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Between city
and country:
domestic workers
building
food sovereignty

In Latin America and the Caribbean, domestic workers make up 18% of the female labour force. Migrating from rural areas to work in the city, many maintain both rural and urban identities. With strong connections to their family's farm on one hand, and playing a key role in buying and preparing food in urban households on the other, they occupy a strategic position within food systems. In Bolivia, increasingly well-organised unions of domestic workers are using this space to both empower their members and educate urban consumers about indigenous foods, healthy diets, agroecology, and the importance of supporting the small farm economy.

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Like many countries of the global South, Bolivia has experienced large waves of internal migration in the past few decades – especially from rural farming areas to urban areas such as the capital, La Paz. The causes of rural outmigration include neoliberal policies that undermine the price of peasant-produced crops, and climate change, which makes agricultural production increasingly uncertain. As a result, many Bolivian women from farming households find themselves forced to move to cities in search of work – often before the age of 15, with little formal education, and many from indigenous backgrounds. Indeed, while rural outmigration is typically portrayed as male, the ‘feminisation’ of migration is increasingly recognised.

In the worst cases, these vulnerable young women become victims of human trafficking. Others end up working in private homes as domestic employees charged with cleaning, preparing meals, and providing child and elder care. Working conditions for domestic workers vary widely, from near-slavery to relatively dignified jobs. But in general, this sector, which comprises an estimated 72,000 workers, 97% of whom are women, has languished in the shadows.

Despite the challenges of organising often fragmented and isolated domestic workers, remarkable progress has been made in forming unions to defend their rights. In 1993, the National Federation of Domestic Workers’ Unions (FENATRAHOB) was founded, which now comprises 13 unions from Bolivia’s nine departments. The unions work to defend domestic workers’ and women’s rights, and provide education and resources to their members. They also work to build the self-esteem and cultural identity of their members, most with roots in rural areas, by strengthening links between the countryside and the city.

Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty

In 2009, the domestic workers’ union of La Paz, SITRAHO (*Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar*), launched the Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project, with the goal of providing members a political education in food sovereignty, and increasing the direct marketing of healthy, ecologically produced food.

With support from the Interchurch Cooperative for Development Cooperation (ICCO), SITRAHO opened its Practical School for Women Domestic Workers (*Escuela Integral Práctica de Mujeres*), which carries out programmes focused on leadership skills, financial management, and entrepreneurship. Among these, the Programme in Gastronomy and Food Sovereignty provides training to the union’s 2000 members in culinary arts, food safety, and other practical food

management skills, together with a political education in the principles of food sovereignty. The curriculum focuses on the use of local products, procuring ingredients from family farmers’ organisations, and revaluing indigenous foods. These principles are then applied in the homes where SITRAHO members work, thus spreading the values of food sovereignty to middle and upper class families. The programme also runs its own lunch counter selling healthy, ecological, locally sourced, and affordable dishes with a focus on consumer education. Most of the consumers are working people from the San Pedro neighbourhood, where the restaurant is located, with the profits used to support unemployed or elderly union members.

Rural and indigenous identity

Many domestic workers remain closely connected to their rural villages, with family members still engaged in farming activities. They are keenly aware of the difficulties farmers face, and of the need for urban, worker, and consumer solidarity with rural producers. Rosalía Lazo Lazo, who came to La Paz from the rural province of Omasuyos at the age of 14, comments, “since we started in 2009 I’ve heard from a lot of peasants and indigenous farmers and this makes me remember my childhood and think of my parents who still work in the fields.”

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Many domestic workers are from Quechua or Aymara indigenous cultures and are familiar with native indigenous foods such as quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*), cañahua (*Chenopodium pallidicaule*), açaí (*Euterpe oleracea*) and muña (*Minthostachys mollis*). These foods are often unknown to urban residents, and are not found in supermarkets that primarily sell imported products and processed foods with homogeneous tastes and textures. Through the Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project, not only do domestic workers value foods from their own food culture, they also introduce these foods to their employers.

Domestic workers are generally responsible for making all household food purchases and for preparing three meals per day. This gives them tremendous influence over families’ food choices, what kind of

food system they support, and whether they promote corporate value-chains or the peasant economy. Rosalía comments, “I know farming is hard work and that people in the countryside need support. My mother still wakes up very early each morning to look after her sheep, and frost or hail sometimes damage her crops. Consumers don’t value ecologically produced products, preferring instead to buy imported produce. But in my last job, I would buy cañahua for the kids. It was hard because they preferred to eat junk food, but I would say to them, don’t you want to grow up to be big and strong? And they then would eat it! Nothing is impossible when you believe in what you do.”

Alliances with family farmers

Over the past few years, SITRAHO has formed partnerships with important food advocacy groups, small businesses, and producers’ organisations including the Association of Organic Producers of Bolivia (AOPEB); the Coordination of Peasant Economic Organisations (CIOEC); *Fundación Sartawi* which promotes sustainable agriculture in the municipality of Calamarca (south of La Paz); Madre Tierra, a chain of organic food stores in La Paz; and Slow Food Bolivia. SITRAHO has made a commitment to source food from these small farmer organisations and local businesses to strengthen the local food economy and support small scale farmers.

In October 2014, SITRAHO co-organised La Paz’s first Ethical Food Fair (*Festival de Comida Consciente*). The women of SITRAHO were in charge of preparing all of the dishes offered at the fair, with an explicit commitment to educating people about non-GMO and ecologically produced ingredients sourced from local farmers’ organisations. Piero Meda, a farmer from Calamarca said, “we work closely with the union of domestic workers to bring healthy food directly to consumers.”

SITRAHO’s partnerships go well beyond food sourcing, consumer education, and helping to create local markets for small farmers. They also translate into political alliances with farmers on important issues of agricultural policy. For instance, SITRAHO is an active member of the Bolivian Consumers’ Collective, a broad-based coalition of workers, activists, and consumer groups, which recently issued a declaration condemning the government’s support of transgenic crops and industrial agriculture.

Looking ahead SITRAHO’s Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project is a powerful example of collective efforts to repair the social, economic, and ecological damage caused by rural outmigration. Such rural–urban alliances are critical to supporting declining peasant

economies and to building food sovereignty in the city and the countryside.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by the union so far is the history of trauma of many of its members. Many domestic workers have been victims of trafficking, child labour, and abuse, experiences that often manifest as internalised oppression. Whereas many domestic workers feel a strong connection to their rural roots, others aspire to the urban, consumerist values of their employers. They have often been subjected to intense racism and may reject indigenous foods so shopping at the supermarket or buying imported food can symbolise status and acceptance.

Thus, building food sovereignty requires tireless, ongoing work to dismantle racism, sexism, and classism; recover rural identities; and construct class-based alliances that link workers and peasants, producers and consumers, in a collective struggle. These lessons from Bolivian domestic workers can be applied much more broadly, to efforts around the world, to create community-based food systems rooted in justice, sustainability, health, and culture.

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The practical school for domestic workers is transformed into a restaurant during lunch hours.

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