

# interview with Diana Rodríguez Franco

*Former Secretary for Women's Affairs in  
the City Government of Bogotá*



**“A city that  
acknowledges those  
who care for us”**

**Imagine a place designed to care for caregivers. Where someone else looks after their young children and does the laundry, while they exercise, study, do therapy or simply breathe. This is the idea of the Care Blocks, a project launched during the pandemic in Colombia's capital city Bogotá that has served over 400,000 women and their families in 20 locations so far. Diana Rodríguez Franco, Former Secretary for Women's Affairs in the City Government of Bogotá, tells journalist Irene Caselli how the Care Blocks were established, and why they are here to stay.**

### **How does caregiving affect the wellbeing and opportunities of women in Bogotá?**

Social norms about the gender-based division of labour mean women are expected to do unpaid care work – washing, ironing, cooking, caring for children, the elderly, people with disabilities. All those care jobs – jobs that sustain life, that sustain families, without which no person would survive – have disproportionately fallen on women's shoulders.

In Bogotá, 1.2 million women are dedicated exclusively to unpaid care work – they spend, on average, around seven to eight hours a day caring for someone else. Of those women, 90% are low-income earners and 70% have not studied beyond primary school – if they have studied at all. Girls commonly drop out of school because of caregiving expectations.

We know that this overload of care generates mental and physical health problems. Two out of ten women caregivers have chronic mental and physical health conditions that arise from their unpaid work and having no free time for themselves.

### **How do the Care Blocks address this problem?**

The Care Blocks address the issue of time poverty for caregivers – for the mother, the grandmother, the aunt, the cousin. We offer these women training, respite and income-generating services, which are the three main things that they have sacrificed because of the care overload.

At the Care Blocks they can finish high school in a flexible way regardless of age. Or they can learn

to use computers and digital skills, they can learn another language, they can learn to ride a bicycle or to swim. They can learn about entrepreneurship and develop business skills or attend workshops to improve their resumés. They can get psychosocial or legal support when needed. There are free public laundromats, washing machines and dryers, so the women do not have to spend several hours a day handwashing their children's or their relatives' clothes.

But the essence of the Care Blocks is to ensure that women can attend by taking care of those they usually care for – that is, children under 13 years of age, elderly people, and those with disabilities.



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### **Why is the work of the Care Blocks so important?**

When we raise the educational level of women and give them more free time, allowing them for example to have more medical check-ups, we know they will have better physical and mental health, and greater social capital.

This has a direct impact on children. We know that children who grow up in homes where caregivers

have more education and more free time are less likely to be victims of violence. In these safer environments, there is a greater probability that they will break the cycles of violence and poverty.

In order to have healthy children, children in the educational system, children who are less likely to be victims of intra-family and sexual violence, we need healthier caregivers with more free time and more training.

### What does the project mean for the city?

First, it is an acknowledgement. It means that Bogotá is now a city that acknowledges those who care for us, a city that places this acknowledgment at the centre of its policies – not only through symbolic services, but also through meaningful actions and programmes for those who have historically supported families and society.



**“This is a very simple thing: it is an issue of dignity that we addressed.”**

Second, this project helps achieve a more inclusive city because it tackles the needs of women. Historically, cities have been designed by men for men, but in Bogotá – as in many cities around the world – women make up the majority of the population. This policy allows us to focus on that 52% of the population who have never been the focus of politics in cities. It makes Bogotá a more inclusive, more egalitarian city that is closer to its citizens.

Third, Care Blocks not only solve a gender problem, they help to solve a mobility problem that is also a climate change problem. Care Blocks bring services closer to citizens, so they no longer need to move around the city to access services, emitting greenhouse gases and generating more pollution. In the city, women move around a lot. We go from the house to leave our children at daycare, to attend to the needs of elderly people, to pick up medicines, to the market, and so on. If we place all these services in an area accessible on foot within a radius of no more than 800 metres, then we will reduce congestion in the city.

**Over 400,000 families have attended the Care Blocks. Quantitative studies on their impact are underway, but anecdotally the response you receive on a regular basis is enthusiastic.**

**Could you share some stories that have touched you most?**

When I visit the Blocks, I ask the women what impact the project is having on them. I have many vivid memories of their answers. Once a woman told me: “Secretary, I used to walk with a cane and after coming to yoga and dance classes I no longer need a cane.” For me, this is a very simple thing: it is an issue of dignity that we addressed.

Another woman I met cares for two adolescent children with disabilities. She told me that nobody had ever helped her take care of her children. She said that she had thought of suicide. “I did not see any alternative anymore,” she said. She told me: “Since I discovered the Care Blocks, now I come twice a week to exercise, do yoga or dance, and sometimes to use other services. It is the first time that someone helps me to take care of my children.”

**As Secretary for Women’s Affairs, with a background as an academic and human rights activist, what does this initiative mean for you personally, collaborating with Claudia López Hernández, the first woman to be elected mayor of Bogotá?**

I am the mother of two daughters, and my youngest was 9 months old when Claudia López took office in 2020. I was still breastfeeding when I became Secretary for Women’s Affairs. I also have a father with Alzheimer’s. I am in a position of privilege

because I have all the necessary support, I live in a very equitable home and work as a team with my partner. But I see what it is like to live while caring for others, I know what poverty of time is, I see what it is to be a woman.

**The vision is for Bogotá to house 45 Care Blocks by 2035. With local elections in October 2023, and the new city administration taking over in January 2024, how has the programme been designed and implemented to ensure quality and sustainability?**

First we included Care Blocks in the Land Use Plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial*). We adopted the whole system into law – not only the Care Blocks, but also care buses, a mobile version of the service that provides at-home assistance for those who cannot reach a Care Block. The law was

unanimously approved in March 2023. This means that when we leave this administration in December, the Care Blocks will continue.

But beyond laws, it is also necessary for citizens to take ownership of a project. So it is vital for women to be ready to go out and say: “No, they are not going to take my Block away from me. They are not going to take away my laundry, or my bicycle class, or my psychologist.”

I believe that for things to last, laws alone are not enough, and citizens’ approval by itself is also not enough – it is that mixture of ownership by different actors and stakeholders that makes things last over time.

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# BOGOTÁ'S CARE BLOCKS

MANZANAS DEL CUIDADO





