

Cultivating autonomy

Colectiva

Polimorfos,

Colombia

*Working at the intersection of feminist
and disability rights activism*



‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’

Mama Cash funds feminist groups and movements led by women, girls, trans people, and intersex people working to secure justice and freedom. Mama Cash’s grantee-partners include groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights activism. This story is excerpted from a longer report on feminist disability rights activism called ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’. The full report presents the stories of eight activist groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights movements. The full report can be found on our website:

<https://www.mamacash.org/en/disability-rights-report>

Cover photo: Members of Colectiva Polimorfos. Photo: Ivan Castaneira.



In 2014, when Bubulina Moreno and Yolanda ('Yoli') del Rocio Gil took stock of the movements most relevant to them, they saw little space for themselves or their issues. 'It became clear for us that within the disability rights movement there was not enough awareness or recognition of the specific issues faced by women and girls,' recalls Bubulina. 'There was no discussion about gender-based violence, or sexual and reproductive health. These were just some of the issues that the movement considered unnecessary or unimportant to address compared to more pressing issues, like education, labour rights and culture.' When Bubulina and Yoli looked toward the feminist movement, they encountered a similar problem. 'The feminist movement was very ableist,' recalls Bubulina. 'They didn't recognise the reality we face. They didn't include us in their activism.'

That situation inspired Bubulina and Yoli to create Colectiva Polimorfias. Based in Bogota, Colombia, the group is dedicated to defending and promoting the rights of women and girls with disabilities – or, to use their preferred description, women and girls with 'functional diversity'. The collective's activities, from education to advocacy, are all geared toward strengthening the autonomy of women and girls with disabilities.

A confidential and safe space

Colectiva Polimorfias facilitates support groups, which meet regularly on the

weekends in Bogota. The support groups provide a safe space for the women and girls with functional diversity to share their experiences, express themselves freely, and discuss their problems, as well as strategies for dealing with them. Cases of sexual, psychological, and economic violence commonly arise as topics for discussion. According to Yoli, many women come to the group believing what they have been told their whole lives: that they are ugly, they are worthless, they are a burden on their families. Violence and abuse are so normalised that the women do not recognise it as such. 'The support group is a space for women to empower themselves and better understand the situation they are in,' says Bubulina. 'They learn more about their rights and how they can protect themselves.'

The COVID-19 lockdown measures had a severe impact on the ability of Colectiva Polimorfias to maintain the support group in-person. As a result, the group shifted to virtual meetings. But most women and girls with functional diversity have no privacy at home. They usually share a computer with their whole family, and few have their own room. 'We had quite a few women who wanted to join in the online support group,' explains Bubulina. 'But when they did, their family members would listen to what they were saying or try to stop them from participating. It is difficult – maybe even impossible – for women [with disabilities] to find confidential, safe spaces virtually.'

The richness and diversity of our disabilities

Colectiva Polimorfias also organises regular workshops to go into depth on important topics, such as sexual and reproductive health. ‘Women with disabilities really lack access to comprehensive education on sexuality and reproductive health. They are very much inhibited from enjoying and exercising their sexual rights,’ explains Bubulina. ‘So it is important that we have an open conversation about the topic. It is important that they can enjoy their sexuality in a safe manner.’ Another key problem is the lack of representation of women with disabilities in the political sphere. Through the workshops, Colectiva Polimorfias educates women and girls about their political rights with the aim of strengthening their political participation and leadership. The workshops are a space for enrichment and knowledge building, not only for participants, but also for volunteers who assist Colectiva Polimorfias staff in organising them. Since Colectiva Polimorfias was founded, upwards of 100 women have been involved in the group’s workshops.

Inclusivity and accessibility are paramount in all of Colectiva Polimorfias’ activities: the group provides sign language interpretation and ensures accessibility of infrastructure. ‘One of the great things about Colectiva Polimorfias is that we don’t focus on one type of disability,’ says Yoli. ‘In Colombia, disability rights activism is very much divided by the type of

disability. Each movement sticks to their own and focuses on their own issues. That’s very concerning to us, because when the rights movement is divided, we end up fighting amongst ourselves rather than focusing on what we should be focused on, which is fighting for all of us and fighting for our rights.’ The group sees the range of functional diversity within Colectiva Polimorfias as an asset. ‘It brings us closer together. We celebrate the richness and diversity of our disabilities. It is something that actually strengthens our organisation.’

Deciding for ourselves

Last year, the group launched an initiative to educate family members of women and girls with disabilities – to increase their awareness of their daughters’, sisters’, and granddaughters’ abilities to make their own decisions, to work, to engage in intellectual pursuits. Often, family members won’t allow women and girls with functional diversity to make even the most basic decisions, such as choosing what clothes to wear. ‘In Colombia, women with disabilities are viewed as eternal children,’ explains Bubulina. ‘Sadly, it is often families that most limit the lives of women and girls with disabilities.’ The workshop, which was very interactive, focused on the importance of being an ally and supporting women and girls in their journey to autonomy. ‘This is something the families are very reluctant to listen to or to recognise,’ says Bubulina. ‘It was not at all easy. But we keep trying.’

Autonomy also drives Colectiva Polimorfias’s political advocacy.

The group has helped organise a new network of disability rights organisations, called *Red en Comunidad* (Network in Community) that has come together to oppose two legislative proposals that are now in Colombia's Congress. The focus of the proposals is financial support – a minimal subsidy and paid work opportunities – for full-time caretakers of people with disabilities, who are usually family members. Proposals were drafted without the input and participation of people with disabilities. 'Neither bill recognises the autonomy of people with disabilities,' explains Bubulina. 'They take away our ability to decide who we want to assist us. And it makes no sense to give additional paid work to caretakers who are already working full-time. In addition to overloading caretakers with work, the proposal would eliminate the possibility of families to adapt to their own situation as they see fit.' *Red en Comunidad* is working with Senator Victoria Sandino on an alternative proposal, which will soon be introduced in Congress. The bill addresses the need for professional support and social protection, and includes both a personal stipend that people with disabilities would receive directly as well as support for full-time family caretakers who, because of their care-giving work, are unable to access paid employment and are therefore ineligible for an old age pension.

An invitation to listen

When asked to reflect on what they are most proud of in the short history

of Colectiva Polimorfos, Bubulina and Yoli speak of the difficulty, as well as gratification, of working with and for women with disabilities. Bubulina emphasises that it's not easy for women with disabilities to come together and organise. Given the lack of accessible spaces and transportation in Bogota, even the effort to find a physical space for meeting was a struggle.

Of course, the challenges are not just physical: 'The society we live in is so exclusionary, and women with disabilities are constantly infantilised. It's as if we don't have voices, as if we can't speak for ourselves, or share our opinions,' Bubulina adds. Given this context, the ability of Colectiva Polimorfos to empower women with disabilities to speak up and have their voices be heard is a great achievement. 'The fact that Colectiva Polimorfos even exists is honestly an achievement, let alone that we have been able to reach so many women and they are exercising their autonomy.' Yoli echoes the sentiment: 'What stands out for me is the autonomy that some of these women have achieved – that they know their rights and are able to speak up when they are being harassed or are in an abusive situation. That they don't have to fight as hard to make their voices heard.'

To ensure that feminist disability rights activism is strengthened, Colectiva Polimorfos invites funders to listen to these voices and learn from them. 'I don't believe in the adage that you can walk in someone else's shoes,' says

Bubulina. 'But I do think we can work to cultivate empathy.' Donors can ask themselves questions about ableism within their organisations and work to change this. They can adopt policies to guarantee that their activities and spaces are accessible, so people with disabilities can participate. They can also change the language they use to talk about people with disabilities. Colectiva Polimorfás believes that these

measures are key for changing the image and narrative around people with disabilities. 'Donors should listen. That's the number one thing,' says Yoli. 'That's what we do ourselves – we listen to the voices of people with disabilities that may be different from ours. By listening to each other and understanding the opinions and lived experiences of others, we can really improve the lines of communication.'



Members of Colectiva Polimorfás. Photo: Ivan Castaneira.

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