

Promoting Registration for Domestic Workers in Post-pandemic Argentina. A Review of *Registradas*, 2021–2023

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Abstract: This article evaluates the scope and limitations of efforts to include domestic workers in the social security and protection system in Argentina, focusing on the policies targeting the sector since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly *Registradas*, a program that subsidizes the employment of domestic workers by middle-income employers. It shows that, while the politics implemented have improved social security coverage and labor conditions somewhat, three out of four workers continue to lack social protection, albeit to different degrees.

Keywords: Paid domestic work, subsidies, social security, labor conditions

Promouvoir l'enregistrement des travailleur-euse-s domestiques dans l'Argentine post-pandémique. Une analyse des *Registradas*, 2021-2023

Résumé: Cet article évalue la portée et les limites des efforts visant à inclure les travailleur-euse-s domestiques dans le système de sécurité et de protection sociales en Argentine, en se concentrant sur les politiques ciblant le secteur depuis le début de la pandémie de COVID-19. En particulier la contribution porte sur *Registradas*, un programme qui subventionne l'emploi de travailleur-euse-s domestiques par des employeur-euse-s à revenus moyens. L'étude montre que, si les politiques mises en œuvre ont quelque peu amélioré la couverture de la sécurité sociale et les conditions de travail, trois travailleurs sur quatre continuent de ne pas bénéficier d'une protection sociale, bien qu'à des degrés divers.

Mots-clés: Travail domestique rémunéré, subventions, sécurité sociale, conditions de travail

Förderung der Registrierung von Hausangestellten im postpandemischen Argentinien: eine Analyse der *Registradas*, 2021–2023

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel bewertet den Umfang und die Grenzen der Bemühungen, Hausangestellte in das Sozialversicherungs- und Schutzsystem in Argentinien einzubeziehen, und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Maßnahmen, die seit Beginn der COVID-19-Pandemie auf diesen Sektor abzielen, insbesondere Registradas, ein Programm, das die Beschäftigung von Hausangestellten subventioniert. Es zeigt sich, dass die umgesetzten Maßnahmen zwar die Sozialversicherungsabdeckung und die Arbeitsbedingungen etwas verbessert haben, drei von vier Arbeitnehmern jedoch weiterhin keinen Sozialschutz haben, wenn auch in unterschiedlichem Ausmaß.

Schlüsselwörter: Arbeitslohn, Subventionen, Sozialversicherung, Arbeitsbedingungen

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1 Introduction

As in other Latin American countries, Argentina has promoted a series of policies to improve the working conditions of domestic workers over the last two decades. Among them, the enactment of a new legal regime for the sector in 2013, which significantly expanded the labor rights of domestic workers, stands out. However, these efforts were limited by the high rates of informality. The registration of labor relations constitutes a persistent challenge in economies with high levels of informality, including Argentina. In this country, unregistered work represents around a third of the working population. However, informality rates rise to three quarters among domestic workers (*trabajadoras de casas particulares*).¹ This is highly significant because of the number of women employed in this sector: in 2022, over 1 500 000 women were employed as domestic workers (INDEC, 2022)², around 18% of the female labor force (EPH, 2023).³

This article reviews the policies implemented over the last two decades to promote domestic workers' registration, focusing on *Registradas*. This program was created in 2021 to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in this sector. *Registradas* sought to promote both employment creation in the sector and its registration. To do so, it provided state financing for up to 50% of the wages of domestic workers for six months in new, formal employment relationships. In return, employers had to commit to continuing the working relationship for at least four months after the subsidy ended. The program, which was discontinued in December 2023, was focused on middle-income employers. Those with higher incomes have already received a tax deduction to subsidize the cost of registering domestic workers since 2005.

Labor registration is one of the pillars that guarantees access to other labor rights. Thus, its promotion has been a key point in the policies towards paid domestic work. Perhaps because it was the tip of the iceberg of a continuum of precariousness faced by domestic workers, or because it was the aspect of the labor relationship in which the state had the best opportunities to intervene, different actors—from

1 “Trabajo en casas particulares” is the term adopted in Argentina both by the majority trade unions in the sector and in the legislation that regulates it to identify domestic and care work carried out in exchange for remuneration in family homes. Throughout the article, we use “paid domestic work” because it is the term most frequently used in English.

2 The 2022 National Census surveyed individuals in households across the country. The frequency of national censuses is approximately ten years. It is a comprehensive description of the whole population, although with limited depth. The main source for the study of the labor market dynamics is the Permanent Household Survey (EPH, for its Spanish acronym). The EPH is a quarterly survey, carried out from a sample of 31 urban agglomerates of more than 100 000 inhabitants distributed in all the provinces of the country. The data in this article take the second quarter of each year as a reference, except for those that mention data for the year 2024, for which the second quarter is not yet available. The choice of the second quarter is linked to the seasonality of economic activity, which over time shows the most stable behavior in this period and is therefore more suitable for year-on-year comparisons.

3 71% of the domestic workers in Argentina mainly perform domestic tasks—cleaning, cooking, washing, etc.—; the main activity for 26% of them is caring; and the remaining 3% perform other activities (EPH, 2023).

trade unions to international organizations and various state agencies—converged around the need to register labor relations not as a floor but as a ceiling for the recognition of rights. In this sense, the focus on registration implied neglecting other key elements in the improvement of working conditions in the sector, such as the intensity of working hours and wage levels.

Different studies have linked the persistence of informality to different elements, such as the presence of migrants; the nature of the tasks performed which involve a strong level of physical or emotional proximity between the worker and the employers; the development of policies centered on an androcentric model of labor unsuitable to the dynamics of paid domestic work; the difficulty for state agents to supervise domestic workers' workplace, both because of its atomization and because of its private nature (Blackett, 2020; Casanova, 2019; Guarnizo & Rodríguez, 2017; Pla-Julian, 2014; for Argentina, Cutuli, 2021; Esquivel & Pereyra, 2017; Gorbán & Tizziani, 2018; Pereyra & Poblete, 2024; Poblete, 2022;). Research has addressed both the strategies deployed by workers to demand registration and the effects of the introduction of new actors in domestic labor relations, such as agencies, digital platforms, and cooperatives, although in all cases they have shown ambivalent results (Andrade Matias & Araujo, 2020; Fragale Filho & dos Santos Lima, 2024; Komposch et al., 2021; Mousaid et al., 2017; Posso Quiceno et al., 2024; Raz-Yurovich & Marx, 2018; Safuta & Camargo, 2019; Triandafylidou & Marchetti, 2016; Tsikata, 2011; for Argentina, Baiocchi, 2019, Freytes Frey et al., 2019; Hopp & Kasparian, 2021; Poblete et al., 2024).

As shown in other cases (Tomei, 2011), one of the most effective strategies to increase registration levels has been to subsidize employers through tax exemptions. In Argentina, since 2005, employers have had the possibility of deducting domestic workers' wages and contributions from income tax payments. This policy focused on higher-income employers, and though it contributed to reducing the informality rates considerably, it has seemed to have stagnated at around 25% of the employment relationships in the sector. In 2021, *Registradas* took up this strategy, but extended it to middle-income employers, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article asks about the impact of *Registradas* and shows that, although it favored the creation of registered jobs, it was less effective than existing subsidies for high-income employers. Throughout the article, we argue that it faced three limitations: firstly, an imprecise characterization of the universe of employers potentially eligible as beneficiaries; secondly, its transience; and finally, its inability to guarantee social security⁴ to workers employed for less than 16 hours per week, which represent a majority in the sector of paid domestic work.

4 Employer contributions to the social security system allow workers to access health care, through health insurance provided by unions; pensions, unemployment insurance, and maternity leave, among other protections; and occupational risk insurance, which covers health and salary expenses in the event of occupational accidents or illnesses, in the event of sick leave. To have access to the protections, workers need contributions equivalent to a labor relation of a minimum of 16 weekly working hours. For those with shorter working hours, they only access occupational risk insurance.

After this introduction, the article is organized in three sections. First, we outline a brief reconstruction of the history of the regulations of paid domestic work in Argentina. Next, we situate the creation of *Registradas* within the framework of the labor policies implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we analyze the scope and limitations of this program in promoting employment creation and registration in the sector. The article is based on the analysis of two sets of data sources: key informant interviews and public statistics. The corpus of interviews allows us to identify the divergences and confluences in the construction of the consensus necessary for the design of public policies.⁵ We recovered the perspective of national civil servants, trade union representatives, and non-governmental organizations involved in the configuration of policies towards the sector. Through our second group of sources, public statistics, we present evidence of the difficulties in characterizing the current dynamics in the sector, reproduced in the design of *Registradas*. The EPH provides information that enables us to describe the evolution of paid domestic work, regarding the registration rate, the sociodemographic characteristics of the workers, the number of working hours, and the main activity performed. It is the only source of information that allows a statistical approach to the sector, including unregistered work. The evolution of registered labor is observed through the public statistics of the Superintendence of Labor Risks (SRT for its Spanish acronym), that make it possible to identify the status of compliance with employers' contributions to the social security system.⁶ Information on the incidence of the income tax deduction and *Registradas* on labor registration in the sector is not part of the public statistical corpus. To elaborate the analysis presented in this article, we requested information from the Federal Administration of Public Revenues (AFIP for its Spanish acronym) and to the Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Security.⁷ We also used statistical reports published by different state agencies.

5 We conducted a total of 14 interviews between July and September 2022. We decided to quote only those that were particularly relevant to the arguments we developed through the article.

6 The SRT is the agency that supervises the labor risk insurance system, mandatory since 1995 and regulated by Law 24.557. In its statistical section there is an abundant corpus of data that enables an approach to some characteristics of the formal labor market, though it does not provide information on the informal sector. Registered paid domestic work relations have been covered by the occupational risk insurance system since 2014. All statistics from this source cited in this article have been extracted from: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/srt/estadisticas>.

7 AFIP is an autarchic entity that regulates the administration of the tax, customs, and social security resources system. It provided us information on the deduction of contributions and salaries made by employers of domestic workers. The Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Welfare—with the rank of ministry until December 2023—oversaw the implementation of *Registradas*. It provided us information on the program (number of benefits requested, approved, and active month by month during the term of the program, tasks performed by the workers hired under the program, working hours and salaries).

2 Domestic Work in Argentina over the Last Two Decades

During the 20th century, domestic workers were excluded and segregated from labor law (Pérez et al., 2018). In the first half of the century, labor rights recognized to all workers systematically omitted them. Decree-Law 326, sanctioned in 1956, opened the doors of labor law to the sector, with marked differences with respect to the legal status of workers situated in a local version of the “wage-earner’s statute” (Castel, 2003). This legislation was designed to regulate labor relations of at least 16 hours per week, at a time when full-time work and the “live-in” modality—colloquially called “cama adentro”—were still common in the sector. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the regulations proved incapable of regulating a significant number of labor relations within the sector. Due to changes in both supply and demand in this labor market, hourly work was becoming more frequent and was no longer protected by law. It should be noted, however, that during this half-century unregistered work was the constant condition for almost all domestic workers.

The domestic labor market has changed considerably since the late 20th century in terms of the composition of both supply and demand, and also in terms of the laws that regulate it. Demand has been transformed by the growing participation of middle- and high-income women in the labor market. With women pursuing longer careers and in a context in which the social organization of care is still family-oriented and feminized, hiring paid staff was a way to decompress the “stalled revolution” (Hochschild, 1989; Wainerman, 2005). Supply has also shifted. In Argentina, households became increasingly impoverished during the debt crisis of the 1980s and the austerity policies of the 1990s, coupled with the deterioration of working conditions and the purchasing power of wages. These factors conspired to push large numbers of women into the labor market under precarious conditions, a tendency that continued in the two first decades of the 21st century. The work most readily available to them was performing the same tasks they had historically done within their homes but for a (low) wage.

In 2013, following the approval of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 189, Argentina enacted Law 26.844, which expanded the rights of domestic workers in two ways: by covering more workers and recognizing more rights. While the previous legislation only covered those who worked for at least four hours a day, four days a week for the same employer, the applicability of the new legislation is not limited by a minimum number of days or hours worked. It also extended the rights enshrined in the Labor Contract Law for all private sector workers to include domestic workers for the first time. These include maternity and paternity leave, occupational risk insurance, and leaves of absence following the death of a spouse or to sit academic exams. Other rights that were previously limited, such as leave and severance pay, were brought in line with the Labor Con-

tract Law.⁸ A fundamental right that was recognized was the inclusion of domestic workers in the protection provided by the Occupational Risks Act. Another major legal advance that resulted from the law was the creation of the National Commission of Work in Private Homes (*Comisión Nacional de Trabajo para el Personal de Casas Particulares*, CNTCP), made up of representatives from worker and employer organizations and the state. The CNTCP began to operate in 2015, and its functions include establishing a minimum wage for the sector, thus empowering unions (Pereyra, 2017; Pérez et al., 2018).

However, in practice, these rights have only become a reality for a limited number of workers due to the high levels of informal employment in the sector. In 2018, access to labor rights among informally employed domestic workers was extremely limited: only 18.8% received the one-month bonus that workers in Argentina are legally entitled to receive, only 9.4% had social security, 13.9% had paid leave, and 16.4% had paid sick days (MTEySS, 2020). In this scenario, different social actors agreed on the lack of registration as the main problem to be addressed to improve the working conditions of domestic workers. Elva López Mourelo, the ILO representative in Argentina, pointed out that informal workers' rights tend to be "flexible" because of the "discretionality [that drifts from] maintaining the relationship unregistered". In her view, the "compliance with a series of formalities" involved in domestic workers' registration entails the payment of contributions, vacations, Christmas bonuses, holidays, etc.⁹ Likewise, members of the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MTEySS, for its Spanish acronym) indicated that "the increase in registration levels will improve labor conditions and collective bargaining".¹⁰ In a similar vein, representatives of the Argentinean Union of Housewives (SACRA, for its Spanish acronym)¹¹, who represent the employers in the CNTP, pointed out that registration boosts "labor rights [and tend to ameliorate] hiring conditions".¹²

In this sense, most of the policies aimed at the sector have focused on registration. Since 2005, labor registration has been promoted through tax benefits for employers: social security contributions and wages were made tax-deductible for high-income employers up to the annual equivalent of the bottom threshold for income tax.¹³ Although tax deduction succeeded in expanding the share of domestic workers in formal employment, it reached its highest pre-COVID level in 2016, when

8 Law 26.844 also governs the working hours of live-out domestic workers, which are limited to 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week. The situation is different for live-in staff, whose working day remains the same as in Decree-Law 326/56 – 12 hours per day. However, their weekly time off was increased from 24 to 35 hours.

9 Interview with Elva López Mourelo, performed by the authors, August 25, 2022.

10 Interview with Mariana Álvarez y Julieta Solano Varela, conducted by the authors, August 19, 2022.

11 SACRA is an organization that brings together housewives. Although it presents itself ambiguously as a union, it represents employers in the negotiation of domestic workers' salary levels at the National Commission of Domestic Work.

12 Interview with Mariana Núñez, Guadalupe Ramírez Cellerino, Amalia Miranda, María Stella, Colombo, Pimpi conducted by the authors, September 10, 2022.

13 Income tax is tax on both salaried and self-employed workers' wages, and the minimum threshold is updated periodically.

27% of the domestic workers were formally employed. Formal employment was also promoted through monitoring mechanisms, such as inspections in gated communities and notifications requiring high-income households that were not paying employer contributions to do so, on the assumption that they were hiring workers on a cash basis. Although these measures have garnered significant media coverage, their impact on formal employment rates has been limited. As pointed out by Lucía Cirmi Obón—who served as Undersecretary for Equality Policies in Argentina’s first Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity during the administration of Alberto Fernández, where she headed the committee of *Registradas*—, before the pandemic, “there was already a stagnation in formalization” in paid domestic work, which was identified as a problem that the State should work on.¹⁴

3 Policies Toward the Sector during and after the Covid Pandemic

Paid domestic work is the economic sector that was hit hardest by the pandemic and has been the slowest to recover. An estimated 1.4 million people were employed in the sector in 2018, 99.3% of whom were women (MTEySS, 2020). It has been estimated that more than 430 000 jobs were lost in the sector between 2020 and 2021. In 2022, employment levels were 9.3% below where they had been before the pandemic began. Consequently, domestic employment went from being the number one occupation for women in the labor market in 2019 to ranking third, behind retail and teaching, in 2021 (DNEIG, 2021). Before Covid, domestic workers represented almost a fifth of Argentina’s economically active female population, and it had the most feminized workforce. It is essential to consider these workers’ role in the social organization of care, as they play a double role as paid care workers—without whom the employment of many women in other sectors of the economy would not be feasible—and as carers in their own homes, where they have more limited resources for delegating care than their employers.

However, until 2021, there was no specific policy addressing employment in the paid domestic work sector. At the end of March 2020, the Argentinean government created two policies: the Work and Production Support Program (*Programa de Asistencia al Trabajo y la Producción*, ATP) and the Emergency Family Income (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia*, IFE). The ATP consisted of several measures, the most important of which was the Compensatory Wage Allowance (ACS, for its Spanish acronym) for all formal workers employed in economic sectors affected by the pandemic, with the exception of formally employed domestic workers. In contrast, the IFE was an unconditional income transfer for all individuals with no formal income suffering from economic precarity due to the pandemic, which included unregistered domestic workers.

14 Interview with Lucía Cirmi Obón conducted by the authors, August 22, 2022.

Initially, formally employed domestic workers were both excluded from ATP and IFE. However, thanks to pressure from domestic workers unions, formally employed domestic workers were shortly after included under the IFE, being the only formal employed workers who could receive it. However, the IFE provided 75% of the minimum wage, while the ACS was equivalent to 125%–200% of the minimum wage per worker. As a result, in April 2020, both the SACRA and the Union of Workers in Private Households (*Unión Personal Auxiliar de Casas Particulares*, UPACP) requested that paid domestic work be covered by the ATP.¹⁵ The request to enter the ATP program only applied to formally employed domestic workers and would have covered 50% of wages, thus halving the amount that employers needed to pay, but it was not approved. They repeated this demand in June 2020 but did not obtain a favorable response.

However, the National Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender under the Ministry of Economy took UPACP and SACRA's demand and drove the creation of a special scheme for the domestic workers.¹⁶ In the words of the then Director of this agency, Mercedes D'Alessandro, there was also "a social demand for something [some kind of state aid] so that those who hired [a domestic worker] could continue paying [her salary]".¹⁷ This demand was expressed in different spaces, such as the National Commission of Work in Private Homes, as well as in the media, in which what several voices demanded "assistance to pay the [woman] who takes care of my mother, or the one who takes care of my children, or the woman who works at home, whom I have to keep paying even if she doesn't come [to work]".¹⁸ After several months of meetings and an intense discussion between different state agencies that were reluctant to launch a specific program for this sector, in September 2021, the Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity and the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security created *Registradas*.

15 UPACP is the largest union of domestic workers in Argentina, and the main representative of the workers' voice in the National Commission of Domestic Work.

16 The National Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender was created in December 2019, with the assumption of the current government. In the same line, this administration created the Inter Ministerial Roundtable on Care Policies, in which the aforementioned Directorate mobilized the implementation of policies related to paid and unpaid care in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the Ministry of Gender, Women and Diversity. Among the actions carried out in this line, the first National Time Use Survey (ENUT, 2021) stands out. There were previous experiences of EUT, but with less geographical scope and representativeness. It also promoted the regulation of Article 179 of the Labor Contract Law on care spaces or economic compensation for workers with children up to three years of age in their care (Decree 144/22), and the elaboration of a Child-Rearing Basket, promoting its application in the parental obligations of food quotas. All these policies contributed to the diagnosis, recognition, and reparation of rights related to care. *Registradas* is among these policies.

17 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

18 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

This initiative was particularly important both because it promotes job creation and formal employment and because it provides economic support to help middle-income households find ways to cover their domestic work and care needs. Only employers with a gross monthly income below the minimum income tax threshold may register. Initially planned to mimic the ATP for six months, the program was subsequently extended. As Mercedes D'Alessandro pointed out, “*Registradas* [was designed] for a scenario in which the pandemic triggered the [economic] crisis, and today the sector is still in crisis and needs to be strengthened”.¹⁹ However, the program was terminated in December 2023, with the change in the national government.

4 Labor Registration Incentive Policies

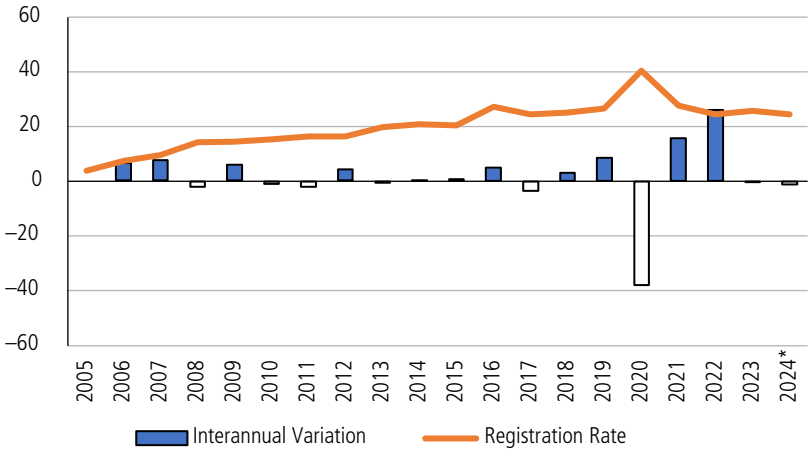
As pointed out in the previous sections, labor registration became the focus of policies towards paid domestic work. Prior to the pandemic, the stimulus with the greatest impact on domestic work registration was the deduction of income tax. Only higher-income employers were subject to this tax, which, with variations linked to the updates of taxable amounts, varied between 9% and 29% of the people with declared earnings. Thus, it was considered necessary to create some kind of incentive that could include employers who were exempted from it. The pandemic added to the problem of job loss, as evidenced by the sharp year-on-year drop in 2020. The higher percentage of registration observed in that year is due to the protective effect that labor registration had on labor stability and has been visible in the labor market as a whole (Actis Di Pasquale et al., 2022). In this context, *Registradas* targeted the registered employment creation in the sector by focusing on middle-income employers, encouraging the labor registration of new hires through a time-limited subsidy.

One difficulty faced by policies aimed at employers is the scarcity of systematized information on them. In public discourse, they are recurrently identified as *workers* who employ *domestic help*. For SACRA representatives, for example, it was important that the State created incentives for domestic work registration for middle-income employers who were “also workers themselves”.²⁰ Diagnoses of the limitations encountered by registration incentive policies have presumed that the 75% of employers who did not register their labor relations would probably have lower incomes than those covered by income tax and, therefore, could not benefit from registration incentives. However, this presumption contrasts with available information. In 2018, only 13% of the total number of households in the country employed domestic workers, for which this expenditure represented only 6% of

19 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

20 Interview with Mariana Núñez, Guadalupe Ramírez Cellerino, Amalia Miranda, María Stella, Colombo, Pimipi; conducted by the authors, September 10, 2022.

Figure 1 Interannual Variation of Total Paid Domestic Work Labor Relations (Registered and Unregistered) and Labor Interannual Registration Rate



Source: EPH, Second trimester of each year.
*For 2024, we used data from the first trimester, which is the latest available.

Table 1 Conditionalities of Income-Tax Deduction and *Registradas*

	Income-tax deduction	<i>Registradas</i>
Direct beneficiaries	Higher-income employers	Employers with earnings below the minimum taxable income
In force	2005–present	2021–2023
Benefit period	Undetermined	Up to eight months
Type of labor relations covered	All	Only new hirings
Salaries and contribution amounts covered by the benefit	Variable, proportional to the employers’ tax burden, it can reach between 30% and 50% of the salaries and contributions, for the duration of the employment relationship	Up to 50% of salaries and contributions, proportional to the employers’ income and workers’ salaries, until the end of the benefit

Sources: AFIP and Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (2023).

total household income. Moreover, 60% of domestic workers' employers were in the top three income deciles (ENGHo, 2022).²¹

Nevertheless, *Registradas* still had a relevant margin of action for the 40% of employers who were in the lower income deciles. In the two years it was in force, it accumulated more than 176 000 subsidized contracts. Through this period, there was a negative variation in the evolution of registered jobs, with a slight increase in the labor registration rate between 2022 and 2023, that returned to the 2022 levels with the end of the program (see Figure 1). The subsidized contracts accumulated during its term represent 11% of the sector's total number of job relations (INDEC, 2022), and 28% of the registered jobs (SRT, 2024). The average number of subsidized contracts was between 1.5% and 2% of the sector as a whole during the program's term. In this regard, the effect of *Registradas* on the total number of registered labor relations did not reach the scale of the income tax deduction which is around 54% of active registered labor relations. However, this is in part due to its cancellation. The income tax deduction had a cumulative effect, visible in longer terms: the registration rate doubled in four years since its implementation and quadrupled in ten (see Figure 1). In the case of *Registradas*, it is impossible to know how the continuity of the program could have affected labor registration levels. During the period in which *Registradas* was in force, both programs had had a complementary effect: together, they covered more than 80% of registered labor relations (AFIP-Public Information Request, 2024).

The duration of the benefit granted by *Registradas* shows a weakness compared to the income-tax deduction. As mentioned in Table 1, the tax deduction is available for any employment relationship and for as long as it remains active. The benefit provided by *Registradas*, on the other hand, could be requested only once and for the registration of a new employment relationship. In other words, even if employers complied with the conditionalities, they could not access the subsidy if they already had an active registered employment relationship. The main protection for the continuity of the employment relationship was given by the obligation to continue the contract for at least nine months, while the benefit was maintained for six, with an exceptional maximum of eight months. These limitations made *Registradas* regressive compared to the income-tax deduction, because the economic benefit was smaller for lower-income employers. Even so, the program managed to scale its impact in a relatively short period of time. These data allow us to infer that there could have been a positive cumulative effect, if sustained over time.

During the period in which *Registradas* was in force, there was also a trend towards a reduction in the number of contributions owed by employers. It should

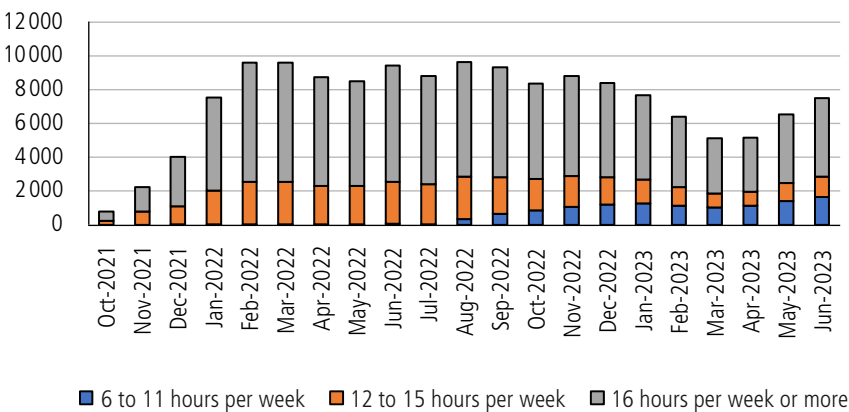
21 The National Household Expenditure Survey (ENGHo for its Spanish acronym) is a one-off operation, the last of which was carried out between 2017 and 2018. It comprehensively surveys household expenditures throughout the country, in localities with more than 2 000 inhabitants (INDEC, 2024). The aforementioned information was processed through a public information request to the agency and is not available in public databases.

be noted that only the workers whose contributions are up to date are fully protected by the regulations, including occupational risk and health insurance. In this respect, *Registradas* was also effective, since to access the subsidy, it was necessary to demonstrate compliance with salaries and contributions. As a result, the non-compliance rate among program subsidized contracts was 4.7% as of November 2023 (Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Welfare-Public Information Request, 2024), while for all registered labor relations it amounted to 15.5% (SRT, 2024).

However, despite the employers' compliance with contribution payments, the social security system has significant limitations for the coverage of domestic workers with contracts of less than 16 hours per week. The sector has progressively shifted from full-time to hourly contracts since the second half of the 20th century, in a trend that has intensified in the last decade: in 2014, 17% of the work relationships were of 15 hours per week or less, by 2022, this proportion had risen to 40% and to 45% by 2023. Full access to the protections derived from social security contributions is only achieved with the contributions corresponding to contracts of 16 or more hours per week (AFIP, 2024). In the case of shorter hours, to reach full coverage, the employer should voluntarily make up the difference or, failing that, the worker should do so. In this regard, the system discourages the labor registration of low-hour contracts.

Moreover, the proportion of social security contributions, the amount of which is fixed, is higher in relation to the salaries of those who are hired for shorter hours. From the perspective of both employers and workers, making contributions that will

Figure 2 *Registradas*: Subsidized Contracts per Month and Weekly Working Hours



Source: Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Security – Request for Public Information – *Registradas* (2024).

not guarantee access to social security protections makes little sense. This translates into divergent levels of labor registration depending on the weekly working time. In 2023, the labor registration gap between workers with contracts of 15 hours per week or less and those with more than 15 hours per week reached 20 percentage points: in the first group, registration rate was 15%, while in the second group it reached 35% (EPH, 2023).

Registradas sought to address this divergence. Initially, it subsidized only contracts of 12 hours per week or more, but after a few months, this conditionality was reduced to 6 hours per week, with the intention of broadening the scope of the program to include the most unprotected workers. As can be seen in Figure 2, the number of contracts from 6 to 11 weekly working hours that were subsidized by *Registradas* increased in the second half of 2022, while those from 12 to 15 weekly working hours remained stable. Likewise, the number of contracts of less than 16 hours per week subsidized by the program went from 27% in early 2022 to 38% by the end of the year. However, as we have noted before, *Registradas* did not guarantee full access to social security benefits to those workers. As of November 2023, 22% of the contracts subsidized by the program gave access only to occupational risk insurance and 16% had incomplete contributions to health insurance and pension contributions.

5 Final Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of paid domestic work, especially affected by job loss, which was even more marked in unregistered labor relations. The increase in registration had already reached a limit in previous years, but the pandemic showed the need to design new specific policies for the sector. *Registradas* arose from this need, with the intention of favoring the recovery of the sector and, at the same time, promoting labor registration. Its implementation fulfilled a double reparatory function: on the one hand, it compensated for the exclusion of paid domestic work from the main support policy for the private sector during the pandemic, the ATP; on the other hand, it remedied the regressive nature of the tax incentive for higher-income employers to register paid domestic work relations.

Throughout the article, we identify three groups of conditioning factors for understanding the limitations of registration incentives created by *Registradas*. The first one is related to the characterization of employers. The aim of *Registradas* was to broaden the base of employers reached by the economic incentives to register paid domestic work relations, based on a diffuse diagnosis of this group. Public statistics describe domestic workers in greater depth than employers, and informality prevents them from being tracked through social security registration systems. Based on the available information, we observed that most employers have high levels of income.

Registradas extended the incentives to middle-income employers, plausibly a less numerous group than the one already reached by tax deduction. Its results support such an assumption, since the total contracts subsidized by *Registradas* are equivalent to slightly more than half of the employers that requested the deduction of wages and contributions of domestic workers from income tax in 2022.

The positive effects of the program on labor registration were, moreover, truncated by its interruption in December 2023. The total number of contracts subsidized by *Registradas* represented 28% of the registered jobs and 33% of the jobs with updated contributions at that time. The two registration incentives in force accounted for more than 80% of registered jobs. This, however, was not enough to raise the level of labor registration, which stagnated at around a quarter of the sector's total. In any case, it should not be overlooked that during the period in which *Registradas* was in force, there was a similar trend to the one observed at the beginning of the income tax deduction in 2005 in terms of the increase in the registration rate. However, it is not possible to know whether this trend could have been sustained.

Thirdly, we have shown how the characteristics of the social security system also limited the incidence of *Registradas* in increasing the registration rate. The system only guarantees full coverage for workers whose contributions are equivalent to an employment contract of 16 or more hours per week. This disincentivizes the regularization for both employers and workers in such labor relations, which have significantly grown in the last decade. The former see the contributions as a high proportion of wages and the latter are discouraged from demanding registration, since it does not give them access to social security protections. Noticing the prevalence of this type of contract, *Registradas* extended its scope to contracts starting at 6 hours per week. However, it did not remedy the exclusions of the social security system for workers who had working weekly hours of less than 16 hours.

More generally, the main tension of the programs that promote registration through incentives to employers is that, despite the profile of the employers addressed, they sustain fiscal regressivity. Both *Registradas* and the income tax deduction subsidize domestic and care services to the higher-income segments of the population, operating as a regressive care policy. These incentives have had favorable effects, but the economic cost they subsidize have low relevance for employers' households. According to the latest available data, domestic workers' salaries and contributions barely represented 6% of employers' household expenses.

The lack of effective penalties for non-compliance with regulations contributes to maintaining the low levels of registration. Since December 2023 this scenario has worsened. The new government presided by Javier Milei implemented flexibilization measures for the private sector as a whole, which have also had an impact on paid domestic work. The regulations in force until 2023 established penalties for non-compliance with labor registrations: employers in default were fined and included in a public registry. Since December 2023, such penalties have been eliminated, in addition to a public discourse in favor of decreasing the relevance of the State

in its role of controlling the labor market. This resulted in a decline in both the total number of jobs in paid domestic work and the registration rate in the sector during 2024. In addition, there was an increase in the rate of non-compliance with contributions, which affected almost 20% of registered domestic work contracts in the first half of the year.

As a lesson learned for future policies, it is important to note the relevance of in-depth diagnoses, including knowledge about the employer households and the characteristics of the contracts. If sustained over time, *Registradas* could have promoted labor registration directly and indirectly with similar effects to the income-tax deduction. Perhaps the new ceiling would have been 50% of labor registration, which would coincide with the percentage of labor relations that equals or exceeds 16 hours per week. However, it is essential to design a sustainable and effective security system for those workers with shorter working hours. Likewise, it is to restore the State's role in controlling labor relations. As long as employers perceive no risk in non-compliance with their responsibilities, informality will continue to predominate.

6 References

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