



#Rio2016

Clashes in Maria da Penha's workshop of dreams

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Maria da Penha Macena lives at Vila Autodromo, in Rio. The community struggles against forced eviction beside Olympic Park. Photo: Aline Furtado/Pacs

Maria da Penha's home was demolished on 8th March 2016, International Women's Day. Know her story

The life of Maria da Penha Macena, 50, can be compared to a carpenter's workshop that never closes. For this small, thin, curly haired lady, there are always dreams to build, expand or polish, in wood or bricks. Judging by her 1.5 m in height and 42 kg in weight, one can tell she has had to fight tooth and nail many times in her life. But when one looks at this woman from Paraíba, it is hard to imagine the scene of 'Penha', as she is known, being beaten with a riot police baton, her face drenched in blood.

Para ler a versão em português deste texto, clique [aqui](#)

This is what happened on June 3rd, 2015. When the judge authorised the municipal police to use force at 2:40 pm that day, Penha linked arms with her neighbors and held on tight. Together, they managed to prevent another home in Vila Autódromo from being demolished. The cost of being part of this human chain against the brutality of the City of Rio was a fractured bone under her one eye. Although she has already recovered from the violent attack, there is still a deeper wound that needs healing every day: that of having to live with the violation of one of her fundamental rights for more than two decades.



The municipal guard violent action is still remembered at Vila Autodromo. Foto: Thiago/Pacs/ February 2016.

"I have been living here for 22 years and I have been threatened with eviction for 22 years", she said some days before the clash with police.

But her bravery is not born of circumstances. Her courage to stand on the frontline of the fight against forced evictions in Rio is quite understandable when we listen to the story of this girl who left Itabaiana at the age of 8 to go live with her mother, grandmother and brother in a wooden shack in Rocinha, one of Rio's most well-known favelas.

"There were four of us. My mother came to Rio first and I stayed in Paraíba with my grandmother and my brother. When my mother was able to buy a shack, we all came", Penha recalls. She cannot remember the long trip from Paraíba to Rio de Janeiro, but her first memories of the new city are still fresh in her mind. It was the first time she had ever seen ordinary things such as Santa Claus, television and toothbrushes. "People used to dream of having a house with a bathroom, electricity, a refrigerator, a television. Today, any poor person can have these things, but that's not how it used to be", she stated.

Memories from her childhood before coming to Rio are also blurred. She attended school for awhile, but left because her family could not afford to buy a uniform. She recalls how good the school meals were, as they did not always have enough to eat at home. She also remembers when her grandmother used to leave her alone at home to go beg on the streets.

But Penha did well in Vila Autódromo. There, she gradually built a spacious house with three bedrooms, a kitchen, two bathrooms and a second floor where children from the community meet for catechism and a terrace.

"I built all of this myself. The government didn't give me anything. And they saw me building it", Penha stated. Now, City Hall fights to take over the land in Vila Autódromo, which is next to where the Olympic Park is being built. Many have left their homes. Penha is one of residents who insisted on staying.

She has the same persistence as the girl who started working in a bar at the age of eight as a dishwasher and, later, serving coffee and buttering bread. In the shack on the top of the hill, four people could barely fit and there was no electricity nor running water. Penha worked part-time every day, then went to school and returned to work at night.

"I used to work seven days a week. I had no day off, no holidays", she said. Penha built up her savings by the sweat of her brow, which allowed her to buy another shack, also made of wood, on the way up the hill.



“When I was about 16 or 17 years old, I realized that I could change my life. I wanted something better for myself. I did not want to live my whole life in that shack. As the shack was in a very high place, my dream was to go down the hill and live in a bigger place”, she recalled.

Penha moved down the hill, but her thoughts remained up at the top.

Even though she now lived in a better place and had already managed to buy a wardrobe and fridge, young Penha was determined.



"I would say [to myself]: 'I don't want to live my entire life in Rocinha'". She added, "I've always had a very strong personality. And I've always been very determined. When I want something, I fight a lot to achieve my goal. If I want it, I'll fight for it".

Pregnant at 20, her desire was to have a proper place to raise her daughter, "a beautiful, healthy girl who is a blessing in my life", she shared with a smile. To buy baby clothes, Penha set up a stand on the street and started selling 'angu à baiana', a dish that is still popular today at church activities in Vila Autódromo.

When she discovered she was pregnant, Penha traded in her 3,500 cruzeiros [Brazil's currency prior to the Real] for an "old shack that was falling apart" and

not fit to live in Rocinha. She pointed out that “I wanted my child to have a place to live when she was born. I started a new stage in my life”. The house was ready when her daughter was two years and seven months old. Penha and her husband had rented a place for nine months during her pregnancy. “We lived there for quite awhile. We were very happy. But I still had the idea that I did not want to live in Rocinha my whole life”. Besides the violence and drug trafficking problems, the narrow alleys of the favela did not offer much privacy to families and the sound of forró [*a kind of music and dance from the Brazilian Northeast*] coming from the bar next door would bother them the entire weekend.

When Penha’s mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer, the family made a decision together. “We came to the conclusion that it would be good to sell all our houses. Even if we couldn’t afford to buy a big one, we could get a large plot of land where we could build houses close to one another”, Penha recalled. The family pooled the money from the sale of the sheds and bought a plot of land in Vila Autódromo in June 1994. Three months later, the first rumors about the whole community being evicted surfaced. Although many residents had a 99-year lease, the City claimed the houses were built illegally in the area.

“That’s when we started to get into the history of Vila Autódromo. What were we going to do? That money was everything we had. We were already settled into our new home. A huge fight [against eviction] already existed, but we didn’t know about it”, she explained. The quiet, spacious area where her daughter could ride her bicycle suddenly became a place of uncertainty. Her family was wary about expanding their houses for fear of what the future would bring.

The Pan American Games were held in Rio in 2007 and rumours saying everyone would be forced to leave resurfaced. After months of pressure, the community was able to breathe again when the games ended and they had not been evicted. Things began to improve in Vila Autódromo. Supermarkets opened up next to the community and buses stopped at the bus stop built by the women of the community.

“They always say they would evict us, but they have never come to negotiate with us. Until today, no one has come to ask me, a resident, if I want to move there [apartments that the City offers in exchange for the house] or where I want to stay”, Penha argued.



Penha and her mother Antonia: three generations *threatened by eviction*

In the brutal attack in June 2015, Penha was the first to be hurt. She was removed from the clash with police with her face covered in blood. “My daughter pulled me out and took me aside. And I said, ‘you can take pictures’ and it started to appear in the media”.



St. Joseph the Worker is the Vila Autódromo's patron saint

Penha knows that the Constitution is not enough to guarantee her the right to housing.

There are “illegal pains”, as Brazilian poet Cassiano Ricardo wrote, still far from “enigmatic hearts” and the focus of the cameras.

“Our rights must be recognized, respected. If there is democracy in this country, we have to respect them”, she argues.

The most sought-after resident of Vila Autódromo, Penha leaves for another interview as soon as our conversation ends. On the wall at the entrance of her house, a picture of St. Joseph the Worker, carpenter in Galilee, reminds everyone that work never lets up.



Penha spreads resistance, struggle, fruits and kindness at Vila Autodromo