

## Community Mothers and Flower Workers in Colombia

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### The Transnationalization of Social Reproduction and Production for the Global Market

*This manuscript focuses on examining the quandary of Colombian flower workers as full-time labourers and mothers, as well as the labour and living conditions of Colombian Community Mothers. It does so, while considering Colombian enduring patriarchal, class, gender and race-based social relations, its civil war, as well as the international trade system, in which mothers' paid and reproductive work are interwoven. The author expands the concept of transnationalization and racialization of social reproduction as developed by feminist political economists by arguing that the concept should encompass work for social reproduction that serves the global market, even when mothering remains in the same geographical region. The survival of the global capitalist flower industry depends on the cheap labour carried out by racialized women, both as workers in plantations and as working Community Mothers; their paid and unpaid work is transnationalized by the system of international trade in which these women's and mothers' work is webbed. The author considers as well the concept of patriarchal motherhood, as defined by Adrienne Rich, and adjusts it, so that it includes not only the limitations and impositions of patriarchy to mothering, but also of the neo-liberal state and the global trading system.*

*Duerme, duerme negrito,  
Que tu mamá está el campo  
Negrito, negrito...  
Trabajando,  
Trabajando duramente, trabajando sí,  
Trabajando y no le pagan, trabajando sí,  
Trabajando y va tosiendo, trabajando sí,  
Trabajando y va de luto, trabajando sí,*

*Pa'l negrito chiquitito, trabajando sí,  
Pa'l negrito chiquitito, trabajando sí,*

*Sleep, sleep, black little baby,  
That your Mom is in the fields,  
Black little baby, black little baby...  
Working,  
Working really hard, yes, working,  
Working and she doesn't get paid, yes, working, yes,  
Working and she is coughing, yes, working,  
Working and she is mourning, yes, working,  
For the tiny black little baby, yes, working,  
For the tiny black little baby, yes, working.*

—Popular Argentinean song by Atagualpa Yupanqui

While conducting fieldwork on the working and living conditions of women who labor in one of Colombia's main export agro-industries, the fresh-cut flower industry, I interviewed many mothers, most of whom were sole heads of households, who worked or formerly worked for the industry.<sup>1</sup> I especially remember one ex-worker, María, who had been fired because she had become pregnant. María, a mother in her thirties, was the sole head of her household and had three children: a six-month-old baby, a four-year-old, and a ten-year-old. During a visit to her home in a town near Bogotá, I asked María who took care of her children while she was away from home looking for a new job. With obvious anguish, she answered that she was forced to leave her three children locked in the room she rented in a house. The oldest child, a girl, cared for the little ones, including the baby. When asked why she felt she had to lock up her children, María said she was afraid they might otherwise be raped or abused by neighbors or strangers and did not want them to roam the streets, where they might be induced to work in prostitution, the drug trade, one or another faction of the ongoing armed conflict, or other criminal activities. Like mothers everywhere, those in Colombia often have to make difficult choices when long shifts, hard work, low wages, a lack of social programs or trusted support from family or community members, and a general environment of conflict and insecurity prevent them from placing their children under qualified care while trying to make a living.

María's story is not an uncommon one in Colombia's small towns, rural areas, and rings of poverty around mega-cities such as Bogotá. Millions of people forcibly displaced by the more than five-decade civil and political war, most of them women and their children (Meertens and Stoller), and economic migrants looking for work have migrated from the countryside

to work in labor-intensive export-led industries such as the flower industry. Mothers working in this agribusiness, like many others around the world, are confronted with the dilemmas caused by having to work double and sometimes triple shifts, including paid work, unpaid reproductive work, and unpaid community or political work. Historically, the gendered division of labor and the practice of what Adrienne Rich has termed the patriarchal institution of motherhood has meant that mothers in Colombia have been the primary caretakers of their children and elderly or ill relatives and responsible for arranging such care if they need to be away for paid work, even when fathers and other relatives are involved in the raising of their children. Although some women workers are able to rely on family members such as sisters, and older or teenaged children or grandmothers for help in caring for their young, this option is obviously unavailable for single mothers who move by themselves and have no family around to rely on, as is the case of most of Colombia's displaced internal refugees.

Who, then, picks up the caring for children of poor working mothers, who cannot afford day care and have no family members to trust with the care of their young children while they produce flowers for the Global North? Forced to come up with their own solutions to this problem, low-income Colombian women have relied on the help of women in the community who volunteer to care for the children of poor mothers while they work. First developed as a survival strategy in the 1970s, after a decade of intense lobbying by mothers for state support, this grassroots community initiative became known as Community Mothers and was coordinated and finally taken over and partially subsidized by the Colombian state, with the help of UNICEF.

This article examines the quandaries posed by the living and labor conditions of mothers working in the flower industry and of the women working as community mothers as they have been shaped by Colombia's enduring patriarchal and class- and race-based social relations; by the forcible displacement and migrations of indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and mestizo peasant communities from diverse sites of the countryside; and by the global trading system in which their work lives are interwoven. As such, this section follows the tradition of feminist political economist scholars who argue that to fully understand the realities of women's lives, we must examine both their paid and unpaid labor and the social relations in which they are inscribed (e.g., Bezanson and Luxton; Molyneux; Waring). In the second section, the article builds upon the analysis of the transnationality and racialization of social reproduction developed by Sedef Arat-Koç to argue that it should be extended to include cases such as those of the Colombian mothers working in the flower industry and community mothers, where care work remains located in the same geographical area but serves the global market nonetheless. As it will show, such an expanded

understanding of transnational and racialized motherhood helps illuminate the ways in which mothering is shaped not only by patriarchy, as pointed out by Adrienne Rich, but by the neo-liberal state and the global trading system. As a result, in the final section, the article argues that the sites of resistance for empowering mothering necessarily extend beyond the private site of the home and must encompass resistance at a broader political and economic social environment.

The first part of this article examines the background of Colombian flower workers and Community Mothers, while addressing the concept of patriarchal motherhood. The second section examines the impact of the trading of flowers on social reproductive processes, while engaging and qualifying the concepts of racialization and transnationalization of motherhood. The third and concluding section refers to the possibilities and limitations of resistance.

### **The Background of Working Mothers in the Colombian Flower Industry and the Community Mothers Program**

A good deal of research has documented the problematic labor relations and working conditions faced by both women and men in the enclosed greenhouses of the flower industry in such geographic locations as Colombia, Ecuador, Kenya, Tanzania, India, and China (e.g., Acosta-Vargas; CACTUS; Ferm; Korovkin; Meier; Oosterveld; Sanmiguel-Valderrama; Talcott). Consistently, this research has shown that the characteristics of precarious feminized labor well-documented by feminist political economists—low wages, short-term contracts, low rates of unionization, little or no benefits, job insecurity, and precarious labor environments—are true of the production of fresh-cut flowers, even when we considering cultural specificities in local venues.

The Colombian CFI was developed explicitly as an export-oriented industry in the 1960s and started to ship carnations to its main market, the United States, in 1968. According to the Colombian Association of Flower Growers (*hereafter* Asocolflores), by 2009 it employed over 100,000 workers, the majority them women, 65 percent of whom are also mothers (Asocolflores, “Floricultura”). Although the industry currently earns over a billion dollars a year, the average wage for a worker is less than US.50 cents an hour, the official minimum salary. Despite Asocolflores’ recognition that “the human factor is irreplaceable in the production processes and is required not only for cultivation but also for the selection and packing” of flowers (Aflonordes and Sena, 3), CFI workers’ salaries (excluding upper- and middle-level management) compel them to live below the official poverty line. This situation holds even after receiving payment for overtime work in shifts of up to fifteen to eighteen hours during the high-pick seasons before Valentine’s and Mothers’ Days and Christmas.

Social scientists have calculated that the cost of the basic goods and services that make up the minimum “family living basket” for a low-income family in Colombia is equal to two-and-a-half times the minimum daily wage, well below the earnings of most flower workers, especially in single-parent households (Escuela Nacional Sindical).

Why, then, would so many workers move to work in an industry that promises them so little? A story typical of the origins and background of CFI’s workers is that of Angela, who grew up in a *hacienda* (large estate) in Sonson, Antioquia, where her entire family—her parents and twelve siblings—worked in exchange for a place to live, some food, and a low wage paid to her father. Angela remembered that the contract was made between her father and the “patron” in exchange for the work of the whole family, and that she had “started to work when I was five years old, placing potatoes, frijol, and maize seeds in the cracks made by my father in the land owned by the ‘patron’ and in helping in other chores on the farm.” She completed only four grades of basic education because, she recalled, “there was no more schooling in the rural areas where I lived.” When she was approximately 13 years old, her father died and the whole family had to move from the farm to another region (Tolima) to work in seasonal coffee harvesting. She worked there for three years and then moved to a small town close to Bogotá to work in the flower industry. Many women and men who work for flower plantations have similar stories of being landless Colombians who grew up with their families working in agricultural production on large haciendas under patriarchal, racist, and classist social relations that resembled servitude. In other cases, many flower workers grew up farming their own family or community land for subsistence production. Most flower industry workers are descendents of aboriginal peoples and *mestizo* (mixed race) populations, and virtually all, like Angela, have been displaced for one reason or another.

Still, many other flower industry workers have fled various different sites around the country due to direct violence against them in the mist of successive waves of violence generated by the ongoing internal conflict that dates back before the 1950s. During just the past decade, more than three million peasants (about 25 percent of the total rural population of Colombia) have been forcedly displaced from their lands by political violence in the countryside (UNHCR). Peasants and indigenous people have often been military targets and their lands and possessions the rewards of war. Under these circumstances, former peasants and small-scale agricultural producers enter the labor market in an state of extreme economic vulnerability. Other workers have gravitated to agribusiness to escape the poverty generated by the stagnation of the traditional, peasant agricultural economy. While the Colombian government promotes and subsidizes large-scale, monocrop, capitalist agribusinesses such

as cut flowers, it has systematically neglected or eliminated development assistance for the traditional, non-capitalist agricultural practices, production, and commercialization within the indigenous and peasant local economy. Therefore, for both the mostly female forcibly displaced population and economic migrants, the growing availability of jobs in the greenhouses of the CFI offers an opportunity to earn a living, even though wages are low and working conditions are precarious.

As noted, most flower workers are women, 65 percent of whom are mothers and more than half sole heads of households (CACTUS; Asocolflores, "Informe"). In the process of forced displacement, extended families disintegrate and many couples separate or the husband is killed by the violence. As a result, members of peasant families often end up living in different geographical areas, and it is usually the mothers who continue caring for their children. Another reason most of the mothers working in the CFI are sole heads of households and live without extended family support is the male bias in property relations within the family (Deere and León), which means that when women leave due to violence within the family or simply to escape authoritarian patriarchal relations or because of family breakup or desertion, they usually depart without assets and begin their new lives in conditions of poverty. The widespread phenomenon of mothers as sole heads of households is also explained by patriarchal, racist, and class-based discrimination in Colombian culture, in which it is not uncommon for men to father children in casual relationships with women not of the race and class with which they would consider establishing a permanent relationship. Such fathers often do not recognize their own children or simply neglect their paternal responsibilities. Many of these women also become pregnant without planning to because of a lack of sexual education or of access to contraceptives.

In terms of unpaid work within the family, and as demonstrated by the case of María mentioned above, domestic work weighs heavily not only in these mothers' own lives but in the lives of the children and adolescents in their families, who are left to do the cleaning, washing, cooking, and taking care of younger children while their parents are away working for export industries. Most children, but especially young girls, have a double shift of school and domestic work or even a triple shift if they also work outside the home. As Días and Salazar point out, such children's work takes place within the framework of an impoverished family's survival needs: whether paid or unpaid, children's work contributes to the family economy. The private educational opportunities that might help children escape this cycle are impossible to afford with a minimum wage income, and for those who find a space in the under-funded public education system, work responsibilities often adversely affect their attendance and educational performance (Días et al.). In other words, although

it may help their families survive, child labor also reproduces poverty because most working children do not have the opportunity to finish high school or even elementary school, becoming a new generation of labor destined to work in under-paid and precarious jobs.

As noted, some of the burden placed on poor working mothers and their older children has been eased by state-run programs known as Community Mothers, which provide care for children up to seven years old while their mothers work. First created by individual communities in solidarity with working mothers, the program usually consists of a neighborhood woman who volunteers to care for children in her home or occasionally in a publicly provided space. The government has since taken over and sponsors these programs, recruiting and organizing volunteers and funding the program, partially with the aid of UNICEF (De Suremain; De Tournemire). Although still not a universal service, Community Mothers programs have expanded to include 80,000 community mothers around the country by 2009. Nonetheless, community mothers are not considered workers with salaried wages, but merely volunteers who provide a service. Although the government does pay community mothers a stipend or fee for their work, even by early 2009 the fee was not the equivalent of even half of the minimum wage (Ramírez-Ríos) and was raised in 2010 to slightly above 50 percent of the minimum wage. In this way, the government can legally avoid guaranteeing minimum labor standards and rights, such as unionization, a minimum wage, and social security benefits, all of which other state workers enjoy. Thus, though community mothers provide a pivotal service that frees mothers to work long shifts for export production, their contribution is, like so much of women's work around the world, undervalued and underpaid. The labor relations between community mothers and the government reinforce the patriarchal stereotype that care giving is a "natural" woman's responsibility, which should remain unpaid. Their work is thus structured under extreme forms of feminized labor.

Although Community Mothers provides an alternative for children while parents are working, it, like the public schools, has a limited capacity to enroll children, particularly in the small towns where many flower workers live. Some flower plantations have successfully lobbied the national agency Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Security, or ICBF) to open community day care centers in the regions where the industry operates or within the plantations, although some regions and most plantations do not offer daycares. In 2007, a study by Asocolflores found that programs provided in plantations serviced only 2,448 children and only one plantation provided this service with their own funds while the others were funded by the state (ICBF) ("Informes"). Community Mothers programs have also been criticized because many of the caregivers have to care for large groups



of children at one time (up to fifteen for one woman), who could range from babies to six years olds.

### **The Impact of Global Trade on Social Reproduction and its Gender, Race, Class, and Nationality Underpinnings**

Thus the Colombian case demonstrates once more feminist political economists' findings that the processes of globalization and economic restructuring that have taken place under neoliberalism around the world have reshaped not only paid work and employment relations, but also processes of social reproduction, including its gender-, nationality-, race-, and class-based features and division of labor (e.g., Arat-Koç; Bakker and Gill; Bezanson and Luxton; Comfort; Elson; Fudge and Cossman; Fox; Hondagneu-Sotelo; Picchio; Vosko; Warning). Of particular relevance here, such research has also shown that despite increasing women's participation in the labor force in locations such as North America and Colombia, adjustments in the organization of paid work do not facilitate reproductive work and responsibilities. Instead, these researchers have found, neoliberal labor reforms have legalized flexibility in the length and timing of shifts, increasing workloads that actually demand more energy, time, and dedication to the workplace on the part of the workers and leave less time for attending to the needs of the family and the community. Within this logic, as Arat-Koç argues, social reproduction, and mothering in particular, continues to be seen as a private responsibility, over-regulated but undeserving of support by the state and capital.

As Arat-Koç has pointed out her case study of transnational motherhood—that is, mothers who migrate across state borders, leaving their children behind and trying to perform mothering long distance—“demonstrates the increased racialization and transnationalization of reproductive work” and thereby “can help to force a rethinking and re-envisioning of the relations between/among the family, the economy, the community, the state, and the world” (91). This article argues that Arat-Koç's analysis of the transnationality and racialization of social reproduction also holds in cases where mothering remains geographically located within the same region, as in the case of the Colombian flower workers and community mothers.

Although most economic analyses of the impact of globalization on women around the world have focused on paid labor, this article demonstrates that the social reproductive work carried out on an unpaid or underpaid basis by both the workers in plantations and community mothers also has transnational dimensions that are worth examining for several reasons. First, their labor has become indispensable to the production of commodities such as fresh-cut flowers for the global market. Without their work, there simply would not be



flowers to export, even with all the necessary capital, management, transportation, technology, land, and other inputs of production and distribution in place. Second, their work is gendered in an additional and ironic way because the primary purpose of the production and the consumption of flowers as a commodity, besides the obvious purpose of making profits, is to celebrate patriarchal motherhood through such commemorations of reproduction and love as Mother's and Valentine's Days and weddings. Since the commodity is global in the sense that its technology, production, trading, distribution and consumption take place in different geographical contexts situated in both the North and the South, this reinforcement of patriarchal motherhood in the Global North, and hence its role in social reproduction, has become a transnational business.

These women's social reproduction is also gendered and classed because mothering continues to be seen primarily as the individual responsibility of mothers, even when community mothers and relatives are involved. In spite of often being employed full time, women still do the bulk of social reproductive work. Under neoliberalism, state, capital, and global financial institutions continue to advocate for maintaining reproductive tasks within the private sphere, even if regulated by the state (Fudge and Cossman; Bezanson and Luxton). This public/private distinction shields the resulting exploitation from scrutiny and serves as a justification for forcing mothers to bear the entire burden of reproduction. Moreover, although most of the mothers in this case study are sole heads of households and therefore presumably outside the control of a patriarchal father figure in the context of the nuclear family, the patriarchal institution of motherhood is nonetheless imposed upon them by the Colombian state and society, the civil war, and transnational global capitalism. The case of CFI working mothers and community mothers also invites a reevaluation of Adrienne Rich's reading of the institution of motherhood as a problem of patriarchy. Rich's conceptualization was developed in a Western, heteronormative, non-colonized/imperialized context that is very different from the reality of neo-colonial Colombia, where not only patriarchy but the global capitalist system and civil war undermine women's ability to mother successfully.

Third, this case demonstrates how social reproductive work has been racialized, as it is mostly racialized women who perform this work under hyper-feminized labor conditions. Under the neo-liberal global market, capital interests benefit from community mothers' underpaid work, which frees other racialized mothers to dedicate most of their time and energy to producing flowers, much as the unpaid work of children also subsidizes production for the global market. The Colombian mothers described here, therefore, provide another demonstration of how racism makes the global capitalist system possible by

excusing the precarious working and living conditions of both mothers, their children, and community mothers, implicitly suggesting that it is somehow all right and “normal” that poor women of color and their children continue to endure working and living under precarious conditions.

This case study also provides a living example of what Arghiri Emmanuel terms the unequal exchange and dispossession among nations that operates within international trade between the Global North and Global South. Using a classical Marxist analysis to demonstrate how the work performed by direct laborers is transferred, embedded, or crystallized in the final commodities they have transformed through their labor, Emmanuel argues that the underpaid, feminized work performed by laborers in low-wage countries to produce commodities exported to the Global North constitutes the surplus value appropriated by international capital through successive trading by multiple owners of the commodity, a process through which the impoverishment of low-wage countries becomes a source of enrichment for others. What the feminist approach taken here has to add to that analysis is its argument that the labor thus transferred to transnational capital in the global trading system includes not only the underpaid and feminized work of plantation workers but the unpaid and feminized social reproductive work performed within the family or by underpaid community mothers, which contributes to both the production of export commodities such as flowers and the reproduction of a new generation of workers who will continue to work in these industries.

### **Control and Resistance of Flower Workers and Community Mothers**

Clearly the conditions shaping the mothering work of both working mothers in the flower industry, their children, and community mothers is largely out of the control of these racialized women, whose lives are instead overwhelmingly structured to serve a patriarchal racist capitalist global trading system. Thus what Andrea O’Reilly refers to as empowering mothering—“women’s experiences of mothering, which are female-defined and -centred and potentially empowering to women” (794)—is in this case constrained and controlled by the patriarchal state and society, by transnational capital, and by the civil war and male violence. Thus, an examination of these women’s lives reveals that while the possibility of empowered mothering and resistance to the patriarchal institution of motherhood does in fact exist within their situation, it can operate only within the very limited parameters left open by the patriarchal global capitalist racist system and the general environment of insecurity in the country.

My conversations with CFI's working mothers and community mothers reveal that they have resisted the institution of motherhood in a number of significant ways. Indeed, the act of becoming mothers in the first place can be viewed as an act of defiance toward the racist, capitalist, neoliberal global system that demands workers' total dedication and availability to serve its needs. These mothers do not see themselves as "trapped by their motherhood." On the contrary, they see mothering as rewarding and part of their reproductive rights, even when pregnancy comes unexpectedly. The trap is the global structures, which leaves them very few choices for survival. As evidenced by María's case and the high incidence of pregnant workers being fired in the industry, this one sends a clear message that women workers should not reproduce or, at the very least, not inconvenience production with their pregnancies and mothering responsibilities. By becoming mothers under adverse circumstances, therefore, these women can be seen as exercising empowered mothering and as what Andrea O'Reilly calls "outlaw" mothers.

Another obvious act of empowerment is Colombian women's creation of the self-help Community Mothers programs in their communities as a resource that would allow low-income mothers to work and earn a living. Its empowering potential has been weakened, however, by the state's taking control of it and creating a regime that devaluates the work of community mothers and reinforces the institution of motherhood by placing the responsibility for caregiving squarely on women's shoulders under underpaid hyper-feminized labor conditions. Instead, the state might have embarked on a well-funded public child-care system, financed both publicly and privately, that could prioritize and support the multiple dilemmas of poor working mothers and promote fair labor relations that would allow them to live above poverty conditions.

Another form of empowerment has been the drive toward organized resistance among both flower workers and community mothers. For several decades, some community mothers have organized associations that seek their recognition by the state as workers as opposed to volunteers, as well as job stability (Hernández-Herreño and Libardo; Maldonado). This has also been the case of flower workers' multiple unionization drives. Collective organization grants them higher power to negotiate better labor conditions, which of course would translate into better living conditions for the mothers and children affected. To these collective organization should be added the types of real or potential acts of resistance at a micro-level, that is, those developed within the interactions between these mothers and with the children under their care (i.e. acts of solidarity for those in need and community activities).

Understanding the above as acts of empowerment or resistance, as limited as they may appear to some, requires a recognition of the desperate reality of women's conditions in a post-colonial context such as Colombia. María's deci-

sion to lock up her children, for instance, is a rational one based on the context of male violence against children and mothers and lack of public services that provide security for the poor. In describing the difficult decisions they are forced to make to keep themselves and their families alive, these women make clear that to make more empowering decisions they need not only reliable and safe child care but safe neighbourhoods and freedom from male violence by individual, gangs, and various actors engaged in the civil war. That is, they need not only good childcare, but child welfare policies, security policies that will create safe communities for all, and more redistributive measures to allow these women to participate in the benefits of the fruit of their labor. Indeed, their stories make clear that the crisis of social reproduction extends well beyond mothering within a patriarchal family context.

Even though the Colombian state and, to a much lesser extent, some plantations have intervened to regulate the child care needs of working mothers and the Community Mothers program, the case of the women described above demonstrates how responsibility for caring for children and related social reproduction tasks continues to be assigned to women by a complex combination of patriarchal, racist, and class-based material relations, including the political economy of the neo-liberal Colombian state and the global trading system. Even though the many “outlaw” mothers in the flower industry perform their mothering responsibilities outside the confines of the nuclear patriarchal family, their mothering work is to a great extent outside their control, shaped by the needs of the industry and constrained by a racist capitalist regime that confines them to live in poverty thus leaving them with very narrow spaces for empowered mothering. By minimizing the industry’s expenditures on labor, the poorly paid work of these allied groups of women workers allows the industry not only to make profits but to sell flowers in the global market at a much lower price than merited by the real sacrifice made by the flower workers and their children and by the community mothers. The beautiful and widely affordable flowers used to celebrate the patriarchal institution of motherhood in the Global North, therefore, come with a hidden transnational price tag: the hardships and dilemmas of motherhood faced by racialized mothers producing in the Global South.

<sup>1</sup>Fieldwork was conducted in Colombia at different periods between 1999 and 2010, and was partially funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the University of Cincinnati’s Charles Phelps Taft Research Center, and the University of Cincinnati Research Council. All translations from Spanish are my own. Names of those interviewed have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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