

CREUZA OLIVEIRA'S VOICE

“My name is Creuza Oliveira and I am the president of the National Federation of Domestic Workers in Brazil. Besides this position and my involvement in the union movement, I have been an activist of the Black Movement in Brazil since the 1980s, in particular in the organization “Unified Black Movement”. I am also part of the Women’s Movement and work constantly for the improvement of my own community. I began to work as an activist in 1983, when I participated in the creation of the Group of Domestic Workers in the State of Bahia, which in 1986 became the Professional Association of Domestic Workers in Bahia and, after 1990, became a full-fledged Union. I was President of this Union from 1990 to 2001. In 2002, I was elected President of the National Federation of Domestic Workers and subsequently re-elected in 2006. Due to my activism, I have been actively participating in forums of Government accountability. I am at the board of the National Council for Defence of the Rights of Women (2002-2007) and the National Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality (2003-2007).

How did I get here? I was born in a family of poor rural workers who did not have an opportunity to go to school, therefore I only started to attend a literacy course when I was 16. I lost my parents very early, before I was 12. Because of poverty, I started to work as a domestic worker when I was 10. In my first years at school, my attendance was hindered because of work, which made me drop out many times.

You can imagine what it means for a child to have to work and abdicate her natural dreams, such as having a family, being loved by her parents and friends, going to school, playing and living a full life, as every child should be able to do.

In the home where I lived I had many tasks, including looking after other children. Besides, I did housekeeping, laundry and other domestic tasks. Whenever I broke an object, I would suffer physical punishment and psychological violence, often with racist and moral slurs such as: “nigger”, “monkey” and “lazy”. These were words that I heard during a large part of my childhood and teenage years, words that marked me and that hindered my self-esteem. As a teen, a number of other practices turned my life into a nightmare: sexual harassment by the young men

in the household where I worked, who insisted regularly with practices that we nowadays consider as sexual abuse against children and teenagers.

Besides domestic and sexual violence I spent this period of my life suffering what I would call patrimonial violence, as I only started to receive a salary as a domestic worker when I was 21. Until that age, my payment used to be used clothes and food. I did not have a right to vacations or other basic rights of any worker.

When I was 14 years old, I was taken by a family to work in Sao Paulo, in the Southeast region of Brazil. I did not have any right, any money, nor did I know the city in which I was going to live in. I was taken as if I did not have a family, without any authorization from my remaining relatives in Bahia. I was a person without citizenship.

Only when I was 28 did I discover that there was a nascent movement of domestic workers in the fight for their rights. I found out, through a radio broadcast, about meetings that were taking place in a school. From that moment, I started to engage in the fight for the creation of an association which became the Union of Domestic Workers of Salvador, Bahia. Also in this period, I started to participate in the black movement and the women's movement. This is when I started to recover my self-esteem and to picture a different future, through the fight for rights and citizenship that was made possible by the union and social movements.

Understanding the importance of the political fight, I entered the Worker's Party in 1995 and was a candidate for city councillor and to the State Parliament, when I became a second surrogate. Unfortunately it is still very difficult in my country for a black working class woman to be recognized as a political leader and be elected. Gender, race and class prejudice prevent the population from seeing a black female domestic worker occupying positions in Parliament.

Despite all the difficulties, I believe there has been important progress. We have several black working class women running for election at various levels, which was unthinkable until the 90s. Today, we have been able to elect women to the Senate, such as Senator Benedita da Silva and Senator Marina da Silva, both of whom are black, working class women.

Domestic workers in Brazil represent a professional category with 9,1 million workers, which represent 5 percent of the Brazilian population. It is also a professional category that has completed 72 years of unionized history and a path that I consider victorious. We are a professional category that still experiences abuse in terms of labour standards and social security. We are also a scattered group of workers, therefore difficult to organize, composed predominantly of women (92%), 80 percent of which I believe are women.

The reason for this is that domestic work in my country still carries the legacy of slavery: lack of application of relevant laws, physical and moral violence; lack of equity vis-à-vis recognized rights for other professions; lack of equity in terms of union rights; etc.

Out of the number of domestic workers, 494,000 are children and teenagers between 5 and 17 years of age. They undertake, as I did when I was 10, all kinds of domestic tasks, often without any compensation. In other words, they work as slaves.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on my participation in the Durban Conference in 2001, particularly in the VOICES event. That was a very special moment for me. I heard many difficult stories, learning about problems which I believed only existed in my country. I learned that racism is a global problem. The fight against it cannot be local, it needs to be global. When I returned to Brazil, I transmitted the message of VOICES in various events which I attended, in order to sensitize people that we could not stand by the situation. We needed to take the fight against racism to the international level.

After VOICES, I became much more mature. I also believe that there were important changes in my country, particularly with the election of a new popular Government. Many public policies changed since 2001. Federal departments for the promotion of racial equality and for policies of gender equality have been established. The organization of domestic workers in the country also gained visibility. We had some important victories, such as the policy of affirmative action and quotas, the recognition of property rights for Quilombolas (land that was historically inhabited by black communities but without the right to ownership). Women's rights advanced a lot, such as on issues of domestic violence.

More specifically, the category of domestic workers had victories concerning specific rights: rest during holidays; job security for pregnant women; prohibition for households to charge housing and food expenses in domestic workers' salaries; 30 days of vacation per year. Specific projects in housing were also developed, such as the construction of public housing for domestic workers. Furthermore, legislation prohibiting domestic work for children and teenagers under 18 years of age has also been recently signed into law by the President.

Despite all advances, we still have a long journey ahead of us. For instance, Article 7 of the Constitution explicitly excludes domestic workers from various labour standards.

To conclude, I would like to state that in order to change the situation that still exists in my country, it is necessary to fight institutional racism that permeates power

relations. The Brazilian State is an institution that still allows for racist and sexist practices.

I am referring, for example, to the press and media outlets that still contribute for the perpetuation of racism in Brazil. I am referring to propaganda that makes non-white persons and women in particular more vulnerable to situations of inferiority, submission and violence. I am referring to songs that diminish women and encourage violence. I am referring to TV shows that portray domestic workers as persons deprived of rights, that trivialize sexual abuse in the household, and that depict black women as being ignorant and disqualified.

I am referring to a country that still has a lot to change, but also to a nation in which people organize as citizens to fight for their rights, social justice and real democracy. Since the colonial period we have been like that: we never give up.

Thank you.”