



#Olympics

Maria from the Street Vendors Movement: Pride in Suffering

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The street vendors' protest on Thursday had already ended when Maria de Lourdes, 41, started chanting on the steps of Rio's City Hall: "Shame! Shame! The mayor has no shame!". Maria heads the *Movimento Unido dos Camelôs* (MUCA, the United Street Vendors Movement), which contests the municipal government's savage repression of the right to work



Photo by Aline Furtado

Maria has been a street vendor for 19 years. One day, right before Christmas, she went out to sell wrapping paper on the street. She has not stopped since.

"I saw people going out on the street and making money, and there I was, working as someone's employee. I decided to quit, get some merchandise and go to work", she said. Today, she sells women's clothing on the streets of downtown Rio. According to a study released in 2010 by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 34% of workers in the city of Rio de Janeiro are not officially registered.

The wrapping paper she had to sell lasted three days, but Maria wanted more. She left her job as a domestic worker and began to buy products to sell. Since then, she works only for herself and has managed to raise three children. Her fourth child, Antônia, was born in April 2016. Kauê was fifteen days old when something that would mark Maria for the rest of her life happened: a brutal attack by a municipal police officer.

Seven days after Kauê was born, Maria was back out on the street, with her child in her arms and still recuperating from two surgeries: a caesarean and tubal ligation. "As there was a lot of repression at the time, my mother wouldn't let me take Kauê with me anymore. So, I would go alone," she explained. Her mother's advice was a godsend. One week later, she was forced to take extra "recovery time" when she was assaulted by a municipal police officer. "The officer grabbed me and hit me a lot. I was badly hurt. I went to the hospital and I stayed at home for a month thinking, 'We have to do something'".

As a result of the physical and psychological violence she suffered in the postpartum period, Maria dos Camelôs, as she is known, had a broken nose. This made it impossible for her to meet one of her basic needs: to wear glasses.

“I recovered, but the scars will always remain, not to mention the hurt. It is very painful to be beaten because you are working,” she told us.



Photos: Aline Furtado

That was when she saw mobilising as the solution for her fight. As soon as she was better, she gathered a group of street vendors — many of which no longer work on the street — and went to talk to people from the Workers’ Party (PT). That was an exciting time: the first year of President Lula’s mandate. The PT suggested she go to the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT, or the Unified Workers’ Confederation) for support. Then, the *Movimento Unido dos Camelôs* was born with “pamphlets, a car with a loudspeaker and a lawyer”, Maria explained.

Pride and shame — “When I had Kauê, I was separated and had to support my home. When I worked for a family, I paid my rent and if I paid someone to stay with my children, I would go hungry. That is when I opted for working on the street and making my own money,” Maria recalled. The street vendor is proud of what she does and has passed this lesson on to her children. At school, they do not hide the fact that their mother is a street vendor.

As a leader, Maria is discreet. She spoke very little during a protest held in August 2015. She basically only asked to speak to denounce the confiscation of a colleague's goods: dish clothes. One of the street vendors' main complaints is that their merchandise is not returned to them when they go to get it from the city's depots. Not even vehicles such as tricycles have been returned. The municipal police's tactics are generally violent and the words street vendors hear the most are "it's gone" — a phrase that is commonly used by thieves when they approach their victims.

At the end of the protest, Maria joined several other women street vendors on the steps of the City Hall in yelling, without a microphone, so that passersby would clearly understand their message: "I am a street vendor. I am proud of what I do and I do it with a lot of love". Their slogans imitate the chants sung by soccer fans in the stadiums. The workers' pride mixes with the shame of the "land of soccer shoes" and the country of the World Cup and the Olympics, which pushes those who seek to earn a living or who are simply not wanted in the pictures of the tourists who will come to see the Games off the field. On this sunny winter day in Rio, the sun hid its embarrassment behind the clouds precisely at the moment when Maria began to sing about pride and suffering.

