methods that seek to get closer to what the IMF would consider a more efficient labor market economy. The Care Blocks officially certify the knowledge of all the caregivers' women. This certification allows them to apply for jobs that require similar services. The UN Development Program has highlighted this vocational program as an example for other places around the world. According to the UN, the main objective of the certification program is to "recognize the empirical knowledge of women caregivers acquired through the performance of unpaid care roles, valuing and certifying their experience" (UNDP, 2023). (See table 2.0 of services offered by the certification program)

Table 2 services offered by the certification program.

<b>Technician for the certification of household knowledge program</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Pedagogical and cultural change strategy to transform stereotypes and discrimination based on disability and gender.</li><li>2. Knowledge evaluation and certification in care in partnership with SENA (largest public vocational university in Colombia).</li><li>3. In-home respite for individuals with disabilities over 18, focusing on building autonomy and independent living skills.</li><li>4. Legal support for accessing social services.</li></ol>

Source: *Oferta de Cuidado a Cuidadoras, Sistema Distrital del Cuidado, 2021*

Similarly, many women benefit from the Care Block program by obtaining training in occupational therapy, elder care, and other areas. Some of these women can subsequently work for the Care Blocks themselves, providing coverage for those who have to take care of children, the elderly, or people with special needs. With this support system in place, these caregivers can attend the Care Blocks to acquire new skills and pursue higher education. This enables them to access better jobs, dedicate their time to more enjoyable activities, and ultimately, enjoy an improved quality of life. The program has a positive impact on the city's and national economy by increasing workforce participation, improving the overall health of caregivers, and reducing the burden of unpaid care work on families.

### Care Blocks as One of the Solutions to Gender-Based Violence

Women all over the world, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or religion, face the widespread issue of gender-based violence. The European Commission defines gender violence as “violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately” (The European Commission, n.d.). Feminist theory has been instrumental in understanding gender-based violence and its impact on society. According to

Kristof and Dunn gender-based violence, which disproportionately affects girls and women, has been called the greatest human rights challenge of our time (Kristof & Dunn, 2009 as cited by Moozt et al, 2017). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979. It is now recognized as an international bill of rights for women, which prohibits gender-based discrimination and promotes equal treatment of all individuals regardless of their gender (Mootz et al, 2017)

The University of Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Bogota, reports that Latin America is the region with the most femicides: 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates are in this part of the world. Around 60,000 women are murdered each year in Latin America (Castro, et al,2020). As reported by Munevar, as of March 8, 2023, in Colombia 45,472 cases of domestic violence have been registered in the country, giving a significant increase of 22% compared to the previous year (Munevar, 2023).In Bogota in particular, according to the Observatory for Women and Gender Equality of Bogotá (OMEG), in January 2023, 2,335 cases of violence against women were registered, representing 1,538 cases of domestic violence, 567 personal injuries, and 225 sexual crimes. These cases include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, and in many cases, the violence is perpetrated by partners or ex-partners of the victims (OMEG,2023). Similarly, The Bogota Council reports that the pandemic increased the vulnerability of women to gender violence in Bogotá. With rising unemployment and economic precariousness, many women have been forced to be financially dependent on their partners, making them more vulnerable to economic violence and sexual exploitation (Consejo de Bogota, 2023).

The Care System in Bogota has developed a wide range of programs aimed at addressing gender-based violence. Some of these programs include the Purple District Line a 24/7 hotline that

provides assistance and care, through socio-legal and psychosocial interventions when needed. The system also includes 20 Local Safety Councils for Women and the Observatory for Women and Gender Equity. Additionally, there is support for cases related to femicides and attacks with chemical agents, and the provision of safe houses, such as the House of All and Refuge Houses (Secretaria de la Mujer, 2021).

Although programs such as the Purple Line, the Local Safety Councils, and the House of All have been implemented, the direct impact of the Care Blocks cannot be evaluated through these programs. It is essential to conduct an analysis of the services offered by the Care Blocks and their outcomes exclusively. Upon visiting their website, it becomes evident Care Blocks are deemed as safe spaces for women. They offer a range of services including counseling and legal guidance to support women when needed. Since the inauguration of the Care Blocks in October 2020, as of March 6, 2023, they have provided nearly 332,000 services across the city and the current administration aims to serve one million people by the end of 2023 (Barrero, 2023). While there is no breakdown of the specific services provided to each woman, it is reasonable to assume that a significant number of the 332,000 women had access to gender-based violence prevention programs.

#### Suggestions for improvement of the program

The Care Blocks program has already made significant progress in helping women and marginalized communities break out of cycles of poverty and inequality. However, there are several ways that the program could be further improved and expanded. One of these is by providing resources and support to help women apply for and obtain scholarships to public universities. Working with more universities to provide information sessions, assistance with the



application process, and support with financial aid and other resources could help ensure that more women have access to higher education.

Another important step is to improve the program's promotional campaigns to raise awareness about the program and its benefits. Financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills are also crucial for empowering women and helping them build a better future for themselves and their families, the program seems to be very successful in this area. However, partnering with financial institutions to give women access to microcredits and other forms of small business financing could help women develop these skills.

In addition to providing support for women who have experienced gender-based violence, it is also important to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. The Care Blocks program may be very effective in protecting and providing legal advice to victims, however, if the legal system fails to deliver justice, all of these efforts become pointless. It is important to work with the judiciary system to improve access to justice for women, including through better training and resources for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges. Finally, given the early success of the Care Blocks program in improving the lives of women and marginalized communities, there is a clear need to consider expanding the program on a larger scale at the national level and in the long term at the regional.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has used feminist theory to identify and define the challenges faced by Bogota's historical patriarchal system. Despite progress made in comparison to other countries in the region, gender inequality persists at an alarming level. The Care Blocks program has emerged as a promising policy solution to address gender gaps in Bogota. By recognizing and valuing the unpaid care work traditionally relegated to women, Care Blocks have successfully freed some

women from domestic labor while also providing them with education and training opportunities to achieve financial independence. The success of this program is also evident due to its sustainable circular economy model where women caregivers are finally being able to have economic value within society. Additionally, the program is complemented by other initiatives like the Purple Line to combat gender-based violence. This paper has argued that the program could benefit from incorporating additional programs to support women's education and financial opportunities. With its successful implementation and relatively wide coverage (Given the novelty of the program, and considering its recent implementation), Care Blocks have the potential to be expanded not only within Bogota but also throughout the country and the region. All things considered, the Care Blocks program represents a beneficial and indispensable policy approach toward gender equality in Bogota.

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