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**‘Domestic work is work’: but for whom? Tensions around labour rights and the valorisation of reproductive labour in Ecuador and Colombia<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Feminist scholarship and movements worldwide have extensively engaged in theorising reproductive labour as an undervalued element of local and global political economies and have been pushing for its recognition ‘as work’. At the same time, since the late 2000s the conditions of paid domestic workers have become an object of a new wave of mobilisation. Demands for equal labour rights and decent work for this category of workers have been put forward at the national and international level, while new international legislation has been adopted, such as ILO Convention 189. Despite these potentially convergent elements, it is not clear to what extent feminist theories on the valorisation of care and reproductive labour can be extended to, or can include, the case of paid domestic workers. In order to address this issue, in this article we present a comparative analysis of the relationships between feminist actors and domestic workers’ groups in Ecuador and Colombia from the late 2000s to 2018.

**Keywords**

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Domestic work, reproductive labour, care, labour rights, Ecuador, Colombia, social movements, feminisms

## **1. Introduction**

Since the 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholarship and movements worldwide have engaged in theorising ‘reproductive labour’ as an undervalued and invisible element of local and global political economies, as well as a keystone of women’s oppression. Feminist theorising and activism have promoted a radical transformation in the social meanings associated with it and have been pushing for its valorisation as a fundamental activity of social and economic value.

Moreover, while there has long been a feminist focus on reproductive labour, since the late 2000s demands for equal labour rights and decent work for paid domestic workers<sup>2</sup> have been put forward at the national and international level, while new international legislation has been adopted, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 189 (Fish 2017). The demand for equal labour rights and social

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<sup>2</sup> In line with the current scholarship, in this article we use ‘domestic workers’ and ‘paid domestic workers’ as exchangeable terms to refer to people who perform remunerated reproductive labour for one or more households, in the frame of an employment relationship, and provide services aimed at the maintenance of households and at the fulfilment of the material needs and wellbeing of its members. The activities and tasks included in this job vary according to the local socio-cultural and legal definitions and often include both housekeeping (i.e. cleaning, cooking, ironing, gardening) and caregiving (i.e. tending and assisting children, adults, elderly, disabled and ill, as well as the pets). Such usage of the term is consistent with the definition adopted by the International Labor Organization (ILO), as well as by the global domestic workers’ movement; moreover, it provides a common English translation for the several local terms used in the different national contexts (See among others, LO 2013, p.7).

recognition put forward by paid domestic workers could be seen as a reformulation of the feminist claim for recognising ‘domestic work as work’: a reformulation that appears to be based on the realities of these (mostly women) workers around the world. In fact, domestic workers’ demands merge together ideals of labour equality and human dignity, and constitute a challenge to the traditional devaluation of what is considered a demeaning, ‘dirty’ activity, and by extension, to women’s ascribed roles and their supposed natural disposition for reproductive labour.

Yet, despite these potentially convergent elements, it is not clear to what extent feminist ideas on the ‘valorisation of reproductive labour’ can be extended to, or can include, the case of paid domestic workers. To the best of our knowledge, possible negotiations about this subject between feminist movements and domestic workers’ movements have not been the object of extensive research. In order to fill this void, in this article we present a comparative analysis of the relationships between feminist activists and domestic workers’ organizations in two Latin American countries, Ecuador and Colombia, in the period spanning the late 2000s to 2018. Drawing on a larger comparative study on domestic workers’ rights<sup>3</sup>, we analyse how the idea of ‘domestic work as work’ is articulated differently in these two national contexts, and the extent to which the feminist struggle for the valorisation of reproductive labour has been incorporated into the discourses and campaigns of the organisations representing paid domestic workers. In so doing, we address the informants’ definitions of their claims and their ensuing priorities, as well as at the construction (or absence of) coalitions and alliances between them.

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<sup>3</sup> ERC Stg project “DomeQUAL: A Global approach to pay domestic work and social inequalities” (2016-2020). For more info visit: [www.domequal.eu](http://www.domequal.eu). In previous publications based on the early results of this project, we looked at different aspects of domestic workers' organizing, by comparing: Ecuador and India (Marchetti 2017), Colombia, Italy, the Philippines and Taiwan (Cherubini, Marchetti and Garofalo Geymonat 2018), and finally Ecuador and Colombia (Cherubini, Marchetti and Garofalo Geymonat 2019). A full comparative overview of all nine countries will be discussed in a forthcoming book (Marchetti, Cherubini, Di Bartolomeo, Garofalo Geymonat 2020).

In the following pages, after presenting a theoretical and methodological overview, we compare the Ecuadorian and Colombian scenarios. We show how the assumed commonality of interests between feminist activists and domestic workers based on ideals of gender equality and the valorisation of reproductive labour, are influenced by different political positionalities which may (or may not) support a convergence between them.

## **2. Care and reproductive labour in feminist agendas**

Since the 1960s, many feminist scholars in different countries have concentrated their attention on the question of what they called ‘reproductive labour’ with the aim of shedding light on the specificity of women’s oppression within the political economy of capitalist societies. At the centre of this elaboration, the notion of ‘reproductive labour’ refers to the material and relational work necessary for the ‘creation and re-creation of the workforce’ through time. Such work includes all activities aimed at the wellbeing and survival of societies, and, in particular, caring tasks relating to the nurturing, tending and assisting of children and of sick people, as well as to the carrying out of housekeeping chores such as cleaning, cooking, and washing, that benefit all household members. This ‘reproductive labour’ has historically been a normative obligation for women, in opposition to the assignment of ‘productive labour’ to men (that is, work for the production of material goods). This dichotomy has been reinforced by moral and religious views that emphasize women’s allegedly ‘natural’ aptitude and skills in this realm, considered inferior to men’s sphere of activity. Challenging these assumptions, feminists have long argued for the valorisation of reproductive labour within capitalist economies (Larguía, Dumoulin 1976; Pateman 1988; Picchio 1992).

Many women around the world have organised their political agendas and campaigns around the notion of reproductive labour, emphasising the need to recognise

the ‘value’ of these activities, not only in social terms but to acknowledge the economic contribution that they bring to society – and the way they are thus exploited in capitalist economies (Sarti *et al* 2018). The tasks performed by women inside their households have been emphasised as ‘work’ in the true sense of the word, which need to be valued as any other work. This has led, for instance, to the transnational campaign on ‘Wages against housework’, inspired, among others, by Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, and animating dozens of groups in Italy and the United States (Dalla Costa, James 1975; Federici 1975; Gissi 2018).

Over the years, the notion of reproductive labour has lost its centrality, however. Part of the feminist debate has preferred to use the term ‘care’ instead, which although not really different in its contents, seems to draw more attention to the emotional aspects of this work, and to the needs of children, the ageing and the ill (Mahon, Robinson 2011; Williams 2011). These questions have been made particularly relevant by the increasing labour participation of women, the crisis of welfare states and the intensification of different forms of commodification of reproductive labour. The transition from a conception of ‘care’ as a mainly familial relationship involving mostly women in unpaid work, towards a conception of care as a commodity, has posed challenges both to sociologists and economists (Barbagallo, Federici 2012; Sarti *et al* 2018).

Feminist economists have drawn attention to the specific implications of processes of the valorisation of care by speaking of a ‘care economy’ (Folbre 2001; Zelizer 2009). From the labour market perspective, ‘care’ is seen by Nancy Folbre and Viviane Zelizer as a specific form of economy which differs substantially from others, given the intimate and personalised character of the service provided. In economic terms, there is a problem with the intimate nature of the context where commodified care services are performed (usually private homes) and the emotional character of the tasks involved in assisting children, elderly and sick people. These have been considered as obstacles to an exact

quantification of the ‘costs’ and ‘tasks’ of this type of labour, which go well beyond a clear-cut relationship between assignments and outputs, nor do they satisfy the principles of pricing based on customer-satisfaction (Folbre 2012, 3).

Now as in the past, debates on ‘care’ and ‘reproductive labour’ have also involved feminist scholars and activists in Latin American countries<sup>4</sup>. From the 1980s, feminist scholars in Latin America seem to have emphasised the question of reproductive labour, as for example in the case of Giovanna Merola (1985), and Luz Gabriela Arango Gaviria (1997). The approach based on ‘care’, however, is also common among Latin American scholars. An example is offered by the *Iconos* special issue edited by Cristina Vega Solis and Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez (2014), with several contributions applying recent debates on care to different national contexts, i.e., Claudia Fonseca and Jurema Brites’s essay (2014) about Brazil, or Pascale Molinier and Luz Gabriela Arango Gaviria’s (2014) work on Colombia. In Latin America, questions of care and reproductive labour are often translated as ‘economías feminista, social y solidaria’, to include all social activities (paid and unpaid) that contribute to society and that are based on principles of reciprocity, and that emphasise social interconnections (Quiroga Diaz 2009). In other words, in the Latin American context, care and reproductive labour are often understood in more general terms as something that ought to be pursued, as a social value embodied by women, and therefore as work that should be respected and valorised.

As we will discuss, ideals around the valorisation of reproductive labour have been taken up by the feminist activists and domestic workers in Ecuador and Colombia

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<sup>4</sup> A complete account of feminist trends and debates in Latin American countries goes beyond the scope of this essay. For historical overviews of feminist debates in the region see among others those by Francesca Gargallo (2006), Virginia Vargas (2008), and Jules Falquet (2012). For assessments of the shape of feminist theory and praxis in Latin America see also Torres and O’Connor (2019) and O’Connor and Torres (2019). Finally, the literature on the *Encuentros Feministas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* (the meetings where feminists from the entire continent have been gathering since 1981) is a useful site to examine the evolution of themes and might be exemplary of the feminist constellation in these countries (Chen 2004; Mauleón 1998; Ribeiro Corossacz 2005).

as well as by institutional actors, even as, the outcomes have been different for reasons that we will explain.

### **3. Inequalities in domestic work: a challenge to sisterhood?**

It is important to expand the discussion to the case of paid domestic workers, which leads us to reflect on the unequal distribution of reproductive labour *between* women, since this can be often delegated from middle-class women onto women from the working class and racialised groups (Nakano-Glenn 1992). This stratification between the subjects involved in reproductive labour contributes to reaffirming the under-valuation of these jobs – as far as these are considered ‘naturally’ assigned to the most vulnerable and stigmatised subjects in each context (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010).

Since in this sector women are usually both employer and employee, a situation often arises in which two women share a daily, intimate, personal relationship directed toward the accomplishment of highly gendered tasks, and yet they are positioned hierarchically. Their relationship can be seen as an unequal distribution of work *between* women, as happens with domestic workers from differently racialised groups within the USA (Nakano-Glenn 2002), or in the ‘international division of reproductive labour’ (Parreñas 2001) when domestic workers are migrants in industrialised countries. At the same time, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) writes about ‘global care chains’ to call attention to the ‘care drain’ from the global South to the global North, with the family life of employers occurring at the price of workers’ family-life (Pratt 2012; Yeates 2004).

The intersectional character of the inequality affecting the employer-employee dyad challenges notions of ‘sisterhood’ between women: assumptions about the mutual understanding based on ‘common’ gender roles are counterbalanced by class-based hierarchies that simultaneously intertwine with differences based on age, religion, race or ethnicity (Haskins 2001; Momsen 1999; Yeoh, Huang 1999). In fact, women in this dyad

have very different social positions. The asymmetry between the social position of employers and that of workers leads to a wide spectrum of phenomena, from abuse to benevolent maternalistic support (as in the emphasis on the worker being a ‘member of the family’) in which, albeit unwillingly, the employer exercises her power over a migrant subject who is dependent on her for her working and/or migratory status (Barua *et al* 2017; Marchetti 2016).

In the Latin American context, these differences between women as employer or employee are strongly inflected by colonial legacies and internal migrations. At the time of European colonialisms, domestic workers belonged to the subjected native indigenous groups and to the enslaved populations from Africa taken to work in plantations. Colonial legacies remained alive even after the end of slavery and independence, with the continued existence of indentured labour and servanthood in most places. The corresponding racialisation of social differences is still evident in Latin American societies in the disparity between different areas (for instance, former plantations vs. colonial capital cities), and in the social stratifications in urban settings. Such differences are of the utmost importance in the relationship between employers and employees, for example when the former belongs to the white urban middle-class and the latter is an afro-descendant woman living on the outskirts of a major city, or when women of indigenous background are working for mestizo households.

In light of these tensions, it often remains unclear to what extent the feminist debates on the valorisation of reproductive labour apply to paid domestic workers. Although the notion of reproductive labour is often used to analyse migrants’ employment in this sector (Kofman, Raghuram 2012), the specific relationship between feminist groups and domestic workers’ groups is not the object of theorisation or political elaboration. Does the logic behind the ‘value of care’ remain valid when these jobs are taken up by paid workers? Or should we avoid this delegation? In this respect, feminist



activists and academics do not seem to concur at the international level. Employing domestic workers can be seen as an anti-feminist gesture in many contexts. To fight to improve their formal rights can equally be seen as problematic, insofar as the delegation of these tasks is a dilemma from a feminist perspective. Thus, one wonders what the connection is between the domestic workers' international slogan 'Domestic work is work' (see section below) and the above-mentioned debates on reproductive labour among feminists, when the latter do not seem to mobilise for paid domestic workers. In the following, we offer a contextual explanation of this tension.

#### **4. Context and methodology: Ecuador and Colombia in the global scenario**

Beginning in the 2000s, the status of paid domestic workers – their poor working conditions and the discrimination they face in different parts of the world – has come to be seen as a 'global problem' and a challenge that exceeds national borders (Cherubini *et al* 2018; Fish 2017; Marchetti 2018). International organisations such the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and UN-Women (among others), as well as several international trade unions and nongovernmental organisations, have undertaken specific actions to promote domestic workers' rights. Pivotal in this process has been the passing of Convention 189 'concerning decent work for domestic workers' (C189) and the relative Recommendation 201 by the ILO in 2011. The convention demands that ratifying countries ensure equal rights between domestic workers and workers from other sectors, overcoming the legal discrimination historically experienced by these kinds of workers in most countries. Moreover, by promoting the idea of 'decent work', the convention also aims to overcome the social stigmatisation and discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, class, origin and migration status that are frequently experienced by these workers. International unions and non-profit organisations then campaigned for its ratification, amplifying the

core message for decent work and equal rights at the global level. Among these organisations, the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) played a leading role. Moreover, the founding of this organisation in 2012 testifies to the consolidation of a movement composed of domestic workers themselves.

Within this global scenario, in Ecuador and Colombia, paid domestic work has become an object of increasing attention from both institutional and non-institutional actors in the last decade. During the late 2000s and the 2010s, newly emergent mobilisations in the field have led to the creation or strengthening of paid domestic workers' organisations, their visibility in the public debate and the political agenda, and to pivotal legislative reforms (among them, the ratification of C189), that have expanded labour rights for this category of workers and are regarded as special achievements of these movements. As we discuss later, these achievements have been favoured by progressive political developments in both countries, related in Ecuador to Rafael Correa's administration (2007–2017) and in Colombia to the negotiations and the peace process (since 2012) following the internal armed conflict that has ravaged the country over the last 50 years<sup>5</sup>. Under these conditions, in both countries we see the expansion of rights for domestic workers as part of larger political projects working towards a more egalitarian society and the desire to include historically marginalised groups into a renewed national identity (Cherubini *et al* 2018; Marchetti 2018).

To sum up, both Colombia and Ecuador have gone through positive processes of transformation in the last decades, that have led to a significant improvement in the legal position of paid domestic workers<sup>6</sup>. Today, the two countries show similarities when it

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<sup>5</sup> The armed conflict that confronted the government, guerrilla groups FARC-EP (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, People's Army) and ELN (National Liberation Army) and paramilitary groups since 1964. In 2012, the first exploratory talks with the FARC-EP were announced; the negotiations went on, at different rates, until November 2016, when the Congress approved the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC. In the post-accords, although violence, clashes and assassinations have not ceased, the peace process, involving several civil society and state actors, continues.

<sup>6</sup> The impact of these legal changes on domestic workers' social and labor conditions implies long-term processes, the demonstration of which exceeds the scope of this article. For examples of key variations in

comes to the legal frame regulating domestic worker's labour rights as well as recent trends in domestic workers' organising. Other relevant similarities between the two countries have to do with the composition of the workforce in the sector, which appears to be fundamentally shaped by internal migrations, ethnic and racial diversity, and gender-race-class relations rooted in their colonial legacy.

According to the latest available data, around 681,000 people were employed as domestic workers in Colombia in 2017 and 214,000 in Ecuador in 2018, representing 3 percent of all workers in both countries<sup>7</sup>. Existing data as well as the qualitative accounts collected in interviews in both countries describe paid domestic work as a highly feminised sector, mainly employing women from lower social classes with low education levels, whose working conditions vary greatly according to their age, rural or urban residence, and ethnicity. Moreover, in both countries, rural to urban migrations as well as internal movements from poor to rich regions have long determined the composition of this workforce. In Ecuador, internal migration flows from the impoverished areas of both the mountains and the coastal areas to the main cities have gained increasing relevance since the 1970s (Vázquez, Saltos 2013) and mainly involve women and girls with indigenous Andean backgrounds in Quito and of Afro-Ecuadorian origin in Guayaquil. Interestingly, such internal flows coexist with consistent international mobility since the 1990s (Herrera 2013). In the case of Colombia, the massive displacement of the population affected by the armed conflict has added its effect to flows from the rural areas of the Pacific and Caribbean regions to the cities of Bogotá and Medellín. Moreover, the civil war had greatly harmed women of Afro-Colombian background who make up the majority of internally displaced war-refugees: the same social group that is employed

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these processes, see the ILO Policy Briefs on Domestic Work, [https://www.ilo.org/travail/info/WCMS\\_155773/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/travail/info/WCMS_155773/lang--en/index.htm) (Last accessed January 27<sup>th</sup> 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Data are taken from the *Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares* of the *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* (Colombia) and the *Encuesta Nacional de Empleo, Desempleo y Subempleo* of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (Ecuador).

more in the domestic sector in those cities today (Grupo de Memoria Historica 2011; 2013). In both countries, the majority of paid domestic workers are, respectively, Colombian and Ecuadorian nationals, although international migrants from other Latin American countries are also present and include, notably, Colombian refugees and Peruvian migrants in Ecuador, and, more recently, Venezuelan refugees in both countries.

Taking such features into account, we can say that we are confronted with two national contexts that can be considered a comparable background for the analysis of the activities and alliances of domestic workers' organisations that we will discuss in the following sections.

Against this background, we offer a comparative study of two selected organisations mobilising for domestic workers' rights in Colombia and Ecuador, focusing on their relationship with feminist actors. The two domestic workers' organisations, both composed and led by women employed in the sector, were chosen both for their visibility and for the impact of their actions at the national level, in the period from the late 2000s to 2018.

This analysis is part of a broader comparative study on the transformations of paid domestic workers' rights and conditions in Europe, Latin America and Asia from 1950 to the present day. The argument presented in this article is based primarily on 23 qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants in each country, and can be divided into three groups: a) academic experts working on domestic workers and related issues from various disciplines (social sciences, social work, history, and law); b) policy makers, governmental and state actors, and international organisations (in particular, the ILO regional offices); and c) civic societies and social movement actors mobilising for domestic workers' rights and in related fields. This last group of informants includes people belonging to domestic workers' grassroots organisations, women's and feminist groups, ethnic minority organisations, trade unions and workers' organisations, human

rights and non-governmental organisations; they were selected according to the mapping of the relevant actors in the field, and the interviews were carried out by the local researchers throughout a one-year fieldwork period. These interviews are complemented by analysis of policy documents, documents produced by domestic workers' organisations and by ethnographic observations during meetings and workshops with local stakeholders. Local researchers<sup>8</sup> gathered data between April 2017 and March 2018, while the authors made ethnographic visits and conducted workshops between September 2017 and January 2018.

## **5. The case of Ecuador**

In Ecuador, paid domestic workers were granted the same labour rights and provisions as other workers after the new Constitution in 2008 and the C189 ratification in 2013. This achievement is the result of a recent history of grassroots mobilisation and state intervention in the field.

The first domestic workers' organisation, ATRH (*Asociación de Trabajadoras Remuneradas de Hogar*), was created in the late 1990s in Guayaquil, a major Ecuadorian city. It mainly operated at the local level until the second half of the 2000s, when it gained visibility at the national level. This move was accompanied by an increasing politicisation of the issue which had previously been absent from both state's and movements' agendas, as the result of two concurrent yet independent processes.

First, in the frame of the increased global mobilisation for domestic workers' rights that surrounded the drafting and promulgation of C189, ATRH was acknowledged as the local interlocutor for Ecuador and thus received technical and financial support by international governmental and non-governmental organisations active in the fields of human rights, women's and labour rights, and development, such as UN-Women, FOS-

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<sup>8</sup> We thank our country-experts for their contribution: María Gabriela Alvarado Perez and Fernanda Cepeda Anaya

Socialist Solidarity (from Belgium), and the Latin American office of CARE International (from the US). This fostered ATRH's collaboration with these organisations in activities targeting women employed in the sector, as well as in lobbying political institutions, such as in the campaign for the ratification of C189 that ran from 2011 to 2013.

Second, Rafael Correa's administration openly expressed its support for the demands of paid domestic workers. President Correa promoted domestic workers' rights as part of the broader programme of socio-economic and political reforms known as the 'Citizen Revolution': a political agenda meant to be favourable to popular strata and the working class, and to promote the expansion of social and civil rights for all the citizens, but particularly for historically excluded groups (for example indigenous groups, afro-descendants, rural population, and women).

Notably, the 2008 constitution included paid domestic workers in the existing norms on labour and social security for the first time, extending the right to decent work, a minimum wage and universal access to social security to all workers. Along with the removal of discrimination in law against these workers, the new constitution also emphasised the value of reproductive labour.

These constitutional norms were followed shortly by legal reforms on the minimum wage and working hours<sup>9</sup>, by public policies for the improvement of working conditions and access to social security<sup>10</sup>, and by the ratification of C189 in December 2013. Moreover, these legal reforms and public policies were accompanied by symbolically charged transformations in the public discourse. For instance, President Correa involved domestic workers' representatives in consultations on labour reforms and invited them to personal

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Organic Law Defending Labour Rights (2012) equated the working times for domestic workers to those accorded to other workers, while the governmental policy of salary unification equated domestic workers' minimum wage in 2010 and rose their monthly minimum wage from 55 dollars in 2005 to 340 dollars in 2014 (Moncayo 2014, 111-115).

<sup>10</sup> Specific plans for promoting decent work in the sector were deployed by the Ministry of Labour since 2010, including measures such as: capacity-building and awareness raising, online procedures and information points on compulsory subscription to social security and wage calculation, labour inspections in private household employing domestic workers (CARE 2014; Moncayo 2014).

meetings at the presidential palace, while an equality-based language was adopted in government's official communications on the topic. Such achievements for domestic workers' rights need to be understood as part and parcel of a period of advancements in the legal and social status of marginalised groups, economic expansion and strong political dynamism among indigenous, feminist, and workers' groups.

However, the last phase of the Correa administration was characterised by a general discontent among social movements, due to the perceived lack of loyalty to constitutional principles on human rights, women's, indigenous and environmental rights. This led to increasing divisions within civil society organisations, particularly around their position with respect to governmental policies (Profumi 2017). Within this fraught context, in 2015–2016 ATRH split into two organisations: the first kept the original name and maintained the preferential relationships established with governmental actors, while a second, denominated UNTHYA (*Unión Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar y Afines*), distanced itself from such political influence. During this phase and until the moment of our fieldwork, new requests by domestic workers to make formal rights a reality were not taken up by the state. Moreover, the sector still lacks a specific law on domestic workers, which is stipulated by C189.

### ***5.1 'Labour rights' or 'economía feminista y solidaria'? Relationships between feminist and domestic workers' groups in Ecuador***

In Ecuador, the claim for decent work and equal rights for domestic workers has not paved the way for a possible a coalition between domestic workers and feminist activists. Rather, in our understanding, in the timeframe under analysis the two movements seem to act in separate, yet not opposed, fields of action (Fligstein, McAdam 2012). This means Ecuadorian feminists have not put domestic workers' demands on their agenda. Although not openly opposing domestic workers' claims and often declaring sympathy for their

struggle, feminist organisations actually have different foci for their actions, interact with different networks, and privilege issues that promise to address all women, such as, for instance, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive rights, health and social services and economic autonomy. On the other hand, despite some collaborations with women's and feminist organisations, organised domestic workers do not self-identify as part of the Ecuadorian feminist struggle. Rather, they have strengthened their collaboration with both international NGOs and the government, whose support brought strategic advantages to the domestic workers' cause and helped to achieve the legal changes described above.

The important thing here is that since its creation and during the first years of activity, ATRH received technical support and training (such as information on labour rights, reproductive health, gender-based violence, self-care and self-esteem) from local non-profit organisations promoting women's rights and supporting the victims of domestic violence: the Maria Guare Foundation and CEPAM (*Centro Ecuatoriano para la Promoción y Acción de la Mujer*). According to the ATRH founders, the relationship with these local women's NGOs played a key role in the initial organising process, as they provided the occasion to meet with other domestic workers, to gain awareness of their social and labour conditions, and to react to widespread rights abuses, labour exploitation and the invisibility of the sector. Nonetheless, such collaborations did not lead to ATRH's inclusion in the broader feminist movement.

Our key feminist informants, as well as many of the experts and domestic workers' allies interviewed, mention a number of reasons that can help explain such division between feminists and domestic workers. First, the incumbent role of the government and the political polarisation existing in Ecuadorian civil society; second, the historical isolation of domestic workers' groups from other social movements; and finally, the influence of international cooperation which further distanced domestic workers from



other local grassroots groups. In our view, however, as relevant as these reasons may be, they do not sufficiently explain the factors at play.

In fact, our empirical data suggests that non-alignment between grassroots feminist and domestic workers' groups also depends on the different ways in which these two actors frame their struggle for the valorisation of reproductive labour, and the social recognition of the people who perform it.

In what follows, we focus on this last factor and analyse the framing processes at play on either side. In order to deal with the heterogeneity of the feminist movements in the country, we focus on two feminist grassroots collectives included in our research, the National Movement of Women from Popular Sectors, *Luna Creciente* (*Movimiento nacional de mujeres de sectores populares Luna Creciente*), and the Assembly of Popular and Diverse Women (*Asamblea de mujeres populares y diversas*). Drawing on interviews with activists in these groups, we see that both nationwide networks self-identify as part of a feminism coming from, and representing, women from popular sectors of society, namely, the working class, the rural and racialised communities and as including all kind of diversity. Moreover, both collectives have shared some space of encounter or sporadic common activities with organised domestic workers over the years. As such, we selected them for this analysis since they were close to the domestic workers' demands and interests, and eager to find forms of collaboration with them.

From the points of view reflected in the interviews with ATRH leaders, paid domestic workers are considered primarily as discriminated-against workers, who nevertheless actively contribute to the economy and wellbeing of families, communities and society at large. ATRH's leaders express a strong awareness of the value of their job, as well as of the continuity with the work they perform for their own households. This means that, in advancing their arguments and demands, organised domestic workers reproduce the feminist claims about the value of reproductive labour and the centrality of

this activity in reproducing women's social position, as shown in section 2. All these arguments are conspicuous in the following excerpt from Lourdes Alban, one of the participants of the association, serving as regional coordinator at the time of the fieldwork:

« It is a hard job, it is not recognised, rights are always violated. Here we can see the patriarchal system: that women, not just those employed in the household, women in general, just because they are women, they must be related to reproduction, to take care of their home, of their spouse, right? This for me is a patriarchal system. [...] For that, I always tell them: comrade, madame, look, our job is as important as any other job, we also contribute to the economy of this country, we allow other families' economic and professional development. Because we take care of these families, we provide for our families with our work, thus there is nothing to be ashamed of. We are not stealing. We are doing a job»

At the same time however, ATRH leaders also express a clear discernment of the intersectional gendered and classist constructions concerning paid domestic workers, something that has been extensively described in the literature (see section 3) and that they experience on a daily basis. The following excerpt from the interview with Lourdes Alban, again, exemplifies the argument:

«The social classes that we come from, we are low social classes [...] We are people who decided to work in a household for different reasons, some of us did not have any other opportunity, others could not free themselves from these chains, their mother, grandmother, generation after generation doing this job»

To sum up, domestic workers' position in Ecuador, we may say that while they advance a reading of the gendered character of reproductive labour which is rooted in feminist analysis; at the same time they also underline the class dimension of their work and see their collective action as part of the struggle for the social and economic advancement of working-class women and, more broadly, for class equality. Drawing on this interpretation, they strategically prioritise the struggle for enlarging their labour rights

and focus on their interests as paid domestic workers, while the equal division of reproductive labour between women and men remains in the background, as a secondary objective sporadically targeted in the awareness-raising activities directed to the members.

On the other hand, from the standpoint of the Ecuadorian grassroots feminists involved in our research, the focus is on the concept of ‘economía solidaria y feminista’, as a complex set of social relations of reciprocity that encompasses all reproductive labour and that link together people, families and communities (see section 2). The common position among feminist activists signals the need to overcome the dichotomy between productive and reproductive labour and the redistribution of the latter between men and women, as well as greater engagement and responsibility in the matter by men, the state and the community.

Consistent with this position, the feminist activists recognise the pragmatic value of domestic workers’ claims for labour rights, welcome their achievements and express solidarity. They also report having tried to find common ground for joint action on more than one occasion, and having attempted to arrange shared meetings and activities aimed at personal and political empowerment and self-training. However, it seems to us that they tend to see the achievement of rights and decent working conditions for women employed in the sector as a valuable goal only when anchored in broader feminist struggles. That is, they only value it when domestic workers’ demands are seen to embody feminist ideals against women’s poverty and lack of autonomy, and when the representation of reproductive labour as a demeaning type of activity is symbolically subverted.

All of these different interpretative frames are clearly mobilised in the following interview excerpt where Clara Merino from the Luna Creciente grassroots collective explains:

«Domestic workers, of course, must be recognised as [doing] work that is sustaining the whole capitalist system. The enrichment of a few is based on this paid and unpaid work, the caring of life, the care economy. So, we know that we must also fight for equality in all kinds of work, for equal wages and the like, but we also know that until a different kind of economy is created, more communitarian and where the caring of life is the responsibility of every man and woman, until then a change towards an egalitarian system is very hard. [...] I mean, actually there is support for their proposals, we are in support of that, yet there has not been a move to engage specifically for their rights, for the rights of the comrades employed in domestic work»

In the subsequent conversation, the same activist points out the relevance of joining forces towards unitary goals and struggles that may unite popular women:

«There are common struggles out there, for wages, for access to housing, property and services, for health, education... These should be the key struggles for the comrades employed as paid domestic workers as for those employed in other kinds of jobs»

In this frame, the demands of paid domestic workers run the risk of being perceived by feminist grassroots actors as fringe parts of broader problems, or as particularistic struggles, driven by sectorial interests – defined in contrast to the general interests of women, and, in particular, working-class and low-status women.

## **6. The case of Colombia**

In comparison to Ecuador, Colombia has a longer history of mobilising for domestic workers' rights, since the first Catholic or secular domestic workers' organisations have been running since, respectively, the late 1930s and the late 1970s. The 1980s especially represent an important antecedent to today's movement. Several campaigns took place during this time accompanied by a proliferation of new domestic workers' organisations, which successfully lobbied for the passage of new legislation favourable to the category<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Law 11 of 1988 facilitated access to social security, pension and health care for paid domestic workers.

However, in the 1990s and 2000s, these mobilising processes were interrupted by the worsening of the internal armed conflict and the increased political violence against social and labour activists. The few existing organisations continued running mainly at the local level.

During the 2010s, two factors contributed to a renewed politicisation on the issue of domestic workers' rights, with an increase in the mobilisation and visibility of domestic workers' groups, at both the local and the national level. First, the transnational mobilisation that was taking place around C189 attracted the attention of international actors and non-profit organisations, similar to what we described above for Ecuador. This opened up new opportunities of financial support for domestic workers' organisations by international unions and NGOs promoting fair employment, economic rights and women's advancement (such as the Finnish trade union solidarity centre SASK and CARE International, among others). Second, the new political opportunities that emerged in the context of the Colombian peace process, namely the restorative policies targeting the affected population<sup>12</sup>, as well as women's grassroots mobilisations for transition to peace and conflict resolution (Paalberg-Kvam 2019), which fostered awareness of the specific needs of women and racialised populations who were victims of the armed conflict.

The recent wave of domestic workers' organising in the 2010s saw the creation of new unions such as the domestic workers' chapter of the national union SINTRAIMAGRA, based in Bucaramanga, and UTRASD (*Unión de trabajadoras Afrocolombianas del servicio doméstico*) based in Medellín. The latter, according to our informants, has been the most active and visible in the period under analysis in this article.

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<sup>12</sup> Among them, Law 1448 of 2011, known as 'Victims' law' (Ley de Víctima y restitución de tierras) dictated assistance, attention and integral reparation the armed conflict victims, as well as land restitution.

Notably, during this phase relevant institutional steps were taken toward equal labour rights for paid domestic workers. Colombia ratified C189 in 2012<sup>13</sup> and thereafter adopted a number of measures that included this category of workers within the general social security system<sup>14</sup>. In 2016, thanks to the campaign run by domestic workers and their allies – that we will analyse in the next section – the right to the ‘*prima de servicio*’ (the additional bonus that workers receive twice a year) has also been extended to domestic workers<sup>15</sup>. Despite these relevant achievements, however, the law still discriminates between domestic workers and other workers (for example, in relation to the ten-hour working day for live-in workers) and there is still no law specifically addressing domestic work. Organised domestic workers, moreover, denounce the lack of implementation of formal rights that were recently gained.

### ***6.1 The Law on Bonus and the coalition between domestic workers and feminists in Colombia***

UTRASD was founded in the early 2010s by a group of Afro-Colombian women domestic workers, mainly internal war-refugees who had been involved in an action-research project on the conditions of this population (Morales and Muñoz Cañas 2013). Since its creation, UTRASD has received support from non-profit organisations such as CARABANTÚ (*Corporación Afrocolombiana de Desarrollo Social y Cultural*), ENS (*Escuela Nacional Sindical*) and Bien Humano Foundation. These are nation-wide organisations active in the fields of Afro-Colombian minorities’ rights, workers’ rights and union empowerment, and education and social change. Moreover, since its inception, UTRASD has also received financial aid by international unions and NGOs promoting decent work and women’s rights in Latin America and worldwide.

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<sup>13</sup> Law 1595. The Convention entered into force in 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Decree 2616 of 2013 expanding access to social security to domestic workers hired ‘per day’; Decree 721 giving access to family benefits.

<sup>15</sup> Law 1778 of 2016.

UTRASD began its activities when the main issue at stake for domestic workers was the improvement of the normative framework in compliance with the requirements set out by C189, which had been ratified by the government without major opposition. In this context, at the end of 2013, UTRASD started a campaign for the Law on Bonus (*Ley de Prima*) consisting of several advocacy events, a communication strategy tackling mass media and social networks, and lobbying activities directed at institutional actors and policy makers. The campaign was promoted by a coalition composed of UTRASD together with the two long-term allies mentioned above, ENS and Bien Humano Foundation, and two feminist congresswomen from the Green Party, Ángela María Robledo and Angélica Lozano. The campaign culminated in the parliamentary debates after which the law was finally approved in June 2016.

The main demand of the campaign – the access to the wage bonus – reflected the core claims and ideals at the basis of UTRASD collective action: first, in terms of achievement of equal labour rights, and second, in relation to their recognition as workers producing valuable services for the employers' household and for the Colombian economy and society. Similar to what we have described for Ecuadorian leaders, UTRASD's members appear proud in portraying domestic workers as a category performing an indispensable job and in asking for more rights and recognition for 'domestic work as work' – as in the words of one of its leaders, Claribed Palacios García:

«Sexism, capitalism, all these things are detrimental to us, the domestic workers [...] It is a matter of recognising [the domestic worker] as a human being, a person, an important source not just for my household as an employer, but also for the entire country, because we as domestic workers largely contribute to the economy of this country. [...] Domestic work is not going to disappear, so let us recognise it, respect it, dignify it! [...] Our message? Domestic workers [feminine form used] give value to your work [...], do it right but give it the right price too. The point is, I do my job well and I demand decent treatment, because domestic work is not a favour, domestic work [...] is work. It is like the nurse, like the professor, the gardener»

This quotation shows how UTRASD promotes an intersectional reading of discrimination and abuses experienced by domestic workers (like other domestic workers' organisations). They are aware of the continuity existing between paid and unpaid domestic work, but in addition, they also elaborate on the gendered, classist and racist dynamics that assign women (particularly in this case, to black women) the responsibility for reproductive labour.

What matters in the Colombian case, unlike Ecuador, is that the need of equal labour rights for domestic workers, based on the awareness of their contribution to society, does not remain a claim solely of UTRASD, but is instead included in a larger campaign in which the valorisation of all reproductive labour seem to converge. This has been possible thanks to a favourable political configuration.

In fact, it is important to highlight that all UTRASD's allies had previously been involved in the public debate on the value of reproductive labour which had been growing in the country since the late 2000s and which led to the Law on the Care Economy in 2010<sup>16</sup>. This law laid out the basis for the financial calculation of the 'care economy' in official national statistics, as a tool for the recognition of the social and economic value of reproductive labour performed by women, and to promote appropriate public policies in the field. After that, a national committee gathering institutional and non-institutional actors was created in order to monitor the implementation of the law: the Intersectoral Committee for the Care Economy (*Mesa intersectorial de economía del cuidado*). According to our key informants, the committee, along with being a key space of planning and negotiation with institutions, has also allowed the building of the coalition and the strategic planning that lies behind the campaign for the bonus to domestic workers.

As mentioned before, the Law on Bonus extended the right to receive the thirteenth check (given to all workers in 'productive' sectors) to domestic workers.

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<sup>16</sup> Law 1413 of 2010.



Notable here is that the argument at the centre of this historical exclusion – opposing *reproductive* to *productive* work– was overturned, and with it, the assumption that domestic workers do not produce any profit. This was achieved by drawing on feminist debates about the value of reproductive labour. The coalition campaign concentrated on two elements in order to emphasise this: first, the existence of the Law on the Care Economy, and second, the possibility of formally calculating the contribution of domestic workers to the national GDP. The combination of the two enabled the reframing of domestic workers’ exclusion as discrimination against a valuable category of workers who actively contribute to Colombian society and even to the national economy.

This is how Andrea Londoño, a long-term ally of UTRASD and former spokesperson of the project ‘Let us talk about domestic workers’ at the Bien Humano Foundation, describes the process:

«Definitely in recent years the ‘care economy’ is what has given to the feminist movement those figures that economists require for making public policies. [...] I can tell you that in almost every more or less serious discussion and analysis on gender equality, in Colombia we can [now] make use of figures of the Care Economy<sup>17</sup>, and in this way the discussion is actually among peers. Before it was a bit romantic and abstract. »

From the descriptions of the Law on Bonus campaign as well as from this last quotation, what emerges clearly is the strategic relevance that the Law on the Care Economy (as the antecedent victory of the feminist movement described above) played in the rhetorical strengthening of the argument for the achievement of the bonus, a significant step towards equal labour rights for paid domestic workers. It also relied on the strategic ability of

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<sup>17</sup> The interviewee makes reference to the official statistics integrated in the national statistics on economy by the Colombian Statistical Institute (DANE)

UTRASD and allies to take it up and rephrase it – although that law was actually primarily related to unpaid work performed by women for their families<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, the campaign developed by UTRASD may be seen as an example of convergence between the domestic workers' struggle for labour rights and feminist struggles for the transformation of the socio-cultural representation of reproductive labour and recognition of the value of women's work. In Colombia the legal and discursive frame of the social and economic value of reproductive labour has transformed into one favourable to domestic workers' struggles.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

In this article we have explored the relationships between domestic workers' organisations and feminist actors mobilising for the valorisation of domestic labour in Ecuador and Colombia. These two country-cases have proven illustrative of divergent processes that may take place alongside struggles to promote the idea of 'domestic work as work', a goal that, as we have shown, both feminist and domestic workers' activists pursue in socio-cultural, political as well as in legal domains, yet with different outcomes depending on the context.

Through the examples of the Colombian and the Ecuadorian cases, we see that an assumed commonality of interests based on ideals of gender equality and on the social recognition of reproductive labour may actually find different applications in different temporal and political contexts. In Ecuador, for example, such an assumed convergence of interests seems to be overshadowed by political and ideological differences and, more specifically, by the differing focus with respect to either paid or unpaid reproductive labour between domestic workers and feminist activists. In the case of Colombia, by

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<sup>18</sup> According to the law definition 'Care Economy' refers to unpaid work deployed in the household for home maintenance, the caring of family member or for the community and the reproduction of the paid workforce

contrast, the theoretical dilemma between focusing on paid vs. unpaid work has been temporarily resolved on the ground, thanks to strategic actions of social movement actors and the opening of opportunities within the broader political context.

In the common scenario of the (re)politicisation of women's and domestic workers' rights and its rescaling from the local to the national level that has marked the last decade in both Ecuador and Colombia, the two countries represent opposite trajectories. Colombia may be seen as exemplary of a possible strategic convergence between domestic workers and feminists around the common idea of the 'care economy' (discussed in section 2). In this context, the feminist achievement represented by the 2010 Law on Care Economy - which recognized the value of reproductive labour and particularly unpaid work - was subsequently expanded to encompass domestic workers' labour rights and was strategically used to overcome part of the salary discrimination. Notably, this has happened thanks to an ad-hoc coalition built by feminists from NGOs, political institutions and academia and the domestic workers' organisation considered in this article.

Ecuador, by contrast, emerges as an example of how movements can embark on separate roads towards the valorisation of reproductive labour. Despite sharing common discursive grounds rooted in the feminist theories of reproductive labour (discussed in the first part of the article), the feminist and domestic workers' groups under analysis frame the struggles for the valorization of reproductive labour in divergent ways. Organized domestic workers stress class inequalities among women and prioritise labour rights for paid domestic workers, while feminist actors aspire to a broader redistribution of reproductive labour between genders, the state and the social community. In the polarised political space that marked the country in the last decade, these framing processes have reinforced the division between the two movements, and thus they have not engaged in coalition-building.

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