

Opinion

Feminism, labor and precarity in Bolivia

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Stencil and drawing with in and pencil crayons @ Lorena K for Ojalá.

The neoliberal period began in Bolivia in 1985, a year forever inscribed in popular memory. The population did not passively accept the changes in capital accumulation but responded with widespread mobilization and protest.

In 1986, mine workers and other popular sectors led the “March for Life,” which marked the beginning of a cycle of resistance. In the midst of the intense struggles that followed, the government, with the support of the army, imposed new economic measures and extractivist industries sank their talons into rural territories.

The implementation of Supreme Decree 21060, which kicked off privatizations throughout the country, reverberates to this day. The near complete elimination of labor protections and an overall deterioration of living conditions are among its most important consequences.

It transformed Bolivians’ lives and, in particular, how they sold their labor. Different work arrangements proliferated, and what is known as “informal labor” grew as outsourcing increased and unions fragmented. Bosses began experimenting with all kinds of labor agreements, most of them informal.

After 15 years of privatization and the repression of the popular, peasant and Indigenous resistance to neoliberalism, the “War in defense of water and life” (known in English as the Water War), broke out in Cochabamba.

We are daughters of that struggle and heirs to the politicization that occurred. It sparked a debate about the commons and put what we now call interdependence on the agenda in a way that remains vital today.

Fighting for life amid precarity

We were undergraduate students during those years of conflict. Since then, we completed our graduate studies, which we funded with scholarships, but now face the difficult fact that having a university degree does not guarantee employment.

To get by, we joined forces to work as researchers. As we observe the world around us, our work aims to contribute to debates that have emerged from this time of women and feminist rebellion.

The working conditions imposed on us have forced us to grapple with the fact that being researchers and “independent” women means freelancing in a sea of piecework. Most of our contracts do not pay a salary, or even for hours worked, but simply for the final product. Being a freelancer in Bolivia also means not having health insurance or other benefits such as a pension.

This is why we understand ourselves as precarious workers who, under the deceptive title of

“consultants,” are obliged, among other things, to comply with all the tax laws. Our precarity explodes in our faces every time we or someone in our family gets sick. Parenting and caregiving make our paths even more complicated.

We realize that one of the most urgent problems we have is to signify our oft-negated condition as precarious workers.

Precarious work means working until we’re exhausted and writing while also caring for our small multi-species communities. It means combining care work and domestic work with intellectual and creative work.

In addition, our homes become our offices. We don’t charge our employers for electricity, internet or other services.

We are millions

Our precarity underscores the importance of a question that has been on our minds for quite some time: What is working women’s situation in Bolivia?

According to the most recent data from 2022, 85 percent of the Bolivian population works in the so-called “informal” sector, defined as paid or unpaid work that lacks legal protections. This means that Bolivia has the highest percentage of the population in the informal labor force in the world. Eighty-seven percent of women workers are considered informal, as are 83.3 percent of male workers.

Women’s participation in the labor market in Bolivia hovers around 60 percent, higher than the global average, which is between 40 and 50 percent. International Labor Organization figures from the end of 2023 show that the ranks of the “working poor” have grown in recent years. People are working more and harder, but not earning enough to pay for basic necessities.

It is important to think of precariousness not only in terms of labor, but also in terms of its impact on life as a whole. The terms “informal” and “poverty” fail to capture the complex ecosystem of labor and contemporary life in Bolivia.

We seek to describe what is taking place in a way that conveys the total absence of stability in a context of civilizational crisis, which, at its core, is an unprecedented ecological crisis that threatens the reproduction of life.

Instead of talking about informality or poverty, we call the processes that degrade the conditions of social reproduction the precaritization of life. We define this as the lack of sustained access to the material and symbolic resources that we want and need to live in a dignified way. Our definition of precarity goes beyond labor precarity, which focuses on the market and wages.

The precaritization of life is directly connected to the cycles of the commodity boom and the extractivist regime of dispossession.

Although women are often self-employed or stuck in jobs without benefits, it is important to note that the precariousness of life does not impact everyone equally. Social class, which shapes things like access to social networks and job titles, also conditions its impacts.

We believe it is vital for the feminist movement to return to debates about social stratification and class hierarchies after more than fifteen years of progressive left governments in Bolivia. There are differences in the way that workers experience processes of precaritization. There are also practices of struggle to politicize.

Where do we go from here?

In the current crisis in Bolivia, few talk about the material conditions required for the reproduction of life. We think it is important to begin to debate the tasks and jobs women do, as well as on the differences and hierarchies among us in feminist and anti-patriarchal struggles. This is the only way that we can come up with creative ways to address these issues, instead of continuing to ignore them.

Our work seeks to center reflective and practical efforts and to politicize the reproductive sphere in the context of neoliberalism and multiple forms of violence.

As feminists and workers, we must again begin to discuss and debate work. Let us return to the issue of labor together, bringing with us all of the other debates and advances made through feminist and anti-patriarchal struggles over recent years.

Marxa N. Chávez and Claudia López Pardo

P.S.

• Ojala. June 20, 2024 :
<https://www.ojala.mx/en/ojala-en/feminism-labor-and-precarity-in-bolivia>

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