



UNMASKING THE VOICE OF YOUNG SHOE SHINERS IN LA PAZ*

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In La Paz, Bolivia, youth turn to shoe shining in the streets as a way to try to support themselves and help their families. Since shoe shiners have a reputation as thieves and drug addicts, youngsters hide under balaclava masks to do their jobs. How is their voice as a social group affected by these conditions?

BEING A SHOE SHINER

The number of young shoe shiners in La Paz, the administrative capital of Bolivia, has grown as the population in La Paz's sister city, El Alto, receives an increasing number of rural migrants.

Between 1976 and 2001, El Alto grew in a haphazard manner to seven times its size, reaching 650 thousand people in 2001, the year of the most recent census (PNUD, 2006). The migration process was accelerated in the 1980s by the closing of the state-owned COMIBOL mines (Bolivian Mining Corporation). The majority of the immigrants to El Alto are indigenous, Aymara-speaking women and children who come from the ecologically poor areas of Oruro and Potosí. In 2001, over 80% of the people of El Alto self-identified themselves as indigenous.

Due to a lack of planning and funding, many areas of El Alto currently lack access to basic services such as trash collection, sewage connections and potable water. An estimated four out of each five residents of El Alto live in poverty conditions that do not allow them to meet their basic nutritional needs (PNUD, 2006). In 2001, the average age of the overall population in El Alto was 19, the average number of years of study was almost eight, and about 15% of the school-aged population did not attend classes. The high rate of households headed by women, lack of basic services, and high poverty levels, combine to drive the young to La Paz, searching for work in an attempt to both help support their families and

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pay for their own studies. Shoe shining is a popular job among these youth because of the little training and equipment needed to get started.

For the young, poverty has not only economic but also social, cultural and political consequences (CFF, 2006). The outfit worn by shoeshine workers in La Paz includes a vest that identifies which workers' association they belong to, and a balaclava ski mask to hide their identity in an effort to avoid social discrimination. Many prefer that their classmates, friends, and family do not know what kind of work they do, since shoe shiners have a reputation as thieves and drug addicts. Such poor reputation and public anonymity obstruct their chances of being perceived as credible sources of information even on topics having to do with their own lives.



My friend is working, shining shoes. Work is a struggle for us.

In a photography workshop held at the Fundación Nuevo Día in December 2006 about what it means to be a shoe shiner, a group of workers reflected on the positive and negative aspects of their job. They stated that shining

shoes is an honorable job like any other that allows them to support their studies and pay for food, clothing and health care costs. Moreover, they see their work as an opportunity to socialize, develop a complex relationship with society and gain life experience, which they felt often makes them mature earlier than their peers.

On the positive side, they enjoy working without a boss or a fixed schedule, and often focus on spending time enjoying themselves and

thinking about the future.

Negative aspects they explored include feelings of political disenfranchisement, the stress caused by many of their clients being rude to them on a daily basis, and that they feel discriminated against by the rest of society. They note, however, that they no longer experience the same discrimination as they used to. The facts that they have organized themselves into associations, and that Bolivia now has the first indigenous president ever in Latin America, have led to certain improvements.



Honest work allows some money for food, clothing and studies. As Christmas approaches, some enjoy presents and a tree, but for shoe shiners it is difficult to celebrate with small gifts.

According to PNUD (2006), an estimated 70,000 youth aged 7 to 13 works in

Bolivia. While shoeshine work doesn't fall into the "worst forms of child labor" category according to OTI and UNICEF (2004), many organizations in Bolivia are struggling with how to deal with it. Should it be eradicated? And if so, how? Should the youth be supported to lead more balanced lives that include work, studies and play? Several studies have found that international treaties, national laws and trade restrictions have little impact on reducing child labor. Instead, the programs that achieve the best results focus on increasing educational access and the quality of instruction offered, while at the same time recognizing the economic importance of the contribution that young people make toward their families' wellbeing (Basu, 1998).

REPRESENTATION

In La Paz, shoeshine workers can choose to belong to many different organizations. The most important type is the territorially based association, which refers to self-organized groups that lobby for local government recognition and channel information and projects from outside organizations to their members. Other organizations that give support to shoe shine workers focus either on providing services to them, “rehabilitating” them, or “organizing” them. In general, these organizations do not grant voice to the youth workers within the public sphere or make efforts to change public perceptions about their work.

Worker associations provide the shoe shiners with a fixed place to work from and at the same time demand that members attend meetings, wear official uniforms, follow internal rules and regulations, and pay monetary quotas. The organizations are managed by elected boards and coordinate with other vender associations that occupy the same geographical space, usually a specific plaza or street. Each of the 17 associations in La Paz is completely autonomous and only two of them are legally registered with the municipality. Those shoe shiners who choose not to join or cannot join because they are older than the age limit or have been barred for past behavior, are not allowed to work in the territory of the associations, which patrol their areas on a rotating basis.

Among the institutions that offer services, the most common are day centers that provide low cost shining materials, meals, showers, storage lockers, vocational training, seminars on various topics, and educational support. Some examples of this type of organization are the *Fundación La Paz*, *Arco Iris*, *Vamos Juntos*, and the shoeshine-run *Fundación Nuevo Día*. The organizations that work on rehabilitation issues usually provide institutional homes to try to end cycles of homelessness, alcohol or drug use or domestic violence, and to prevent street workers from being a nuisance to the public. Examples include the Mayor’s Citizens Rights office, the Fundación La Paz’s Okarikuna program, Hogar Bernabé, Comunidad Juan Pablo XXIII, and Alalay.

VOICE

While shoeshine workers say that there is nowhere they can go to express their opinions, and that no one asks them what they think, there are three projects in La Paz and El Alto that are taking small steps in this area: one

media training project, one newspaper, and one radio station. Aside from these three projects, in the last six months two small initiatives have provided youth workers with an outlet for self-expression and public voice through photography.

Media training

In 1997, staff from several different well-established radio and newspaper outlets joined forces to start a youth media-training project in El Alto called *Eco-Jóvenes*. The organization focuses on the defense and promotion of children's rights through several projects, including two weekly radio shows run by youth, public education campaigns on youth rights, training of adult reporters on how to cover youth issues, as well as monitoring of mainstream media's coverage of such issues. Through open public invitations, they work with about 30-40 young people at a time. They train about 300 youth per year, and occasionally have worked specifically with young street worker populations through the rehabilitation homes of the organization Alalay. The two weekly radio shows are divided by age groups: *Radio Colmena* for 8-12 year olds and *Radar Juvenil* for 13-18 year olds. Both are broadcast on local radio networks and are available to other radios nationally. At the beginning of each week, members of *Eco-Jóvenes*' national network of youth communicators decide what program themes they will address (such as violence, education, sports, public figures, health, etc.) and then they go out on the street, to schools and to institutions to interview people about the chosen topics.

The newspaper

Hormigón Armado –Reinforced Concrete- was started in late 2005. and currently about 5,000 copies are published every three months. The project managers decide the overall content and layout of the paper. however, youth street workers attend workshops every Saturday where they give their opinions on selected topics and receive training on human rights, use of drugs and other matters. These interviews are sometimes incorporated into the paper as life history interviews or as part of an article. Youth who participate in the workshops are given free copies of the paper to sell for 3 Bolivianos each (US\$ 0.38) to supplement their other income. One worker who participates in this project says, "it doesn't really give us a voice, but the money we earn does help out. It is good to participate in a project that gives us work rather than handing out things for free, we have had too much of that, other projects have trained us to expect everything for nothing and this has had a very corrupting effect."

Radio

About four years ago, a youth-run radio station called *Wayna Tambo* opened in El Alto. While the station doesn't specifically work with shoe shiners, all of the programs are produced by youth. They present their ideas for a series of weekly shows to the organization's decision-making and coordinating collective for approval. In general, the organization tries to promote youth as noteworthy generators of culture, rather than just consumers of it. One important effect of *Wayna Tambo*'s projects has been the legitimization of the young immigrant experience through the recording and diffusion of hip-hop music that combines lyrics and social commentary in Aymara, Spanish and English, from bands such as Ukamau y Ké (that's the way it is and so what?), Wayna Rap (youth rap) and the all-female La Nueva Flavah (the new flavor). The radio supports modern expressions of indigenous cultures through their programming, publishing house, recording label, cultural festivals and creativity workshops.

Photography

Two small-scale photography projects based on the grassroots "Photo Voice" methodology developed by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris (that blends photography and social action by providing cameras to people with little access to those who make decisions affecting their lives) took place recently: one sponsored by Fundación Arco Iris and the other by Fundación Nuevo Día. The Arco Iris project consisted of an exhibition organized by four British youth serving as gap-year volunteers at Arco Iris: 45 photographs taken with disposable cameras by the shoeshine workers of the city's cemetery district were displayed under the title *Desechable* (Disposable) at the Tambo Quirquincho Museum. The stated purpose of the exhibit was to break down social barriers by exposing the thoughts of the people behind the ski masks, giving the youth the opportunity to express themselves artistically. However, few of the young photographers were present at the exhibit, most visited by foreign tourists rather than Bolivian nationals. The project also included hip-hop workshops – music created will become an album to be sold by the youth to raise funds for themselves, following the model of the *Hormigón Armado* newspaper.

The photography project at Fundación Nuevo Día took the form of a contest. Winning photographs were printed on note cards and sold to raise

funds for the center. Fifteen shoe shiners participated in two workshops, where they analyzed what it means to work on the streets and what emotions they most commonly experience in their everyday lives. Based on this analysis, they spent two days taking photos of their lives with digital cameras; each participant then selected five photos to submit to the contest.



Working downtown implies the privilege of observing and deciphering many things that people ignore, such as behaviors and attitudes.

CONCLUSIONS

While social conditions for the shoeshine workers in La Paz are slowly improving, one of the barriers they must overcome in their efforts to be

heard by the wider public is their own self-esteem. Since the majority of them come from lower-class indigenous immigrant families with little formal education, they often feel as though they don't have the status to speak. Yet, when they are in a supportive, safe environment and feel free to speak their minds, they have astonishing things to say.

The expression of their voices could be fostered in at least two ways.

First, through public education campaigns around ideas such as this one expressed by a youth worker: “under this ski mask there is a human spirit like any other”.

Second, through training youth to report on their own issues and interests, and providing spaces for the diffusion of their opinions without adult mediation.

Long-term projects such as *Eco-Jóvenes* and *Wayna Tambo* , and short-term initiatives like the photography projects introduced above, are steps

in that direction.

The photographs included in this article were taken by participants of the first Annual Photography Contest held in December 2006 by the Fundación Nuevo Día. They are published courtesy of the photographers and the Fundación Nuevo Día.

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