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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relational Work and Policy Change: Feminizing the Local State from Within in Bogotá

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue that relational work between the state and civil society is crucial for social change, focusing on the relational work between activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives in the development of Bogotá's gender and care policies. While existing literature shows that social movement embeddedness within the state helps explain why some governments achieve more egalitarian outcomes, this structural concept lacks micro-level foundations. Highlighting the role of relational work fills this gap. Drawing on three years of ethnographic research—including 54 semi-structured interviews and over 300 hours of observation—we show that the intense relational practices of citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats (materialized in open and effective participation, joint and coordinated advocacy, and translation of bureaucratic jargon to common language) was crucial to advance feminist agendas. This study contributes to an understanding of how everyday relational practices between state actors and citizens can generate policy change.

Keywords: comparative politics; Latin America; institutional participation; bureaucratic activism; relational work

Introduction

In December 2023, Bogotá received the Guangzhou International Urban Innovation Award for its Care System (Sistema Distrital de Cuidado, SIDICU). The jury highlighted the Care Blocks—the system's central implementation mechanism—as a globally pioneering model for reorganizing the city around caregiving to meet the needs of caregivers, especially their time poverty. Anyone who considers themselves a caregiver, particularly the approximately 2 million mostly female full-time caregivers, can attend the Care Blocks. Here they can finish their school examinations or take a yoga class while their dependents are being taken care of and, in some cases, while their laundry is being washed and folded by an employee of the center. The Care System is evidently an innovative public policy. For many residents of Bogotá's peripheral neighborhoods—especially women—this represents the first time the state has provided comprehensive public services and offered additional amenities free of charge close to their homes (Guevara-Aladino et al. 2024; Álvarez Rivadulla et al. 2024). Bogotá is the first city in Colombia, and one of the first globally, that places caregivers explicitly at the center of a public policy. The aim is to recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work—the "Three Rs"—which marks a groundbreaking approach in urban governance (Moreno 2021).

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Despite its apparent novelty, the Care System builds on a longer history of gender policy in Bogotá. Local activists and organizations spent years pushing for the institutionalization of a feminist agenda in the city's politics—at least since the 1980s—efforts that contributed to the new Constitution in 1991 (Fuentes and Peña 2009; Gómez Correal 2011; Velásquez 2019; Espejo Fandiño 2025). Initially, these mobilizations took place on the streets and in autonomous movements. Eventually, however, they also worked from within the state as activist bureaucrats, or from the many intermediate spaces of encounter that the new Constitution had opened: bodies of institutionalized civil participation in the planning and accountability of local policy, through which women's movements became embedded in the local state.

Yet what does embeddedness really mean? How does it work in practice? In this article, we unpack this phenomenon and focus on its relational underpinnings. We show that embeddedness works through intense relational work, between citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats. The first are dedicated long-term activists who occupy institutionalized positions for citizen participation in local government. The second, are activists-turned-government officials, self-identified feminists, who design and implement social policy. Below, we show through careful negotiation, repeated encounters, trust building, and understanding between social movements and the state how it became possible to advance more progressive[1] and persistent policies such as the Public Policy on Women and Gender Equity (Política Pública de Mujeres y Equidad de Género, Política Pública de Mujer y Equidad de Género, hereafter *gender policy*) in Bogotá. Importantly, while the case examined here involves feminist actors pursuing gender-transformative goals, relational work is not inherently progressive; its ideological direction is related to the values and agendas of the actors involved.

During our three years of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, we worked collaboratively with the Women's Advisory Council of Bogotá (Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres de Bogotá, hereinafter *Women's Council*), the city's highest participatory body on gender issues. During this time, we witnessed or were told several times about the possibilities and vulnerabilities of this relational work. We observed over 300 hours of meetings between institutionalized civil society and two different local administrations, including with the two mayors, high ranking and street-level bureaucrats. We conducted 54 interviews and several workshops with current and previous bureaucrats and civil society leaders to understand the history of gender policy in Bogotá. What we found was a set of delicate relationships, where moments of greater advancements were the product of periods of intense relational work that allowed for synergies between activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives.

In this article we argue that relational work between the state and civil society is crucial for social change, focusing especially on the relationship between citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats. The literature has extensively discussed how results are potentially more egalitarian and legitimate when civil society is involved in policy making. Civil society influence can take different forms, from street protesting to institutionalized participation. It can also happen within the state, through activist bureaucrats who pursue policy change through their technical and bureaucratic abilities. Embeddedness of social movements in the state, explains (among other factors) why some governments are more able to reach egalitarian outcomes. Yet, this structural notion of embeddedness needs more theoretical micro foundations, and the concept of relational work fills this gap. Discussing the case of gender policy and the Care System in Bogotá, in this article we show the relevance of relational work between activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives in bringing about policy change.

[1]A progressive policy is a public policy designed to reduce social, economic, or political inequalities by expanding rights, redistributing resources, or increasing protections for historically disadvantaged groups.

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Literature Review

Relational Work and Policymaking

Much of the scholarship suggests that civil society's participation in policymaking tends to produce outcomes that are both more equitable and more widely perceived as legitimate (Huber and Stephens 2001; Pribble 2013). Yet, civil society can participate in different ways, from street protests to more institutionalized forms of participation (Niedzwiecki and Anria 2019). According to Bradlow (2024), when social movements are embedded in the state, more egalitarian outcomes emerge. Embeddedness can refer to social movements that become parties or are closely connected to them (Anria 2018); city councils of different formats (Evans 2003; Baiocchi 2005); or bureaucratic activism (Abers 2019).

Embeddedness in this sense means the degree to which the state is connected to civil society, to networks, or to the ties between social movements, community groups, and the state that shapes policy making (Bradlow 2024). The concept of embeddedness was coined by Polanyi (1944) to describe the rootedness of the economy in social institutions. Granovetter (1985) appropriated the term to explain how, from a network perspective, economic ties are rooted in social ties. Since then, embeddedness has been used mainly in Economic Sociology and Political Economy (Evans 1997; Fonseca and da Costa 2024) as a structural concept that speaks about connections and relations. Yet we know little about the relational work that brings embeddedness about and reproduces it.

The concept of relational work comes from economic sociology under the leadership of Zelizer (2012) and later of Bandelj (2012). According to Zelizer (2012, 149), relational work is "the creative effort people make establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations." While Polanyi and Granovetter's notion of embeddedness highlighted that economic action was embedded in social institutions and networks, Zelizer's contribution unveiled how people actively shape those networks. Relational work offers the micro foundations of economic embeddedness (Bandelj 2012).

The notion of relational work can open the black box of how political embeddedness of social movements in the state is built by people who make the connections, and how it works on the ground. In this article, we show the relevance of relational work between state workers and citizen representatives in building and sustaining policy innovation. This important work remains hidden when we describe the structural relationship of mobilized citizens and the state simply as embedded.

Relational Work and Institutional Participation

One of the forms through which social movements have engaged with the government is via the multiple participatory institutions that have proliferated since the 1990s, following democratic transitions and decentralization reforms particularly across the Global South (Velásquez 1995; Evans 1995; Abers 1998; Goldfrank 2002; Heller 2022). These reforms expanded access to state decision-making through direct democracy, particularly for historically excluded groups (Fung and Wright 2001). In Latin America, they contributed to gradual yet contested advances in redistribution, state capacity, and civil society mobilization (Baiocchi et al. 2011). From then on, they have proliferated globally, featuring prominently in government projects, international conferences, policy reforms, and contemporary political thought (Baiocchi and Ganzua 2016; Mayka and Abbott 2023). Despite notable achievements, a substantial literature has documented their limitations: citizens' growing disenchantment due to cooptation by political elites, parties, and clientelistic networks, as well as their routinization, fragmentation, and their reduction to consultative roles with limited decision-making power (García 2003; Almonacid 2015; Fernández-Martínez et al. 2020; Verloo 2023).

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A paradigmatic example of participatory institutions is Brazil's participatory budgeting (PB). The practice expanded rapidly and became a global best practice adopted by many municipalities, despite later critiques and backlash, particularly in the contexts where it first emerged (Montero and Baiocchi 2022; Wampler and Goldfrank 2022; Touchton et al. 2023). Scholarship on this experience has extensively examined the everyday dynamics of citizens' institutional participation; links to policy outcomes, and dynamics among citizens, party actors, and bureaucrats within these settings are well documented, yet rarely theorized explicitly as relational. For instance, Abers (2000) ethnographically shows how activists sustained mobilization and organizational capacity. Together with supportive state actors, this enabled PB to operate and generate meaningful opportunities beyond formal rules and frameworks. Similarly, Baiocchi (2005), examines neighborhood assemblies, citizen councils and forums, and demonstrates that citizenship and militancy emerge not only from institutional design or deliberation, but from sustained relationship-building across unequal positions between citizens and bureaucratic actors. Yet we learn little about the relationships citizens establish with governing authorities.

This literature has foregrounded that participatory instruments are not static or premade devices, but political technologies that actively shape state–citizen relations in practice (Almeida 2014). Although these accounts often describe trust-building, negotiation, and informal ties, these are seldomly theorized as ongoing relational labor necessary to sustain participation and persistent policy change. Moreover, there is limited analysis of activists' circulation across fields; ethnographic work is focused on activists' entry into institutions or specific periods of success or crises but has overlooked the fluctuation of actors in and out of institutions over time, a dynamic foregrounded by the Bogotá case.

Relational Work and Bureaucratic Activism

Bureaucratic or institutional activism refers to the process through which social movement actors enter the government and become embedded within state institutions (Taylor 2002; Pettinicchio 2012). Activist bureaucrats are disproportionately concentrated in underfunded agencies, which recruit them more often. This is because policy areas such as gender (Banaszak 2005), the environment (Abers 2019), and social justice (Silveira 2022), require forms of expertise rooted in movement experience rather than technocratic training alone. Once activists become state insiders, they pursue organizational and policy change from within the administration, advancing agendas associated with their social movements, sometimes even in tension with dominant and official state priorities (Abers 2015; Cayres 2017). Nevertheless, those engaging in institutional activism face a dual challenge: adapting to bureaucratic rigidity while translating movement knowledge into policy and remaining accountable to the diverse constituencies and social movements they represent (Abers and Tatagiba 2016).

Research in Latin America has focused on how periods of political transition and democratic opening enabled activists to enter the state (Álvarez 1990; Rich, Mayka, and Montero 2019). AIDS activism in Brazil presents a paradigmatic case. Activists engaged in intensive relational work with technocrats, local politicians, and sympathetic technical experts, while the state actively fostered their activism. Conjointly, they pressured health services, led prevention campaigns; expanded access through treatment, and brought the epidemic to the center of public debate (Biehl 2004; Rich 2019).

In other contexts, bureaucratic activism has been shown to emerge independently of social movements, as bureaucrats themselves align around shared agendas and citizen interests. For example, Andia (2016), introduces the concept of visiting bureaucrats to describe academics who temporarily enter the state and, unlike conventional technocrats, retain external positions that grant them greater autonomy, enabling them to advance policy reforms beyond government priorities. Alike, Nicholls and Baran (2024), use the concept of insurgent bureaucrats to describe

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the process by which civil servants may progressively develop awareness and empathy with the causes they work on, even without prior ties to grassroots, and in doing so contest state institutions from within to advance structural change.

Regardless of whether they are militants entering the state, researchers or technocrats sympathetic to social movement causes, or career bureaucrats who, over time, become sensitized to citizens' concerns, institutional activism entails extensive relational work, as activist bureaucrats interact, establish, and maintain relations with citizens, politicians and other strategic actors. Their direct agency to advance agendas from within can lead to the formation of better relationships with citizens (Honig 2024; McDonnell 2020) and produce better bureaucratic performance and productivity (Dilulio 1994; Pepinsky et al. 2017). Relational work between institutional actors and citizens is central to building state capacity beyond formal rules and technical expertise (Honig et al. 2025). It can even enable progressive policy change in difficult contexts, as Abers and von Bülow (2025) show, with activist networks advancing their goals from within the state by holding positions and leveraging institutional ties under a far-right government.

In this article, we argue that when both forms of embeddedness—bureaucratic activism and citizen councils—come together, the resulting relational work can generate synergies conducive to policy change. The case of Bogotá's gender policy and its Care System illustrate how sustained interaction across institutional and societal arenas enables coordination, mutual reinforcement, and the translation of feminist agendas into concrete policy designs and implementation practices.

Methods

This article is based on three years of ethnographic research. During the first year (2022–23), we focused on the development and functioning of the newly created Care System in Bogotá (reference omitted for anonymity). Since 2023 the research has been part of an ongoing international project that seeks to unveil the complexities of sustainable change by comparing three cities in three continents (reference omitted for anonymity).

We conducted 54 semi-structured interviews with previous and current state employees and women leaders. We also use more than 300 hours of observation in several collective spaces, such as community meetings and forums, and the informal interactions during those hours. Among these events was a three-day meeting we organized as part of the project, with the participation of (then) Mayor Claudia López, the former Women's Secretary, and leaders from the Women's Council. We also conducted document analysis of the history of the gender policy in Bogotá since the 1990s until today, including all decrees related to the policy, press analysis, etc. Based on this material, we built a timeline that we used as a prompt in interviews and informal conversations.

From the beginning, our research was designed as a committed and applied project, attempting to avoid extractive knowledge production. This allowed us to slowly establish the necessary trust of the main participants—women in social movements and participatory institutions, who are generally hesitant to allow access to outsiders, particularly researchers. To gain their confidence, we offered our help to both the city government and the Women's Council with different activities. For the Women's Secretariat, we contributed to developing a survey and collected data in different Care Blocks in 2023. Based on our early results, we gave a presentation about burnout among street-level bureaucrats that we witnessed in the Care Blocks. Diana Rodríguez, then Women's Secretary, welcomed research conducted alongside policy development. Following our presentation, the administration provided Care Block coordinators with administrative support to reduce workload and burnout. We also supported the Women's Council and Secretariat in organizing an event on the council's memory and legacy.

Regarding names and confidentiality, we use pseudonyms or avoid mentioning names when we consider that using them could negatively affect individuals. But we often keep the original names,

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either because they are public figures, or when we want to highlight the voices of the leaders that have sufficiently been made invisible before, always with their authorization.

The Case

In 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, when gender inequalities in care work gained global visibility, Bogotá launched an innovative policy. Mayor Claudia López (2020–23) inaugurated the city's Care System and its first Care Block in Ciudad Bolívar, one of Bogotá's poorest areas. Care Blocks repurpose existing public infrastructure in peripheral yet well-connected areas to spatially concentrate services for women caregivers. Conceived as gender-differentiated "time banks," the policy seeks to reduce unpaid care work by providing education, personal development activities, and care services for dependents, thereby reallocating time to women. Elsewhere, we assess the Care System's outcomes (reference omitted). We show that women users—mostly from low-income households—report high satisfaction, though they demand stronger links to employment and income generation. Although care responsibilities remain largely unchanged and many users report feeling even busier than before, Care Blocks facilitate learning and rest by partially socializing care work and positioning the state as a co-responsible actor.

The policy has gained strong international support from development agencies such as UNDP, USAID, Oxfam, and others, as care and gender inequalities rise on global agendas. In parallel, Colombia's national government is currently trying to scale up the policy. One of the main brains and managers behind the policy is currently directing the program nationally. She took some of her former colleagues with her, who all match the profile of activist bureaucrats, and who were crucial for the development of the local Care System.

Although former Mayor Claudia López was pivotal for the policy, other women also played a crucial role for the generation and implementation of the policy. In fact, some women leaders told us, "She did not share that prize with us" and "this policy happened also because of us." López herself, however, recognizes that she came to this policy because of the local women's organizations, as she said in an event we organized for this project:

> What we achieved in Bogotá is the result of a pact we made during the mayoral campaign. I was the only woman among four candidates in 2019, and I gladly endorsed a covenant proposed by feminist organizations, women's groups, and Bogotá's Women's Council (. . .) Together, we drafted this 13-point agreement, which included transitioning from the care economy to care services.

The Women's Council is a participatory body of the local government of Bogotá, in charge of proposing and overseeing the gender policy, active since 2007. Currently integrated by 51 women, it is representative of Bogotá's 20 localities as well as different rights such as housing or health. It also represents women's diversity, such as indigenous women or sex workers. To be elected, women must be nominated as representatives of social organizations (i.e., not as individuals) and demonstrate at least 18 months of community work in support of women's rights.

The Care System is an important achievement in a series of progressive and persistent changes towards a more equitable city, which the Women's Council has played an important part in over the last 20 years. The Women's Council successes are numerous: They led to the enactment of regulations and policies that favor women's rights and needs in the city. They managed to create a new governmental bureau, the Women's Secretariat; and they managed to make changes in state rhetoric and symbolic recognition of the movement's demands.

Bogotá's transformation was enabled by distinct political opportunity structures around gender equality that predate the Care System, extending back at least to the 1990s. This includes the

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creation of dedicated institutions and a gender-differentiated policy approach. The broad political opening in the 1990s, culminating in Colombia's 1991 Constitution and subsequent mechanisms concerning women's participation (among other populations), allowed feminists to influence local government. A second opening came with the incorporation of gender issues into Bogotá's public policy, especially through the 2003 City Council mandate to develop the Plan of Equal Opportunities and Gender Equality, driven by both grassroots mobilization and supportive political leadership. A third opportunity emerged with the election of left leaning mayors in 2004, 2008, and 2012, who created neighborhood Houses of Equal Opportunity for Women, formalized women's participation bodies, and consolidated the Women's Secretariat. These advances, however, were uneven across administrations. While Claudia López's 2019 election renewed momentum, we argue in this article that persistent change depends not only on political openings but on the relational work of citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats who turn opportunities into concrete institutional progress.

Results

Relational Work and Policy Change

Through our three years of fieldwork, we were able to witness how the gender policy of the city is constructed in meetings that brought together citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats in the same room. A high representative of the Women's Secretariat is regularly present at Women's Council meetings. They are there not only to inform citizens but also to listen. There are at least two other lower-ranking bureaucrats dedicated to helping with the agenda and facilitating participation by connecting people online. These often extensive meetings sometimes finish with frustration by the citizen representatives at the Women's Council, because they do not feel recognized by the government, or by the bureaucrats who feel that representatives do not recognize their efforts. At other times, however, we could register important moments of synergy in which progressive policy changes took place, namely, when the work of representatives and bureaucrats corresponded or overlapped. Interviews about the history of the gender policy in the city were full of such occasions of productive correspondence between representatives and bureaucrats, moments that involved a great deal of relational work between them. We were able to identify three distinct forms of relational: open and effective participation that transforms demands into concrete policies; joint and coordinated advocacy; and translation of bureaucratic jargon into common language.

Open and Effective Participation

Advancements in Bogotá's gender policy have been connected to citizen participation and activist bureaucrats since its conception. In 2004, under Luis Eduardo Garzón, the first elected leftist mayor of Bogotá, openly receptive to women's demands, an Advisory Office for Women and Gender Issues was established within the city's Social Welfare Bureau. For the first time, Bogotá had an office focused exclusively on women's issues. At the same time, women's organizations across the city co-created the Plan of Equal Opportunities and Gender Equality (Plan de Igualdad de Oportunidades y Equidad de Género), a precursor to the current gender policy.

One of the main characters in this organizational innovation was a feminist union activist, deeply connected to women's organizations in the city and to political training and popular education programs for women trade unionists, who later became a bureaucrat under this government. In her words:

> During Luis Eduardo Garzón's campaign for mayor, we formed a kind of working group to think about his candidacy because I knew him quite well, and we had already made some progress on certain issues. So, we began to think that if he was going to be a candidate, we

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> wanted the points of the women's agenda—on which, for some reason, we found common ground with different groups—to be part of an agreement with Lucho before he became mayor. And that led us to come together with women from different sectors, and we began scheduling meetings to work with the candidates. We invited all the candidates, but the only one who came was the one who ended up winning. So, we made an agreement with him. (. . .) Once he won, we said: well, we expect the points we proposed to be included in his action program. And Garzón said, "Fine, then name a person." And that person was Juanita Barreto.[2] Juanita, of course, joined the Mayor's Office team as an advisor, and that's when we began working with three other women. I was in charge of the political participation issue, another colleague took on economic development, another handled international financing, and another addressed the issue of violence.

The newly appointed activist bureaucrats emerged from the movement itself and understood what the women wanted and demanded. They also knew the modes of engagement through which women's voices needed to be heard for them to feel genuinely recognized as political and transformative agents. They engaged in various forms of participatory mechanisms to ensure that all women were heard, especially the most disadvantaged. The formulation of the policy was a collective effort in which relational work was fundamental.

To develop the new gender plan, nine participatory forums called Diverse Roundtables (Mesas Diversas) were held with "representatives from 67 women's organizations across the city. These forums provided a space for dialogue and generated proposals and key elements to define priorities" (Política Pública de Mujer y Géneros, 2005). As one official from that period that later worked within the Women's Secretariat, a 45-year-old psychologist with a PhD in Social Sciences, explained,

> They [referring to the women from the movement that participated in the roundtables] were fundamental in the discussions—especially around rights. The way they pushed the debates at the time, deciding which rights should be prioritized, really set the tone [e.g. Right to participation and representation; Right to a life free from violence for women]. There was deep dialogue between those of us on the staff and the women's organizations. They practically set the direction for how the State should approach women's rights

The policy was not simply the outcome of consultation with civil society, but embedded civil society's problem framings and social rights claims into the gender plan. This was possible because the bureaucratic activists took the time to actively listen and acknowledge the citizens' needs and wants and incorporated them into the official documents. In effect, activist bureaucrats created an empowering space for civic participation in which demands were transformed into concrete policy.

This openness to civil society was not unique to Garzón's mayorship. Other mayors have also been openly receptive to women's demands and have engaged in relational work with them to achieve progressive and persistent policy change. The most recent example is the Care System. Care had become a central topic for various grassroots and feminist organizations in Bogotá before Claudia López entered the mayoral race. Its inclusion in her government agenda was not the result of a single interaction, but rather the outcome of sustained relational work between different civil society actors and the receptive mayoral candidates. The Women's Council, following its practice of crafting a collective agenda before elections based on input from all the city's organizations represented in the council, presented it to different candidates. In 2019, care appeared as one of the central priorities in the Women's Council agenda, and then-candidate López signed it.

[2]Juanita Barreto a feminist academic, who we also interviewed for this work.

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Yet López did not only engage with the Women's Council. She also established a direct relationship with The Intersectoral Roundtable on the Care Economy, a coalition of feminist economists and academics who had been promoting care as a public issue since 2014. As one of its founding members—a nationally renowned feminist economist—recalled:

> Claudia called us and said: "I'm interested. I'm not a feminist, I don't know much about the topic, but I understand it's a matter of guaranteeing rights and citizenship. Present an agenda, we'll discuss it, and I'll see what I can commit to." We presented eight points. She accepted all of them, including the creation of the City's Care System.

This episode shows how López incorporated not only social demands, but also technically grounded proposals developed by feminist experts.

A crucial expression of embeddedness was the direct incorporation of movement actors into the institutional apparatus responsible for designing and implementing the Care System. One of López's key officials—the Director of the Care System—came directly from this coalition. An activist bureaucrat who is part of the coalition and at one point worked for the Women's Secretariat highlighted that "Natalia Moreno was trained within The Intersectoral Roundtable on the Care Economy," underscoring that a person from the movement, technically trained and politically invested in feminism, became responsible for materializing the policy.

Once in the government, López had to present a development plan for 2020–24, the city's four-year strategic policy framework that sets priorities, programs, and budget guidelines for each mayoral administration. This required intense relational work between state bureaucrats, many of them self-identified feminists. As a member of the Women's Council, the representative of the right to habitat, a 60-year-old teacher recalled:

> At our monthly meeting we were invited to collaborate with Claudia López's program to mainstream the topic we had managed to agree upon in the pact—care. We created a Care Commission. That commission held a meeting with the Director of the Secretariat of Planning, and we, the representatives of the Women's Council, had to make sure that care was in all dimensions of the Development Plan.

This collaboration and the direct relationship between citizen representatives and government officials, illustrates how the Women's Council's participation extended well beyond the campaign and agenda-setting periods; it evolved into a sustained and structured relation in shaping the strategic direction of the Care System. The following excerpt of a leader who coordinates an organization for addressing gender-based violence, representing the locality of Bosa, on the periphery of Bogotá, relating how the mobile units of care, the care buses, came about, illustrates the synergy between representatives and bureaucrats:

> We told the former Women's Secretary: "Secretary, the anchor points [for the Care Blocks] need to move, because the system must adapt to care, not care to the system, right? And no one can leave their home to come here unless they have a way to do so." Then she added, "Well, let's put in some buses." And honestly, as I'm telling you, there are services that emerged because the administration had that political will, and both Claudia [López] and Diana Rodríguez Franco [Secretary of the Women's Secretariat at the time] sat down with their teams and said, this is what we're going to do. And when they told us, "We're going to do this thing with the buses," it seemed brilliant to me—something we had never considered. Because it's one thing to have the administrative perspective, because you have the means to do it, because you are the Secretary, and another thing entirely to be a caregiver, an ordinary person. I mean, it never would have occurred to me to think of a care bus because I don't have the capacity to make it happen, but she does.

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Figure 1. Representatives from the Women's Council, Members of Care Organizations, Activist Bureaucrats, and Politicians Came Together When the Bogotá City Council approved Agreement 893 of 2023, Institutionalizing the Care System. (Women's Secretariat, March 9, 2023: https://x.com/secredistmujer/status/1633922605940985858/photo/2).

The exchange exemplifies how the co-production of the Care System relied on the negotiation between experiential and bureaucratic knowledge. Movement actors were able to identify everyday barriers and articulate what care looked like in the territory, while bureaucratic activists had the authority, tools, and resources needed to translate these insights into policy design and service innovation. The resulting policies, such as the creation of buses providing mobile care services, were therefore neither solely technocratic nor solely activist-driven but emerged from the negotiation and acknowledgment of each other's capacities.

Joint and Coordinated Advocacy

The new care policy was institutionalized with Agreement 893 of 2023 of the city legislature, the Council of Bogotá. This was important to make it less likely for a future government to change it. The moment was mentioned repeatedly during our fieldwork as a major political achievement of the combined efforts of the Women's Secretariat together with the Women's Council (Figure 1).

Representatives of the Women's Council had done the personal lobbying work with city councilors of different political parties to convince them to protect the Care System with an agreement. As citizen representative of the locality of Antonio Nariño, a 56-year-old accountant, remembered: "we went every day, talking to each council member, presenting the proposal we had built, to convince them with evidence. We basically moved into the Council."

Yet the citizen representatives were not the only ones doing difficult work. Government officials from the Women's Secretariat were crucial in this effort by providing legal and technical advice. As one citizen representative of the locality of Puente Aranda, an engineer who came to participate by chance, and who, unlike other citizen representatives, has a master's degree in project management and always insisting on being strategic and efficient, explained,

> The Secretariat's legal team supported us. It was a collective process. We read and re-read that document eighty times, making comments until everyone agreed this was the final version to submit.

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Activist bureaucrats worked alongside citizen representatives to facilitate the agreement. Their relational work in the meetings and their negotiations with important institutions and actors led to the final document.

The resulting agreement was approved to legally safeguard this progress in feminist governance. It ensured the Care System's "continuity and permanence, preventing regression of achievements, and promoting the progressive and sustainable development" of the policy (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2023).

Translation of Bureaucratic Jargon to Common Language: "The Fight Is In the Words"

Another important form of relational work is translation. To be effective, the women participating in the institutionalized mechanisms such as the Women's Council need to acquire certain bureaucratic skills, including the language of the state, knowledge of the law, as well as the basic workings of the state. They must learn about local decrees and agreements, multiple acronyms, legal language, and what can be said and done in different committees. We thus conceive of them as citizen representatives. As explained to us by the representative of the right to housing, "the fight is in the words." This sentiment was shared by the former representative of the locality of Usaquén, a 63-year-old psychologist, who remarked that:

> When I arrived, I had no idea what CEDAW [The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] was—no idea at all. When they spoke using those acronyms, I thought . . . But you start learning, and you can't just stick to what you hear; you have to read.

She never thought that deciphering the technical and obscure language of the state in its decrees and planning documents would become part of her responsibilities, nor that learning how to debate, negotiate, and submit formal petitions would be central to her role. Now, she is an expert in bureaucratic paperwork of different sorts, including "derechos de petición" (right of petition), a legal mechanism that allows any person to formally request information from public authorities and receive a timely and reasoned response. She uses this mechanism for her activism, as well as for personal matters involving the care of her elderly mother. After over a decade of participating in different councils in the city, she is now proficient in this new language. For citizen representatives to master this vocabulary, relational work is fundamental.

In fact, for her and for many women councilors of her period, it was working closely with an architect from the local government on the master plan of the city, a technical document, that helped her enter the obscure world of the state's jargon and understand the power of the words. The architect, Mónica Sánchez, entered the city government with the leftist administration of Mayor Gustavo Petro (2012–15) and left in 2020. During the time, she played a mediating role, translating bureaucratic and technical language for the representatives of the Women's Council, while also converting the council's demands back into institutional terminology.

Mónica had a close relationship with the women of the Women's Council and accompanied them throughout the advocacy process that allowed the creation of the Secretariat. She illustrates well the people we have referred to as activist bureaucrats, but her role was larger than pushing the policy from within the state. An architect specialized in feminist urbanism, she recognized the role of grassroots movements, and especially women, in planning. During our research, Women's Council representatives insisted that we had to meet her.

> There was a moment when the councilors were very critical of the fact that they did not understand why there was a relationship between women and the POT [acronym for the master planning document]. (. . .) I explained to them the importance of addressing the issue of the POT and participating in the process that Bogotá was opening. From then on,

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> there were years and years of meetings with the representatives of the Women's Council. (. . .) The POT uses such a technical language, hyper-technical, that for the citizens, men and women, and non-binary, for everyone, it is often difficult to understand it, right? (. . .) So, I became like that translator to be able to understand what was being said.

Mónica generated discussions about feminist urbanism or about the way that urban renovation and gentrification can disproportionally affect women by cutting their neighborhood survival ties when displaced or expulsed from their homes. Her most important contribution, however, was teaching Women's Council representatives how to express their needs in the bureaucratic language of government plans.

> What really has an impact is when we talk about modifying or adjusting or including articles or paragraphs in the documents because that is finally what allows us to take hold of things, right? (. . .) A POT can have 700 articles. It´s too big and confusing. [I worked with them] to say let's modify this word instead of this one or, the gender approach is missing and the wording of that little sentence or paragraph is wrong.

Interestingly, a great part of this relational work between Mónica and the Women's Council occurred during a local government that was not especially progressive in gender terms (the second Peñalosa administration, 2016–20). Feminist agendas, however, were sustained through the efforts of activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives, working both within and alongside the state. This relational labor was key to maintaining gender and care priorities in urban planning.

Revolving Doors: The Overlap Between Bureaucrats and Citizens

During fieldwork we found a network of contacts between citizen representatives and bureaucrats that went beyond their current relation through institutional participation. Relational work, we came to understand, is partly enabled by the fact that some state workers and citizen representatives emerge from the same social movements; they know each other from participating in the same campaigns or from working together before. Even if they had not met before, they felt that they broadly belonged to the same women's movement. Supporting this sense of connection and relational work is the in- and out-circulation of women into public positions. Several participants had moved back and forth between women's movement and state institutions, where they tend to be hired on short-term contracts. This fluctuation between activism and state employment produces hybrid actors who are particularly apt in mediating between institutional and grassroots logics.

Indeed, 12 of the 19 bureaucrats we interviewed had been part of the women's movement before becoming bureaucrats, and all of them identified as feminists. And 9 of the 29 active Women's Council representatives at the time of research had held a public position in the local government, usually short-term contracts.[3]

The circulation of activists in and out of the public sector facilitates connections and eases the relational work necessary to advance their agendas. Movement actors who enter the state, bring situated expertise of neighborhood realities and feminist priorities; when they return to activism, they have acquired institutional experience and strategic skills to navigate bureaucratic and legal arenas.

Silvia is a great example. Her work related to the gender policy of Bogotá began more than a decade ago as part of the social movement that fought for the creation of the Women's Secretariat.

[3]It becomes important to know that since the 1990s, the Colombian state including local governments works mainly through short-term contracts (Sanabria 2015).

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Silvia began her activism in the southern, less privileged districts of Bogotá, where much of the women's movements in the city originate. There she coordinated a participatory process that brought together young and older women. She was also an active member of her locality's gender committee, another participatory body that exists in each of Bogotá's 20 localities.[4] These committees are open groups that meet monthly to discuss gender and feminist issues. They have representatives from the Women's Secretariat in charge of helping them. And they invite other parts of the local government to explain activities or transmit their concerns.

In 2015, Silvia started working on different strategies within the Women's Secretariat. This was a time when the institution provided opportunities for grassroots women to engage directly in street and mid-level bureaucracy positions. In her words "in the Secretariat I worked on a strategy for feminist pedagogy and another on gender justice. I also accompanied the election process of the Women's Council and was involved in the local participatory budgeting processes." Rising through the ranks, in 2021 she joined the City's Care System program as the coordinator of the first Care Block, hired in part because of her prior experience working with the local community. In due course, she was promoted to the position of zonal coordinator. She oversaw five Care Blocks in the southern localities of the city, some of the most populated areas with the highest levels of multidimensional poverty and care demands in Bogotá. Silvia comments:

> I believe that was the first approach, hiring strategic women, professionals close to the women's movement who had a specific track record (. . .) it works a lot that we [women from the feminist cause who have successfully joined the Women's Secretariat] take on these types of roles because we have the system and its operation in our heads.

Since leaving the Women's Secretariat in early 2024, this mid-level bureaucrat has expressed concern that, although the Care System will remain in place, future administrations may give it lower priority within the broader urban policy agenda. This concern is shared by another former contractor from the Women's Secretariat—a social worker and former member of the university-based feminist movement—as well as many of our interviewees, who stress that sustained progressive policy change depends on civil servants with genuine political commitment and on the continuous circulation and mutual retrofitting of expertise between activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives:

> I am troubled that the new administration does not prioritize the Care System (. . .) It is is now being focused on assistencialism and poverty criteria, a departure from the universal principles and the prioritization of care demands that initially guided the policy (. . .) I am concerned that there are no directives within the institution confronting this situation (. . .) It's something that worries me but that we must evaluate over time. It's upsetting to witness the construction of policy, only to experience the grief of seeing it disappear over time—such is the routine in municipal governance (. . .) The only thing that remains at this moment is citizenship [la ciudadanía]. If there are no directives to defend this [The Care System], it will be the caregivers and the Women's Council who will stand firm for their program. (. . .) Many of the women who have worked at the Women's Secretariat are activists (. . .) most are there because of political conviction, not because the job is the best in the world. They are there because their life project is anchored in defending women's rights.

She is referring to the Galán administration (2024–28), whose development plan prioritizes metro construction and security. Since taking office, the expansion of the Care Blocks has slowed

[4]Operational and Logistical Committees for Women and Gender Equality (Comité Operativo y Logístico de Mujer y Equidad de Género, COLMYEG).

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markedly compared to the previous administration, during which 23 of the 27 blocks were inaugurated (Malaver 2025).

Precarization and Bureaucratization: The Risk

If circulation enhances relational work, the precarization of both state workers and citizens participating in institutional instances puts relational work at risk. Also, governments less in favor of movements' goals make the work of both bureaucrats and citizen representatives more difficult. Relational work within institutional spaces unfolds under difficult conditions that generate tensions, especially for grassroots women who face precarious labor conditions, unpaid participation, and demanding institutional requirements. Leaders from the Women's Council repeatedly highlighted how participation is "precarized": they must attend numerous long meetings, often without reimbursement for transportation, food, or basic needs, making it hard to maintain formal employment. These material constraints intersect with internal frustrations—the feeling of invisibility, fragmentation of the movement, and the burdens created by multiple participation arenas. Together this forms a social context of exhaustion and disillusionment even as women persist in their roles. Power imbalances further complicate the dynamics, as activist bureaucrats often come from more privileged backgrounds, while citizen representatives are often household heads with limited financial stability. In addition, as the Colombian bureaucracy relies heavily on temporary contracting, most personnel in the Women's Secretariat have short-term contracts that are—usually—renewed annually. This evidently destabilizes relationships, continuity, and collaboration within institutionalized participatory spaces.

The precarity and uncertainty that circumscribes both representatives' and activist bureaucrats' lives has high emotional costs. This was evident when a senior official in the Women's Secretariat—and herself a long-time member of the women's movement—broke down in tears and told council members: "It [endless discussions that fail to reach agreements] moves me because you don't know the struggle inside [the Women's Secretariat] to preserve what exists; our work is to maintain and improve, and we want your work to have greater impact." Her experience encapsulates the strain produced by short-term contractual structures, high turnover, and the pressures of navigating dual identities as both former activists and current state officials who may not share the same priorities.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we unveil the complexities of relational work and its role in making embeddedness of civil society in the state work for policy change. In other words, our research uncovers the micro foundations of embeddedness by showing how everyday relational practices between state actors and citizens can generate policy change. We found three main forms of relational work: (1) open and effective participation; (2) joint and coordinated advocacy for change, and (3) the translation of bureaucratic jargon into accessible, everyday language. Relational work is easier when the government is aligned with the movements. But relational work can become especially critical under less supportive administrations that constrain the scope of action of both citizen representatives and activist bureaucrats.

We also identify some conditions that ease relational work, especially the circulation of actors that allow activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives to mutually reconfigure one another. At the same time, we highlight the tensions and vulnerabilities embedded in this work, notably those arising from precarious labor contracts and the demanding, often exclusionary requirements of institutionalized participation.

Activist bureaucrats and citizen representatives were crucial in feminizing the state in Bogotá from within. Yet it is their connections and the relational work between them that makes their incidence powerful and synergetic. These connections were at least twofold: shared interests and

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ideological connection, in this case feminism. Yet, perhaps even more importantly, although stemming from shared interests and ideology, is the interpersonal relationship between bureaucrats and representatives, and all the relational work it implies. Moments of heightened synergy among actors (shaped by structural conditions such as proximity and circulation of actors, as well as by a deliberate willingness to engage) opened more favorable opportunities. But building networks, cultivating trust with political institutions and actors, and persisting through setbacks was key to enabling persistent social change from the bottom up, from within the women's movement, rather than top down from the state. Far from eroding militancy or movement autonomy, feminist bureaucrats in Bogotá have leveraged their positionality to institutionalize innovations such as the Care System, demonstrating how enduring activist–bureaucrat alliances can embed social movement agendas into policy while ensuring their recognition within state frameworks.

Without this relational work, the ties between movements and the state, known as embeddedness in the literature (Bradlow 2024), would not necessarily result in progressive, sustainable, and legitimate social change. Embeddedness between social movements and the state requires more than just social positions and ties. It requires continuous work of trust, negotiation, and translation.

While in our case relational work contributed to progressive social change in the domain of gender policy, there is nothing intrinsically progressive about it. Embeddedness, and the relational work through which it is enacted, are ideologically indeterminate. The same relational practices that sustain progressive reforms can also enable conservative or exclusionary agendas, depending on the actors, values, and coalitions that become embedded within the state. Embeddedness and relational work are thus more general mechanisms that can produce state change in directions that must be specified empirically and that vary according to the agendas of the actors involved.

Importantly, embeddedness and relational work between the state and civil society have clear limitations. First, they are not sufficient to guarantee policy continuity or sustained prioritization. Under the current Galán administration, the Care System has lost institutional priority. When the political conditions that sustained the original coalition between government and civil society shift, relational work alone cannot protect policy standards. Second, and equally importantly, relational work often relies on unpaid or precarious labor from both bureaucrats and—especially—civil society actors. Most bureaucrats in the Care System are women on precarious contracts with the state; they are not civil servants with permanent positions. Citizen representatives, in turn, are also often women in precarious economic situations, for whom participation entails additional unremunerated labor, with economic, temporal, and emotional costs. Relational work is not a costless solution, but a practice embedded in—and reproducing—structures of class and gender inequality.

Beyond our case, we believe ethnographic methods to be particularly suitable to understand relational work. Our findings are grounded in in-depth interviews with a great variety of citizens and bureaucrats but also on several years of ethnographic work in forums, participatory spaces, formal and informal meetings, casual conversations, and digital platforms, that allowed us to trace the everyday practices of embeddedness carried out by them. It was in our ethnographic work that we were able to see firsthand this relational work happening, especially its nuances beyond the relevant cases of both success and failure that tend to be remembered in interviews.

The concept of relational work between bureaucrats and citizens might be fruitful in realms beyond policy change and embeddedness. It might also be useful, for example, to illuminate the black box of policy implementation, such as the everyday work of street bureaucrats and program users, or even as a good lens to better understand how state capacity works on the ground.

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