

Como Cualquier Otro Trabajo: Organizing Domestic Workers in Urban Ecuador

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**Como Cualquier Otro Trabajo: Organizing Domestic Workers in Urban Ecuador**

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## **Como Cualquier Otro Trabajo: Organizing Domestic Workers in Urban Ecuador**

Based on fieldwork and interviews with members of Ecuador's pioneer organization of paid domestic workers, this paper considers the challenges that they face in improving working conditions for members of a precarious, transitory, and informal workforce. First, outreach is made difficult by the long working hours of domestic workers and the sizable population of live-in employees. Second, because of the predominance of informal employment arrangements and the invisibility of work conducted in private homes, enforcement of existing labor laws applicable to domestic workers is nearly impossible. Third, the state, while initially bringing attention to domestic worker issues, has been an unreliable ally. The domestic workers' organization studied tackles these challenges through a variety of strategies, especially re-defining paid domestic work as "regular work".

Objective:

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the strategies and challenges of one domestic worker organization in Guayaquil (Ecuador's largest city) in the context of recent governmental and non-governmental efforts to formalize domestic work. I am interested in the effects of the national government's recent efforts to formalize domestic work, especially in terms of relations between workers and employers, and how domestic workers think about their jobs and make decisions related to work. How does the domestic worker organization reach out to workers and navigate the changing political landscape?

Description of Topic:

Paid domestic work is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary urban life. This largely informal employment arrangement continues because of the need for poor women to work and support their families and the entrance of middle-class women into the paid labor force. There have been important research studies on the nature of paid domestic work in Latin America and the Caribbean (Chaney and García Castro 1991; Karides 2002) and in the U.S. and other wealthy countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Romero 2002). These studies place domestic work in the context of social and economic inequality, and examine the role of such work in maintaining these inequalities. This literature also focuses on the gender and racial/ethnic aspects of domestic work. With the exception of some recent work (Bernardino-Costa 2011; Cabezas Fernández 2012; Karides 2002; Mose Brown 2011), none of which focuses directly on Ecuador, there has been very little scholarly focus on the collective organizing of domestic workers to improve their standard of living, or on government interventions in domestic employment relations.

Domestic worker advocates point out that the International Labor Organization's Convention on domestic worker rights has been ratified by just one member nation, indicating a lack of attention to this issue globally. Worldwide, 43.6 million women are paid domestic workers, totaling 7.5 percent of the planet's employed women (ILO 2011). In Latin America, about 14 million women, 14 percent of the region's women workers, are in paid domestic employment (Estrada 2009). Approximately 11 percent of Ecuadorian women employed in cities are domestic workers, for a total of 155,894 urban domestic workers (Pérez and Gallardo 2005). Nationally, an estimated 18 percent of employed women are domestic

workers (Reyes and Camacho 2001). The informal nature of domestic work means that official statistics surely undercount the number of women laboring in private homes. The female labor market in Ecuador is bifurcated, with a set of ‘good’ jobs (though too few) available to women who have completed college, and a set of less-desirable jobs, or informal self-employment, for women with less education (Casanova 2011). Domestic work is often described by women with few resources as the least appealing employment option available, because of its low pay and the potential for exploitation by employers who are basically unregulated; many prefer other informal work (e.g., small-scale selling) (Casanova 2011).

Guayaquil is Ecuador’s largest city, with 2.4 million people living inside the city limits (M.I. Municipalidad de Guayaquil 2012) and a metropolitan area population of about 3 million. Many of Guayaquil’s residents live in poverty (as much as 87 percent in the early 2000s: Floro and Messier 2006, 234), and it is common for middle-class families to employ domestic workers. Employment arrangements vary, with some elite families employing an entire live-in staff, and some lower-middle-class households having someone come in for a few hours a week. Many families’ only tangible claim to middle-class status is the presence of a domestic worker in their household. Long an informal, under-the-table, contract-free type of employment, domestic work is now the subject of increased government scrutiny and public consciousness-raising by worker organizations, and both workers and employers have the sense that the sands are shifting.

The timing of this study was ideal, as the left-leaning government of President Rafael Correa began to enforce labor laws protecting domestic workers—though not in any systematic or sustained way—in 2009-2011. Domestic workers’ issues were frequently featured in the news media, and workers’ organizations began to ramp up advocacy and peer education efforts to leverage state support and improve working conditions. It was always difficult for domestic workers to negotiate for a living wage and a bearable workload because of the unequal position of employer and employee and the lack of regulation, and the public attention around domestics’ legal rights in this period paradoxically made such discussions even more difficult for workers.

I examine how the organization as well as employees and employers have responded to a new political and legal framework for domestic work, how recent changes have led to--or

resulted from--collective organizing, and how public actions around domestic work have affected employee/employer relations. This research has the potential to contribute to theoretical and empirical debates regarding the organizing of precarious workers, the status of working women, the importance of the public/private divide in social and economic life, and cross-class employment relations.

*Methodology:*

This presentation is based on ongoing research with one domestic worker organization in Guayaquil. Until recently, this was the only organization in the country dedicated solely to domestic work issues. The organization has links to various unions and national/international non-governmental agencies, and is run by former and current domestic workers from an office in downtown Guayaquil. I employ multiple methods of data collection, including participant observation, archival research (including an analysis of newspaper classified/"help wanted" advertisements), and interviews. In 2010 and 2012, I conducted fieldwork and 14 interviews in Guayaquil with members of Ecuador's pioneer organization of paid domestic workers. I also interviewed three employers of domestic workers in order to get their perspective.

*Results:*

This paper considers the challenges that they face in improving working conditions for members of a precarious, transitory, and informal workforce. First, outreach is made difficult by the long working hours of domestic workers and the sizable population of live-in employees. Even if workers do not live in employers' homes, they often work six days per week, limiting their availability for trainings, meetings, protests, or even one-on-one conversations with the activists from the domestic workers' organization. Second, because of the predominance of informal employment arrangements and the invisibility of work conducted in private homes, enforcement of existing labor laws applicable to domestic workers is nearly impossible. In 2010, the government (through the Ministry of Labor) briefly conducted inspections designed to identify which homes had domestic workers and whether those workers were receiving the required minimum wage and benefits such as enrollment in the Social Security system. Third, the state, while initially bringing attention to domestic worker issues, has been an unreliable ally. Despite sitting next to the Ecuadorian

president at news conference on domestic worker issue a few years ago, the organization has not been able to keep the attention of the government, which has embarked on domestic work campaigns without consulting with the organization. The domestic workers' organization studied tackles these challenges through a variety of strategies, especially re-defining paid domestic work as "regular work", but also including consciousness-raising activities aimed at employers, networking with domestic worker organizations in other Latin American countries, partnering with local labor unions for training and other assistance, and support of workers' legal battles against former employers.

The preliminary results of this research raise larger questions, including: What factors enable or inhibit success in the organizing of precarious workers? Is the formalization of informal work desirable, and if so, how should it be pursued? Is the unionization of domestic work a possibility, and what would the advantages and disadvantages of this approach be? How does gendered work (such as paid domestic work) challenge traditional approaches to labor organizing? The domestic workers' organization studied is currently grappling with such questions, in a political environment in which domestic workers' needs are being simultaneously publicized (by government agencies) and overlooked (by employers and legislators).

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