

Gender and teleworking: The case of the workers of the Uruguay Crece Contigo program

Género y teletrabajo: El caso de las trabajadoras del programa Uruguay Crece Contigo

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Background

The health emergency caused by COVID-19 introduced collective and personal changes, proposing new scenarios for daily life, which was previously affected by different social inequalities, such as those of gender, class and race. These pre-existing inequalities were deepened. As of the confinement of the population to the domestic sphere, the vast majority of public care supports were put on hold, affecting one of the gravitational centers of inequality: care work. Care work is still widely feminized and Latin American States are beginning to consider its incorporation as a central part of public policies that seek to generate equal opportunities in choosing to care and accessing quality care. Uruguay is a pioneering country in the region in having a Care Law (Law No. 19,353). Given this panorama, the response of public policies around the challenges of care in a pandemic was different in the countries. In cases like Uruguay, the responses around care were null. After the closure of educational and care centers, teleworking in Uruguay has been a recommended and promoted modality. The Program Uruguay Crece Contigo (UCC) has as its main component in the territory the Family Accompaniment Program. Through local operators, accompanies pregnant women and children from 0 to 4 years of age in situations of social vulnerability. As of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interventions of the program were redefined, moving to a hybrid modality that combined presence in the territory and teleworking.

Aims

The following objectives are addressed: to analyze the working conditions during telework of UCC program workers who also do unpaid care work; to study the conditions given for the exercise of the rights to care, and to understand the mechanisms for the redistribution of care work between men and women during voluntary confinement.

Method & procedures

Based on the contact with the UCC Program management, an intentional sample of UCC program workers was selected and in-depth interviews were conducted and a content analysis was performed. The region of the country where they work, and living with young children were taken as categories for their differentiation. The interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform, from February to May 2020, to UCC supervisors, facilitators and outreach operators. Findings are presented around the following dimensions: the guarantees for paid work and care work and the distribution of care burden.

Results & discussion

A major theme address in the speeches was how problematic was the overlapping of work with living with children, who switched to tele-study mode. Within it, the difficulties of not having a defined space for work and the need to prioritize (care or paid work) one over the other became difficult and guilt-producing for women. The opposite scenario, that this happens to male fathers, is less frequent due to the lower involvement of men in care in general and, particularly in a pandemic. Although teleworking made it possible to continue developing the program, maintain the labor sources of the workers and articulate paid and care work, it involved a real trap for women, combining the work and mental load in the same space, with no possibility of better distributing work with men or have some type of support from the State. This placed strong tensions on working women, clearly expressed in the speeches where the overload of work, physical, mental, emotional and with material costs generated costs in the performance of all jobs: paid, domestic and unpaid care.

Conclusion

The costs assumed by the workers of UCC Program both in relation to the provision of their private resources to sustain the implementation of a public program, as well as the problematic working conditions that teleworking, care and domestic work meant for them were high and show an absence of risk management by the State through public policies. The State reproduced the accentuation of the sexual division of labor in this new context, and did not consider the non-closure of educational or care centers and did not order any type of substantive measure to generate employment conditions for women who lived with people in a situation of dependency and teleworked. The costs generated by the adaptation to teleworking were both material and emotional, identifying the need to have separate spaces for carrying out the types of work when living with children, mainly, and the requirement for new care policy actions in the face of transformations in the world of work towards teleworking and flexibility. Women mitigated both labor and care risks to the detriment of their own time, health and the possibility of adequately performing both tasks. Faced with the future challenges posed by virtual work modalities, it will be necessary to have new tools to modify the sexual division of labor in the domestic sphere as a scenario of convergence of mercantile production and reproduction of life.

Keywords: care, COVID-19, gender, homeoffice, public policies

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