

Care for those who care for you! Domestic workers' struggles in times of pandemic crisis

Louisa Acciari (24th June 2020)

“Cleonice Gonçalves, present!” became the new slogan on the WhatsApp groups of domestic workers in Brazil.¹ Not by coincidence, one of the first deaths confirmed by COVID-19 in the country (March 17th) was that of a domestic worker: Cleonice Gonçalves, a black woman, aged 63, diabetic, leaving in the city of Miguel Pereira in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Her employer, a resident of the upper-class area of Leblon, had just returned from a trip to Italy and did not inform her employee that she had been contaminated. One survived, the other did not.

The new coronavirus was initially seen as a disease affecting more the cosmopolitan middle and upper classes, with the financial conditions to travel abroad and organise fancy parties. However, the virus soon started to reach the popular classes, having a more critical effect on them. Since Cleonice Gonçalves died, Brazil has registered more than 50,000 deaths, but many specialists alert that the actual number could be 10 times higher, since the government has a policy of not testing and not reporting adequately the causes of death. While the middle and upper classes can easily protect themselves in spacious houses, with the option of home office, social isolation is much more complex for the popular classes who are forced to stay in work, and face precarious living and housing conditions.

Domestic workers are the typical example of this precarious working class, exposed to high risks of contamination and without adequate social protection: they are black women, poor, with an average income below the minimum wage, often heads of their households, and located in the informal sector. Of the 6.3 million domestic workers in Brazil, only 41% contribute to social security, 70% do not have a formal contract and 47% are day labourers (IPEA, 2019). This means that although there is a law that guarantees labour rights to them (Complementary Law n. 150 of 2015), the majority of domestic workers fall outside of the scope of the legislation. If this sector of activity has always been marked by high rates of informality, precariousness is felt more violently in times of pandemic crisis. The leaders of the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) conducted a partial assessment of the situation of their affiliates over the phone, and found three types of cases: day labourers (with no

¹ There is a tradition to say out loud the name of activists who passed away to show that their memory is still alive; for instance, in women's movements, it became common to scream “Marielle Franco, presente!” in honour of the council officer of Rio de Janeiro, murdered on 15 March 2018. Cleonice Gonçalves was not an activist, but her death became a symbol of the precarious situation of domestic workers.

formal contracts), full-time domestic workers with a formal contract, and caregivers.

Day labourers

According to union leaders, 90% to 95% of the day labourers (*diaristas*) with whom they spoke over the phone are being fired without pay. A study published by the Institute Locomotiva, made with employers, suggests that this number would be closer to 40%, and that 23% of the day labourers would still be working normally.² The actual proportion is probably in between, as we can expect that employers would under-report dismissals because of the Covid-19, while the union leaders are quite likely to have been contacted only by those who were fired. This mass dismissal is not illegal; day labourers are considered “self-employed” by law, which means that they do not have access to the unemployment benefit, and the employer owes them no notice period or financial compensation. They are totally unprotected. There are about 2.5 million day labourers in Brazil. If they all get dismissed, there will be millions of families without income or with a significant drop of income during the pandemic crisis. Although the government has announced an emergency financial support (\$115 per month) for informal and unemployed workers, which includes the day labourers, workers are facing difficulties in claiming this benefit and the process is rather slow.

As explained by Valdelice de Jesus Almeida, President of the union of Maranhão, and elected officer of the FENATRAD:

“Those who have a contract can stay home, and the day labourers, like myself, get fired. Staying at home means not getting paid. As most of the domestic workers are the breadwinners for their households, how will they pay for their bills? My family, for example, depends on my salary, since my husband cannot afford to pay for everything on his own. I don’t know how I am going to pay for the share of the expenses I am usually responsible for. I haven’t been receiving money for weeks. Most of the daily workers, *diaristas*, will go through this same situation.”

The FENATRAD has been contesting the unfair condition of the *diaristas* since the approval of the law 150/2015. Although day labourers already existed before, this legislation institutionalizes the distinction between full-time formalised workers (who work for at least 3 days a week for the same employer), and day labourers (who work up to 2 days a week for the same employer). A difference that contradicts ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic

² See study published on 23 April: <https://www.ilocomotiva.com.br/single-post/2020/04/23/G1-39-dos-patr%C3%B5es-dispensaram-diaristas-sem-pagamento-durante-pandemia-aponta-pesquisa>

workers, ratified by Brazil in 2018, which does not recognize any criteria of days worked for the good application of equal labour rights.

Domestic workers with a formal contract

There is a minority of domestic workers with a formal contract. Some are managing to negotiate a paid quarantine or anticipated vacations to maintain their salary. The union of the city of São Paulo, where there have been collective agreements with employers since 2017, estimates that about 70% of domestic workers with a formal contract are in paid quarantine. But that only takes into account the workers and employers with whom the union has been able to speak in recent weeks, and it probably does not reflect the reality of the rest of the country where such agreements do not exist. According to the Institute Locomotiva (cited above), only 48% of the full-time formalised domestic workers would benefit from a paid quarantine. Put in other words, more than half of the domestic workers who hold a contract are being either dismissed or kept in work.

In fact, many domestic workers reported to their unions that they have no choice but work to survive. Some are being picked-up at home by their employers, others have to face crowded public transports. One even shared that her employer had raised her pay so that she keeps cleaning and cooking for the household and their two student daughters (all working from home). These kind of cases cause a certain discomfort; first, why is having someone else doing your cleaning so vital during a pandemic crisis, and second, why not pay more the employee under normal circumstances, if the employers can afford it? On the bright side, when domestic workers have a formal contract, cases of abuse or unfair dismissal are likely to be brought to a labour court by their unions.

Caregivers

The third case is that of the caregivers, who have been declared an essential sector by the government. According to the unions, the absolute majority of caregivers are, in fact, working. In many cases, patients could not stay without this service, and their own families are often not trained to do the work of the caregiver. However, there have been many reports of abuse, showing that the rights of this category are not respected. Many caregivers continue to use public transport on a daily basis, the employers do not always provide the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and unions have exposed several instances of what they call “private imprisonment”. Some employing families forced their caregiver to remain in quarantine with them, while others demand double or triple shifts without offering the worker any financial compensation or sufficient resting time.

Several feminist authors have discussed the precarious conditions of domestic workers and caregivers, revealing the tension between the need for social reproduction and the devaluation of the women who perform those tasks

(Duffy, 2007; Hirata, Guimarães, 2012; Parreñas, 2001; Sorj, 2014). In the context of the current crisis, this tension becomes particularly visible, and even shocking. The cases of abuse reported by the domestic workers' unions are disconcerting: families aware of having a contaminated person who do not inform the worker, threats of dismissal or just dismissal without pay, forced quarantines, non-remunerated extra shifts. Domestic work is rooted in the colonial legacy that has established a gender and race division of labour in Brazil, and in fact, in most countries. The Covid-19 crisis shows only a new expression of these persistent social inequalities, within which the labour and the life of domestic workers are considered to worth less than that of the other workers. In the collective imagination, certain tasks cannot be performed by the “qualified”, white, middle-class, even in a situation of pandemic crisis.

Care for those who care for you!

But domestic workers are resisting. They are simultaneously fighting against the Covid-19 and the exploitation from their employers. The FENATRAD launched a national campaign, with the same slogan as their sister organisations in Latin America affiliated to the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), called “Care for those who care for you” (in Portuguese: “*cuida de quem te cuida*”).³ They require that employers provide the adequate level of protection to those who have to work, such as the caregivers, while demanding the right to a paid quarantine for the professional category. Their allied Congresswoman, Benedita Silva, from the Workers' Party, proposed a bill relaying domestic workers' demands. As argued by Creuza Maria de Oliveira, General Secretary of FENATRAD: “the domestic worker is also a human being, she has a family and needs to preserve her health”,⁴ while Luiza Batista, President of the Federation, emphasizes: “We have to end this idea that quarantine in Brazil has become a class privilege.”⁵

The FENATRAD also published guidelines for domestic workers, offering advice on how to protect themselves and suggesting ways of negotiating the best possible working conditions with their employers. Furthermore, local unions are informing and representing their members via phone and WhatsApp even though their doors are closed. As the crisis progressed, the Brazilian government took some measures that impact the sector: the announcement of an emergency financial support, and the possibility for employers to suspend

³ See FENATRAD's website : <https://fenatrad.org.br/2020/03/18/cuida-de-quem-te-cuida-proteja-sua-trabalhadora-domestica/>

⁴ Video published on 25 March: <https://fenatrad.org.br/2020/03/25/veja-video-creuza-oliveira-faz-apelo-aos-empregadores-para-a-liberacao-das-trabalhadoras-domesticas-durante-a-pandemia/>

⁵ Interview published on 29 March : <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/03/29/domicas-defendem-direito-a-quarentena-remunerada-e-dividem-patroes.htm?cmpid=copiaecola&cmpid=copiaecola>

contracts or reduce wages and working hours for a period of 3 months. The unions are helping domestic workers to claim their benefit, as many struggle with the website, and they offer mediation with employers to those who have a contract that is being revised.

Last but not least, union leaders are indeed taking care of domestic workers. In most cities, they have been asking for donations and distributing food baskets to those who lost their job. For most leaders, this is the first experience of fundraising, and they have had to learn quickly how to handle new online technologies. With homemade face masks, a bit of alcohol in gel 70% in their bag, and an infinite amount of compassion, union leaders are facing the virus to support the most vulnerable workers. Valdelice, President of the union of Maranhão in Brazil, explains that taking care of domestic workers has become one of her most important tasks:

“I also spend part of the day calling my affiliates and comrades to check in on them, to know how they are coping. I speak to at least 20 domestic workers every day, by WhatsApp, and I call another 5 who don’t have the application, every Saturday, on their landlines. I ask them how they are doing, if they are taking care of themselves, and offer my support. I let them know that I am here if they need me. I know the situation is difficult for all of them and it can be nice to have someone to talk to, we all want someone to tell us everything is going to be fine.”



Luiza Batista (with the red mask), President of the FENATRAD and of the union of Pernambuco, distributing food baskets to domestic workers.

All over Latin America, the unions affiliated to IDWF are adopting very similar strategies: legal mobilisations, information, and humanitarian aid. In Chile, for instance, the National Federation of Unions of Home Workers (FESINTRACAP), sent a bill to the Congress demanding the right to a paid quarantine. In Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, the unions are providing information to their members via WhatsApp, Facebook, online conferences, and they produced guidelines on how to avoid contamination. In El Salvador, Guatemala and Paraguay, the leaders are distributing food and hygiene baskets to domestic workers who lost their jobs.⁶ At the global level, IDWF is raising an emergency fund to support its affiliates, if you can, please donate!⁷ With very limited resources, and under an incredibly adverse context, domestic workers' organisations are showing us the way forward: more rights, more collective action, more solidarity.

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⁶ See more actions on IDWF website: <https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/rapid-responses-by-the-idwf-affiliates/every-action-counts>

⁷ Link for donations: <https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/solidarity-fund/idwf-solidarity-fund>

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⁸ <https://www.reflexpandemia.org/texto-5>