

# EVERYTHING I DO IS FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

**Silvia González (Casa Latina / Mujeres Sin Fronteras)**

Translated by Juan Heiremans

I want to say thank you for the invitation to be part of LAPES 2022. In case you didn't hear, my name is Silvia González. I have been a household worker for more than fifteen years. I'm part of the staff of Casa Latina, a non-profit organization that advances the power and well-being of Latino immigrants. Casa Latina has a program called Mujeres Sin Fronteras that promotes leadership development for household workers. This program arose from the need to create a space where household workers could organize themselves to fight for dignifying this work sector and create better working conditions without putting aside their own challenges as women and mothers. This is a space by and for social justice where they share information relevant to the Latina woman. They make community and work collectively. I am the result of this leadership group called Mujeres Sin Fronteras. I have been part of this group since 2011.

When I received the invitation to participate in this feminist pedagogies event, I asked myself "Why are they inviting me? What does all my work have to do with this?" I thought they had the wrong person but I took it upon myself to look up what feminist pedagogies meant and discovered to my surprise that it's all the work I do. The movement for the fight for household workers' rights are feminist pedagogies of household workers.

## **THE HISTORY OF HOUSEHOLD WORKERS**

A moment ago, I was talking about the word "household workers" because a lot of people use the word domestic workers. And it's a movement that has been taking place along with the National Domestic Workers Alliance since years ago. The word domestic in Spanish has a very strong meaning. It comes from domesticating, from controlling, from dominating. Part of our work that falls under feminist pedagogies is to change that context. We want to educate people little by little. Although we are still in a modern world of slavery, we can start changing phrases, educating people. We know that by saying "Not now!" maybe we are going to stop doing something or change phrases that we have been using since long ago. Maybe it is

not the intention of this space, but hopefully after this session maybe you will remember Silvia and you can help us in this movement to make this shift and call “household workers” instead of “domestic workers.”

I want to mention some historical moments of household workers. Household work has its roots in the history of slavery. European colonizers used violence to create an enslaved servant class of Indigenous, African and poor white workers. This allowed them to maximize their profits and establish power through slavery and abolition. Colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism shaped the domestic labor that is performed primarily by whom? By women of color.

The United States expanded westward and then abroad in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, occupying lands transformed by previous generations of colonial violence. American colonialism and imperialism brought new forms of racial violence to all these borderlands. This included an increased dependence on Black and indigenous servitude. The servant class also grew to include laborers, Mexican, Chinese and Irish immigrants among others. African Americans migrated from the South to northern cities fleeing violence and poverty during the 1910s and 1920s. This was called the Great Migration. Caribbean immigrants also arrived in the northern cities of the United States. In this period, they were also largely forced to do household work.

During this time together they formed alliances and unions to defend their rights. The African American freedom movement gave birth to new forms of organizing among household workers. In the 1950s and 60s they led victorious movements to end racial segregation, like the Montgomery Bus Boycott between 1955 and 1956. At that time, more household workers than ever joined the movement. As a result of the triumph of civil rights, African American women left domestic work in large numbers in the 1970s and 80s and employers began to hire Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian immigrant women in greater numbers. Immigration and United States foreign policies created this new group of workers vulnerable to

exploitation.

While I was going over what I was going to talk about today, it came to mind one of the phrases mentioned yesterday that said, “it is the past that allows us to walk well into the future.” That is why, because of all this struggle and history of the past, using feminist pedagogies that maybe back then we didn’t know those words, the National Domestic Workers Alliance was created.

## **THE WORK OF THE NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE**

I will give a little bit of history and then close with what we are working on locally. Because all these movements are intertwined and that is what makes us stronger. At the founding of the National Workers Alliance in June 2007, over fifty household workers, representing thirteen local organizations from across the country, gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, for a National Meeting of Household Workers as part of the first United States Social Forum, by its acronym in English USSF. Each of these organizations was working in their own cities to win rights and dignity for household workers. They knew they had to go beyond their communities in search of models, strategies, and a greater sense of solidarity in the organizing projects for household workers. In previous generations of household workers’ organizations there had been national networks, but at this point there was no such national coordinating body. Over the course of the meeting over these four days, they shared organizing models, they learned about the history of household work, they talked about campaign victories and challenges, and they presented their struggles to thousands of participants of this Social Forum. Despite language barriers and cultural divides, workers shared organizing experiences, laughed, cried together, and developed lasting relationships. On the last day of the meeting, these three organizations decided to form the National Domestic Workers Alliance, known by its English acronym NDWA, to build their own collective power and elevate their local work to a national stage.

The founding organizations—worth mentioning because they are

such powerful organizations that still exist—included: the Women’s Collective of Centro Legal “La Raza,” active women and individuals organized to gain labor rights in the North Bay area of California; the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, known as CHIRLA; the Filipino Workers Center in Southern California; the women workers project, known by its English acronym, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities; The Damayan Migrant Workers Association; Domestic Workers United; Haitian Women, for Haitian refugees; Housecleaners Cooperative of the Workplace Project in Hempstead; Las Señoras de Santa María in New York; Casa de Maryland; and obviously Casa Latina.

Why do I mention all of these organizations? Because they played such an important role in bringing about this National Domestic Workers Alliance. Many of these organizations are still fighting locally for benefits for household workers. Today, the National Domestic Workers Alliance is the nation’s leading voice for dignity, justice, and respect for millions of household workers in the United States. As of 2021, the Alliance comprises more than seventy-five affiliate organizations and local chapters, as well as a growing base of individual memberships across the country. In 2019, a national bill of rights was introduced for the first time in the U.S. Congress, where the champions of this bill of rights were current Vice President Kamala Harris and Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal.

I remember this movement was so impressive. We were hundreds of workers at a press conference outside Congress. At that moment the #MeToo movement joined that press conference and we visited several politicians inside the Congress. The movement that is created is incredible, the momentum that is created. Most of the politicians have a connection with household workers because when I say household workers it includes several things: nannies, house cleaners, people who take care of the most precious thing, their parents. I remember we were in a room where Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was one of the politicians, also a champion among so many other politicians, and she said that her mother cleaned houses and that she went with her mother and that while her mother cleaned, she

sat down to do her homework. We all connect at some point with that. I still clean houses, but I remember when I would go clean houses and I would take my daughter with me. And when I listened to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tell her story, you identify and you feel like you're on the right path. Right? It's not that [my daughter] is going to become a politician, but you can do something in this movement to change the laws and be able to leave a path with better working conditions for the new generations that are coming, because household work is never going to stop.

How many people are coming across the border to get to this country? I was talking to the colleague [in the audience] saying how many people were struggling from Mexico? We came to this country looking for a better education, a better way of life. We were talking saying that we don't want to leave our land, our parents, our customs to come here and suffer discrimination. But here we are. We have to keep moving forward. So, I went back to that space in the Congress, when I heard Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. That empowers. That gives strength to keep fighting.

In 2019, the National Bill of Rights was introduced. It didn't pass. But that doesn't mean we have thrown in the towel. In 2022, approximately less than a month ago, we went to the United States Congress again. The pandemic stopped us a little bit, but we just caught our breath and came back. It's still undecided. The papers are still on the table. But we had more acceptance, more politicians listened to us, more politicians know that there are thousands, millions of household workers in the unprotected shadows. I remember hearing now Nancy Pelosi near us saying she supports and that she's with us, and obviously Jayapal, who is still one of the champions of the Bill of Rights.

This whole movement has many faces. Because being in the United States Congress, these are many challenges and not just economic challenges, because these are women who have no legal status and they get inside Congress. Can you imagine the fear for those women when you walk through a detector and you see a bunch of people there with guns and the whole thing? It is a tremendous fear,

but the need for a change is stronger. If we don't remove the finger of fear, if they reject it [the Bill of Rights], we will go back there, because the first time we introduced it, when there were two or three people, is fine. Now, this time there was more awareness. Next time maybe it will be the final one, if it can be done.

The National Domestic Workers Alliance works to achieve three main strategic objectives.

- 1) Raise standards for the national workforce by obtaining new legal protections.
- 2) Change business practices in the private sector.
- 3) Help build a powerful movement to earn an economy and democracy that works for all of us, channeling the transformation, the civic power of household workers, women, and people of color. Its multiple identities and experiences impact household workers.

That's why the National Domestic Workers Alliance applies its strategic objectives on many levels, not just in the workplace.

The Alliance has won bills of rights for household workers at the state and municipal levels. But it also led initiatives that changed immigration policy and fought anti-Black racism. The efforts for cultural change by the National Domestic Workers Alliance have increased public awareness of the importance of household work, the humanity and contribution of all immigrants, the power of history, Black leadership, and the need for dignified care for both workers and care recipients.

The vision and strategy of the National Alliance would not be possible without the leadership of the hundreds of household workers. Each year, hundreds of household workers participate in intensive leadership development programs, which we can also call feminist pedagogies.

This includes a program called "Unity, Dignity and Power" and "We Dream in Black." These programs position household workers to lead successful campaigns, to amplify the household workers' perspective in culture change work and mass media, to build sustainable

organizations, and to engage in practices that promote healing and resilience. This is speaking of the National Alliance, of a national movement.

## **INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS**

I am now going to talk a little bit about an international movement. On June 16 we are going to celebrate big time the International Household Workers' Day. This is all due to the building of an international movement. In 2009, the first transnational household workers' organization, the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN), was launched at the International Trade Union Confederation in Geneva, Switzerland.

Unions and organizations of household workers came together to meet. They came from all over the world, including Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Many of these groups had been organizing for decades. Their main objective was to mobilize household workers' organizations and their allies around the globe to establish international standards for paid household work. They also sought to share resources and better organizational practices to achieve labor standards in their respective countries.

One of the main objectives of the International Domestic Workers' Network was to address Convention 189 on decent work for household workers. The International Domestic Workers' Network pushed for international labor standards at the United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO), which is the world's largest global labor governance body. The Convention recognized that household workers have the same basic labor rights and protections as other workers. It also included clauses that agreed to the specific needs of that sector. In 2013, the International Domestic Workers' Network became a formal federation of household workers' organizations. It became the International Domestic Workers' Federation with over 200 household workers participating in this new federation.

The Federation is the only women-led labor federation in the world.



Its main focus is to help national groups implement local standards and protections. As of May 2020, the Federation has seventy-four affiliates from fifty-seven countries. It represents more than 560,000 household workers in unions, worker cooperatives, and other organizations. The National Domestic Workers Alliance is represented in this International Domestic Workers Federation.

Myrtle Witbooi is President of the Federation and a former household worker from South Africa. She linked her personal history with the movement. “My mother was a cook. My father was a gardener. That’s why I’m a unionist, unionist, unionist.” Myrtle continued, “The new federation will have a big task ahead, but with the right leadership we will conquer the world by storm. We are no longer slaves, we are workers with the same rights as other workers.” Listening to or reading Myrtle, it reminds me sometimes why I have this passion for this movement.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s, my mother was a laundress. I remember she tells of going to rich people’s homes to knock on the door to ask if they had clothes to wash for them. In our poor countries where there are no washing machines, she had to go to the river where most of the time her knees were in the water. Now my mother cannot walk well without the support of a walker because of the rheumatic pains in her knees. Having to iron with those heavy irons that were put on the coals without electricity, without anything and for a miserable salary that was not even enough to put food on the table, maybe because of that, this movement is in my veins. Not so much because I am a household worker, but also in honor of my mother and not only her. How many women in our countries have been doing that and without being able to raise their voices, without being able to say anything, because of male chauvinism, because of capitalism, because of so many things?

1→ Editors’ note: Myrtle Witbooi passed away on January 16, 2023, after dedicating her lifetime to co-create a household laborers movement. The International Domestic Workers Foundation compiled a series of video and written tributes in her honor. See <https://idw-fed.org/remembering-myrtle/> and <https://idwfed.org/biography-and-life/>.

## THE WORK OF CASA LATINA

Although the Federation recognizes that we household workers should have the same basic labor rights, we do not. In many parts of the country we are not protected under labor laws. Currently, only ten states in the U.S. have bills of rights for household workers. Ten states and two cities have bills of rights. Among these cities is the city of Seattle and here my colleague [Jason Wozniak] is telling me that the other one is Philadelphia.

In 2018, Seattle was the first city nationwide to win a bill of rights protecting 33,000 household workers followed by Philadelphia. This Bill of Rights for the city has basic rights such as minimum wage, breaks, time to eat, protection from sexual harassment and the right to not have your documents withheld by your employer or boss. We also earned the right to have a Labor Standards Board, a unique model nationwide. The Labor Standards Board provides a venue for household workers, private household employers, workers' organizations, and the public to consider and suggest ways to improve working conditions for household workers. All of this would not have been possible without Casa Latina.

Casa Latina has a base of approximately 300 household workers, most of them, arguably 90% of them are house cleaners, although the Seattle Bill of Rights covers house cleaners, nannies, care givers, gardeners, housekeepers, and cooks or women cooks.

We also have a large base of gardeners. But we have a big challenge in reaching out to gardeners so that they feel included in this Bill of Rights. Why do you think they don't feel included or don't feel they belong in this Bill of Rights? Because they are men, because they don't feel like they are part of household work.

There is a lot of education we have to do yet. One of the big challenges we have with the Bill that was already won, and I think it is in most of the places that have won Bills of Rights, is to be able to bring the information, is to be able to reach out to the community, both worker and employer or homeowner. We have had a Bill of Rights for three years in the city and today we still cannot reach 50% of the

household workers. We are still in the struggle. We have gotten more funding from the city so that we can continue to look for ways and strategies to reach both employers and workers. Casa Latina is working on a representative-based model, because we know that most of the workers may not feel comfortable coming to the organizations. They don't feel identified. These representatives are going out to the bus stops, to the supermarkets, taking the information. They don't have to get to Casa Latina to know the information, but it is important that they know the rights they have at home.

And another very important point is that we have to do education and believe, us household workers, that the work we do is as worthy as that of a teacher, as that of a dentist, as that of an educator. If I don't believe it myself, how am I going to project that? It's easy to say, but when it comes to action, it's not there. Always when I am asked, "what do you do?," before I put Casa Latina, I say that I am a household worker.

I remember yesterday we were also talking in relation to debt. I was asked how debt fits in with household workers. I am going to take my daughter, who is here, as an example. It is hard. Household workers get into debt and a lot of it because they earn a low salary. Now with the pandemic, if you are sick, you have to pay bills.<sup>2</sup> We don't have health insurance. We don't have paid sick days, not one. So what do we do? We borrow from the bank and it accumulates and the debts increase.

I remember when my daughter went to college. We went to drop her off at the university. I had my job and I told her, "I don't know. But you with the numbers in school and I'll take care of putting numbers on this side here." A week after she left, they closed the place where I was working and that's when the world came crashing down on me. Good thing she didn't have loans, right, but no scholarship support, no support at all. That's where my career in the household workers' movement began. I won't forget because my daughter left in 2011 to go to school and I met Casa Latina in 2011 and that's where my

2 → In English in the original.

feminist pedagogies began.

They told me “This Casa Latina connects household workers with homeowners.” And I said, here I go. I worked up to two houses in one day and in the afternoons I went to work in a fast food restaurant. And so I went every semester. I would start every semester and I had to see how much money I was short to pay. I would ask my friends not for a loan, I would say “a help.” I would ask everywhere. Back then there were no such things like GoFundMe or something like that. If I had known about that from before, I would have applied to those things. I remember my daughter saying to me, “Mom, how do you pay for it?” I remember I wouldn’t even buy myself a coffee. Every penny<sup>3</sup>, every cent I had to save. I would get to the fast food restaurant and my coworkers knew me: when I would arrive and they already had my food ready for me. “Eat before you come in,” they would tell me, because they knew I came from working cleaning houses and without eating.

And my daughter still tells me, “My friends ask me, ‘What do you do for work? How do you pay for school?’” And I would say to them, “Tell them with great honor that your mother works cleaning houses.” Because it’s true that I don’t earn much, but it all depends on how you organize your finances to get ahead. She graduated and now she knows the value of being a mother and fighting to support her children to fulfill their dreams.

Going back to Casa Latina, Casa Latina works a lot with “power with” not “power over.” It also works a lot with the power of narrative. Without the power of narrative, the Bill of Rights they announced would not have been so quick. Household workers were getting in front of politicians, in front of councilors, being vulnerable and saying why it was necessary to have a minimum wage and break times and meal times.

That’s it, the power of the narrative. The “power with” is what makes the household workers in Casa Latina feel empowered, that they feel at home.

Sometimes I am asked if I like my work, if what I do brings me

3 → In English in the original.

enough money. Maybe not, but the feeling it gives me to be able to help people, to be with them, to educate people, to make a change in the lives of the people, of household workers, to raise their voices. That makes me feel good and fills me with pride. I receive, but I also give. And now I know that everything I do is feminist pedagogy. ■

