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## Childcare work in Barcelona and Amsterdam

This newsletter is based on an anthropological research performed in 2009 in Barcelona, Spain and Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The childcare workers in Barcelona took my interest because of my personal experiences with having a childcare worker and performing childcare work in Amsterdam. Walking around on playgrounds in Barcelona I observed some interesting differences between Barcelona and Amsterdam in relation with childcare work. Furthermore, during the research period several thoughts about the place of childcare

workers in society came to my mind. Childcare work requires a high percentage of responsibility and confidentiality. Even though childcare work requires a lot of responsibilities many childcare workers do not have official contracts. Often, childcare work is not seen as an official job, but is seen instead as informal, low valued and easy work. The contrast between the important responsibilities of the childcare workers and the low status of childcare work is a fascinating phenomenon. This interesting phenomenon in combination with

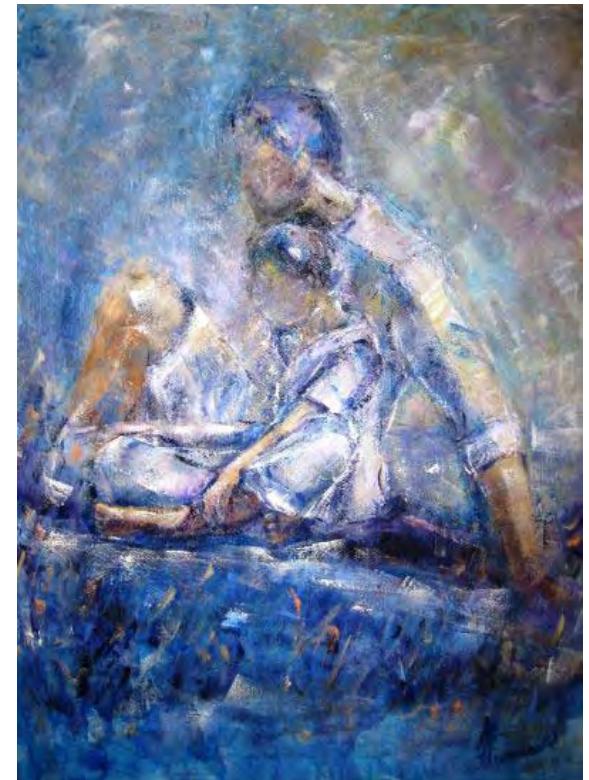
the comparison of childcare work in Barcelona with childcare work in Amsterdam became the fundamental concept of the investigation.

## Why certain families have a childcare worker for their children?

Most of the families hire a childcare worker because both of the parents are working outside the house and therefore do not have sufficient time to take care for their child or children. In many societies in the world women are doing the household tasks and men work outside the house. But nowadays there are many families whereby both of the parents work outside the house. This has as a consequence that nobody of the family takes care of the household, the elderly and the children. The increasing amount of females working outside the house produced the need for domestic workers, including childcare workers.

Mothers started to work outside the house for several reasons. First of all, the rising costs of living made it difficult to maintain a household with only one salary. Secondly, women were stimulated to work outside the house because of the increasing labour possibilities for women. And a third factor was the rise of the feminist movement which motivated women to search for work outside the house. Fur-

thermore, the ideology about household and caring work changed in many societies from the duty of the mother to an inferior, low valued informal job. This has as a consequence that many middleclass high educated women prefer to hire somebody who performs the household and caring tasks. The increase of mothers working outside the house is therefore also related to the greater access to higher education for women. Childcare makes it possible for parents to dedicate their time to activities which are for them of importance. But not every family earns enough money to hire a childcare worker. In general, having frequently a childcare worker is expensive and therefore not a possible option for every family.



Pare i fill  
(Father and son)

## How families find their childcare worker?

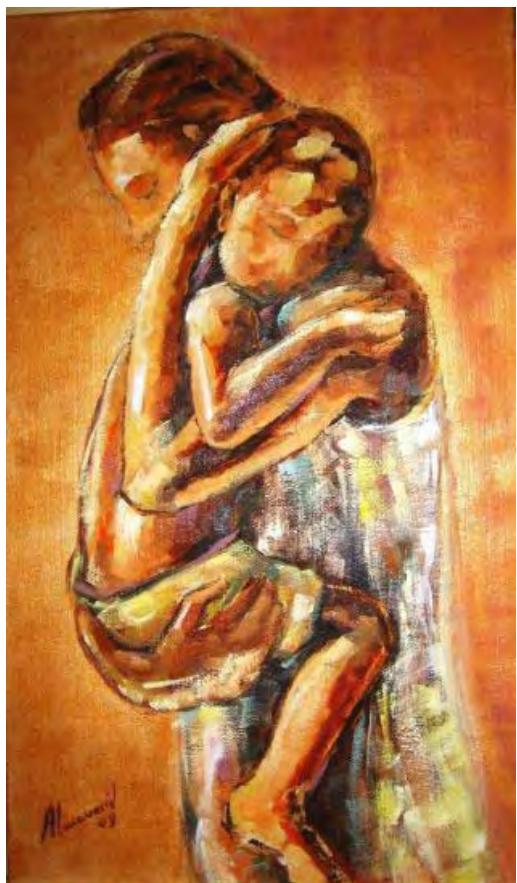
The answer to this question will already reveal a difference between childcare workers in Barcelona and childcare workers in Amsterdam. There are two ways to obtain a childcare worker. You can hire a

childcare worker through an agency or you can find a childcare worker with the help of your family, friends and connections. In Barcelona many childcare workers are not originally from Spain and therefore do not have an expanded network. Therefore they make use of a domestic work and childcare agency to help them to find a family who needs a childcare worker. In Amsterdam most of the childcare workers are from The Netherlands and find their job through their connections. Both of the methods have their advantages and disadvantages.

Childcare agencies can be very useful for the families in need as well as for the childcare workers. The agencies can offer families on short notice a childcare worker and the childcare workers have a formal contract. One of the disadvantages of hiring a childcare worker through an agency are the regulations of the agencies. They are often experienced as too complicated. Hiring informally a childcare worker saves the parents a lot of time because they do not have to follow the regulation rules of the agency.

Finding a childcare worker informally means finding a childcare worker by con-

nections from friends and family. This suggests that at least one connection of the parents already knows the childcare worker and this fact gives the parents a save and comfortable feeling. The following example of the mother Mira from Amsterdam demonstrates how childcare workers are found through connections.



*Mare i fill*  
(Mother and son)

Fleur: How did you find the childcare worker?

Mira: The childcare worker who we had first, who is in Peru right now and took care of our children the longest period, is a girl from the neighborhood. In fact we already knew her since she was young and after a while she became older and took care of the children of a friend of us. Yes I just really liked the girl. We knew that she took care of children and then on a certain moment we asked her if she wanted to take care of our children. We don't want somebody inside our house we don't know. We made a deal that we will never call a childcare agency. The second childcare worker is also a girl from the neighborhood. She is the sister of a boy from Jaira's (the oldest daughter of the mother) class.

(House of Mira, 28-05-2009,  
Amsterdam).

Finding a childcare worker from the neighborhood has as an advantage that the childcare worker does not have to travel far to reach the parents house. The childcare workers also experience certain advantages and disadvantages with hav-

ing an informal job. The informal character makes the job accessible for immigrants who do not have a valid residence permit. Employers can sponsor the childcare worker to obtain a legal status but on the other side, the informality makes the childcare workers also vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. These illegal childcare workers are often more submissive because of the shortcoming of working possibilities. Another factor that influences the exploitation of childcare workers is the invisibility of childcare work because it is mainly located inside the house. It is individual, isolated and often non-regulated work.

### Value of childcare work

Now we know why certain families hire a childcare worker and where they find their childcare worker. Another important theme related to childcare work is the value of childcare work and the value of children. The value of children changes over time. The perspectives about children changed from children as beings who participated with the running of the household to vulnerable sacred expensive passive beings. But families value children in different ways in

different societies. Therefore, the vulnerability of children can be seen as typical for the Dutch and Spanish urban societies of nowadays but is not applicable to every society. This perspective about the value of children is especially visible in urban areas, where young children are always accompanied when walking in public spaces like on the street. Children are seen by many parents as being among the most valuable things in their life. It is clear that the majority of the parents want the best for their children. This includes of course also a childcare worker who is appropriate for their children. Observing the desires of parents in relation with their children demonstrates that children are very valuable for them. This makes the childcare worker also an important person, because she-or he spends her-or his time with the valuable children. But the value of the childcare worker also depends on the working hours. Some of the childcare workers are students and work part-time as childcare workers; others perform childcare work as a full-time job. Working frequently as a childcare worker for the same family makes the value of childcare work and the childcare worker higher. Spending as a



*Passeig de tardor (Autumn walk)*

childcare worker weekly many hours with the children of somebody makes the childcare worker an important influence on the development of the child. Working once a week a few hours has less influence on the development of the child. This difference in working hours is of great importance

for the value of the childcare worker and for childcare work in general.

Childcare is often seen as a job which requires little knowledge and little effort to understand. But childcare requires a high amount of understanding and experience. The fact that nowadays more and more childcare agencies exist, suggests that the value of childcare is rising. Hiring a childcare worker has a certain influence on the childhood of the child. The parents still see the child but share the part of forming childhood for the child with the childcare



*Nens a la platja (Children on the beach)*

worker. The child learns from the childcare worker and is observing the habits of the childcare worker. The following example from Barcelona of the Argentinean childcare worker María who has a child herself describes the influence of the caretaker on the child.

Fleur: Do you think that having a childcare worker influences the development of the child?

María: Yes, of course.

Fleur: When yes, how and why?

María: Because the person who takes care transmits his habits. For example the parents are a big example for the child, how we eat, what we say, we are the example, because they are watching everything. They are observing, how you feel, what you do etc. Therefore when the parents aren't there they take the example of the other person, like the nanny.

*(Parc del Guinardo, 08-04-2009*

*Barcelona)*

The childcare worker and the parents function both as examples for the child. The fact that the caretaker of the child is experienced by the child as a behavioural example makes childcare work of great

importance and value. The child can start to see the childcare worker as a second mother/father or as a sister/brother, especially when the childcare worker takes care of the child frequently or when the child has no brothers or sisters. How the childcare worker treats the child is also influenced by several factors. Some immigrant childcare workers who have children of their own in their home country can experience close feelings for the child they take care for because the child reminds them of their own children.

### **Immigrants and childcare work**

The need for childcare workers in European cities like Barcelona and Amsterdam stimulates women from countries with a lower economy to immigrate to countries with a higher economy in search for employment in the domestic sector. There are several reasons why families hire immigrant childcare workers and why women immigrate to Europe to perform childcare work. Some families want specifically immigrant childcare workers because they have different habits in comparison with local childcare workers. Immigrant child-

care workers who speak another language than the language spoken in the receiving country are sometimes hired because they can offer something unique, like teaching a foreign language to the child. It can be the case that the parents of a child prefer an immigrant childcare worker from a specific area because the parents prefer the cultural habits in relation with childcare of the immigrant childcare worker. The following example of a Hungarian mother named Zita, who lives in Barcelona with her Catalan husband and her two children, demonstrates that cultural habits in relation with childcare are of great importance.

Fleur: When your childcare worker is not Spanish, why did you choose a not-Spanish childcare worker?

Zita: Because of the culture and the language. They have another vision about care and education of children. It is not better or worse, but simply different and because I arrived with two little children I did not have experience, I did not know this world and I felt more secure and familiar with the type of education which I knew.

(House of Zita, 11-05-2009 Barcelona)

Zita hired preferably Hungarian, Polish or German childcare workers. She found them at the Hungarian consulate in Barcelona. Another reason why parents hire an immigrant childcare worker is related to the wage, flexibility and availability of the childcare worker. Many immigrant childcare workers have lower wages and are more flexible than local childcare workers because of their subordinate immigrant status. On the other side, the supply of immigrant childcare workers also influences parents to hire an immigrant childcare worker. Female immigrants search for work in the domestic sector because of the limited job opportunities. Most of the jobs for them are available in the domestic sector because the local habitants prefer to perform other work than full-time domestic work.

Having an illegal status is also a factor that limits the job possibilities. Immigration policies can use the undocumented women to fill the gap of the increasing need for domestic workers. But also some of the female immigrants with a legal status work in the domestic sector, because of its availability and their urgent need for work.

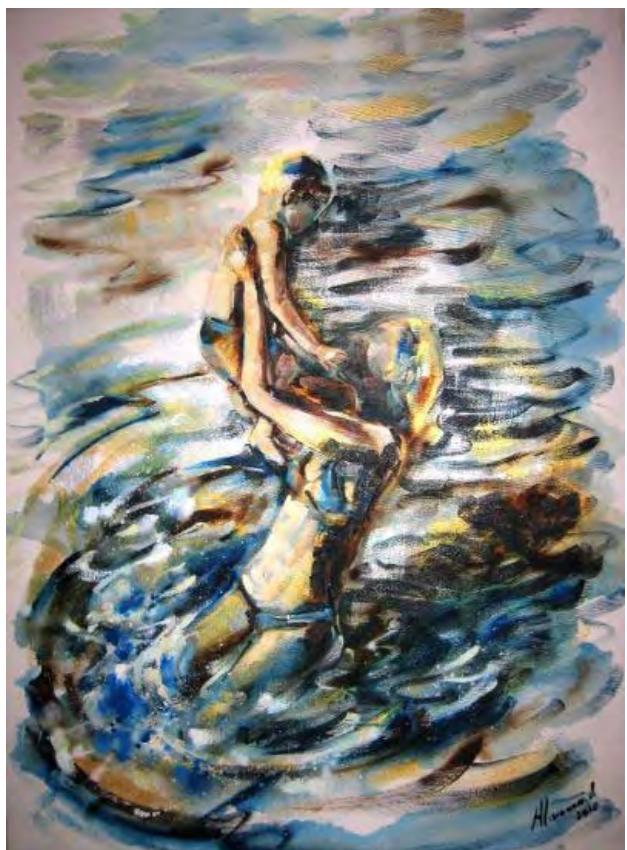


*Instint protector  
(Protective instinct)*

### Contrast among Amsterdam and Barcelona

During the investigation I tried to obtain as much information as possible about the different childcare workers in Barce-

Iona and Amsterdam. The majority of the full-time childcare workers in Barcelona were female immigrants from Latin America or the Philippines, who came in search for better paid work than they could find in their home countries. In contrast, the Spanish childcare workers in Barcelona were most commonly students who



*Jocs d'estiu (Summer games)*

worked part-time as childcare workers. All of the investigated Spanish childcare workers found the childcare job through the network of their friends, family and neighbours. This visualizes the difference with the immigrant childcare workers who normally found their childcare job with the help of an agency. The Spanish childcare workers did not perform other tasks than childcare, which in contrast almost every immigrant childcare worker did.

Working in the domestic sector is the major job possibility for female immigrants who are not rightly qualified to perform other types of work in Spain. The rising amount of female immigrants is created by the demand of cheap and flexible domestic workers and childcare workers. The labour possibilities for immigrants have changed from industrial labour for men to domestic work for women. This clarifies the rise of female immigrants working in the domestic sector and doing childcare work. Working full-time as a childcare worker gives the immigrant childcare worker the possibility to build up a close relationship with the children. Some of the immigrant childcare workers had children of their own; frequently back in their home country.

The majority of the childcare workers in Amsterdam were Dutch students. These students often performed another job besides the part-time childcare job. Almost all the immigrant childcare workers were au-pairs or had started their life in The Netherlands as an au-pair. Most of the full-time childcare workers were au-pairs but in some cases also Dutch or immigrant childcare workers who lived with the family but without being an au-pair. Normally the au-pairs also had cleaning duties which the majority of the part-time childcare workers did not have. In general, the observations made in Amsterdam demonstrate that childcare work and cleaning work was normally separated.

The fact that most of the au-pairs only stayed with a family one year and that some families had several part-time childcare workers because of the lack of available full-time childcare workers demonstrate that many children experience having several childcare workers during their infancy. This diversity has as a consequence that the children who have a childcare worker need to learn to adapt and to be open to different types of persons. Children who get raised during their child-

hood with every year a different au-pair will experience several ruptures of attachment. After a while the children may start to develop a certain robustness of attachment feelings. The willingness of the child to re-attach to another childcare worker is diminished because they have experienced several ruptures of attachment with their caretakers. This influences the feelings of the child about the acceptance of the childcare workers authority. The childcare workers themselves experienced being an au-pair as a good practise for the future when they will have children themselves. Many of the au-pairs did not have a lot of experience with childcare and learned a lot during the au-pair year about how to care for and raise children.

Last but not least I also observed the children who had a childcare worker. It happens frequently that parents start to hire a childcare worker when a second child is born. Taking care of one child is still possible, but with two children it becomes more complicated to divide the care. But having two children can also have as an advantage that the children can take care of each other. An only child needs a childcare worker to have some companion-

ship. The difference between the childcare worker and the parents is especially visible in the fact that the childcare worker dedicates all her or his time exclusively with the children. Another commonly named difference is that childcare workers are in general younger and more active then the parents.

The interviewed children in Barcelona and Amsterdam had in common that the majority thought that having a young age was the most important characteristic of the childcare worker. Younger people were according to the investigated children on a closer mental level with them. Children who do not have brothers or sisters often experience a childcare worker as an older brother, sister or friend. Of course this depends also from the age of the childcare worker. A younger childcare worker can be more like a brother or sister for a child then an older childcare worker.

Being together with somebody is often the only reason why parents hire a childcare worker when their child is already a bit older. Being home alone, without a brother or sister, is often experienced as a scary thought for children under the age of ten. In the case of immigrant childcare

workers some children noted that their childcare worker was different from their parents because the childcare worker had a different skin colour and spoke with a different accent then their parents and themselves. How children experience having an immigrant childcare worker is highly influenced by the perspectives of the parents about immigrants. Some children also argue that their parents and the childcare workers have no difference, they are practically the same.



*Jocs a la platja (Beach games)*

## REFLECTIONS

Childcare work is often seen as an informal job which requires little knowledge and experience. For some, childcare work is indeed experienced as an informal easy part-time job but for others, childcare work is their main source of income. Stereotypical ideas about childcare work devalue childcare work and therefore also childcare workers. Children are often seen by parents as being among the most valuable things in their life but this emotional value does not make childcare work valuable as well.

The demand for cheap private childcare workers created by working parents stimulates females internationally to migrate and create the supply of cheap flexible childcare workers. Especially these female immigrants are dependent from their employer because of the limited employment possibilities and for some of the immigrants, their illegal status. This dependency makes the immigrants vulnerable to exploitation of the employer.

Because of the existence of childcare agencies childcare work becomes part of the formal labour sector. Financial exploitation can be decreased because the childcare agencies introduce in many cases a standard wage. But exploitation can equally take place by for example asking the childcare worker to perform extra duties without giving extra payment. The growing amount of childcare agencies is certainly a good development because this demonstrates that childcare work is taken more seriously. Childcare agencies introduce certain obligatory requirements for future childcare workers. These requirements demonstrate that childcare work is not a job suitable for everybody. But still, childcare work is by many people not seen as a valuable full-time profession. Children are very valuable to parents and therefore childcare work should be valued the same.

## ...FURTHER READING

Colen, S. 1995. 'Like a mother to them': Stratified reproduction and West Indian childcare worker and employers in New York, in: Ginsburg, F.D. and Rapp, R. *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*. pp 78-102. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Colen, S. 1989. Just a little respect: West Indian domestic workers in New York City, in: ed. Chaney, E.M. and Garcia Castro, M. *Muchachos no more: Household workers in Latin America and Caribbean*. pp 171-94. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Zelizer, V.A. Rotman. 2005. The priceless child revisited, in: ed. Qvortrup, J. *Studies in modern childhood: Society, Agency and Culture*. pp.184-200. London: Palgrave

## INTERESTING LINKS

[The Anthropology of Children and Youth Network](#), VU University, Amsterdam).

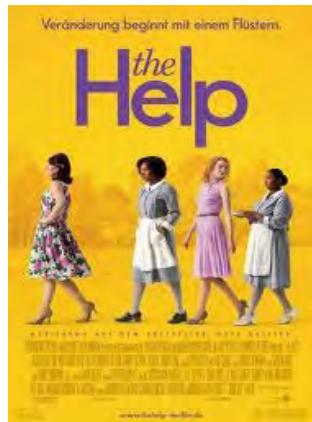
[The Child Rights Home](#), Leiden.

[WeCare AuPair](#)

## ...FURTHER VIEWING

### [The Help](#)

Directed by Tate Taylor. USA:  
DreamWorks Pictures. 2011.  
138 min.



An aspiring author during the civil rights movement of the 1960s decides to write a book detailing the African-American

maid's point of view on the white families for which they work, and the hardships they go through on a daily basis

### [Mrs Doubtfire](#)

Directed by Chris Columbus. USA:  
20th Century Fox. 1993.  
125 min.



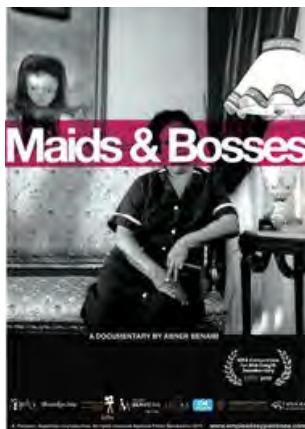
rough divorce in which custody of children is in the hands of his wife, he decides to pose as an elderly lady to be, at least, the babysitter of his children.

Williams is father and husband. His children see him as a wonderful father, but his wife is tired of his childish behavior.

After a

### [Maids and bosses](#)

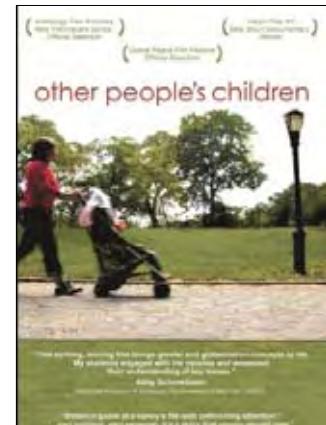
Directed by Abner Benaim.  
Apertura Films & Barakacine.  
Panamá/Argentina. 2010.  
58 min.



Bosses evaluates human relations between social classes in Latin America. Rich and poor, under the same roof, share a big part of their life, and very complex emotional relations surge. In this creative documentary, the class divide and its implications is approached from an intimate, personal point of view, focusing on those who choose to, or not, look each other in the eyes and accept each other as equals.

### [Other people's children](#)

Directed by Beth Miranda Botshon.  
Producer: Miguel Ayuso. 2011. 42 min.

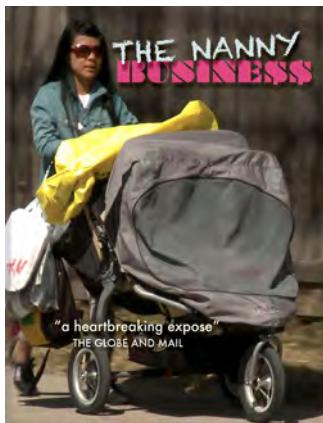


There are thousands of women in New York City taking care of other people's children. They work long hours

with no benefits to keep kids safe and parents happy. Other People's Children is an intimate, eye-opening look at the lives of three immigrant women working as nannies in New York City. The challenges they face are as diverse as their stories.

[The Nanny Business](#)

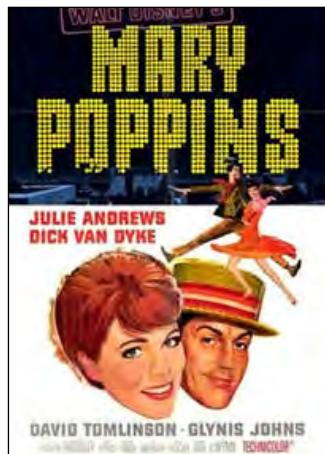
Directed by: Shelley Saywell. Bishari Films.



The domestic labour market brings in an estimated 5,000 women to Canada every year to serve as caregivers. These women, mostly escaping poverty in the Philippines, leave their own children behind. This documentary follows the journey of Edelyn and Joelina, two single mothers, university-educated, determined, and brave.

[Mary Poppins](#)

Directed by Robert Stevenson. USA: Walt Disney. 1964. 139 min.



The life of an English family formed by a banker father, a suffragist mother and two rebel children - who seek to draw the attention of their parents making life miserable for all nurses-, will be altered with the arrival of Mary Poppins, an extravagant governess who comes down from the clouds using her umbrella as a parachute.

## FUTURE EVENTS

## CONFERENCES

[4 ICAR: International Conferences on Adoption Research.](#) 7-11 July, 2013. Bilbao, Spain. *Call for papers:* until December 15, 2012.

[Pan-African Anthropological Association 2012 Conference.](#) Nairobi, Kenya. 13- 14 August, 2012.

[International Geographical Congress 2012 Plants, Play and Place: Green Environments as a contribution to children's healthy development.](#) Köln, Germany . 26 - 30 August, 2012.

[Seminar of the Comitee on Family Research 2012: new family forms following the family dissolution: consequences in / on postmodern society.](#) Leuven, Belgium . 12-14 September, 2012.

[2nd International Conference on Geographies of Education.](#)

Loughborough, United Kingdom. 10-11 September, 2012.

[Children, Young People and Adults: Extending the Conversation.](#) Lancashire, United Kingdom. 5- 7 September, 2012.

[Solidarity, Memory and Identity. Interdisciplinary Conference.](#) Gdańsk, Poland. 20- 21 September 2012.

[Mothering, Science and Technology.](#) Toronto, Canada. 18 - 20 October 2012.

## DOCUMENTS

[La infancia en España 2012-2013: el impacto de la crisis en los niños.](#) G.González-Bueno, A. Bello, M. Arias. UNICEF España.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE TEXT

**Fleur Verbiest**

Born in Amsterdam, Fleur Verbiest studied anthropology at the Amsterdam University and made an Erasmus exchange with the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona. This experience was so interesting that in 2008 she returned to Barcelona to study a Masters in Anthropology. For the thesis, she conducted a research on caregivers in Amsterdam and Barcelona.

"I always had interest in Latin American immigrants in Spain and, with this research, I investigated a small part of their lives from a broad perspective that related to my personal life," she says.

She currently lives in Amsterdam and works in The Hague for the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research. Her main interests are in childhood studies, migration and domestic work, as well as culture and art.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS

**Montse Almonacid Cebrián**

This artist from Tarragona had been interested in painting since she was a child, she learned with renowned professors, then she entered at the School of Arts and Crafts Penedès. In 1994 she obtained the Diploma "Drawing and Painting" of "Planeta-Agostini" in Barcelona.

Almonacid defines her work as a way to externalize her feelings, according to artist's own words: "Art is part of me of my day to day; any situation, person or landscape I used to "capture it" in a piece of paper... I cannot understand life without art "

She has exhibited throughout Catalonia, Spain and other European places such as Italy, Berlin, Paris and Portugal. Among the last received awards is worth mentioning: the Medal Gallery ESART 2011 -2010 (Barcelona) for "Sleeping" and "Partner", the 2nd prize at the 26th Art contest San Raimundo de Peñafort for "The fountain of my father's village" and Honor mention at the Contest conectArte of Cordoba for "The dancer".

[almonacid.artelista.com](http://almonacid.artelista.com)