

GLOBAL VOICES

María José builds bridges

María José Calderón works to establish connections between vulnerable groups and Spanish society. She is also professionally active and has a goal of creating a common platform for European social workers. And she is even starting her honeymoon when she attends the AIEJI congress...

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She is the only social worker in Zaragoza who works at the city's museums. She will likely become the first female representative for Spain on AEJI's board. And she is probably the only participant who is celebrating her honeymoon at the AIEJI congress.

María José Calderón is a woman with many irons in the fire and a burning desire: She wants to build bridges – on several levels. This is a desire that is evident in both her professional and private life.

Her interest in social work developed as she was employed in her first job at an activity centre for seniors in the north-eastern Spanish city of Zaragoza.

"Here I realised the complexity of this field and was quickly appointed trade union representative for my Aragonese colleagues," she says.

The Spanish programme of study to become a "social educator" was first established in 1991. Those who had worked in this field prior to 1991 could attain a status as social educator during a transitional period.

Thus, María José and many of her colleagues

have very different educational backgrounds. For example, María José Calderón has a qualification in Occupational Therapy from Zaragoza University.

She works daily on a local basis to build bridges between Aragon's marginalised groups and Aragonese society as a whole.

Meanwhile, she dedicates a large portion of her free time to international work to build bridges between European social workers.

María José Calderón also builds bridges on a private level, such as her plan to marry her boyfriend of four years, Miguel Angel, on May 2, just two days before the congress in Copenhagen.

A cultural educator

María José Calderón is employed as a "social educator" at museums and exhibitions in Zaragoza Municipality. The features of this job are not those of a traditional social worker in a Danish sense.

Blending the roles of historical and cultural educator, she uses culture, art and history in her daily work to generate dialogue on important and often sensitive issues relating to basic social values.

As opposed to many of her colleagues in the field, María José Calderón's job profile is preventative in nature. She works with groups of people at risk. Her work is inspired by Ezequiel Ander-Egg, who advocated the use of cities as an educational resource and whose ideas are based on a conviction that it is possible to combat alienation and marginalisation via awareness-raising, reflection and articulation.

Her work thereby also reflects the rapid development that has occurred in Spain over the past 30 years.



“After Franco, Spain has undergone decentra-
lisation, which means greater local competencies
and increased financial means in the individual
regions and municipalities. This makes it possible
to get closer to citizens and identify their indi-
vidual needs,” she says.

According to María José Calderón, this con-
stellation is vital in successfully convincing the
groups she works with that culture plays an
important role in their everyday lives, thereby
strengthening the community.

“Culture describes the values on which we
build our society, it enables us to compare oursel-
ves with others and to accept differences, which is
essential to being able to live together,” she says.

Targeted communication

María José Calderón works with five of the city’s
museums, which she uses actively in communica-
tion work. The target groups vary and may include

everyone from people with handicaps and immi-
grants to university students and professors who
want to learn how to present ideas and get a di-
scussion started.

Before a session, María José Calderón typically
meets with the person responsible for the visiting
group to identify the group’s needs and thereby
adjust and customise the route and themes for the
client group. This adjustment for individual needs
requires her to be open and willing to adapt.

“This is one of the greatest challenges in my
daily work and also what makes every day a lear-
ning experience,” says María José Calderón.

“Based on something tangible, I build bridges
with something figurative to thereby illuminate
various understandings and perspectives.” She
continues explaining the common thread in her
work:

“For example, I can present a group of young
immigrants with the archaeological remains and

reconstruction of a Roman theatre and introduce them to its traditions. Then I ask them where they think women sat in the Roman theatres. Most guess that they sat in the NEXT to last rows, with the assumption that slaves sat in the BACK rows. They are always surprised when I reveal that unmarried women had a lower status than slaves. This provides them with the opportunity to discuss women's roles throughout history and, not least, in various societies today," says María José Calderón.

In communication situations with the physically or mentally handicapped, María José Calderón works with clients' physical and cognitive abilities.

"I emphasise the senses in my work because I believe that the ability to view the world from various perspectives enables us to acquire a greater knowledge of our own culture, thereby contributing to greater social inclusion," says María, adding:

"For example, I often use sculptures in my work with the blind, so that we have the opportunity to work with the concept of space."

History as a mirror

Even though María José Calderón realises that the Catholic faith still has an influence on social work, she believes that it is much less paternalistic than in the past: Communication with marginalised groups has developed from pedantic one-way communication into encouraging dialogue and a genuine interest in learning from other cultures.

"In dialogue with the various client groups, I seek elements that provide the opportunity to exchange views. In a city like Zaragoza, which was first under Roman, then Muslim and later Jewish rule, there is plenty of material.

Just a few metres under what is now the city centre, one can visit the original Roman forum, which first comprised the gathering place for trade and later was also the centre of political activity. Here, María José Calderón usually begins a discussion about politics, historical and current. The discussions can be based on everything from food, music and theatre to hygiene.

"History provides us with the ability to look in the mirror. It is important to know where we come from to know where we are going, which is true for individuals and society as a whole. I work to increase this awareness," she says.

Social politics and professional politics

María José Calderón also builds bridges in her free time. Through the professional union CEES Aragón, she and her colleagues work to represent the interests of Aragón's social workers and the field as a whole, for example by offering a professional community and a job bank, as well as the ability to participate in professional networks and to work to expand the field of work for social workers.

Despite an otherwise willing socialist government, the social field is affected by the financial crisis, increased immigration and ever-increasing unemployment, which combined with a nearly unchanged budget results in worsening working conditions for the country's social workers.

As she does not personally deal with the most marginalised groups in her work at the museums, María José Calderón primarily notices the effects of the crisis in her volunteer work at CEES Aragón.

"It is affected by the fact that my colleagues have less time for volunteer work. This has impacted the quality of our cross-disciplinary work," she says.

Common European platform

On a higher level – and as a likely future board member of AIEJI, representing the joint council of the Spanish trade unions in the social field – María José Calderón works to create a common European platform that will enable increased mobility and unity between Europe's social workers.

"With a common platform, we can increase the opportunities to share practical experiences with colleagues in other countries, which I see as vital to being able to better our understanding and the quality of our daily work," she says.

She says that her personal contributions are based on curiosity:

"As I can speak English and German quite well, I thought that it could be interesting to expand my knowledge of the social situation in other countries and thereby contribute to a future professional association; in addition, based on my work with CEES Aragón and the union's boards, I wish to help spread knowledge about our profession's conditions in Spain," says María José Calderón.

One of her greatest hopes for the AIEJI congress is to be able to initiate negotiations on the basis for a common European platform for social workers, which would make it easier to use one's educational training in other European countries.

And she also looks forward to a visit in the field to TV-Glad, where she hopes to have the opportunity to ask a couple of questions.

"I find the project interesting because it combines various media and handicapped people's resources in an innovative way," says María José Calderón.

And there's also the wedding: On May 2, she will marry her boyfriend and, after a visit to the AEJI congress, where she will give a presentation on her work, she will head to Japan to celebrate the rest of her honeymoon.