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A project for homeless women in Nou Barris

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"Lola, no estás sola" Association

"Lola, no estás sola" is an association formed by eight women set up to manage a social intervention project with homeless women in Nou Barris. The reason why a group of women organised ourselves to make this project a reality is part of the DNA of the district we live in; it's because of the air we have breathed taking part in associations and organisations, because of all the times we have felt the solidarity between women neighbours in the streets, and because of our feminist outlook too.

1. Where does "Lola, no estás sola" come from?

The aim of the association is to propose a social intervention project with women who are vulnerable, invisible and discriminated against, with a vision that is faithful to the way feminism and social movements in Nou Barris do things. The "Lola, no estás sola" project is a great opportunity for direct action with women, as well as highlighting their situations and generating a social and feminist transformation of the associations, organisations, the district and the men and women who live here.

Mutual support and solidarity have been one of the foundations of social construction since the district's origins. The working class of the Seventies showed its strength by raising its neighbourhoods and houses (Las Roquetes, for example) and it fought to have the streets paved and traffic lights put up. But things didn't stop there. They continued building the neighbourhood and focusing the more human side of their attention on social problems.

A clear example of that was the associations' stance on locating a care and monitoring centre (CAS) on drug addiction in the area, despite the opposition of some local residents. While in other districts they blocked the streets, demanding the CAS wasn't located in their neighbourhoods, in Nou Barris it was the people who were at the centre of the debate. They understood that their sons and daughters might need the centre's services and, therefore, they had the right to have it nearby. That way the stigma was removed from those suffering from drug addiction and the reality was considered through an integrational approach. A committee was set up, not anti-drugs, but to deal with the situation in the neighbourhood. The image of "Comidroga" was displayed on badges and stickers at popular festivals and families who were grappling with this problem, which had been affecting youth so much in the Eighties, felt they had the support of their neighbours.

There are more examples, such as the 9 Barris Acull network. It was set up from the sit-ins immigrants being organised in Barcelona's churches in 2001, more specifically, in the Santa Engràcia church in La Prosperitat. Their aim was not to form an organisation that would deal with immigration but to integrate this reality into the organisations in the district. For years links have

been created with people who arrive from other places and they have been included in this rich district. Likewise, local people and associations have been provided with tools so they can be more inclusive with the various realities. The “Festival de Sopas” is a great example of the community spirit in the district and its annual gathering is an opportunity to develop the inclusive discourses of associations and organisations, to strengthen them and generate debate.

As early as 2013, under the “Nou Barris cabrejada” campaign, the district, associations and other organisations took a stand on poverty, with the slogan “It’s not poverty, it’s injustice”. Local associations carried out a study on the situation regarding inequalities in the district to demand improvements in the quality of life of its inhabitants, faced with an Administration with little social vision.

Campaigning to overcome the social inequalities of our neighbourhoods is now a way of building the district, which is reflected in a host of realities: in associations, in streets, in communities and in families; between individuals and between collectives; in schools, health services, community centres, community plans, facilities, *esplais* [recreation centres], sports clubs, entities and collectives. Through “Lola, no estás sola” we want to gather all those experiences and share them with women living on the streets and, at the same time, encourage associations and organisations to learn from them. Because if there is something we learn every day it is that each person has a lot to say in improving their reality and in transforming those inequalities, creating fairer spaces for living together.

Nou Barris also took part in the feminist movement, specifically in the *vocalías* [women’s groups] that sprang up in the city after the “Primeras Jornadas Catalanas de la Mujer” [First Catalan Women’s Conference], in June 1976. The struggle of those women is also part of this project.

Demands for women’s equality have made this society a little fairer with our situation but in Nou Barris the *vocalías* of the residents’ associations did a lot more. Spaces have been created for women to meet and discuss their problems, helping each other with the situations they experience in the neighbourhood and finding solutions for them: from a whole network that helped women to go and have an abortion in Avignon, to free them from the “Butcher of Sants”, to a demonstration to denounce the harassment a woman working at a neighbourhood supermarket was getting from a boss. The women were clear that the struggle in the neighbourhood was the responsibility of everyone, men and women, but the associations were not taking women into account when making decisions. An example of that was the meeting times, which prevented lots of women from going. However, they were the ones organising to keep up the fight, to close off the streets or put the neighbourhood under siege to demand traffic lights.

The *vocalías* provided a space where these women could be empowered. They talked about sexuality and maternity, focused on their education, highlighted schools for adults, the demand for municipal nurseries, the family planning centre and so on. The struggle that began with those *vocalías* continues today in the form of the feminist groups and it has left a big mark on the associations and on the streets.

And that is where the Nou Barris Women’s Group came from, uncoupled and freed from the residents’ associations, which played an essential role in creating the women’s advice and information points (PIAM) and in highlighting and conceptualising male violence. The celebration of 8 March shows how eager we women in Nou Barris are to keep on celebrating and demanding.

From now on, given the situations we are experiencing in a district full of all kinds of injustice, through “Lola no estás sola” we are planning to work with the women who have it the worst and suffer the most: homeless women, more specifically, those living on the streets or temporarily at the Centro Residencial de Primera Acogida shelter in Nou Barris.

2. Homeless women: a harsh, hidden reality

The situation facing women sleeping rough on the streets, their specific needs and the lack of any resource adapted to them make this project necessary.

Seventy-six percent of the women in this situation have been victims of male violence, 71.5% are mothers and cannot care for their children, 22.3% are suffering from a serious or chronic illness and 57.2% suffer some type of mental disability. All those percentages are higher than those of the male population living in the same circumstances. On top of that, the distribution of gender roles in the patriarchal society we live in, where men come to occupy public spaces and women domestic, directly affects those women. It holds back the process by which they end up on the streets but, once they reach that situation, they enter it in worse conditions than men. In addition, they never represent more than 20% of the population in the resources they opt for, which is why they suffer the consequence of being a minority group.

The 2015 study carried out by the Barcelona Homeless Persons Care Network (XAPSLL, by its Catalan initials) devoted a chapter to women's homelessness, showing the need to work with this group of women and learn more about their circumstance (Sales, 2015).

Women who end up out on the streets come over to residential resources looking for protection but what they find does not match their expectations. They experience situations of intimidation, they are a minority surrounded by men, they yield their privacy to men and so on. That only increases the victimisation they face and makes it much more complicated to work on the process to empower them as individuals and women. To solve that problem, we have to attend to their needs through a place, a secure place that is adapted to those needs.

Lack of privacy and personal hygiene at centres or on the streets has repercussions on the women's self-esteem and identity, two basic pillars for their empowerment, which would improve if they were offered a resource that they did not have to share with men.

Women with children have no way to normalise their relationships, as their situation makes it difficult for them to have meetings with the children. The place they live in will have to have spaces where they can see their children and thereby establish family relationships that are less painful for them.

However, the reality of the job market and the difficulties women face do not help them to maintain the financial stability they need to turn their situation round. The solutions they often resort to consist of precarious jobs that provide them with accommodation and help them survive but not in their personal or interpersonal process.

3. What response can you give?

Through "Lola, no estás sola" we plan to give a feminist and community response, as these are the two approaches through which we women can be dealt with in a fairer way and go through processes of empowerment that will enable them to reverse the situation.

When we talk about a feminist response or outlook, we mean recognising and highlighting the specific problems that these women experience for the simple fact of being women. Women sleeping rough on the streets have an added difficulty as regards men: they have failed in their "mission", the role that society has marked out for them; they are no longer able to care for anyone, not even themselves. That idea not only lurks in each personal process, it is present in the abuse they experience and the relationships they establish. Added to that, there are fewer of them than men. So, the reality they face is full of different kinds of violence, discrimination and forced relationships. Their experience is nothing but an extreme version of the machismo all women suffer but they reach this stage so damaged on a personal level and so invisible to society that they are immersed in a spiral where they assume their reality is justified.

The idea is to work not just to ensure these women and society recognise all the circumstances they face are the result of a patriarchy and that they are at a disadvantage, but also to offer them adequate protection and support. Working to give these women autonomy through collective empowerment, to understand where this patriarchy places us. Enabling them to look at their situation, history and life experience, and freeing them from some of the responsibility and guilt that are imposed on them for being women. Enabling them, in short, to place the reality they experience in the context of the inequality between men and women.

Once this vision of women's homelessness has been assimilated and understood as the basis of our response, we will focus our work on other premises that refer to homelessness in a more general way.

We understand homelessness as a lack of housing, a situation which violates human rights, so our main solution is to offer homeless women a safe place that can reverse their situation and which, what is more, is not subject to time restrictions, so it is as much like a home as possible. For that, "Lola, no estás sola" is planning a specific project we will explain later.

Besides our feminist outlook and understanding that we need to provide homes for the homeless, we at "Lola, no estás sola" believe that the project would be incomplete without a community response. When people, and women specifically, reach this point, the social networks they can rely on are very limited or non-existent. What's more, those they subsequently establish do no more than perpetuate their situation. Establishing relations in new conditions of equality, with no stigma attached, would facilitate their process. The reality of Nou Barris, an assertive protest district which, far from resigning itself to its situation of poverty, fills its streets with culture, solidarity economies and various forms of mutual help and offers women a whole host of possibilities. And these women, too, are an opportunity for all those movements to incorporate new realities to fight and keep changing for. The great variety of entities and their predisposition will get women, who so wish, to become part of this fabric, learn other ways of doing things and adopt several perspectives while sharing theirs. An enrichment that will surely be incorporated into their empowerment, which will return to society in the district, by showing it a hidden reality. There can be no change, without this two-way path, for recognising homelessness as a violation of human rights and acknowledging the difficulties faced by women in this society. And for a transformation, besides recognition, to achieve a fairer society.

4. How can that be done?

We at the association aim to respond to this situation through various projects. The first of these consists of finding funding for two flats in Nou Barris.

Our idea is to offer these women a room in a flat shared with two other women in the same situation - where they will find the protection they are looking for and be attended to according to their individual difficulties - and to work on their collective empowerment. The stay will be limited to the individual process of each woman, under a personalised work plan where each is the master of her own empowerment.

The women will take part in organising and managing these flats, so they resemble a home as much as possible. Besides that, they will be able to organise meetings and share spaces with their children. They will be likewise given appropriate resources to cover their psychological, physical and social needs, so they can achieve their personal independence. In short, these flats will provide the women with the positive shared living, privacy and emotional and personal recovery they need, while establishing links with entities and collectives in the community that will enable them to create new social networks and other realities.

The "Lola, no estás sola" project is meant to be a home for women who are on the streets can recover emotionally and become aware of who they are and how they are capable of being the masters of their own change. They will always have the help and support of professionals and

women in the district, who will offer them tools for their empowerment, helping them to set out on the path to personal success they want.

Our methodology is based on a three-level process of empowerment (individual, interpersonal and collective), during which the woman herself can identify her reality, along with her strong and weak points, become aware of her needs and take the necessary decisions for responding to them.

These three levels are the basis of the intervention areas that are being developed under the following programmes:

- Individual work plan: the woman will have to do a snapshot of her reality, identify her needs and propose a series of actions that will lead her to improve and overcome her situation. The time needed will depend on each woman. It will be a dynamic stage, open to modifications, and a way for her to gradually become aware of her individual empowerment and life process.
- “Soy madre” [I’m a mother]: this is about adapting the project to women who are mothers, offering them meetings with their children in the flats and working individually on their relationship, with the aim of developing it in a positive way so they can experience their motherhood naturally, not as a burden. There is also the possibility of linking them up with a children’s group or family space in the neighbourhood, where they can take their kids and get them to take part in children’s activities in the district.
- “Participando en mi barrio”[Taking part in my neighbourhood]: is a programme where they can establish new social relations and foster the creation of new social networks. The women will be put in touch with district entities where they will be able to take part in developing those networks. That way, the association gets known among the neighbourhood entities working on a community level, establishes links of mutual aid and raises awareness of reality of these women to remove the stigma from homelessness.
- Women’s Assembly: aims at getting the women themselves to organise the running of the flats. The assembly will be run by one of the women on a rotating basis, and a mediator plus a person from the association will also take part. In addition, the assembly will take charge of flat logistics and act as a space for tackling issues relating to cohabitation or relationships that develop among women.
- Women’s Group: the aim of this group will be highlight women, whether by talking about important women in history, dealing with feminist issues or simply offering a meeting where women can share their reality. The purpose will be decided by the participants themselves and may change if they consider it opportune. Any woman will be able to take part, whether or not they are homeless.

“Lola, no estás sola” is a project that puts women at its heart, supports them in their empowerment and offers them the necessary time and space for achieving that. We at the association believe that, if these aspects are not respected, it will be very difficult to achieve successful outcomes, a success which not only depends on reversing the situation but also on achieving women’s empowerment.

5. A year and... of “Lola, no estás sola”

Since we started giving shape to this project in July 2016, it has been a stage full of reflection, debating and questioning, all for the purposes of enabling its practice and implementation in the best way possible. We have not lost sight that women and the violation of their right to housing have to be at its heart. It is from here that we will be looking more into Housing First and introducing its principles into the project.

We have introduced it to the neighbourhood's organisations and the response has been very productive, not just in raising awareness and removing stigmas, but also in getting entities and individuals involved in the project. So far it has been they that have been offering contributions to enable its funding.

We have been able to contact some women living in homeless situations, even without the resources of the flats, offering them information, help and support. The experiences we have had until now have reaffirmed our belief that empowerment of the woman herself must be based on respect for her times and she must play the leading part in it. All that is helping us to generate new projects where we can provide these women with other resources.

We have had the opportunity to explain the project at women's conferences in Barcelona, at community spaces in the district and also to the authorities, in an initial phase of publicising the project and looking for resources.

It is worth mentioning that we have achieved some results: we are starting to take part in a University of Barcelona study on the reality of homeless women and their support, and we have joined the Barcelona Care Network for the Homeless (XAPSLL).

This path, where we are only at the beginning, is gradually leading us towards realising the project. Our next step is to offer a flat in response to the need of three women for a room who can then choose their path from here on, start from zero and empower themselves. Requiring investments yet to arrive, this intervention stems from our sense of solidarity as a campaigning neighbourhood and from our feminist heart. And from our dedication and the project's warm reception from women an