

## Nohra Padilla, Third Generation Recycler and Advocate for Organizing the Working Poor<sup>1</sup>

By Melanie Samson

**Impact:** *Nohra was born into a family of recyclers (waste pickers), but when her livelihood was threatened she organized with her fellow recyclers to form a cooperative that struggled to make their voices heard. This process eventually led to the formation of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB), now 18,000 members strong. The ARB organizes recyclers and works to improve the working conditions and livelihoods of recyclers in Bogota.*

Norah Padilla is a third generation recycler. Norah began working with her mother collecting recyclables from waste when she was seven years old. She worked from 4 am until 10 am and then went to school. Upon completion of secondary school Nohra could not afford university studies and so she too became a recycler.

Nohra worked at the municipal dump for four years. When the municipality announced that it was closing the dump, Norah and others formed a cooperative to fight for the right to keep recycling. Three other cooperatives were also formed at the dump. In total there were approximately 200 organized recyclers soliciting the city to keep recycling at the dump. Although the municipality did close the dump, it gave the cooperatives money to help finance their activities so that they could continue their collection work in the streets.

Norah played an important role in bringing the original recycler cooperatives together to form the city-wide Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) in 1990. She is currently the Executive Director of the ARB. Three years ago Norah also received a scholarship to finally attend university. She is completing a degree in administration which will help to strengthen the skills she has developed while working to organize recyclers.



photo: Filipe Balestra

The Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) is now 18,000 members strong and consists of 24 cooperatives. The ARB seeks to promote and strengthen the organisation of recyclers; defend their common interests; improve their working conditions; and gain social and economic recognition for their work. The ARB has a three year agreement with the municipality which covers 10% of Bogotá. In this agreement, municipal trucks collect recyclables that residents have separated out from their garbage and deliver these to a center where members of the ARB sort the recyclables, press them, and sell them to factories. Workers are each employed for six months by the ARB. They receive a salary, social security, medical aid, pensions, and access to occupational health and safety services. Conditions for these workers are significantly better than they were for the founders of the ARB who originally worked in an open dump site with no access to social protection programs.

The ARB was the local host organisation at the First International Conference of Waste Picker Organisations in February 2008, organized by waste picker organisations with the support of WIEGO and the Avina Foundation. Through the Inclusive Cities project, waste picker groups from Asia, Africa and Latin America are sharing their success stories, such as this one from ARB. By organizing at the global level, waste pickers can learn from one another how to effectively organize so that their voices can be heard by local and national decision-makers and their working conditions and livelihoods can be improved.

<sup>1</sup> Based on an interview with Nohra Padilla conducted on January 14, 2009 with translation assistance by Matt Nohn. Photo: Nohra with Waste Pickers in Pune, India.