COVID-19 and the housing movement



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Graça Xavier**



Neuma Silva de Oliveira Cruz***

These interviews are part of a set of two conversations carried out within the scope of the ICOLMA Project, which aimed to understand the role of the housing movement in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The first was conducted with Graça Xavier, coordinator of the Housing Movement of the Southeast Region and affiliated with the Union of Housing Movements of Greater São Paulo and Interior, as well as the National Union for Popular Housing. The second interview was conducted with Neuma Silva de Oliveira Cruz, secretary of the Housing Movement of the Center (MMC).

The trajectories and actions of both are fundamental to understanding the strategies adopted by popular movements in response to the challenges imposed by the health crisis. The interviews were conducted by Letícia Ueda Vella, master's student and researcher in the ICOLMA Project.

Letícia Ueda Vella interviews Graça Xavier

Letícia Ueda: How do you evaluate the role of the housing movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and what strategies were adopted to protect residents of the occupations, including the monitoring of contamination cases?

Graça Xavier: The housing movement played a fundamental role at the time of Covid, of the pandemic, especially in welcoming poor and peripheral families, particularly women and Black women. At that time, everyone on television, in the mainstream media, kept saying "stay home, wash your hands." And these

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people, for the most part, did not even have a home to stay in and lived with five or six people in shacks, much less water to wash their hands.

So, what did the housing movement do at the time of the pandemic? We organized an entire campaign to collect food, but not only food, also hygiene products such as hand sanitizer, disinfectant, soap, detergent, and other supplies, so that people could have access to everything the media and capitalism induced people to need at that time.

Beyond that, we not only organized a campaign to collect these supplies, but also one to ensure water donations at specific points and to install taps with potable water in some places, so that unhoused people and communities without adequate housing could actually access water to wash their hands and also to drink in their own homes.

So the housing movement acted strategically to serve the least favored population during the pandemic.

Letícia Ueda: What concrete measures were taken to prevent the virus from spreading inside the occupations (for example, hygiene, isolation, communication)?

Graça Xavier: All this work of collecting and donating food baskets, hygiene supplies, and even potable water. During this entire process, we were also producing and distributing materials so that people could protect themselves- not only inside their own homes but also on the streets when they went to collect donations or even to seek work to sustain themselves. So, we were always dialoguing: keep at least two meters away from others. People had trouble understanding this, so we would stop in a spot, spread our arms, and say, "Look, you cannot touch the other person. This is about two meters." We also donated masks and produced masks at that time to give to those who could not afford to buy them.

Popular movements played a fundamental role, especially in providing guidance to populations without access to the internet, communications, or mainstream media due to lack of electricity or free internet. So, popular movements produced simple, easy-to-understand materials and distributed them in the communities, instructing people to use masks and avoid crowds.

Even though families lived four or five people in tiny shacks, making distancing nearly impossible, we still encouraged people-even at home-to wear masks and protect those most vulnerable, such as people with diabetes, high blood pressure, older adults, children, and pregnant women.

Another key role we played was addressing domestic violence. With women and men confined together at home for longer periods, rates of domestic violence and femicide skyrocketed during the pandemic. That is why the Women's Secretariat of the Housing Movements worked to raise awareness and advise women to denounce and seek protective measures, even though we know police stations are not prepared to provide the necessary humane support. We sought to humanize the care for women victims of violence inside

their own homes.

Letícia Ueda: What were the biggest difficulties faced by the movement in relation to residents' health during this period?

Graça Xavier: One of the biggest difficulties for popular movements was carrying out this work of awareness and training while also providing support for community residents and for the leaders themselves. For those who don't know, leaders of popular movements do not receive a salary-our work is voluntary. So these same leaders, while needing to work for their own survival, also had to dedicate time to community organizing to reduce contamination in poor territories and peripheral communities.

Another difficulty was misinformation and lack of clear information, even in health centers, where people with suspected Covid were all grouped together without even being tested first, which often caused contamination.

And then there was the denialism. Denialism all the time from the federal government under Jair Bolsonaro, as well as from allied states and municipalities. This denialism caused many deaths. In our view, these authorities were genocidal for failing to support families as they should have, including in vaccination campaigns and public adherence to vaccination.

Letícia Ueda: How did the internal policies within the occupations differ from or oppose government policies, especially given the denialist stance?

Graça Xavier: Our work of awareness and orientation with poor families was crucial. If it had depended on the president at the time, Jair Bolsonaro, and his allies, mortality would have been much higher.

Public policies-municipal, state, and federal-failed to fulfill their role, especially in terms of providing guidance and care. Popular movements, on the other hand, produced lives, produced simple materials to raise awareness, and organized communities that otherwise would not have had access to public policies, even though they are guaranteed by the Constitution.

The pandemic, I would say, had a color, a gender, and a class. The poorer people were, the more they died.

Letícia Ueda: Was there support from other social movements, entities, or health professionals to face the pandemic within the occupations?

Graça Xavier: Yes. Popular movements came together and joined forces to fight the pandemic, denouncing denialism and uniting communities. Universities, churches (especially grassroots ecclesial communities), institutions, and health professionals provided fundamental support. It was an arduous, collective effort, particularly by women leaders, to prevent evictions, ensure food, and build networks of solidarity.

This highlighted structural racism and inequality: Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, fat, and poor populations were most affected. The pandemic revealed the face

of class struggle, but thanks to the resistance of movements, many lives were saved.

Letícia Ueda: Do you believe women in the occupations were affected differently by the pandemic? If so, what strategies were used to support them?

Graça Xavier: Yes, women were directly affected. Our workload tripled, since we had to both seek jobs for survival and take on caregiving roles in communities. Women played a central role in campaigns like Despejo Zero (Zero Evictions), in denunciations of domestic violence, and in supporting other women in maintaining livelihoods through virtual work and training.

We always said: "Housing is the gateway to all other rights." From decent housing, women can access education, health, and dignity. Women were, and continue to be, key in resisting violence and fighting for public policies like subsidized housing for victims of violence.

As I often say: "If one woman can change the world, imagine all of us together- we transform Brazilian society."

Letícia Ueda Vella interviews Neuma Silva de Oliveira Cruz

Letícia Ueda: How do you evaluate the role of the housing movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and what strategies were adopted to protect residents of the occupations, including monitoring contamination cases?

Neuma Cruz: The movement played a fundamental role in residents' lives, clarifying doubts, encouraging safety measures, and informing people about government economic measures, among other things.

Letícia Ueda: What concrete measures were taken to prevent the virus from spreading inside the occupations (for example, hygiene, isolation, communication)?

Neuma Cruz: Mandatory mask use, guidance to avoid crowds in common areas, distribution of masks and hand sanitizer, as well as posters and leaflets everywhere. We also distributed food baskets and cleaning supplies. Sinks were installed at occupation entrances so residents could clean their hands before entering.

Letícia Ueda: What were the biggest challenges regarding residents' health?

Neuma Cruz: The movement always remained faithful to science. The measures taken inside occupations never used or encouraged denialist practices. The movement was always opposed to denialism.

Letícia Ueda: How did internal policies within the occupations differ from or oppose government policies, given the denialist stance?

Neuma Cruz: By encouraging vaccination, making clear statements that vaccines save lives, and positioning against denialism.

Letícia Ueda: Was there support from other movements, entities, or health professionals?

Neuma Cruz: Yes. There were movements exchanging information and assistance. Health professionals helped as much as possible, despite the calamity they faced.

Letícia Ueda: Were women affected differently by the pandemic? What strategies were used to support them?

Neuma Cruz: Yes. As in all situations, women are the most affected. During this uncertain period, the movement worked with the information available in the midst of the state of calamity, distributing masks, sanitizer, cleaning supplies, and more.

Conclusions

The interviews with Graça Xavier and Neuma Silva highlight the decisive role of housing movements in protecting vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when the State denied the severity of the health crisis and failed to provide preventive measures and support, the movements took on the responsibility of organizing donation campaigns for food, hygiene products, masks, and even potable water, while educating communities about basic care and the importance of vaccination. This work was essential to contain virus transmission and to provide dignity to families often lacking minimal housing and sanitation conditions.

Another key point revealed is the differentiated impact of the pandemic on women in occupations. They bore the greatest burden of caregiving, suffered increased domestic violence, and faced forced evictions, yet they were also protagonists in community resistance and organization. Women leaders spearheaded initiatives like Despejo Zero, solidarity networks, and awareness campaigns on rights and protection against violence. Thus, housing movements, largely led by women, not only replaced an absent State but also reaffirmed housing as the gateway to all other rights, connecting the struggle for territory to the struggle for life.

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