

Cooperatives and the World of Work

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Engendering Waste Pickers Cooperatives in Brazil¹

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Abstract

Women waste pickers experience multiple forms of oppression within the sector, despite the invisibility of these specific gender-based vulnerabilities. Based on findings from a research-action project with women waste pickers, this paper maps out the objectives of the participatory project and considers the barriers to gender equality in waste picking. More specifically, it considers how the expressions of gender inequalities within cooperatives and the national movement in Brazil present a contradiction to the very ideals that founded the cooperative movement. In this sense, the discussion seeks to contribute to an understanding of (1) gender relations in the context of waste picking, (2) the impediments to women's empowerment, (3) how forms of agency emerge in contexts of gender oppression, and (4) how to promote gender-sensitive research-action projects in waste pickers' cooperatives. We claim that engendering waste at the national movement of waste pickers can contribute to both strengthening collective action and revitalizing the cooperative movement in this sector.

Introduction

Despite the growing number of studies that focus on solid waste management, the literature on gender dynamics within the sector and waste pickers' cooperatives is still scant (Dias et al, 2013). Moreover, gender issues have been, up until recently, largely ignored by the cooperative movement of waste pickers² in Brazil. Although women are the majority of the members within cooperatives, their presence in the higher echelons of the waste pickers' national movement has been a major challenge. As exemplified by a woman waste picker: "we are very active in our cooperatives, but when it comes to power positions at the national movement we face constraints"³. Gender relations and inequalities in the sector have also been ignored by NGOs that support the national waste picker movement in Brazil until recently. Adopting a gendered approach to waste picking is, therefore, one of the key challenges in the cooperative movement of waste pickers in Brazil.

Against this background, researchers and waste pickers began exploring gender inequalities in an exploratory research-action project in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The idea for the project came from demands made by Brazilian and Latin American women waste picker leaders. In approaching WIEGO experts, these women emphasized the importance of confronting the forms of discrimination they experience as leaders and members of their cooperatives.

Based on findings from a research-action project with women waste pickers, this paper maps out the objectives of the participatory project and considers the barriers to gender equality in waste picking. More specifically, it considers how the expressions of gender inequalities within cooperatives and

¹ We want to acknowledge the relevant contributions of the Center for Women Studies and Research from the Federal University of Minas Gerais – NEPEM/UFGM, The National Movement of Waste Pickers of Brazil- MNCR, and the NGO Instituto Nenuka de Desenvolvimento Sustentável –INSEA in the implementation of this research-action project and in the evaluation process.

² In some countries waste pickers may collect recyclables and household refuse filling the gap of absence of municipal household waste collection. In Brazil, since household refuse is collected by formal municipal workers waste pickers collect mainly recyclables.

³ Source: Dias' field notes, entry 13-15 July 2012, National Meeting of Women, Paranaguá, Brazil.

the national movement in Brazil present a contradiction to the very ideals that founded the cooperative movement. In this sense, the discussion seeks to contribute to an understanding of (1) gender relations in the context of waste picking, (2) the impediments to women's empowerment, (3) how forms of agency emerge in contexts of gender oppression, and (4) how to promote gender-sensitive research-action projects in waste pickers' cooperatives. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the genesis of the cooperative movement in Brazil and characteristics of the sector based on official statistics and small scale studies. In the second section, the gendered dynamics of waste picking is discussed and the main features of the participatory research-action project are presented. The third section looks at some findings from the project and explores how it has placed gender on the agenda of the national movement of waste pickers in Brazil. In this section we also discuss important lessons on how to promote gender-sensitive projects in waste pickers' cooperatives.

Ultimately, we claim that engendering waste at the national movement can contribute to both strengthening collective action and revitalizing the cooperative movement of waste pickers in Brazil.

1. Cooperative Movement of Waste Pickers in Brazil

Studies have highlighted how the less organized informal workers are in the waste picking sector, the more vulnerable they become (Dias, 2009; Wilson et al, 2006)⁴. The majority of workers in the informal recycling sector throughout the world are still not organized, however in the last three decades, waste pickers have begun organizing themselves around their collective demands, including struggles for recognition. Organizing may take the shape of associations (some operating under the cooperative model and some not), unions, community based organizations, micro enterprises, and cooperatives (Moreno et al, 1997; Dias et al, 2008; Samson, 2009).

Cooperatives in the third world have been looked upon favorably due to their potential in terms of a "emancipation of the marginalized" (Bhowmik, 2006). In Latin America, particularly in Brazil, the most common model of organizing of waste pickers has been through cooperatives. Some claim waste pickers cooperatives in Latin America have managed to circumvent middlemen and increase their profits (Medina, 2005).

Informal pickers of recyclables have been fundamental actors since the early stage of the recycling industry in Brazil. Most of the time they have worked in an autonomous and isolated manner in a market where the recycling industry has extraordinary market power to determine prices. Consequently, these workers are prone to exploitation by middlemen as they receive low prices for materials, suffer from fraud and tampering of scales by middlemen, and work in appalling conditions (Dias & Alves, 2008:14).

In Brazil, cultural and social stigmas have attributed demeaning stereotypes to these workers, reinforcing the notions they were vagrants or beggars. Denying them recognition and dignity, waste pickers have been commonly referred to as "urubus", "badameiros", which means vulture or scavenger. This lack of recognition and the weight of such negative social perceptions have impacted their self-esteem and self-respect, which, in turn, made it difficult for them to see themselves as workers (Dias, 2002). This kind of pattern of injustice is what authors have signaled

⁴ "As a general rule, the less organized the informal recycling sector is, the less the people involved are capable of adding value to the secondary raw materials they collect, and the more vulnerable they are to exploitation from intermediate dealers (Wilson et al, 2006:800)."

as the symbolic or cultural dimension. Fraser claims that cultural or symbolic injustice is deeply rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication (2000:113-114), that establish patterns of subordination in every day interactions. Ignored in public policies and denied participation as political actors, these workers had no social recognition and were cast aside. In many ways, they were invisible.

Until the late 1980s their work traditionally took place in two ways: (i) street waste picking activities carried out from the trash bags found on the curb or taken from offices and shops, and (ii) waste picking at open dumps⁵. They worked in an autonomous manner or as family units. They did not have or belong to any representative organizations. It was only at the end of this decade that waste pickers began organizing themselves in the capital cities of the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul. The efforts to organize workers mainly stemmed from the work of Catholic NGOs that began pioneer work with street dwellers in those cities. While they worked with street dwellers, NGOs noticed that among these groups of people there were those who lived on the streets and collected recyclable materials on a regular basis for a living. Against this context, they believed this sub-group had the potential to organize themselves around labour issues. The fact that some street people salvaged recyclables on a frequent basis meant that there were specific characteristics of the group that would facilitate the organizing process. This would include the fact that they had a fixed working routine, an itinerary for the collection of materials which could be traced back, concrete demands to have a sorting facility for sorting of materials, and a pressing need to be granted access to recyclables by the municipalities. These factors indicated these workers would be able to be organized as a professional category (Dias, 2002).

Ignored by economists who up until recently had not acknowledged that waste pickers were part and parcel of the world economy (Scheinberg, 2006, Medina, 2007b), invisible to academics in the social sciences (Dias, 2009), and despised as the lumpen by academics and social activists alike, there was a certain disbelief with regard to their organizing capacity. In many ways, the assumption was that there was no room for collective agency within this group. Therefore, Catholic Church organizations were very important in Brazil as the first to take a stand for the waste pickers. Organizations like “Pastoral de Rua”, “Organização para o Auxílio Fraternal”, Caritas or the Maristas Fraternity were inspired by the principles of “Teologia da Libertação” (Liberation Theology) that sought to foster the organization of the poor and by the work of Paulo Freire in popular education. They mobilized workers and supported the establishment of the first waste pickers’ cooperatives in Brazil.

The first organizations of waste pickers to have legal recognition were founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the cities of São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Belo Horizonte. By the 1990s, these three important cities included waste pickers coops as partners in the respective city’s solid waste management. During the first term of the Workers Party in these cities (São Paulo in 1989, Porto Alegre in 1990, and Belo Horizonte in 1993), municipal source segregation programs were implemented whereby the newly formed cooperatives of waste pickers were included as service providers (Dias & Alves, 2008). Integration of waste pickers’ cooperatives in the early 1990s resulted from the willingness of the first municipalities, run by the Workers’ Party, to incorporate waste pickers’ demands. Much of this can be due to the party’s high responsiveness to claims coming from Brazilian social movements in general (Alvarez et al, 1998)⁶. Clearly the opening of

⁵ Open dumps are unsanitary sites where waste is dumped with no treatment whatsoever. They should not be confused with sanitary landfills, where waste is disposed of in a site that abides by environmental measures in order to minimize impacts to the environment.

⁶ For a discussion on the nature of the political transformative project of the Workers’ Party in Brazil and how the dynamic of party-social movement interactions has created a window of opportunities for social inclusion and participation, see Heller, 2001.

these institutional channels gave a boost to the organizing process of waste pickers in other parts of the country since many say this as an example of what to strive for (Dias, 1998; Dias, 2002; Jacobi, 2006).

These experiences of integrating cooperatives within municipal solid waste (SW) systems also inspired the creation of a national stakeholders' platform called the National Waste & Citizenship Forum (FNLC), whose main goal was to promote better environmental standards in SW and social inclusion (Dias, 2009). The National Waste & Citizenship Forum helped give more visibility to the social and environmental importance of the work carried out by the waste pickers and brought existing waste pickers' cooperatives into the spotlight. This visibility had an impact nationwide, inspiring other groups of waste pickers to get organized. Ultimately it served as a catalyst for social activism among workers that led to the creation of the Brazilian national movement of waste pickers (MNCR) during the First Congress of Brazilian waste pickers held in Brasília in 2001.

Unlike India where waste pickers first organized themselves as unions and then formed cooperatives supported by their unions⁷ (Bhowmik, 2006; Chikarmane, 2012)⁸, the model for organizing workers in Brazil was through the formation of cooperatives. This would, in turn, lead to the creation of a national movement of waste pickers that would represent existing cooperatives in the country⁹. There are still few studies on the MNCR that attempt to both analyze it through a social movements framework and offer insights as to why this specific model has been adopted. In fact, a comprehensive account of the genesis of the national movement of waste pickers is still lacking¹⁰. While we do not intend to provide answers regarding the adoption of the cooperative model, there are a few arguments that help us understand the connection between this choice and the social and political context. We argue there are at least three insights worth considering: values that form the basis of the model, and the demands and alliances of social movements during the late 1980s through to the 1990s during the redemocratization phase and the policy context.

On one level, the values associated with cooperatives serve as an entry point for our analysis because it casts light on the association between the precarious nature of the work done by waste pickers and the emphasis on mutual support. According to Birchall (2001), both trade unions and cooperatives have shared values such as liberty, equality, solidarity, and democracy, as first order values and democracy, mutual struggle and mutual help as second order values. The difference lies

⁷ The most famous cases are: the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP).

⁸ Bhowmik (2006) argues that the success of the Indian cooperatives created by the waste pickers' unions - SEWA and KKPKP in Ahmedabad and Pune respectively - is mainly due to their strong ties with their trade union. More recent studies are beginning to deepen the understanding of this model by exploring the challenges both unions and cooperatives linked to unions face. Gadgil and Samson (2015) explore the political implications of these hybrid forms. In addition the study by Arora (2015) examines the case of the scrap shop cooperative in Ahmedabad and its failure to understand the value chain dynamics, among one of the many complex issues the cooperative had to grapple with.

⁹ Little attention has been paid to the different models of organizing adopted by waste pickers across the world and its implications for economic sustainability and the political implications of each organizational model. Gadgil & Samson (2015) are one of the few exceptions. These authors have explored the dynamics between cooperatives and unions for the case of SWaH and KKPKP respectively in Pune, India. They argue that forming cooperatives can engender new forms of organizing, as well as strengthen broader political campaigns within waste picker unions.

¹⁰ Dias (2002) has documented and analyzed the early years of the formation of the waste pickers' movement in particular, by looking at the role of early cooperatives in disseminating the cooperative model across the country. Teodósio et al (2013), has mapped out the formation of the identity field of the MNCR and its relationship with the struggles under the right to the city concept. A comprehensive account of its creation, the role of external organizations, its strategies, achievements and challenges is still missing. An understanding of cooperatives from a social movement angle could be useful to examine the waste pickers' cooperatives in Brazil. This paper does not intend to fill this gap, but rather contribute with some reflections that can inform future research agenda on the topic.

in the strategies used to achieve these outcomes, as cooperatives focus more on setting the grounds for mutual help and equality of opportunity. Cooperatives, however, cannot be disassociated from a market logic. Nevertheless, they fulfill other roles for the social movement, representing then tensions between an economic rationale and a social movement framing around collective demands for justice. This is clearly expressed by Delvetere, when noting that “one of the fundamental implications of using enterprises is that the cooperative movements attempt to bridge the calculative and power rationality (found in the Market and the State) and the goal or communicative rationality (driving social movements and found in the spheres of reproduction)” (1993:187). Another challenge for waste picker cooperatives relates to the fact they are service providers for SW systems and have to abide by the specific demands from this political and/or economic sector (Dias, 2009). As a result, waste picker cooperatives not only have to meet demands from the market and represent the ideals of the social movement, they must also meet public health standards and understand the rules involved in many political negotiating arenas (Dias, 2009)¹¹. Thus it is important to analyze waste pickers cooperatives under these different tensions and demands.

One way to consider the choice of the cooperative model versus trade unions refers back to the political climate in Brazil during the late 1980s. Many of so-called “new social movements” of the late 1980s and 1990s attempted to separate themselves from traditional routes of political contestation through unions and political parties (Adler Hellman, 1995). However, this autonomy would be temporary as the Workers’ Party offered a path for presenting demands based on social and economic exclusion (Scherer-Warren, 1987 apud Adler Hellman, 1995). In Brazil, while the period of redemocratization also saw the strengthening of unions, resulting in part from the stronger presence of leftist governments through the Workers Party, the effervescence of social and popular movements seemed to represent the very demands of injustices which would be brought forth by waste pickers. The political alternatives of this period also created room for different participatory channels in civil society. As Telles and Paoli (1998) claim this new proposal for popular participation was not only linked to the ideals of the Workers Party, but also formed part of the ideals of democracy. Hence, social and popular movements saw the opportunity to highlight the inequalities and social and economic conflicts pervading their everyday life.

Associated to this broader context is the role the Catholic Church, NGOs and other organizations played in supporting social movements and their demands. The web of interactions was bound by its own common ideals, revolving frequently on the notion of mutual support and self-management. The Church’s communitarian ideology and practice with the “ecclesiastical based communities” (CEBs) were very much aligned with the cooperative principles. The Catholic NGOs in Brazil were inspired by the strong housing cooperative movement in Uruguay since one of their leaders – Sister Nenuka - was a Uruguayan economist involved in pastoral work with street dwellers and was one of the first to acknowledge the potential for organizing waste pickers amongst the street community. Sister Nenuka thought that cooperatives would be an ideal model to encourage the mobilization of what they called “o povo da rua” or street people (which included waste pickers at that time since until the 1990s they lived and worked in the streets)¹². A more critical perspective analyzes the creation of cooperatives in developing countries according to the distinct support from a variety of actors including development agencies, local, state and national

¹¹ Dias (2009) further notes that one of the steps towards understanding the multifaceted demands creating indicators need to take into account how cooperatives have a social function (its livelihood dimension), perform a public health service (by providing service for urban solid waste systems), and are an important economic actor in the recycling chain.

¹² According to Sister Cristina Bove they had engaged in talks with left-wing unionists in the 1980’s to seek support for their work with street dwellers and waste pickers but they heard once too often that these two groups would never be able to form organizations as they were part of the lumpen proletariat. Sister Cristina acknowledges that given how atomized street dwellers and waste pickers were a model of organization based in strong cooperation principles would be better suited to galvanize organizing of these groups. Source: interview to Sonia Dias, 19/08/2015.

governments through public polices and the Catholic Church (Lima, 2004). Such support was seen as a tackling growing unemployment and the limitations of the State. Nevertheless, the Church was fundamental in disseminating the notion of alternative means for dealing with these economic and social problems through popular movements. General campaigns in the early 1990s (*Campanha da Fraternidade de 1991 e 1992*) were aligned with popular solidarity economic ideals seeking to establish new ways of organizing workers in cooperatives (Souza, 2007). Furthermore, the ties between the Church and the leftist governments in the aforementioned cities and later with key political actors at the federal level helped strengthen the vindications brought forth by the waste pickers (Pereira & Teixeira, 2011).

Another insight into this choice considers the relevance of the policy and legislative environment. As Samson affirms: “there is an intimate relationship between policy and organizing; that the policy and legislative context influences the form and goals of waste picker organizations...” (2009:3).

1.1 Overview of the National Movement of Waste Pickers (MNCR)

The National Movement of Waste Pickers is a social movement committed to organizing waste pickers and to furthering their main collective demands. The cooperatives and associations affiliated with the MNCR abide to their guiding principles: worker control of the organization by waste pickers; direct action; autonomy from political parties, governments, and private sector; class solidarity; direct democracy and collective decision-making¹³. In this sense, there is a direct link to principles behind the cooperative model and the choice made by recently organized waste pickers.

The movement identifies classic class issues as part of their demands. As a group of marginalized, exploited and oppressed workers they have fought for: recognition as environmental agents; worker’s identity primarily based on a class identity; collective rights for waste pickers; recognition as service providers in solid waste systems, and demands for public policies (Samson, 2009; Dias, 2009). Their demands have been directed at both governments and industries as they realize their insertion in urban, political landscapes, as well as a value chain. Munck notes that “...social movements’ orientation towards change can only be realized by conjoining identity, its vision of change, to an appropriate strategy, the means of effectively bring about change” (1995:677)¹⁴. The MNCR has been able to assert their identity as workers and to act simultaneously in two arenas. First, it has focused on its strategies and repertoires by mobilizing protests, social marches and other activities associated with social activism. These actions are part of conventional repertoires of social movements, once they are recognized by political elites and society in general and may facilitate the process of having demands met (Tarrow, 1998:138). Second, it established direct links with the political-institutional arena given the political opportunity of the redemocratization phase, where leftist governments and key actors such as the Church supported the claims of struggles for justice from various social movements, including those of the poor. Thus they participated in committees, working groups and forums that involve actors from the government and private sector¹⁵. What is important to note here is that the MNCR’s actions are geared towards achieving its objectives on two levels. Clearly it strives for workers to be included as relevant actors in SW management. Yet they do so by making demands based on a class identity, which reveals injustices on a material,

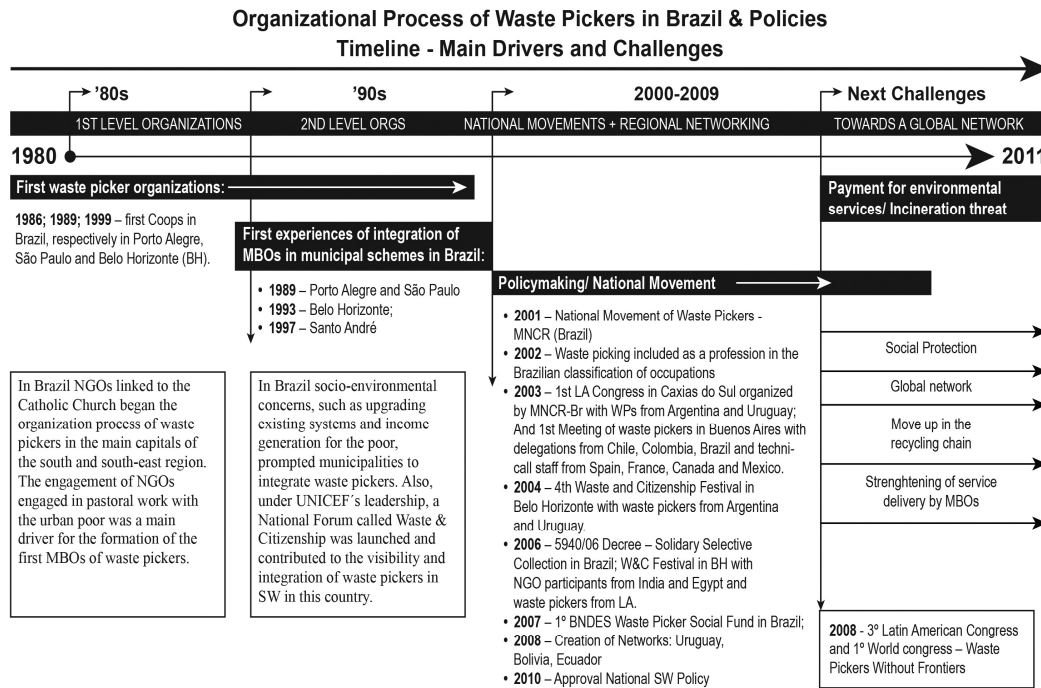
¹³ Source: www.mnrc.org.br

¹⁴ Tarrow (1998) points out that social movements may engage with governments in order to advance their cause, particularly when there are moments of political opportunities. The redemocratization phase presents this opening of institutional channels.

¹⁵ Social movements experiment a permanent tension of its two arenas of action – social and political-institutional. The greatest challenge for social movements is to have an offensive strategy without losing its identity. The waste pickers’ movement has been able in achieving this balance, so far.

political and symbolic level. Such injustices are rooted not only in a politics of redistribution, but one of recognition and representation as well¹⁶.

Dias (2014 and 2009) has documented the social struggles of the cooperative movement and advances in inclusive solid waste management. The timeline below summarizes the main driving forces, achievements and challenges of this cooperative movement:



Source: Dias, 2009

In spite of the many challenges that still need to be addressed, during the last two decades Brazil has gradually introduced inclusive policies that give legal backing to redistributive measures and establish grounds for socially recognizing waste pickers' cooperatives. This has also enabled the recognition of waste picking as a professional category. The next section discusses this in more detail.

Profile of Waste Pickers in Brazil

¹⁶ Elsewhere Dias (2009; 2014) has interpreted the struggles of the Brazilian waste pickers under Fraser's social justice framework. Fraser (2007) has argued that a theory of justice in a globalizing world must be three-dimensional. This means, in her view, the incorporation of the political dimension of representation, as well as the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition. She argues for the need to think of injustices in an integrated manner where political, economic and cultural injustices require social arrangements that can address, simultaneously, claims for political representation, redistribution and cultural identity. The MNCR has fought for *recognition* (re-signification of social imaginary about the waste pickers - from beggars to environmental workers) for *redistribution* (struggles for public policies designed to overcome social and economic exclusion of waste pickers and *representation* (for governance spaces/forums to voice their demands).

Brazil is the only country that systematically captures and reports official statistical data on informal waste pickers (Dias, 2011). Efforts to organize waste pickers and improve their livelihoods have been ongoing for more than two decades in Brazil. This has led to the official recognition (in 2002) of waste pickers as a profession in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO¹⁷) under the category *catador de material reciclável* (picker of recyclables). This category includes those who pick, select and sell recyclable materials such as paper, cardboard and glass, as well as ferrous and non-ferrous and other reusable materials (this category does not include those who collect other types of solid household waste).

Once the occupation of waste pickers was made official in the CBO, national databases started to include data on waste pickers. More specifically, the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD)¹⁸, Brazil's main source of social and economic data, began providing information on waste pickers both in informal and formal employment¹⁹. In addition, the Annual Listing of Social Information (RAIS²⁰) provides data on waste pickers formally employed by commercial establishments. These official databases include statistics on the distribution of waste pickers by federal units, sex, age, schooling, income, etc. Pioneer work done by Crivellari, Dias et al (2008) on these two databases is summarized in box 1:

Box 1. Waste Pickers in Official Databases

PNAD 2006:

Total Number of Waste Pickers: 229,568²¹ (14,029 for the state of Minas Gerais)

Number of Waste Pickers with a formal contract: 10,272

Sex: 67% men, 33% women

Age: 10% children between the ages of 10-16; 40% between the ages of 30-49; 25% between the ages of 50-64; 7% between the ages of 65-97

Education: 12% had attended school

RAIS (waste pickers with a formal contract):

Number of Waste Pickers with a formal contract: 11,781

Contract for an undetermined period of time: 95%

Sex: 80% men, 20% percent women

Earnings: 98% of men receive 3-4 minimum wages; women are only 2% of this group

Education: 80% of those with a contract have schooling beyond the 4th grade;

¹⁷ The CBO is a fundamental classification underlying the employment data produced by Brazil and is based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations.

¹⁸ PNAD is carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE – on an annual basis between the Censuses. It provides information on work, population, education, etc. The fact that it is household based permits identification of the population that works informally, and even those who have a contract but work in households, such as maids. The PNAD enables, therefore, a view of the waste picker collected in his/her own home and *according to his/her own statement*.

¹⁹ The distinction of formal and informal in Brazil is directly linked to a body of legislation called CLT that contains rules for fair labour relations, including work hours, minimum wage and other rights. Formal workers are those who are employed through a contract registered in a specific document called *carteira de trabalho (CT)*. Informal work under Brazil's definition refers to workers without a CT, as well as own account workers and unpaid workers.

²⁰ RAIS is a national administrative register of the Ministry of Labour and Employment with annual periodicity. Employers are obliged to declare the individual status of each employee with whom they maintain continued employment. With the inclusion of waste picking as a profession, waste pickers can be formally employed by commercial establishments. Therefore, RAIS captures data for individuals hired by contracts under the profession of waste picker.

²¹ Please note that PNAD provides estimates, not absolute numbers of workers.

over 60% have completed 8th grade or higher education

Key fact: Organizations that employ waste picker are spread throughout the various branches of economic activity: waste and junk retailers are the largest at 17 per cent of the total, followed by material and recovery class businesses and the metallurgic industry (Dias, 2011a: 02).

More recent data from the 2010 Demographic Census found a total number of 387,910 pickers. This total may seem small when considering the size of the country, but these are the workers who are responsible for the high rates of recycling in Brazil (Dias, 2011:02). It is relevant to bear in mind that the data base (PNAD) is a household survey, which means that pickers who work and live by dumpsites will not be captured in these figures. In fact, the National Movement of Waste Pickers (MNCR) claims that there are 800,000 to 1 million pickers in the country.

Data from the National Solid Waste Diagnostic (IPEA, 2012) states that there 1,200 organizations (cooperatives or cooperative-like associations) of waste pickers in the whole country. Small scale studies show increasing numbers of women employed as waste pickers in cooperatives with an increase from 18 per cent in 1993 to 55 per cent in 1998 (Dias, 2002). More recent data shows that women comprise 56 per cent of these cooperatives, whereas men make up 44 per cent (INSEA, 2007). However, when looking at data available from the official data system (PNAD) for 2006, out of the 14,029 waste pickers, only 3,902 were women. Gender distribution nationwide for the same year shows 67 per cent male pickers against 33 per cent female (Crivellari, Dias et al, 2008). This data bank captures information from both cooperative and autonomous waste pickers. It seems that cooperatives are more conducive to women's work than autonomous work at middlemen deposits primarily since cooperatives allow women more flexibility given their double and triple work shifts.

However, higher concentrations of women waste pickers in cooperatives are not necessarily indicative of gender equality. There has been little if no attention to gender issues within the waste picker movement²². Academics have only recently started to dwell upon gender issues within the sector. Some of these studies have documented conflicts arising from the sexual division of labour at cooperatives (Wirth, 2010; Goulart & Lima, 2012). Other studies argue that women may have access to management positions at the cooperatives, but are still under-represented at the higher positions in the national movement (Dias, et al, 2013; Zeeland, 2014). In the next section, the paper examines the gender dynamics and inequalities within the sector and then provides an overview of the gender awareness research action project that was initiated with cooperatives in Brazil.

2. Engendering Waste: Reflections on Building Gender Awareness at Cooperatives

Despite the increased attention given to studies on waste picking and solid waste management, there is still a lack of understanding of the gender inequalities including the sexual division of labor involved in waste picking activities. Adopting a gendered approach to waste picking, therefore, recognizes the need to (1) address the multiple dimensions of subordination women are subject to on various fronts; (2) problematize the ways men and women naturalize their social relations; (3) focus on the threats and opportunities that men and women experience in their jobs; (4) question how one of the ways the social division of labor manifests itself is through the sexual division of labor or the differentiation of job positions/roles according to gender; (5) explore how the

²² It is fair to say that meetings with woman waste pickers have been held since 2010) in the southern state of Paraná. However, many women waste pickers have pointed out these meetings did not necessarily tackle gender issues upfront (Dias' field notes, 13-15 July 2012, National Women's Meeting, Paranaquá, Brazil).

marginalization of waste pickers and women waste pickers, in particular, impedes access to greater economic independence; (6) recognize how gender stereotypes are often employed as a means of discouraging women's participation, especially at more formal levels. A deeper understanding of these gender dynamics, often masked or invisible, ultimately seeks to provide women waste pickers with the tools necessary to enhance their role as economic and political actors.

Women informal workers women waste pickers confront numerous obstacles on a daily basis. Gender inequalities manifest themselves through structures of exploitation and marginalization that also cut across race and class lines and may result in a lack of authority and recognition. In capitalist societies, gender exploitation at the workplace and at home can involve, among other definitions, tasks that require "typically feminine" activities that are often unnoticed and undercompensated (Young, 1990, p. 51). Marginalization not only involves matters of distributive justice, but also entails the "deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction" (Young, 1990, p. 55). These oppressive structures²³ coupled with feelings of powerlessness and experiences of violence are a direct extension of the social division of labor in capitalist societies, but may also result in the sexual division of labor.

At the workplace, women waste pickers experience such forms of oppression in at least three different ways. First, women might not be allowed access to recyclables with the highest value (Dias and Fernandez, 2012), therefore negatively impacting their earnings when compared to men. In Brazil, for example, a gender analysis of an official database called RAIS shown above concluded that among waste pickers, men earn much more than women in all age groups. Furthermore, no women are found in the highest income groups, which would include those who earn more than 10 times the minimum wage (Crivellari, Dias et al. 2008). These discrepancies may be why women are drawn to the cooperative model in order to find more favourable working conditions.

Second, it is important to recognize that both women and men are exposed to several health risks while working with waste materials. Despite the lack of documented studies, Muller and Scheinberg (2007) point out how people who have "physical contact with human excreta or other raw materials contract diseases like hepatitis and diarrhea and suffer eye and skin infections more frequently than people not so employed". Other studies have documented the impacts on the physical and emotional well-being of informal workers, including waste pickers, as a result of precarious and unsafe work conditions (Wrigley-Assante, 2013; Bleck & Wettberg, 2012; Gutberlet & Baedler, 2008).

Thirdly, as the literature on organizing of informal workers points out it is particularly more difficult for women workers to get organized (Chen et al 2015, Kabeer et al, 2013). As women in the informal economy are "located at the intersections of different kinds of inequalities: class, race, caste, and legal status, so building shared identity and interests represent a great challenge" (Kabeer, 2013:249). This has been more dramatic for women waste pickers whose occupation carries a double layer of invisibility, resulting from economic marginalization and the social stigma of working with waste.

Finally, when women waste pickers get organized they may not occupy positions of authority within their cooperatives or communities. Or when women do occupy such positions, they may not be as respected as their male counterparts. In addition, women's participation seems to be higher at the community and local level, with stronger gender gaps appearing as the distance from the

²³ Iris Young (1990) provides a detailed account of five criteria or "five faces of oppression" that can be used to assess how groups suffer injustices, which include: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.

community and the formality of the setting increases (Muller and Scheinberg, 2007)²⁴. Stereotypical assumptions regarding women's use of emotion and different communicative patterns contribute to women waste pickers being ignored or silenced in group meetings or formal settings.

Beyond the workplace, women also confront gender inequalities, mainly in the private sphere, which is known for maintaining patriarchal values and practices. Asymmetrical power relations at the household level affect women's abilities to take part in public committees or to exercise leadership within their representative organizations. This can mainly be attributed to the fact women are responsible for raising children and fulfilling most (if not all) domestic chores, ultimately limiting their time and energy for taking up leadership opportunities (Dias and Fernandez, 2012). Besides the unequal division of domestic labor, women are often subjected to sexual exploitation and violence within the private sphere.

A close examination of the gender dynamics at cooperatives in Brazil help illuminate how gender awareness might be a relevant topic for furthering the cooperative ideals of internal democracy and equality.

The emerging literature on gender reveals there is a clear division of labour in most recycling cooperatives in Brazil whereby men work in collection, transport and processing activities such as weighing and compressing materials. These activities involve physical strength, in comparison to the activities women are involved in that require greater dexterity, such as the sorting of recyclables (Wirth 2010, Goulart & Lima, 2012). Sorting is one of the most time-consuming activities for waste pickers, yet it is essential because it adds more value to recyclables, enabling workers to sell to specific markets. Curiously enough, this activity is deemed less important in some cooperatives. Goulart & Lima's (2012) small scale study of cooperatives in the state of Minas Gerais illustrates how gender can be a source of conflict among workers since men and women attribute different value to each other's tasks and accuse each other of not being responsible enough with collective duties. In addition, the study highlights how in some cooperatives women are allowed to work flexible hours to meet their domestic demands, creating another source of conflict with men. As mentioned previously, the sexual division of labour, as exemplified in these studies, reinforces the idea that certain tasks are given more value in detriment of others (Young, 1990).

When focusing on the dynamics within the movement, women leaders across the country are becoming increasingly vocal with regard to the need for equal representation in other levels of the movement (Dias et al, 2013; Zeeland, 2014). Nevertheless, this visibility, considered here as a dimension of their agency, has only recently emerged.

In light of these different dimensions of gender inequality, several questions important in order to bridge together gender equality and waste picking are necessary to guide future debates. What are the consequences of reproducing multiple dimensions of gender inequality within the cooperatives and movement in light of the ideals of the cooperative model? Can gender awareness help renew these cooperative ideals? How can we introduce gender awareness in a movement where sexism is deeply entrenched and reproduced on various levels? How can we address the fact gender inequalities are present in various spheres beyond the workplace and movement, including the home? While these are complex questions, they are nonetheless worth calling attention to in an effort to begin processes of challenging such hierarchies and forms of subordination. One path for doing so is providing women waste pickers with the tools they need to enhance their role as

²⁴ Recent data from a cooperative in São Paulo shows that women continue to be the majority in cooperatives and associations, including among the administrators. Women are also important during negotiation processes with the local government. However, the scenario changes a bit when considering women's participation within the National Movement Movement of Catadores (MNCR). Even though there are still many women participating at the local and state levels, there are more men participating at the national level (COOPCENT ABC, presentation at World Urban Forum, 2012).

economic and political actors. As part of this objective a gender research-action project was created in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil so as to strengthen women's capacities and voices. The idea for the project came from demands made by Brazilian and Latin American women waste picker leaders, who along with the support of WIEGO, decided to emphasize the importance of confronting the forms of discrimination women waste pickers experience given their role as leaders²⁵.

Initial discussions were carried out throughout 2012, including smaller to more collective group discussions with women leaders and academics from the region and country and with international partners on the continent and abroad. The project proposal was designed as a "bottom-up" process,²⁶ which was essential for understanding the most pressing issues from the women waste pickers' perspective, as well as for gathering support from both men and women waste pickers. In 2013, as a result of this participatory process the gender project, a partnership between WIEGO, the National Movement of Waste Pickers of Brazil (MNCR), the Centre for Women Studies of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (NEPEM/UFMG) and the NGO *Instituto Nenuca de Desenvolvimento Sustentável* (INSEA) was developed.

We claim that the relevance and legitimacy of the project is especially tied to the women's perceptions of the need to begin not only discussing gender inequalities, but also creating an agenda capable of addressing such matters within the national movement.

2.1 Theoretical and Methodological Notes on the Gender & Waste Project

The exploratory research action project sought to understand the dimensions of discrimination women waste pickers face (1) at home, (2) in their jobs, and (3) as leaders in the networks and movement. In addition, the project intended to map out the *practical strategies*, in terms of professional and/or educational qualification, that women need in order to attain economic, political and symbolic empowerment. In order to do so, the research is grounded on certain premises of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and feminist approaches to economic, political and symbolic/cultural empowerment as mutually entwined objectives that can lead to women's greater sense of agency.

In general terms, PAR, including its various schools²⁷, is committed to obtaining knowledge through the direct involvement with the community (Fals Borda, 2011). However, the "quest for knowledge" should not be seen as an end to itself. PAR is especially interested in "the transformation of individual attitudes and values, personality and culture" (Fals Borda, 2011, p. 32). Such transformations do not occur in the short-term. They should be understood as part of long-term processes according to the way in which individuals and groups redefine their in light of constraints based on hierarchical patterns of valorization.

The entry point of PAR investigations is the "local knowledge or "common sense" produced and gathered at the community level (Fals Borda, 2011). Hence, it values the lived experience, perceptions and voices of the local community in both rural and urban areas (Moser and Stein

²⁵ The exploratory research-action project initiated in Brazil will serve as an example for future interventions that seek to explore gender awareness within the Latin America network of waste pickers (LAWPN).

²⁶ According to Moser (1993), the entry point for any kind of gender training will have implications with regards to the structure set up.

²⁷ For a list of at least 11 schools of thought that develop their own strands of Participatory Research, see FalsBorda (2011).

2011). In this sense, participatory approaches work with the notion of establishing “more reciprocal relationships between “insiders” and “outsiders” and of facilitating the local community’s involvement “in the design, implementation, and outcomes of programs” (Kesby, 2005, p. 2037). Often times, participatory research action projects do not necessarily involve local groups in the elaboration processes, leading to the control of local elites (professionals, academics and powerful community members (Mitlin, 2012). Working against such practices, this project understood the importance of incorporating the community’s perspective, in this case the women waste pickers’ own demands.

Through this process, the once considered “objects” of research become the “subjects” or owners of knowledge. Participatory methodologies provide a platform for invisible voices to be heard and create spaces for new ways of knowing (Kesby, 2005), where paths towards empowerment can be paved. Ultimately, working with the knowledge and demands brought forth by women waste pickers, the design of the project “draws more people and organizations, more resources and political support” for establishing a “robust” perspective (Mitlin, 2012) needed to tackle gender discrimination.

It is important to stress that empowerment here should not be considered as one singular turning point or moment or revelation. Rather moments of empowerment can spring up throughout the processes of transforming unequal social relations and practices. However, this involves recognizing and making sense of the different roles a person undertakes (Cahill, 2007), as well as understanding the power dynamics involved in these different roles.

In this sense, drawing from feminist participatory action methodology and tenets of Freirean pedagogy²⁸, The Gender & Waste project was designed to prioritize women’s lived situated as the starting point for building gender awareness (Weiler, 1991; Maguire, 2001; Kesby, 2005). Nevertheless, it recognized that consciousness raising must be tied to political action and cannot only be centered on individual experiences in order to ensure more effective challenges to hierarchical social practices and institutions (Miraftab, 2004; Frisby et al, 2009; Freire, 2000; Weiler, 1991). Further cautions were taken with regard to the emphasis on individual subjective experiences as a means of avoiding a sense of victimization, as well as a universalizing lens that places women into a coherent, homogeneous group. This methodological framework was chosen due to its commitment to challenging hegemonic and hierarchical structures that permeate social relations and to enabling processes of empowerment. Feminists have long claimed that the “personal is political” and like feminism, participatory methodology refers back to the personal, or lived experience, as a form of exposing various inequalities.

Feminist studies have sought to unravel how different groups are marginalized and oppressed based on the intertwined axes of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, nationality and sexual orientation. Gender planning should therefore adopt an intersectional²⁹ approach that recognizes unequal gender relations on a variety of levels and relations, often legitimized and reproduced in androcentric,

²⁸ Freirean pedagogy is modeled on Paulo Freire’s vision of empowering the oppressed by shifting epistemological claims. For Freire, experience is knowledge that is capable of raising consciousness regarding different forms of oppression. In this sense, the teacher or educator is not the only bearer of authority, truth or knowledge. The construction of knowledge is in itself a political act.

²⁹ The marginality and invisibility of waste pickers in society not only cast light on economic forms of exclusion, but are also intricately related to other structures of oppression such as gender, race, age, sexuality and so forth. Once the work and contributions of these informal workers are taken for granted in urban landscapes, so are the intertwined axes of oppression that affect them. In this sense, an intersectional approach to the livelihoods of waste pickers, and more specifically here, to women waste pickers reveals how distinct oppressions impact their access to resources and power given their multiple identities. Often times, individuals or groups with intersecting identities may end up being further marginalized within an already historically marginalized group (Purdie-Vaughn; Eibach, 2008).

classist, racist, heteronormative etc. value patterns found in symbolic codes, normative concepts and institutionalized practices (Fraser, 2003; Young, 1990; Wieringa, 1998).

The transformative potential of empowerment considers the individual and collective capacity to re-consider and re-create new ways of thinking about gender roles in society. A feminist conception of power must also look at the intricate web of power dynamics present in contemporary societies, but most importantly, it should highlight the instances where women do have power in spite of masculine domination – that is, empowerment (Allen, 1999). In this sense, the project looks at the ways in which a group of women can collectively exercise power as they define the gender inequalities necessary to challenge and resist. Furthermore, the project has a particular interest in *solidarity* and *coalition-building* (Allen, 1999)³⁰ that can foster power among and with other women and men.

According to this broad feminist conception of power and relying upon the research expertise of two of its partners – WIEGO and NEPEM –, the project specifically concentrated on the axes of economic³¹ and political³² empowerment of women waste pickers. In addition, it focused on the symbolic³³ empowerment of women waste pickers, through the objective of making visible the ways in which women already have power and re-inventing the demeaning ways in which women are depicted in daily life. The integration of all three dimensions works towards building a new sense of self and status for women. The proposal's overall emphasis is on rebuilding alliances and elaborating new initiatives that are based on notions of solidarity, dialogue and justice.

The proposal's overall emphasis was to build alliances and elaborate new initiatives based on notions of solidarity, dialogue and justice among women and with men. Thus it explored the potential that individual experience could illuminate gender inequalities in fostering broader claims and collective struggles against them. The project was divided into three phases as described below.

Phase 1 began in 2012 as an important learning phase. During this first phase, literature review (production in English and Portuguese) on gender and waste pickers was carried out by researchers from WIEGO/UFMG and MIT. Important parts of this phase were the discussions and meetings with women leaders of the movement in Brazil and Latin America. These meetings served to inform

³⁰ For Allen, power should always be considered in relation to the dynamics of power-over, power-to and power-with.

³¹ For WIEGO, empowerment refers to the process of change that gives working poor women – as individual workers and as members of worker organizations – the ability to access the resources they need while also gaining the ability to influence the wider policy, regulatory and institutional environment. Ultimately, economic empowerment is a condition that allows women a more equal standing ground needed to participate as a peer in social interactions (Fraser, 2003).

³² For NEPEM/UFMG, political empowerment involves an opportunity for establishing and/or encouraging a critical-feminist consciousness with respect to the need for women's entrance in distinct public spheres. This process entails contributing to women's knowledge in relevant areas such as human rights, social movements and citizenship, Brazilian political and party system, electoral laws, etc. The primary focus is on the conversion of these initiatives into concrete actions of broader political empowerment, in the sense that women can now play a relevant and critical role in the most diverse arenas of social life. Furthermore, such interventions seek to provide women with some resources necessary to expand the discussions on women's rights and equality in multiple decision-making spheres. Ultimately, for this project political empowerment establishes gender awareness/consciousness, improves women's skills, and broadens women's access to knowledge and support networks.

³³ Symbolic empowerment involves challenging the codes, practices and concepts that contribute to establishing gender and racialized subjectivities and power relations. It involves pointing out how historical and social constructions of gender subjectivities and gender relations have been used to maintain a logic of exclusion. A feminist and critical approach to symbolic empowerment recognizes the need to critically assess how patterns of subordination are present in a myriad of structures that range from "patriarchal modes of [capitalist] production, patriarchal relations with the State, domestic violence, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions such as religions, media and education" (Walby, 1990, p. 177).

researchers of the demands and concerns of women waste pickers, ultimately influencing the design of the project and workshops.

Phase 2 was implemented in 2013 through four Exploratory Workshops, representing distinct regions in Minas Gerais: (1) the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte; (2) the Estrada Real Region; (3) Catavales Region, and (4) the Region around Itaúna. The one-day workshops focused on issues related to women's autonomy in a multidimensional perspective, including sexuality, the sexual division of labor, and gender roles in the home. In addition, the workshops sought to identify the problems and impediments women face with regards to their empowerment as women and leaders in both the cooperatives and national movement. The workshops had between 12-22 women, representing 41 cooperatives in the state³⁴.

The third phase of the project is currently underway and began in 2014. The focus of this phase is to consolidate findings and plan for future gender-awareness workshops in Latin America. Part of this phase consisted then of: a) a detailed analysis of the individual reports of each workshop carried out and the consequent production of a report with theoretical-methodological reflections according to this exploratory experience; b) the production of reports in a more accessible format with photos and information on the workshops to be distributed to the participants as feedback; c) a meeting with MNCR from Minas Gerais and INSEA as part of the feedback process; d) the elaboration of a popular education toolkit³⁵ and an academic/practitioner's toolkit.

In the next section we explore some of our learnings from this process and discuss in which ways this research-action project has contributed to an understanding of gender dynamics in cooperatives.

3. Women's Perceptions on Gender Inequalities: Reflections on Exploratory Findings and Impacts

Until now we have tried to show how there have been few attempts at problematizing the multiple ways in which gender inequalities manifest themselves in the waste picking sector. The naturalization of gender identities and a sexual division of labour attribute specific meanings and value to gender roles, impeding women's access to greater economic independence and discouraging more active participation and engagement within their cooperative's administration and at different levels of the national movement.

In this section we present some initial reflections on the ongoing processes of building gender awareness with women waste pickers. The analysis is based on informal conversations with women waste pickers who participated in various stages of the Gender & Waste project, participant observation and reports from each exploratory workshop and semi-structured interviews³⁶. Here we explore women's perceptions on recurrent concerns in all phases of the project and more

³⁴ The workshops lasted for an entire day. In order to ensure the participation among all women, we sought to work with smaller groups (Moser, 1993) and also to break the larger group into smaller reflection groups of 4-5 women during several activities. It is very important to consider the number of participants to ensure participation of all and avoid the reproduction of hierarchies even among groups of only women

³⁵ For more details on the popular toolkit, see here: <http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Gender-Toolkit-EN-HR.pdf>. For more information on the Gender & Waste project, see here: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/waste-gender-rethinking-relations-empowerment>

³⁶ A detailed account of findings from the workshops in all dimensions including learnings and needs identified by the women is provided at From Theory to Action - Gender and Waste Recycling: A Toolkit for Teachers, Researchers and Practitioners (forthcoming).

specifically highlight those related to inequalities in their work environment and the movement. These discussions cast light on what women identify as barriers to greater equality, but also on the strategies they have used to overcome these challenges. Dealing with gender awareness in the sector has created its own tensions, therefore, we also examine some of the alliances forged in order to prevent male colleagues from boycotting the project and future dissemination. This section is divided into five parts: relations at work, relations in the movement, gender roles and multiple identities, women's practical needs and levels of empowerment, and general impacts and outcomes of the project.

3.1. *Relations at work*

In all of the workshops, the women waste pickers proudly claimed they do all types of activities in their cooperatives. In this sense, many claimed this was an example of achieving greater equality once they take on even men's typical activities requiring more physical strength. However, this was an opportunity to reflect on how gender is relational and the fact men are refusing to take on what they consider more 'feminine' activities reinforces patterns of a sexual division of labor. During these discussions, a woman claimed that "if a man stays alone in the cooperative, he will have problems to do the activities only women do" (Itaúna workshop). In addition, women claimed there are fewer women who pick up materials in the streets or pick up materials at establishments that generate a lot of waste; though some noted that in some cases they accompany drivers. The sexual division of labor in cooperatives became clearer to women once they realized that while women may be doing all kinds of activities, the same is not true for the men.

This division extends itself to decision-making moments. Interestingly enough, the consensus among participants is that there seem to be more women working in their cooperatives; however, in some workplaces the men are usually members of the cooperative's board. In such circumstances, women's voices and representation is not always equal to that of the men. According to a participant in one of the workshops: "There is no autonomy inside the cooperatives. The board is in charge. And there is always someone new saying what has to be done. Women should be more united within the cooperatives" (Itaúna workshop). Another commented: "When men sit on the board [of the cooperative] there is almost no recognition [of women]" (Itaúna workshop).

There were some cases of women who direct and preside over the cooperative and the cooperative's decision-making board. These women are very articulate and enjoy their leadership positions. They take great pride in discussing stories of negotiations with local politicians and serving as examples for other women in the cooperatives. This is especially true for cooperatives where women are the majority. "I feel at ease to administer [the cooperative], to give opinions. The majority of the time women are leading here," explained a president of a cooperative (Belo Horizonte workshop). In these cases, women feel a level of comfort and confidence. In other situations, women believe women presiding over the cooperatives brings more efficiency because women "act differently, men are much slower [in taking action]" (Conselheiro Lafaiete workshop).

Nevertheless, the participants mentioned instances of men cutting them off or of not giving them enough space and respect when voicing their opinions. Others expressed concern for the bullying and sexual harassment they experience at work. These examples encouraged women to think about strengthening their own relations among women in the cooperatives.

On a positive note, the women waste pickers claimed that the work space is often a safe environment for them. They feel the job they do offers them more flexibility than other informal and formal jobs. This enables them to dedicate themselves to either other informal jobs or their

domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, all of this work is, in and of itself, an obstacle for women to participate in other activities since they have no leisure time.

3.2 Relations in the Movement

There are at least three general findings with regard to the perceptions on gender relations within the movement. First, the women emphasized how they would like more women from the movement to participate in workshops and activities such as the one being conducted on gender. Second, they emphasized the need for all workers to participate more in meetings held in all government levels. In this sense, there was a demand for broader participation. A complaint is that there some waste pickers and leaders are usually the same ones representing the movement. Third and associated with the second finding is the demand for more transparency and access to information. Many of the workers claimed they are not aware of all the decisions and would like to learn more about what is happening. A concern of a woman leader was the inability to share power. For her there is a clear gender distinction as men seem to be more aggressive in order to benefit from having more authority within the movement. “Women are not supportive, but men aren’t either. Men are supportive of each other when they gossip, but when they are fighting for power they aren’t. When they are on the road to power, they are capable of killing. This occurs in the bases of waste picking, in the movement, men want to be better than the other, they are always ready to pull the rug from under someone’s feet” (Conselheiro Lafaiete workshop).

On the other hand, some participants also stated that waste pickers have to make the time and express their interest in learning more about what is going on in the movement. In general, the women agreed that there should be more joint efforts for women to collectively participate both in their cooperatives and in the national movement. Finally, in some of the workshops, women expressed their desire to have a women’s forum within the national movement of waste pickers (MNCR).

In order to do so they need to have more solidarity amongst themselves, which many claimed would be a source for improving their self-esteem as well. The key to participating is through more information, including on the laws related to waste picking, more collective efforts among women, and more skills so that women can be respected in such arenas. As an example, a woman stated: “Women need to be united in their own decisions [opinions] and not just accept what men say”. (Itaúna workshop).

3.3 Gender Roles, Vulnerabilities and Intersecting Identities beyond the Workplace

One of the main topics emerging from the workshops was the unequal division of domestic labour. Interestingly enough, women were quite aware of the sexist and heteronormative cultural norms that pervade everyday interactions that essentialize gender roles. Such discussions also led to critical reflections on how both men and women reproduce and sustain unequal gender ideologies. A black, lesbian waste picker brought attention to how participating in the workshops led her to be more aware of her own attitudes and actions: “Wow, it’s even difficult to say this. Well, in my experience, I even noticed [this] in other women that sometimes we are, we are sexist and don’t even realize it” (Belo Horizonte workshop). Another claimed her husband refuses to help around the house because ‘he thinks he will become less manly’ (Belo Horizonte workshop). Though women recognized the need for equally dividing the work a home, they understood that there were serious cultural barriers limiting possibilities for more just relations within the home.

Gender violence against women was one of the most recurrent themes in all of the workshops. The stories and experiences of gender violence were significant and, in many ways, one of the central elements for establishing solidarity among the women participants. It also served to demystify notions of victimization and encourage others to confront oppressive situations. Women were clear to point out husbands, fathers, brothers or other male figures were to blame for not only experiences of physical violence, but verbal, sexual and psychological abuse. Expanding the definition of violence allowed women to publicly voice their strengths and self-worth. In her interview, Pollyana Inácio explained how a ‘simple discussion on gender’ changed her perspective on accepting violence in her household:

‘Because inside the movement, we always discussed topics [related] to waste pickers, but we didn’t have anything, until then[...] like this discussion on gender, something centered on women, on what we are going through, on what we feel, what we hope for. So when this occurred, I felt that it was the moment for me to find strength from those who were guiding me. So in that first discussion I decided, I chose to not subordinate myself anymore to violence. So it was something like I revealed my story and was able to openly tell all the people there what I was going through and I had this certainty, this conviction that I could change. I could have a chance. Because up until then, I didn’t know where to find this [strength].’

Stories of overcoming violent relationships illustrate how some women have been able to challenge the frontiers of a subjectivity designated to them by creating new meanings and paths for their lives. Some of the women pointed out the importance of knowing what laws can protect them, such as Lei Maria da Penha³⁷. Yet they highlighted the difficulties they face when using the law. Many claimed that police officers and authority figures are limited in how much protection they can offer or, in some circumstances, may even suggest that women stay in these relationships to protect the family. Some of the stories illustrated how women live in abusive relationships for many years as a result of the death threats they receive, which would put not only their lives at risk, but the lives of their children and even relatives. Discussions on gender violence never succumbed to an emphasis on victimization. Rather the group collectively reflected on these experiences and was capable of recognizing women’s agency even in such violent and abusive circumstances.

Another topic that raised tensions among women was the issue of sexuality, as many claimed they had never had the chance to discuss the issue. In two out of the four workshops, it was important to deconstruct some moralist judgments that countered the objectives of the research. Some of the opinions on women’s sexual behavior and how they should dress represented patriarchal and conservative stances. In these cases, the facilitators played a fundamental role in questioning why such perspectives have such a stronghold in Brazilian society today. These tensions were important to explore the reproduction of gender ideologies and reflect on how autonomy also includes women’s control over their bodies.

In other workshops, the discussion on sexuality provided the space for lesbian waste pickers to call attention to the discrimination they have encountered at work. By sharing these experiences, other women commented they had not reflected on their own stereotypes against LGBTQIA (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) workers in their cooperatives. We believe that by mentioning such examples, women waste pickers began to understand how gender oppressions are enforced by external and intragroup forces as well.

³⁷ Lei Maria da Penha is a federal law enacted in 2006 by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, seeking to reduce domestic violence. The law changes the punishment for perpetrators. The law states that aggressors should no longer be punished with alternative sentences, and increases the sentence as well as offers a variety of measures for removing the abuser from the home. The law is named after Maria da Penha Maia, whose ex-husband attempted to kill her twice, causing her to become paraplegic. For more information, see: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/8/maria-da-penha-law-a-name-that-changed-society>.

Discussions on race appeared tangentially in the workshops. On few occasions, class and race were associated as identity markers that intensify the discrimination and marginalization of waste pickers in general. In one workshop, during the discussion on gender roles, a participant gave an extensive testimony on how slavery and racial discrimination pervade various facets of contemporary life and waste picking. In another workshop, a black woman who is currently dating a younger white man said interracial dating still shocks a society that claims to live in a racial democracy.

3.4 Addressing Practical and Strategic Needs and Levels of Empowerment

Before women construct their own understandings of the forms of exploitation, marginalisation and powerlessness that affect them, projects that seek to build gender awareness must also pay attention to different levels and forms of empowerment. We argue there are clear links between individual and collective forms of empowerment. This is because an initial process that encourages cognitive and symbolic empowerment on an individual level can lead to critical reflections on a more collective level regarding hierarchical structures and institutions. In other words, individual and collective levels of empowerment are interconnected and bound to the ability to enhance women's practical needs. As Pollyana, who confronted gender violence stated: "if I hadn't known the movement perhaps I would not have been exposed to this gender discussion [...] I may not be alive today" (Interview).

Focusing on their practical needs, women expressed interest in having access to capacity-building courses, which would give them more self-esteem and resources to actively participate within their cooperatives and the national movement. One woman waste picker expressed her concern as a result of being illiterate: "How can I be the treasurer at my association if I can't read or write?." Despite the lack of specific skills, another woman affirmed this should not be used as an impediment to participating: "We don't know how to read, we have ears [...] we cannot be scared of being leaders. I'm not afraid because I can't read³⁸".

While women identified concerns regarding innumerable skills and resources they lack, they nonetheless claimed their value as workers, militants, mothers and wives. Having a platform to voice their concerns and lived experiences allowed women to resignify the value they have in their homes, cooperatives, movement and society at large. At the symbolic level, women seemed to redeem their self-confidence and dignity. During the evaluation activity at the end of a workshop, a waste picker said the experience "opened her mind" and that from now on she would be "more decisive, have more courage" (Belo Horizonte workshop). Another reinforced the idea of having a moment just for women to discuss gender issues: "this was useful, sometimes we are embarrassed of expressing ourselves. Here we felt comfortable" (Belo Horizonte workshop).

At the political level, women understood the pressing need to participate more in decision-making processes within their cooperatives and movement. One of the entry points for sustaining this argument was made by the participants when they noted they are the majority in many cooperatives. Participation and equal representation are important for changing both decision-making processes and the rules that guide them. Working towards these practical outcomes, women can more effectively mobilize for social change and more democratic practices within their workplace and movement. Interestingly enough, this activism may also affect how women perceive other struggles for social justice in society. Along these lines, a woman mentioned the connections between struggles:

'As a militant in the movement, as a woman, as a waste picker, the discussions on gender all feed into each other in the following way because we have the conviction that when we are all there, women [coming from] various places and with various stories have shown us they were capable of

³⁸ Dias' field Notes, 13-15 July 2012, National Women's Meeting, Paranaguá, Brazil

overcoming [hardships]. This encourages [us] more and more, [encourages] this militancy that we have to continue struggling, that it is possible.’

At the economic level, recent activities centered on women’s leadership skills have given women more confidence in managing their cooperatives. A leader within the movement and president of a cooperative claimed that activities on communication skills for women leaders have helped her deal with conflicts at the workplace, stating: “Sometimes it is complicated, we are leaders of a cooperative and a job like this requires us to give orders to men, right? So sometimes it is difficult for us to delegate responsibilities, and so sometimes there are confrontations and such but I was able to deal really well with this confrontation” (Interview). Learning to manage conflicts within the workplace, which reflect gender power dynamics, empowers women and also improves the levels of productivity, positively impacting all workers.

Overall, incremental steps brought about changes that range from an individual to a collective level within a framework that highlights the links between economic, political and symbolic injustices.

3.5. General Outcomes and Impacts

The exploratory research-action project gave women a first opportunity to understand the dimensions of gender inequality in the public and private sphere in a more in-depth and critical manner. This is intricately tied to the importance of reinforcing and broadening the notion of autonomy, something key to the way the project defined different levels and forms of women’s empowerment. Knowledge on gender issues was thus seen as the gateway for connecting levels of empowerment. As a woman commented during the workshops: “We aren’t making any money [by participating], but we are gaining knowledge. Participating is important” (Belo Horizonte workshop).” Ultimately, the opportunity for discussing their concerns was a way of claiming their own space or “having the privilege to seek autonomy” as another participant exclaimed. Furthermore, women recognized how the discussion is important for their personal lives, but for improving work conditions and practices in the movement. In one of the events held to disseminate findings from the project in early 2015, a woman leader called upon other women to embrace the ideals of gender equality. “This project gave us hope to take it to our base. We need to make changes. As women continue to produce this sexist thought, we won’t change. We know it is a slow process. Women have to change”, she said (Personal Statement, April 2015 event).

From a broader social and cultural point of view, the process not only helped women become aware of multiple forms of gender inequalities, but also gave them more self-confidence that they could confront these obstacles. Many expressed the interest in continuing these discussions and having the time to reflect more carefully on topics such as sexuality, violence and forms of participating more effectively in the cooperatives and movement. Another interesting element is that women shared their experiences from the workshop with other co-workers and even family members. “I tried to share the information with others, not only with my co-workers but also with some family members” (Interview). Many of the participants requested that women waste pickers have access to such examples and stories by suggesting the project should publish short stories on women’s empowerment particularly when facing violence and other issues. The practical outcome of this is that knowledge on gender inequalities travels beyond the group of participants. As noted above, some women have claimed to have left abusive relationships given the discussions in all phases of the project.

From the point of view of what changed within the movement, the discussions on gender awareness served as a catalyst for bringing about more equal participatory and representative practices. It is worth mentioning that for the first time a male dominated movement of waste pickers

acknowledged the issue of gender. During the movement's main annual event – Expocataadores in 2013 – there was a panel on gender issues. In 2014, a group of women waste picker leaders from different states challenged male leaders within the MNCR demanding fair representation at the coordination level of the MNCR. They also wrote a letter to the President of Brazil – Dilma Rousseff – asking for a seat for a women at the Inter-ministerial Committee of Social Inclusion of Waste Pickers (CIISC)³⁹. The MNCR has a male waste picker as a representative in this committee, but the women waste pickers demanded parity. President Dilma accepted the request and now there will be equal gender representation in the committee.

In addition to these repercussions, the discussions of gender have also started to impact men's perceptions on their attitudes towards women. During a feedback event with women participants and other waste pickers from Brazil and Latin America in early 2015, men contributed with their reflections on the findings from the project. Surprised with the personal accounts of experiences of violence and harassment, a male leader from the MNCR commented: “We [men] need to discipline ourselves and understand women's suffering” (Personal Statement, April 2015 event, male waste picker leader, MNCR). Another male waste picker said the event was positive because of its self-reflexive nature. “This meeting has been very good in this sense of liberating me from my sexism”(Personal Statement, April 2015 event).

While these outcomes represent initial changes in both men and women's attitudes and belief systems, as well as indirect consequences of working on gender awareness, they are nonetheless significant. The Gender & Waste project has served the objective of bringing gender onto the movement's agenda so that women and men can work towards actions that consolidate more gender equality at the cooperative and movement level.

4 Lessons and Challenges in Building Gender Awareness

Feminist participatory methodologies have proven to be a powerful means of connecting discussions on multiple forms of oppression with different forms and levels of empowerment. Nevertheless, we recognize that the project in and of itself would not automatically transform gender relations in the different spheres of interaction in the waste picking sector. Some important lessons and challenges in building gender awareness are worth noting.

First, participatory practices involve building bridges and alliances with those who are most interested in the discussion. As a result, respect for women's pace during phases of involvement was crucial to allow women to join in without pressing deadlines⁴⁰. Thus, in addition to involving gender and waste experts, the process consisted of consultations and various meetings with women waste picker leaders during all phases of the project. Second, by beginning with women's lived experiences at home, at their cooperatives and as militants of the national movement, women were able to identify the forces that often invisibly or subtly establish inequalities. It also allows the women space to identify through shared stories and listening, support and recognition, the other forces they can use to revert such unjust practices. Collectively sharing experiences brought attention to that which has historically been designated as unimportant or invisible, paving the path for new ways of understanding inequality.

³⁹ CIISC is an inter-ministerial committee created by former President Lula to coordinate actions of integrating pickers within solid waste systems.

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that this approach was made possible due to WIEGO's core funding. The project effectively worked on implementing a bottom-up approach and avoided a process driven by tight deadlines.

Lastly, while gender is a relational concept, we understood the need for starting with women only reflection groups prior to the process of involving men in order to provide women with a safe space to voice their concerns. However, it is fundamental to engage key male leaders as supporters of gender awareness so as to avoid creating further tensions in a male-dominated sector. Thus, we strategically engaged with male national leaders that expressed support for the project and recognized that building gender awareness also means working towards a more emancipatory agenda for the movement.

5. Concluding Thoughts: How Gender Awareness Can Revitalize the Cooperative Movement

By fostering an outlet for women waste pickers' demands to be heard, by permitting women to deepen their understanding and analysis of their situation, and by providing women with the opportunity to develop their demands, the project could facilitate the creation of new alliances⁴¹, as well as new attitudes and behaviors in the process (Mitlin, 2012). This is the key to the transformation which can take place through a dialogue based on solidarity and the sharing of experiences of oppression as discussed by the participants. As a woman waste picker participating in a general meeting with women and men waste pickers: "if women empower themselves, this could lead to more women mobilizing for other causes" (Personal Statement, April 2015 event).

What this waste picker's comment reflects is that building gender-awareness should not be seen as disassociated from the MNCR's general ideals as a social movement. Historically, leftist social movements have had difficulties in incorporating gender equality in their own practices and structures once their primary struggles were directed at class injustices (Alvarez, 1990). In this sense, many social movements reproduce patriarchal practices and structures despite an ideology based on equality and justice.

In many ways, there is a disjuncture between what authors have claimed to be three important components of a social movement: ideology, praxis and organization (Gerard and Martens, 1987). These three components mutually reinforce one another, though there may be times where one component becomes more dominant. MNCR's ideology for organizing cooperatives include the ideals of mutual help, democratic practices such as direct democracy and direct actions, and self-management as specific forms of targeting oppression and exclusion. The ideals behind gender equality are not distant from MNCR's ideology, the difference lies in the praxis and actions taken by the movement in effectively working towards democratic practices at the local and national levels. Some authors argue that cooperatives are well-positioned to answer claims for gender equity since they are "rooted in values of self help, equality, and equity, as well as economic growth through cooperation and democratic processes" (McMurtry, 2013:03). The extent to which these values truly represent the dynamics within cooperatives is open to contestation, which is why gender equality cannot be taken for granted in cooperatives. For instance, Wirth's (2010) study of gender relations in recycling cooperatives in Brazil reveals tensions given certain hierarchies in the management process that do not necessarily reflect solidarity or a more democratic management.

Gender awareness can revitalize the movement as it works towards transforming the very structures and practices that perpetuate injustices beyond a class axis. Gender equality does not base itself on establishing divisions, but rather on building alliances that are capable of challenging hierarchies on multiple levels. Viewed from this angle, gender awareness can be a dimension for linking the abovementioned components. As a result it can bring forth significant changes in the cooperative practice and vision (Gerard and Martens, 1987) that works towards democratizing the ways it organizes workers.

⁴¹ One such alliance is with the International Coaching Federation which has provided assistance in activities that foster women's leadership skills.

If women waste pickers gain the confidence and interest in representing the movement's demands, they will only serve to strengthen the very ideology of the movement. On a more specific economic level, but one which also integrates changes on a political and symbolic level, combined efforts to gain recognition from society and key political actors will bring about positive economic impacts on worker's earnings and productivity. Challenging the sexual division of labour can also stimulate more efficient practices within the workplace, which, in turn, may call attention to the ways in which men and women reproduce gender ideologies in the home. Once again, these processes involve time and the willingness of the movement to provide more spaces for women to present their concerns and interests. What is undeniable is that the women waste pickers are becoming increasingly more vocal and assertive, presenting a clear challenge to the long-established barriers embedded in the movement's praxis and action. By incorporating the demands for gender equality, both men and women waste pickers will admittedly be struggling as partners against common structures and practices that oppress not only women in the sector, but men as well. The idea of a forged struggle among equals reflects back to the notion of mutual help, one of the pillars of the cooperative movement's ideology.

Building gender-awareness then has unraveled the ways in which the movement and dynamics in cooperatives reproduce sexism. The visibility given to feminist struggles in contemporary Brazil have also facilitated a process by which men and women identify inequality and mistreatment of women on a daily basis. According to Klatch (2001), not only do social movements have to recognize the inequality women face, but they must also work on articulating how these injustices must be rejected even in traditionally male dominated spaces. This involves framing these gender injustices as part of a social condition that entails political action (Klatch, 2001: 803), in the same way class-based demands do. In other words, working towards gender equality does not diminish class struggles, but is connected to broader struggles for social justice.

We have made a modest attempt to demarcate how building gender awareness is aligned with the ideals of the cooperative movement precisely because it exposes how forms of power and injustices undermine workers' capacities to improve their livelihoods. One of the main points to be emphasized is that our exploratory findings can serve to encourage future dissemination projects in Brazil, Latin America, and elsewhere. Ultimately, if gender equality is a path for envisioning more just relations, further ties between collective feminist struggles and other social movements must also be established through the combined efforts of men and women.

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