

How does plastic affect waste pickers?

Interview with Valquiria Candido da Silva



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Valquiria Candido da Silva is a recyclable waste picker, founder and president of the Parque Cocaia Work and Collection Cooperative (COOPERPAC). She is also a leader of the National Movement of Recyclable Waste Pickers (MNCR) in the municipality of São Paulo. Valquiria is currently an undergraduate student in the Labor Sciences course at DIEESE – Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies and a popular educator at the University of and for Recyclable Waste Pickers (UNICATA).

Isabella de Carvalho Vallin: Can you share a little about your journey as a waste picker and tell us how you became a leader?

Valquiria Candido da Silva: I was an employee at a company that worked with garbage disposal. I worked there for four years with the street cleaners and had a great connection with them. I was laid off and got pregnant. I tried to get back into the job market, but I wanted to give my son priority and attention. So, I started looking for other alternatives, you know? And then I went into the cooperative segment. Both my husband and I came from this garbage disposal sector. We were invited by an acquaintance to set up a cooperative, this was during the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), many years ago. This acquaintance, she would say: “Let’s write a project so you can get a warehouse, equipment, and resources”. That’s how it all started. To learn how to set up a cooperative, we started attending meetings of the National Movement of Recyclable Waste Pickers (MNCR). As we attended meetings and

learned, we were also working. We started separating recyclable materials at home, on the street, and with our neighbors, and it just grew and grew to a huge proportion. At the time, we were very prejudiced against, you know? People would ask if we were really going to keep handling trash. My mother and my family would say offensive things to me. I know we all went through a lot of trouble along the way, but we never thought about giving up. Then, in 2008, we finally set up the cooperative and, in 2010, we landed a partnership with city hall, and things started to shape up until we became what we are today, after sixteen years of struggle. A recent achievement was that the cooperative had a project approved by the Ministry of the Environment to implement organic waste collection. It's a strategy to supplement our income, because I think we won't survive on recycling alone anymore. We believe that composting will be our future if recycling isn't enough anymore because of competition. There are many competing companies related to recycling, there are companies making money from recycling that are not waste pickers, and then there's the interest in installing an incinerator in the city, which is very serious, so we're building new paths. Regarding my leadership path, I actually started attending the MNCR São Paulo City Committee in 2015, that's when I realized that I was also part of the movement, that's when I started looking outside the cooperative. I thought it wasn't fair to have all those waste pickers working like crazy with that volume of waste and still hear from the city government that the cooperatives were inefficient, that the cooperatives had no management, that the cooperatives only had horrible things. I kept hearing that and thinking: "This is just unacceptable!". Then I started to inform myself and started questioning things too. Why were we being humiliated? From then on, I got involved with the MNCR and became an official member of the City Committee. Today I can support other cooperatives and pass on the knowledge I acquired to strengthen the group.

Isabella: Could you talk a little about how the work of waste pickers has changed over the years in terms of the volume and type of plastic collected?

Valquiria: We used to sell a lot of plastics. After the pandemic, the number of independent waste pickers increased and they collected most of the materials of higher value, such as aluminum, and all the plastics would come to the cooperatives. However, now, we aren't receiving as much as before. We don't sell all the plastic every month, because it's taking a long time to arrive, like HDPE. For example, we used to make an average of 50 bales of PET per month, now we make 50 bales in 60 days. Despite this situation, about 40% of our income comes from plastic, especially PET. The problem is that a lot of plastic arrives at the cooperative, but it's the kind that has no value. We receive tarps, Styrofoam, trays, biscuit and snack packaging, bags lined with non-recyclable plastic, gift wrappers, lipstick packaging, all sorts of things that have no value. There's a lot of school supplies, for example, that the industry is concerned with the beauty of the product, but not with the quality and destination of the material after it's used. These plastics represent unproductiveness in the cooperative, because they have to go through the hands of the waste pickers, we have to sort them, and our time is spent on this but then we are unable to sell the material. This is a problem. Non-recyclable plastics end up taking away part of our production, part of our working hours, burdening the cooperative and they have no value, you know? They are rejected waste. And when we look at what we rejected, 20% is plastic, which is a lot. So, we often have to work more to be able to earn the income needed to pay all cooperative members. Plastics that have no value directly affect the cooperative and the waste pickers.

Isabella: What are the main challenges that waste pickers face when dealing with this rejected plastic waste?

Valquiria: It is precisely the fact that we are unable to sell this waste, because the plastics that have value are in high demand, it takes longer to get a good volume to sell, they aren't so available anymore, they are in higher demand and the ones that come to us easily have no value. So, we would have to invest in technology that could reuse these plastics, so they don't end up in landfills. We need technology to be able to give new meaning to plastics that have no value and insert them into the production chain, sharing the responsibility with all those involved: industry, commerce, citizens, everyone involved has a responsibility, this needs to be considered. So, we still need to make significant progress in the disposal of non-recyclable plastics. Today, they go to landfills, but it's important to say that this doesn't mean this waste has to be incinerated, you know? We need to invest in technology to make them recyclable. Incineration is not the solution. We need to value recycling and the work of waste pickers. It's important to consider that the action of removing plastics from the environment should be financially compensated, because it's a very important job, but that's not what happens. Waste pickers need to be paid for the services they provide, because it's a public service that benefits society as a whole.

Isabella: What changes would you like to see in the relationship between society, companies, government, and waste pickers to tackle the plastic crisis?

Valquiria: Well, big companies have their engineers and technicians to develop technology, but they don't have baseline information. They can't do something completely coherent without having baseline information, from the cooperatives, from the waste pickers who know what the challenges are. There's no point in them inventing technology from their own head that comes from other countries without having local information. Even here, in one city, in São Paulo, there are different places, different neighborhoods with their particularities. So, it's not just one technology for everyone, for all places. It won't work for everyone; it has to be in accordance with the demands of each place and each community. So, I think there would need to be greater integration among the people who are formulating policies and technologies, those who will implement them, the cooperatives, and society. We need greater interaction among all parties. The best scenario would be that the cooperative receives only recyclable plastics.

Isabella: How do you imagine the future of waste pickers in an ideal scenario for the use of plastics?

Valquiria: In an ideal scenario, I would say that the industry would be more responsible and would no longer produce plastic that is not recyclable. Also, the industry would share information and engage in dialogue with waste pickers and would understand the problem from the perspective of those who are working on depolluting the packaging they sell. Everything would be connected and in dialogue, from the waste pickers to the sale and final destination. This way, the industry wouldn't produce anything that isn't recyclable and would stop selling materials that end up being rejected waste. These single-use disposable items won't be missed by the cooperatives because we don't sell them. They only go through the cooperative, we don't separate this type of material, such as plastic cutlery, plastic cups, and even bags, we are having trouble selling them. So, I think that these types of plastics will not be missed by the cooperatives.

Isabella: What message would you like to leave for society about plastics?

Valquiria: For people to consume packaging and then dispose of it correctly. People need to start consuming consciously from the moment they purchase a product until they throw it away. That means reflecting and considering whether they want this waste to become pollution in the environment or to benefit the work of waste pickers. It means separating waste appropriately, storing it in a clean place, and sending it to waste pickers.

