



## LAS KELLYS. THE STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN PRECARIOUS BARCELONA

María Ruido, *Precarias a la Deriva*,  
Pedro Ortuño and Estíbaliz Sádaba

*Female precariousness: no equality in law or in life*

They aren't invisible, they are clearly seen. Behind the magnificent city of Barcelona, they are found in the hotels, bars and restaurants, cleaning, cooking and caring for customers. They are in the parks looking after children and walking with the elderly, in offices, hospitals, schools and colleges, delivering mail, driving public transport, working in banks, shops, at supermarket tills, in the kitchens of workplaces, and in industrial factories hidden between mountains. They aren't invisible, they are also clearly seen when they fight.

After viewing the fantastic HAMACA archive, we have hand-picked some of the most meaningful works that give an insight into the relationship between increased female presence in the workplace and job insecurity. Currently, over 40% of jobs worldwide are carried out by women, and in Spain there is a high female presence in the fields of healthcare and social services (77.5% women), education (67.4%), the service sector (66.6%) and all care-related and domestic jobs (88.6%). The pay gap, meanwhile, stands at 23%, and 73.86% of people with part-time jobs—i.e. three out of every four—are women.

These figures, which were last updated in 2017, haven't been plucked out of thin air. They are rooted in the Spanish capitalist labour model that took shape in the 1980s and 90s as a result of different policies applied by governments, ranging from the so-called "industrial reconversion" to the privatisation of public services, labour reforms, layoffs and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs to the contracting and subcontracting of services.

One of the selected pieces, which gives a clear explanation of this process in industrial cities such as Mataró and Terrassa, is *Ficciones anfibias* by María Ruido (2005). The image of amphibians is used as a way of showing the adaptation of workers to changes in the production system during the transition from a centralised manufacturing system to one that was extremely flexible, to the outsourcing of production by large corporations and the transformation of a new workforce, bolstered with the considerable increase in immigration from China, North Africa and Eastern Europe.

Flexibility, domestication and precariousness in the new work conditions. Processes which, in order to be implemented, had to completely bypass a tradition of working-class organisations that were closely linked with the feminist struggle, due to the strength of the textile industry which counted on a strong female presence. The video talks about this, and how the double workload—working in the factory in addition to caregiving and domestic tasks—affects women. Business owners did not handle these changes peacefully: they had to break important strikes from the mid-70s, in an attempt to "domesticate the factories", allowing them to move forward with relocations, closures and layoffs during the crises of '78 and '79 up until 1984, with the loss of previous achievements in the area of workers' rights and the crisis of the welfare state.

Title: *Ficciones anfibias* (Amphibious Fictions)

Directed by: María Ruido

Production: Ajuntament de Terrassa and Hangar (2005)

Length: 00:32:50

Languages: Catalan and Spanish

Subtitles: English

Licence: Copyright

Synopsis: *Ficciones anfibias* (Amphibious Fictions) is an attempt to analyse the social, economic and emotional changes that the new production conditions—imposed on the textile industry in the industrial belt of Barcelona—had on the population of these towns, especially on the life of the employees and former employees of the factories.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/ficciones-anfibias/>

The profound transformation of labour that took place as a result of the new forms of capitalist exploitation has not only had an impact on the daily life and social make-up of the working class—particularly women—but also on the entire framework of social, political and cultural relationships, creating deep and permanent contrasts in Europe's largest cities.

One such model is Barcelona, which, just like Madrid, Murcia or any other tourist city in Spain, appears to be split in two. The first is the cosmopolitan part, which dazzles and offers culture, leisure, picturesque neighbourhoods to visit, museums, theatres, music, sea

and mountains. The other is that of working class women, who ensure that all parts of this tourism machine continue to run smoothly. It is these women who are paid the least for their jobs, which are considered as “the bottom category” of positions. Barcelona is not split in two. It is just another European city which is governed by the laws of capitalism and the large tourism, construction and hotel companies, which require this army of women who are invisible to the eyes of tourists, who are too busy taking photos of Gaudí’s architecture or La Boqueria market.

María Ruido’s *Tiempo Real* (Real Time; 2013) clearly depicts the impact that precariousness has in the cities. It covers Barcelona and the precariousness faced by women working as artists, telemarketers and shop assistants; how the types of relationship operate in caregiving jobs—crucial for the economy in order to “produce capital gains”—and how they interact with immigration to resolve the contradiction of the “care crisis” in the upper classes.

The video looks at images of the city of Barcelona over which construction works are erected, depicting the contradiction between the interests of the construction companies and the needs of residents, local culture and artistic life. New forms of political action against the criticism of trade unions, which have ceased to be tools for fighting. Contradicting images mixed with designs of political strategies to combat precariousness, in order to question the viewer, one of the objectives of the film. The juxtaposition with Chantal Akerman’s iconic film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), which takes a critical look at female oppression in patriarchal relationships.

Title: *Tiempo real* (Real Time)

Directed by: María Ruido

Production: Fundació La Caixa (2003)

Length: 00:42:30

Languages: Spanish

Subtitles: English

Licence: Copyright

Synopsis: Among inhabitants of “total work”, since the 1970s and against traditional trade unionism, the call to bring production to a halt became a position of fundamental resistance. *Tiempo Real* (Real Time) takes place in this redefining climate, based on the author’s own experience as a cultural worker. It is a project which, by taking a new look at previously asked questions, aims to investigate the possibility/opportunity of creating visibility and a narrative for the new working class.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/tiempo-real/>

*No equality in law or in life for women in precarious situations*

According to the Equal Opportunities Strategic Plan (*Plan Estratégico de Igualdad de Oportunidades*, PEIO), the Spanish Government has a “commitment to the effective equality of women and men”, and the plan states that “the right to equal treatment and non-discrimination and the principle of equal opportunities

between women and men is embodied in the Constitution, in articles 14 and 9.2, and is essential for building a fair, united and free, socially and economically developed society, laying down the consideration of equality as a superior value of our legal system”. However, as we have seen, statistics show that this “equality” in the eyes of the law does not equate to equality in terms of life for the majority of women—the workers, the poor, the young—whether from Spain or further afield.

Female precariousness. It’s difficult to go out onto the streets, to strike or collectivise the feeling of exploitation and oppression when the working class is so fragmented and divided. It is also difficult to feel part of something greater when you can’t even get to know the hotel chamber maid that cleans the room next door. This is because she only has 15 minutes to leave it spotless, and she doesn’t have time to eat if she wants to do what should be considered as normal or a “right”: leave at the established time, because overtime is not paid.

Her body aches from cleaning so much, as if it were an assembly line in which the machines were the hands and backs of workers. But there is no “right” for these bodily pains to be recognised as occupational diseases or injuries, because they may derive from “events outside of the workplace”. So there is no alternative but to live by taking twenty painkillers a day. This means that there are no basic rights or constitutional article regarding legal equality that explains why there is no life equality. So, what is female precariousness?

One of the selected works is *Precarias a la Deriva: a la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad* (Precarias a la Deriva: Adrift through the circuits of feminised precarious work; 2004), produced by the collective Precarias a la Deriva. Its protagonists, a diverse and wide range of women, reflect on job insecurity from a gender perspective based on their own personal experiences: exploitation for being female, commercialisation of bodies, sexual division of labour, reproduction, areas set aside for women in the world of work and the expansion and erosion of such places. Individual images that combine to make a greater picture, comprising the relationship between the workplace, the home, personal relationships, conflicts, transport and housing, perception of time, leisure, consumption, resources and social services.

The film depicts a meeting of women held in Madrid, “who wanted a politics that begins with, but does not end with, they themselves” in order to “recover continuous work—not work as a political playing field”. It leaves us with a hopeful message of women fighting from different experiences, with this great diversity transforming into the potential for battle, despite the fact that it stems from the fragmentation and division of the working class itself. The migrants, the “*sin papeles*”—people without papers—as they’re referred to in reactionary immigration laws, suffer from stress due to the fear of remaining jobless, with many employed as live-in domestics working 24 hours a day. Young

women, who are also overrepresented in the precariousness rates, need to work several jobs to make ends meet, or also migrate, “to work as little as possible” so as to not fall into a routine. Stemming from these new forms of exploitation are renewed ways of fighting, and new alliances which make up, as the film says, “a rebel group of precarious republics that organise themselves to break free from isolation and fear”.

Title: *Precarias a la Deriva: a la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad* (Precarias a la Deriva: Adrift through the circuits of feminised precarious work)

Directed by: Precarias a la Deriva

Production: Precarias a la Deriva (2004)

Length: 00:50:30

Languages: Spanish

Licence: Creative Commons

Synopsis: The whole process of discovering and accompanying the schedules and itineraries of precarious workers has been captured in this video, *Precarias a la Deriva: a la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina* (Adrift through the circuits of feminised precarious work), in which the name of the collective is mixed with the title of the work, to produce a double effect: as well as diluting the authorship of the investigation (truly choral and polyphonic, devised between many women), it highlights the fact that precariousness, besides describing work, is a type of modern-day existence. The video has been created as a tapestry of stories, tales, interviews and conceptualisations that theorise the issues for which the *derivas* are working to raise awareness, all located in Madrid.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/precarias-a-la-deriva-a-la-deriva-por-los-circuitos-de-la-precariedad/>

Another of the works, *Blanca sobre Negra* (White on black; 2004), by Pedro Ortuño, takes place in a small Murcian village called Blanca. The protagonists, employees of one of the village’s remaining carpet factories in the wake of the closure of five others, feel the debilitating effects of exploitation and precariousness in their bodies. The camera excellently captures the faces of strong and happy women, who are far from considering themselves as victims. “It’s like we’re living under Franco” they say as they speak with the owners of the factory, as the video culminates with shots of street signs bearing names such as *18 de Julio* and *Generalísimo Franco*.

Title: *Blanca sobre Negra*

Directed by: Pedro Ortuño

Production: Pedro Ortuño (2004)

Length: 00:12:20

Languages: Spanish

Licence: Copyright

Synopsis: This work by Pedro Ortuño portrays the reality of a small Murcian village called Blanca. The video begins with shots of the village’s streets at night, with the church bells audible in the background. An undoubtedly idyllic image conveying the notions of tranquillity and peace that are associated with these small towns and villages dotted all across Spain, in which antiquated ways of working and living also exist.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/blanca-sobre-negra/>

*From the home to the workplace.*

*The fight against precariousness to not “go home”.*

The increased female presence in the workplace is, among other things, the result of decades of struggle by women to make a place for themselves in the job market. As women left the home to go to work, this brought into question the model of femininity that prevailed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, known as the “domestic angel” or the “perfect wife”. This posed a challenge to the entire discourse of domesticity that was spread by the famous 1886 pamphlet for the “Women’s Library” collection, which described the responsibilities of women at home, both in terms of home economics and morals.

This ideology was refined with new arguments, such as those of the famous endocrinologist Gregorio Marañón, who, in 1920, acquired notable fame in Spain after he released his theory about differentiation and the complementary nature of the sexes. Marañón maintained that women were not inferior, but they were indeed different in terms of their psychological and biological traits: reason, logic, reflexion, analytical and intellectual capacity and creativity were biological characteristics of men; sensitivity, sentimentality, affection, intuition, passivity and abnegation were those of women. This distinction was used to reinforce women’s domestic role as wives and mothers (Mary Nash, *Rojas*).

“The happiness I felt in taking home my first wage packet. The first day I handed over my wage packet to my mother, I told her: Mother, we won’t be hungry any more”. These are the words of one of the protagonists of *Necesidad* (Need), by Pedro Ortuño, a beautiful short film that takes place inside a straw mat factory in the Murcian village of Blanca, where the workers are women. The life stories show another side to the job, of hand-crafted production, in which female representation and job insecurity go hand in hand. “When I go to the doctor he asks me what I’ve done to my back. I’ve been working my whole life”, says one of the female employees.

Title: *Necesidad* (Need)

Directed by: Pedro Ortuño

Production: Pedro Ortuño

Length: 00:08:05

Languages: Spanish

Subtitles: English

Licence: Copyright

Synopsis: *Necesidad* (Need) takes place inside a straw mat factory in the Murcian town of Blanca, where, strangely enough, there are only female employees. The video shows us the process by which the mats are hand-crafted, as the workers tell stories about their lives, chores and daily activities.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/necesidad/>

Currently, domestic tasks continue to permeate the feminisation of precarious work. Childcare, caring for elderly dependents or ill or disabled people is highlighted as a cause of part-time contracts for 12.98% of women (268,200), compared to 1.78% of men (13,600). That’s 7 times more for women. Meanwhile, “other family

commitments” is the main reason for 6.31% of women (130,900) and 1.55% for men (11,400) That’s 4 times more for women.

But other data exists which show that women are forced to go back to the home. Women are also over-represented in jobseeker figures, with around 2 million women currently seeking employment. The percentages currently stand at 16.65% for men and 18.35% for women. Other areas where a gap exists include presence in the workforce, with over one-and-a-half million women less in the workforce (this is reflected in the percentage pay gap, of 11.24 points); and time spent seeking employment, with 1 in every 2 women looking for work for over 1 year (51.27% of all unemployed women). And, compared to 2007, the number of women who have spent over 2 years searching for work has multiplied by 5 (143,500 in 2007 and 707,000 in 2017).

The fight against these gaps and job insecurity is a fight against the return of women to the home, in equally precarious life conditions. In other words, they have no spare time for leisure activities or their own needs; instead, this time is for fulfilling reproduction tasks: caring for elderly people, children or other dependents, within the private family sphere.

From the Time Usage Surveys, it can be seen that women spend less time than men in all activity categories, with the only exception being those related to caring for family members and the home. Women, as a whole, whether or not they carry out another activity, spend an average of 4 hours and 7 minutes on home and family-related tasks, whereas men only spend on average 1 hour and 54 minutes. With regards to leisure activities, women have almost one hour less free time than men per day.

The work *El concurso de la gran felicidad (esto pasa mucho)* (The competition of great happiness (this happens a lot); 1999), by Estíbaliz Sádaba, takes us—in barely 2 minutes—to the eternal and fundamental fight of women for the right to work. The film shows a normal conversation between a couple, in which the woman has to explain why she wants to work and not stay trapped carrying out household tasks. Precariousness, salary and domestic (free) work are some of the words heard in the background of this short, yet deep and meaningful work about the discourse of domesticity.

Title: *El concurso de la gran felicidad (esto pasa mucho)*  
(The competition of great happiness (this happens a lot))

Directed by: Estíbaliz Sádaba

Production: Estíbaliz Sádaba (1999)

Length: 00:01:50

Licence: Copyright

Synopsis: In *El concurso de la gran felicidad* (The competition of great happiness (this happens a lot)), the author’s reflection no longer focuses on women’s bodies and how society moulds and restricts them, but on everyday life as part of a couple, revealing how women deal with inequality on a day-to-day basis, having to fight for such basic issues as working outside of the home or sharing childcare responsibilities.

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/el-concurso-de-la-gran-felicidad-esto-pasa-mucho/>

## Fights

They aren’t invisible, and we also see them leading true rebellions in the “other” Barcelona: that of the female precariousness on which the touristic model of a magnificent city, which the workers are unable to enjoy, is founded.

Explicitly or not, female workers in precarious situations, such as immigrants and young people, are challenging the labour model of Spanish capitalism that took shape in the 1990s. That which *Las Kellys*, the self-organised hotel chamber maids, suffer from and refer to as “externalisations”; a process which worsens working conditions, creates job insecurity and jeopardises the lives of millions of people.

Female precariousness. It is not an individual issue, but a collective one. With the new structuring of the capitalist labour market, there were “post” theories that the old and traditional types of struggle had died away, along with all ideologies besides capitalism. The only remaining options are the individual and cultural struggle, they said.

But capitalism has gone back to its “old and traditional” ways using other forms of exploitation, such as the subtraction of capital gains and patriarchal oppression. And working class women are showing that they can rupture the fragmentation and individualism by organising themselves to fight collective battles, side-by-side with the rest of the working class. Together with other social collectives. Strikes, resistance fund raising, support commissions, going back to “old and traditional” ways because they have to fight as their great grandmothers did for the principle of “same work, same pay”, and in some cases just so that they are allowed to work.

This exhibition aims to reflect these experiences. Because the battlefield of gender inequality is also a battlefield of classes; from there we aim to recover and reclaim the lost rights, winning this battle on behalf of all women.

CYNTHIA BURGUEÑO- *PAN Y ROSAS* (BREAD AND ROSES)

<https://devel.hamacaonline.net/titles/ficciones-anfibias/>

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