

## 22. Servicio Doméstico Activo

### The Association of Domestic Workers in Madrid

#### Konstanze Schmitt

*Rafaela, Marlene, and Mary from the Sedoac association in conversation with Konstanze Schmitt*

Rafaela is from the Dominican Republic, where she did key educational, social, and cultural work. She has been in Madrid for twenty years. For four years she had no papers. Now she has acquired Spanish nationality. For a few years now she has been working forty-hour weeks in domestic service for a private family.

Marlene is from Colombia, where she was a secretary. She fled the insecurity of her own country in search of a “better life” and more financial stability. She has been in Madrid for eight years. Marlene works forty hours a week cleaning banks for a temporary employment agency for a monthly salary of €580. She does so to allow herself to make social security contributions. As her salary is not

enough to live on she has to work on an hourly basis in private houses.

Mary was also a secretary. She left Colombia during the economic crisis in the 1990s. She spent several years working in Costa Rica. She has been living and working as a live-in domestic employee in Madrid since 2007.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** The association Sedoac was set up in 2006. What prompted the group to be set up and how does it work? What are your objectives?

**Marlene:** We met each other at some workshops organized by another association related to care work. We started talking to some other domestic workers and we found we were in some pretty tough situations; there are some very bad employers and families out there. There are live-in workers who barely get food to eat. We said no. And we had the idea of setting up an association for domestic staff, to make ourselves heard, to make ourselves seen and to claim our rights. Sedoac has been a legally established association for a year and a half, and I am the treasurer.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** Attending your meeting yesterday, I realized that it is a larger space: it was not only women from Sedoac, but also Agencia Precaria and other women's groups.

**Mary:** The workshop at the La Karakola feminist social center where we meet on the second Sunday of every month is called "Domestic Territory." It is a place where we listen, provide support and help, and get involved with all aspects of our work, with what the government wants to do with foreigners, etc. "Domestic Territory" is not a collective, but a place for building, with very different women and groups participating. What unites us is that we are

all, in some way or other, involved in care work and domestic service. We want to get stronger and join up with other groups to make us stronger, and to fight for our rights. Sometimes there are fifty women, sometimes twenty. And we come from many different countries, such as Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Morocco, Bangladesh, and, obviously, Spain. As there has been a big crackdown recently some women without papers no longer turn up, for fear of being arrested and deported. I have been here for three years as a live-in care worker for the elderly, and I have no papers.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** What are your political objectives?

**Rafaela:** One of the main motives is our working conditions. Domestic service is a very poorly paid profession and, besides that, we do not get the same benefits as other welfare systems. We are in a special system that means we do not have the right to unemployment benefit, sick leave, a minimum wage, or paid vacations. The law gives us absolutely no protection. Along with other domestic service associations, we form part of a national platform of domestic workers. We want domestic work to be covered by the general system, for it to be valued as highly as any other job. I consider myself to be a worker, and my rights should be respected. We are also fighting for the legalization of people in our sector who have no papers. The current government has a dual strategy; on the one hand, they are promising more rights for domestic workers with papers, and at the same time introducing intermediary companies to operate as temporary employment agencies. On the other hand, they are criminalizing workers without papers. But these are the very women who end up in

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domestic service, not just because it is one of the few options for them, but because employers are always looking to pay as little as possible, and that is why they look for women from new countries, not women who are already organized.

In 2005, the Zapatero government legalized 800,000 people without papers. Now, the climate has changed. Previously, you could be legalized by being established. If you had been in Spain for three years and you had an employment contract, they gave you a residence permit. Now it is much more restrictive, and we are afraid that Spain is bringing its immigration laws in line with European regulations. We believe that the policies of the government and Europe want to split us into “the good ones” with papers and “the bad ones” without. We cannot allow this to happen.

But our criticism goes beyond that; the Spanish State and the Spanish economy have profited from us for years, to do a job that no one paid a real wage for. Now it is time for them to provide the money required to give us dignified working conditions. Now is the time for them to pay to bring us into the general system, and to recognize our right to sick leave, and to implement the financial aspect of the Dependency Law. I am also talking about professional training.

It is thanks to us that Spanish women managed to get out of their houses. Some people criticize us for perpetuating gender roles. But it is not the domestic workers who perpetuate them, it is the people who employ us. This is the work that we were given.

**Marlene:** We also have an education project, mainly aimed at new arrivals, so that we can raise their awareness and let them know about their rights.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** What do you actually do? What strategies do you use?

**Marlene:** Let me give you the example of Latifa. Latifa is a girl from Morocco who worked as a live-in, until they fired her for no reason and refused to pay her wages. At the Sunday meetings, we told her that she had to report them, but Latifa was scared. Of course she was. Firstly, because at the time she did not speak Spanish very well, and secondly because she had no papers. Then, one of the girls at Karakola called Latifa's former employer pretending to be a lawyer. They filed the complaint, followed it up, the settlement process was a success and they had to pay Latifa. This shows that you can file a complaint, even if you do not have papers, but you have to know who to complain to, because if you go to the police without any papers, they will deport you.

**Mary:** Without the girls at Karakola we would not be where we are now. They lend us their space, they advise us, they help with our projects and our dreams. They are always with us. They use their influence, for example by getting lawyers to advise us on the current legal situation. We are always looking for partner associations and movements to help us fight against precarious employment.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** You mentioned the issue of domestic work being invisible. What do you do to protest about this issue, and to raise awareness?

**Rafaela:** The first time Sedoac went out onto the street was in November 2008. We were claiming our rights, confronting rumors about intermediary companies, something

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which was being negotiated in government without our input. We denounced the fact that undocumented employees are treated as slaves, and we chanted our slogans for the first time: “The world would stop without us!” and “No more slavery!” We also did some street theatre on the issue of domestic work. This gave us a lot of strength. There were not many of us, but we were able to break the silence. At the same time we issued a leaflet on “advice for powerful domestic workers,” which we handed out in the streets, inviting women to our meetings. On March 8, we got together as a group for the International Women’s Day demonstration, for the third year running. And on March 28, for International Domestic Workers Day, we took to the streets with associations and individuals who want to join in our fight.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** Mary, what is it like as a live-in worker with no papers?

**Mary:** Well, the two things kind of depend on one another. Women without papers do not have many options. I cannot do cleaning work by the hour like Marlene, it would be very risky for me. I try not to move around too much, and I take taxi cabs whenever I can. I do not go out at night. I always try to go along slowly. I avoid stations and places where there are lots of migrants. Once I got caught in a raid in the Metro. They arrested everyone who looked Latin American, but they did not check me because I am fair-haired and blue-eyed.

The drawbacks of being a live-in worker are obvious: It is very difficult to have your own space and time. There are people who think that because you are there twenty-four hours a day, you can work all the time. You have to set boundaries, including for your personal life. I am

caring for an elderly man. Like other live-ins, I have to put up with sexual harassment at work from some employers. But living in helps me to save money. My dream is to return to my country and to set up a project.

**Rafaela:** Yes, there are a lot of expenses here. Even I – and I am in the “privileged” position of earning €950 a month for a forty-hour week with a contract, insurance, and vacations – spend €550 on accommodation. I cannot save anything, I work to live and to send something back to my family. My mother is ill and has no pension.

**Konstanze Schmitt:** It sounds like you are in one of the “global care chains” described by Arlie Russell Hochschild and other sociologists. Women who emigrate for work, often as carers or domestic workers, leave the care and education of their families (children, parents) to other, poorer women or family members. What are your experiences?

**Rafaela:** The people migrating to Spain up until the 1990s were women. The men came in the early 1990s, with the rise in construction. But all that has passed now. On the other hand, there has always been demand for domestic staff in Spain. It was the women who went, they made the chain in two ways: Your family depended on you. So all you could do was work. You feel responsible. I paid for my sister to do an economics degree. She worked for a little over a year at a law firm, then I told her to come to Spain. She is here now, working as a domestic worker. The fact is that she earns eight times more here than in the Dominican Republic. It is another chain: we bring our sisters, our mothers, and our aunts here to work. I also think it is very common for there to be an emotional chain in domestic service: You leave your children there,

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and you get really lonely. There is a great deal of solitude in migration, especially among live-ins, and eventually, whether you like it or not, your affections are projected onto the people you are working with, especially if they are children. There are families that take advantage of these feelings to further exploit you.

*The interview was conducted in Madrid and Vallecas, October 10/12, 2009.*

On March 28, 2010, domestic workers demonstrated in downtown Madrid for labor rights and rights of residence. The women of Territorio Doméstico, a platform of organized domestic workers, individuals, and activists, wheeled this wagon through the streets. It was a stage set for several scenes of an agitprop performance staged within the frame of the demonstration: “Latifa’s Story,” “Sans Papiers in Europe,” and “Arrested” – scenes in which domestic workers give an account of oppression and resistance in their daily lives.