



# “Women are always the strongest”

Interviewing Paola Caviedes Martinez,  
*Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular de Argentina*

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## Paola's Story

Paola Caviedes Martinez is a single mom concerned with children's rights, raising children without male role models and the psychological turmoil caused by financial crisis, credit crunch and a general decline in living standards. Coming from the poorest class in her native city of Buenos Aires in Argentina, she herself is an eye witness and victim of the huge costs of economical decline.



**“I still remember the humiliation of going through other people’s garbage”, Paola says with a sad grin on her face.**

In the mid-1990s, Paola was working in a kitchen for an informal foundation for children set up by workers in the informal economy. This kindergarten-like institution was the only solution for the moms who needed someone to care for their children while they went to work to earn an income. Paola thrived in this work, but since it was not a part of the formal economy it provided little social security. The only real issue was that she did not get enough income from this position to provide for her son. She then entered the waste picking line of work around 1998:

“I still remember the humiliation of going through other people’s garbage”, Paola says with a sad grin on her face. “I had to focus on my son’s needs and try to block out the image of myself plowing through leftovers to make a half decent meal.”

Paola soon became part of the more organized form of waste picking, which can be better described as a form of recycling. The waste pickers collect garbage and sort out valuables which can be recycled. Bits and pieces are then sold to scrap dealers to make an income.

“At the time I entered waste picking there was a law banning this line of work. The law made it illegal to go through other people’s waste and made a hard life even harder for the poorest among the Argentines. This law also makes it really, really hard to gain respect for waste picking being a regular line of work and the waste pickers as regular, ordinary workers,” Paola continues.

When she thought things could not get any worse, 2001 came along and the great financial crisis hit Argentina big time. Many people in the formal economy lost their jobs and income.

“Banks seized the money from the people. Without a house or money, there is nothing to lose. I am a survivalist,” is Paola’s laconic comment on the events concerning the financial crisis.

“The saddest consequence of the credit crunch was all the children and young people turning to drugs as a way of coping with the situation. Normal kids with parents in the informal economy turned to paco (a left over from cocaine production, smoked to inhale fumes of chemical waste) and this started a wave of mental illness. Their parents were not able to look after them as they now had to work twice, if not thrice as hard as before the crisis.”

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Alongside these ill events in her home country, was Paola’s growing concern about the waste pickers’ rights and demands for recognition. She soon was elected a trustee of the confederation of waste pickers in Buenos Aires, the movement of the Excluded Workers (*Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos*, or MTE for short). MTE soon realized that their concerns and struggles were the same as those of other workers in the informal economy, and together they formed the Confederation of Workers of the Informal Economy (*Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular*, or CTEP for short).

"It is important to gather collective strength," Says Paola. "Together we can achieve much more than on our own. The politicians and the law makers cannot ignore masses of tens of thousands marching in the streets demanding changes."

Paola says that their collective effort has been successful, and that the local government of Buenos Aires actually passed a law in 2011 securing a minimum of social protection for the workers in the informal economy. But there is still a long way to go, she continues:

"We want to be recognized as regular workers, both by the government, local authorities and the trade unions. Today we are not recognized at all; we are being excluded from all kinds of political processes and bargaining on minimum wage, for instance. It seems that they want to ignore our bare existence, make us invisible. Therefore we have started cooperating with other unions in order to make them realize that without organized unity there will be no sustainable economy."

Latino culture is commonly known for its macho ideals, the 'machista'. When asked about the gender issue in Argentina, Paola chuckles and states: "I'm not a feminist, I am a machista, too. I'm a militant activist working for all workers' rights, not only the ones in the formal sector or female workers. Besides, women are always the strongest. We need to take care of and feed our children. We are not like weak men who turn to alcohol to escape their daily sorrows. That being said, I am a defender of fighting and struggling women, of course, and Argentine women have gained many more rights through legislation in recent years." "One of the greatest hinders for poor people is the access to guidelines, information, mass media and the legislation process. Without crucial knowledge of these processes we will not be able to make changes to our system. So, education and training is an important issue for the poor, maybe even more so for women of the poor classes", she says in conclusion.

Paola was attending the International Labour Conference as a delegate for the NGOs. As neither MTE nor CTEP are recognized as unions per se, there are limitations to her influence on the workers' group present at the conference. However, she still believes it is of utter importance that the NGOs are present and make their case:

"We as representatives of the NGOs need to uphold pressure, both nationally and internationally. The poor people need to be seen. "The ongoing struggle for the importance of being recognized

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as regular workers needs to be addressed to the workers present at the conference. We have experienced good support from the workers and they really seem interested in what we have to say, but they are still unwilling to include us as workers. This upsets me, as well as all the experts at this conference. They pretend to know how it is to live in the informal economy, but you cannot read to an exam in informal economy – you have to live it to understand it.

“One example of this lack of knowledge is when they speak of the social solidarity economy. They seem to believe that there are great profits to be gained from this part of the economy. In Argentine we have loads of cooperatives which have taken over abandoned production facilities and overrun factories. Ninety-eight per cent of the income is for survival - purely for survival. There is a huge gap between the concept of micro enterprises and the survivalists of real life.”

Meeting Paola was an unusual glimpse into a world quite unknown to the neat and orderly relations we know from our Nordic reality. She has proven to us that the struggle for all workers’ rights is an ongoing struggle not nearly won yet, and that the way to victory comes through education, training and legislation.



**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base, and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).