Working Papers Regional Urban Economics - Unpaid Care Work and Regional Gender Gaps in Labor Force Participation in Colombia

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Gender inequality in the labor market is not experienced uniformly across the country. While Bogotá shows the narrowest gaps and fewer unexplained barriers, the Caribbean region and rural areas present deeper differences that may discourage women's participation.

Publication Date: Wednesday, 1 of July 2026 **Approach**
This paper examines gender gaps in labor force participation in Colombia. Its motivation lies in the persistence of marked inequality, despite the significant educational progress made by women in recent decades. To understand this dynamic, the study adopts a territorial and population-based perspective, analyzing how these disparities vary across regions, urban and rural areas, and among different ethnic groups.

Using recent microdata from the National Time Use Survey, this study examines the relationship between participation in the paid labor market and time devoted to unpaid domestic and care work. The latter includes activities related to the care of children and dependent persons, household tasks, and other responsibilities that make up the unpaid workload borne by households, with a particularly disproportionate burden on women.. Methodologically, the analysis decomposes the observed gap into two main components: one attributable to differences in measurable characteristics between men and women (such as age or education), and another associated with structural or unobserved factors (such as social norms and institutional barriers).

The scope of the study allows not only for quantifying the gap at the national level, but also for identifying the deep geographic heterogeneities that characterize the Colombian labor market.

Contribution
This study aims to enrich the analysis of labor gaps by incorporating unpaid domestic and care work as a direct and measurable factor. While the literature has traditionally approached this reality through proxy variables, such as marital status or the presence of children, this analysis uses direct time-use data to more precisely capture the constraint faced by women.

By making this "double burden" visible, what previously appeared in models as an "unexplained" inequality is now revealed as a concrete asymmetry in workload. Furthermore, the decomposition applied provides evidence on the particularities of this dynamic in rural areas and among diverse ethnic groups, dimensions that have been only marginally explored in the national literature.

The central message is that achievements in human capital are insufficient to ensure equity if the distribution of household tasks is not transformed, a reality that differentially conditions women's time and opportunities

depending on their context and background.

Results
The empirical results of the paper are organized around three main findings.

First, most of the gap in labor force participation is not explained by differences in women's endowments or skills relative to men. In fact, characteristics such as formal education now work in their favor; if the market were to value these skills symmetrically, the employment gap should be much smaller. The real constraint lies in unequal returns and structural factors that shape female labor supply.

Second, when unpaid work hours are introduced into the analysis, the composition of inequality changes. The greater amount of time women devote to household care emerges as the main observable factor associated with their lower participation.

Finally, the results reveal a marked territorial disparity. Gender inequality in the labor market is not experienced uniformly across the country. While Bogotá shows the narrowest gaps and fewer unexplained barriers, the Caribbean region and rural areas present deeper differences that may discourage women's participation. This heterogeneity highlights that employment policies and care provision strategies must be adapted to geographic realities rather than designed under a single national approach.

Fuente: https://d1b4gd4m8561gs.cloudfront.net/en/publications-research/working-papers-regional-urban-economics/unpaid-care-work-regional