

23. Interview with Liliana Caballero Velasquez

Interview conducted via email by Silvia Federici with Liliana CABALLERO VELASQUEZ, of the Association MADRES COMUNITARIAS in Bogota' Colombia. [February 2011]

This is our situation, us being the COMMUNITARIAN MOTHERS. We are a group dedicated to caring and protecting young children in Colombia. We look after the nutrition as well as the physical, social and emotional growth of the children in general. For the past 22 years we have been fighting to have the Colombian State recognize this work as a most important work, but apparently these people could not care less given that we have been exploited for a long time, first of all with bad remuneration, which affects us to a great extent given that many of us are heads of our families or rather single mothers raising our children on our own.

We have had connections with organizations at the national level including farmers' and factory workers' organizations... and many others. Through these unions we have motivated each other. Beside looking after 12 kids every day I have to prepare the food for them and sit down and feed them myself. And on top of it all there is no

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space to welcome them and I have to use my own home where I live with my children, using all of my own services, like electricity, water, gas, and the cost of all of them is 150,000 Columbian pesos. I have to pay for the cleaning with the 24,000 pesos that they provide for, and my wages, if you can call them that, because they are 221,000 pesos a month which is not even enough to go the market for the week.

Generally, we work in our homes and we have 13 to 14 kids under our care, but some communitarian mothers work in groups and cover the rents with their own wages because the employer doesn't help them in any way. The working hours are half shift from 5 am to 1 pm, our wages are called bonuses because none of us are state employees and we cannot say that they are wages. We have no benefits; we do not have paid holidays; and we don't have weekly time off, because in our time off we must assist obligatory meetings and trainings.

The tasks we have to carry out are the following: we prepare the food to give to the children, we carry out pedagogical activities, ensure they receive a good nutritional diet, we take care of their health. Apart from these, we must make sure that the children's rights are respected, that we are up to date with the planning of the activities that we do with the kids. They [the authorities] do not help us to improve the space where we attend to these 13 or 14 children; the parents are freed from their responsibilities and these are imposed on us, the communitarian mothers.

Our working conditions are very hard. Some communitarian mothers don't have any social security because the employer doesn't take responsibility for this. With our

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struggle we managed to force the state to create a special regime within social security, which includes the 1023 law of May 3, 2006. But the employers do not want to take responsibility to pay for it. Some communitarian mothers have worked for 22 years without receiving any benefit in exchange; some are 59-60-65 years old and it is injustice what they get for a pension. We will end up with nothing.

We also do not have any type of job security. We can be fired at any time, and many of us have been, unfairly, some because they were very ill, others for minimal problems. To these we must add the dismissals or termination of our services following standard quality checks, when they evaluate the space in which we attend to the children. If this is not adequate they close the communitarian homes down with no second thought; the employers demand all this but they do not help us make these spaces suitable, which are our own homes which we offer to provide the services to the children.

Our main problem is the lack of recognition for our work and the fact that we working consecutive hours. We also have problems with the workers who are sent by foundations to manage the communitarian homes, that is, we are managed by an operator. The relationship with the children is excellent because of the work we do; those who love what they do keep good relations with all that surrounds them, we are never scared to look after children, on the contrary, it is our duty to do so. But we, communitarian mothers, end up neglecting our own children to look after those of the community, because they do not allow us to bring our children to the communitarian homes, because according to them we would be neglecting the children we are caring for.

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Our organization is a union for communitarian mothers, we organize together with all the other organizations at the national level, which has prepared us to manage to defend our own rights and problems. We organize mobilizations, meetings, trainings, and we know people who are part of the parliament and support us. Our demands? We want recognition for our work, we want to obtain respect, and a lot benefits because we are the pillars of early childhood.

The situation I am describing is a general one. Out of 100% of communitarian mothers, 99% of us work in our own home, while the remaining percentage work in places called 'gatherings' where the communitarian mother has to be, according to the employer, the one in charge of paying the rent and the services of such place. The reality is that we live in a state of labour exploitation that you cannot even imagine, you know, Rihoacha, la Guajira in Colombia is a place where indigenous Wayuu live and many of their women are communitarian mothers, they are much more exploited, you know, if you saw the depressing conditions in which these indigenous women work you would immediately publish all of this.