

Women's Economic Empowerment

Voice for Domestic Workers



Marcelina Bautista

IDWN Latin American Regional Coordinator and General Secretary of CONACTRAHO [Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers], by Steffany Sinclair

With no possibilities of an education past the primary level or work in her home town, Marcelina left Oaxaca at the age of 14 and traveled alone to Mexico City to find her future. She didn't know anyone in the big city, nor did she speak Spanish, but she did want to study and earn a living for herself and to help her family economically. Her options however, were limited - live on the streets or work as a live-in household¹ worker. She soon discovered the harsh realities of the profession.

At 14 years of age Marcelina worked a gruelling 15 hour schedule with only one day off every two weeks. Her list of tasks seemed endless. Additionally, she was responsible for taking care of children and found the situation difficult - she wanted to play as a child but didn't have the rights of a child. She had the responsibilities of an adult worker, but not the rights of one and as is often the case, she didn't realize this. *"It's very hard to take on such responsibilities at that age. You have to put your own childhood aside."*

For all her hard work, Marcelina earned low wages and because of the language barrier and the fact that her employer denied her the right to go to school, she had to put her studies aside as well. To escape the drudgery, she sought the opportunity to learn handicrafts and became involved in a church group, where she played guitar and sang in the choir. There she met a Christian working youth group that gathered in a church where they discussed their labour conditions and learned about religion and the bible. The group leader, a priest named Ivan Perrot supported the young people and encouraged them to continue their lives as workers and move forward. One of the things she learned was that household work wasn't only a mission to serve but also about reclaiming rights. *"As household workers, human rights in the workplace are particularly important, as they are the least respected."*

Unfamiliar with the legal aspects of household work, the priest directed her to a group of older household workers from whom she learned, among other things, about issues particular to women and household work. She also continued to learn more about labour law. By the age of 17 she began the process of organizing other groups of household workers and in 1988 Marcelina participated in a Congress of household workers of Latin America and the Caribbean held in Bogota, Colombia with the participation of 11 countries. *"... it was an interesting experience to work in leadership with other women in other countries; that even though they were from different countries and considering how far away they were, they experienced the same conditions of exploitation in relation to labour laws and the conditions of the work that we do as women in the household work sector"*.

Marcelina returned to Mexico with a greater commitment to continue organizing and learning and felt that this was the work she wanted to pursue. In September 2000 Marcelina founded CACEH, *Centro de Apoyo y Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar* [Support and Training Center for Household Workers] in Mexico City, a centre for support, training and personal development formed by and for household workers based on the platform of defending and promoting human and labour rights. Ten years strong, the organization extends an open invitation to household workers to attend training and to receive help in placing them in better positions to improve their working conditions. One of CACEH's mandates is to fight for reform of the chapter of the law relating specifically to household workers. Currently, there is no relationship between the written law and actual rights, so there is a need for action for stronger legal reform so that rights can be enforced and there is also a need for groups in other states in Mexico to unite on issues relating to labour and human rights for household workers.



Photo by Julian Luckham, WIEGO's General Assembly

¹ CONACTRAHO has rejected the term "domestic workers" and instead uses the Spanish term "*Trabajadores del Hogar*" - in English "household workers"

At CONLACTRAHO's Second Congress she was elected Secretary of Acts and Archives in 1991, where she served for two periods and in 2002, Marcelina was elected General Secretary of CONLACTRAHO. *"As Secretary General of 14 countries and to represent domestic workers on a regional and international level is a great commitment and challenge because one is elected in this position to be the voice of demands of domestic workers so I have to accomplish this mission. It is very difficult, as these are different countries with varying cultures from the organization in my own country."*

It is important to be informed on the relevant issues, Marcelina adds, and to be organized and continue working and representing organizations at different levels - including institutional issues and sectoral worker demands.

The Latin American Confederation, CONLACTRAHO participated actively in the first international conference of domestic workers -Respect and Rights. Protection for Domestic Workers! organized by IRENE (an NGO) and the FNV(Netherlands Trade Union Federation) supported by a Steering Committee that included WIEGO which was held in Amsterdam in 2006, and where it was recommended that an international network of domestic workers be formed.

Because it is difficult to garner the attention and respect that is required, alliances with other institutions and collaboration with trade unions that work on the issues of discrimination, exploitation and gender issues is important. It is equally important that women who get into positions of power understand the importance of these issues.

One of the undertakings Marcelina is involved with on an international level is ensuring the direct participation of domestic workers in the discussions at the ILO in June 2010 and 2011 around a Convention and Recommendation on household work. It is a very difficult challenge for household workers and the organized labour sector, Marcelina concedes, *"... because in order to participate in this function we need to be delegates. In labour unions in our countries, the issue of household work hasn't been taken into consideration so in order to participate and to be part of the central unions, gain support and play a role in the conference we must be seen as delegates and be recognized before this conference as being in positions of authority"*.

On the international level, (including Africa and Asia) the preparation for the Latin American campaign which she is coordinating, consists of preparing the workers to participate in the conference as delegates from trade unions. It is essential that their governments be sensitive to the importance of the rights that they are demanding as household workers as an ILO Convention and Recommendation will help initiate the process of legislation where needed.

Marcelina has great empathy for, and understanding of, the household workers she so fervently supports. In her 22 years of household work and lobbying for legal reforms, she has seen much suffering and hardship among the workers, particularly in regions of great poverty.

"I believe it is very difficult to find work to earn a living and (women) are willing to accept any conditions. Concurrently, the employer exploits the situation by saying they are doing them a favour and that in their house the conditions are better than in their towns where there are no conditions for a dignified life."

Marcelina would like to see child labour abolished - some girls start work as early as 8 years old, going from fields into the city. It comes down to economic survival, particularly for migrants. It is one of Marcelina's goals to gain acknowledgement and raise awareness in society on these issues.

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