

The intersections of work, families, and care. Reconciliation with co-responsibility

Las intersecciones trabajo, familias y cuidado. ¿Conciliación con corresponsabilidad?

As interseções entre trabalho, família e cuidados. Conciliação com corresponsabilidade?

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21803/penamer.18.38.874>

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Abstract

Introduction: This article presents reflections derived from the research project “*Social Organization of Childcare for Boys and Girls under 12 in Family Groups: An Analysis from Gender and Socioeconomic Position*”, conducted in Cartagena. The study aims to contribute to the institutionalization of care from a perspective of social co-responsibility. **Objective:** To understand the meanings associated with the organization of childcare within families, in relation to their articulation with the State, the market, neighborhood networks, and NGOs. **Methodology:** A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with mothers and fathers, and focus groups with children. **Results:** The findings reveal tensions arising from the dual responsibility of working and caregiving, particularly due to the unequal distribution of tasks, the female care overload, and the limited male participation. In the labor sphere, the absence of effective work-family reconciliation policies is evident, often leading to rights violations. **Conclusions:** Reconciliation policies continue to be conceived as family matters centered on women, without incorporating a vision of shared responsibility or corporate social commitment, thus perpetuating gender gaps in both work and home environments.

Keywords: Care; Childhood; Gender; Families; Reconciliation; Work.

Resumen

Introducción: Este artículo presenta reflexiones derivadas de la investigación “*Organización social del cuidado de niños y niñas menores de 12 años en grupos familiares: un análisis desde el género y la posición socioeconómica*”, realizada en Cartagena. El estudio busca aportar a la institucionalización del cuidado desde una perspectiva de corresponsabilidad social. **Objetivo:** Comprender los significados asociados a la organización del cuidado infantil en las familias, en relación con su articulación con el Estado, el mercado, las redes vecinales y las ONG. **Metodología:** Se llevó un enfoque cualitativo, se aplicaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a padres y madres y se realizaron grupos focales con niños y niñas. **Resultados:** Evidencian tensiones derivadas de la doble responsabilidad de trabajar y cuidar, especialmente por la desigual distribución de las tareas, la sobrecarga femenina y la escasa participación masculina. En el ámbito laboral, se observa la ausencia de políticas efectivas de conciliación entre trabajo y familia, lo que en ocasiones genera vulneración de derechos. **Conclusiones:** Las políticas de conciliación siguen concibiéndose como asuntos familiares centrados en las mujeres, sin incorporar una visión de responsabilidad compartida ni de compromiso social empresarial, perpetuando así las brechas de género en el trabajo y en el hogar.

Palabras clave: Cuidado; Infancia; Género; Familias; Reconciliación; Trabajo.

¿Cómo citar este artículo?

Rodríguez, M. (2025). The Intersections of Work, Families, and Care: Reconciliation with Co-responsibility? *Pensamiento Americano*, e#:874 - 18(38), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21803/penamer.18.38.874>

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Resumo

Introdução: Este artigo apresenta reflexões derivadas da pesquisa “*Organização social do cuidado de meninos e meninas menores de 12 anos em grupos familiares: uma análise a partir do gênero e da posição socioeconômica*”, realizada em Cartagena. O estudo busca contribuir para a institucionalização do cuidado a partir de uma perspectiva de corresponsabilidade social. **Objetivo:** Compreender os significados associados à organização do cuidado infantil nas famílias, em relação à sua articulação com o Estado, o mercado, as redes comunitárias e as ONGs. **Metodologia:** Adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, aplicando entrevistas semiestruturadas com pais e mães e realizando grupos focais com crianças. **Resultados:** As evidências apontam tensões derivadas da dupla responsabilidade de trabalhar e cuidar, especialmente pela desigual distribuição das tarefas, pela sobrecarga feminina e pela limitada participação masculina. No âmbito laboral, observa-se a ausência de políticas efetivas de conciliação entre trabalho e família, o que, em alguns casos, gera violações de direitos. **Conclusões:** As políticas de conciliação continuam sendo concebidas como assuntos familiares centrados nas mulheres, sem incorporar uma visão de responsabilidade compartilhada nem de compromisso social empresarial, perpetuando assim as desigualdades de gênero no trabalho e no lar.

Palavras-chave: Cuidado; Infância; Gênero; Famílias; Conciliação; Trabalho.



1. INTRODUCTION

The global demand for care compels us to prioritize the sustainability of life over the accumulation of capital, requiring the central placement of care within both social and economic development models (Carrasco, 2021; Herrero, 2021). Nevertheless, the prevailing model—contrary to a care-based society—continues to promote the integration of women into the labor market without corresponding transformations in the social organization of care and domestic work. In Colombia, women dedicated an average of 7 hours and 44 minutes per day to these tasks, while men averaged 3 hours and 6 minutes. This disparity is even more pronounced in Cartagena, where the difference reaches five hours, according to the Time Use Survey (ENUT) by the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE, 2021; 2022).

Furthermore, children between 0 and 15 years of age constitute 22.9% of Cartagena's population, according to DANE projections (2022), reflecting a high demand for care and protection. However, district-level childhood policies have proven insufficient in guaranteeing these rights—not only due to limited coverage in areas such as healthcare, nutrition, education, and housing, but also due to the pervasive poverty affecting many Cartagena households. These are mainly concentrated in socioeconomic strata 1 and 2, where informal labor remains a significant source of income, as noted in the Quality of Life Report (Informe de Calidad de Vida [ICV], 2023). Within this context, it was relevant to investigate how caregivers organize childcare, what resources and support networks are available to them, and how they navigate the dual responsibility of caregiving and income provision within the household.

A review of studies conducted in various countries on the intersections of work, family, and care—through diverse analytical lenses—reveals these spheres as often contradictory (Pellejá, 2016; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990), conflicting and interactive (Geurts et al., 2005), and requiring balance based on individuals' capacities. Other research has focused on integrating work-life time and on measures that support reconciliation—such as flexible work arrangements—often under a framework that prioritizes corporate productivity (Fagan et al., 2012). In the European Union, Bustelo and Lombardo (2013) identified reconciliation as a matter framed primarily around working mothers. Solutions have included increasing women's labor market participation, halting demographic decline, supporting families, and/or promoting gender equality in caregiving—or a combination thereof. In this regard, the perspective of co-responsibility in work-life reconciliation has gradually gained traction across Europe, both in academic research and in regulatory developments, as evidenced by the study conducted by Cristóbal (2024).

In Latin America, scholarly output has increasingly positioned care at the center of social policy, highlighting the conflictive relationship between the labor and family spheres as key to the social organization of care, particularly from a gender and social co-responsibility perspective (Aguirre et al., 2014; Batthyány, 2018; Faur, 2018; Jiménez & Orellana, 2023). Additionally, studies conducted in Colombia have identified a growing concern for reconciliation (Arango, 2016; Arias, 2015; Ayala, 2015; Puyana et al., 2020; Pineda & Munévar, 2020; Ramírez & Vargas, 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Nevertheless, these findings underscore the ongoing need for gender-sensitive analyses and assessments of the extent to which reconciliation measures contribute to gender equality in both family and work contexts—beyond mere economic outcomes and the instrumentalization of human potential.

Research grounded in feminist and gender perspectives offers a critical redefinition of care, removing it from the private sphere and re-situating it at the core of social organization. From this standpoint, care is understood as a shared responsibility among all pillars of well-being—namely, the State, families,



the market, and the community—thereby ensuring both human and planetary sustainability. The study's principal contribution to gender studies lies in centering the voices of both caregivers and care recipients, unveiling the intersecting gender and class-based inequalities embedded in the organization of care.

This article focuses on the intersections between work and family life as reflected in the narratives of interviewed parents, exploring the conditions that either facilitate or hinder the organization of care within households. It further considers the economic activities and gender relations that shape these dynamics and the perceived role of companies from a co-responsibility perspective.

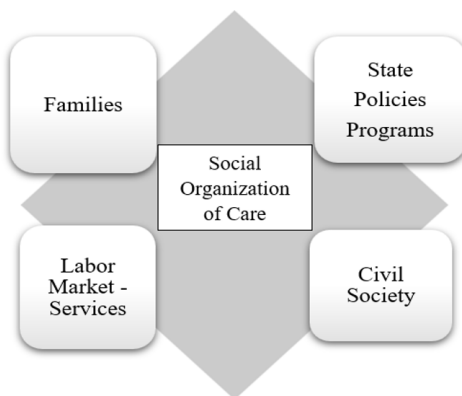
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundations of this research are grounded in the feminist paradigm and gender perspective (Benhabib, 1993; Lagarde, 1996; Scott, 1996), framed within feminist economics (Carrasco, 2017; Esquivel, 2011; Pérez, 2014), and enriched by contributions from feminist sociologists (Durán, 2017; Torns, 2011; Faur, 2018; Batthyány, 2018). The incorporation of a gender perspective into labor studies enables the recognition of domestic and care work as essential forms of labor for the economy and for social reproduction, encompassing material, emotional, and ethical dimensions.

The care economy, in addition to offering a conceptual framework, represents a more integrative and strategic approach by placing unpaid domestic and care work at the center of economic analysis—an area historically rendered invisible. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand the functioning of the economic system as a whole, including the labor market, where the unequal distribution of employment opportunities and quality paid work is revealed (Esquivel, 2012, p. 35).

The concept of the social organization of care, in turn, serves as an analytical lens for cross-sectoral policy review from a feminist perspective. It conceptualizes care holistically, as a co-responsibility shared among the different pillars of well-being: families, the State, the market, and the community (Razavi, 2007) (Figure1), while addressing how households from varying socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from and achieve gender equality (Esquivel, 2012).

Figure 1.
The social Co-responsibility of Care



Note: Based on Razavi (2007).

Feminist economics and critical perspectives such as ecological economics and ecofeminism offer a broader societal analysis, focusing centrally on planetary sustainability, human well-being, and quality of life (Herrero, 2021; Pérez, 2014). Additionally, the concept of a care society is understood as “a form of organization that places the sustainability of life as its primary goal, enabling the dismantling of the structural knots of gender inequality, recognizing its irreplaceable value, and socializing its provision on the basis of social co-responsibility” (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2022, p. 13).

Reconciliation between work and family life is framed within a rights-based perspective that emphasizes gender equality, which entails the redistribution of care responsibilities. This redistribution is “Rooted in socioeconomic injustices stemming from social structures, and in the recognition of existing cultural injustices” (Armijo, 2018, p. 6), as well as political representation as an integral part of all advocacy (Fraser, 2008). The interplay between work and family life introduces tensions, intersections, and hierarchies (Faur, 2012). Therefore, effective reconciliation requires basic mechanisms such as caregiving time—through leave policies and paid time off—financial support to hire care services, and a publicly funded offer of quality care services (Torns, 2011). However, access to these rights is mediated by factors including family diversity, labor guarantees, gender norms, socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative-interpretative approach, which emphasizes knowledge construction through language, giving precedence to relational dynamics in the contextualized creation of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Haraway, 1988). The study employed narrative methods to explore caregiving practices as narrated by participants, whose experiences are shaped by cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions, and expressed through their motivations and meanings (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003).

Information was gathered using semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Gómez, 2012)¹, which enabled a comprehensive and interpretative analysis of how individuals live and interpret the social world through their narratives. The study utilized theoretical and purposive sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2002), with selection criteria including: being a parental caregiver, residing in Cartagena for more than 10 years, and having children under the age of 12. Participants reflected diverse family structures and socioeconomic positions, defined by housing location and ownership, educational attainment, and occupation. The group of participants gradually assembled through the snowball sampling strategy and in accordance with the principle of theoretical saturation, which, as noted by the authors cited above, occurs when adding new cases no longer yields information that contributes to developing new properties of the analytical categories.

Fifty interviews were conducted with parents, 12 fathers and 38 mothers—aged between 29 and 40 years, with educational levels ranging from completed secondary education to university and postgraduate degrees, across all socioeconomic strata. Most had between one and two children, primarily aged between 6 and 8 years, followed by children aged 0 to 2 years, representing high caregiving demand.

The economic activities of interviewed parents spanned both the formal and informal sectors.

¹ The data collection instruments were previously validated by a team of researchers, in addition to a pilot test that allowed for adjustments to ensure their feasibility and optimization.



Among the mothers, the largest group (14) worked in social, communal, and personal services; 10 were homemakers; 9 worked in commerce, hospitality, and food services; and others included 2 students, 1 domestic worker, 1 retired woman, and 1 in the transport and communications sector. Among the fathers, 6 worked in services, 2 were unemployed, and others included 1 student, 1 miner, 1 in manufacturing, and 1 in transport (See Table 1).

Table 1.
Socio-demographic Data of Research Participants

Interview No.	Gender	Age	Stratum	Educational Level / Profession	Occupation	No. Of Children
1	F	31	3	University / Bachelor	Teacher	1-2
2	M	32	2	High School	Mototaxi Driver	1-2
3	F	38	6	Lawyer	Homemaker	1-2
4	F	32	1	University	Secretary	1-2
5	F	40	4	Technician	Hairstylist	1-2
6	F	32	1	Technician	Restaurant Clerk	1-2
7	F	34	4	Secondary	Teacher	1-2
8	F	28	4	University (in progress)	Student	1-2
9	F	45	4	University	Freelancer & Homemaker	1-2
10	M	34	3	University	Teacher	1-2
11	F	31	3	Technician	Homemaker	1-2
12	F	21	2	High School	Homemaker	1-2
13	M	40	1	Technician	Unemployed / Homemaker	1-2
14	F	29	5	University	Homemaker	1-2
15	F	47	4	Technological	Freelancer & Homemaker	3-4
16	F	46	1	University	Homemaker	3-4
17	M	39	5	Doctorate	Teacher	1-2
18	M	45	3	Postgraduate	University Executive	1-2
19	F	17	1	Secondary	Homemaker & Student	1-2
20	F	32	6	Lawyer	Homemaker	1-2
21	F	44	6	University	Independent Worker	1-2
22	M	31	2	High School	Mototaxi Driver	1-2
23	F	34	3	Postgraduate	Primary School Teacher	1-2
24	F	53	3	Postgraduate	University Professor	1-2
25	F	25	2	University (in progress)	Homemaker	1-2
26	F	39	1	Incomplete Primary	Fish Vendor	3-4
27	F	40	4	Postgraduate	University Professor	1-2
28	F	50	3	University	Homemaker	1-2
29	F	30	2	University	Social Worker	1-2
30	F	21	2	Technological (in progress)	Merchandiser & Student	1-2
31	F	41	5	University	Teacher	1-2
32	F	29	1	Postgraduate	Social Worker	1-2
33	M	38	4	Postgraduate	Teacher	1-2
34	F	34	1	High School	Domestic Worker	1-2
35	M	40	4	Technological	Operations Supervisor	1-2
36	M	36	5	Lawyer / Postgraduate	Independent	1-2



37	F	37	6	Postgraduate	Homemaker	1-2
38	F	40	5	University	Graphic Designer	1-2
39	M	28	3	University	Lawyer	1-2
40	F	28	1	Technician	Teacher	1-2
41	F	42	2	Primary	Restaurant Assistant	1-2
42	F	38	5	Postgraduate	Social Communicator	1-2
43	F	28	2	Incomplete University	Merchandiser	1-2
44	F	24	3	University (in progress)	Student	1-2
45	M	34	3	University	Engineer	1-2
46	F	26	1	High School	Homemaker	1-2
47	F	50	2	High School	Hairstylist	1-2
48	F	31	3	High School	Manicurist	1-2
49	F	31	3	University (in progress)	Worker	1-2
50	F	32	4	Technician	Beautician	1-2

Note: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

Focus groups were conducted with children aged 7 to 12 and required methodological adaptations to acknowledge their capacities as social actors and to deepen understanding of how they perceive their world²

. Techniques included drawing and storytelling, tailored to their age and educational level. The selection of focus groups and recruitment strategy involved coordination with public and private educational institutions across all socioeconomic strata. Seven focus groups were conducted with 23 girls and 23 boys from various neighborhoods of Cartagena. In both interviews and focus groups, participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with participants anonymized through pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, respecting the ethical principles of research with human subjects to safeguard their well-being, integrity, and to minimize potential risks or violations of their rights.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, without the use of software for processing. For the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, from a narrative approach (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003), qualitative matrices were constructed to enable the comparison of similarities and differences among narratives, supporting both emergent inductive coding and deductive coding based on pre-existing categories, concepts, or theories, which allowed for the interpretation and understanding of participants' subjective meanings and experiences. Strategies to ensure data validity were based on triangulation of primary sources, including interviews and focus groups with caregivers and care recipients selected from diverse sociocultural and economic contexts for narrative comparison, alongside theoretical references and documentary sources such as existing legislation and regulations on the topic under study.

From a feminist epistemology (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987), our positionality as women researchers is embodied in an ethical commitment grounded in transparency, respect for participants' socioeconomic and cultural differences, and recognition of them as knowledge subjects. Highlighting their voices and demands fostered a reflective and intersubjective dialogue aimed at political action to transform the gender inequalities and injustices women face as the primary pillars of social care organization.

² For the focus groups involving children, prior consent was obtained from their parents, along with their voluntary agreement to participate. In addition, written requests and authorization were obtained from the schools once the research objectives, discussion guides, and proposed activities had been presented, with supervision provided by the school guidance team during each session.



4. RESULTS

4.1 Unpaid Work and Full-time Caregiving

Among the interviewed mothers, it was notable that some (10) were fully dedicated to caregiving, while fathers served as primary income providers. In several cases, this led women to interrupt their educational pursuits or withdraw from paid employment to provide care—an arrangement observed across all socioeconomic strata (See Table 2).

Table 2

Care organization matrix according to the intersections of work, household type, and service hiring by gender and socioeconomic stratum

Trends in the Social Organization of Care	Characteristics of Work	Care Strategies by Gender and Household Type	Hiring of Private Services or Public Subsidies	Arrangements for Work-Family Time Reconciliation	Barriers to Co-responsible Care Organization
Familialist, market-oriented, with some legislation for flexible work but low implementation	Full-time or part-time formal work. Employees and contractors. With or without labor flexibility. Dual parental income	Nuclear biparental households. Extensive network support; care provided by both father and mother during rest periods. Some cases with extended network support. Fathers minimally involved.	Strata 3 to 6. Domestic service, paid caregivers, formally contracted. Private services	Flexible leave and schedules aligned with school hours. Greater redistribution of care. Support from private services	Rotating shifts exceeding 8 hours. Absence or limited presence of fathers in caregiving. Care organized by mothers. Greater tensions due to women's overload in strata 1 and 2
		Nuclear biparental or single-mother households. Mothers as full-time caregivers. Fathers selectively care during rest periods (play, sports)	Strata 3 to 6. Formal and informal domestic service. Private services	Autonomous caregiving mothers, children with rights to protection and care. Support from private services in middle and upper strata	Reproduction of patriarchal model. Centrality of care in women, without family or social co-responsibility. Violation of parental leave rights by some companies or employers
Familialist, market-oriented, with state support in strata 1 and 2	Formal work. Employees and contractors. With or without labor flexibility. Single income	Single-mother households. Mothers as full-time caregivers. Participation and support from extended network	Strata 1 and 2. Receive public subsidies	Caregiving mothers with extended network support ensure more time for childcare. Support from services and public subsidies	Absent fathers undermine children's rights. Lack of personal and economic autonomy for mothers to generate income
		Nuclear biparental households. Fathers as full-time caregivers, unemployed. Mothers as part-time providers and caregivers	Strata 1 and 2. Receive public subsidies	Fathers participate in care and domestic work. Breaks patriarchal model	Transitory paternal participation. Labor and income instability. Mothers care during free time. Multiple workdays
Familialist, market-oriented	Informal work. Dual provision. Medium income. Flexible time	Biparental, extended households. Mothers share work and care time in the same space. Extensive network available. Minimal or absent paternal participation	Strata 4. Hiring of domestic work. Private services	Provider mothers with more autonomous management of time to care, work, and redistribute care	Lack of formal employment and social security access for women. Maternal responsibility in care organization. Reproduction of the traditional model: father as provider, mother as caregiver
Familialist with or without state support	Informal work. Self-employed. Low income	Single-mother households with mother-centered care. Organization of work and care time in the same place	Strata 1 and 2. Receive public subsidies	Caregiving mothers develop strategies for care with or without support from public services	Labor precariousness. Absence of paternal participation. No family and/or community support networks. Greater vulnerability

Source: Prepared by the author based on the interviews

For some women from higher socioeconomic strata, the motivations behind such decisions focused on the needs of their children in early childhood and a deeply felt maternal responsibility, often framed as a non-transferable duty:

“One should not have children just to have them; one should have children to dedicate time to them. Yes, because it’s not just a monetary issue, but to me, a third child would mean less time with the other two, and I love spending time with my kids. I feel the greatest gift I can give them is my time.” (Paola, 2018, interview)

For women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (strata 1 and 2), caregiving is coupled with unpaid domestic labor. Their caregiving responsibilities are largely material, centering on children under 12. These responsibilities include all activities necessary for the children and their partners to recuperate and resume daily routines—often exceeding 10 hours of work per day. Added to these are routine management tasks such as paying bills, medical appointments, and school meetings. This is evidenced by the following testimony:

“I clean, cook lunch, wash the dishes, then at three José Luis comes home—we play for a while, I play with Diana and Alex, I dedicate time to them, I prepare dinner. At night, they watch TV, I help with homework, bathe them again, feed them, and put them to bed.” (Lucero, 2018, interview)

By contrast, mothers from higher socioeconomic strata (4, 5, and 6) hired formal domestic workers for material caregiving, allowing them to focus on direct involvement during mealtimes, school, and extracurricular activities—sports, cultural, social, recreational, and leisure—supported by the resources they had to outsource other services. Meanwhile, fathers’ participation was generally restricted to after-work hours or weekends, and selectively involved in schoolwork based on their skills, emphasizing both provision and moral care: “I do the minimum at home; if my wife or the maid is busy, she might ask me to watch them for a moment and that’s it... But I’m always looking out for their physical safety, making sure they have what they need, and setting a good example.” (Wilfrido, 2018, interview)

In all cases, women’s time was tightly structured around their children’s school schedules, limiting their autonomy over personal, health, or other matters. They expressed that their time was not their own—it was governed by the needs of their children.

4.2 Informal Work and Caregiving

The informal employment of participating mothers and fathers varied according to their socioeconomic status and educational levels, which determined their differentiated access to the labor market. In socioeconomic strata 1 and 2, self-employment and the inherent informality of their work blurred the boundaries between domestic and labor spheres. Some women managed caregiving from the very same space in which they generated income, ensuring the care of their children in the absence of support networks within their community context. Meanwhile, in higher socioeconomic strata, women provided professional services or owned businesses, appreciating the flexibility these arrangements offered for caregiving, as Patricia noted: “For example, sometimes I get small jobs. Right now, I’m making t-shirts, headbands with flowers, and the costume for my daughter’s year-end school show. But when she gets home from school, everything stops! All my attention is on her” (Patricia, 2018, interview)

The informality identified in the mothers' occupations was perceived as both an opportunity and a disadvantage, "It brings different consequences for households and the organization of care, since women speak from positions of privilege, discrimination, and/or vulnerability from which they construct their realities" (Rodríguez et al., 2020), further shaped by current labor market dynamics and local and national labor precarity.

4.3 Paid Work and Flexibility for Caregiving

The labor market participation of parents entails a constant need to devise strategies for organizing care while providing income. Part-time employment, project-based contracts, or service agreements were modalities that offered greater possibilities for coordinating work and family responsibilities. These were especially prevalent among professional women from middle and upper strata, living in nuclear households with dual income providers, typically employed in teaching or sales. These roles allowed greater time flexibility and autonomy for caregiving and work, albeit under occasionally precarious employment conditions.

Paid leave, granted to both mothers and fathers across all strata, was identified as a facilitating factor for caregiving and responding to family emergencies, in exercise of a labor right³. However, some testimonies indicated that such permissions were often contingent on the flexibility of direct supervisors or the specific characteristics of their job roles.

4.4 Work Schedules and Time for Care

Work schedules were determined by economic activity, type of employment contract, and job characteristics of the parents. Narratives revealed the time commitments required, including commuting between home and workplace. In dual-income households, this situation was further complicated by the overlap with school schedules, making it difficult to dedicate time to caregiving (Rodríguez et al., 2020). In such cases, caregiving was delegated to domestic workers (in strata 3, 4, 5, and 6) or supported by extended family networks, especially grandmothers or other female relatives such as aunts and nieces (in strata 1 and 2). Martha explained: "I leave everything ready for my mom. I start work at six-thirty in the morning, so I get up at four to prepare everything—meals, baby food, clothes, everything!" (Martha, 2018, interview)

Other testimonies revealed tensions between partners due to the caregiving overload on mothers and minimal paternal involvement:

"When the father comes home, he does very little. I've always been the one supporting them through their education. My children get up at five in the morning, and I'm right there preparing their breakfast, giving them baths... I pick them up at six when I finish work. I text the nanny to remind her of everything—not to forget the vitamins, for example—I write everything down in a note." (Loida, 2018, interview)

Flexible schedules are considered in Colombia as a tool to increase parental involvement in caregiving (Ley 1857, 2017), yet they are poorly known and rarely enforced. According to the testimonies, the most supportive work schedules are those that align with school hours, facilitating the coordination

³ Article 57 of the Substantive Labor Code.



of responsibilities. However, alignment does not guarantee gender-equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities within the home.

4.5 Working Hours and Tensions Around Care

Fathers working in operational roles in the industrial sector with rotating shifts exceeding eight hours—or those with jobs requiring frequent travel—faced the greatest difficulties in securing rest days or spending time caring for and bonding with their families (Rodríguez et al., 2020). In such cases, mothers were fully responsible for caregiving, as Yeimy explained:

“My husband works from six in the morning to six in the evening. That’s normal, but lately, with the business trips he’s being sent on, sometimes he’s gone for 10 days, sometimes 15—sometimes a month, two months, or even longer! And the kids need their father too.” (Yeimy, 2018, interview)

Children’s testimonies highlighted their desire for more parental attention, acknowledging their parents’ absence while also expressing the emotional toll it took:

“I want my mom to spend more time with me, but she says she can’t because she needs to work to buy us food.” (Diana, 9 years old, E1). “It’s sad when you don’t see them for a long time. But if they don’t work, how would they buy us things?” (Fanny, 2018, focus group). “I wish my parents didn’t work so much so I could see them more.” (Juan, 2018, focus group)

These jobs often involve unfavorable conditions such as health risks and long hours, which limit the time available for caregiving during critical developmental stages. In some cases, these tensions led to job resignations, as shared by Nibis: “At my previous job, I worked too many hours. I would leave home at 4:30 a.m. and return at 7:30 p.m. It was incredibly difficult; I had almost no time for Julián—just enough to help with homework, make dinner, and then bedtime. That’s why I quit.” (Nibis, 2018, interview)

In formal employment, regarding maternity leave (Ley 1822, 2017) and paternity leave (Ley 1468, 2011), participants reported situations in which fathers were unable to exercise their rights, due in some cases to fathers’ decisions, minimal working conditions that allowed for leave, and limited evidence of companies implementing policies to facilitate and/or promote employees’ fulfillment of family responsibilities. The importance of care and parental co-responsibility remains largely absent, deeply rooted in patriarchal culture as an issue considered exclusive to women⁴. Additionally, mechanisms for enforcing these rights are underutilized, and the legal framework—such as the provision for two weeks of paternity leave and six weeks of shared parental leave (Ley 2114, 2021)—is widely unknown. These barriers hinder the active exercise of fatherhood and the integration of men as affective and caregiving figures within the everyday dynamics of family life.

4.6 Unemployment and Precarity in the Context of Care

In Cartagena’s low-income households, as in other Colombian cities, a pattern of male unemploy-

⁴ Regarding the use of leave, fathers’ testimonies highlighted sociocultural factors related to traditional notions of fatherhood, as well as the time commitments and work schedules imposed by the 24/7 production demands of the industrial sector, with reduced income identified as one of the main limiting factors.



ment was identified. In these cases, men, excluded from the labor market, temporarily assumed caregiving responsibilities, while women took on jobs with more flexible hours and less demanding conditions to ensure the family's survival (Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 160). The caregiving was organized similarly to that provided by mothers who do so full time, though marked by a significant gender gap—fathers would relinquish caregiving duties once mothers returned home from work, as shared by Fabián:

“When their mom comes home from work and finds the girls doing homework, I hand over the shift to her. That’s where my part ends” (Fabián, 2018, interview)

In the most precarious households, women assumed motherhood alone, facing daily tensions between caregiving and income generation:

“If it were up to me—if I had help—I’d have my kids with me every day. But I don’t have that help. They rely only on me. Their father? He has no idea how they’re doing. Sometimes I find them asleep because I come home from the market at 10 or 11 at night.” (Luisa, 2018, interview)

Female heads of household, as sole income providers like Luisa, perceive work as an obligation they would abandon in favor of caregiving—if their livelihoods were otherwise secured (Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 161).

5. DISCUSSION

The reconciliation of work and family life, as evidenced by participant testimonies, rests primarily on the strategies and arrangements assumed by parents in their dual roles as providers and caregivers. These roles are marked by significant gender disparities and are not adequately supported by labor policies that are socially responsive to the needs of working families. This aligns with various studies in Latin America that underscore the conflictive relationship between work and family as a critical issue for advancing the social organization of care (Batthyány, 2018; Faur, 2018).

Within households, care arrangements—one of the co-responsible agents—depend on the types of jobs held by parents, their working hours, school schedules, and the availability of childcare services (Batthyány, 2018). Attempts to reconcile labor and family time often result in tensions, conflicts, and complaints, particularly concerning parental absences and the unequal caregiving burdens assumed by women, with minimal or non-existent participation from fathers. This constitutes a rights violation, as also reported in all participating cities and other studies (Rodríguez et al., 2020; Puyana et al., 2020).

While flexible labor arrangements can offer opportunities for some workers by easing the integration of work and caregiving responsibilities (Fagan et al., 2012), they may also lead to disadvantages. Informality in parental occupations is often accompanied by instability, precarious contracts, reduced income, and limited access to social protections.

Achieving gender-equitable reconciliation between work and family life requires redistributing time and responsibilities equally between parents (Jiménez & Gómez, 2015; Armijo, 2018; Fraser,



1997). Some families, equipped with cultural capital and/or caregiving support resources, achieved shared arrangements and greater co-responsibility across different socioeconomic strata. However, the lack of public and corporate policies to support this reconciliation perpetuates the familialization and commodification of care (Esping-Andersen, 1993). This highlights the State's weakness in enforcing existing regulations and in providing quality, universal care programs and infrastructure that respond to childcare demands across territories, as a citizen's right to social protection (Sentencia T-583/23, 2023).

From an ethical standpoint, social co-responsibility views businesses as “public goods that guarantee justice, freedoms, rights, and the quality of life for people involved and/or affected by corporate activity” (Cortina, 1994, p. 30). Thus, companies and markets bear a fundamental responsibility as pillars of the social organization of care, which should transcend their purely economic and profit-driven motives. Based on the study's findings, it is evident that employers and businesses lack policies that promote work-life reconciliation. Existing measures are often limited to parental leave or permissions subject to the discretion of job roles, undermining acquired labor rights and disregarding their social obligation toward care (Rodríguez et al., 2020; Pineda & Munévar, 2020).

Some studies suggest that Colombian companies are beginning to show greater concern for reconciliation, indicating an incipient shift. However, corporate social responsibility remains mostly directed toward external projects rather than addressing the internal needs of employees with family responsibilities (Idrovo et al., 2012; Arango, 2016).. Other findings (Mendoza & Peñaranda, 2017; Pineda et al., 2021) document progress among a small number of companies certified by the Ministry of Labor with the *Equipares* seal for implementing gender equality policies or recognized as *Family-Responsible Companies (EFR)*. Nevertheless, these companies constitute a minority and are not representative of the national or local context. Even so, they serve as a model for other businesses seeking to break barriers and promote social co-responsibility in caring for life and the planet.

Co-responsibility in caregiving for life's sustainability represents a new horizon for a caregiving society—one that recognizes human beings as interdependent and eco-dependent throughout their life course (Herrero, 2021). To achieve sustainable living, as Carrasco argues, the three spheres of production—market, ecological, and caregiving—must form a multidimensional sustainability, operating in interdependence without losing sight of the centrality of life. In this context, care—whether material, emotional, or ethical—is a determining factor, calling for a paradigm shift and a reorientation of our perspective (Carrasco, 2016, p. 109).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The social organization of care in Cartagena—as in the other participating cities—being predominantly sustained by families and by women's labor in an unjust and unequal manner, highlights the difficulties and tensions involved in reconciling family and work time from a co-responsibility perspective. Among the factors to consider in addressing this challenge, it is essential to emphasize, first, the limited scope of existing policies aimed at articulating these two spheres, and the sociocultural barriers hindering their implementation, as revealed by the unequal sexual division that permeates both family and work relationships.



Added to the above is the general lack of awareness of the current regulatory and legal framework on the subject among many employers, male and female workers. This lack of knowledge has led to a reduction of the issue to a few basic rights, such as maternity and paternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and work permissions, which are at times made conditional by companies, as identified in several testimonies. Alarming, these policies and/or regulations are addressed exclusively to workers in the formal labor sector, excluding those employed in the informal economy.

It is further concluded that achieving cultural and structural transformations requires both an ethic of care and a political practice capable of fostering justice and gender equity in care organization from an ecofeminist perspective. This calls on us to go beyond the redistribution of existing forms of labor and to question the use and reorganization of time, such that companies assume co-responsibility for ensuring ecological and human sustainability, wherein the concept of buen vivir (living well) in a caregiving society becomes a collective commitment.

This challenge currently presents opportunities for the development of structural policies and for continuing progress toward a fair National Care System that guarantees these rights across all territories.



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