

TALKING WITH LXS PARCES

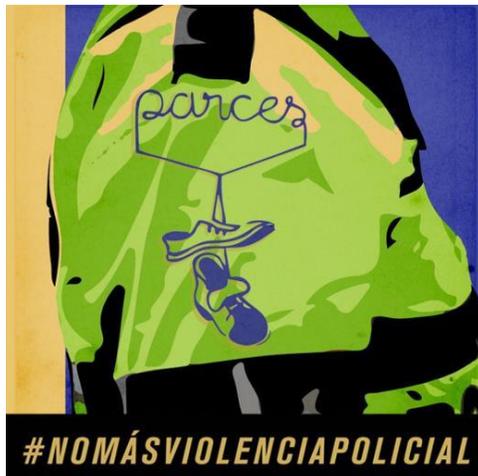
On January 20th, 2016, the Metropolitan Police of Bogotá went to the Mariposa plaza, in the San Victorino neighborhood, and without justification violently detained 15 women sex workers. Since then, the **NGO P.A.R.C.E.S.** has decided to intervene with advocacy strategies and legal actions; with support from **UAF-LAC** they brought the case to the country's highest legal body. Learn more about this story here, in an interview with Nora Picasso, director of the organization's legal committee.

UAF-LAC: What happened that day at the Mariposa?

NORA PICASSO: Police trucks arrived at the Plaza de la Mariposa and detained various women sex workers, bringing them to the UPJ (*Unidad Permanente de Justicia*, a police lock-up facility). While putting them in the truck the women faced different kinds of aggression: the police pulled on their bags, breaking them, they also pulled on their shoelaces, and women were slapped.

UAF-LAC: How did P.A.R.C.E.S find out what was happening and how did you support the case?

NP: That day, the women let us know and a lawyer from the legal committee went directly to the UPJ. There they asked the police why the women had been detained. The response was “instead of of defending these SOBs you should educate them.” Given the repeated police brutality not only against the detained women, but also the PARCES team, we decided to file two *tutelas* (writ of protection of constitutional rights), but these had some legal challenges; so we initiated an advocacy and mobilization strategy, looking for alternative legal protections for these women.



UAF-LAC: What did this strategy look like?

NP: The first action was a public press release, but this led to a series of sensationalist news stories on the case, generating increased social polarization, which could affect the *tutela* and revictimize the women. That was when we decided to activate our network of friends and seek out legal and psychological support for the women. Through the Urgent Action Fund, we had access to economic support to hire professionals who could have a 100% dedication to the case. This allowed for greater coverage and political advocacy.

UAF-LAC: How did you initiate the legal process?

NP: We started with the *tutelas*, but it wasn't easy, the Police responded that they were “fulfilling the law to recover public spaces,” which was issued by the new Mayor. Our second action was to send a review request, signed by PARCES, to the Constitutional Court. We also presented other cases to show that these are not isolated incidents, but in fact respond to a systematic policy of police brutality ordered by the Mayor's Office. Also, since we carry out

oversight on the human rights of sex workers, it was possible to get the Colombian Human Rights Ombudsman's Office to send the Constitutional Court a review request for this case.

UAF-LAC: Can you share some of the case's legal arguments?

NP: What happened to these women is unjust: first, the current police code establishes that sex work is not punishable; second, sex work is not taking place on the street, this takes place in private; and third, the procedure established by the police code is that a person should be taken to a health center or their home, not the UPJ. The Police is not complying with the established procedures. In addition, during the sex work laboratory carried out by our NGO in Bogotá, it could be seen that police brutality against sex workers is on the rise. This is not just a problem in San Victorino, but through the city!

UAF-LAC: Did the violence against these women continue after sending the request?

NP: Yes. Two months ago we received a call saying that the police were bothering them again, and that the police wanted to take the women to the UPJ. Just this week, we received another call saying that the women were being forced to sign a document stating that they had violated the police code and were not going to return to that area. Many others have received threats and have been beaten for helping us denounce the police.



UAF-LAC: What actions are you carrying out to protect these women's rights until the court makes a ruling?

NP: The *tutela* process has been difficult because we didn't have hard evidence and the testimonies become a he said she said with the Police... So, we have filed disciplinary complaints to demonstrate the repressive actions against the women, the complaints even include the Police's Human Rights director. In addition, since many women fear the threats, we have workshops and accompaniment to share legal tools, helping the women to empower themselves about their rights and what is and is not allowed in the Police Code. That means they have been able to use arguments to defend themselves when there is an abuse of authority by the Police. A lot of the women have been interested in the case and have helped to obtain more evidence, making it possible to file other complaints.

UAF-LAC: What will happen after the Court makes its ruling?

NP: The idea is to continue promoting these small actions, because we might get a response that isn't ideal, so we must continue with other actions. For example, we sent a presentation to the judges with quantitative data to support our case, and even though they cannot be included in the *tutela*, we will continue sending notifications and press releases about the situation faced by sex workers in Bogotá. We will not be satisfied with a court ruling, we will continue working for a dignified life for women sex workers, and against discrimination, exclusion, rejection, abuse, and a violation and negation of their rights!