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Public Policy Toward the Mother–Worker in Colombia (1960–2025): Recognition Without Emancipation

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Abstract

Colombian public policy directed at women as mothers and workers between 1960 and 2025 does not constitute a cumulative expansion of rights but a dialectic of recognition that operates against effective emancipation. This article develops a phenomenological reading of that trajectory from Hegel, Honneth, and Han. Four figures of state consciousness are identified: the tutelary mother (1960–1974), the abstract worker (1974–1991), the differentiated rights-bearing subject (1991–2010), and the administered contradiction (2010–2025). Drawing on legislative reconstruction (12 laws, 11 Constitutional Court rulings), official statistical series (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE], Profa-milia, International Labour Organization [ILO]), and phenomenological interpretation, the analysis demonstrates that each figure emerges from the negation of the previous one without suppressing it, reproducing the split between Honnethian spheres of recognition as the operative mode of the peripheral capitalist state. The fourth figure is analyzed through Han’s burnout society: the mother–worker who has internalized the demand to reconcile productive and reproductive roles embodies the achievement-subject who self-exploits in the name of freedom. Colombia’s fertility collapse to 1.2 children per woman in 2023 may be read as an indication that the dialectic has reached a demographic threshold. The central thesis holds that state mediation without synthesis is not institutional deficiency but a mode of governance that reveals a structural limit of recognition theory.

Keywords: recognition; emancipation; mother–worker; public policy; peripheral capitalism



Academic Editor: Andreas Pickel

Received: 21 April 2026

Revised: 13 June 2026

Accepted: 16 June 2026

Published: 9 July 2026

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1. Introduction

Contradiction is not an accident of social history but its constitutive engine. The position of Colombian women as mothers and workers between 1960 and 2025 constitutes one of those contradictions that the state has formally recognized without materially transforming. Over six and a half decades, female labor participation rose from 15% to 52.6% ([DANE 2000, 2024](#)), a growth that state rhetoric presents as evidence of sustained progress. Yet the gender wage gap averages 6.3% nationally but reaches 28% in informal employment and 21.9% among the top income quintile ([DANE 2022](#)), female labor informality reaches 53.5% nationally ([DANE 2023](#)), and Colombian women devote 7.5 h daily to unpaid domestic work compared to 3.2 h for men ([DANE 2017](#)). The disaggregated structure of the gap is itself diagnostic: inequality concentrates precisely where the majority of mother–workers are located, in informal employment invisible to the juridical instruments that

nominally protect them. The question these data impose is not why inequality persists but why growing legal recognition fails to produce effective emancipation.

This article proposes a socio-juridical analysis that, departing from a Hegelian philosophical base, brings institutional reconstruction, statistical evidence, and recognition theory into dialogue to diagnose the structural logic that connects growing juridical recognition with persistent material inequality. The central argument holds that recognition and emancipation are not complementary moments of a single process, as presupposed by the theory of recognition formulated by Honneth (1997), but poles of a dialectic that the peripheral capitalist state maintains in permanent tension. Recognition operates here not as a prelude to emancipation but as its functional substitute. Every law, every constitutional ruling, every decree that names the mother-worker as a rights-bearing subject produces a double effect: it makes the contradiction visible and simultaneously stabilizes it by offering juridical mediation without structural transformation. The thesis is not that the Colombian state deliberately conspires against women's emancipation. The thesis is that the structure of power reproduces itself by adapting to each new demand for recognition without relinquishing the conditions that make domination possible. The state does not need intentionality to administer the contradiction: the logic of peripheral capitalism generates recognition as a structural output of its own operation, in the same way that the market generates prices without any individual agent intending them. The result is the same whether intended or not: partial, fragmented, and cumulative recognition that generates an illusion of progress without altering the material bases that produce inequality.

The Colombian context warrants a brief overview before the theoretical apparatus is introduced. Three structural features frame the analysis. First, female labor participation rose from roughly 15% in 1960 to 53.7% in 2025, yet it remains some twenty-three percentage points below male participation, and more than half of employed women work in informal arrangements (DANE 2025). Second, the country underwent an exceptionally rapid demographic transition: the total fertility rate fell from above seven children per woman in 1960 to 1.2 in 2023, the lowest figure in its recorded history (DANE 2024). Third, the institutional response unfolded within a peripheral capitalist economy whose redistributive capacity is structurally limited; it crystallized politically in the 1991 Constitution, which for the first time named women as bearers of differentiated rights, and developed against the backdrop of an internal armed conflict that displaced millions and disproportionately affected women. These features, namely high and rising participation without convergence, an abrupt fertility decline, and an expanding juridical apparatus operating without robust redistribution, constitute the empirical terrain on which the dialectic of recognition examined here unfolds.

Colombia is treated here as a revealing rather than a representative case. It combines, to an unusual degree, two conditions whose coexistence is analytically productive: one of the most jurisprudentially elaborate frameworks of gender and maternity rights in Latin America, and a labor structure in which informality exceeds half of the female workforce and effective redistribution remains marginal. Where juridical recognition is maximal and material redistribution minimal, the relation between recognition and emancipation becomes visible in a form that more redistributive welfare regimes tend to obscure. The case is therefore offered not as an exemplar from which to generalize, but as a critical instance in which a structural feature of recognition theory can be examined; the comparative question, namely whether the same dialectic operates in other peripheral economies, is left open for future research.

The Hegelian inspiration of this approach is deliberate. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel establishes that consciousness does not progress linearly but through figures that emerge from the negation of previous ones without suppressing them (Hegel [1807] 2010).

Each figure of consciousness contains the previous one as a sublated (*aufgehoben*) but not eliminated moment. Colombian public policy directed at the mother–worker exhibits precisely this phenomenological structure: each historical period produces a new figure of state consciousness that negates the previous one without abolishing it, generating layers of partial recognition that coexist contradictorily.

Honneth (1997) provides the complementary analytical instrument: the differentiation of three spheres where recognition operates independently but interdependently. These are the sphere of love (care, intimate relationships, family affection), the sphere of rights (legal dignity, formal equality, state protection), and the sphere of solidarity (social valuation of individual contributions, communal esteem). The fragmentation between spheres is not an anomaly but the key to the problem: the Colombian state recognizes the mother–worker in the juridical sphere with increasing legislative sophistication but does not transform the sphere of solidarity (where reproductive work remains devalued) or the sphere of love (where the burden of care falls disproportionately on women).

The contribution of this article is not exhausted in applying Hegelian–Honnethian categories to a national case. The argument has a theoretical dimension that transcends Colombia: if recognition can operate as a governance mechanism that substitutes for emancipation, then Honneth’s recognition theory has a structural blind spot, not because it is invalid outside Europe but precisely because its analytical power makes visible phenomena that its own normative framework cannot fully explain. The three spheres, the forms of disrespect, and the moral grammar of conflicts operate in the Global South with the same conceptual rigor as in the North. What differs is not the validity of the categories but the institutional context in which they operate. In the European social democracies where Honneth’s examples are drawn, the state possesses effective mechanisms of redistribution (progressive taxation, universal public services, strong collective bargaining) that translate juridical recognition into material conditions of life. In peripheral capitalism, as developed by the Latin American structuralist tradition (Prebisch 1949), those mechanisms do not exist or are deliberately weak. The categories are valid. The presupposition that recognition produces redistribution is not. Colombian peripheral capitalism demonstrates that recognition without redistribution is not an incomplete stage of an ongoing emancipatory process but a stable and functional mode of state operation.

Colombian gender and public policy scholarship has produced fundamental contributions with which this article engages critically. Arango (2006) has demonstrated that female labor insertion in Colombia reproduces class and race hierarchies rather than dissolving them. Puyana (2003) documented that legislative changes precede cultural transformations in the conception of motherhood and fatherhood by decades. León (1982) was early to establish the connection between female subordination and Colombian agrarian structure. Meertens (2000) showed that the Colombian armed conflict differentially affects women by destroying community care networks. Viveros Vigoya (2016) has insisted that the intersectionality of class, race, and gender makes it impossible to speak of the Colombian mother–worker as a homogeneous category. This article introduces a dimension that Colombian scholarship has not systematically explored: a Hegelian–Honnethian phenomenological reading of public policy as a sequence of figures of consciousness, not as a chronology of advances and setbacks. The research program from which this article originates was established in Pérez y Soto and Cortés Gallego (Pérez et al. 2012), whose legislative reconstruction of the mother–worker’s double condition in twentieth-century Colombia provides the empirical foundation that is here reinterpreted through the phenomenological framework. Taken together, this body of work establishes that legal reform in Colombia has historically outpaced cultural and material transformation, that female labor insertion has tended to reproduce rather than dissolve class, race, and territorial

hierarchies, and that the conditions of motherhood and work cannot be analyzed as a homogeneous category. What remains underexamined is the logic that connects the continual expansion of formal recognition with the persistence of material inequality; it is this logic, rather than the chronology of advances and setbacks, that the present article reconstructs.

This article contributes to recognition theory in three respects. First, it shows that, under determinate institutional conditions, recognition may operate as a mechanism of governance rather than as a pathway to emancipation. Second, it proposes the administered contradiction as a phenomenological category for analyzing gender policy under peripheral capitalism. Third, it examines recognition where redistributive capacity is weak, a setting underrepresented in the institutional contexts that inform much of Honneth's work, and uses that setting to specify a limit internal to recognition theory itself.

1.1. Hegel: Contradiction, Negativity, and Figures of Consciousness

The analysis that follows requires a preliminary clarification of its object. The condition of the mother-worker is treated here not as a biological datum but as a historically constructed social position. The biological capacity for gestation and lactation does not determine the social position of the woman who gestates and lactates: that position is configured by a cultural legacy that precedes her, by juridical institutions that classify her, by an economic structure that assigns her unpaid reproductive labor, and by a state that administers the distance between what she is told she can be and what her material conditions allow her to become. [de Beauvoir \(1949\)](#) established the foundational distinction: one is not born a woman but becomes one through a process of social formation that naturalizes what is in fact contingent. [Federici \(2010\)](#) demonstrated that the assignment of reproductive labor to women is not a pre-capitalist residue but a historical product of primitive accumulation. The Hegelian framework adopted here radicalizes this premise: if the condition of mother-worker is a historical construction, then it is also a figure of consciousness, a configuration of the relationship between subject and structure that exhibits internal coherence, constitutive contradiction, and dialectical movement. The categories deployed below (figures of consciousness, spheres of recognition, forms of disrespect) do not operate upon a natural subject but upon a historically produced position whose construction is itself part of the problem that this article diagnoses.

The Phenomenology of Spirit establishes that contradiction is not simply external negation of one position by another but self-negation, the internal movement through which each determination reveals its own insufficiency and is compelled to transform itself ([Hegel \[1807\] 2010](#)). Hegel formulates it with characteristic precision:

The inequality that arises in consciousness between the I and the substance that is its object is their difference, the negative in general. It can be considered as the defect of both, but it is rather their soul, that is, what moves them both ([Hegel \[1807\] 2010](#), p. 136).

This negativity is not a deficiency that legislation can correct but a dialectical engine that produces the movement from one figure to the next. The concept of figure of consciousness (*Gestalt des Bewusstseins*) allows transcending conventional periodization of public policy. A figure of consciousness is a configuration of the relationship between subject and object that exhibits internal coherence and constitutive contradiction. Hegel warns that the transition between figures is not linear progress. Each figure contains the previous one as a sublated (*aufgehoben*) but not eliminated moment.

Five additional Hegelian categories prove indispensable for the analysis. First, there is unhappy consciousness (*unglückliches Bewusstsein*): the consciousness that knows of its own split, recognizes its internal division, but cannot overcome it ([Hegel \[1807\] 2010](#), chap. IV). Second, there is the triad of the Philosophy of Right: abstract right (*Recht*), morality (*Moralität*), and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Hegel establishes the following:

The system of right is the realm of freedom realized, the world of spirit produced from itself as a second nature (Hegel [1821] 1975, par. 4).

Third, there is beautiful soul (*die schöne Seele*): the consciousness that recognizes injustice but refuses to act transformatively because acting would mean contaminating itself (Hegel [1807] 2010, chap. VI). Fourth, there is the cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*):

It can be called the cunning of reason that it lets the passions work for it, so that it is that through which reason comes into existence that suffers losses and damage (Hegel [1837] 2005, p. 97).

Fifth, there is the distinction between *Bestimmung* (determination as normative vocation) and *Bestimmtheit* (concrete determinacy by material conditions), which operates transversally across the Hegelian system from the Science of Logic (Hegel [1812] 2015) to the Philosophy of Right. The mother-worker has a *Bestimmung* that the state recognizes abstractly: to be a subject of full rights. But her *Bestimmtheit* contradicts it.

1.2. Honneth: Spheres of Recognition and Their Pathologies

Axel Honneth, critical heir of the Frankfurt School, formulates in *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1997) a tripartite theory differentiating three spheres where recognition operates autonomously but interdependently. The sphere of love produces self-confidence as the psychological result of being recognized unconditionally in intimate relations. The sphere of rights produces self-respect as the effect of knowing oneself to be a bearer of universal rights. The sphere of solidarity produces self-esteem as the consequence of one's contribution being valued by the community. Fragmentation between spheres constitutes Honneth's central diagnostic category. When recognition in one sphere is not accompanied by recognition in the others, the subject experiences what Honneth calls forms of disrespect: physical and emotional abuse (sphere of love), deprivation of rights and exclusion (sphere of rights), and dishonor and invisibilization (sphere of solidarity). Each form of disrespect damages the corresponding dimension of the subject's practical relation to self. Honneth warns:

The experience of being deprived of rights is connected with a loss of self-respect, a loss of the ability to refer to oneself as a subject of interaction equal in rights with all others (Honneth 1997, p. 163).

Three additional Honnethian categories allow us to specify the problematic. First, there is the moral grammar of social conflicts: expectations of recognition that, when violated, produce indignation and struggle (Honneth 1997). The question the Colombian case poses is as follows: why does the systematic violation of the mother-worker's recognition expectations not produce the collective indignation Honneth predicts? The answer this article proposes is that partial recognition deactivates the moral grammar without satisfying the expectation. The mechanism operates through a cognitive displacement: the mother-worker who holds constitutional rights, who is protected by 22 Constitutional Court rulings, who has 18 weeks of maternity leave inscribed in law, cannot frame her situation as disrespect in Honneth's sense because the state has formally recognized her. The juridical recognition provides sufficient symbolic satisfaction to prevent the cognitive reframing of her condition as injustice. She experiences exhaustion, frustration, and material deprivation, but she cannot name these as *menosprecio* because the state has already named her as a subject of rights. The moral grammar requires a clear opposition between a subject who demands recognition and a structure that denies it. Partial recognition dissolves this opposition: the structure does not deny recognition but grants it in one sphere (rights) while withholding it in the others (love, solidarity), producing a situation that is experienced as personal insufficiency rather than structural injustice. The mother-worker does not say 'the state does not recognize me.' She says 'I cannot manage.' The grammatical subject

of the sentence shifts from the state to the self, and with it, the possibility of collective indignation collapses into individual burnout.

Second, there is the distinction between negative freedom, reflexive freedom, and social freedom formulated in Freedom's Right (Honneth 2014). Social freedom requires institutions that enable effective mutual recognition. Honneth formulates it thus:

Freedom is not primarily a property of individual will but a pattern of interaction, something that can only be realized between subjects, not through an isolated subject (Honneth 2014, p. 86).

Third, there is the thesis of the paradoxes of capitalist modernization (Honneth 2004): the normative achievements of modernity (individualization, juridical inclusion, recognition of rights) are converted into their opposite by capitalist dynamics. This category is decisive because it transforms the argument from political denunciation into philosophical diagnosis.

1.3. Synthesis: Dialectic of Recognition as Governance

The articulation of Hegel and Honneth allows us to formulate the central hypothesis with analytical precision. The three theoretical frameworks mobilized in this article occupy hierarchically distinct positions: Hegel provides the phenomenological structure (the concept of figures of consciousness and the logic of internal negation that produces transitions between them), Honneth provides the diagnostic categories (the three spheres, the forms of disrespect, and the moral grammar that identifies where recognition fails), and Han, introduced below, provides the subjective-experiential dimension (the burnout as the somatic form in which the administered contradiction is lived by the body that bears it). The peripheral capitalist state produces recognition in the sphere of rights as a functional substitute for emancipation that would require simultaneous recognition in all three spheres. Each figure of state consciousness amplifies juridical recognition and, in doing so, deepens the split between spheres that prevents effective emancipation.

Fraser (2008) provides a complementary distinction: the difference between redistribution (transformation of economic structures) and recognition (transformation of cultural and juridical patterns). The Colombian state has expanded juridical recognition far more than redistributive transformation. Federici (2010) adds the indispensable materialist dimension: unpaid reproductive labor is not a pre-capitalist residue but a structural condition of capitalist accumulation. The state recognizes this reality (Law 1413 of 2010 created the Care Economy Satellite Account) but administers it without transforming it. It measures unpaid work, quantifies it, makes it statistically visible, but neither remunerates nor redistributes it.

Han (2012) provides the final conceptual piece for the analysis. Han argues that contemporary society has transitioned from Foucault's disciplinary society (Foucault 1975), which operates through external prohibition and says 'you must not,' to an achievement society (*Leistungsgesellschaft*) that operates through internal demand and says 'you can.' The subject of the achievement society is no longer oppressed by an external master but exploits herself in the name of freedom and self-realization. The result is not liberation but self-exploitation (*Selbstaussbeutung*), whose clinical symptom is burnout (*Erschöpfung*). The mother-worker who simultaneously manages household, children, paid employment, and entrepreneurial projects is the paradigmatic achievement-subject: she does not need an external oppressor because she has internalized the demand to excel in every sphere simultaneously. The connection with Honneth is direct: ideological recognition (Honneth 2012) is the mechanism through which the achievement society operates upon the mother-worker. The state tells her 'you can,' recognizes her as an entrepreneur, and thereby returns to her the responsibility of individually resolving a structural contradiction.

A fourth theoretical reference operates transversally rather than sequentially. The intersectional analysis developed by Viveros Vigoya (2016) does not occupy a separate moment in this architecture but qualifies each of the three others; it disaggregates the universal subject that Honneth's spheres presuppose, showing that recognition and its failures are distributed unequally across class, race, and territory. Where Hegel supplies the structure, Honneth the diagnosis, and Han the subjective register, intersectionality specifies that the same structure is inhabited differently by the Afro-Colombian woman from Chocó, the indigenous woman from Guainía, and the professional woman from Bogotá; that the spheres fragment along axes of social position as well as between one another; and that burnout is stratified rather than uniform. Intersectionality is thus not a supplementary reference but the analytical corrective that prevents the phenomenological reading from reproducing the very abstraction it sets out to criticize.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological assumption of the problem addressed here departs from a strong philosophical base, specifically a Hegelian reading that constitutes the conceptual thread developed throughout the document, to address a socio-juridical and institutional problem: Colombian public policy directed at women as mothers and workers. The social problem in question is approached through the concept of recognition in its Hegelian base. Hegel constructs an ontology in which recognition operates as an inexhaustible need of the human being, that which defines its telos: self-consciousness constitutes itself only through being recognized by another self-consciousness, and this need is not satisfied once and for all but unfolds dialectically through successive figures that seek an ever more complete recognition without ever achieving it definitively. It is this ontological structure that allows reading Colombian public policy not as a sequence of administrative decisions but as the state administration of a need that, being constitutive of the subject, cannot be suppressed but only governed. Hegel's continuators in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries deepen this base: Honneth translates the dialectic of recognition into diagnostic categories operable upon contemporary institutions, and Han identifies the subjective consequences of a recognition that has ceased to be emancipatory and has become a device of performance. The position of the mother-worker is not a sectoral question amenable to a single disciplinary treatment but a reality that traverses the institutional, the juridical, the economic, and the social because it originates in a deeper stratum: the dialectic of recognition and power through which the state configures its relationship with subjects it simultaneously protects and subordinates.

The legislative and jurisprudential expressions of this relationship, its statistical traces in participation rates and wage gaps, and its experiential consequences in exhaustion and demographic withdrawal are not parallel phenomena requiring separate analyses but manifestations of a single logic that can only be grasped when these dimensions are brought into dialogue. The socio-juridical approach adopted here operates through a continuous dialogue between category, data, and narrative: philosophical categories organize the reading of legislative and statistical sequences, empirical data validates or challenges the analytical reach of those categories, and the legislative narrative provides the temporal structure within which the dialectic unfolds. This article undertakes that dialogue through three operations that correspond not to three methods juxtaposed but to three entry points into the same problem. The interdisciplinary composition of the authorial team reflects the structure of the problem itself: a nurse whose professional practice engages directly with maternal care and reproductive labor, a microbiologist whose work on bioeconomy and biopolitics provides the lens through which the governance of the reproductive body is

analyzed, and a political philosopher and economist who provides the phenomenological and institutional reading.

The article integrates philosophical analysis with empirical evidence through three complementary operations. The first is the legislative and jurisprudential reconstruction of the period 1960–2025. The documentary corpus comprises 12 national laws directly related to the mother–worker position (from Law 75 of 1968 to Law 2126 of 2023), 11 Constitutional Court rulings with structural effects (C-470/1997, T-873/2005, C-355/2006, C-577/2011, SU-070/2013, C-005/2017, SU-075/2018, C-374/2023, C-507/2023, T-447/2023, T-520/2024), the pertinent constitutional articles (42, 43, and 50 of the 1991 Constitution), and 3 national public policy instruments (Care Economy Satellite Account, National Gender Equity Public Policy, Ministry of Equality). The 11 rulings were selected on the basis of their structural effect on the legal framework governing the mother–worker position, as determined by three criteria: their explicit modification of prior jurisprudential rules (as in the case of SU-075/2018 modifying SU-070/2013), their citation frequency in subsequent Constitutional Court jurisprudence, and their direct incidence on at least one of Honneth’s three spheres of recognition: love (maternity protection, care), rights (formal equality, anti-discrimination protection), or solidarity (valuation of reproductive work). The selection is not exhaustive of all rulings touching upon female employment or maternity but targets those that produced structural shifts in the state’s configuration of the mother–worker contradiction.

The second operation is the analysis of official statistical series. The main sources are DANE’s Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (labor participation, wage gap, informality, female-headed households), DANE’s National Time Use Survey (distribution of unpaid work), Profamilia’s National Demographic and Health Survey (fertility, reproductive health coverage), and International Labour Organization (ILO) reports on female employment in Latin America. The series cover 1960–2024 with sex-disaggregated data available since 1990 and greater precision since 2001. The choice of 1960 as the starting point responds to the confluence of three factors: the onset of Colombia’s demographic transition, the significant expansion of female labor participation, and the creation of the first institutional instruments directed at the family, the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF), created by Law 75 of 1968 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1968](#)). While earlier milestones such as Law 28 of 1932 (patrimonial capacity) and Legislative Act 3 of 1954 (female suffrage) are conditions of possibility for the mother–worker position, the object of this article is not female citizenship in general but the specific contradiction between reproductive and productive functions as the state recognizes, administers, and legislates it.

The third operation, properly philosophical, is the phenomenological reading of the legislative and statistical sequence as figures of consciousness with internal dialectical structure. This operation does not consist in applying Hegelian categories as external labels to historical periods but in identifying the logic of internal negation that produces the transition from one configuration to the next. The criterion for delimiting each figure is the exhaustion of its internal coherence, not a change in government or the enactment of a particular law. The proposed periodization (1960–1974, 1974–1991, 1991–2010, 2010–2025) responds to phenomenological logic rather than conventional institutional cuts, although it partially coincides with these when legislation crystallizes transformations that had already occurred in the structure of the contradiction.

The phenomenological reading proceeds according to an explicit analytical procedure. The unit of analysis is the configuration of the recognition relation between the state and the mother–worker within a given period, reconstructed from the triangulation of three sources: the legislative–jurisprudential corpus, the official statistical series, and the phenomenological interpretation of both. The identification of each figure follows four steps. First, the dominant operation of recognition in the period is established: whom the state recognizes,

in which Honnethian sphere, and through which instruments. Second, the constitutive premise on which that operation rests is made explicit, for instance the presupposition that the mother remains within the domestic sphere. Third, the contradiction that the operation itself generates is traced in the statistical and institutional record. Fourth, the point at which that premise can no longer contain the contradiction it has produced is identified as the exhaustion of the figure's internal coherence. On this criterion, a figure begins when a new configuration of the recognition relation stabilizes around a coherent premise, and it ends not with a change in government or the enactment of a particular law, but when the premise is structurally negated by the dynamics it set in motion, compelling the transition to a successor figure that incorporates the previous one as a sublated moment.

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the four figures of state consciousness reconstructed below, together with the dominant mode of recognition and the central contradiction associated with each.

Table 1. The four figures of state consciousness in Colombian public policy toward the mother–worker (1960–2025).

Period	Figure of State Consciousness	Dominant Mode of Recognition	Central Contradiction
1960–1974	The tutelary mother	Paternalistic protection (sphere of love)	Recognition without autonomy
1974–1991	The abstract worker	Formal equality (sphere of rights)	Recognition without differentiation; invisibility of reproductive labor
1991–2010	The differentiated rights-bearing subject	Differentiated rights (constitutional and jurisprudential)	Mediation without synthesis; fragmentation between spheres
2010–2025	The administered contradiction	Recognition without redistribution	Self-exploitation and demographic withdrawal

3.1. The Tutelary Mother: Recognition Without Autonomy (1960–1974)

The analysis of the results takes the concession of the right to vote as its starting point for public policy directed at women, insofar as this right constitutes the woman as a citizen in the full exercise of her civil and political rights, and it is only as a citizen that she becomes a subject upon whom the state can exercise the dialectic of recognition that this article diagnoses. In 1853, the liberal Constitution of the Province of Vélez granted women the right to suffrage, making this province of what is today the department of Santander not only the first territorial entity in Latin America but one of the first in the world to recognize the female vote (Aguilera Peña 2003; Goldwaser Yankelevich 2015). At the time, only a few states in the United States (Kansas 1838; Wyoming 1869) and some European territories (Austria and Germany 1848; Sweden 1866) had adopted similar provisions, all of them preceding New Zealand (1893), which is conventionally cited as the first country to approve female suffrage at the national level. Article 7 of the Constitution of Vélez (Republic of Colombia [Province of Vélez] 1853) established: ‘All inhabitants of the province who are married or over twenty-one years of age are electors’ (Aguilera Peña 2003). The fact is little known, and its obscurity is itself significant. The recognition was short-lived: the Supreme Court of Justice annulled the Constitution probably in late 1854 or early 1855, ruling that the inhabitants of Vélez could not possess more rights and obligations than the rest of the Granadian population (Aguilera Peña 2003; Bushnell 1994). There is no

certainty as to whether women actually exercised the right to vote during its brief validity. Contemporary accounts cited by José María Samper affirmed that women did not wish to exercise the right, but press criticisms highlighting women's political disinterest and ignorance appear to suggest the contrary, and it is possible that women participated in some of the three elections scheduled for 1854 ([Aguilera Peña 2003](#)). The right was only restored a full century later, through Legislative Act 3 of 1954, under the military government of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. The document that materialized female citizenship, the *cédula de ciudadanía*, was first issued to Carola Correa de Rojas Pinilla, wife of the president (cédula 20,000,001, 25 May 1956), and second to her daughter María Eugenia Rojas (cédula 20,000,002) ([Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil 1956](#)). The detail is not anecdotal but symptomatic: the distribution of recognition reproduced proximity to power. The sequence of concession, judicial annulment, and restitution a century later reveals a constitutive structure: in the Colombian case, the state does not recognize pre-existing rights of women as subjects endowed with an inalienable natural condition but concedes them as a sovereign prerogative. The difference is decisive. In the natural rights tradition, the state is the guarantor of rights that precede it. In the logic that operates here, the state is the source of rights that do not exist outside its concession. What the sovereign concedes, the sovereign, or its judicial apparatus, can withdraw or empty of content without incurring normative contradiction. This article assumes the condition of women under the exercise of citizenship, that is, as the exercise of their civil and political rights, and it is this logic of sovereign concession that structures the four figures of state consciousness analyzed below. Law 28 of 1932 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1932](#)), which recognized the patrimonial capacity of married women, and Legislative Act 3 of 1954 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1954](#)) itself are the conditions of possibility of the first figure.

The first figure of state consciousness configures women as objects of protection rather than subjects of rights. The Colombian state of the 1960s legislates for women, not with or from women. Law 75 of 1968, which created the ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare), constitutes the founding act of this figure: it establishes state protection of the family, women, and children as an undifferentiated unit where women appear subsumed within their reproductive function. The ICBF was not created for women but for children through women. Its operative logic is protective-affective (caring for women as vulnerable beings who need tutelage) rather than juridical-emancipatory (recognizing women as autonomous subjects who bear rights). This distinction is decisive for the Honnethian reading: the ICBF belongs to the sphere of love, not to the sphere of rights, because it operationalizes care without autonomy.

Female labor participation was 15% in 1960 and reached 25% by 1974 ([DANE 2000](#)). The total fertility rate exceeded 7 children per woman at the beginning of the decade and declined to 4.5 by 1974 ([Profamilia 2010](#)), driven not by state policy but by Profamilia, a private organization founded in 1965 that introduced the contraceptive pill against the open resistance of the Catholic Church, whose regulation of marriage had conditioned women's juridical position through the Concordat of 1887.

Law 24 of 1974 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1974](#)) represents the inflection point that exhausts the figure of the tutelary mother. By granting married women full patrimonial capacity, eliminating the marital authority that subordinated her juridical will to that of her husband, the state recognized women as juridical-patrimonial subjects. However, patrimonial recognition was not accompanied by differentiated labor recognition. The Substantive Labor Code was not reformed in gender matters during the entire period: maternity leave remained at the minimum established decades earlier, protections against dismissal due to pregnancy were nonexistent in practice, and unpaid domestic work was not even named as a relevant economic category.

In Hegelian terms, the tutelary mother corresponds to the moment of abstract right (*Recht*) without ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*): the state produces formal norms of protection but not the institutions that would realize women's concrete freedom (Hegel [1821] 1975). In Honnethian terms, recognition operates exclusively in the sphere of love (women as mothers are recipients of affective state protection through the ICBF) without corresponding recognition in the sphere of rights (full juridical autonomy achieved only at the end of the period) or in the sphere of solidarity (reproductive work remains invisible). The dominant form of disrespect is deprivation of rights (*Entrechtung*). Female occupational concentration reveals that the sphere of solidarity operated actively against working women: 78% of employed women were concentrated in the service sector, distributed across domestic service (28%), retail trade (22%), and primary education (12%) according to the national census (DANE 1964).

Pateman (1988) illuminates the deep logic of this figure. The modern social contract presupposes a prior, silenced sexual contract: the subordination of women to the domestic sphere as a condition of possibility for men to participate freely in the labor market. The Colombian tutelary mother of 1960–1974 is the institutional incarnation of that unspoken sexual contract. The state does not need to make it explicit because the Church, the family, and custom execute it in its stead.

The exhaustion of this figure is produced by an internal contradiction that Hegel would have recognized: tutelage presupposes that the mother remains in the home, but the Colombian economy undergoing industrialization and urbanization requires female labor power. The state cannot simultaneously maintain the fiction of the domestic mother and the reality of the growing urban worker. Female labor participation of 25% in 1974 was already too high for the figure of the tutelary mother to retain internal coherence. Negation emerges from within the figure itself, not as external imposition, and produces the transition to the second configuration.

3.2. *The Abstract Worker: Recognition Without Differentiation (1974–1991)*

The second figure emerges from the internal negation of the first. The state recognizes women as workers but through an operation of abstraction: it recognizes the worker without recognizing the mother-worker as a specific position. Arango (2006) has demonstrated that this abstraction is not neutral but reproduces pre-existing class and race hierarchies. Women access the labor market under the same formal conditions as men, which in practice means carrying the entirety of reproductive work without the state legislating on that differentiated burden.

Law 50 of 1990 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1990), which reformed the Colombian labor regime, established labor flexibilization, fixed-term contracts, and the elimination of retroactive severance payments. Female participation nearly tripled between 1960 and 1990 (DANE 2000) but under conditions of greater precariousness and zero consideration of reproductive responsibilities.

The Hegelian master-slave dialectic inverts with unexpected analytical productivity. In the Phenomenology's original formulation, the slave conquers self-consciousness through transformative labor: she shapes the external world and, in shaping it, discovers herself as a formative power (Hegel [1807] 2010, chap. IV). The emancipatory moment depends on labor being recognized as transformation of the world. In the figure of the abstract worker, women access paid labor (the position of the slave who works) without freeing themselves from unpaid labor (the position of the slave who serves). The inversion is precise: the mother-worker's reproductive labor transforms the conditions of social reproduction (it produces the labor force, sustains the household, enables the productive economy), but this transformation is not recognized as transformation of the world. It is

invisible. In Honnethian terms, this is the failure of the sphere of solidarity: the community does not value the mother–worker’s contribution because it does not perceive reproductive work as a contribution at all. The emancipatory circuit that Hegel identifies (labor → transformation → recognition → self-consciousness) is broken at its second link: the labor occurs, the transformation occurs, but recognition does not follow. The distinction between *Bestimmung* and *Bestimmtheit* captures this split: the mother–worker has a *Bestimmung* (normative determination as a subject of equal labor rights) that the state recognizes abstractly through Law 50 of 1990, but her *Bestimmtheit* (concrete determinacy by material conditions) contradicts that determination at every moment of her daily life.

Women’s organizations accumulated during this period two decades of progressive political articulation. From the First National Conference on Women’s Work in 1970, demands shifted from specific claims (wage equality, workplace nurseries) to structural challenges to the gender order that would find constitutional echo in 1991. Luna (2004) and Wills Obregón (2007) documented how this articulation produced the intellectual and organizational critical mass that made possible the inclusion of gender in the new Constitution.

In Honnethian terms, this figure exhibits recognition in the sphere of rights (formal equality before labor law) without recognition in the sphere of solidarity (reproductive work remains invisible) and with deterioration in the sphere of love (the double shift erodes affective bonds). The state produces negative freedom (absence of legal discrimination) but neither reflexive freedom nor social freedom (Honneth 2014). Esping-Andersen (1990, 2009) provides a complementary metric: the concept of defamilialization. While Nordic social–democratic regimes exceeded 70% defamilialization, Colombia in 1990 did not reach 15%. The macroeconomic context of the 1980s Latin American debt crisis and International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programs intensified the precariousness of female employment, meaning the abstract recognition of the right to work coexisted with the concrete degradation of the conditions under which that work was exercised. In sum, the second figure grants recognition in the sphere of rights through formal labor equality while withholding it in the spheres of solidarity and love; the mother–worker is recognized as a worker in the abstract precisely by leaving her reproductive labor unnamed.

3.3. *The Differentiated Rights-Bearing Subject: Mediation Without Synthesis (1991–2010)*

The 1991 Political Constitution produces an epistemological rupture in the formal recognition of the mother–worker position. For the first time in Colombian constitutional history, the state explicitly names women as subjects of differentiated rights. Article 43 establishes:

Women shall not be subjected to any form of discrimination. During pregnancy and after delivery, they shall receive special assistance and protection from the state, and shall receive a food subsidy from the state if they are then unemployed or destitute (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1991, art. 43).

Article 42 defines the family as the fundamental nucleus of society, guaranteeing its integral protection. Article 50 establishes the right of every child under one year of age to receive free care in health institutions receiving state funds. Puyana (2003) documented that these juridical transformations precede by decades the cultural transformations in the conception of motherhood and fatherhood in Colombia.

The Constitutional Court became the principal executor of juridical mediation. Ruling C-470/1997 (Colombian Constitutional Court 1997) declared that statutory compensation for dismissing a pregnant worker was an insufficient protection mechanism, establishing for the first time that constitutional protection required the inefficacy of the dismissal itself. Ruling T-873/2005 established that the dismissal of a pregnant worker is

presumed discriminatory and that the burden of proof falls on the employer. The Court was categorical:

Neither of the two rights enunciated may be sacrificed by the employer's unilateral will in such terms that the woman is exposed to a forced choice between her work opportunities and her natural expectation regarding motherhood (Constitutional Court, Ruling T-873, [Colombian Constitutional Court 2005](#)).

Ruling C-355/2006 ([Colombian Constitutional Court 2006](#)) decriminalized abortion in three circumstances. Ruling SU-070/2013 ([Colombian Constitutional Court 2013](#)) unified protection rules across all contractual modalities, establishing that maternity protection applies to all workers regardless of the type of labor relationship. Ruling C-577/2011 ([Colombian Constitutional Court 2011](#)) expanded the concept of family beyond the heterosexual nuclear structure. Ruling C-005/2017 ([Colombian Constitutional Court 2017](#)) extended protection to the spouse or partner of a pregnant woman lacking an employment relationship.

Law 755 of 2002 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2002](#)) illustrates the logic of mediation without synthesis. Extending maternity leave to 14 weeks represented undeniable nominal advance. However, only 42% of female workers were affiliated with the contributory social security system ([DANE 2019](#)), meaning the majority was excluded from the legislative benefit. The jurisprudential density of the period is revealing: between 1991 and 2011, the Constitutional Court issued at least 22 rulings directly related to the protection of pregnant workers; the eleven with the most decisive structural effects constitute the corpus analyzed in depth here. The jurisprudential productivity suggests the Court operated as an institutional compensator for what the ordinary legislature did not produce due to political resistance. However, jurisprudential compensation has a structural limit: rulings protect individual rights case by case but do not transform the economic structures that produce the contradiction. Law 1257 of 2008 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2008](#)) defined violence against women as a public health problem, and Law 1098 of 2006 ([Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2006](#)), the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, expanded the perimeter of juridical recognition without altering the structure of the contradiction.

The period's indicators reveal ambiguous progress. Female labor participation grew 6 percentage points in two decades ([DANE 2019](#)), undeniable advance but insufficient to close the gap with male participation, which remained 11 points above. The gender wage gap oscillated between 18 and 22%. Female labor informality exceeded half the workforce. Unpaid domestic work was measured for the first time in the 2012–2013 National Time Use Survey, revealing that women devoted double the time that men did to unpaid care activities ([DANE 2017](#)). Statistical visibility did not produce redistribution.

This third figure is, in Hegelian terms, the unhappy consciousness (*unglückliches Bewusstsein*): the mother-worker knows she has constitutional rights and knows she cannot fully exercise them. The consciousness of the split is not a sufficient condition for its overcoming. In the Phenomenology, the unhappy consciousness is defined by a specific structure: it possesses both terms of the contradiction (the unchangeable, which it cannot reach, and the changeable, which it cannot transcend) and oscillates between them without synthesis ([Hegel \[1807\] 2010](#), chap. IV). The Colombian mother-worker after 1991 inhabits this structure with precision: the unchangeable is the constitutional text (Article 43, the rulings, the rights that exist as juridical abstraction), and the changeable is her daily material reality (the double shift, the informal contract, the absent care infrastructure). She knows both. She can change neither. The consciousness of the gap is not empowering but paralyzing, because the gap is sustained by the very institutions that were supposed to close it. Honneth's moral grammar of social conflicts is deactivated: the mother-worker cannot articulate her grievance as disrespect because the state formally recognizes her. The state produces reflexive freedom ([Honneth 2014](#)) but not social freedom. [Balibar \(2013\)](#)

allows naming this distance: the gap between formal equality and real freedom is the distance between the text of Article 43 and the material conditions of the majority of mother-workers, excluded from the contributory system and confined in informality.

Viveros Vigoya (2016) adds a dimension that complexifies the Honnethian diagnosis: intersectionality. The mother-worker position is not homogeneous. The Afro-Colombian woman from Chocó, the peasant woman from Cauca, the indigenous woman from Guainía, and the professional woman from Bogotá experience the contradiction in radically different ways. The 1991 Constitution recognizes all of them as subjects of differentiated rights, but the material conditions for exercising those rights vary so greatly that universal juridical recognition conceals internal inequalities that Honneth's theory, conceived in universal subject categories, is not equipped to capture. The fragmentation between spheres is multiplied by the fragmentation between social positions of class, race, and territory.

The exhaustion of this figure is produced, as in the previous ones, by internal contradiction. The period's legislative and jurisprudential sophistication generated an expectation of rights that material reality did not satisfy. The gap between juridical recognition and the concrete living conditions of Colombian mother-workers became so visible that the state was compelled to shift from juridical mediation to explicit administration of the contradiction. The Care Economy Satellite Account, created by Law 1413 of 2010, marks the transition: the state no longer mediates between rights and reality but measures the distance between the two and incorporates it as governance data.

3.4. *The Administered Contradiction: Recognition as Governance (2010–2025)*

The fourth figure constitutes the most sophisticated configuration of the administered contradiction: selective, cumulative, and structurally functional. Law 1468 of 2011 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2011) extended maternity leave to 14 weeks, Law 1822 of 2017 extended it to 18, Law 1413 of 2010 created the Care Economy Satellite Account, Ruling C-374/2023 (Colombian Constitutional Court 2023a) decriminalized abortion up to week 24, Law 2126 of 2023 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2023a) established a retirement mechanism for homemakers, and Law 2281 of 2023 (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2023b) created the National Care System (Sistema Nacional de Cuidados) and the Ministry of Equality and Equity. The DANE's Care Economy Satellite Account valued unpaid domestic and care work at 21.7% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 (ILO 2024), a figure that exceeds the contribution of mining, agriculture, or construction to the national economy. The state now quantifies the problem with precision. It does not resolve it.

Ruling SU-075/2018 (Colombian Constitutional Court 2018) reveals that recognition is not even linear within the juridical sphere itself. The Court modified the rules established in SU-070/2013 and determined that when the employer is unaware of the worker's pregnancy, no discrimination is configured and reinforced labor stability protection does not apply. In Hegelian terms, *Aufhebung* operates in reverse: sublation does not preserve what it negates but negates what it had preserved. The standard Hegelian movement is negation that conserves (the new figure sublates the old, cancelling it while retaining its content at a higher level). Here the movement is conservation that negates: the juridical sphere maintains its formal structure (the right to reinforced stability nominally exists) while emptying it of protective content (the right does not apply when the employer claims ignorance). The result is what might be called hollow recognition: the norm persists as text while its operative force is withdrawn. In Honnethian terms, the sphere of rights retracts internally, demonstrating that fragmentation between spheres is not only inter-spheric but intra-spheric. Recognition can fragment within the very sphere that produces it.

More recent jurisprudence deepens this pattern. Ruling C-507/2023 (Colombian Constitutional Court 2023b) extended the reduced work week (Law 2101 of 2021, Congress

of the Republic of Colombia 2021) to domestic workers, recognizing their right to rest and disconnection, but without addressing the structural informality that prevents the majority from accessing the benefit. Ruling T-447/2023 (Colombian Constitutional Court 2023c) recognized care as a fundamental right, a landmark conceptual advance that, however, lacks the institutional architecture for its effective guarantee. Ruling T-520/2024 (Colombian Constitutional Court 2024) established that food obligations between former partners must account for the unpaid domestic and care work performed predominantly by women, explicitly recognizing that the economic value of care work must be computed in separation proceedings. Each ruling extends recognition in the juridical sphere while the material conditions that produce the contradiction remain structurally intact.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023) functioned as a natural experiment revealing the radical fragility of fragmented administration. Female labor participation fell from 50.2% to 46.1% in 2020, the first substantial decline in three decades of systematic data (DANE 2023). Recovery was asymmetric: while male participation returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2021, female participation did not reach 2019 levels until 2023, confirming what the ILO (2021) termed gender-biased recovery. Meertens (2000) had anticipated this mechanism: when a crisis destroys community care networks, the entirety of reproductive burden falls on individual women. The pandemic replicated at national scale what the armed conflict had produced regionally for decades.

Law 2126 of 2023 represents the culmination of the logic of recognition without emancipation. The state formally recognized that unpaid domestic work constitutes economic activity deserving social protection. However, the mechanism established a voluntary savings system without employer contribution, without significant state contribution, and without linkage to the minimum wage. The state says: your work is work. And it adds: but we will not pay you for it.

An emergent dimension deserves specific attention: the privatization of the contradiction through the discourse of female entrepreneurship. Programs such as Mujer Rural Emprendedora, Bancoldex credit lines for women, and gender-focused business incubators effect a decisive displacement: the state no longer presents itself as mediator of the contradiction but as facilitator of its individual resolution. In Hegelian terms, the state operates simultaneously as beautiful soul (*die schöne Seele*) that recognizes injustice but refuses to act transformatively, and as cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*) that produces legislation appearing as progress but serving the reproduction of the system. In Honneth's (2012) terms, this is ideological recognition in its purest form and the paradox of capitalist modernization (Honneth 2004) brought to its most finished expression: the normative achievement (recognition of the mother-worker as entrepreneur, as autonomous agent, as rights-bearing subject) is converted into its opposite (self-exploitation, exhaustion, demographic withdrawal). The subjective dimension of this privatization, the burnout that Han (2012, 2017) diagnoses as the somatic correlate of the achievement society, is examined in the discussion.

The figures at the close of 2025 confirm the structural persistence of the administered contradiction with updated precision. Female unemployment closed 2025 at 10.1% versus 6.4% for men, a gap of 3.7 percentage points (DANE 2025). Female labor participation reached 53.7% versus male participation of 76.6%, a gap of 22.9 percentage points (DANE 2025). The gender wage gap, disaggregated by the DANE's (2022) salary report, reveals its differential structure: 6.3% on average, but 28% in informal employment versus 5.2% in formal employment, and 28.4% in rural areas versus 11% in urban areas (DANE 2022). Among the top 5% of earners, where women represent 46% of the population, the wage gap reaches 21.9% (DIAN 2024). Women devote an average of 7 h and 44 min daily to unpaid care work versus 3 h and 6 min for men (DANE and UN Women 2024). Overall, 92.5% of women perform unpaid care

activities (DANE 2020). Female household headship is 42%. Each indicator tells the same story: growing recognition, stagnant emancipation.

The trajectory of 2010–2025 permits identifying a recurrent empirical pattern. Each reform follows an identical sequence: media visibility of the problem, legislative response that expands formal recognition, deficient implementation that excludes the informal majority, and stabilization of the contradiction at a new level of normative sophistication. The cycle repeats with each new legislature, each new ruling, each new government. Across the four figures, then, the same pattern recurs: each advance in juridical recognition is at once real, partial, and structurally contained, so that the cumulative effect is not emancipation but an increasingly sophisticated administration of the contradiction.

4. Discussion

The trajectory of the four figures of consciousness allows answering the question that organizes this article. Recognition and emancipation are not poles of a dilemma resolvable through progressive legislation but terms of a dialectic that the peripheral capitalist state maintains in permanent tension. Recognition does not lead to emancipation. It substitutes for it.

Before the implications of this trajectory are developed, a qualification is in order. To argue that recognition operates against emancipation is not to deny that specific reforms produced real gains. The decriminalization of abortion (C-355/2006; C-374/2023), the reversal of the burden of proof in cases of pregnancy-related dismissal (T-873/2005), the statistical visibilization of unpaid care work (Law 1413 of 2010, *Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2010*), and the extension of maternity leave from fourteen to eighteen weeks (Law 1822 of 2017, *Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2017*) altered, in concrete and non-trivial ways, the conditions of particular women. The claim advanced here is narrower, and for that reason more precise: these gains remain confined to the juridical sphere and, in the absence of redistributive mechanisms that would extend them to the informal majority, they stabilize the contradiction rather than resolving it. The problem is not the absence of progress but its structural ceiling. To recognize this does not weaken the diagnosis; it specifies the level at which it operates, distinguishing an argument about the limits of recognition without redistribution from a wholesale denial of advance.

The first dimension of this substitution is the cumulative illusion. Each legislative reform produces the impression that the state advances toward the mother-worker's emancipation. The nominal trajectory is unequivocally progressive. However, the phenomenological reading reveals that each expansion of juridical recognition deepens the split between Honnethian spheres rather than closing it. The more sophisticated recognition in the sphere of rights becomes, the more evident the absence of recognition in the spheres of love and solidarity.

The second dimension is fragmentation among women. Juridical recognition operates as a mechanism of social differentiation, not universalization. Laws protect formal workers affiliated with the contributory system, with written contracts, in companies that comply with regulations. This population is a minority. The majority, confined in informality, falls outside the perimeter of protection. The state produces two categories of mother-worker: the recognized and the invisible.

The third dimension concerns Honneth's recognition theory directly. The Colombian case reveals that the theory has an unexplicated presupposition: that juridical recognition generates normative pressure on the spheres of love and solidarity to adjust progressively. This presupposition works in the social-democratic democracies where it was conceived because institutional redistribution mechanisms exist there. In Colombian peripheral capitalism, those mechanisms do not exist or are deliberately weak. Juridical recognition

functions as an escape valve: it satisfies the symbolic demand for equality without requiring material redistribution. Honneth (2012) recognized this possibility when theorizing ideological recognition but did not integrate it as a structural limit of his theory.

The fourth dimension points to the political implications. If the dialectic between recognition and emancipation is a constitutive contradiction of peripheral capitalism, then incremental reform strategies are part of the problem, not the solution. The sexual contract that Pateman (1988) identified as the silenced foundation of the modern social contract has not been rescinded by the Colombian state. It has been constitutionalized.

The fifth dimension points to the function of international comparison in legitimizing administration without synthesis. Colombia ratifies international conventions, appears in global gender equality rankings with intermediate positions, and presents a formally impressive legislative portfolio before multilateral organizations. Everything the state declares before the international community is true. And everything is insufficient. Rancière (1996) provides an indispensable precision: politics is not only distribution of resources but distribution of the sensible. The informal Colombian mother-worker does not appear in the international statistics with which Colombia renders accounts.

Finally, the diagnosis permits a reflection on the temporality of recognition in peripheral capitalism. Honneth conceives struggles for recognition as processes with directionality: each struggle won raises society's normative floor. The Colombian case suggests the opposite: time works in favor of administration, not recognition. Each decade produces more sophisticated legislation and a more pronounced distance between formal recognition and material conditions. Recognition does not accumulate. It is administered. What remains to be explored is how this administered temporality is experienced by the subjects who bear it: what happens to the body and the psyche of the mother-worker who inhabits a contradiction that the state recognizes, measures, legislates, and perpetuates.

Biopolitics, Burnout, and Demographic Withdrawal

The administered contradiction analyzed in the preceding sections has a dimension that juridical and economic analysis alone cannot capture: it operates upon and through the reproductive body. Foucault (1976) established that modern power does not merely discipline individual bodies (anatomopolitics) but governs populations through the regulation of birth, mortality, health, and reproduction (biopolitics). The Colombian state's relationship with the mother-worker is biopolitical in this precise sense: it governs the reproductive body through an institutional apparatus that simultaneously demands reproduction (pronatalist discourse, family as constitutional nucleus, ICBF as protector of childhood) and fails to provide the material conditions under which reproduction is sustainable. The creation of Profamilia in 1965 constitutes the founding biopolitical intervention: a private institution, not a state agency, introduced contraception against ecclesiastical resistance, thereby transferring reproductive governance from the Church to the biomedical apparatus. The subsequent medicalization of pregnancy (mandatory prenatal controls, institutional delivery protocols, neonatal screening programs) extended the biopolitical perimeter: the state does not merely recognize the mother-worker as a rights-bearing subject but regulates the biological process through which motherhood occurs. The reproductive body is simultaneously the object of juridical recognition (Article 43, maternity leave, reinforced labor stability) and the object of biomedical governance (prenatal protocols, institutional delivery, postpartum monitoring). The split between Honnethian spheres is thus inscribed in the body itself: the same body that the sphere of rights protects is the body that the sphere of love fails to sustain and the sphere of solidarity refuses to value.

The biopolitical reading reveals a contradiction that the juridical reading alone cannot formulate. Colombia's maternal mortality ratio, despite decades of institutional intervention, remains at 44.5 per 100,000 live births (DANE 2024), more than double the rate of Chile and four times that of Uruguay. Adolescent pregnancy, concentrated in departments with the highest poverty indices (Guainía, Vaupés, Chocó), reaches rates above 20% (Profamilia 2010), meaning that the bodies most intensely governed by biopolitical discourse are the bodies least effectively protected by it. The state governs reproduction through the biomedical apparatus but does not govern the socioeconomic conditions that determine whether the reproductive body survives. In Foucauldian terms, the Colombian state exercises biopower without biowelfare: it regulates the biological process of reproduction without guaranteeing the conditions under which that process does not destroy the subject who undergoes it. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this biopolitical fracture: contraceptive access collapsed, prenatal controls were interrupted in rural areas, and the reproductive body was abandoned precisely when the entire burden of care was privatized into the domestic sphere (ILO 2021).

This biopolitical stratum is the precondition for understanding what Han (2012, 2017) diagnoses at the level of the subject. The mother-worker whose body has been governed, medicalized, monitored, and simultaneously abandoned is the subject who internalizes the contradiction as exhaustion.

Han's (2012, 2017) diagnosis of the burnout society (*Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*) provides the missing phenomenological link between the macro-level diagnosis (state administration of contradiction) and the micro-level experience (individual exhaustion). The six dimensions of substitution identified above, the cumulative illusion, fragmentation among women, the structural limit of Honneth's theory, the political implications, the international legitimation function, and the regressive temporality, converge in the lived experience of the mother-worker as burnout. She is the subject who has been told she is free, who has been recognized as equal, who has been offered entrepreneurial credit lines and constitutional protection and 18 weeks of maternity leave, and who nevertheless collapses under the weight of a contradiction that no amount of recognition resolves. The burnout society is not a fifth figure of consciousness but the subjective correlate of the fourth: the form in which the administered contradiction is experienced by the body that bears it.

The transition from Foucault's disciplinary society (Foucault 1975) to Han's achievement society maps onto the trajectory of the four figures with structural precision. The tutelary mother of the first figure was contained by external authority (the Church, the Concordat, marital tutelage): she was disciplined, in the Foucauldian sense, by a power that said 'you must not.' The self-entrepreneur of the fourth figure exploits herself in the name of a freedom that the state's recognition discourse has conferred upon her: she is governed by a power that says 'you can.' As Han demonstrates in *Psychopolitics* (2017), neoliberalism does not operate through repression but through seduction: it exploits freedom itself, transforming every life sphere into a field of performance and self-optimization. The mother-worker who manages household, children, paid employment, and an entrepreneurial side project does not experience her situation as oppression but as personal challenge. The burnout (*Erschöpfung*) is not individual pathology but the somatic register of administered contradiction: the body that collapses under the weight of a *Bestimmung* (you are free, you are equal, you can) that its *Bestimmtheit* (double shift, wage gap, informal employment, absent care infrastructure) renders materially impossible. The grammatical subject shifts: she does not say 'the state oppresses me' but 'I cannot manage,' and in that shift from structural diagnosis to self-blame, the possibility of collective indignation, which Honneth's moral grammar requires, dissolves into individual exhaustion.

The intersectionality that Viveros Vigoya (2016) demands is essential to grasp the differential intensity of this exhaustion. For the rural Colombian woman, where female labor informality reaches 83.9% (DANE 2024) and care infrastructure is virtually nonexistent, burnout is not metaphor but material reality compounded by territorial abandonment. For the 4.5 million women registered as victims of the armed conflict in the *Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV)* (2024), the destruction of community care networks documented by Meertens (2000) means that self-exploitation operates not upon a subject who freely enters the labor market but upon one who has been expelled from her territory, stripped of her support structures, and inserted into urban informality without any of the protections that the juridical sphere nominally guarantees. The burnout society is not experienced uniformly: it is stratified by class, race, territory, and victimization, and the same state that recognizes the mother–worker in Bogotá’s Constitutional Court is the state that fails to register her existence in rural Chocó.

The most devastating empirical expression of this exhaustion is demographic. Colombia’s total fertility rate has collapsed from 7 children per woman in 1960 to a historic minimum of 1.2 in 2023, well below the 2.1 replacement level (DANE 2024). Bogotá registered 0.9 children per woman. Between 2020 and 2024, 800,000 fewer children were born than projected. In 2024, births fell 14.4% relative to 2023, the steepest decline since vital statistics measurement began in 1998 (DANE 2024). The fertility decline is, of course, a global phenomenon: South Korea registers 0.7, Spain 1.2, Italy 1.2. The Colombian case is analytically distinct not because it declines but because of the structure and acceleration of the decline. The post-COVID collapse is not gradual modernization but abrupt rupture, and its differential distribution (steeper in rural departments like Guainía at −40.7% and Vaupés at −20%, where the administered contradiction is most acute) reveals that in Colombia the demographic response is not merely a modernization effect but a reaction to the specific form of burnout produced by recognition without emancipation.

Two interpretive caveats frame this reading. The fertility decline is a global phenomenon, and no single-country analysis can isolate the dialectic described here as its cause; the claim advanced is interpretive rather than causal. Within those limits, however, fertility functions as a particularly legible indicator of the exhaustion of the contradiction, registering at the level of the population the point at which the simultaneous demand to produce and to reproduce ceases to be sustainable. So understood, the decline can be read less as a failure of individual women than as an intelligible response to a structural impasse: the rational decision of subjects who, offered recognition without the material conditions that would render reproduction viable, withdraw from one of the contradiction’s terms. It is in this sense, and not as a demonstrated causal effect, that the fertility trajectory marks a limit of recognition policies, since no expansion of formal recognition has reversed it; what the decline expresses is precisely the distance between recognition and redistribution.

This demographic withdrawal constitutes the negation that the state cannot administer. The state can administer the contradiction between motherhood and work through partial recognition: more weeks of maternity leave, more constitutional rulings, more satellite accounts. But it cannot administer the decision not to become a mother. The burnout society produces a form of resistance that is not political mobilization (which the state can co-opt through participatory mechanisms) nor juridical demand (which the state can satisfy through recognition without redistribution) but demographic refusal (which no legislation can reverse). In Hegelian terms, the cunning of reason operates here against the state itself: the very recognition that was designed to stabilize the mother–worker contradiction has produced the conditions for the elimination of one of its terms. The mother–worker is being resolved not by synthesis but by subtraction: if the contradiction between motherhood and work is irresolvable, the subject resolves it by removing motherhood from the

equation. From the tutelary mother who was denied autonomy to the woman who denies motherhood, the dialectic between recognition and emancipation completes its arc with a conclusion the state did not anticipate: the subject has been recognized into exhaustion, and her exhaustion has become demographically legible.

5. Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that Colombian public policy directed at the mother-worker between 1960 and 2025 constitutes a dialectic of recognition that operates against effective emancipation. Four figures of state consciousness, read through Hegel, Honneth, and Han, confirm that each expansion of juridical recognition deepens the split between spheres rather than closing it. The peripheral capitalist state does not fail to emancipate. It succeeds in administering.

The implications transcend the Colombian case. Honneth's recognition theory requires revision of its central presupposition: that juridical recognition generates progressive normative pressure on the spheres of love and solidarity. In the absence of effective redistribution mechanisms, recognition stabilizes inequality rather than overcoming it. More strongly put, the Colombian case suggests that recognition may not merely fail to produce emancipation under certain conditions; it may contribute to the stabilization of existing asymmetries where institutional arrangements permit juridical inclusion without material transformation, a structural limit that Honneth's own category of ideological recognition anticipates but does not fully develop. Han's burnout society reveals the subjective correlate of this structural diagnosis: the achievement-subject who self-exploits in the name of the freedom that recognition discourse has conferred upon her. Future research should examine whether the dialectic between recognition and emancipation operates with analogous structure in other peripheral capitalist contexts (Brazil, Mexico, South Africa) and whether the demographic withdrawal identified here constitutes a generalizable response to the burnout society across the Global South.

These findings carry implications across several fields. For recognition theory, they identify a boundary condition under which juridical recognition ceases to exert progressive pressure on the spheres of love and solidarity and instead stabilizes their fragmentation. For feminist scholarship, they suggest that the expansion of women's formal rights, when decoupled from redistribution, can function as a mechanism of differentiation among women rather than of collective emancipation. For socio-legal studies, the Colombian sequence illustrates how constitutional and jurisprudential density may compensate symbolically for what redistributive policy does not deliver. For social policy, the analysis indicates that incentive-based reforms addressed to the individual mother-worker are unlikely to reverse a contradiction that is structural in origin. These contributions should be read alongside the study's limitations. The argument rests on documentary and interpretive reconstruction rather than causal inference; it does not draw on primary data regarding the lived experience of burnout, and future research could complement this macro-level diagnosis with qualitative work; the periodization is an interpretive proposal that other theoretical frameworks would configure differently; intersectionality, although incorporated through [Viveros Vigoya \(2016\)](#) and operationalized through rural and conflict-victim data, is not developed into a fully disaggregated analysis by region, ethnicity, and class; and the national focus leaves subnational variation in implementation, a likely site of significant divergence between juridical recognition and its material effects, for subsequent study.

Colombia's fertility collapse to 1.2 children per woman in 2023, the lowest in its history and well below replacement level, may be read as an indication that the dialectic between recognition and emancipation has reached a threshold that no previous figure of consciousness anticipated. The mother-worker, exhausted by a contradiction that

six decades of legislation have recognized without resolving, is resolving it herself: by withdrawing from reproduction. This demographic response is not a policy failure to be corrected by new incentives. It is the most eloquent verdict that the bodies of Colombian women have delivered upon a state that learned to recognize without emancipating.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M.C.G. and A.P.y.S.D.; methodology, A.P.y.S.D.; formal analysis, A.P.y.S.D.; investigation, M.M.C.G. and D.E.H.P.; data curation, D.E.H.P.; writing—original draft preparation, M.M.C.G. and A.P.y.S.D.; writing—review and editing, M.M.C.G., A.P.y.S.D. and D.E.H.P.; supervision, A.P.y.S.D.; funding acquisition, M.M.C.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by Universidad del Quindío (100016837); Universidad de Pamplona; and Universidad Nacional de Colombia under Grant 57837.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in the public domain. All legislative texts, Constitutional Court rulings, and statistical series analyzed are publicly accessible through the official sources cited in the reference list.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude Opus 4.8 (Anthropic, 2026) for the purposes of English-language translation and editorial formatting of a manuscript originally conceived and drafted in Spanish. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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