

# Feminist Care Policy in Action: How Bogotá, Colombia Pioneered the Blocks of Care



## About the authors

Dr. Jennifer M. Piscopo is Professor of Gender and Politics and Director of the Gender Institute at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is co-PI of CaRI, the Care, Rights, and Inclusion project. [www.jenniferpiscopo.com](http://www.jenniferpiscopo.com)

Dr. Kiran Stallone is a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University and Senior Researcher at Ladysmith Collective. She is co-PI of CaRI, the Care, Rights, and Inclusion project. <https://kiranstallone.com/>

## About the Gender Institute

The Gender Institute at Royal Holloway, University of London is a hub for research, teaching, learning, and activism about gender, gender identity, and sexuality in all their diversity.

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank SIDICU's Laura Gamba for all her assistance with fieldwork coordination and report preparation; Merike Blofield for her comments; and Ana María Granda Moreno, Luisa Salazar Escalante, and Charli McMackin for their outstanding research assistance. This research received financial support from the Social Purpose grant at Royal Holloway, University of London.

## Recommended citation

Piscopo, Jennifer M. and Kiran Stallone. 2025. "Feminist Care Policy in Action: How Bogotá, Colombia Pioneered the Blocks of Care." The Gender Institute, Royal Holloway, University of London, Policy Report No. 1.

# Executive Summary

Worldwide, women are responsible for the majority of unpaid domestic work in the home. Feminist care policy that supports unpaid carers and reduces their burden recognizes care's economic value and enhances population wellbeing. Bogotá, Colombia's city-wide care system is at the forefront of these policy efforts. The care system's signature program is the manzanas del cuidado ("Streets of Care" or "Blocks of Care"): community centers that offer continuing education, respite, physical activity, entrepreneurship training, and psychological and legal services to carers—all free of charge.

This policy report draws on interviews with 13 policymakers alongside site visits to six manzanas, which included interviews with 29 staff members and focus groups with 25 women users. By utilizing existing infrastructure and sharing program provision across different agencies, Bogotá's Blocks of Care are cost-effective, flexible, and responsive to local neighborhoods' distinct identities. Women users report high satisfaction with the manzanas' services, especially the recreation and income-generating opportunities and the workshops on women's rights. Bogotá's experience shows that innovative care policies are possible and the manzanas model can be adapted and replicated in other national or subnational contexts.

## Resumen ejecutivo

A nivel mundial, las mujeres son responsables de la mayor parte del trabajo doméstico no remunerado en el hogar. Una política feminista de cuidados que apoye a las personas cuidadoras no remuneradas y reduzca su carga de trabajo reconoce el valor económico del cuidado y mejora el bienestar de la población. El sistema de cuidados de la ciudad de Bogotá, Colombia, está a la vanguardia de estos esfuerzos políticos. El programa emblemático del sistema de cuidados son las manzanas del cuidado ("Calles del Cuidado" o "Bloques del Cuidado"): centros comunitarios que ofrecen educación continua, espacios de descanso, actividad física, formación en emprendimiento y servicios psicológicos y jurídicos para las personas cuidadoras, todo ello de manera gratuita.

Este informe se basa en entrevistas con 13 responsables de políticas, así como en visitas a seis manzanas, que incluyeron entrevistas con 29 miembros del personal y grupos focales con 25 mujeres usuarias. Al utilizar infraestructura existente y compartir la provisión del programa entre diferentes agencias, las Manzanas del Cuidado de Bogotá resultan rentables, flexibles y responden a las identidades particulares de los barrios locales. Las mujeres usuarias reportan una alta satisfacción con los servicios de las manzanas, especialmente con las oportunidades recreativas y de generar ingresos, así como con los talleres sobre derechos de las mujeres. La experiencia de Bogotá demuestra que es posible innovar en el diseño de las políticas de cuidado, y su modelo puede adaptarse y replicarse en otros contextos nacionales y subnacionales.

# Introduction

“Before the manzana, I did not take time for myself,” a focus group participant reported in April 2025. Another explained that “being in the manzana, I realized that socializing with people and making contact with others brings me happiness.” The women were describing their participation in Bogotá, Colombia’s manzanas del cuidado, which translates to “Streets of Care” or “Blocks of Care” (as in the streets in your neighborhood). The manzanas are community centers open to the city’s estimated 1.3 million carers.<sup>1</sup> They offer continuing education, respite, physical activity, entrepreneurship training, and psychological and legal services—all free of charge. The vast majority of users are women, although the Blocks of Care welcome people of all genders in caregiving roles. Since their 2020 launch as the flagship element of Bogotá’s District System of Care (SIDICU, by its Spanish acronym), thousands of women have visited the manzanas. The manzanas’ users have learned new skills, from digital literacy to starting small businesses to riding a bicycle.

Worldwide, women are responsible for the majority of unpaid care work (around 75%).<sup>2</sup> Unpaid care encompasses the domestic chores performed in the home, including cooking, cleaning, and performing childcare and eldercare.<sup>3</sup> That unpaid care work contributes substantially to countries’ gross domestic product (GDP) is now well-established. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Nations Development Programme estimates that domestic tasks account for 21% of GDP.<sup>4</sup> Recently, global bodies like the International Labour Organization and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America have collaborated with national policymakers and women’s movements to draft new care policy frameworks.<sup>5</sup>

These initiatives include efforts to count unpaid care work in national statistics. In Latin America, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile have passed national care systems that aim to harmonize and universalize the provision of care for children, elders, and dependent adults. Others, like Argentina and Bolivia, have created special pension contributions for women who exit the labor market due to care responsibilities. Yet only Bogotá, Colombia, has implemented a care system that returns women carers the time and opportunities that unpaid care work has cost them.

Bogotá’s SIDICU and its Blocks of Care place carers’ needs front and center. In 2020, women’s movement representatives and activists, feminist economists, and municipal policymakers came together to design a municipal-level care system operated by the city’s Women’s Secretariat. Within their first three years of operation, 18 Blocks of Care had attended to 68,000 users.<sup>6</sup> As of July 2025, SIDICU now provides 25 Blocks of Care, with at least one manzana operating in each of Bogotá’s 20 localities.<sup>7</sup>

This brief draws on the authors’ primary research into the history, design, structure, successes, challenges, and key lessons of Bogotá’s Blocks of Care. Data gathered over April–May 2025 include authors’ interviews with 13 policymakers involved in the SIDICU’s initial design and current management; site visits to six Blocks of Care; 29 interviews with the manzanas’ coordinators, staff, and instructors; and focus groups with 25 women users.<sup>8</sup> Bogotá’s experience reveals that innovative care policy can happen in Latin America and the rest of the world. Indeed, that the manzanas could be created to serve women carers in a mega-city of nearly 8 million people suggests the exportability of the model to other municipal and national settings.

<sup>1</sup> Secretaría Distrital de la Mujer (Bogotá). 2023. “Informe de resultados línea base del sistema distrital del cuidado.” Bogotá, Colombia.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women. 2022. “A Toolkit on Paid and Unpaid Care Work: From 3Rs to 5Rs.” New York: UN Women, p. 5. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/A-toolkit-on-paid-and-unpaid-care-work-en.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> UNDP. 2024. “The Missing Piece: Valuing Women’s Unrecognized Contribution to the Economy.” New York: United Nations Development Programme, March 8. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/missing-piece-valuing-womens-unrecognized-contribution-economy>

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the 2024 resolution adopted by the International Labour Organization’s International Labour Council, ILC.112/Resolution V, available at: [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ILC112-Resolution%20V-%7BRELMEETINGS-240620-001%7D-Web-EN\\_0.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ILC112-Resolution%20V-%7BRELMEETINGS-240620-001%7D-Web-EN_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá. 2023. “Informe de resultados.” Document SDP-CM-001-2023, Bogotá, Colombia, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> As a mega-city, Bogotá consists of 20 localities and refers to itself as a district (distrito, in Spanish) rather than a city. Hence, its care system is formally the District System of Care and the Bogotá-wide agencies that run and support the system are technically District Secretariats, e.g., the District Secretariat for Women. In this brief, however, we use the terms “municipality” and “city” to help readers in diverse national contexts make the analogy to their own government levels.

<sup>8</sup> The authors also conducted documentary and background research over January–June 2025. All photos were taken with permission by the authors during fieldwork.



# Establishing the Manzanas del Cuidado

The gendered burden and economic value of unpaid care had long been on the Colombian women's movement agenda. In 2007, Bogotá formed the Consultative Council of Women of Bogotá, an official advisory body comprised of 46 women from diverse backgrounds, to guide city policies and programs related to gender equality. At the national level, in 2010, the Colombian Congress passed Law 1413, which mandated the calculation and inclusion of unpaid household work into the national accounts, to measure women's contribution to economic productivity. The law required the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, by its Spanish acronym) to develop measurement mechanisms, including periodic time-use surveys to capture women's and men's self-reported hours on paid and unpaid work. Law 1413 also created an oversight body to which DANE would report, leading policymakers, academics, trade union members, and representatives from women's civil society groups to create

the first feminist economic roundtable at the national level. A similar roundtable was formed in Bogotá in 2014, making the care concerns already articulated within the Consultative Council of Women of Bogotá more visible at the local level.

These developments all contributed to opening the window of opportunity for creating a Bogotá-wide care system. The 2019 campaign and election of Claudia López, the city's first woman and out-lesbian mayor, provided the final catalyst. López made a formal pact with the Consultative Council of Women of Bogotá and women's and feminist movements. During her campaign, López made a formal pact with the Consultative Council of Women of Bogotá. The pact included the promise to establish a Bogotá-wide system of care "that recognizes women's overload of unremunerated work and that reduces and redistributes this work within the home and among the city government, the market, and social,



The exterior of the manzana Engativá-Pueblo. The manzana was celebrating its anniversary, and women graduates of the income generation program were selling their products.

community, and family organizations.”<sup>9</sup> Following López’s victory, a team within the municipal Women’s Secretariat formed to design the promised care system. They did not know the exact form the care system would take, but as one team member recounts, “The focus on carers was there from day one.” This distinction matters: whereas other care systems aim to provide care services, thus benefiting those who are “cared for,” the Bogotá women’s movement insisted on a care system that would benefit carers directly.

Two principles guided the Women’s Secretariat team during the design phase. First, the principle of “the 3Rs”: that any care system needed to recognize, redistribute, and reduce women’s care burden. Second, that any system needed to save carers’ time, meaning any physical spaces would need to be close to or integrated with services or places carers already visit, such as schools, health clinics, or existing community centers. The latter corresponds with best practices in urban planning, such as “15-minute cities” (the idea that all residents count on needed services and shops within a 15-minute walking radius from their home) and “universal design” (the idea that any environment should be built for access, understanding, and use by all, regardless of identity or ability).

The team leveraged DANE’s national time use surveys and other sociodemographic data to, as one member recalls, “map the care burden” in different Bogotá localities. These baseline measures would show, for example, that Bogotá women each day averaged about 2 hours and 35 minutes more than men on unpaid care, and that women exceeded this average in the city’s more marginal neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> They then combined such data with census data on the number of women residents, the number of children, and women’s poverty to create indices of prioritization. They partnered with feminist academics to conduct focus groups and phone surveys to assess the community’s needs and to understand what city services or spaces women already visited. They also held planning sessions with other city secretariats, in which the Consultative Council of Women of Bogotá and the feminist roundtables on care sent representatives to speak on carers’ behalf. As a team leader explained, “The idea was to assess where the services

already were, the supply, and to understand the care demand, and to cross the two.”

The manzanas del cuidado, as the centerpiece of Bogotá’s system of care, emerged from this process: the manzanas would consolidate city services around care within a nexus of city streets or neighborhood blocks, hence the name. As the team worked on the design, preserving the focus on carers became essential. One team member explained, “You have to think clearly about the differences between care services and social services, they are not the same.” Another illustrated with an anecdote. As policymakers deliberated the menu of services, someone suggested incorporating an existing program wherein women conflict victims engaged in creative activities. The team member rejected this idea: “That is a great program, but it is not about carers,” she stated emphatically. In their view, Bogotá already offered transitional justice programs and conflict victims already received services. The SIDICU and its Blocks of Care needed to orient themselves towards the population not currently served: carers. The team wanted the manzanas to be more than a regular women’s community center; they wanted to provide tailored opportunities that women carers lacked because they were time poor.

The design process ultimately combined principles, academic research, and community consultation. The District System of Care emerged during the first six months of López’s administration (January–June 2020). The SIDICU would have three parts: (1) the manzanas del cuidado, physical spaces closely located to other city services, such as community centers, schools, and recreational facilities; (2) the buses of care (buses de cuidado, in Spanish), mobile manzanas that would set up temporary care spaces in hard-to-reach communities; and (3) assistance in the home, for those who could not travel to a permanent or temporary care space. Of the three, the manzanas del cuidado—the Blocks of Care—became the most prominent.

<sup>9</sup> López, Claudia. 2019. “Pact of Claudia López with the Diversity of Women That Live in and Comprise the Social Fabric of Bogotá in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Bogotá, Colombia, October 22.

<sup>10</sup> Secretaría Distrital de la Mujer 2023, p. 23.



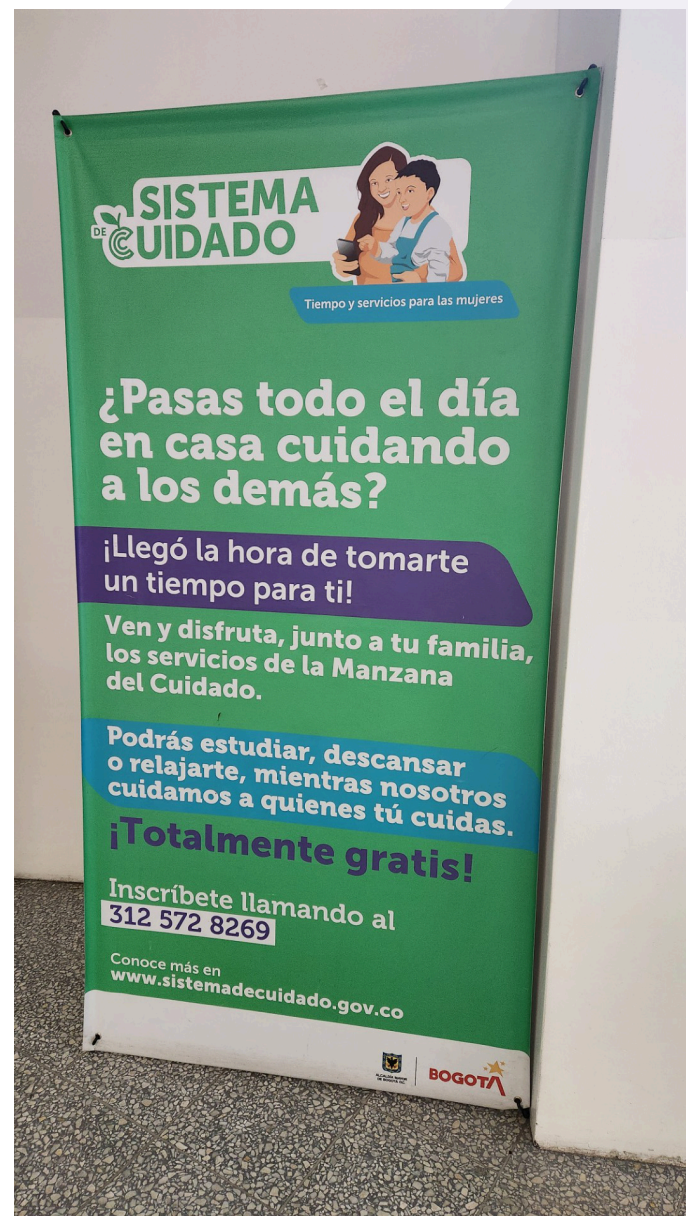
# Structuring the Manzanas del Cuidado: A Nested Model

The concept of the manzanas was novel, but to actually create them, policymakers built on and combined existing infrastructure, programs, and services. In their design process, the Women's Secretariat team identified the core design principles. First, the manzanas would be located within existing spaces. Second, the manzanas would focus on services within three broad categories that addressed carers' foregone opportunities: formation (education and training), respite (including recreation), and income generation. Third, the Women's Secretariat would administer the manzanas, but they would combine their signature services and programs with those already offered by other city secretariats or government agencies, again focusing on formation, respite, and income generation. The key partners within Bogotá are the city Secretariats of Social Integration; Health; Economic Development; and Culture, Recreation, and Sport.

To locate the manzanas, the Women's Secretariat team begins by examining existing buildings providing care-related or adjacent services and asks, "who has underutilized space?" The team then visits each potential space and considers not just the services already offered at the location, but the proximity of other city services and the community needs. The entity operating the space, usually another city secretariat, then serves as the manzana's "institutional anchor" (equipamento ancla, in Spanish). The Women's Secretariat and the institutional anchor sign a bilateral agreement to host the manzana. In this way, each locality receives a manzana in a different space, one already tailored to the neighborhood's profile in ways that the Blocks of Care can then build upon.

In some localities, the manzana has opened in clinics run by the Secretariat of Health and in others, in centers for community development run by the Secretariat for Social Integration. Other manzanas have opened in justice centers run by the Secretariat for Security, Coexistence, and Justice. In Martires, an area containing a large itinerant population and a red-light district, a former strip club reclaimed as a

community arts hub serves as the institutional anchor. In the semi-rural locality of Juan Rey, the institutional anchor is the visitor center of an ecological park administered by the Secretariat of the Environment. And at the Manitas manzana, located in a low-income neighborhood high on the mountainside, the manzana operates in a supercade, a city office that unites all the various secretariats' services in one place, facilitating residents' access to support.



Publicity for the manzanas. In English the banner reads, "Do you spend all day at home taking care of others? It's time to take some time for yourself! Come and enjoy, with your family, the services of the Care Block (Manzana del Cuidado). You'll be able to study, rest, or relax while we take care of the people you care for. Completely free!"

The SIDICU's partners, primarily but not exclusively the other city secretariats, offer their own services and programs through the manzanas. Each offering corresponds to the pillars of formation, respite, and income generation. Formation includes flexible and continuing education programs for literacy and degree completion, alongside workshops on topics like digital literacy. Respite includes classes like yoga, meditation, dance, tai chi, and urban gardening. Income generation entails an "entrepreneurship route" consisting of courses on small-business creation and management and an "employment route" that includes support for job-seeking, resume writing, and interviewing.

All courses and programs are tailored to meet carers' particular situations. For instance, the municipal Secretariat for Education flexibilized the time requirements for completing certain degree courses, recognizing that carers' studies often become interrupted. The National Training Service created a new certificate course in care provision, allowing carers to be credentialed in tasks they already know how to perform, but granting them formal recognition they can use for seeking remunerated care work. Bogotá's Secretariat for Economic Development designed the employment and entrepreneurship routes, alongside other training courses, with carers' needs in mind. Their programs emphasize objectives like labor market re-entry and scaling-up micro-businesses.

The participation of city secretariats and other agencies in the manzanas' offerings is guaranteed via an inter-institutional agreement between the Women's Secretariat and the 22 different entities contributing to the manzanas. This agreement forms the core contract of Bogotá's SIDICU. Each individual manzana is then governed by a technical sheet that describes the target population, the institutional anchor, and lists the services particular to that manzana. The technical sheet contains a data-driven report on the locality's care burden, drawing from the Women Secretariat team's research using the time-use surveys and other sociodemographic data. The technical sheet describes the manzanas' user base, including figures such as the number of proximate households where women over 15 complete domestic chores as their primary activity. The technical sheet then lists the manzana's particular offerings, which entity provides the service or program, and how often. The technical sheet

creates a contract between the manzana, the institutional anchor, and all the participating city secretariats and government agencies.

Technical sheets and day-to-day practice reflect adjustments based on the anchor and the locality. For instance, Martires links users with nighttime nurseries for children, given its population's working hours, while Juan Rey's nurseries operate only during the day. Martires's location in a community arts space means its user base—migrants, sex workers, and other marginalized individuals—has access to art therapy, but it has no outdoor space to offer the urban gardening found in other manzanas. Juan Rey's location in the mountainous ecological park makes a bicycle school impractical, and Juan Rey offers hiking instead, alongside courses on recycling, conservation, and animal husbandry. "Each manzana has its own particularity," one staff member explained.

In this way, the Blocks of Care are cost-effective and locally-based. They require neither new infrastructure nor the wholesale creation of new services and programs. The Women's Secretariat provides core staffing and core elements (discussed below) while the other entities contribute the marginal cost of extending and adapting their existing offerings to the manzanas. The Blocks of Care capitalize on existing infrastructure and public goods while responding to each locality's built environment and needs. This variation means the per-manzana costs vary. Overall, estimates placed the annual all-in operating costs—including all staffing, programming, and utilities—for the first 19 Blocks of Care at 58,191 million Colombian pesos, or approximately 15 million US dollars.<sup>11</sup>

The nested model explains how the Women's Secretariat team could design and open 25 manzanas in just five years. The Women's Secretariat maintains ultimate responsibility for operating SIDICU and the manzanas. Within the Women's Secretariat, SIDICU corresponds to the Sub-Secretary for Care and Equality Policies. This Sub-Secretary hosts the SIDICU Director, who oversees staff divided into an administrative and planning team, a legal and governance team, a technical team, and a communications and outreach team. At the manzana level, the Women's Secretariat funds

<sup>11</sup> Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2023, pp. 171-177.





An urban garden at the manzana Engativá-Pueblo. Women learn to plant and harvest a variety of fruits and vegetables at the manzanas. The banner reads, "This neighborhood has a Block of Care" and lists the SIDICU's website.

three full-time staff members in each manzana alongside instructors who visit several manzanas.

Among the full-time staff members is the coordinator, who liaises with the institutional anchor, sets the schedule, and sits on a "local roundtable" to reflect, review, and discuss the Blocks of Care's day-to-day operations. The roundtables are organized by the Women's Secretariat and include coordinators from several manzanas, a "territorial link" (a Women's Secretariat staff who oversees several manzanas), and representatives from the other contributing agencies. In addition to this operational role, coordinators promote the manzana. All coordinators spoke of going "door to door" in the community, handing out fliers advertising the manzana, and relying on word of mouth to recruit users. Coordinators are the first point of contact for carers arriving at the manzana, orienting new users. Their role is technical but also social: they are embedded in the locality, directly interfacing with and supporting the community. They forge ties with women's groups, connecting women's movement members to the manzanas. The other staffers and instructors help the Women's Secretariat deliver their signature programs, to ensure the Blocks of Care deliver the feminist vision of recognizing, redistributing, and reducing women's care burden.

## Ensuring a Feminist Vision: Caring for the Carers

Bogotá's Blocks of Care are unique in recognizing and redistributing unpaid care work. The idea is not to help carers be better at providing care, but to empower them to invest in themselves and to assert their rights. Central to all manzanas' operations are core programs the Women's Secretariat designed exclusively for the manzanas. As one member of the national and Bogotá-based feminist roundtables on the care economy recalled, "The first step was to organize the manzanas to help the carers, and the second step was to make sure the manzanas were feminist." The Women's Secretariat's programs realize both goals.

From the beginning, the manzanas' designers understood that women carers needed time to visit the manzanas. Each manzana provides a program called "the art of caring for yourself" (arte de cuidarte in Spanish), a childcare service



## Bogotá's Blocks of Care – The Basics

- ✓ Flagship program of Bogotá's Care System.
- ✓ 25 Blocks of Care operate in 20 localities (as of July 2025).
- ✓ Return to carers the time and opportunities their unpaid care work has cost them.
- ✓ Programs focus on education and training, respite and recreation, and income generation.
- ✓ Majority of users are women, but all genders welcome.
- ✓ Administered by the municipal Women's Secretariat and established via an inter-institutional agreement with 22 governmental and non-governmental partners.
- ✓ Each operates within an institutional anchor, a physical space co-located with another city service.
- ✓ Each Block of Care has:
  - ✓ One full-time coordinator.
  - ✓ A "psycho-juridic double": a full-time lawyer and a full-time psychologist working in a pair to provide counselling and legal support.
  - ✓ At least one pedagogy specialist overseeing a children's day care.
  - ✓ Instructors leading two core courses that focus on women's rights and the care economy.
  - ✓ Visiting instructors leading all other courses and programs.

where women can leave children aged one to eleven. The children include anyone whom a carer cares for, that is, not just sons and daughters, but also grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and other young charges. The Secretariat of Social Integration provides the teacher, but the Women's Secretariat maintains the space, which is stocked with games, books, and toys, and decorated in a colorful and inviting way. In some manzanas, the teachers work in what the Women's Secretariat calls "a double" (una dupla), staffing the center alongside an art therapist. Crucially, "the art of caring for yourself" is not a traditional daycare. It is not a full-time nursery that children register for and attend every day; children only attend when their carers use the manzanas. Even the name of the program sends the signal: receiving care is caring for oneself.

Similarly, most manzanas offer a laundry service that is not a community laundromat, but another service that carers can access while using the manzana. Run by the Women's Secretariat (in partnership with Bogotá's gas and energy utility), carers in most locations can have 8-kilos of laundry done each week. In a city where in-home laundry facilities are a luxury and many women wash clothes by hand, this service provides women with relief from a time-consuming task.

The Women's Secretariat further offers a counselling and legal aid service, funding a full-time psychologist and lawyer for each manzana (thus bringing the permanent staff at each manzana to three). The psychologist and lawyer also work in dupla, meeting women to discuss any problems they may have. The psychologist listens and supports, and where necessary, the lawyer assists with initiating legal processes

and preparing paperwork, including attention in cases of domestic abuse, violence against women, elder abuse, and other rights violations. Though other city services also help women make legal claims, the manzanas' dupla reaches carers who might not visit or know about other sites. The Blocks of Care thus make the reporting process easier on the carers.

Lastly, but importantly, the Women's Secretariat funds instructors to run two courses for all carers who visit the manzanas: 1) Women Who Care, Women Who Lead, and 2) the Value of Care. These are 4-session consciousness-raising courses wherein women carers are introduced to the reason for the manzanas' existence: to recognize, redistribute, and revalue care. Course leaders hired by the Women's Secretariat follow a standardized curriculum that introduces carers to feminist ideas, including the history of women's rights and gender equality legislation in Colombia; definitions of gender in all its diversity; discussions of gender stereotypes; explanations of the sexual division of labor; and insistence on carers' rights to redistribute tasks within the home to male partners and other family members. Instructors adapt the delivery to their own preferred pedagogy, such as having women knit during discussions or using body mapping

and trust exercises. At the course's completion, carers receive certificates, often in graduation celebrations the community attends.

As one of SIDICU's creators explained, "The point of the courses is to ensure that there is a feminist focus." The other Secretariats that offer formation, respite, and income generation programs in the manzanas may not have feminism as their starting point, but the Women's Secretariat does. The course leaders echoed this point, with one instructor saying, "This is how women learn they are citizens with rights, that 18 hours of work a day in the home is work." The instructors, alongside the teachers and art therapists in the childcare, the lawyer, and the psychologist, all accept and deliver the Blocks of Care's feminist vision. Together with the coordinator, they are the most recognized faces within the manzana, and they deliver upon the promise of caring for the carers.



The Art of Caring for Yourself space at the manzana in Manitas. Caregivers can leave children aged one to eleven while they participate in activities at the manzana.





Remnants from an activity at the manzana in Manitas. The paper cutouts include statements about women's rights, such as the "right to education," "right to a life free from violence," "right to vote," and "right to private property."

## Carers' Experiences at the Manzanas

While carers of all genders can attend the manzanas, most users are women. Carers used the manzanas differently, but there was a shared sentiment from their participation: through the manzanas, they learned to care for themselves. Their experiences distinguish the manzanas from other care programs that focus on supporting carers to fulfill their existing domestic roles.

Carers participated in focus groups at the invitation of the coordinator. They reported that the manzanas equipped them with knowledge about self-care. Multiple women echoed the carer who said, "Before the manzana, I did not take time for myself." Another said, "I did not think I also needed to care for myself and realized that doing so made it possible for me to care for others." She now attends activities regularly and considers the manzana a space she dedicates to herself. Yet another woman shared that before the manzana, she had put others first and her own health last.

Another woman commented that she previously socialized very little because she rarely left the house. Thanks to the manzana, she has now taken English, dance, weaving, and bicycle lessons. She is also getting her high school diploma, and explained, "Now my life is very busy with my activities, but I am very happy." Another woman commented, "They have changed my life; before, I wouldn't talk to anyone." Referring to her locality, a woman said, "The manzanas are the best thing here."

The manzanas have provided women with entrepreneurship trainings. Through the Secretariat of Economic Development's employment routes and entrepreneurship routes, women learn about how to launch a small business, from budgeting to marketing their products. A coordinator from a manzana in Ciudad Bolívar, a marginalized locality in southern Bogotá, confirmed that income generation programs were very popular. At a small fair where graduates of the entrepreneurship courses sold their new products, such as handmade soaps and desserts, a woman explained, "When we have to depend on our husbands for money, there are problems... The manzanas have given us economic autonomy, and we are not dependent on our husbands for money."

Coordinators report that the most popular activities are exercise classes, from cardio dance to tai chi. One coordinator pointed out that exercise builds the social fabric: “Before, the women did not leave their house, but now, through the exercise classes, they create a community.” One manzana user commented, “I never did exercise before, I just sat and watched television. Now I come to the manzana for dance, yoga, aerobics, and pilates.” Another explained that she never exercised prior to visiting the manzana, but now she has run two 5K races. She proudly wears her latest race shirt, in which she ran the 5K to raise awareness about combatting femicide.

The themes of personal empowerment and creating community ran through reflections from manzana staff and manzana users. Some women users noted that, while their male partners initially expressed skepticism about their visits to the manzanas, other family members—often older or adult children—encouraged their mothers to attend. When some family members recognized the manzanas’ benefits, they helped normalize attendance for other family members. Many women said they first heard about the manzana from a friend or neighbor, emphasizing the importance of word-of-mouth for helping install the Blocks of Care within each locality.

## Navigating Challenges

Given the collaborative way the manzanas are structured across existing city secretariats and certain national agencies, one key challenge is maintaining the inter-institutional agreement over time and as the government changes. Bogotá mayors cannot seek immediate reelection and, on January 1, 2024, López stepped down and Carlos Galán became the new mayor. Interviewees representing the Women’s Secretariat’s original team emphasized that Claudia López’s decision to prioritize SIDICU’s creation mattered for securing collaboration and buy-in from Bogotá’s other city secretariats. As one of the manzanas’ designers stated succinctly, “The other secretaries collaborated because it was on the mayor’s order.” The Women’s Secretariat noted

that the inter-institutional agreement would need to be periodically revisited and renewed, but reviews would happen in changed circumstances. One leader summarized the dilemma: the agreement requires 22 different entities to commit to providing space, offering services and programs, and operating utilities that keep services like the washers and dryers going. Revisiting the agreement opens the risk that one entity “could say I don’t want to be part of this.” To avoid this possibility, all entities agreed to renew the inter-institutional agreement as-is in 2024. Prioritization from Galán and future mayors will matter for ensuring that budgets remain robust and services are not diminished.

In the manzanas’ day-to-day operation, the time required for contractual and bureaucratic processes can slow down service delivery. For example, in April 2024, Bogotá’s care buses were paused for over a year. The buses themselves do not belong to the Women’s Secretariat and are instead contracted through a third-party operator, necessitating contract renewals that take time. Most coordinators also work on contracts that are periodically renewed, often creating uncertainty about whether coordinators will remain in their posts. Unlike the buses, the physical Blocks of Care have not experienced disruptions, but some focus group participants believed that program offerings had diminished, a decrease that coincides with Galán’s tenure. Additionally, coordinators flagged challenges with navigating relationships with the institutional anchors, noting that some hosts welcome the manzana more than others and that some are more flexible and creative with respect to the manzanas’ offerings than others. Coordinators, staff, and even users also flagged that the SIDICU needed better overall attention to people with disabilities, especially those who cannot visit the Blocks of Care or access the buses’ visits. SIDICU does include in-home assistance, but the high price tag of this program relative to the manzanas’ and the buses’ makes coverage difficult.

A final challenge is promoting the manzanas to ensure they are well utilized. Estimates suggest the Blocks of Care attend to about 36% of the target population in each locality.<sup>12</sup> Many women carers remain unaware of their existence. The coordinators go door-to-door in their localities, but they are just one person trying to spread the word among thousands of local residents. Stronger promotion would advance the

<sup>12</sup> Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2023, p. 41.



care agenda and further cement the Blocks of Care within Bogotá's larger suite of social and community services. City secretariats may consider creative publicity strategies, such as radio and television advertisements on popular channels.

## The Feminist Future of Care

Bogotá's SIDICU and its flagship component, the Blocks of Care, reveal that innovative policy design remains possible. The original team at the Women's Secretariat reflected on the energy and creativity that infused the first six months of López's administration, from January to June 2020. Thanks to López's Pact with Women during her campaign, a Bogotá-wide system of care had been promised and needed to be delivered. At the same time, the exact contours of the care system remained unknown, effectively handing the Women's Secretariat team a blank slate. They had the freedom to dream but also the mandate to convene other stakeholders, as the priority López placed on addressing care gaps meant

other city agencies needed to respond. Their freedom, flexibility, and mandate generated tangible and rapid programmatic results.

The feminist vision and design principles that emerged easily travel beyond Bogotá. Programs and services that return carers' time and deliver them opportunities remain a gap in public policy in nearly every country, region, territory, city, or town. Yet such care systems can be both cost-effective and efficient, as the design principles from Bogotá's Blocks of Care demonstrate. The decision to map existing resources and utilize existing spaces by co-locating the manzanas with other public services demonstrates how policymakers can leverage existing resources. Combining institutional anchors and the commitment to the 15-minute walkability principle shows how community care centers can start out adapted to community needs.

Caring for the carers also need not be a one-size-fits-all model. Bogotá's Blocks of Care combine local flexibility with core feminist programs and services from the Women's Secretariat. The childcare, the psycho-juridic double, and the empowerment courses link the Blocks of Care together. This



Participants learn to ride bikes in the bicycle school at the manzana in Manizales in Ciudad Bolívar.



model also translates to other contexts. Administrators can focus their effort on ensuring uniformity in signature programs and services, while letting partner institutions and local needs determine the remaining offerings.

Ultimately, Bogotá's Blocks of Care demonstrate that public policies and care systems can address carers' needs. As one team member from the Women's Secretariat summarized, SIDICU and its Blocks of Care show that "the politics of care

could jump from the academy and arrive to public policy.... The grand idea behind SIDICU was making the care economy visible." Another stated succinctly, "The manzanas were a win for women." Ultimately, the Blocks of Care serve all carers, but their feminist orientation means that their predominantly women users have their care work redistributed, recognized, and reduced. Through formation, respite, and income generation activities, women carers expand their horizons, learn new skills, and reclaim their time.



The laundry service at the manzana Engativá-El Camino. Women can bring their clothes to be washed while they participate in activities.

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