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Global Care Crisis and COVID-19: The Actions of States and the Initiatives of Female Domestic Paid Workers in Latin America

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Abstract: Since 2020, social movements, organizations, and nation-states in Latin America have taken concrete actions in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Although contingency policies were promoted, it did not take long for inequities to become visible. The paid domestic work sector, historically feminized, was strongly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. While Latin American governments launched various assistance policies for the domestic work sector, a contemporary regional initiative of Latin American women, CONLACTRAHO, was also working with its members to help them retain their jobs while risking contracting the disease. Here, we will explore the initiatives developed by some Latin American governments and strategies from CONLACTRAHO in the context of the care crisis and the COVID-19 crisis. These examples will allow us to reflect, from a qualitative, intersectional, and decolonial approach, on commonalities and differences between the civil society agenda and the gender agenda of nation-states in the region. We understand that the unequal labor conditions of domestic workers are strongly related to the societal gender regime that historically distributes roles, opportunities, and resources among gender categories. This work is part of a broader reflection regarding the process of Latin American regional construction and its interrelation with contemporary ideas of nation.

Keywords: nation; gender regime; region; paid domestic work; Latin America



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis had a very specific impact on women, especially women from popular sectors or with informal jobs. Women from all social classes were forced to spend more time at home, often with their families or partners. This situation multiplied their domestic tasks, since care tasks that were usually delegated to institutions (schools, care spaces) and other people, mostly women (family members who assumed care tasks for free or employees), fell back on the women living at home. Quarantine and isolation also allowed us to visualize that the day-to-day management of the home in heteropatriarchal households usually falls on women.

This situation was particularly serious for women who hold informal jobs or jobs in which the existing legal framework is not respected (ECLAC 2020b; UN Women et al. 2020). Paid domestic workers, a sector that has historically presented important rates of informality, not only had to deal with the work overload that the COVID-19 crisis meant for all women, but they also went through situations of mistreatment by their employers and states. In this context, community care actions and pre-existing solidarity networks prevailed. Likewise, the experiences of social mobilization that called out the situation of the popular sectors and the living conditions of Latin American women were strengthened.

A contemporary regional initiative of Latin American women, the Confederación Latinoamericana de Trabajadoras del Hogar (CONLACTRAHO), had many members trying to retain their jobs while risking contracting the disease.

During the 20th century, several Latin American governments implemented political programs that helped define their nation and face the diversity contained in their territories. Then, with the outbreak of COVID-19 in the 21st century, some of these governments launched assistance programs for the domestic work sector.

This paper explores these government programs as well as the current initiatives developed by CONLACTRAHO and the national organizations inside the Confederation in the context of the care and COVID-19 crises. These initiatives will allow us to reflect, from a qualitative, intersectional, and decolonial approach, on commonalities and differences between civil society norms along with attitudes toward gender roles in the region.

Based on an analysis of paid domestic work organizations and an assessment of government programs, this work will seek to contribute to the reflection upon the attitudes toward gender roles in Latin American societies.

This work is also part of a broader reflection regarding the process of construction of Latin America and its interaction with the existing ideas of nation in the region. We understand that contemporary national societies are unfinished signification processes. During this process, societies of the region are grappling with concepts of gender roles and answering questions about what constitutes inclusion in a diverse society. Those who have been excluded from the national narratives—women, ethnic groups, and sexual diversity, among others—are questioning those symbolic constructions, as the discourses of exclusion have a direct impact on the distribution of the material resources of society.

This work is designed to contribute to a theoretical journey about the link between the idea of nation and the construction of sex and gender categories—what we call the national gender regime (Walby 2000). Our theoretical framework will help us to continue reflecting on the conflict in the nation, the correlation among its hegemonic forces, and the place of heterogeneity in multicultural proposals. Based on the exploration of a regional organizational experience and government actions aimed at the care crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, we create an analytical scenario to reflect on the contemporary gender regime of Latin American nations and their interaction with the scale of transnational collective action.

After presenting our objectives and approach, the next section of this article introduces the theoretical framework on nation and gender from which we address the collective experiences of Latin American domestic workers in the face of COVID-19. In that section, we discuss how each nation builds and holds a specific gender regime that has a direct impact on the way societies deal with the consequences of a crisis. Section 3 describes the introduction of a gender agenda in Latin American governments and international organizations. In this way, we think about how gender regimes have been changing in Latin America and how this has affected paid domestic workers. After presenting our theoretical perspective and the context for addressing the situation of paid domestic workers, Section 4 describes actions carried out by Latin American governments and by domestic workers' organizations during the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, Section 5 presents some final reflections that are a starting point for future approaches to the subject. We revisit in that section what is the main argument of this work: that government interventions and legislation are founded on hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality (which we understand as national gender regimes). Those ideas have a direct impact on the living conditions of the population. We understand that the unequal labor conditions of domestic workers are strongly related to the national gender regime that historically distributes roles, opportunities, and resources among gender categories. Here, we explore the living and labor conditions of domestic paid workers, specifically during the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Nation, Gender, and Care Crisis

National projects (and, we add, nationalist movements) are gendered (Walby 2000; Lugones 2008). These representations establish the limits of what is possible and what is not allowed, coming into conflict with the ideas held by other nations and nationalisms. Silvia Walby (2000) refers to the ways of categorizing genders and sexes in a national

context as a specific gender regime that works at a structural level, that is susceptible to historical changes but that, in addition, must be analyzed by appreciating the differences and giving space to transformations. A gender regime is composed of six structures or domains, systemically linked together under two main forms, the domestic and the public gender regime: paid employment, domestic production, politics, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions (Walby 2000). This distinction would make it possible to evaluate different gender regimes in a comparative key and to observe in which nation states there is a regime where the public sphere predominates—where women are not so much excluded as subordinate or segregated—and a more domestic regime, where women are excluded from the public space.

Rita Segato (2007) has also written about the particular forms that each nation develops to deal with diversity. Under the concept of national forms of alterity, Segato describes nations as historical formations based on the construction of social frameworks in which diversity is contained in specific ways. Each nation organizes its internal diversities differently. This organization is hierarchical and is not exempt from conflict. Segato proposes the concept of historical alterities to account for how otherness is organized in specific fields. Conceptualizations of the other and their experience change across national borders and historical processes. The senses in which identity terms are organized also change across nations. The nation, then, represents a particular historical formation, which includes a specific matrix of differences. This idea coincides in some points with Walby's concept of gender regime, as for Segato, each nation develops a particular way of dealing with that heterogeneity and builds representations and hierarchies that have a historical origin.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) propose a categorization of how women were historically involved in nation-building processes: as biological reproducers, as ideological reproducers of the collectivity, and then as reproducers of their borders, as signifiers of national differences, and finally as participants in national economic and political struggles. Given that nations and nationalism are usually understood as part of the political sphere (the public), the exclusion of women from that sphere has implied their exclusion from the discourse on the national. This location of each gender in a different sphere has explained much of the oppression of women (Yuval Davis 1997).

Within the domestic space, especially when they are included in a family group, women are in charge of the social role of intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions, music, customs, gastronomy, and language. Their actions reproduce and confirm the symbolic borders of the nation while reinforcing the idea of national homogeneity on which the division between us and them is sustained. Their role as guardians of symbolic borders is so relevant to the nation that it is their behavior, including their sexual conduct, that shows what is allowed and what is not considered acceptable. Different control and punishment devices are put into operation. For this reason, it is a conceptual error to consider that the family is an area where the individual prevails over the collective and that remains free from the political sphere. This idea denies social relations within the family, confusing all its members in a homogenizing view and denying the distribution of power within the group (Walby 1994).

Nation states legitimize actions, codifications, patterns of behavior, and ideas. The state consolidates those ideas into institutions, including the hierarchies (of gender, ethnicity, class, etc.) that these ideas propose. In addition to condensing the institutions responsible for the administration of life within a national community, the state represents a resource of power for those groups that dispute the possibility of installing legitimately sustained hegemonic ideas. The ideas about the relations between genders that the state maintains and reproduces are invisible under the idea of equality or legal neutrality that a democratic state supposes (Yuval Davis 1993). However, it is in the daily exercise of sovereignty where these hierarchical differences can be felt.

The link between state and nation forms a symbolic and structural framework of inclusion and exclusion, which is reflected in specific institutions, policies, and programs

through which the state shapes the nation and builds gender roles (Gutiérrez Chong 2006). The citizenship of women (at least, women who belong to the hegemonic ethnic group and class) carries a greater complexity given its duality: they have been included in the universalist idea of citizenship that sustains the democratic regime, and they are also reached by particular social and legal policies (Walby 1994).

However, female citizens usually have a series of particular policies and targeted legislation that gives them specific characteristics. Inside these policies, even in their legislation, it is also possible to recover symbolic constructions regarding gender identities. This is evident in the legal disputes led by organizations of paid domestic workers, in which they encounter resistance to equating the legal conditions of their activity with any other job (López and Loza 2019). The claimed universality of democratic citizenship does not cease to be situated within the historical borders of a nation.

The ideas about sexuality and gender that a community holds in each historical moment respond, following Partha Chatterjee (2008), to the hegemonic alliance of that time, which was able to impose a specific discourse about the national leader. Readings about inequality within the national community allow us to deepen these affirmations: for Stavenhagen (2001), the dilemma of the construction of the nation under certain dominant ideas is that they guarantee a distribution of material resources that leaves mired in inequality to broad masses of that nation. That is, there is materiality produced by the dissemination of certain ideas. The distribution of this materiality, in terms of gender and sex categories, excludes those who do not fall into the hegemonic categories of public policies and legal protections. Access to rights guaranteed by a nation state is governed, then, by the ideas of community that this administration contains. We can think, then, that the historical and widespread lack of legal protection of paid domestic workers and reproductive work in general is directly linked to the gender categories on which nations were built.

The development of the capitalist system rests on the aforementioned gendered division of public (productive) and private (reproductive) spheres, and the lack of recognition of the contribution of women's work in the private sphere to the productive sphere (Federici 2010; Faur 2014). The division between private and public spheres is reproduced in what we called the national gender regime (Walby 2000; Segato 2007) in Section 2.

The invisibility of the subordination of reproductive work to productive work is what has guaranteed the sustainability of that national gender regime and the economic system (Ezquerro 2011), legitimized by certain ideas about the community such as we discussed in previous pages. As Leonor Faur (2014) explains, government institutions that provide care services have been designed in tune with the roles and expectations assigned to each gender, that is, within the symbolic framework that established family models and cooperates with the capitalist economic order.

The care crisis refers to the phenomenon that reveals the difficulties in meeting the real care needs of the population, as well as the absence of state strategies and policies to solve it. The traditional system of task distribution begins to break down when women have greater access to the labor market outside the home. This restructuring of the production system did not, however, bring with it a reformulation of the traditional model of sharing roles and tasks within the home (Ezquerro 2011). In the last few years, this issue has had a strong impact on media coverage but also on transnational networks and social organizations in general. The pandemic aggravated the urgency to think about who takes care of those who need it and how those responsibilities are distributed within the home.

3. National States and International Organizations' Gender Agenda: What Is the Place for Care Work?

We should like to emphasize that in this article we seek to show that the labor conditions of domestic workers in Latin America are directly related to the national gender regime that historically distributes roles, opportunities, and resources among gender categories. On this basis, in this section, we will explore national and international bodies

of labor legislation and institutions that regulate domestic work. We will also go through civil society experiences, showing the link between those initiatives and the international or regional gender agenda.

Exploring the international system makes it possible to identify a path that is not very linear, which includes the participation of non-state actors and which has had an impact on how national states organize their gender regimes¹.

The process of institutionalizing the gender agenda gave legitimacy to government initiatives but also to civil society mobilizations, which gained recognition for their demands. In 1975, the United Nations Organization created the first program focused on the situation of women, UNIFEM, which would later become the current UN Women. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was signed, an important advance in support of anti-discrimination legislation. In 1994, for its part, the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence against Women (known as the Convention of Belém do Pará, the location of its adoption in 1994) was signed. Those instruments generated government institutions and supported policies to promote equal opportunities (Valdés 2003).

In Latin America, the government coalition Mercosur (created in 1991 with the Treaty of Asunción, signed by Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay) institutionalized its gender agenda in 1998 with the creation of the Specialized Meeting for Women (REM), which mainly discussed equal opportunities in the workplace, showing the bias on the productivity of the bloc. These approaches in Mercosur sought to show that economic policies impact employment and reproductive work in a differentiated way according to gender (Espino 2001). However, the participation of civil society in Mercosur occurred gradually, and at the beginning, this participation was carried out by trade unionists and academics, who in turn were gaining space in governments (Valdés 2003).

The issues addressed from a gender perspective were expanded until 2005, when educational issues were included in the discussion on equal opportunities, at the same time that strategies for the eradication of gender-based violence began to be considered. The following years included the participation of civil society actors in the design of mechanisms to incorporate the gender dimension in the block in a transversal way, and the participating governments.

Institutional support for gender equality was strengthened in Mercosur in 2011, when the REM reconfigured its status, becoming the Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities for Women in Mercosur (RMAAM, as of CMC 24/11). The RMAAM now summoned the highest gender authorities in the structure of the governments of the block, constituting itself as a space for dialogue and interaction that proposes initiatives and advises the decision-making body of Mercosur. At the same time, the Meeting of High Authorities on Human Rights of Mercosur established the Working Group on Gender and Women's Human Rights, which today functions as a permanent commission and is advised by the IPPDH (created in 2008). The Working Group incorporated a cross-cutting gender perspective into all priority activities. In addition, it was proposed to monitor the adequacy of the regulations of the countries of the block to the international and regional Human Rights instruments related to the situation of women.

The discussion on paid domestic work entered first the agenda of feminist spaces in Latin America, such as the Latin American Feminist Encounters, conveyed by women's organizations that maintain fluid contact with the struggle of domestic workers (Goldsmith 2013). These spaces served to consolidate alliances with women's organizations, such as the Feminist Articulation Marcosur (mentioned above for its advocacy link within the MERCOSUR regional bloc), which has launched the campaign "Raising your voice: Domestic Workers" for the training of activists. Marcosur has also performed research and dissemination on the working conditions in the sector. In 2009, the MERCOSUR Parliament started supporting this initiative (Goldsmith 2013). MERCOSUR officially included the situation of paid domestic workers in its agenda in 2017, when the RMAAM emphasized the issue on its agenda. The same year, at a MERCOSUR meeting, member countries

committed to support the formalization of this activity in the countries that form the bloc and to contribute to reducing the existing gaps between legislation and the exercise of rights.

The existing coordination between social organizations from Latin American countries is not a novelty and has deepened in recent decades. In the experiences of transnational collective action, we find the possibility for local social movements to rebuild or affirm subordinate identity ties and establish links with other movements. In the mobilizations that take Latin America as a reference, the transnational or regional scale is consolidated. The actors involved in those experiences appeal to daily regionality. Here, local identities come into dispute, although we observe that they do not lose presence but rather interact with other scales of action (Jelín 2003).

Sonia Alvarez maintains that it was the meetings between feminist organizations in the region that consolidated an international gender agenda that was built and rebuilt as a product of a constant exchange between the international, national, and local spheres, the academic sphere, and the popular sectors, states, and organizations, and civil society of women and sexual diversity. For Vargas Valente (2005), the regionalization of feminism began in 1981 with the creation of the Latin American Feminist Encounters, although Valdés (2003) mentions a slightly older antecedent, the Inter-American Commission of Women, the first conference to convene the subject in Latin America, held in Havana in 1930. These meetings arose from previous contacts between female activists and were an important element in the regionalization of the political processes that feminism spearheaded. Sonia Alvarez will say that they helped build an idea of an “imagined” Latin American feminist community, whose borders are in constant negotiation (Álvarez et al. 2003). That imagined community also built strong ideas about who is a legitimate member of it and who is not, and what the principles that define them are. One of the characteristics of the Latin American feminist mobilization has been a marked anti-imperialism and a strong work of articulation with other demands (Lamus Canavate 2007).

The 1990s showed an increase in feminist organizations intervening in national and international political processes. The opening of international organizations to the participation of civil society was essential for deepening the access of social organizations to the regional scene, as well as for the construction of new advocacy strategies and the strengthening of transnational ties. From then on, “feminists thus began to be fundamental actors in the construction of democratic spaces of civil, regional and global societies” (Vargas Valente 2005, p. 138, own translation), with the consequent professionalization of some of the fields traditionally linked to the claims of women’s movements, such as sexual and reproductive rights. The increase in international funding allowed many organizations to strengthen their structures (Lamus Canavate 2007), but at the same time, it gave these experiences a highly technical nuance, which met the requirements of the funders and transformed political claims into activities and projects. This hybrid identity of feminist organizations raised the question of representation and the space of militancy.

In the case of domestic paid workers, the support of international organizations such as the ILO and the UN was fundamental for the positioning of their claims on the international scene (Goldsmith 2013). At the 99th and 100th ILO Conferences, international standards for domestic workers were specifically discussed, signing Convention 189 “On Decent Work for Domestic Workers” and giving room for regulatory changes in national contexts. Since then, ILO has functioned as a disseminating actor of information through the publication of analyses and data on the situation of domestic workers in the region.

Despite this political context inside feminism and the institutionalization of domestic workers’ claims in the gender national and regional agendas, collective action amongst paid domestic workers is challenging. There are historical conditions that have weighed on the trajectories of national organizations and regional organizations that need to be acknowledged. The labor market has devalued reproductive work by not considering it a proper job, thus leaving domestic work conditions outside the scope of the demands of workers’ unions. The historical majority presence of men in union leadership and

the under-representation of working women in these spaces also represent obstacles to organizing domestic workers.

The transnational collective action of paid domestic workers in Latin America consolidated in the 1990s and the care crisis and COVID-19 crisis might have been an opportunity to strengthen their strategies and reinforce their common frames of meaning. However, experiences of the global visibility of claims are directly related to what happens in each national context. Thus, national identity is often the organizing axis of transnational mobilization networks and the criteria for representation in international organizations. That is why we will analyze some national initiatives on paid domestic work during the pandemic in the next section.

4. COVID-19 Crisis and Care Work: National States' Actions during Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis, unleashed in 2020 and still ongoing, evidenced the vulnerability of female workers' lives and bodies, as well as the weakness of trade union confederations in Latin America when it comes to the issue of domestic work (Poblete 2021). In my opinion, the crisis showed the existing strong structural inequalities in access to employment, education, and health for large sectors of the region's population. Under these conditions, women saw their living conditions impoverishing and inequalities increasing (ECLAC 2020b; Blofield and Filgueira 2020). For women who were already employed in vulnerable conditions, the opportunities to comply with current legislation were reduced, whereas the safety and health risks of their jobs increased.

Information released by different organizations estimates that between 50% and 70% of paid domestic workers in the region lost their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis (ECLAC 2020b; Blofield and Filgueira 2020). The highly vulnerable conditions these workers are used to suffering were exacerbated by the increase in demand for their services, as schools and other childcare spaces closed during the pandemic, as well as their exposure to the virus, as they were considered essential workers who continued to work normally after the outbreak of COVID-19 (Blofield and Filgueira 2020; Poblete 2021).

A survey conducted by the International Federation of Domestic Workers and CON-LACTRAHO between April and May 2020 found that paid domestic workers in Latin America were fired or suspended in large numbers: 77% of them in Colombia, more than half were fired in Chile (56%) and Paraguay (55%), and only 15% in Argentina (cited in Poblete 2021, p. 38). In Argentina, half of the workers who were already hired continued to receive their salaries, whereas in Chile and Colombia, less than 10% received their salaries during the same period (Poblete 2021).

It is estimated that there are 18 million paid domestic workers in the region, 93% of whom are women (UN Women et al. 2020; ECLAC 2020b). These women compose 11.4% of the regional female workforce (ECLAC 2020b). Although Latin America is the region where the largest number of countries have ratified Convention 189 (UN Women et al. 2020; Themis 2021), progress in labor security for women in reproductive work has been limited and very slow (López and Loza 2019).

The national legislations that contemplate the remunerated activity of domestic work have not managed to grant sufficient protection to workers, especially in comparison with other labor activities that have legal regimes anchored in representations about these activities (López and Loza 2019; Poblete 2021). In addition, in countries where there is a specific legal framework on paid domestic work, the implementation of these protections has been very complicated given certain characteristics of the activity: it is carried out in the privacy of the home, there is usually a single person employed at each house, and there is a high lack of knowledge of labor rights amongst employers and employees (Poblete 2021).

Argentina and Uruguay have presented concrete progress with legislation that seeks to regularize paid domestic work, given that around 80% of this sector is still in informality (ILO 2016). It is estimated that in Latin America, only 24% of paid domestic workers benefit from health or social security services (Torres Santana 2021). ECLAC reported on another

fundamental inequality, related to access to information and communications technology (ICT) (ECLAC 2020b).

During the pandemic, Latin American countries adapted pre-existing mechanisms and tools to face the crisis unleashed by COVID-19 (Blofield and Filgueira 2020). Latin American governments concentrated their efforts on the distribution of subsidies to workers, the extension of permits to be absent from their workplaces, and the application of the regulatory framework of paid domestic work. Let us review some national cases to think, then, about the actions of the organizations that bring together paid domestic workers.

Uruguay continued the implementation of the National Care System (SNIC), an initiative enshrined in Law 19353 of 2015. It is the only country in the region that has made progress in putting together a care system with qualifications and training guaranteed by the state. The SNIC starts from a comprehensive perspective on care, in which it considers people who require attention or care as a target population, assuming them as rights. At the same time, the SNIC law deals with caregivers as workers who require the training and labor protection that the state can guarantee. Implementation involves extending care services, reconciling working life with family reproduction, regulating existing public and private services, and training caregivers, both those who receive remuneration for their work and those who do not.

Argentina passed Law 26844 in 2013, which attempted to formalize workers in the sector, and launched a new initiative in 2021 that seeks to help unregistered workers retain and formalize their jobs. With the support of ECLAC, Argentina also designed the Federal Map of Care to register institutions that are of care services in the whole country (ECLAC 2020a). The debate between care and the reproductive economy has been institutionalized in the Inter-ministerial Commission for Care Policies, created to plan public policies for a social organization of care.

Additionally, we observed some money distribution initiatives for female workers who had lost jobs during the pandemic in other Latin American countries. In Costa Rica, domestic workers were able to apply for the Bono Proteger when their working hours were reduced or when they were fired from their jobs. Argentina created the Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia, which reached out to all workers who had lost their jobs during the pandemic, including domestic workers. For their part, Mexico and Peru established measures to facilitate compliance with employers' obligations towards domestic workers.

We also observed other strategies, of which we will name some examples: Argentina established paid leave for domestic workers for the duration of the confinement. In cases where female workers were deemed essential (caring for people), their employers had to ensure that they would not be exposed to the virus. In countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, and Costa Rica, the governments promoted dissemination and awareness campaigns on the guarantee of the rights of domestic workers. In Ecuador, an interinstitutional roundtable was established to support domestic workers' rights, with the contribution of the national government, ILO, UN Women, and unions.

In 2021, the year in which the first decade of the signing of ILO Convention 189 was commemorated, CONLACTRAHO developed a series of studies and exchange initiatives with organizations, unions, and governments to discuss whether alternative reports are useful tools to publicize the status of the application of the Convention in the countries of the region that had ratified it. Although these meetings highlighted the political and cultural diversity of the countries gathered in CONLACTRAHO, they also made it possible to reaffirm the regional extension of the situation of vulnerability of women workers, as well as the rights violations that they usually suffer, and the persistence of discriminatory and racist practices. Faced with these conditions, the organizations seek to consolidate effective mechanisms for reporting and protecting women domestic workers against violations of their fundamental rights.

Since the COVID-19 crisis started, CONLACTRAHO has been disseminating information about the situation of paid domestic workers in the region to awaken greater awareness in society. However, they have also been working together with other organizations to

achieve policy influence through national governments of the region and intergovernmental organizations, especially in compliance with the regulations already approved. The national organizations of paid domestic workers and CONLACTRAHO continued working to convince Latin American countries to expand the recognition of labor rights for those women.

Organizations of domestic workers in the region were also actively involved in denouncing situations of rights violations during the COVID-19 crisis. In Brazil, one of the first deaths from COVID-19 was a domestic worker who was forced to continue working at the home of her employer. In that country, organizations denounced situations of forced labor, in which employers prevented the workers from returning to their homes. In other countries, such as Argentina, although such extreme situations were not reported, there were cases of women who preferred to stay at their workplace because of the fear of losing their jobs if they left. During the quarantine, in addition, there were cases of migrant women who were forced to continue working without receiving wages (ECLAC 2020a).

International organizations and agencies were very active in generating and disseminating specific information on the situation of domestic workers, as well as recommendations for policy intervention. CARE, a US-based organization that supports CONLACTRAHO, shared outreach campaigns with updated information on the conditions of women workers in the region during the pandemic. The NGO reported that the salary of domestic workers was reduced on average by 50%, as their working hours were cut or they lost some of their multiple jobs. Intergovernmental agencies such as ILO, UNDP, and ECLAC have also been advocating for regularization in national contexts as a way to improve working conditions in addition to promoting the strengthening of domestic workers' unions.

CONLACTRAHO and CARE worked on the campaign "Use of digital tools and platforms to defend the Rights of Domestic Workers in Latin America", through which representatives of unions and domestic workers' organizations of 11 countries were trained in the use of social networks and regional communication campaigns from their own narratives. In this context, they launched the Illustrated Manual of ILO Convention 190, as a strategy to make it more accessible to women workers.

The crisis unleashed by COVID-19 evidenced the need to think socially, as a state policy, for the reproductive economy and care tasks. However, in addition, it showed the vulnerability of the situation of paid domestic workers. The care crisis requires active states that take measures to protect those who require care and those families who face an unequal distribution of tasks. The distribution of care services is unequal in terms of gender but also in terms of class, as households that can afford to pay for them have access to private care, reproducing the existing inequality. That is why it is also the responsibility of the state to apply the legal framework—or create it if it does not yet exist—that protects the work of those who care in exchange for remuneration and consolidates the institutional infrastructure of care that allows covering the needs of men and women who work outside their homes.

What the mobilization of domestic paid workers showed during the pandemic is that the intergovernmental negotiations at the regional and international levels are not enough to improve the conditions in which Latin American domestic workers live. The work of grassroots organizations is then elemental, as they implement strategies that reach domestic workers. They also pursue the recognition of the importance of their jobs among workers. Additionally, the dissemination of information is aimed to make employers understand domestic workers' contribution to daily life. The pace of regional gender governance does not seem to follow the velocity of the current crisis.

Despite the advances regarding the organization of paid domestic workers on the transnational scale, as well as the inclusion of the topic of domestic work within the strengthening process of the gender agendas of regional organizations, the gap between existing legislation and the situation of female domestic workers is still very large. It is possible to think that the active participation of women's organizations at the regional and international scales interacted with social representations on the region and domestic

work that allowed inclusion that is claimed in the gender agenda. At the national scale, representations of domestic work and gender regimes seem to act as a strong obstacle to the implementation of international agreements.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic outbreak in 2020 aggravated the care crisis in an unprecedented way and urged us to rethink how Latin American nations interpret these tasks and see their workers, a vast majority of whom are women. The historical discrimination—by gender, race, and ethnicity—that weighed on these women contributes to increasing their invisibility.

The international dimension of paid domestic work is also observed in the circulation of female workers in what has been called global care chains. International migrations have become more feminized, increasing the number of women and girls who leave their homes looking for better labor opportunities abroad, leaving their own families to the care of other women, generally relatives. In other words, it is necessary to analyze these processes from an intersectional perspective: a gender perspective that observes the geopolitics of migration and its materiality in each household.

Female domestic workers show difficulties in unionizing themselves, linked to the characteristics of the activity and the historical undervaluation of their work. However, in the context of the crisis unleashed by COVID-19, they demonstrated their ability to respond to emergencies and work together with governments (or alone) to bring resources to a sector of the population that was experiencing extreme vulnerability. In parallel, the organizations continued with their central objective: to make visible the conditions of domestic workers marked by the lack of recognition and rights.

In those efforts, we can see that the protection of care workers across Latin America continues to be a strategy for civil society. During the deep crisis unleashed by COVID-19, we observed in Latin America how the active participation of domestic workers' organizations has been sustained, denouncing the situation of extreme vulnerability in which the sector found itself. On this basis, the entire Latin American region appears as a political platform for collective action.

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Notes

- ¹ The gender agenda of international organizations was strengthened at the end of the 20th century, after a process that began some decades earlier. In 1975, named International Women's Year, the First World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City. This Conference resulted in the World Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women and the Declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women and Development (1975–1985). In the 1990s, two conferences marked turning points for the global agenda for gender equality: the International Conference on Population and Development (held in Cairo in 1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995). The latter achieved the signing of a joint declaration and the application of a Platform for Action. The Beijing process was characterized by providing transversality and by supporting affirmative policies in terms of gender diversity.

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