

## Revealed Cities: A Photovoice Project with Domestic Workers in Salvador, Brazil

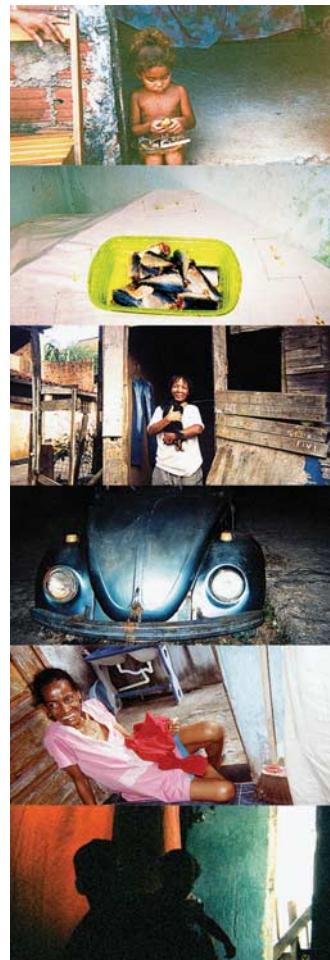
ANDREA CORNWALL, FERNANDA CAPIBARIBE  
AND TEREZINHA GONÇALVES

Salvador is a much-photographed city. Beyond the gorgeous beaches and the romantic splendour of the historic centre are informal settlements where the majority of Salvador's inhabitants live. Middle-class Bahians rarely venture into these neighbourhoods. Yet every day, thousands of women traverse the city to spend long days cleaning their homes, caring for their children, washing their clothes and preparing their food. Their lives are hidden. Their work is underpaid and undervalued. Their invisible hands sustain families, support middle-class women's careers and make a significant contribution to Brazil's growing economy.

Some 9.1 million Brazilian women work as domestic workers, constituting around 17.8 percent of the entire female labour force. Since the first domestic workers' association was founded in the mid-1930s, domestic worker activists have been engaged in a long, hard, struggle for rights and recognition. They have won significant labour rights. But many domestic workers remain undocumented and continue to suffer exploitation and abuse in their places of work. The domestic workers' struggle is not just one for labour rights. It is also for dignity: to be treated as fully human.

Re-presenting their humanity, as well as revealing the conditions in the places where they live and work became a vehicle for a participatory photography project that Pathways carried out in collaboration with Creuza Oliveira and colleagues from the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) and its local chapter.

Action research with FENETRAD turned the tables on the conventional researcher-researched relationship, placing domestic workers themselves at the heart of the process of enquiry. Terezinha and Andrea came to work closely with Creuza, a long-time comrade and colleague of Terezinha's in a project that explored the history of domestic workers' mobilization, and issues of power and empowerment in domestic workers' everyday lives. An impulsive purchase of an armful of disposable cameras in a Brighton photography shop by Andrea led



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to enlisting Fernanda, who was working as a photographer and researcher on another Pathways project, in designing and running a photography course that was attended by twelve domestic workers. They began to use what they'd learnt to document their everyday lives, first with the disposable cameras and then with digital cameras. They traced their movements between the neighbourhoods where their friends and families live, and in which those who do not stay with their employer have their homes, and the middle-class suburbs where they work.

In the process, they generated a wealth of new perspectives on their city and their lives. Ana Cristina Machado, aged 28 years, commented, 'Sometimes we take a photo of a place and when we come back the next day it is no longer the same. Photos give me a thrill'. Ma de Fatima Almeida, aged 30 years, reflected, 'I felt I grew a lot because I learnt how to look more closely at my everyday life'. And Francislene Guimarães, aged 32 years, remarked, 'photography has increased my desire to see other places. It is a way to register our experiences and living moments'. Photography awakened sensitivities, as Gildália Santos, aged 46 years, noted: 'For me, a picture is much more than pressing a button. You must do it with your heart, and I put a lot of feeling into the images'.

For some of those who participated in the photography project, learning to observe and document their lives brought about changes in the way they came to see themselves. Neusa Palmeira, aged 44 years, is a grandmother and works in a family home as a domestic worker. She reflected:

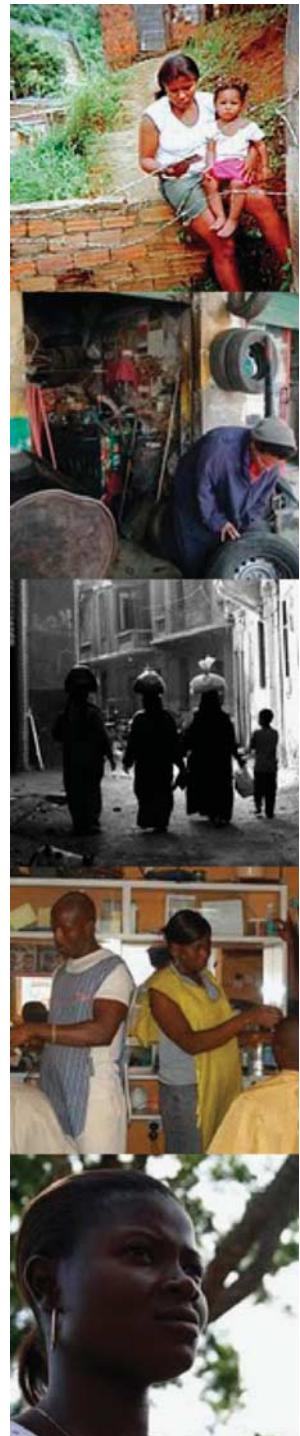
Photography has changed my life. The coolest thing was learning to pay closer attention to things around me and to see the results in the images I took.

A lasting memory of the project is meeting Milca Evangelista, aged 39 years, outside the hall in the neighbourhood where the training was taking place, brimming over with excitement. 'I've become a photographer', she said, 'now I won't take anything that I am seeing around me for granted. I've learnt to see things differently'.

The photographs that the domestic workers produced show the changing landscapes of the city, and reveal the privation and inequity that marks the contrast between the homes where they work and those in which they live. But they do more than this. They bring into focus aspects of everyday life that give them pride and pleasure, as people.

Shown in one of Salvador's most exclusive exhibition spaces, the collection *Revealed Cities* brought these representations of domestic workers' everyday lives to the attention of the middle-class public. Just as the domestic workers spoke of the power of photography to focus attention on aspects of everyday life that we take for granted, we might hope that those who saw the exhibition will see the women whose work keeps their households running smoothly in a different light.

A photoclip of *Revealed Cities* can be viewed on the Pathways YouTube channel pathways08 at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).



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