# Job Quality in Colombia: A Sectoral and Regional Analysis by Gender in 2025*

*[English Version]*

## Calidad del empleo en Colombia: un análisis sectorial y regional por género en 2025

## Qualidade do emprego na Colômbia: uma análise setorial e regional por gênero em 2025

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To assess job quality in Colombia for the year 2025, considering gender differences and its distribution across regions and branches of economic activity. **Methodology:** Using data from the Great Integrated Household Survey (GEIH) for June 2025, and following the methodological approaches proposed by Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022), and Chen and Mehdi (2018), both objective and subjective job quality indexes were calculated by gender. Additionally, estimates were produced for economic activity branches according to the *International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities* (ISIC) and for Colombia's 23 main cities and metropolitan areas. **Results:** The objective job quality in Colombia is low, with better outcomes in the public administration and mining sectors. Medellín, Manizales, and Bogotá show the highest scores, while Sincelejo and Riohacha present the lowest. However, subjective perception of job quality is high and does not align with actual working conditions. **Conclusions:** The study reveals that subjective job quality in Colombia exceeds objective measures, evidencing a mismatch between perception and reality. Sectoral and gender-based differences are identified, as well as persistent urban disparities and methodological limitations, providing updated evidence to inform public policy and academic debate.

**Key words:** quality of working life; gender; job quality; job satisfaction; labor well-being (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** evaluar la calidad del empleo en Colombia para el año 2025, considerando las diferencias por género y su distribución según las regiones y ramas de actividad económica. **Metodología:** utilizando los datos de la Gran Encuesta Integradora de Hogares (GEIH) de junio 2025, y los enfoques metodológicos propuestos por Hidalgo Tarapuez (2022) y Chen y Mehdi (2018), se calcularon los índices de calidad del empleo objetivo y subjetivo por género. Adicionalmente, se estimaron los datos para las ramas de actividad económica según *Clasificación industrial internacional uniforme de todas las actividades económicas* (CIIU), y para las 23 ciudades principales y áreas metropolitanas de Colombia. **Resultados:** la calidad objetiva del empleo en Colombia es baja, con mejores resultados en administración pública y minas. Medellín, Manizales y Bogotá tienen los puntajes más altos, mientras Sincelejo y Riohacha muestran las peores condiciones. Sin embargo, la percepción subjetiva es alta y no corresponde con la realidad laboral. **Conclusiones:** el estudio revela que la calidad subjetiva del empleo en Colombia supera la objetiva, evidenciando tensiones entre percepción y condiciones reales. Se identifican diferencias sectoriales y de género, brechas urbanas persistentes

y limitaciones metodológicas, que aportan bases actualizadas para políticas públicas y debate académico.

**Palabras clave:** calidad de vida laboral; género; calidad del trabajo; satisfacción en el trabajo; bienestar laboral (obtenidos del tesauro de la UNESCO).

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** avaliar a qualidade do emprego na Colômbia para o ano de 2025, considerando as diferenças de gênero e sua distribuição entre as regiões e ramos de atividade econômica. **Metodologia:** utilizando os dados da Pesquisa Integrada de Domicílios (GEIH) de junho de 2025 e os enfoques metodológicos propostos por Hidalgo e Tarapuez (2022) e por Chen e Mehdi (2018), calcularam-se os índices de qualidade objetiva e subjetiva do emprego por gênero. Além disso, foram estimados os dados para os ramos de atividade econômica segundo a Classificação Industrial Internacional Padrão de Todas as Atividades Econômicas (CIIU/ISIC) e para as 23 principais cidades e áreas metropolitanas da Colômbia. **Resultados:** a qualidade objetiva do emprego na Colômbia é baixa, com melhores resultados na administração pública e no setor de minas. Medellín, Manizales e Bogotá apresentam os maiores índices, enquanto Sincelejo e Riohacha exibem as piores condições. No entanto, a percepção subjetiva é elevada e não corresponde à realidade laboral. **Conclusões:** o estudo revela que a qualidade subjetiva do emprego na Colômbia supera a qualidade objetiva, evidenciando tensões entre percepção e condições reais. Identificam-se diferenças setoriais e de gênero, persistentes desigualdades urbanas e limitações metodológicas, que fornecem bases atualizadas para políticas públicas e debate acadêmico.

**Palavras-chave**: qualidade de vida no trabalho; gênero; qualidade do trabalho; satisfação no trabalho; bem-estar laboral (obtidos do tesauro da UNESCO).

## Introduction

Job creation remains a challenge for all economies, particularly for developing ones, where medium and high levels of unemployment persist. To this, the debate surrounding job quality has been added, involving variables such as job stability, income level, and social security coverage, among other factors that contribute to improving workers' quality of life (Gómez-Salcedo *et al.*, 2017; Pineda & Acosta, 2011). This interest has emerged as a response to the increasing labor regulations in high-income countries and has been transferred to developing nations as part of the economic integration processes associated with Free Trade Agreements (Pineda & Acosta, 2011).

Furthermore, the study of job quality is not alien to institutional frameworks. For instance, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) includes factors that promote workers' well-being, such as social security, contractual relationships, and social affiliations. This approach moves beyond the concept of "employment," which limits the analysis merely to job positions and remuneration.

In this sense, several authors have developed methodologies to measure job quality, such as the synthetic index proposed by Farné (2003). This index considers four analytical dimensions (income, type of contract, social security, and working hours), each with its respective weighting. As a result, the index allows for the generation of analytical categories in which higher indexed values correspond to better job quality, classifying workers into three categories: low, medium, and high.

Worth noting is that this methodology has been questioned due to the lack of a solid theoretical framework to support it, as well as the absence of a conceptual basis for the weighting system (Lasso & Frasser, 2015). One element identified as missing is the inclusion of social representation; however, authors such as Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022) have expanded the model by incorporating this component, which they consider essential for achieving a more comprehensive approach to the study of job quality.

Likewise, Chen and Mehdi (2018) developed a methodology to calculate a job quality index that considers aspects such as job prospects, career development, leave policies, and social environment, among others. These components are more closely aligned with the analysis of workers' social well-being.

Consequently, the objective of the present study is to assess job quality in Colombia for the year 2025, considering gender differences and their distribution across regions and branches of economic activity. To this end, the study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) What is the variation in job quality at the national level by gender? (2) How does job quality vary by economic sector when

disaggregated by gender? (3) How is job quality distributed across the country's main cities, and what differences can be observed between men and women?

To address these questions, two types of job quality were estimated. First, objective job quality was calculated using the methodological framework proposed by Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022). Second, subjective job quality was estimated following the methodology proposed by Chen and Mehdi (2018). This dual approach contributes to the literature in two ways: these methodologies have typically been analyzed separately, not jointly; and this study provides three distinct levels of analysis: by gender, by economic sector, and by urban center.

This article is structured as follows: the second section presents theoretical references and empirical studies on job quality from a global and national perspective. The third section describes the methodological strategy employed. The fourth section presents and describes the results obtained, followed by the discussion section. Finally, the sixth section offers the concluding remarks of the study.

## Theoretical Framework

The conceptualization surrounding job quality is ambiguous, even though it has been theorized since the second half of the twentieth century. During the initial phase of this process, "job quality" was conceived as a subjective construct in which worker satisfaction was assumed to be the foundation of the concept. This approach was built on various evaluation criteria assessing the worker's perception of how their job impacts their quality of life (Land, 1975; Staines & Quinn, 1979; Wnuk-Lipinski, 1977).

However, this subjective perspective faced several criticisms. Among them, Seashore (1974) emphasized the need to move beyond the idea that job quality was merely a subjective factor of the employee. He also proposed defining objective criteria that would allow for determining the quality of job positions.

According to this view, the subjective approach lacks rigor because individuals tend to involve factors of convenience, ignorance, self-deception, and social pressure that bias their opinions (Seashore, 1974). Therefore, the author argued that such measurement should incorporate both individual and social factors that reflect objective components. These elements must be supported by theoretical and empirical evidence, taking into account aspects such as sectoral differentiation and the need to include subjective assessments without allowing them to outweigh objective perspectives.

Although there is consensus on the need to incorporate objective factors in measurement, no agreement exists on which specific factors should be included (Galvis-Aponte *et al.*, 2017; Warr, 1987). This has led to different positions on the matter, such as those proposed by Lawler (1975), who stated that any measure of job quality should consider at least four factors: (1) validity, understood as the inclusion of components associated with job quality; (2) sufficiency, referring to the completeness and representativeness of the indicators; (3) objectivity and verifiability of the information; and (4) the ability to distinguish significant differences between employment situations. These factors allow for a comprehensive review of the concept.

Gallie (2007) argues that job quality is linked to the employment structure; therefore, it must be assessed across economic sectors, as these involve differentiating conditions. The author also highlights the need to include factors such as employees' participation in workplace discussions, autonomy, and access to social security. This coincides with the arguments of Farné and Vergara (2007), Gómez-Salcedo *et al.* (2017), and Pineda and Acosta (2011), who associate these factors with job formality, thereby adding an additional dimension to the understanding of job quality.

Along these lines, Farné (2009) proposed a comprehensive analysis of the concept through the construction of a synthetic index that incorporates both objective and subjective dimensions. The author emphasized variables such as job stability, income, social protection, and contractual conditions, noting that these variables enable the evaluation of workers' integration into the labor market and how such integration affects their well-being. This contribution is fundamental as it provides a comparative perspective for Latin America and demonstrates how job quality constitutes a determining factor in processes of equity and social cohesion.

Moreover, various approaches highlight income as a key factor in the analysis, given that job quality should generate quality of life, which in turn is associated with individuals' capacity to meet their monetary, environmental, and physical needs (Pérez-Valbuena, 2013). Consequently, the literature agrees that an adequate level of income is required to satisfy such needs (Burchell *et al.*, 2014; Chen & Mehdi, 2018; Gómez-Salcedo *et al.*, 2017; Hidalgo & Tarapuez, 2022; Pineda & Acosta, 2011; Wagner, 1997).

In summary, theoretical and empirical evidence indicate that measuring job quality should respond to a construct that integrates objective factors, such as labor and extra-labor benefits, workers' associative capacity, and income, and subjective factors related to employees' perceptions of their work. Thus, since the ILO (2003) introduced the concept of "decent work," four dimensions have been involved: employment, social security, labor rights, and social dialogue.

Accordingly, the ILO (2023) reported that despite economic recovery after the pandemic, structural problems persist in the Latin American and Caribbean labor markets. The report highlights the limited growth of formal employment compared to the high incidence of informal work, which particularly affects women and rural populations. It also notes a slowdown in the creation of quality jobs, stagnation in real wage growth, and marked gender inequality in labor participation and remuneration. These findings reveal the region's ongoing challenges regarding inclusion, productivity, and job sustainability.

In this regard, Fernández-Franco *et al.* (2022) analyzed the situation of salaried and self-employed workers by aggregating data on remuneration and worker qualification. They then developed a scale to measure job quality, demonstrating that wages in Latin America remain lower than those in countries such as the United States, even for highly qualified positions. They further showed that this situation contributes to the region's economic lag and is exacerbated in small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of Latin American economies.

Similarly, Basantes-Garcés (2022) established an index to measure job quality in micro and small enterprises in Ecuador, based on the synthetic index proposed by Farné (2003). Using a multiple linear regression model, the author measured job quality and compared it over time to assess labor precariousness. This model highlights variations in the labor market and offers recommendations for improving productivity, which in turn could lead to the creation of jobs with decent working conditions.

Regarding job quality in Colombia, Gómez-Salcedo *et al.* (2017) proposed a multidimensional approach using a fuzzy indicator and data from the *Great Integrated Household Survey* (GEIH), considering variables such as gender and educational level. They introduced a new methodology for measuring job quality, theoretically linking it to the life cycle of work quality, and found lower quality indices among workers under 30 years old. This result indicates that young people are not contributing to pension or social security systems, creating pressure on subsidized schemes and exacerbating current social problems.

Lasso and Frasser (2015) evaluated job quality in relation to social well-being through the theory of consumption and economies of scale. They constructed equivalence scales to analyze social well-being according to household characteristics directly related to age groups. Their findings revealed that the lowest job quality indices are concentrated in youth employment, confirming the existence of a labor life cycle. The authors also emphasized that consumption and economies of scale vary with household size, potentially improving or limiting the level of social well-being achieved.

In the Colombian context, the literature has shown different approaches to measuring and understanding job quality, highlighting both progress and persistent limitations. Farné and Vergara (2015) analyzed the link between economic growth and labor flexibilization during 2002–2011 and found a slight improvement in indicators due to increased income and expanded social security coverage, though qualitative deficits still limited the impact of growth on labor well-being.

From a different methodological perspective, Cortés *et al.* (2024) proposed a measurement based on workers' preferences, incorporating subjective dimensions that complement traditional objective indicators and give greater relevance to employees' perceptions of their working conditions. Similarly, Mora *et al.* (2016) developed synthetic indices applied to the Afro-Colombian population, revealing structural inequalities in stability, income, and access to social security that disproportionately affect this group.

Additionally, other studies have focused on urban environments and the relationship between human capital and job quality. Mora and Ulloa (2011) examined Colombia's main cities and concluded that although improvements were observed between 2001 and 2009, they were insufficient to close existing gaps, noting that education translates into better job quality only for salaried workers. Likewise, Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022) constructed objective and subjective job indices based on ILO's decent work pillars, identifying a gap between workers' perceptions and the structural conditions of the labor market.

Moreover, Ramírez (2022) proposed a Job Quality Index (JQI) composed of five dimensions: underemployment, training, wage benefits, social protection, and work-life balance, providing an integral tool for monitoring precarization processes and guiding public policy in the country. These contributions enrich the discussion by showing the diversity of approaches and empirical results on job quality in Colombia.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that although the theories for measuring objective and subjective job quality have been widely criticized, regarding the percentage weights assigned to each group, this methodology continues to be used as the main tool for assessing job quality. Consequently, researchers can adapt it through empirical foundations that have significantly contributed to emerging theories such as the labor life cycle.

## Methodology

For this research, data from the GEIH for June 2025 were used, as this month shows less seasonality compared to the rest of the year (Pineda & Acosta, 2011). The database was filtered to include only employed individuals over 18 years of age. Additionally, only observations containing information on labor income and area of residence were included; that is, observations with incomplete information were removed. Finally, retired individuals were excluded from the sample, resulting in 12,154,098 valid observations, of which 46.03% were women.

The sample includes information from Colombia's 23 main cities and metropolitan areas, as well as the national index, disaggregated by branch of economic activity and gender. Table 1 presents the variables used for the objective and subjective job quality indicators. Table 2 shows the interpretation scale for the quality indicators.

**Table 1.** *Description and Descriptive Statistics of Variables.*

| Dimensions | Indicator | Criterion Used | Variable |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | ***Objective Quality*** | |
| Income adequacy | Hourly labor income | Less than one minimum wage | Low income |
| | | Between 1 and 3 minimum wages | Basic basket income |
| | | Between 3 and 5 minimum wages | Medium income |
| | | More than 5 minimum wages | High income |
| Job security and stability | Contractual relationship | Type of contract | Written, indefinite-term contract |
| | | | Written, fixed-term contract |
| | | | Service provision contract (OPS) |
| | | | Verbal or no contract |

| Dimensions | Indicator | Criterion Used | Variable |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social security and protection | | Contributions to health, pension, and occupational risk insurance | Full coverage |
| | | Health (contributive regime) and occupational risk contributions | Partial coverage |
| | | Health (subsidized regime) and occupational risk contributions | Partial coverage |
| | | Health (beneficiary) contributions | Partial coverage |
| | | No contributions to any system | No coverage |
| Contractual benefits | Vacations | Entitled to paid annual leave | Vacations |
| | Christmas bonus | Receives Christmas bonus | Christmas bonus |
| | severance fund contributions | Entitled to severance fund contributions | severance fund contributions |
| | Paid leave | Includes paid leave | Paid leave |
| Social dialogue and representation | Union or professional association representation | Affiliated with a trade union and/or professional association | Unionized or affiliated |
| | | | Not unionized or affiliated |
| ***Subjective Quality*** | | | |
| Job subjective Quality | Perceived job quality and stability | Job satisfaction | Satisfied with current job |
| | | | Satisfied with benefits and compensations |
| | | | Satisfied with current working hours |
| | | Job stability | Perceived job stability |

To achieve the research objective, weightings were defined following the methodologies of Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022), as well as Chen and Mehdi (2018) for measuring job quality, as shown in Table 2. This table presents both objective and subjective components and the percentage assigned to each variable. For objective quality, the components of income, stability, and access to social security were prioritized, jointly representing 70%, while extra-labor benefits and

associative or union representation accounted for 30%. The table also includes the interpretation scale of the indices.

**Table 2.** *Dimensions of Job Quality.*

| Variable | Employees | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Score Distribution** | **Score Assignment** |
| ***Objective Quality*** | | |
| Low income | 30% | 0% |
| Basic basket income | | 10% |
| Medium income | | 20% |
| High income | | 30% |
| Written, indefinite term | 20% | 20% |
| Written, fixed term | | 15% |
| Service provision (OPS) | | 10% |
| Verbal or without contract | | 0% |
| Full social security coverage | 20% | 20% |
| Partial coverage | | 15% |
| Partial coverage | | 10% |
| Partial coverage | | 5% |
| No coverage | | 0% |
| Paid vacations | 5% | 5% |
| Christmas bonus | 5% | 5% |
| severance fund contributions | 5% | 5% |
| Paid leave | 5% | 5% |
| Unionized or affiliated | 10% | 10% |
| Not unionized or affiliated | | 0% |
| ***Subjective Quality*** | | |
| With current job | 30% | 30% |
| With benefits and compesations | 20% | 20% |
| With working hours | 20% | 20% |

| Variable | Employees | |
|---|---|---|
| | Score Distribution | Score Assignment |
| Perception of job stability | 30% | 30% |
| ***Interpretation Scale*** | (%) | |
| Very low | 0 – 20 | |
| Low | 21 – 40 | |
| Medium | 41 – 60 | |
| High | 61 – 80 | |
| Very high | 81 – 100 | |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022, p. 88), and Chen and Mehdi (2018, p. 10).

## Results

### Dynamics of Job Quality at the National Level by Gender

For June 2025, Colombia had 23,752,953 employed individuals, earning an average monthly income of COP 1,925,286. However, 50% of the population earned COP 1,423,500 or less. Likewise, 58% of the employed population were men, and 31.9% of workers were concentrated in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. Meanwhile, 36.74% of the employed population worked in the wholesale and retail trade sector, and only 10% were employed in manufacturing industries.

Using the proposed methodological strategy, objective and subjective job quality indicators were calculated at both the national and gender levels (Table 3). Following, the results for both indicators are presented for men and women. Regarding the objective job quality indicator, men showed slightly lower-quality jobs than women, with scores of 0.29 and 0.30, respectively. However, this difference is not significant. According to the proposed interpretation scale, both groups fall under the low objective job quality category.

**Table 3.** *Average Job Quality at the National Level.*

| Objective Quality | | | Subjective Quality | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Men** | **Women** | **Total** | **Men** | **Women** | **Total** |
| 0,29 | 0,30 | 0,30 | 0,81 | 0,81 | 0,81 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on GEIH data (2025).

## Differences in Job Quality by Economic Sector and Gender

Table 4 shows the results disaggregated by branches of economic activity, following the *International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities* (ISIC), Revision 4, adapted for Colombia. Significant variations can be observed among the different branches in terms of objective job quality. The best results were found in public administration, defense, education, and health, with an index of 0.57, which exceeds the mining and quarrying sector (0.41) by 0.16 point

For the remaining branches, objective quality scores ranged between 0.14 and 0.40, evidencing widespread labor precariousness among Colombian workers. This situation is most severe in artistic, entertainment, and recreation activities, where a score of 0.14 was recorded, likely related to the self-employment nature of these occupations.

**Table 4.** *Job Quality by Economic Sector.*

| Economic Activity | Objective Quality | | | Subjective Quality | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **H** | **M** | **T** | **H** | **M** | **T** |
| Artistic, entertainment, recreation, and other service activities | 0,15 | 0,13 | 0,14 | 0,78 | 0,79 | 0,79 |
| Professional, scientific, and technical activities | 0,36 | 0,21 | 0,29 | 0,84 | 0,72 | 0,78 |
| Public administration, defense, education, and health | 0,60 | 0,55 | 0,57 | 0,87 | 0,87 | 0,87 |
| Agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing | 0,19 | 0,28 | 0,23 | 0,79 | 0,73 | 0,76 |
| Wholesale and retail trade | 0,23 | 0,25 | 0,24 | 0,80 | 0,80 | 0,80 |
| Construction | 0,15 | 0,52 | 0,34 | 0,74 | 0,90 | 0,82 |
| Mining and quarrying | 0,44 | 0,37 | 0,40 | 0,84 | 0,92 | 0,88 |

| Economic Activity | Objective Quality | | | Subjective Quality | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | H | M | T | H | M | T |
| Manufacturing industries | 0,33 | 0,27 | 0,30 | 0,85 | 0,82 | 0,83 |
| Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply | 0,41 | 0,41 | 0,41 | 0,84 | 0,83 | 0,83 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on GEIH data (2025).
Note: M= men; W= women; T= total population.

Subjective job quality evidences that Colombian workers, regardless of their economic activity, perceive their jobs as being of high quality, with scores ranging from 0.75 to 0.89 across all sectors. Once again, mining and quarrying, public administration, and defense show the highest perceived job quality.

## Job Quality by City and Metropolitan Area

Table 5 presents the results for the 23 cities where GEIH data are representative. Results reveal that Bogotá exhibits relatively high objective and subjective job quality; meanwhile, Manizales and Medellín stand out for scoring high in both measures. Conversely, Sincelejo, Riohacha, and Cúcuta show the most precarious labor conditions nationwide.

**Table 5.** *Job Quality by City and Metropolitan Area.*

| City | Objective Quality | | | Subjetive Quality | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women | Total |
| Armenia | 0,29 | 0,29 | 0,29 | 0,85 | 0,84 | 0,84 |
| Barranquilla | 0,29 | 0,29 | 0,29 | 0,83 | 0,81 | 0,82 |
| Bogotá | 0,40 | 0,40 | 0,40 | 0,85 | 0,82 | 0,84 |
| Bucaramanga | 0,31 | 0,31 | 0,31 | 0,83 | 0,86 | 0,84 |
| Cali | 0,35 | 0,32 | 0,33 | 0,80 | 0,77 | 0,78 |
| Cartagena | 0,26 | 0,28 | 0,27 | 0,82 | 0,84 | 0,83 |
| Cúcuta | 0,19 | 0,24 | 0,21 | 0,71 | 0,72 | 0,71 |
| Florencia | 0,29 | 0,27 | 0,28 | 0,80 | 0,76 | 0,78 |
| Ibagué | 0,31 | 0,31 | 0,31 | 0,83 | 0,84 | 0,84 |
| Manizales | 0,38 | 0,38 | 0,38 | 0,86 | 0,86 | 0,86 |
| Medellín | 0,38 | 0,39 | 0,39 | 0,86 | 0,87 | 0,86 |

| City | Objective Quality | | | Subjetive Quality | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women | Total |
| Montería | 0,21 | 0,23 | 0,22 | 0,86 | 0,86 | 0,86 |
| Neiva | 0,28 | 0,32 | 0,30 | 0,83 | 0,80 | 0,82 |
| Pasto | 0,23 | 0,25 | 0,24 | 0,70 | 0,71 | 0,71 |
| Pereira | 0,36 | 0,35 | 0,36 | 0,82 | 0,81 | 0,82 |
| Popayán | 0,24 | 0,27 | 0,26 | 0,71 | 0,69 | 0,70 |
| Quibdó | 0,23 | 0,29 | 0,26 | 0,80 | 0,79 | 0,80 |
| Riohacha | 0,19 | 0,22 | 0,21 | 0,79 | 0,81 | 0,80 |
| Santa Marta | 0,26 | 0,28 | 0,27 | 0,85 | 0,85 | 0,85 |
| Sincelejo | 0,15 | 0,25 | 0,20 | 0,70 | 0,75 | 0,73 |
| Tunja | 0,33 | 0,33 | 0,33 | 0,82 | 0,80 | 0,81 |
| Valledupar | 0,21 | 0,23 | 0,22 | 0,84 | 0,82 | 0,83 |
| Villavicencio | 0,27 | 0,26 | 0,27 | 0,78 | 0,78 | 0,78 |

Source: Authors' elaboration based on GEIH data (2025).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these relationships for the 23 analyzed cities. According to the interpretation levels shown in Table 2, the heatmap's color intensity increases with higher levels of objective and subjective job quality.

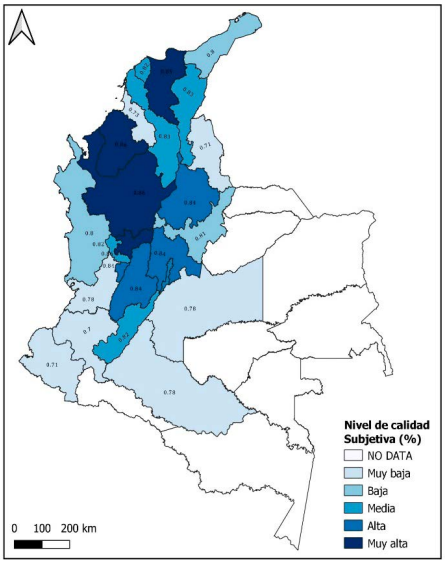


**Figure 1.** *Objective Job Quality by City.*

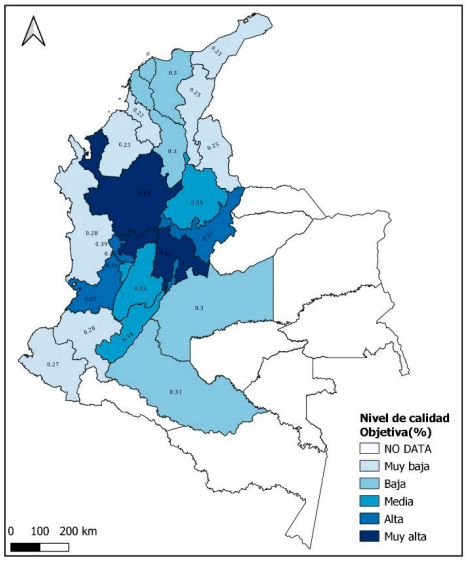


**Figure 2.** *Subjective Job Quality by City.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on GEIH data (2025)..

Finally, workers in cities with greater labor precariousness were observed to show high or very high subjective job quality indices. In other words, employees perceive their jobs as higher quality than their actual contractual conditions indicate, suggesting limited recognition of their true labor situation. This may be explained by the heavy dependence of these cities on highly informal service sectors and high unemployment levels, except for Santa Marta, where unemployment is below the national average. In this context, the perceived difficulty of entering the labor market leads workers to accept and tolerate jobs of lower objective quality.

## Discussion

This research provides a differentiated approach by combining the analysis of objective and subjective job quality with three dimensions that rarely have been explored together: (1) gender disaggregation, (2) sectoral comparison, and (3) regional disparities among cities. While most previous studies have focused on national averages or case studies of major cities, the present study demonstrates that internal differences within Colombia's labor market are key to understanding job quality. Indeed, although no substantial differences between men and women are observed at the aggregate level, when results are disaggregated by economic sector, significant gender gaps emerge that were previously concealed in national analyses.

Previous studies in Colombia have sought, since the early 2000s, to construct indicators capable of explaining the dynamics of a labor market characterized by high levels of informality and structural inequality. For example, Farné and Vergara (2015) found that increases in income and expansion of social security coverage slightly improved job quality indicators, although persistent qualitative deficits limited the impact of economic growth on labor well-being. Similarly, Mora and Ulloa (2011), in their study of major cities between 2001 and 2009, found insufficient progress in closing structural gaps, a finding consistent with this study's results, which reveal ongoing gender inequalities and precarious labor conditions despite modest improvements in some sectors.

More recently, Cortés *et al.* (2024) proposed a measurement model based on workers' preferences, incorporating subjective dimensions alongside traditional objective indicators. This is also reflected in the present research, where perceived job quality consistently exceeds objective measures across all cities and sectors. Similarly, Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022) identified discrepancies between objective

and subjective indicators, consistent with the gender and sectoral gaps revealed in this study. Ramírez (2022), in turn, proposed an integral job quality index comprising five dimensions (working conditions, underemployment, wage benefits, social protection, and work-life balance), which aligns with this study's multidimensional approach. Likewise, Mora *et al.* (2016) documented structural inequalities affecting Afro-Colombian workers, findings that echo the territorial and sectoral disparities identified here, particularly in cities such as Sincelejo and Riohacha.

The case of professional, scientific, and technical activities is illustrative: the 15-percentage-point gap in objective quality favoring men suggests the existence of structural barriers that limit women's access to higher-quality jobs in highly skilled sectors. This finding expands upon and problematizes the results reported by Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022), who developed a national overview but did not reveal the magnitude of sectoral differences. The inclusion of a gender perspective in this study therefore refines the analysis, showing that national indicators may obscure significant inequalities within key sectors of the economy.

Conversely, in sectors characterized by physical labor, such as construction and agriculture, livestock, forestry, and fishing, women displayed higher objective quality indicators. This apparent paradox can be explained by differentiated labor insertion: men are concentrated in operational, often informal, positions, whereas women tend to occupy administrative or support roles within these sectors, which leads to better objective indicators. This finding reinforces the need to consider the economic sector as a whole, as well as the internal segmentation of jobs by gender and by role performed.

Regarding subjective job quality, the results indicate that both men and women perceive their jobs as being of high or very high quality, even in contexts of low objective quality. This finding is consistent with the theoretical approaches of Lewis (1954) and Perry (2007), who argue that informality may, in some cases, represent a form of choice and that satisfaction can stem from factors other than formality or stability. However, the study also reveals a divergence in job quality perceptions between men and women, in line with Gómez-Salcedo *et al.* (2017), who found that since 2015, women's perceptions of job quality have become more critical than men's. This contrasts with Farné and Vergara's (2007) earlier findings, which reported more favorable female perceptions, suggesting that recent sociocultural shifts and increased public debate around gender inequalities may have fostered greater awareness among women regarding their labor conditions.

The territorial analysis complements these discussions by showing that job quality is strongly conditioned by each city's economic structure. Cities with greater productive diversification and higher concentrations of formal employment, such as Bogotá, Medellín, Manizales, and Bucaramanga, exhibit the

best objective and subjective job quality indicators. These findings partially align with Mora and Ulloa (2011), who emphasized that larger metropolitan areas offer better employment opportunities. However, this study adds nuance by showing that in major cities like Cali and Pereira, objective job quality tends to favor men, contrary to the trend observed in most other Colombian cities.

In contrast, cities such as Sincelejo, Riohacha, Cúcuta, Valledupar, Montería, and Pasto exhibit low objective job quality indices, ranging between 0.20 and 0.34, reflecting their dependence on highly informal sectors, such as commerce and tourism. The limited productive diversification in these regions restricts formal job creation and negatively impacts workers' quality of life, creating additional social pressures on local governments. This finding expands on Farné and Vergara's (2015) discussion by revealing that economic growth in Colombia is not evenly distributed across territories and that local sectoral characteristics play a decisive role in explaining variations in job quality.

These findings have important implications for public policy. Evidence shows that aggregate indicators can mask deep inequalities between men and women, between economic sectors, and among cities, therefore requiring targeted, differentiated interventions. To increase women's participation in sectors where they remain underrepresented, policies should promote access to highly skilled occupations, particularly in scientific and technical fields, where structural entry barriers persist. At the sectoral level, labor formalization and specialized training programs are recommended for artistic, recreational, and service-related industries, along with incentives for companies that offer formal contracts and improved working conditions to reduce structural precariousness. At the regional level, promoting economic diversification and productive development in intermediate cities is crucial to strengthening their capacity for generating formal and quality employment.

Finally, this study contributes to the national literature by showing that job quality in Colombia cannot be understood solely through aggregate indicators; rather, a true understanding of job quality requires a differentiated analysis by gender, sector, and territory. In doing so, this study goes beyond the methodological replication of previous studies and offers a broader, more detailed, and more critical perspective on contemporary labor dynamics, one that provides valuable insights for both academia and public policy design.

## Conclusions

The analysis of job quality in Colombia, based on objective and subjective indicators, shows that these two approaches do not always coincide, reflecting tensions between contractual conditions and workers' perceptions of stability and satisfaction. Although subjective job quality tends to be higher than objective measures, this study demonstrates that such a gap stems from self-assessment factors and cultural elements previously identified in the literature. These findings reaffirm classic insights such as those of Seashore (1974), while providing updated evidence that this phenomenon persists in the Colombian labor market.

Regarding gender, the results reveal slight advantages for women in certain sectors, which can be explained by their insertion into administrative occupations within physical or operational branches, where men are more concentrated in precarious roles. This finding adds a novel perspective to the debate. Whereas previous studies, such as Mora *et al.* (2016) and Ramírez (2022), documented structural inequalities disadvantaging women, the present analysis shows that, under specific sectoral conditions, women may access jobs of better objective quality. Likewise, the evidence by city confirms that economic diversification favors job quality, as seen in Bogotá, compared with territories more dependent on informal sectors such as Sincelejo. This outcome reinforces Mora and Ulloa's (2011) argument concerning regional determinants, while providing an updated perspective that highlights persistent urban gaps.

The main contribution of this study lies in combining objective and subjective measurements of job quality with a disaggregated approach by gender, economic sector, and city, thus moving beyond the simple replication of previous methodologies. While studies such as Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022) or Ramírez (2022) developed integral indices, this research integrates comparative and territorial dimensions, offering a more refined understanding of labor dynamics and providing useful inputs for both public policy design and academic discussion.

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis relies on cross-sectional data, preventing the examination of labor trajectories or intertemporal mobility in job quality. Moreover, although objective and subjective dimensions are integrated, perception-based information comes from self-reported survey data, which may introduce bias and restrict exploration of cultural, family, or individual factors underlying subjective evaluations of work. These limitations open opportunities for future studies aimed at deepening the understanding of labor quality in Colombia.

Looking ahead, advancing toward longitudinal studies that examine labor transitions and their relationship with job quality is necessary, as well as applying intersectional approaches incorporating variables such as ethnicity, age, and educational level. Complementary qualitative research exploring workers' narratives in informal sectors could further enrich the understanding of subjective job quality and its determinants. Additionally, future studies should analyze the impact of labor formalization policies, particularly in intermediate cities where structural challenges are most evident.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of deepening sectoral gender analysis, especially in highly precarious branches such as artistic and personal service activities, where gender gaps persist and targeted policies on formalization and social protection are urgently needed.

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