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## Care Economy Applied in the Case: Female Janitors of the Municipality of Pasto

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### Abstract

*The life story of Sandra Azucena Suárez Erazo, a janitorial worker in Pasto, highlights the struggles many women face in balancing paid employment with caregiving. Since starting her job in 2011, Sandra has endured long hours and low wages while supporting her family. Her experience underscores the deep structural inequalities impacting women in vulnerable sectors, particularly the unequal distribution of care work and the lack of social and economic support, with physical and emotional tolls. The story calls for public policies that recognize and value care work to promote greater fairness and equity for workers like Sandra. The article analyzes how care economies influence and shape the lives of women in similar situations.*

**Keywords:** Care Economy, Paid Work, Care Work, Inequality, Precarious Work, Precarious Employment, Work.

### Introduction

The story of Sandra Azucena Suárez Erazo exemplifies the struggles of many women who must balance paid work with caregiving responsibilities. Since 2011, she has faced precarious working conditions, long hours, and low wages while supporting her family. Her experience reflects her resilience and the structural inequalities that affect workers in vulnerable sectors, highlighting the unequal distribution of care work, the lack of social support, and the physical and emotional consequences of this disproportionate burden. This article analyzes how care economies impact the lives of women like Sandra, affecting their economic stability, well-being, and development opportunities. It also highlights the urgent need for public policies that recognize and value care work, promoting a more equitable balance in the lives of those who face these challenges daily.

### Methodology

This study analyzes how the care economy interacts with economic variables, using a specific case to explore its impact on the distribution of domestic and care work. A qualitative and interpretive approach was used to understand the experiences and perceptions derived from one woman's life story, highlighting the subjective and social dimensions not captured by quantitative methods. From a critical perspective, the study questions the social structures that perpetuate inequalities in the workplace and examines the contribution of economic variables to these inequalities, highlighting the need to reflect this phenomenon on the political stage. In-depth interviews were conducted, along with a review of literature and official data that contextualized and enriched the study's theoretical framework.

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## Care Economy: An Emerging Concept

Economics is a fundamental part of the social structure, influencing individuals and being influenced by them as well. However, as a discipline, it has its own schools of thought that analyze how society uses resources for goods and services. Among these schools is feminist economic theory, considered a heterodox approach, meaning it questions mainstream ideas. Feminist perspectives are rooted in post-structuralist thought, as they critique hegemonic discourse and examine how gender impacts the economy and people's lives. This approach aims to challenge the neoclassical view, which assumes that everyone is equal in characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, living conditions, and beliefs—an outlook that feminist economics questions and critiques (Rodríguez, 2015).

In other words, they are based on the concept of homo economicus or the economic man by John Stuart Mill. He focused on the abstraction of man as the object of study for political economy and identified four basic characteristics: leisure, accumulation, luxury, and procreation (Persky, 1995). As can be seen, this way of perceiving the relationship between the economy and humans centers on consumerism, but it also creates a perspective where people live under equal conditions, ignoring the diverse factors that influence and affect this relationship.

Hence, currents such as economic feminism construct the relationship between economics and the individual based on various factors. This is why this current can be approached from a methodological and analytical perspective, but also from a third perspective, such as the organization of the system, as referred to by Orozco (2014). The latter aspect takes into account factors such as gender, sexual orientation, and living conditions that influence how people position themselves within the system.

Feminist economists emphasize that work has traditionally been understood solely as that for which remuneration is received, a limited view for understanding social structure. For this reason, authors such as Orozco (2014) reformulate Marx's class conflict to include unpaid work. Marx identifies three economic cycles: productive, commercial, and financial, but only the productive cycle generates value, specifically through labor, which creates surplus value when the capitalist appropriates a portion of unpaid labor. This process is the basis of labor exploitation and class conflict.

Orozco (2014) argues that a person's standard of living depends not only on consumption but also on unpaid work. Although there is debate about whether these tasks generate productivity, the author points out that Marxist theory focuses mainly on paid work, neglecting how unpaid work is also linked to capital. For her, this conflict can be called the conflict between capital and living conditions.

From this perspective, life is not limited solely to the value or acquisition of goods, but also involves other factors that influence the economy. Furthermore, gender becomes an important category of analysis in this school of thought, considering the relationship between production and reproduction, the sexual division of labor, the social organization of care, and the care economy (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2015, 34). This gives rise to the concept of the care economy. However, before delving deeper into this notion, it is necessary to explore other related concepts.

The category of production and reproduction can be understood as a discursive construct that establishes a dichotomy between good and bad, based on values associated with a hetero-patriarchal discourse and reinforced by capitalism. According to Orozco (2014), reproduction is perceived as something purely instinctive, while production is considered a more rational and

elaborate process. This favors the division of labor roles by gender, assigning production mainly to men and reproduction to women.

Work that does not generate remuneration is not considered significant in a capitalist and hetero-patriarchal system, as it does not contribute value to capital. This leads us to question how the economic model has constructed a discourse in which care work, such as being a good mother, daughter, or sister, is seen as a natural duty and hidden within the social structure, without recognition in an economy that only values production and profitability. These discourses reinforce the roles assigned to women, relegating the importance of their care work. Furthermore, as Lamas (2018) points out, the sexual division of labor does not arise from biological differences, but is a social and cultural construct that, influenced by upbringing and social values, assigns specific roles to men and women. This separation generates perceptions and expectations that affect people's life plans and dispositions, justifying gender-differentiated tasks (16).

The construction of the economic system is not only based on valuing life solely in terms of capital, but also on hetero-patriarchal discourses rooted in social upbringing models, which divide work according to what is considered appropriate and expected. Furthermore, this system dehumanizes people by focusing solely on production, overlooking unpaid work that is essential to life. Vulnerability and interdependence are fundamental aspects of human existence, but a normative model of self-sufficiency is imposed, represented in the figure of the “mushroom worker” in feminist economics, an individual who acts independently in public and depends exclusively on the market. This model reflects a unidirectional relationship between the market and society, linked to self-sufficiency and masculinity in a heterosexual context, although it can also include female bodies (Orozco, 2014, 224).

This utopian vision creates the idea of a person who acts independently, without any support, despite the fact that one of the real foundations of society is the need for care. According to Orozco (2014), these conceptions of self-sufficiency not only obscure the importance of care work, but also generate an overload of these tasks, which in many cases fall mainly on women. For this reason, the social organization of care is largely understood as a function of the home.

Society and public policies often neglect caregiving work, intervening only in specific cases such as education. In addition, there is stratification in caregiving, as the economic capacity of some women influences their situation: those with greater resources can hire external services to care for their children, making it easier for them to enter the labor market, while others do not have that option. An important aspect is the case of migrant women, who leave their homes in search of better opportunities and participate in global care chains. In these transnational networks, migrant workers transfer the care they provide to their employers to their families in their countries of origin, but inequalities in their living conditions affect the quality of that care and contribute to deepening social inequalities at the global level (Rodríguez Enriquez, 2015).

Care economies, which originated in 20th-century economic feminism, are forms of economy that play a fundamental role in society, as their absence could seriously affect the social structure. Work in households focuses on caring for people at all stages of their lives, including aspects such as emotional care, relationships, health, the environment, and the production of goods and services. The home is where the first emotional bonds are formed, where we learn to interact and internalize values, and where we carry out essential daily activities that go beyond the demands of the market (Carrasco, 2013, 47-48).

The importance of care economies lies in their approach, as they challenge the traditional view of the economy, which tends to focus on profit and depersonalizes people. These economies highlight the importance of care, which is generally associated with the responsibility of women, who perform this work without remuneration and out of a sense of duty, often linked to moral and religious values typical of Latin American culture. This work is seen as an act of personal sacrifice that is rewarded with the satisfaction of doing what is morally right.

The care economy emerges as a key concept for understanding the relationships between gender, economy, and society, highlighting the limitations of neoclassical economics, which ignores the diverse realities of people and the invisibility of unpaid work, mostly performed by women in a capitalist system. From a feminist economic perspective, this vision seeks to recognize and value these tasks that are essential to life and social structure, proposing a reconceptualization that includes both production and reproduction and the social organization of care. By valuing unpaid work and human interdependence, a more inclusive and equitable economy is promoted, with policies that reduce gender inequalities and recognize the importance of the tasks that sustain daily life and the social fabric.

### **Genesis and Historical Evolution of the Care Economy**

The care economy, which emphasizes the importance of the work that sustains daily life and the social fabric, has its roots in the “domestic work debate” of the 1970s. This debate, developed in Spanish-language literature, sought to unravel the relationship between capitalism and the sexual division of labor, revealing how a privileged class, represented by husbands, benefited from a subordinate class, housewives. Through this discussion, the care economy has been reconceptualized, integrating production and reproduction within the social organization of care.

Subsequently, domestic work changed the way it was perceived and came to be understood as reproductive work. Initially, from a Marxist perspective, the aim was not only to criticize domestic work but also to abolish it. However, over the years, an analysis began to emerge around the costs of care work for women. It is worth mentioning that authors such as Daly and Lewis (2000) establish that the concept of care can be understood in three ways.

On the one hand, there is the concept understood as a form of work. For this first form of understanding, it is important to bear in mind that the work-based approach to care not only highlights care as a task and caregivers as protagonists, but also invites comparison with other forms of work. Highlighting care as a particular form of work reveals the conditions under which it is carried out, prompting an analysis of the role of the welfare state, especially in terms of whether care is paid or unpaid, formal or informal, and how the state establishes these and other factors (Daly & Jane 2000, 285).

By understanding care as a form of work, a complex relationship is revealed between those who perform it and the social and economic structures that surround it. Daly and Lewis (2000) invite us to reflect on how care, often considered an act of love or family responsibility, is also work that should be valued in terms of its working conditions. This perspective highlights the historical invisibility of care work, especially unpaid care work. It also points to the need for the state to intervene to ensure that these activities, which are essential to social well-being, are recognized and protected, whether they are carried out in formal or informal settings.

In this way, analyzing care from a labor perspective opens the door to discussions about social justice, gender equality, and the redefinition of what we consider valuable work in our society. On the other hand, the second dimension addresses the contentious regulatory framework of

obligation and responsibility surrounding both family and social relationships between the caregiver and the care recipient. Finally, the third dimension conceives of the concept as a cost to the caregiver. This is due to the emotional cost that caregiving entails for the individual.

Hence, Daly and Lewis (2000) establish a three-dimensional framework based on these three forms of analysis, where care is understood in terms of work, the regulatory framework, and costs. "Defining care as those activities that are carried out and the relationships that are established to meet the material and emotional needs of dependent children and adults" (Daly and Lewis, 2000, 285). Despite this, authors such as Carrasco (2019) believe that care work actually stems from four major currents: the second wave of the Annles school, the history of the family and feelings, the history of childhood and women, and feminist conceptions of work and women.

For this author, the way in which these four schools of thought study care work is what has allowed debates to arise today around this concept and care economies. It is important to mention that Carrasco (2019) perceives that historical studies of care work are essential to understanding the context in which we find ourselves today. They believe that sometimes the sciences begin their studies without taking into account the environment in which they are carried out. Thus, the care economy did not always function in the same way it is understood today. This is because the sexual division of labor in pre-industrial times did not function in the same way it does today.

This is supported by Mondejar (2001, 105-106), who states that in those times in Catalonia, men stayed in the fields while women worked in factories. On the other hand, he analyzes those families that form a work team to share their duties. However, he notes that in the British case, family hiring led to a change in perception. This was apparently what led to the emergence of the domestic ideology, which meant a reduction in costs for industry owners. It is important to highlight the fact that the labor struggles carried out by male workers led to restrictions on female labor, the latter with state support.

However, it is important to note the observations of Mondejar (2001), who, based on studies conducted by Cerdá (1856), established that in jobs where family members were hired, special emphasis was placed on the work that women performed in the home in addition to their work in the factory. This was because it reduced the costs of hiring personnel. It is therefore valid to say that the commodification of domestic work is influenced by the technology available in households and monetary income, which highlights that the distribution of unpaid domestic and care work is closely linked to the level of income inequality and poverty (Esquivel, 2011, 22).

Economic dynamics within the home determine who performs care tasks and how they are valued, perpetuating cycles of inequality and poverty. In low-income households, women continue to shoulder most of the care work, limiting their opportunities to improve their economic situation. Although there have been changes in the care economy, these have not managed to break the cycle of inequality. To move toward a more equitable economy, it is crucial to recognize care work as a matter of public interest and to promote policies that encourage gender co-responsibility, investment in accessible technology, and adequate remuneration for these jobs.

### **Characteristics and Statistics of the Care Economy**

In economics, statistical analyses and variables have mainly focused on activities that generate income measurable in monetary terms. Until recently, productivity was only evaluated in terms of money, which made it easier to identify the most profitable activities in order to make

decisions that would improve businesses or economic sectors, as reflected in statistics and other quantitative instruments. Regarding the perception of the economy, it is considered that “it has been dominated by historically dominant orthodox thinking, embodied today in the neoclassical approach, which reduces the economy to commercial activities and wealth to the mass of goods produced by a society” (Coraggio 2009, as cited in Pessolano 2016, 193).

Based on this premise, the care economy can be understood as a variable that has recently been incorporated into economic analysis. According to Díaz and Llorente (2016), care has been considered in Western economics as a flow of goods and services produced by different actors, such as the state, the market, and the family, which contribute to individual and social well-being. However, because it is classified as a good intended to generate well-being, its economic value is often overlooked or rejected, as its distinctive characteristics are not usually recognized in traditional analyses (73).

Initially, it was not considered a productive activity that generated any kind of quantitatively verifiable income, since, from a sociocultural perspective, it is domestic work carried out mainly by women. “Women have played a fundamental role in care work, and it is they who, anonymously from their homes, carry out these tasks, thereby contributing significantly to the economic and social growth of their countries” (Windebank, 2012, as cited in Malaver, Serrano & Castro, 2021, 154). This allows the economy to evolve towards models that are less objective and more focused on the subjectivity of interpersonal relationships, in the case of care, on family relationships.

Caregiving was not previously viewed as a productive activity in economics. This leads care economics to focus on subjective aspects, characteristic of the social sciences, distinguishing it from traditional economic studies as a formal and autonomous discipline. As Pessolano (2016) argues, the economy is not an independent sphere, separate from politics and culture, but rather integrated into everyday life. It manifests itself through diverse social practices that differ from the homo economicus model of neoclassical theory, which assumes a rationality based on utilitarianism (192).

In this vein, “the care economy encompasses the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of care services” (DANE, n.d.). From an economic perspective, the production, exchange, and consumption of work socially and culturally assigned to women in the home will be measured as part of the differential analysis of new lines of the economy, which consist of “recognizing different circumstantial and cultural elements and, centrally, it can be considered, without attempting to reduce the diversity of approaches, that each of these alternatives is the product of a broad and substantive vision of the economy.” (Galindo, 2017, 89).

By incorporating care as a productive activity in economic studies, possibilities are opened for more comprehensive and multidisciplinary research, linking economics with areas such as gender, feminism, sociology, anthropology, as well as law and political science. An emerging branch of this field is feminist economics, which seeks to link sociocultural aspects with the productive and capitalist factors of the economic system. This movement emphasizes the importance of including gender relations in economic analysis to understand and highlight the mechanisms that maintain existing economic inequalities (Rodríguez 2007, 229).

The care economy is a relatively new discipline that has gained recognition thanks to criticism and reflection in various areas of economics, at the micro, meso, and macro levels, and from different schools of thought. These critiques seek to promote gender equality, reduce labor gaps,

and raise awareness among society and states about the importance of rethinking the social, cultural, and economic dynamics that arise in the family, considered the fundamental nucleus of society (Rodríguez, 2015, 32).

It is essential to support the relevance of the care economy through statistics from national and international government institutions, in order to inform the creation of plans, programs, and public policies based on objective data. “The androcentric bias of the conventional economic view is evident, and therefore its inability to adequately explain how reality works and contribute meaningfully to public policy debates” (Rodríguez, 2015, 32).

The International Labor Organization (2019) has been the main entity studying the progress and challenges in implementing public policies related to the care economy in different countries. To promote an environment that values and recognizes these tasks, it is essential to measure the time spent on them. Globally, women spend approximately 448 minutes per day on care, of which 265 are unpaid tasks and 183 are paid activities. In contrast, men spend about 404 minutes per day on these tasks, with 332 minutes on paid care and 83 on unpaid care (30).

Globally, women spend approximately 44 minutes more than men on caregiving tasks, both paid and unpaid. In total, they spend about 8 hours a day on caregiving activities for dependents, devoting 59.15% of their time to these unpaid tasks, while men only devote 20.54%. This reflects a 38.61% difference in the time spent on activities essential to family well-being. Furthermore, in countries of all income levels, women are primarily responsible for unpaid care work due to traditional gender-based social roles. Even when adjusted for hours of employment, women tend to have less time available than men, and the excessive and exhausting burden of unpaid care work can lead to inadequate strategies, affecting both those who receive care and those who provide it (ILO, 2019, 30).

International statistics show that many people, especially women, remain outside the labor market due to caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the need to implement policies and standards that guarantee labor and gender rights in countries that have ratified international treaties. Most people who are inactive in the labor force, mainly in a neoliberal economic context, devote their time to caregiving, which excludes them from the productive system. Globally, the main reason why women leave work is unpaid care work, which affects 41.6% of them, equivalent to some 647 million women of working age who are outside the labor market due to family responsibilities (ILO, 2019, 32).

Men leave the labor market for personal reasons in 44.1% of cases, although these reasons are not related to caregiving tasks. The highest rate of women leaving the labor market to engage in unpaid caregiving occurs in middle-income countries, at 46.7%, while in low-income countries it is 35.3% and in high-income countries, 19.6%. These data reflect that women prioritize family care, which reduces their time for their own physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Unlike men, personal reasons such as studying or attending to health issues are the second leading cause of their departure from the labor market, with a difference of 20%. In addition, dedication to unpaid care work increases significantly when there are young children at home, leading to a “maternity penalty” in the workplace, a global phenomenon that affects women with children in all regions. (ILO, 2019, 32).

The employment gap between women and men with children is significantly greater than between those without children. Only 47.6% of mothers participate in the labor market, compared to 87.9% of working fathers. Among those who are not mothers, 54.4% of women are

employed, compared to 78.2% of men without children. This means that the employment gap for those with children is 40.3%, while for those without children, the gap is 23.8%. (ILO 2019, 33).

In Colombia, according to a report by the DIAN (2020), unpaid domestic work accounted for approximately 20% of Colombia's gross domestic product in 2017 (7). In that year, women devoted 4,741,177 hours to care and support tasks, equivalent to 76.2% of their time, while men invested only 1,479,043 hours, representing approximately 17% of their time. The difference in participation in care work between women and men is 59.2%, evidencing a marked inequality in the distribution of these tasks (12).

According to the aforementioned report, Colombia has a much greater disparity in the distribution of care functions than the global average, with a difference of 20.59%, making it urgent for national policies to address this gender gap. Women's participation in unpaid domestic work reaches 78.4%. According to the DANE report, the economic value of unpaid domestic work in Colombia is estimated at 185.722 billion pesos, surpassing economic sectors such as commerce, the automotive industry, transportation, gastronomy, and public services, among others. In addition, participation in caregiving tasks varies little according to geographical location: women in municipal capitals devote 76.5% of their time to caregiving, while in dispersed rural areas the figure is 75.2%, with no significant differences in the care of household members. The trend of women, regardless of age—from girls to adults—being primarily responsible for caregiving remains constant, with an average distribution of hours per week that reflects this inequality (21). That is, the distribution can be summarized as follows:

<b>Age range</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
10 to 18 years old	13,9	10,8
19 to 28 years old	18,4	10,1
29 to 38 years old	16,6	10,6
39 to 48 years old	12,9	10,3
49 to 60 years old	11,4	8,8
Over 60 years old	10,0	9,5

Table 1.1 Hours Spent On Caregiving By Age And Gender

Source: own creation.

The report also presents the average hours worked by men and women between 2016 and 2019 in unpaid domestic work (UDW) and other related activities. Women devoted approximately 28,728 million hours to (UDW), while men contributed only 7,829 million. In the system of national accounts, women contributed 18,941 million hours, compared to 32,147 million for men. However, adding both activities together, women spent a total of 47.669 billion hours, compared to 39.976 billion hours for men, indicating that, over a three-year period, women have invested 7.693 billion more hours than men in domestic and external tasks (23). This implies

that the workload and strain on women is significantly greater, regardless of age. Furthermore, in 2021, according to DANE, women continued to be primarily responsible for unpaid work, contributing 77.7% of the total annual hours devoted to these tasks, while men contributed only 22.3%. In that year, the economic value of UDW was estimated at 230.338 billion pesos, surpassing other economic sectors such as commerce, education, health, manufacturing industries, and real estate activities (5).

Statistics show that, in general, women continue to face disadvantages compared to men, with a significant difference in the time devoted to tasks, although in some specific areas there has been some progress. This second report also includes an analysis of household type, making it possible to determine how women's participation in unpaid domestic work varies according to family structure (13-14).

Type of household	Percentage of women participating in UDW activities
Childless nuclear family	76,7%%
Nuclear family with children	78,2%%
Single parent (male) with children	29,1%
Single parent (female) with children	88,5%
Extended household	81,5%
Compound household	74,4%

Table 1.2 Percentage Of Women's Participation In Unpaid Domestic Work Based On The Composition Of The Family Unit.

Source: own creation

This data is essential for designing effective public policies that promote gender equality in all its aspects, especially with regard to unpaid domestic work and family care, regardless of family structure. Significant progress in workplace equality will not be achieved without first addressing inequality in unpaid care work, through its recognition, reduction, and redistribution among women, men, families, and the state (ILO, 2019, 35).

The data highlights the urgency of creating public policies that promote gender equality, especially in unpaid domestic work and family care. To advance gender equality in the workplace, it is essential to address inequality in unpaid care work, recognizing its value, reducing its burden through supportive policies, and redistributing it equitably among women, men, families, and the state. Only in this way will a more just society and true progress toward gender equality be achieved.

## Results

### Life story of the female janitor from the municipality of Pasto

Sandra Azucena Suárez Erazo, originally from Pasto, has dedicated her life to community

service since 2011, working as a janitor in educational institutions of the Mayor's Office of Pasto. Although she has faced changes in her working conditions and a starting salary of approximately 500,000 Colombian pesos, her persistence and union activism have allowed her to improve her situation. She currently earns 1,385,000 Colombian pesos, but after deducting social security, her net income is approximately 950,000 Colombian pesos.

Sandra has been working since 2011 at the Ciudadela de Pasto in the Villa Flor II neighborhood, initially working 12-hour days, including nights and weekends. Thanks to union efforts, she now works 8 hours a day, Monday through Friday, although she still faces challenges at work. She has had health problems, such as knee and shoulder pain, but she continues to work and support her family. Her commitment to her family has also been significant, as she has worked hard to support her daughter while facing a demanding work schedule. Her daughter, a 19-year-old medical student in Argentina, is a great source of pride for her.

Sandra's life has not been without difficulties. As a displaced person from Policarpa in 2004, she faced numerous obstacles in obtaining her own home and other rights to which she was entitled. Despite these challenges, she has persevered, working to provide the best for her daughter and her family. Sandra divides her time between work and home, also devoting herself to domestic chores. Her work schedule and lack of free time have left her with few opportunities for recreation, limiting her moments of rest to weekends. Despite these sacrifices, Sandra remains a dedicated mother and committed worker, striving to improve her life and that of her family in the face of adversity.

It is important to highlight that Sandra Azucena Suárez's experience reflects how caregiving responsibilities significantly influence people's working lives, especially in the context of jobs with demanding schedules. Sandra, despite her dedication to her work as a janitor, faces the challenge of balancing her job with the responsibilities of caring for her daughter. The need to coordinate her time between household chores, caring for her daughter, and her job highlights the additional burden faced by female workers in similar situations.

On the other hand, Sandra's distribution of time between her job and her domestic responsibilities is a clear example of how the burden of care impacts the daily lives of female workers. Despite her long working hours, Sandra is forced to manage meal preparation and childcare in her spare time, which often means she has to rely on family members for support in caring for her daughter during her absence. This situation demonstrates how caregiving responsibilities can limit a person's ability to enjoy free time or engage in recreational activities.

The social support Sandra receives from her family highlights the importance of a support network in managing caregiving responsibilities. However, it also highlights the limitations of this support. Her dependence on family members to care for her daughter reveals the lack of formal support systems that could alleviate some of this burden. This dependence can increase the stress and emotional burden on female workers, as they must coordinate their schedules and rely on third parties to care for their loved ones.

The impact on Sandra's health and well-being is also notable. The physical and emotional demands of work, combined with caregiving responsibilities, contribute to a level of fatigue and stress that affects her quality of life. The constant concern for her daughter's care and the limitations on access to adequate rest time reflect how caregiving responsibilities can affect not only physical well-being but also the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Sandra's experience illustrates how care economies profoundly impact her work and personal

life. By caring for her daughter and managing the household, she must adjust her work schedule and reduce her opportunities for professional development, limiting her access to training and career advancement. This situation highlights a structural inequality that disproportionately affects those who perform care tasks, creating an imbalance between paid work and care work.

Her economic insecurity is exacerbated by the need to balance both responsibilities, as reducing her working hours decreases her income and increases her financial vulnerability, especially in the face of unexpected expenses such as medical care for her daughter. The lack of adequate social and economic support perpetuates this vulnerability.

In addition, caregiving affects their emotional well-being and mental health, causing stress, anxiety, and exhaustion due to the constant pressure to fulfill both roles without enough time for self-care. This highlights the urgent need for a support system that facilitates a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and provides resources to manage these pressures.

Sandra's situation highlights the need for inclusive public policies that recognize and support care work, such as paid leave, accessible services, and greater workplace flexibility. These measures would improve her quality of life and reduce the economic and social inequalities associated with care work.

Ultimately, Sandra's experience reflects a persistent gap in social and economic equity, highlighting the urgent need to transform the structures that maintain the disproportionate burden of care in the lives of many people, promoting a fairer balance between work and family responsibilities.

## **Conclusions**

The story of Sandra Azucena Suárez highlights the disproportionate burden faced by many women, especially those in low-income sectors, due to caregiving responsibilities. These tasks limit their opportunities for professional and personal development, perpetuating structural inequalities. The lack of adequate support for these workers reinforces equity gaps, attributing caregiving work primarily to women.

The physical and emotional impact of her work, combined with domestic responsibilities, has negatively affected Sandra's health, highlighting the need for labor protection measures and a comprehensive approach to health and emotional well-being. This situation is further complicated when workers lack formal contracts and are bound by service contracts, which significantly reduces their protections.

The dependence on informal family support networks highlights the lack of a formal system to alleviate this burden. The absence of accessible public care policies reinforces the precariousness of these workers. A state-led approach is needed to balance these responsibilities equitably, in accordance with the principle of the social rule of law.

Sandra's experience also highlights the emotional and mental effects of care work, such as stress and anxiety, underscoring the urgent need for resources to manage these pressures. The lack of time for self-care increases the risk of mental health problems. Finally, Sandra's experience highlights the urgent need for inclusive public policies that recognize and value care work, offering paid leave, accessible care services, and flexible work schedules to improve the quality of life for workers.

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