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# Comprehensive Protection Shelters: Gender-based Violence and the Dual State Response

Hogares de Protección: violencia por motivo de género y doble respuesta estatal

Tamara Mariel Romina Gómez <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales. Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. <https://ror.org/0081fs513>.

## Abstract

This article is framed within a comparative research study of two Comprehensive Protection Shelters for women experiencing gender-based violence in the Buenos Aires suburbs during the 2016-2019 period. The general objective was to explore, through the assessments of the workers themselves, the potential and limiting aspects of these devices in supporting the transition out of violent situations. To this end, a qualitative approach based on a comparative case study was carried out, utilizing sixteen interviews with technical teams, operators, and assistants of the Comprehensive Protection Shelters, as well as key officials, as the primary technique. Specifically, this work analyzes the tasks assigned to the housed women and the working conditions of the teams. The findings demonstrate that, in both devices, interventions tend to reinforce sexist mandates and practices regarding women, thereby reproducing the sexual division of labor. Likewise, it is observed that the working conditions of the staff have a negative impact on the overall intervention. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the State needs to design and execute gender-oriented public policies aimed at building autonomous projects for women and guaranteeing care strategies for those who provide care.

**Keywords:** Care, Comprehensive Protection Shelters, Gender-based Violence, State, Work.

## Resumen

El presente artículo se enmarca en una investigación comparada de dos Hogares de Protección Integral (HPI) municipales, para mujeres en situación de violencia por motivos de género en el Conurbano Bonaerense durante el período 2016-2019. El objetivo general fue explorar, a través de las valoraciones de sus propias trabajadoras, los aspectos potenciales y limitantes de estos dispositivos para acompañar la salida de las situaciones de violencia. Para ello, se llevó adelante un abordaje cualitativo basado en un estudio de caso comparado, utilizando como técnica la realización de dieciséis entrevistas a equipos técnicos, operadoras y acompañantes de los HPI e informantes clave. Este trabajo, específicamente, analiza las tareas asignadas a las mujeres alojadas y las condiciones laborales de los equipos. Los hallazgos demuestran que, en ambos dispositivos, las intervenciones tienden a reforzar mandatos y prácticas sexistas sobre las mujeres, reproduciendo la división sexual del trabajo. Asimismo, se observa que las condiciones laborales de las trabajadoras repercuten negativamente en el abordaje. A partir del análisis se puede concluir que el Estado requiere diseñar y ejecutar políticas públicas en materia de género orientadas a la construcción de proyectos autónomos para las mujeres y la garantía de estrategias de cuidado para las que cuidan.

**Palabras clave:** Cuidados, Hogares de Protección Integral, Violencia por motivo de género, Estado, Trabajo.

Correspondence: [tmrgomez@hotmail.com](mailto:tmrgomez@hotmail.com).

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## Introducción

Gender-based violence against women is a problem that has gained a place on the public and political agenda over the last decades. As defined by the Comité para la Eliminación de la Discriminación contra la Mujer (CEDAW, 2017), this type of violence is not an isolated or individual event, but rather a social, political, and economic phenomenon rooted in power structures that have historically subordinated women. It constitutes a fundamental obstacle to achieving equality and the full exercise of human rights and freedoms. In response to this reality, various public policies have been promoted in Argentina.

Within this framework, Comprehensive Protection Shelters (Hogares de Protección Integral, HPI) emerged as a tool to provide protection for women in situations of high-risk violence. These facilities offer temporary accommodation accompanied by an interdisciplinary team that seeks to facilitate women's exit from situations of violence and promote the construction of autonomy. However, the mere existence of these spaces does not guarantee their effectiveness. The implementation of gender policies at the local level and the functioning of these facilities reveal challenges and contradictions that deserve further analysis.

This article aims to explore some of these challenges and contradictions. First, it examines whether the daily tasks assigned to women residing in HPIs reinforce sexist practices and the traditional division of labor between the public and private spheres or, on the contrary, contribute to the deconstruction of these roles and the construction of an autonomous life project. Second, it analyzes the working conditions of the women employed in these HPIs.

To address these questions, an exploratory study with a qualitative and comparative methodological design was conducted. The study focuses on two municipal temporary accommodation facilities located in the Greater Buenos Aires area and is based on the analysis of sixteen interviews conducted with HPI workers and key informants. Through a conceptual analysis grounded in a rights-based and care perspective, this paper seeks to provide a critical view

of institutional practices and the conditions involved in addressing gender-based violence, in order to contribute to the improvement of these policies.

## Theoretical Framework

Violence against women is understood, within the framework of this study, as a form of discrimination that impedes the enjoyment of rights and freedoms on equal terms with men (Naciones Unidas, 1993). This conceptualization refers to violence directed against women because they are women, or violence that affects them disproportionately on the basis of gender. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other forms of deprivation of liberty.

To understand gender-based violence against women, it is necessary to address the notion of sexism, which is grounded in discrimination based on sex and in the subordination of women, resulting in inequality. Biological and physiological differences between the sexes do not explain sexism; rather, it is socially constructed symbolism—that is, gender—that produces social and cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity that underlie sexism (Lamas, 1998).

Violence is inseparable from the concept of gender because there exists a social and subjective differentiation and hierarchy between the sexes. In other words, gender discourses have constructed cultural representations and archetypes of femininity and masculinity that have contributed to the reproduction of behaviors, social practices, and beliefs according to sex (Velázquez, 2003).

Lamas (1998) states that sexism enables the public/private dichotomy, in which men develop socially within the public sphere while women are largely linked to the private sphere. In this regard, the author points out that women are assigned caregiving tasks that are not recognized as work, since work is understood merely as an economic activity.

Sexism has led to the stereotyped construction of masculinity and femininity, resulting in inequalities of power between genders. These inequalities translate into violence against women, as women may find themselves in disadvantaged positions. It is therefore

proposed that these socially reproduced stereotypes be deconstructed, recognizing that there are diverse ways of expressing femininity and masculinity and multiple gender identities. Thus, genders should not be assigned to specific tasks or spaces, such as the public or private sphere; instead, efforts should aim at equal opportunities and gender equity.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand violence against women on the basis of gender as a social issue rather than an individual problem, taking into account the social structures that make it possible. For this purpose, the concept of patriarchy is necessary, understood as a “socio-political-symbolic system that has produced particular effects on the constitution of female subjectivity” (Burín, 1998, p. 215).

As discussed above, the sexual division of labor places women at a disadvantage, and in order to understand this, it is imperative to delve deeper into caregiving tasks and economic dependency. According to Dorola (1998), the sexual division of labor leads to the naturalization of roles assigned to women through culture, constituting a form of invisible violence because it limits freedom of choice and autonomy. Although domestic work is social labor, insofar as it reproduces the labor force, it is organized in a private and individual manner. Domestic work is not recognized as work, nor is it associated with any social prestige because it is excluded from economic logic due to its unpaid nature. Domestic labor—whether performed exclusively, as a double workday, or through the continued responsibility for such tasks—prevents women from fully participating in the public sphere, constituting another form of invisible violence.

Even when women manage to enter the public sphere, for example through participation in the labor market, they continue to face other forms of violence, such as the double burden of paid and unpaid work and the lack of resources to hire third parties (generally other women) to perform domestic tasks. Women who do possess the financial means to hire others for domestic work nevertheless remain tied to these tasks in the form of supervision. Furthermore, labor market competition means that women who manage to enter the workforce often receive lower wages for equal

work or occupy lower-ranking positions with fewer opportunities for advancement.

To further understand the sexual division of labor, it is also necessary to examine the construction of the public and private spheres. Fernández (1998) argues that the mechanisms that naturalize inequality are embedded within a broader process of naturalization that unfolds through the division between the public and private spheres. These two social modalities are opposed and governed by different rationalities, one subordinating the other, trapping social agents within them. Power and money are associated with the masculine public sphere, whereas the private sphere, sentimentalized in nature, is linked to femininity and subordination.

Women have gained access to the public sphere, though unequally in relation to the opportunities afforded to masculinities. The same applies to the private sphere in its modern construction, although it is often considered a place of female power. It is within the private sphere that women’s economic production becomes invisible in the form of unpaid labor (Fernández, 1998).

Likewise, Dorola (1998) maintains that the economic and political transformations of society have shifted the axis of kinship and modified existing social functions, thereby shaping the private (domestic) and public (educational and productive) spheres. This has been changing over the last centuries in all societies, even overlapping with economic inequality.

Continuing with caregiving tasks, Pautassi (2020) argues that they involve a set of activities related to labor and caregiving responsibilities within the family. These tasks become non-transferable and emotionally charged. Paid work also entails a high degree of responsibility for women, affecting their quality of life and daily existence. Care responsibilities have historically been assigned to women and distributed inequitably. According to the author, social care policies have emerged over the past two decades, though not yet as comprehensive policies.

Despite these advances, inequity persists because caregiving continues to be reinforced as an individual problem that women must solve on their own with

whatever resources they have available. According to Pautassi (2020), social policies are aimed at people in vulnerable situations and are based on the assumption that women are responsible for caregiving tasks, which in turn conditions their access to monetary transfers. The conception of women in Latin American social policies is linked to the roles of mother, worker, wife, and poor woman, whereas care should instead be understood as a human right—for giving care, receiving care, and self-care—regardless of social conditions or position, and therefore should not fall exclusively on women.

The division of labor affects women with informal employment to a greater extent, especially younger and less educated women (Pautassi, 2020). Furthermore, in the case of commodified care work, wages are low. Women also encounter difficulties entering the labor market due to the previously described situations, as well as the number of children they have had. At the same time, these women devote a great deal of time to unpaid labor and caregiving within the household, spending twice as much time on these tasks as men, which affects their work, education, and lives in general.

According to Pautassi (2020), without active care and employment policies, women will not be able to escape situations of vulnerability. To be effective, such policies must be comprehensive and grounded in a human rights perspective.

In order to design and implement public policies on gender issues, it is important to adopt a rights-based approach, since gender-based violence against women is considered a violation of human rights. Gender public policies seek to improve women's living conditions by recognizing that women's social and political position in society must change and that the State must provide the means for this transformation to occur. Equality and the exercise of human rights are also the foundation of democracy and sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to advance political guidelines requiring States to incorporate into their agendas the demands and objectives aimed at achieving equality (Naciones Unidas, 2016).

The design of public policies is a collective action involving governmental and non-governmental actors,

including citizen participation to raise awareness of rights and obligations, thereby enabling citizens to hold the State accountable in cases of noncompliance. This implies the need to understand citizens as subjects of rights.

In this regard, the State must implement policies that involve a development strategy promoting cultural change aimed at consolidating equality between women and men. Public policies are often mistakenly assumed to be neutral, thereby deepening inequalities and hindering women's development and autonomy. In Latin America and the Caribbean, advances have been made in women's rights and their social, political, and economic participation; however, these gains remain at risk of regression due to fundamentalist positions, economic crises, and changes in public administration (UN, 2016).

Implementing policies with a human rights approach entails reviewing them and identifying government actions that are inefficient, inequitable, and discriminatory, thereby guaranteeing the progressive expansion of rights (Pautassi, 2007).

There must be coexistence between equality policies aimed at overcoming discrimination and affirmative action policies intended to incorporate women into spaces socially assigned to masculinity. Nevertheless, as a third type of policy, it is necessary to consider mainstreaming processes that evaluate the effects of State action with regard to gender (Naciones Unidas, 2017). In this same sense, Corina Rodríguez Enríquez and Pautassi (2016) argue that policy planning must be transversal and interjurisdictional, ensuring women's participation.

The effectiveness of gender policies is not exhausted in their normative design but is instead tested in what Sagot (2000) calls the "critical path." This concept allows for the analysis of women's processes of seeking help and the responses offered by State agents. Within this framework, HPs constitute fundamental State mechanisms within the critical path. The intervention of the agents working in these facilities is decisive, since their discourses and practices may either facilitate women's autonomy or obstruct the critical path if they merely reproduce gender mandates. Therefore, the success of public

policy depends on whether these facilities and their agents manage to transform the critical path into a process of rights restoration rather than a new scenario of revictimization or normative demands regarding what women “should be.”

Likewise, the implementation of these policies depends on work teams that are themselves not exempt from the tensions of the system. Zaldúa et al. (2020) point out that workers often face precarious working conditions and multiple jobs which, combined with the complexity of the subjective demands they address, generate stress and occupational burnout. These identity-related repercussions among professionals directly impact the quality of interventions and the care practices they themselves carry out.

According to the Annex to the Red Provincial de Dispositivos Territoriales de Protección Integral, del Ministerio de las Mujeres, Políticas de Géneros y Diversidad Sexual (n.d.), HPIs are facilities intended to respond to women experiencing situations of high or extremely high-risk violence who require protection and lack safe support networks. Accommodation should be considered a last-resort strategy and requires a risk assessment.

Women must be accompanied by an interdisciplinary team that facilitates their exit from violent situations, the deconstruction of violent relationships, and the development of autonomy. These facilities must provide services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Length of stay depends on each individual situation, although a period of no more than three months is recommended.

HPIs are spaces of public visibility in which women and their family groups are not condemned to seclusion and concealment, without prejudice to their safety. This visibility favors the dissemination of the problem and community involvement. Shelters function as instruments in the struggle against violence toward women and seek to generate spaces for debate and participation within the community (Plan Nacional de Acción para la Prevención, Asistencia y Erradicación de la Violencia Contra las Mujeres, 2017–2019, Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres). The objective is for HPIs to work outwardly

as well, in coordination with governmental and non-governmental teams in matters of awareness-raising, training, and community outreach aimed at preventing violence against women.

HPIs are located—or should be located—within a much broader system of actions and interventions (rights promotion, violence prevention, etc.). In other words, their success will largely depend on whether they are integrated into a system of comprehensive public gender policies. The fulfillment of this objective will be evaluated according to whether the stay in the HPI promotes individual and collective awareness, in order to foster women’s autonomy and the full exercise of their rights.

### **Background**

According to Tallarico and Di Marco (2020), research conducted on facilities for women in situations of violence can be grouped into four categories. First, studies devoted to describing shelters and facilities. Second, those that compile the characteristics and experiences of sheltered women and their children. Third, research focused on the psychosocial aspects of these facilities and the assessment of their appropriateness. Finally, studies centered on interactions among residents in shared spaces and compliance with institutional rules. According to the authors, there is still a gap in the analysis of the different modalities and approaches used in the care of women in situations of violence and their children.

Worldwide, during the last twenty years, although there has been an increase in evaluations of shelter facilities, these have primarily aimed at accountability in order to justify expenditures (UN, 2016). In other words, there are no studies evaluating the effectiveness or impact of these facilities. This situation is replicated in Europe and North America, where resources have been allocated to research, although such studies provide no evidence regarding effectiveness and are not comparative in nature (Wathen & MacMillan, 2003; Ramsay et al., 2005; Ramsay et al., 2009).

In Argentina, research of this type remains limited, although some studies may be mentioned: those documenting a shelter in San Luis (Loizo et al., 2011);

a report by the General Directorate for Women (1994–1996) on the various activities carried out within the facility (Dirección General de la Mujer, 1996); an undergraduate thesis on the trajectories of women who experienced violence and left their homes (Castelnuovo Biraben, 2005); a study problematizing the intervention strategies of three NGOs in addressing situations of gender violence (Brunatti, 2006); and a report by the Observatory on Gender and Public Policies of the City of Buenos Aires (Penchansky et al., 2018) on the magnitude of gender violence and the public policies implemented by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires during the 2015–2017 period.

Despite the above, more specific studies are needed to evaluate the implementation and scope of HPIs for women in situations of violence. In Argentina, such studies and the dissemination of these facilities were requested by the Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Convención de Belém do Pará (MESECVI, 2012). In the Province of Buenos Aires, there is a wide variety of these institutions, both State-run and non-governmental, with different approaches and working mechanisms.

## Methodology

This study is framed within a comparative investigation of two municipal temporary accommodation facilities that provide protection to women in situations of high-risk violence in the Greater Buenos Aires area during the 2016–2019 period, based on workers' assessments regarding the strengths and limitations of these facilities in supporting women in leaving violent situations.

The research was exploratory in nature and employed a qualitative methodological design. The study was based on a comparative case-study methodology that enabled the analysis of both HPIs in terms of their similarities and differences.

Individual interviews were used as data collection techniques (Samaja, 1993), allowing for the gathering of opinions and descriptions concerning the HPIs (De Souza Minayo, 2005). The aim was to collect the workers' social representations, assessments, and experiences.

The interviews were conducted with members of the staff teams (technical team members, operators, support workers, and authorities) of two temporary accommodation facilities that provide protection to women in situations of high-risk violence in two municipalities of the Greater Buenos Aires area.

Interviewees working in the facilities were required to have performed their role for at least one year, as this criterion would ensure a relatively extensive period of work experience within the facility.

Additionally, key informants were interviewed to complement the information provided by the HPI workers. These informants were former public officials at the national and provincial levels from the governing bodies responsible for gender issues and violence against women on the basis of gender. Fieldwork was carried out between June and October 2019.

It is important to note that the municipalities in which the research was conducted have remained confidential and are therefore referred to as Municipality A and Municipality B. Furthermore, the identities of the interviewees, who voluntarily provided informed consent, were protected through the use of fictitious names.

Regarding the selection criteria for Municipalities A and B, both share a series of similarities in terms of geographic extension, overall population density, and demographic proportion of women. As both municipalities belong to the Province of Buenos Aires, they also share certain geographic, social, cultural, and economic characteristics.

The sampling method employed was non-probabilistic. It was operationalized through the Snowball Sampling technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), considered the most appropriate for this case given the very small study population. The technique consisted of selecting an initial subject who subsequently facilitated contact with new participants, generating a chain that continued until information saturation was reached.

A total of sixteen interviews were conducted and distributed as follows: seven corresponded to workers from Municipality A (the general head of the Women's Area; two Social Work graduates; two

operators/judicial support workers; and one Psychology graduate), and six corresponded to workers from Municipality B (the former head of the Women's Area; one lawyer; one Psychology graduate; one Social Work graduate; one operator; and one judicial support worker). Regarding the key informants, two were former public officials from the national governing body on gender issues and violence against women during the 2012–2015 period, and two were provincial officials from the 2017–2018 period.

No interviews were conducted with women currently or previously in situations of violence, due to the sensitive circumstances they are experiencing or have experienced. Likewise, no references are made to them through the disclosure of personal data or stories.

Following the fieldwork, analytical dimensions were constructed that enabled the formulation of questions concerning the similarities and differences necessary to establish comparisons among the arguments advanced by the actors involved. "Ruptures" were identified in order to begin constructing a synthesis through the creation of meanings. This construction considered concepts, empirical data, contexts, questions, objectives, as well as the data and information gathered during fieldwork (De Souza Minayo, 2005). Finally, the conceptual analysis was conducted from a rights-based perspective and incorporated feminist theoretical concepts and references.

### **Ethical Considerations, Funding, and Conflict of Interest**

This article derives from the thesis submitted, evaluated, and approved by a committee of examiners from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Social Policies. At the time of the thesis evaluation and defense (2021), there was no mandatory ethics committee for qualitative research in the Social Sciences. Nevertheless, the ethical safeguards were assessed and endorsed by the academic jury that approved the thesis, acting as guarantor of the scientific integrity of the study.

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social research, implementing an informed consent process (Piovani, 2007). A document was designed and implemented, which interviewees were required to sign, expressing their voluntary, informed, and conscious participation. Furthermore, the researcher provided ongoing support throughout the interview process in order to guarantee transparency regarding the use of the information collected.

In addition, the explicit decision was made not to conduct interviews with women in situations of violence residing in the shelters in order to avoid their revictimization.

To ensure confidentiality, the geographic identities of the municipalities where the Hogares de Protección Integral were located were also protected by identifying them as "Municipality A" and "Municipality B." In addition, fictitious names were used for all interviewed workers and key informants in order to safeguard their identities.

The author declares that this research received no external funding, grants, or subsidies from public or private institutions. Likewise, it is stated that there were no conflicts of interest that influenced the research design, data analysis, or publication of the results presented in either the thesis or this article.

## **Results**

### **Institutional Framework**

At the time this research was conducted, Municipalities A and B had a similar number of inhabitants and proportion of women. The HPI in Municipality A (created in 2014) had been operating longer than the one in Municipality B (opened in 2016). In the case of Municipality A, the facility was situated within an organizational structure in which the Women's Area held a higher hierarchical status than in Municipality B.

Regarding the national organizational structure during the research period, the governing body responsible for gender issues and violence against women on the basis of gender was the former Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres until 2017, after which the former Instituto

Nacional de Mujeres was created. At the provincial level, the former Subsecretaría de Políticas de Género y Diversidad Sexual, under the Secretaría de Derechos Humanos, operated from 2016 to 2018. Beginning that year, the former Instituto Provincial de Género y Diversidad Sexual was established.

According to fieldwork data, the HPIs in both municipalities function as closed-door facilities intended for the temporary accommodation of women in situations of high risk. Their central objective is to provide physical and emotional safety, operating as a last resort when support networks are unavailable. The aim is for the stay to be as brief as possible.

In Municipality A, a change in the operational guidelines of the facility was recorded: the approach that had previously prioritized childcare was formally replaced by protocols oriented toward addressing gender violence after the facility was reassigned within the organizational chart. In Municipality B, regarding the mission of the shelter, interviewees stated that it was linked to the Provincial Network, compensating for the lack of judicial resources that often leave women “adrift.”

Regarding the profile of residents, field data indicate that they are women (and their children) experiencing gender-based violence and facing imminent risk. Although institutional discourse includes gender-diverse individuals, the research found no effective records of accommodation for transgender or transsexual women.

Admission to the shelters is determined following an intake interview in which the level of risk is assessed. If the situation does not meet the high-risk criterion or if the woman declines admission, she is referred to outpatient services.

Concerning staff composition, both shelters include a person in charge of the area, psychologists, social workers, and operators. Municipality B additionally includes lawyers and judicial support workers.

With regard to team roles, operators are responsible for daily operations, providing listening and emotional support, and supervising compliance with coexistence rules. The professional team conducts intake

interviews, discharge follow-up, and actions aimed at building support networks.

### **Activities and Dynamics of Coexistence in the Comprehensive Protection Shelters**

This section presents the main findings related to the objective of examining whether the tasks assigned to women residing in HPIs reinforce sexist practices and the traditional division between the public (masculine) and private/domestic (feminine) spheres, or whether, on the contrary, they contribute to the construction of an autonomous life project.

To this end, it was necessary to understand the strategies used to address gender-based violence and the objectives, protocols, and procedures described in the narratives of municipal HPI workers.

The HPIs operate according to rules established in protocols for staff work. Likewise, there are coexistence guidelines for resident women, forming a code that they are required to sign upon admission to the HPI as evidence of their agreement. No records were identified of systematic instances or formal mechanisms designed to work through these guidelines with the women. Instead, professional staff address coexistence regulations whenever they consider intervention necessary.

The protocols include specific rules such as meal schedules, respectful treatment among residents, distribution of cleaning tasks, and responsibility for the upbringing and care of their children, among others.

Regarding coexistence-related problems among resident women, interviewees stated that these generally arise from disagreements concerning parenting practices. Other conflicts may occur:

Because one woman has been there longer, they begin interacting with one another. One may clean one week, the other the next, and then they start making arrangements among themselves, such as ‘I clean, but you give me a cigarette’ (...) it has to do with the characteristics of each family group and each woman, where they come from, and so on (Valentina,

personal communication, August 2019).

Conflicts also arise between operators and resident women regarding issues such as hygiene and head lice, among others.

Regarding women's relationships with their children, a Psychology graduate stated:

Many of us try to work on rebuilding the bond with their children. Sometimes this happens: women are outside the home, and violent situations lead to the children staying at someone else's house, with the other parent, or not being properly cared for or attended to. Then they reconnect with their maternal role, which is very difficult and must be worked through and supported (Valentina, personal communication, August 2019).

The same interviewee elaborated further on the relationship between mothers and children:

Above all, we try to ensure that the bond with the children exists. If the women have to go out to do something, they must go out with their children unless it is an extreme situation where the children have to stay behind. They should always be with their children because that is what everyday life will be like afterward—they will have to take care of them. The same applies to cleaning: cleaning the room, taking out the sheets, washing the sheets, asking us for clean ones, washing the children's clothes themselves—that more than anything (Valentina, personal communication, August 2019).

Returning to domestic tasks, the same Psychology graduate stated:

We also try to ensure that they maintain the cleanliness of their

rooms, partly for the sake of order, because they find themselves alone, and the idea is that when they leave they will be in a space where they must take responsibility and begin to assume responsibility for those things (Valentina, personal communication, August 2019).

On the other hand, regarding motherhood, a Social Work graduate commented:

The whole construction of motherhood is also very difficult to address from within a closed-door facility because you are there 24 hours a day with your children, and this often creates a situation of desperation (...) afterward, it becomes the mother's responsibility to take care of her children within the shelter. This also sometimes creates a situation of constant observation (...) both by the professional team and by the operators. It is inevitable—the gaze of others is constantly present" (Lucia, personal communication, June 2019).

In the shelter in Municipality A, resident women are responsible for cleaning tasks such as tidying rooms and washing clothes. Regarding other activities, some operators possess sewing and hairdressing skills that they pass on to the women. However, this instruction is not provided through formal classes or workshops, nor are there scheduled days and times. Instead, operators teach informally and spontaneously whenever opportunities arise.

Likewise, no formal activities or training programs related to microenterprises or preparation for paid employment are carried out, although all interviewees agreed that such initiatives are greatly needed. A Social Work graduate from the technical team in Municipality A stated that they occasionally worked on preparing résumés to encourage employment opportunities; however, this was neither formalized nor systematized as part of the facility's practices.

In Municipality B, efforts are made to involve women in handicraft activities; however, this is often unsuccessful because women generally do not coincide in their periods of stay. Other interviewees explained that women have few activities available within the shelter beyond cleaning their rooms, caring for their children, and assisting in the kitchen.

In this regard, a judicial support worker from Municipality B considered one of the State's greatest shortcomings to be its inability to offer vocational training or microenterprise programs. Likewise, the former head of the Women's Area in Municipality B stated regarding these activities:

The truth is that women, being confined and having so much time without being able to use it productively, was my main concern (Romina, personal communication, October 2019).

### Working Conditions

This section presents the main findings related to the objective of examining the working conditions of HPI staff members and determining whether care measures or strategies are implemented for the teams themselves.

To begin with, in Municipality B, staff members are not employed directly by the Municipal Government but instead work as independent contractors under the *monotributo* system. In Argentina, the *monotributo* system is a simplified tax regime for self-employed workers that allows them, through the payment of a unified fee, to accumulate retirement contributions and access health coverage through a social security provider.

This situation is reflected in some of the interviewees' testimonies:

The other day we were explaining things to the new coworkers, because half of the team is new. Fortunately, most people leave because they find another job and not because their contracts are not renewed, but because they decide not to renew. It is also because this is not very stable work. Even though I have been here for five years, you are constantly

thinking about whether you will continue or not. Besides, *monotributistas* are precarious workers; it is not formal employment" (Natalia, personal communication, September 2019).

By contrast, all staff members in the Women's Area in Municipality A are employed directly by the Municipal Government:

We are all municipal employees, and we all hold permanent positions. That also provides greater stability and another way of planning work. It allows us to think a little more long term, which is no small matter" (Lucía, personal communication, June 2019).

In another respect, when exploring the intervention strategies and protocols concerning the work teams in Municipalities A and B, the research revealed an absence of external supervision capable of providing a more objective perspective and addressing the personal and professional implications of the work.

Regarding team meetings, in both municipalities these are held whenever workers consider them necessary; in general, interviewees did not report any regular schedule.

Concerning staffing levels, both municipalities indicated that no additional professional staff had been hired since the creation of the facilities. As a result, the staff responsible for outpatient office services are the same professionals who work in the shelters, generating work overload.

With respect to work roles and task division, in Municipality B one of the operators also serves as cook and manages the inventory of cleaning supplies and food, receiving additional compensation for this responsibility. Likewise, those working as legal support staff also perform administrative tasks for outpatient consultations in the Women's Area. In addition, they carry out support work both within the shelter and in outpatient services.

Continuing with the overlap of tasks and roles, operators stated that because police officers are not always present at the shelter, they themselves conduct "searches" of women's belongings upon

admission. Operators in Municipality B expressed feeling especially exposed in this role:

And yes, unfortunately it is the operator who has to face things directly. It is complicated (Patricia, personal communication, September 2019).

By contrast, one professional explained:

We cannot physically search them because that requires a police officer, but yes, we do inspect everything (Carmen, personal communication, September 2019).

Interviewees also reported that they frequently pool their own money to pay for medications and cigarettes for the resident women:

And we do not have petty cash, for example. So sometimes in emergencies we contribute peso by peso, and we buy things ourselves (Natalia, personal communication, September 2019).

In Municipality A, the head of the Women's Area stated that coworkers who live near the HPI come to the shelter whenever anything happens, and no mention was made of additional compensation for these responsibilities.

On the other hand, an operator and judicial support worker from Municipality A explained that people in the same role also perform cleaning tasks. Furthermore, because they often work alone, when the professional team comes to the shelter to speak with one of the women, these workers also help with cooking or preparing snacks.

Regarding the number of people on the team, interviewees from Municipality A indicated that the team is smaller than that of Municipality B and includes fewer professional disciplines. The Municipality B team reported the absence of psychiatric professionals for intake evaluations. All interviewees emphasized that the same HPI team is also responsible for outpatient services in the Women's Area, which contributes to work overload. Furthermore, neither municipality relies on *ad honorem* volunteers, only university interns, who do

not interact directly with the women residing in the shelter for confidentiality reasons.

Returning to the operators' team in Municipality B, interviewees stated that there is only one operator per shift. Workers explained that the absence of technical staff during nighttime hours limits intervention possibilities in the event of incidents.

Likewise, the team identified as problematic the succession of three different heads of the Women's Area over the course of three years:

2018 and 2019 were chaotic because there were changes in coordinators, so nothing could really be organized (Natalia, personal communication, September 2019).

At the beginning of the HPI's operation in Municipality B, there was no cleaning staff assigned from other municipal areas, meaning that women residents and operators themselves were responsible for cleaning tasks. The former head of the Women's Area explained:

We were not much of a team, so we took turns in shifts" (Romina, personal communication, October 2019).

In Municipality B, the role of support worker is separate from the role of operator. In Municipality A, however, operators also fulfill support roles:

Even when we had the previous head, when we had to stay overnight, we took turns. Many times, we had to stay at night because sometimes there were women in crisis; they were delicate situations where someone needed to be there" (Catalina, personal communication, August 2019).

Regarding the training and education of staff teams, in both municipalities none of the professionals had completed specific training courses, certifications, or postgraduate studies related to the issue. In Municipality A, only the head of the Women's Area possessed considerable experience in the field. Among all the professionals, only the general head of

the Women's Area had completed a Master's degree, though not in a field directly related to the problem addressed. In Municipality B, none of the professionals had completed postgraduate studies or specialized training. In both municipalities, some interviewees stated that the issue had not been substantially addressed during their undergraduate education, emphasizing that they had studied at a time when the topic had not yet been fully incorporated into university curricula.

For its part, Municipality B offers almost no specific training activities. The few trainings that did occur were organized by external institutions, for example by a court or an NGO working on violence perpetrated by men. The professional team stressed that operators serve as the main link with women experiencing violence and that it is essential to train them properly. They reported that when the shelter was inaugurated, the Provincial Shelter Network trained the staff. However, the operators either did not remember or did not know who had trained them. Finally, the former HPI coordinator explained that the training had actually been promoted through the former Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INAM).

Regarding training activities, the head of the Women's Area in Municipality A explained that these took place at the beginning of team formation through the Popular Schools initiative of the former INAM. During 2016–2017, various training activities continued, and at the time of the interviews they were no longer considered necessary. Nevertheless, staff members still attended different training sessions offered within the municipal framework on diverse topics.

Professional teams stated that they shared readings provided by the head of the Women's Area and, together with the operators, reflected daily on their professional roles. Like the Municipality B team, they also received training on working with men who perpetrate violence, although no such intervention programs were offered within the Women's Area during the period analyzed.

## Discussion

The main findings regarding the coexistence protocols in both HPs invite reflection on the nature of the tasks

assigned to the women residing there. These tasks may reinforce sexist practices by emphasizing the division between the typically masculine development associated with the public sphere and the association of women with the domestic or private sphere, given that women are socially assigned caregiving tasks that are not recognized as work (Lamas, 1998).

This observation is reinforced when examining the principal coexistence problems among the women, as the points of conflict are centered on tasks characterized as domestic in nature. It is essential to identify within these situations the social mandates that place responsibility for domestic work exclusively upon women. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the women are not provided with tools that would allow them to develop within the public sphere.

Regarding women's relationships with their children, although preliminary, the findings suggest that in situations of gender-based violence against women there is a displacement of socially established criteria concerning "good" caregiving and parenting. Thus, in many cases, women's maternal caregiving role is called into question. This may explain the emphasis that technical teams place on the resocialization of women around caregiving roles.

In both municipalities, women residing in the HPs are encouraged to carry out caregiving tasks, which involve a set of activities related to labor and family care responsibilities. These tasks are non-transferable and emotionally charged, involving a high degree of responsibility that affects women's daily lives and quality of life, since such obligations have historically been assigned to women (Pautassi, 2020).

Thus, the role of those working within the critical path of addressing violence against women (Sagot, 2000) tends to focus on what women "should do," such as "leave their husbands," "find employment," "resume studying," "file complaints," or "become better mothers and wives." This simultaneously reveals both the agents' lack of understanding regarding the problem itself and the centrality of their own role within the critical path process.

Continuing along the same lines, neither municipality provides activities or training related to

microenterprises or preparation for paid employment. Instead, opportunities are offered for learning sewing and hairdressing, although these activities never become structured workshops or formal training programs.

Contrary to the findings of this study, according to the National Action Plan for the Prevention, Assistance, and Eradication of Violence Against Women 2017–2019 of the former National Women's Council (Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres, 2016), shelters should provide vocational guidance, job training, and recreational activities. They should facilitate women's labor market insertion by helping them identify their interests and connecting them with educational programs, vocational training, employment initiatives, microenterprise programs, among others.

Regarding the analysis of working conditions within the HPIs, the data reveal a difference between the two municipalities. In Municipality A, staff members are employed directly by the municipality in a formal dependent employment relationship, whereas in Municipality B workers are *monotributistas* (independent contractors), resulting in high staff turnover.

In current practice, especially within public administration, the *monotributo* arrangement has been distorted into a mechanism for concealing dependent employment relationships. Rather than formally registering workers under labor contract laws, the State requires them to enroll as *monotributistas* so that they may issue monthly invoices for their services, thereby simulating autonomy. In these cases, although workers formally appear as external service providers, in practice they work fixed schedules, receive instructions from hierarchical superiors, and use the resources and facilities of the public institution, thereby fulfilling all the elements of a dependent employment relationship. This arrangement allows the State to reduce costs related to social security contributions and labor benefits, but it leaves workers in vulnerable situations by depriving them of fundamental rights such as severance pay, annual bonuses, and job stability. What should function as a formalization mechanism for autonomous workers instead becomes an instrument of labor precarization,

transferring responsibility for social security onto the workers themselves.

In other areas of analysis, similarities were found in both municipalities during the period studied: absence of team meetings, external supervision, and training, as well as overlapping tasks and work overload.

Teams require spaces in which they can critically reflect upon the realities they experience and the subjective and identity-related repercussions associated with stress and occupational burnout (labor precarization, multiple jobs, deficiencies in infrastructure and supplies, low salaries), in addition to the impact these dimensions have on the caregiving practices they themselves perform (Zaldúa et al., 2020).

Care work produces affection as its outcome. Through human contact and assistance and prevention tasks, caregiving generates intangible products such as well-being, satisfaction, and emotional support. When labor precarization and the erosion of labor rights exist, this intangible component becomes less visible and, at times, entirely invisible. Women who work in caregiving roles are affected doubly: on the one hand, because they care for others with complex demands, and on the other, because their work lacks recognition at both the political and social levels (Fernández, 1998).

Based on the findings regarding working conditions, it may be hypothesized that there is no evidence of care-oriented policies directed toward workers in these municipalities. Consequently, it is likely that such labor contexts negatively affect workers' ability to carry out their duties effectively.

This suggests the need to provide responses to situations of gender-based violence that require specific and comprehensive care and support strategies. However, the gaps in responding to these demands generate stressful situations for workers in caregiving sectors (Zaldúa et al., 2020).

It is important to clarify that although labor precarization is a transversal problem within public employment in Argentina, its persistence within facilities addressing gender-based violence creates a particular tension. This is not merely an administrative

deficiency; rather, it concerns how the lack of formal recognition of institutional caregiving work—historically invisibilized and feminized—affects the quality of the State's response. Thus, the labor vulnerability of operators conflicts with the institutional mission of the HPI, which seeks precisely to promote women's autonomy and the exercise of their rights.

The analysis conducted reveals that, despite their purpose of protecting women, the HPIs studied reinforce social gender mandates by assigning women activities associated with the domestic sphere while failing to provide tools for their development within the public sphere. This situation perpetuates the sexist division of labor and limits women's autonomy, which is a central objective in overcoming situations of gender-based violence. The absence of vocational training or formal labor insertion programs is identified as a significant deficiency.

Finally, the findings reveal that HPI workers experience task overload, lack of training and professional preparation, and the absence of spaces for emotional support and supervision. This suggests that although public policies seek to address gender-based violence, their implementation presents difficulties that affect both the workers and the women they aim to protect. It is essential for the State to guarantee a framework of rights and specialized, qualified support for those working in these spaces, ensuring dignified working conditions and adequate tools for their labor, which in turn will allow for higher-quality care for women seeking to build life projects free from violence.

## Conclusion

This research made it possible to account for the complexity involved in the management of Hogares de Protección Integral (HPIs) as central mechanisms of public policy for addressing gender-based violence. Based on the comparative analysis of two shelter facilities in the Greater Buenos Aires area, critical reflections emerge regarding the State response during the 2016–2019 period.

This article demonstrates that although HPIs emerge as spaces of protection, the intervention strategies described by the workers tend to reproduce the

mandates of the sexual division of labor. By requiring resident women exclusively to perform domestic and caregiving tasks, the State risks reinforcing the same traditional roles that sustain gender inequality, rather than fostering projects of autonomy that transcend the private sphere.

Furthermore, the development of this study made it possible to explore the working conditions of HPI workers (precarious hiring arrangements, low salaries, lack of supervision spaces, among others), which directly impact the quality of interventions. What has been described demonstrates that, during the period analyzed, the State had not yet fully integrated a care perspective into the design and implementation of public policies.

For all the reasons stated above, it is important that policies aimed at protecting women in situations of gender-based violence not be limited to temporary accommodation and physical safety alone. Only by overcoming the current double State response—which oscillates between emergency protection and the reproduction of traditional caregiving mandates—will it be possible to offer public policies grounded in a comprehensive paradigm that guarantees tools fostering women's autonomy in overcoming situations of gender-based violence, while simultaneously professionalizing and guaranteeing the rights of work teams.

Accordingly, efforts must be directed toward strengthening these facilities and denaturalizing gender roles within interventions, thereby enabling the State to provide a response that effectively contributes to overcoming violence and to the construction of citizenship.

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To the collective of women, to my ancestors, whose struggle has made it possible for me to be here today.

To the women with whom I have shared personal, professional, and academic spaces, who contributed to my process of empowerment as a woman.

To the women with whom I worked in my professional role, who inspired me to begin this path, and with

whom we fought together so that we may live lives free from violence.

We want ourselves alive.

Not one woman less.

### Availability of research data

The data from this research are available in the repository of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires (<https://repositorio.sociales.uba.ar/>), under the title “*Dispositivos de alojamiento para mujeres en situación de violencia en alto riesgo: una aproximación a hogares de protección integral en dos Municipios del Conurbano Bonaerense (2016-2019) desde el punto de vista de los equipos de trabajo*” (2021).

### Review comments

This article underwent a peer-review evaluation process under an anonymous review system, in accordance with the journal’s editorial transparency policy. The reviewers, who participated anonymously in this process, consented to the publication of the comments issued during the review.

**Review Comment 1:** The article addresses a highly interesting topic, namely the functioning of Comprehensive Protection Shelters and the dynamics involved in the reproduction of gender roles. Nevertheless, a revision of the structure is recommended prior to publication, as well as the inclusion of essential contextual information and the reconsideration of certain assertions lacking empirical support. In this regard, specific recommendations are detailed in the following section.

**Review Comment 2:** My recommendation is to accept the article for publication with modifications, since the study fits within the thematic scope of the journal and contributes to the discussion on gender policies, provided that the missing elements are incorporated. In particular, the abstracts should be expanded and structured, an ethical statement section should be included, the references should be standardized, and the use of both Spanish and English should be revised in order to guarantee clarity and coherence. Once these adjustments are made in

accordance with the journal’s guidelines, the article will constitute a valuable contribution.

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