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Collective Political Capabilities: Women's Agency, Care, and Peacebuilding in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper aims to connect women's community experiences in building peace and social cohesion in Colombia with political philosophy. It argues that i) the concept of *collective political capabilities* helps to understand, acknowledge, and value what women have been doing in areas affected by armed conflict; ii) there are ways to explore this concept in relation to women and what has been referred to as a feminine approach to action and thought in a non-essentialist sense; and iii) the fact that these capabilities, largely exhibited by women, are rarely recognized and can only be exercised by overcoming significant barriers represents a form of hermeneutic injustice. The research employed Participatory Action Research, hermeneutic methodology, and an intersectional approach. The main conclusions are that continued peacebuilding requires i) recognition of *collective political capabilities*, ii) the reevaluation of the feminization of care, and iii) the overcoming of hermeneutic injustice against women.

Key words:

collective political capabilities; care, women; hermeneutic injustice

JEL classification:

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Capacidades políticas colectivas: la agencia de las mujeres, el cuidado y la construcción de la paz en Colombia

Resumen

Este artículo pretende conectar las experiencias comunitarias de las mujeres en la construcción de la paz y la cohesión social en Colombia con la filosofía política. Argumenta que: i) el concepto de capacidades políticas colectivas ayuda a entender, reconocer y valorar lo que las mujeres han venido haciendo en zonas afectadas por el conflicto armado; ii) hay formas de explorar este concepto en relación con las mujeres y con lo que se ha denominado un enfoque femenino de la acción y el pensamiento, en un sentido no esencialista; y iii) el hecho de que estas capacidades, en gran medida exhibidas por las mujeres, rara vez sean reconocidas y solo puedan ejercerse superando importantes barreras representa una forma de injusticia hermenéutica. La investigación empleó la Investigación Acción Participativa, la metodología hermenéutica y un enfoque interseccional. Las principales conclusiones son que la construcción continuada de la paz requiere: i) el reconocimiento de las capacidades políticas colectivas, ii) la reevaluación de la feminización de los cuidados y iii) la superación de la injusticia hermenéutica contra las mujeres.

Palabras clave:

capacidades políticas colectivas; cuidados; mujeres; injusticia hermenéutica

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Introduction

The concept of *collective political capabilities* is understood here as a set of strengths used to build, develop, and sustain the common good of a community. It is centered on care and emphasizes the importance of resisting oppression, inequality, and injustice. These capabilities have been largely developed by those involved in caregiving tasks, both within families and communities in territories severely impacted by armed conflict. Given that caregiving has traditionally been carried out by women, these care-based capabilities are often seen as exclusive to them. However, this is a misconception, as men can—and do— develop these capabilities as well (Ruddick, 1995; Schwarzenbach, 2009; Tronto, 1987). The proposed concept of *collective political capabilities* underscores both the intrinsic and instrumental value of collectivities in the development of human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2002;

Sen, 1999). Capabilities such as protection, resistance, affiliation, governance, cooperation, solidarity, and participation are fundamental, particularly for communities deeply affected by adverse conditions. These capabilities foster—and are simultaneously fostered by—*collective agency* (Ibrahim, 2006). In this sense, a community is a complex system with emergent emancipatory properties since developing collective political capabilities leads to new forms of social organization and resilience (Elder-Vass, 2010).

This paper draws on findings from three Colombian departments as part of the *Colombia Científica* program, specifically within the framework of the *Reconstruction of the Social Fabric in Post-Conflict Zones* project. This program included several initiatives, including *Weaving Political Capabilities for Transitions in Territories* (Sánchez-Jiménez et al., 2021), which was implemented in six municipalities heavily impacted by the Colombian armed conflict: Samaná and Riosucio (Caldas), Chalán and Ovejas (Sucre), and Bojayá and Riosucio (Chocó). The project prioritized the involvement of social actors who have been victims of territorial conflicts, with the central goal of developing political capabilities for transitions in these territories, through democratic mediation of social conflicts, aimed at reconciliation and building stable and lasting peace (Sánchez-Jiménez et al., 2021, p. 45).

As this paper will show, these capabilities are primarily exhibited by women. It will be argued that these political capabilities[1] are crucial for peacebuilding and the public sphere. Lastly, it will be asserted that the limited recognition of these collective political capabilities—and the fact that they are only exercised through overcoming significant barriers—constitutes a form of epistemic injustice against women, specifically hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2017).

[1] Since this article stems from participation in the aforementioned project, the primary focus was on exploring the notion of political capabilities through the lens of women's activities in these territories. During the research, it became apparent that the capabilities approach might be critiqued from the perspective of Latin American communitarian feminism, as it is traditionally associated with Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2002), whose philosophical foundations are often viewed as liberal. However, it is important to note that the roots of the capabilities approach lie in Aristotelian thought, under the concept of virtues, which is inherently communitarian—though not feminist. Despite such critiques, the core idea of considering what individuals are capable of being and doing, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others, under the right conditions, remains valuable. This is the essence shared between Aristotelian virtues and the human capabilities framework as proposed by Sen and Nussbaum.

Methodology

In line with the objectives of this study, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was employed as the primary research methodology. This approach not only facilitated a horizontal exchange between the researcher and the communities but also sought to explore the potential for women's emancipation within these communities. Additionally, a hermeneutic methodology with a feminist lens was utilized, meaning that the process of analysis and interpretation paid special attention to women's experiences as a key resource for gaining deeper insights—particularly regarding the notion of capabilities and the importance of their recognition. This methodology requires a commitment to interpreting the meaning of concepts by considering the context in which they arise, as concepts must not be detached from the social environments in which they are applied or developed (Warnke, 1993).

The approach also incorporated an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), recognizing that both the development and recognition of women's human capabilities have been hindered by multiple intersecting factors. This is especially true for impoverished, Indigenous, Black, and peasant women in Colombia. In the research that led to this article, I worked with three specific groups:

1. *Escuela de Mujeres Sabias por el Territorio* of Riosucio (Caldas), composed primarily of Indigenous and peasant women from the colonial Indigenous reservation Resguardo Cañamomo Lomaprieta (Grisales-Pascuasa et al., 2022);
2. *Red de Cuidadoras Comunitarias de Riosucio* (Chocó) and *Mujeres Tejedoras de Paces por Amor a Bojayá* (Chocó), both composed of Black and Indigenous women, mainly from the Emberá Dóbida and Wounan communities;
3. *Cocinando Ideas* in Ovejas (Sucre), comprising mainly rural and tobacco-growing women (Corporación Humanas, 2022).

To conduct the research, I employed a combination of methods and interactive elements, including women's circles, semi-structured interviews, and field journals as tools for engagement and data collection.

Theoretical References

Human Capabilities and Women

According to Nussbaum and Maldonado (2009), human capabilities are defined as what people can *be* and *do* in a normative sense. This concept does not refer to the actual conditions people face around the world but instead proposes a cross-cultural framework for understanding what we should strive to *be* and *do* if provided with the best possible conditions. Nussbaum and Maldonado (2009) argue that exercising these capabilities is essential for affirming that people live a dignified human life. Therefore, she contends that social justice is unattainable unless states provide their citizens with the minimum material conditions necessary for these capabilities to develop.

Nussbaum and Maldonado (2009) emphasize that this approach must be feminist, as women have historically been the most marginalized group. Among the ten human capabilities Nussbaum outlines, this analysis focuses on the *capabilities of association* (capability 7) and *control over one's environment* (capability 10). The latter is particularly relevant to control over the political sphere: "to be able to participate effectively in the political choices that govern one's own life; to have the right to political participation, protection of freedom of expression and association." (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 123). The necessary conditions for the flourishing of these capabilities have been scarce for many women, especially those in non-privileged or non-hegemonic positions—such as rural, impoverished, Indigenous, and Black women. As we will explore, despite these challenges, many women in these territories have managed to organize, associate, and exercise some degree of control over their environment.

Collective Political Capabilities, or Collective Capabilities for Public Construction

While contemporary literature on the specific notion of political capabilities is limited (Classen, 2018), we can refer to Aristotle's (1992) concept of humans as *zoon politikon*—political animals (1992, I253aI). This concept reflects both necessity and possibility: We are human because we live in communities, caring for and teaching one another how to live. Simultaneously, recognizing ourselves as political animals reveals the capabilities we have to associate, deliberate, plan,

and determine how we want to live (McIntyre, 2001). Despite this, certain human groups have historically been considered "more human" than others, granting them privileged access to knowledge creation and societal participation (a topic we will explore further with Miranda Fricker, 2017).

To live well—or attain *eudaimonia*—according to Aristotle (1999), we need both material conditions (external goods) and cultivated virtues (internal goods). As political animals, the cultivation of virtues requires societal interaction. Nussbaum (2002) builds on these Aristotelian ideas, asserting that human capabilities are opportunities, freedoms, and possibilities. Although she emphasizes individual capabilities, she also considers capabilities related to public life, such as *capabilities of association and control over one's own environment* (both material and political).

However, an interesting critique of Nussbaum and Sen's capabilities approach suggests that it insufficiently captures the instrumental and intrinsic value of social structures and collective action, freedom, and agency. Solava S. Ibrahim (2006) proposes complementing their approach with the notion of *collective capabilities*, which emerge especially in communities facing adverse conditions. Ibrahim emphasizes that collective action is crucial for expanding and exercising new "collective capabilities," particularly in impoverished groups with limited financial, physical, and human capital. In her words:

> In poor communities, while the limited financial, physical, and human capital restrains individual agency, it encourages the poor to engage in collective action to enhance their capabilities in various ways. First, collective action is instrumentally valuable for promoting income generation, resource sharing, and creating a sense of self-esteem among the poor while encouraging them to participate in local decision-making (Stewart, 2005, p. 190; Thorp et al., 2005, pp. 907–913). Secondly, collective action is also intrinsically important for affecting the formulation of values and beliefs… Thirdly, individual freedoms and collective action are mutually reinforcing… Finally, the ability to engage in a collective action or form a group is itself a capability. (Ibrahim, 2006, p. 406)

I suggest that this framework offers a valuable lens for understanding the situations that have happened in the territories of *deep Colombia*[2]—those neglected

[2] Expression attributable to Alfredo Molano, former Colombian peace commissioner.

by the State and affected by both centuries of structural violence and the 60-year armed conflict.[3] The women's networks and their community actions observed in this research are concrete examples of these collective capabilities described by Ibrahim.

Victoria Pinilla-Sepúlveda and Victoria Lugo-Agudelo (2021) also link political capabilities and agency to the possibility of acting in what Hannah Arendt called *the common world* (pp. 55–56). This leads to capabilities for protection, resistance, affiliation, governance, cooperation, solidarity, and participation (pp. 65–66). In particular, the capability for solidarity and cooperation implies creating or strengthening social, emotional, spiritual, and institutional support networks, group participation, or leadership actions. Solidarity requires sharing what one has without submitting it to the calculation of personal gain, but thinking of the good of the whole from feelings such as empathy, compassion, and a sense of belonging to the group (p. 66).

All these authors emphasize the opportunities available to agents when they unite and collaborate. In this sense, the notion of collective capabilities can also be understood within the framework of collective agency, conceived as a form of emergent power, as explained by Dave Elder-Vass (2010).[4] In his words:

> As I understand emergence, a causal power or emergent property is a capability of an entity to have a certain sort of causal effect on the world in its own right—an effect that is something more than the effects that would be produced by the entity's parts if they were not organized into this sort of whole. (p. 66)

They are emergent relational properties since the specific relations and organization among the parts that constitute the whole make possible the emergence of powers or properties, which he calls *causal mechanisms* (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 66). He says:

> Although emergent properties, and thus real causal powers, can therefore be explained, they cannot be explained away. They exist only when the relevant

[3] In this case, I am employing an abductive reasoning approach.

[4] Although the primary aim of this work is not to provide an ontological explanation of what occurs in these territories with women's organizations and resistance, I am thankful for a blind reviewer's suggestion to consider this perspective.

> type of whole exists, hence they are causal powers of this type of whole and not of its parts. (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 67)

This is crucial to my argument because, as we will see, what has given those women a certain power over themselves and their environment (material and political, in Nussbaum's terms) is their association and organization.

Given that in Elder-Vass's (2010) theory, the essential parts of those social groups are individuals, "the ontology of social structure also depends upon the ontology of human individuals and their causal powers" (p. 86); i.e., it depends upon their agency.[5] So, building on what we have seen in previous sections, we can ask what happens when people are prevented from fully gaining and exercising their individual agency. But we can also highlight the emergence of power when a group of individuals in such a situation unite and organize in special ways, as the women referred to in this paper do. Although Elder-Vass (2010) centers his analysis on individual agency (Ch. 5), he endorses Coole's (2005) definition of political agency as: "… the possession of 'the power to bring about effective change in collective life'" (p. 88). I argue that the actions of women in these territories exemplify political agency. Among other things, they create networks that mobilize resources, support, and solidarity. Working together to reform laws or policies for the common good, they challenge harmful power structures in their communities[6] and bring about effective changes in their collective lives.

Results

The conceptual analysis outlined above is supported by the testimonies of women from the three departments visited. These women acknowledge that they have developed a unique sensitivity to addressing public issues and ensuring the continuity of community projects that promote the common good, all while resisting various forms of oppression, inequality, and injustice.[7] As one woman stated:

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[5] This explains why Nussbaum and Maldonado (2009) argue that capability approach must be implemented from a feminist perspective.

[6] They oppose not only unjust state and legal powers and structures but also illegal ones that have taken over their territories, sometimes risking their lives in the process.

[7] For more on this, see Rincón-Isaza and Grisales-Pascuaza (2024).

> Women are more sensitive to social problems; men are more indifferent. We are more open to listening, more empathetic.[8] (Member of *Escuela de Mujeres Sabias por el Territorio*).

In Chocó, women expressed similar sentiments:

> Women work more because they think about the future of their children… Women know their needs; they can connect more with people's needs, with more love. (Black woman, member of *Red de Cuidadoras Comunitarias de Riosucio*)

However, these women have faced significant barriers to developing their human capabilities, as described by Nussbaum (2002). For example, members of *Escuela de Mujeres Sabias por el Territorio* shared that women often accompanied their husbands in processes of recovery and care of the land but were denied recognition. They physically participated in the struggle and "*ponen más el pecho*",[9] yet they were not acknowledged. In response, they began organizing coffee plantations as a strategy since they were not permitted to gather for openly organizational purposes. They referred to *Democrat Women*, a national process, and mentioned that women from the cities sent them materials (such as newspapers and books) that they had to hide in banana leaves in order to study their rights.

According to some of the *mayoras*,[10] in earlier times, they could not gather as they do now because neither men nor society allowed it. This is why they had to conceal educational materials in their food. Each woman took on the responsibility of inviting another, and in this way, their association grew gradually. To raise funds, they organized parties, prepared empanadas,[11] and held sales and dances. They faced sexism and harassment from men who, for example, would sprinkle chili powder on the floor to disrupt their dances or start fights to break up their

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8 These testimonies and the ones that follow were gathered during two different women's circles through semi-structured interviews. Dates: *Escuela de Sabias por el Territorio*, Riosucio, Caldas: June 20, 2022; *Cuidadoras Comunitarias de Riosucio* (Chocó): August 11 and 12, 2022.

9 Colloquial expression meaning they took on greater responsibility or showed more courage in facing challenges.

10 Refers to women who are not only older in age but, more importantly, are respected in the community for their wisdom.

11 A traditional Colombian snack, typically made of dough filled with meat, potato, or cheese and deep-fried.

gatherings. The men themselves would beat them off. These men, perhaps fearing that the women were plotting against them or that they would lose them, would not allow women to attend political meetings, claiming that such spaces were only for men. They thought women were only good for the home and housework.

In a personal interview, a Black woman from *Red de Cuidadoras Comunitarias de Riosucio* (Chocó) stated:

> Ancestrally, there has been a struggle for land, education, respect, and equality, which has been violated by sexism. There has been a limitation to women's participation in politics, as it is believed they belong in the kitchen, as Rodolfo Hernandez[12] said.

This is significant because the systematic lack of conditions for women to develop what Nussbaum calls *capabilities for association*[13] and *capabilities over one's own environment*—which include political capabilities—has perpetuated both direct and symbolic injustices against them. As a result, the development of some of women's human capacities has been hindered.

Despite these adverse conditions, women have developed mechanisms and strategies to organize and act within their environment, thereby developing political capabilities. For example, the women of *Escuela de Mujeres Sabias por el Territorio* in San Lorenzo (Caldas) organized to recover ancestral knowledge, learn about their rights as Indigenous women, strengthen their public voices, engage in political training, and advocate for public policies with a gender perspective, as well as for the construction of a *Casa de la Mujer* (Women's House). In Riosucio and Bojayá (Chocó), Black and Indigenous women have formed emotional, material, and social support networks to confront the difficulties of armed conflict. These networks have helped them recognize the importance of raising their voices, as seen with the *Cantaoras de Pogue*, who use singing to narrate their suffering. Through these networks, they have also come to understand their rights and work to uphold them. For example, *Red de Mujeres*

[12] A late Colombian presidential candidate in the 2022 election known for his controversial remarks regarding gender roles.

[13] Women have traditionally been denied these capabilities, a situation that worsens during times of conflict. For instance, the Truth Commission Report indicates that women were forbidden to meet in various conflict-affected territories (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022b, p. 51).

Tejedoras de Paces por Amor a Bojayá helped to formulate a gender-focused policy. As one Black woman from Bojayá expressed:

> These ethnic organizations formed the Departmental Women's Network; with them, Bojayá is the second municipality to have a public policy with a gender perspective. The women already know how to demand recognition; they know their rights, that they must be acknowledged in public spaces, and that the Gender Quota Act exists. And as they are trained, they claim their space. (Personal interview, August 2022)

Similarly, the women of *Cocinando Ideas*, in Ovejas (Sucre), remind us that the traditional work of cooking can also be a political act when done collectively, and it serves to narrate and heal the pain of war. It also offers a way to rethink and plan new forms of organization and action for the common good.

Despite these efforts, women's contributions have yet to be fully recognized. In the history of the colonial Indigenous reservation of Cañamomo Lomaprieta (Riosucio, Caldas), there has only been one woman governor, Arnobia Moreno Andica. In Bojayá, out of 15 mayors, only two have been women, and currently, there is only one woman councilor among nine elected representatives: Mary Chaverra.[14] In Ovejas, women observe that when one of their initiatives gains political traction, a man becomes interested in it. Fieldwork in Sucre revealed the challenges women face in creating spaces beyond those traditionally assigned to their gender. While *Cocinando Ideas* has allowed them to engage in political work (Carmona-González et al., 2023), it remains centered around the kitchen and their roles as mothers. Their representation in higher-level political decision-making at the regional and departmental levels remains very limited.[15]

This underrepresentation of women in political spaces is only a small example of the broader exclusion of women from decision-making processes. As Ivonne Wilches (2010) notes, women's participation in peace processes is estimated at

[14] Mary Chaverra leads *Red de Mujeres Tejedoras Paces por Amor a Bojayá* and has served as a councilwoman for two consecutive terms (2016 and 2020).

[15] According to Corporación Humanas (2022), in Sucre, out of 26 municipalities, five elected a female mayor, including Chalán, Los Palmitos, and Toluviejo; and in Bolívar, a total of five female mayors were elected, compared to 41 male mayors. Of the Bolivar municipalities belonging to Montes de María, only in María la Baja was a woman elected. In Colosó, El Carmen de Bolívar, Ovejas, Palmito, and San Jacinto, there was at least one woman candidate for mayor, while in the other Montes de María municipalities, there were none (p. 136).

4%, highlighting their absence rather than their presence. The Escola de Cultura de Pau, in its 2008 report, refers to 33 negotiations in 20 countries and says that of the 280 people involved, only 11 were women. They found that the percentage was slightly higher in government negotiating teams, which reached 7%. They also determined that women in armed groups were 0.3%, and in facilitating teams, they were practically non-existent (1.7%) (p. 92).

Mónica Pachón et al. (2012) highlight that in Latin America, despite the efforts to close the gender gap in political participation (such as quota systems), significant disparities still remain. They point to the perception of discrimination as a key factor limiting women's political involvement (Pachón et al., 2012, pp. 362, 364). Although Colombia has made substantial progress over the past 30 years in closing gender gaps, the country still ranks 75th globally and 16th out of 22 Latin American countries. According to the National Registrar's Office, for the 2019–2023 period, 132 women were elected mayors in the country, representing 11% of the total number of mayors (Cuéllar, 2023).

This underrepresentation is problematic not only because of the challenges it poses for women's ability to develop their human capabilities but also because excluding women from the construction of the public sphere and politics[16] silences their voices—and, with them, their unique perspectives and needs.[17] This raises the question: What exactly are we missing?

[16] However, it might be essential to consider whether political participation and skills are accurately reflected in party politics. It is possible that some of these women's political practices have evolved in response to a reluctance to participate in traditional party politics. Instead, politics may be extending into other realms or being practiced from other different spaces. The paradox lies in the fact that, in many cases, participating in conventional political structures is a necessary evil for effecting significant and urgent changes in the lives of those facing pressing challenges.

[17] For this reason, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) established necessary measures to eliminate discrimination against women in public and political life (Article 7). Additionally, Resolution 1325 (ONU, 2000) calls on member states to integrate a gender perspective into peacekeeping missions. For a discussion on the ongoing challenges related to these initiatives, see Mesa (2012).

Discussion

Women's Issues?

As argued throughout this analysis, the notion of *collective political capabilities* is essential for understanding what has been developed and exercised in territories marked by extreme vulnerability, poverty, and ongoing armed conflict. The women living in these regions have nurtured and harnessed their human capabilities, even as they themselves and their lands face systematic oppression rooted in intersecting forces such as racism, capitalism, and sexism. They have persisted in maintaining their lives and supporting their communities. This resilience is evident in the women's testimonies as well as the outcomes of their community projects. But what is distinctive about the way these women have been working in and for their communities?

Care at the Center

Carol Gilligan (1982) suggests that the distinct voice and reasoning characteristic *of care ethics* arise from the ways women are primarily educated and socialized.[18] Women, she argues, tend to resolve moral dilemmas with empathy, paying more attention to the specific context, the well-being of individuals, and the relationships among them. While significant critiques have been raised against the notion of equating care ethics with "women's ethics" and justice or principled abstract ethics with "men's ethics" (Tronto, 1987), it remains clear that the latter, justice-based ethics, has predominantly shaped the construction and management of the public sphere. This raises an important question: What might happen if care were placed at the center, not only in private relationships and at home but also in the public arena?

From Private Care to Public Care

There are both fictional (Belli, 2010; Gilman, 2019) and nonfictional (Held, 2006; Ruddick, 1995; Schwarzenbach, 2009; Tronto, 1993) works that explore the question of whether care is inherently a feminine trait, with some accepting

[18] But it is not limited to women alone. In her recent book, Gilligan (2023) argues this voice is characteristic of humanity when it is not stifled by patriarchy.

an essentialist view—that it is women's biological nature that makes them the principal bearers of the "care voice." Others attribute this association to education and socialization. Following Elder-Vass's (2010) critical realist ontology, we can say that a combination of both material and social structures has led to care being predominantly recognized as a feminine trait.[19] Setting aside this long-standing debate, the hypothesis regarding the extension of care to the public sphere suggests that this underappreciated voice offers valuable insights for addressing some of the most pressing problems of our time.[20]

What we found in field research provides strong evidence to support this idea. Not only are most community projects led by women, but their continued success is largely due to women's leadership. This is also reflected in the testimonies of women from these regions. For example, members of *Escuela de Mujeres Sabias por el Territorio* in Riosucio (Caldas) have expressed that women tend to be more organized, more detail-oriented, and better at managing resources. Similarly, the women of Chocó affirm that "When women govern, there is more order and development, more cleanliness", and "We women have a greater ability to distribute resources."[21] The women of *Cocinando Ideas* in Ovejas (Sucre), as indicated by their organization's name, have found in traditionally feminized work (such as cooking) a way to contribute to rebuilding the social fabric of their territory.

However, two key qualifications must be added. First, acknowledging these women's capabilities is not an endorsement of biological or cultural essentialism. It is, rather, a recognition of what has developed as a result of the roles traditionally assigned to women, which have resulted in the feminization of care work (Schwarzenbach, 2009; Tronto, 1993). This is a social and historical product. Therefore, recognizing these capabilities should not romanticize or perpetuate these roles but should instead value them in broader contexts beyond the traditional private sphere (home and household care). Second, the role of care in the territories has been shaped by the specific conditions in which these women live. Most of them are rural, Indigenous, or Black women living in areas

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[19] He asserts that human agents have "a realist conception of human agents as material beings with causal powers arising from their socially influenced structures" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 204).

[20] Ruddick (1995) argues that bringing a care-centered perspective into the public domain could help prevent or end wars. Similarly, Schwarzenbach (2009) suggests the idea of "developing a public civic analogue of ethical reproductive activity" (p. 260), which is grounded in the notion of care. For further insights, see also Gilligan (2023).

[21] Testimonies shared during the women's circle held on August 11 and 12, 2022.

deeply affected by Colombia's armed conflict. As a result, their caregiving has extended beyond their families to encompass care for the community and the territory. Their work in maintaining the social and cultural fabric is, therefore, of immense political responsibility.

It is also important to emphasize that the concept of the "feminization of care" (Varela, 2019) serves two purposes: to acknowledge women's work and to highlight that this feminization is problematic. The idea that women are natural caregivers is a form of social construction that harms both women and men. Not all women feel the desire or need to dedicate themselves to caregiving, and many do it out of obligation rather than love. This also harms men, who, when raised with the belief that caregiving is exclusively for women, are deprived of the opportunity to develop into fully functional human beings capable of caring for themselves, their environment, and their relationships. It also hinders men from sharing domestic responsibilities under the principle of co-responsibility.

A second reason for re-evaluating the feminization of caregiving is that it has led to a lack of recognition of those who provide care. The work of caregiving, often carried out by women in families and communities, has been materially and symbolically undervalued (caregiving work has been mostly unpaid work) because it is assumed that women do it out of love or because it makes them happy, and thus, they need nothing else in return.

Third, this has contributed to the broader undervaluation of care itself. Not only have caregivers been underappreciated, but the act of caregiving is often seen as unimportant or even degrading, especially by men. Despite this, several studies indicate that caregiving tasks have been essential to the survival of the human species (Comins-Mingol & Jiménez-Arenas, 2018) and continue to sustain modern economies. National and international studies suggest that if care work (largely performed by women) were included in GDP calculations, it would account for around 20 %. In Colombia, for example, care work would contribute more than agriculture (6 %), industry (11 %), or even the financial sector (18 %) (DANE, 2014).[22]

[22] "Between May and August 2021, according to the National Time Use Survey (ENUT), presented by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), inequality persists between men and women when performing unpaid work in the home. In this quarter, women spent 7 hours and 22 minutes of their day in work activities that did not generate any income. Men, on the other hand, spent 3 hours and 1 minute on such work. In other words, women work 51 hours and 56 minutes a week in domestic service and home care, while men only work 21 hours and 7 minutes. Women work a longer working day than the one established by law: 48 hours per week without being paid." (Alzate, 2022).

Fourth, the perception of women primarily as caregivers constitutes a form of instrumentalization that ignores their personhood and subjectivity, valuing them only in relation to their caregiving roles.

Fifth, the assumption that caregiving is both exclusively feminine and confined to the private sphere reinforces the divide between the private and public spheres, where politics and public affairs are traditionally viewed as male domains (Beard, 2018; Kymlicka, 1995). As discussed earlier, rethinking human relationships invites us to take the concept of care beyond gender (Comins-Mignol, 2018; Tronto, 1987) and extend it into the public sphere (Schwarzenbach, 2009; Woodly et al., 2021).

In what follows, I will argue that the lack of recognition of women's capabilities in constructing the public sphere is a direct consequence of the feminization of care, constituting a form of epistemic injustice: *hermeneutic injustice*.

Non-recognition as a Hermeneutic Injustice

Miranda Fricker's (2017) concept of *hermeneutic injustice* offers valuable insights into understanding why women's contributions to the construction of the public sphere have been neither sufficiently recognized nor valued, even by the women themselves.

Fricker (2017) argues that throughout the centuries of knowledge construction, certain individuals and social groups have been marginalized, suffering epistemic injustice. These groups primarily include women, racialized individuals, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community. She identifies two key forms of epistemic injustice in our daily practices: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutic injustice*.

Testimonial injustice occurs when biases lead a listener to accord a diminished degree of credibility to a speaker's words. In contrast, hermeneutic injustice "occurs at an earlier stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources places someone at an unfair disadvantage with regard to understanding their own social experiences" (Fricker, 2017, p. 18). This means that when someone lacks the necessary elements—primarily linguistic, according to her analysis—to understand their own experience or to communicate it to others, they are placed at a disadvantage.

According to Fricker (2017), the root cause of this type of injustice is *structural identity prejudice*, which reduces collective hermeneutic resources—those ideas, concepts, and notions that allow a community to interpret the experiences of its members. The injustice arises when these resources are shaped by identity

prejudices that arbitrarily disadvantage certain members of the community. When these resources are insufficient for some members to make sense of their own experiences or to be understood by others, and when this occurs systematically over a long period of time, the injustice becomes naturalized.

Beneath this hermeneutic injustice lie social conditions that facilitate and perpetuate such injustices, particularly symbolic injustices, which are closely linked to more visible forms of injustices, like the unequal distribution of wealth and power.

During the Colombian armed conflict, although women endured all kinds of violence and injustices (both direct and indirect), a *structural symbolic injustice* —deeply rooted in culture— preceded these events. This injustice served as fertile ground for the various forms of violence women experienced.[23] The hermeneutic injustice suffered by women made them feel isolated in their experiences, often unable to name them or, if they could, unable to be heard and understood by others.[24]

Fricker (2017) emphasizes that "every epistemic injustice injures someone in their status as a subject of knowledge and thus in a capacity essential to human dignity" (p. 23). Such injustices exclude individuals not only from the practice of knowing but also from the *construction of knowledge* itself. However, her thesis can be extended further: these injustices not only undermine a person's status as a subject of knowledge but also as a *generator of social meaning* (Fricker, 2017, p. 253).

Women who have suffered these injustices face barriers not only in the recognition of their practices as politically valuable but also in their participation in spaces of political decision-making and public life. This has marginalized them on multiple levels.

There are instances where testimonial and hermeneutic injustices intersect, further obstructing women's agency in the public sphere. Women who have been direct victims of the armed conflict often feel that they lack the words to describe their experiences or narrate the horrors of war and its consequences (hermeneutic injustice) while also feeling that they are not sufficiently heard or believed because they have been assigned a deficient degree of credibility (testimonial injustice). Women who have organized collectively and led movements have faced

[23] In this regard, see Chapter 10 of Comisión de la Verdad (2022a): The Relationship between Culture and Colombia's Internal Conflict.

[24] Flor Emilce Cely (2022) discusses this phenomenon in the Colombian context, particularly in Chapter 4.

numerous obstacles, and those who have succeeded in gaining a foothold in the public sphere often encounter challenges that stem from deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. These challenges represent a *hermeneutic gap* or *darkness* that persists even today (Corporación Humanas Colombia, 2017).

The women in the territories involved in the *Hilando* project have also suffered these forms of injustice, particularly as impoverished, rural, and racialized women. Their testimonies reveal not only the pain caused by the armed conflict but also the pain of not being heard, believed, or considered for roles outside of traditional gender expectations. Their stories convey a discomfort with inhabiting a world that has not fully opened to them—the world of the public sphere and political participation.

Conclusions and Implications

The primary conclusion of this work is the urgent need to recognize that women have been systematically prevented from fully realizing their human capabilities. Among the many forms of violence they have suffered, *epistemic violence* (both testimonial and hermeneutic) has played a crucial role. As the intersectional approach highlights, and as observed in the territories visited, this violence is even more severe for impoverished, rural, Black, and Indigenous women.

Recognizing the emergent power of women's collective political capabilities and addressing the hermeneutic injustice they have endured is critical for creating spaces for meaningful participation and representation. Facilitating spaces—particularly in moments and places of decision-making—where women can participate and exercise their political capabilities is essential. The Colombian Truth Commission (2022a and 2022b) indicates that women's political participation has been systematically obstructed, underscoring the need to reconsider our understanding of political power. As Mary Beard (2018) argues, *rethinking political power* is necessary to address these systemic barriers.

The women's experiences in Colombia offer valuable insights into how we might reshape power dynamics. Their work suggests that public and political power should be *constructed and exercised collectively*, centering on what has been traditionally characterized as feminine: *care*. As Comins-Mingol (2018) suggests, *de-gendering education for care* will be a fundamental step in achieving this transformation.

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