

6 Labor organizing among women workers in maquiladoras: Crossing the border of gender and class in the cases of Matamoros, Mexico, and San Marcos, El Salvador

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Mucho se ha publicado sobre el trabajo de las mujeres en zonas industriales de exportación de los países en desarrollo pero hay poco escrito sobre la agencia de estas mujeres y sobre el cruce de fronteras que tienen que hacer en relación a cuestiones de género y de clase para poder organizarse. El objetivo de este artículo es hacer una comparación entre dos experiencias de organización laboral entre mujeres trabajadoras de industrias maquiladoras (plantas de montaje industrial con fines de exportación). Estas plantas están situadas en las primeras fases de producción, sobre todo en la industria textil, electrónica o de auto-partes. Las maquiladoras han reclutado tradicionalmente mano de obra femenina aunque la situación ha cambiado en los últimos años. La historia de su explotación es de sobra conocida, lo que es menos conocido son sus experiencias de organización laboral. Con los casos de Matamoros en México y San Marcos en El Salvador queremos ilustrar la diversidad de experiencias en el cruce de fronteras y delinear los factores que afectan este cruce. El material base de este artículo proviene de trabajos de campo. En el caso de Matamoros, se trata de un trabajo que cubre varios años de observaciones y entrevistas en diversos periodos; en el caso de El Salvador, se trata de un trabajo de campo realizado durante 2009.

Much has been written on women's labor in the export industrial zones of developing countries, but not so much on their agency, their organizing efforts, and their crossing of gender and class borders. The aim of this paper is to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. These companies are situated in the first stages of production, mainly in the textile, electronic, or auto-parts sector. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor, although the situation is changing in recent years. The story of their exploitation is quite well known; what is less well known are their organizing experiences. With the cases of Matamoros in Mexico and San Marcos in El Salvador, we want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. The material for both of these experiences is taken from our own fieldwork. In the case of Matamoros, this is part of a long-term observation with interview work at several stages. In the case of El Salvador, the fieldwork took place during 2009 in the zone of San Marcos in San Salvador.

Introduction

Women workers' organizing has always involved the crossing of borders. The border of their gender identity, their traditional responsibilities, always a hindrance to their integration into the labor markets, and the hindrance of joining an organization, in this case a class organization, but also the bodily hindrance of their potential pregnancies and the risks of factory work to themselves and their potential children. These borders have transformed into challenges. The challenges of assuming a worker identity, of coping with all the problems encountered at the workplace, and of becoming a worker activist, but also the challenge of becoming a feminist worker activist. This has opened new possibilities in the way of creating alternative labor organizations, for example, or of confronting the traditional leadership structures within trade unions and thus rejecting the authoritarianism and patriarchal hierarchies still plaguing classic trade unions.

The aim of this paper is to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. These companies are situated in the first stages of production, mainly in the textile, electronic, or auto-parts sector. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor. The story of their exploitation is quite well known; what is less well known are their organizing experiences. With the cases of Matamoros and San Marcos, we want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. The material for both of these experiences is taken from our own fieldwork. In the case of Matamoros, this is part of a long-term observation with interview work at several stages. In the case of El Salvador, the fieldwork took place during 2009 in the zone of San Marcos in San Salvador.

Women crossing the borders of active trade union participation

In spite of the fact that women have a growing share in labor markets (they represent about one-third of the world labor market) and represent about 40 percent of all workers organized within trade unions, their active participation in trade unions has been very modest. According to the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), women are poorly represented at the level of decision making in most trade unions. The glass ceiling that many feminists argue is a fact in most workplaces is also quite present within trade union structures. These structures seem to be one of the strongholds of patriarchal practices, difficult to eradicate.

For a long time, union leaders maintained that there were no differences between men and women inside the unions, that unions represented both men's and women's interests regarding wages and other benefits. However, they

overlooked the differential treatment that men and women receive in many workplaces. While men enjoy the best positions, wages, and benefits, women are for the most part in subordinate positions and they are over-represented in part-time labor, thus losing benefits and wages as well as stability. This situation is more than reproduced within trade unions, although nowadays many unions have recognized the need to achieve gender equity and a gender perspective in their statutes and behavior (ICFTU 2006: 7). According to the ICFTU, a gender perspective implies the creation of a women's committee or the inclusion of several women members on the executive committee; gender units provided with sufficient financial support and decision-making power; gender equity considerations at all decision-making levels; gender quotas in all eligible positions; and finally, gender mainstreaming measures in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all policies and programs within the union (ICFTU 2006: 7–8).

In spite of the advances of these proposals, they still represent a liberal-quantitative interpretation of a gender perspective, leaving outside such important problems as wage discrimination and sexual harassment. Also, these recommendations are extremely difficult to implement in the unions that are still patriarchal strongholds based on the traditional idea that the man is the main breadwinner in the family as well as the main person responsible for making decisions about *public* issues such as wages and labor benefits. The participation of women in these issues is still minimized.

Also, in spite of the increased number of women in the labor market, most of them do not join the unions, either because their work is in the informal sector, or because they work only part time, or because, according to the (male) leaders, “They don't know how the unions could help them,” or because they do not have time for union work due to their family responsibilities. Women workers thus mistrust unions for not being sensitive to women's needs, or for the cost of membership dues, or for putting their jobs at risk (ICFTU 2006: 3). Moreover, the study of women inside the unions has been quite poor. Whenever such studies have been done, women have been studied only as victims, not as agents capable of generating changes or even accumulating power and exercising relations of domination (Sánchez 2000). And in the case of the women workers we study, we have discovered that their organization by NGOs has created other sorts of conflicts involving gender and class, as many of these NGOs are organized and led by middle-class women, as we shall see in our case studies.

Women and unions in maquiladoras in the case of Mexico

During the period after the Mexican revolution, labor conflicts were minimized and always ruled by the state, and very few independent unions managed to survive the long period of rule (1929–2000) by the official and so-called

revolutionary party, the PRI (Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada – the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution). Moreover, this revolutionary regime proved from its beginnings (1917) to be very patriarchal, denying women any political rights until 1952. Needless to say, trade unions (both corporate and independent) reflected such patriarchal structures and attitudes. The economic crisis that started with the debt crisis in 1981 demanded an economic restructuring and an opening of the economy that threatened the corporative structures mentioned above. The corporate unions and their affiliates were among the first victims of this restructuring. Moreover, it is during this period that the maquila industries, established in the mid-1960s on the U.S.–Mexico border, increased in importance, especially regarding the creation of jobs with women as their preferred source of labor.¹

The industrial restructuring demanded a deregulation and flexibilization of labor to improve productivity. These requirements were included in collective bargaining, and some benefits like maternity leave and access to nurseries suffered. Women started to participate in movements of protest in all unions: in public service unions and the big corporative confederations like the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos), but also among independent unions like FAT (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo). The protests asked for a stop to the firing of workers and respect for collective bargaining, subordinating women's demands to these more general labor demands.

After the signing of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), women's union participation increased, in separate organizations or in questioning patriarchal unions, and in integrating into transnational alliances with women trade unionists in Canada and the U.S. They thus found a better combination for their roles as trade unionists and feminists. This led to the creation of the Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas de México, RMSM (Network of Female Trade Unionists of Mexico).² Parallel to this, an effective effort to organize women workers in Exporting Processing Zones was registered. This organizing was conducted through unions and NGOs. The NGOs were hostile to corporative or “*yellow* trade unions,” criticizing them for their lack of attention to women workers. This naturally created a huge rift between unions and NGOs.

Trade unions have never been welcome in the maquiladora industry. The managers or owners of these industries have always considered real unions to be problematic, and these organizations have questioned the low wages and minimal working conditions inside these companies. However, the *real* unions were few. In other words, we distinguish two types of unions: traditional/corporative unions, devoted to a minimum defense of labor rights (right to organize, collective bargaining, and right to strike), and subordinate unions or “*yellow* unions,” characterized by the defense of the companies' interests instead

of protecting those of the workers. Traditional/corporate unions keep women's rights to a minimum; "*yellow unions*" have a total disregard for these rights.

Crossing the border of traditional trade-unionism: The case of the SJOIIM in Matamoros, Mexico

Matamoros, Tamaulipas, in northeast Mexico on the border with the U.S., started becoming a maquiladora region in the mid-1960s. During the 1980s and part of the 1990s, these industries in Matamoros developed very fast, reaching their peak in 2000. At that point the Matamoros region had 60,000 workers employed in the maquila industry, mostly in the production of auto parts (especially for Delphi Corporation) and electronic products. From 2000, Matamoros entered a recession as a consequence of the contraction of the U.S. market, the main export market for maquiladora products, and the crisis in the U.S. auto industry.

The principal trade union among maquila workers in Matamoros has been the SJOIIM (Sindicato de Jornaleros y Obreros Industriales y de la Industria Maquiladora – Trade Union of Laborers and Industrial Workers and of the Maquiladora Industry). This union, which started as a union of cotton workers in 1932, expanded from the mid-1960s to represent maquila industry workers. The SJOIIM may be considered the prototype of a traditional/corporative union, protecting some basic labor rights. By 2010, the SJOIIM had reached an affiliation of around 45,000 workers, of whom 60 to 65 percent are women.

From its beginnings, the SJOIIM managed to sign collective contracts with the first maquiladoras and since then has maintained its control in most of the companies in the region. During the maquiladora boom, in the 1980s, the SJOIIM gained important victories: the best wages in these companies, with wage increases superior to those approved at the national level and strong collective bargaining, where seniority was the criterion for receiving labor benefits. These advantages were also possible because General Motors, especially Deltronics of Matamoros, produced 90 percent of all the radios and stereos GM used in its international car production. Even after the 2000 crisis started, the increases in wages followed national increases, and labor benefits were kept at almost the same percentages as before. However, some companies fired all of their workers in order to rehire them at the basic wage and lower benefits.

The predominance of SJOIIM in the Matamoros region has obstructed the organization of any alternatives, either in the form of other unions or of organizing by NGOs. Most companies still prefer to deal with the SJOIIM because they are used to it and because of its strength.

The situation of women within the maquila industry and the attention they have received from the union may be seen at two levels. The collective bargaining

and its achievements naturally benefitted them as part of the collective labor force. However, women were concentrated in non-skilled tasks and functions, while men occupied the skilled positions (like technicians), and the highest post a woman could attain was as head of line. When maquilas modernized, during the 1980s, with new machinery and new forms of labor organization, hundreds of women were fired because production lines were replaced by group production.

The second level refers to the inclusion of clauses specific to women in collective bargaining. Despite their numerical strength, in collective bargaining women's rights referred only to the basic rights in the national labor code: maternity leave and protection of pregnant women; that is, reproductive rights. But even these were quite neglected by the SJOIIM, even during the maquila boom period. The health of women workers suffered as a consequence of their work in this industry. For example, several cases of anencephaly among the children born to women working in the Mallory Company in the 1970s and the 1980s made Matamoros known worldwide through the *Mallory children* scandal. The SJOIIM's reaction, probably triggered by international pressure, was to include a clause in the collective contracts forbidding companies to place women in locations where they had to use chemical products.

Another case in which international pressure played some role in the SJOIIM's reaction was at the beginning of the 1990s, some years after the international campaign to stop the pregnancy tests required by major companies in order to ensure the hiring and the stability of women workers.³ At that time, the SJOIIM included another clause in the collective contracts in which the companies agreed not to fire pregnant women, including temporary workers. Moreover, the company would respect the payment of maternity leave and other rights that the national labor code stipulated (SJOIIM, 1990). In the middle of the 1990s, the SJOIIM also obtained the creation of a space where women workers would be able to breastfeed their babies. However, maternity leave suffered a new attack from the companies in the 1990s, when they tried and managed to drop it from collective bargaining, arguing that it was not necessary to include such clauses because they were in the national labor code already. Although the SJOIIM accepted this at the time, the specific clauses were included again some years later, since some factories had taken advantage of their absence to fire pregnant women.

Nurseries were another issue to which the SJOIIM was unable to respond. Although the trade union did contribute to the construction of some nurseries within the social security system, these proved insufficient to meet the demand. Women workers had to find alternate solutions like private nurseries, hiring women to care for the children, resorting to support from their extended family, or even leaving the children by themselves (Quintero 1998). The companies also

distributed scholarships for children of women workers to attend school, but these too were clearly insufficient.

But what has been the role played by women workers within the SJOIIM? It is evident that women have played a very important role in strengthening the trade union. First, as the critical mass to support the pressure the union needed from the beginning, at the end of 1960s and during the 1970s, when the companies were not so willing to bargain. Several times the SJOIIM had to resort to strikes, and women workers, socialized within a labor culture where the strike was a conventional and accepted tactic, were the main supporters of these movements. Second, as potential leaders because of their participation in labor movements and meetings even though they did not occupy the highest positions in the union structure. Women workers stood out as organizers of the movement and defenders of the union. And they were conscious that most of the clauses in the collective bargaining had been gained thanks to them.

Moreover, up to beginning of the 1990s, women affiliates within the SJOIIM were extremely active, especially the older ones. They were in daily contact with the union and had been participating actively from the time they joined, before being hired by any maquiladora, until they were fired or they retired. A survey carried out at the beginning of the 1990s found that 90 percent of the women workers knew their union and considered it to be their defender, and 73 percent expressed some knowledge of collective bargaining. Further, 70 percent of those interviewed said they knew their leader and their *delegado* (local union representative), and 100 percent of them attested to their participation in the election of *delegados* and were convinced that they could remove them if they did not respond to the demands of the workers (Quintero 1997).

However, the situation has been changing in recent times. Women workers seem to be the first victims of the recent economic crisis. A significant number of them have lost their jobs as firms with economic problems closed, and whenever companies re-open their doors they have preferred younger women or men. Also, new generational contradictions seem to threaten the union's legitimacy. Senior workers enjoy better wages and benefits than the younger ones, who see their possibilities for improvements limited by the weakened position of the union. Thus, younger women workers appear to be more critical and less respectful of the struggle and benefits of the union than the senior women. The relationship with the union among these young workers has become more pragmatic: they join because that gives them the possibility to be hired in the maquila industries, but they are not involved or interested in union issues.

On the other hand, and in spite of their previous active participation, women workers within the union seem to be unable to have a more formal role as protagonists in the union's hierarchy. The leadership of SJOIIM is

mostly dominated by men, first in the person of Agapito González, a strong and patriarchal leader who, although encouraging women's involvement in labor movements and negotiations, always kept them under his control. His successor, a younger adept of the former leader, has included women in his team in central positions such as Secretary of Organization, but the key posts are still held by men in spite of the fact that the majority of affiliates are women. Moreover, women still have to confront the challenges of the priority given to economic issues over any gender demands, and the absence of new groups of women leaders.

In other words, women in the SJOIIM have crossed the borders of becoming full-time workers and assuming a worker identity, but the border of active participation in union affairs, fully crossed by earlier women workers, is hardly trespassed by younger affiliates, and the border of joining the ranks of high leadership or becoming highly positioned feminist leaders seems still out of reach.

Trade unions in the social context in El Salvador

Women workers in El Salvador have to face challenges similar to those of their counterparts in Mexico, trying to cross the border of gender, class, and physical risks. El Salvador was one of the first countries in the region to have an organized labor movement as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was also the first country (1932) where trade unionists and the local Communist party led a popular insurrection, gathering together indigenous people, farm laborers, peasants, and students, and it resulted in bloodshed, *la Matanza* (massacre), in which about 30,000 people were killed by the military, whereupon the whole labor movement disappeared.

In January 1992, after a twelve-year civil war (and the deaths of about 100,000 people), peace accords were signed. However, peace and transition to democracy did not restore labor's strength, because some of the alliances among the labor organizations and the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) were broken, some of the federations, like FENASTRAS (the National Federation of Salvadoran Workers), had moved to the right, and the ones remaining with the FMLN, like FEASIES (the Federation of Associations and Independent Unions of El Salvador) or FESTES (Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers), could not cope with the challenges of organizing workers in the maquiladora era. By 2006 there were 191 trade unions with 163,000 affiliates, of whom 24,432 belonged to the manufacturing sector (UNDP 2007–2008: 355). Within the maquila industries there were only six trade unions in 2003, and of these, two disappeared that year (Wolf Herrera et al. 2003: 42).⁴ In

Central America as a whole, while maquiladoras increased by 37.5 percent, trade union presence decreased by 17.5 percent.

The maquiladora industry started in the 1970s but did not flourish until the 1990s with the creation of free trade zones and *recintos fiscales* (fiscal precincts). Both of these forms offer foreign (and national) investors tax exemptions, duty-free import of machinery, raw materials, and unlimited repatriation of profits. This development was encouraged by the U.S.-backed CBI (Caribbean Basin Initiative) and the GSP (Generalized System of Preferences), which guaranteed certain specific exports, like textiles, access to the U.S. market “based on the protection of international labor standards.” Maquila exports rose from 18 percent of total Salvadoran exports in 1991 to 48 percent in 1998, and from less than 5,000 workers in 1990 to about 60,000 in 1996 and about 90,000 in 2003 (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 70; REDCAM 2005: 5). In contrast to the Mexican maquilas, those in Central America concentrate their production on clothing and apparel goods, and most of the factories are subcontractors. In El Salvador, half of these factories are owned by Salvadoreans.

Other important information: as in Mexico, in all Central American countries, labor legislation and national labor codes are applicable in free trade zones and related areas (like *precintos fiscales*) (Wolf Herrera 2003; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; REDCAM 2005). This means that, at least in theory, maquiladora workers have the same rights as those in the rest of the industries and workplaces in the country. As we shall see, however, because of the classic collusion between justice authorities and other ministry officials, maquiladora owners, and some co-opted trade unions, these are not applied.

Women workers crossing the border of maquila work

Most maquila workers are young women between the ages of sixteen and thirty; in the mid-1990s they represented about 78 percent of all maquila workers and 87 percent of the female labor force. About 50 percent of these women were single mothers (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 70; REDCAM 2005: 5). Most of them received the minimum salary of about 150 U.S. dollars per month, while the basic food basket amounts to five times that sum (Connor et al. 1999: iv).

In contrast to the Mexican case in Matamoros, women workers in free trade zones in El Salvador are not attracted by trade unions. According to official figures for 2002, of 138,000 trade union affiliates only 11,740 were women, that is, only 9 percent of all affiliates (Análisis sobre El Salvador 2003). To obtain a collective contract in El Salvador, trade unions must affiliate at least 51 percent of all workers in a factory. According to UNDP figures, by 2006 in the manufacture sector there were about eight enterprise collective contracts

supporting 1,211 male workers and 433 female workers and one industrial collective contract protecting 1,829 male workers and 1,455 female workers (UNDP 2007–2008: 356). This from a total of 80,000 workers in maquiladora in the whole country.

What are the obstacles to more trade union affiliation within the maquila industries? One is the volatile character of these factories, which open and close very swiftly. Governments are unable to control their permanence in the country, since these companies are totally dependent on their parent companies. Another factor is their vulnerability to commercial agreements, like the end of the MFA (Multifiber Agreement) in 2005 and the recent one in 2008–2010. Both situations led to unemployment for thousands of workers. A third reason is the mistrust and hostility of factory owners toward any kind of labor organization that they do not control or use for their own purposes; thus the use of threats and blacklists. Most of the time government officials have obstructed labor organizing and have discouraged conflicts, siding most often with maquila owners. Also, workers have adapted and resigned themselves to permanent instability; they see no point in organizing, and sometimes they even use trade union affiliation to get the management to fire them in order to obtain certain indemnities and thus be able to change their workplace. Thus, worker rotation has become a tactic of resistance and survival in times when the work on offer is plentiful. In addition, trade union organizing has sometimes become a one-time solution in order to solve a certain state of affairs but is rarely a permanent solution to poor labor conditions or low salaries. The bad reputation of many trade unions, like FENASTRAS, which uses labor conflicts only to benefit itself, has also contributed to a strong rejection of trade union affiliation. And, last but not least, is the lack of interest by male-dominated unions in women's interests and problems and women workers' lack of time (with the double burdens of work and home) to organize (Martinez and Quinteros 1997; Wolf Herrera et al. 2003: 44–46; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 71).

This does not mean that there are no labor conflicts in the maquilas in El Salvador. On the contrary, given the low pay and the physical risks of precarious working conditions, the long working hours, the rarely paid overtime, and the mistreatment and harassment (particularly sexual harassment), several such conflicts have taken place. The Mandarin International conflict in 1995 was one such effort to organize a union affiliated with one of the big union federations. It was successful, thanks to transnational support and international campaigns against GAP, but although the independent trade union survived for some time (before the factory closed and moved out), it never managed to gain a collective contract and thus to improve the salaries of the workers (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 75–80).

Crossing class and gender borders in El Salvador: Two study cases

In what follows we shall try to give an overview of organizing efforts with women maquiladora workers in El Salvador, taking the concrete case of San Marcos. We focus on some of the organizations, trade unions, and NGOs that try to organize or support these workers. In El Salvador, in contrast to the Matamoros case, it is NGOs that have been more successful in their efforts to help women maquiladora workers, although, as we shall see, some trade unions also continue to struggle. Among the women's NGOs involved in this terrain we have ORMUSA, Mujeres Transformando (MT), Movimiento Salvadoreños de Mujeres (MSM), Las Melidas, and Las DIGNAS. Among the more active trade unions we have the federations FEASIES (Federación de Asociaciones y sindicatos independientes de El Salvador) and FENASTRAS (still considered to be a "yellow union" negotiating directly with the managers without any concern for the workers' interests), and smaller trade unions like SGC (Sindicato General de Costureras), SGTV (Sindicato de Gremio de Trabajadores del Vestido), and other factory trade unions.

Using information gathered through interviews and direct observation during the summer of 2009, we will take the case of a group of trade unions, SGC, SGTV, and their joint MSTSM (Mesa Sindical de Trabajadores de la Maquila), and will continue to the case of a federation of trade unions, FEASIES, in alliance with an NGO, Mujeres Transformando (MT). We will present the ways in which these organizations try to cross the borders of gender and class to confront the challenges faced by their affiliates.

Trade unions on their own: The Mesa de la Maquila (SGC and SGTV)

The trade unions around the MSTSM, especially the SGC and SGTV, try to organize women workers through focusing on what they call "labor clauses," that is, concrete issues negotiated by trade union groups called "seccionales."⁵ They have already managed to organize six seccionales, four by SGC and two by SGTV, with a total affiliation of about 1,654 women (and 118 men), most of them in San Marcos. The issues taken up with the factory owners are very concrete and sometimes small: demanding good toilets or subsidized lunches or fighting in court for the reinstatement of fired workers. But this negotiation is bound to be unsuccessful if it is not supported by a larger group of workers and by alliances with other organizations like the National Commission for Human Rights or with foreign organizations that use the banner of corporate codes of conduct to exert pressure on the brands for which maquilas work. However, according to the leaders of the SGC and the MSTSM, every factory demands different strategies according to its own situation. The ideal solution would be a collective contract, but that is extremely difficult to achieve given the fact that

they would need to affiliate 51 percent of the workers. However, according to its general secretary, the SGC was close to concluding such a contract in Empresas GAMA, an enterprise with Palestinian owners. Needless to say, this would be an historic achievement.

These trade unions had integrated a gender perspective into their training courses for women workers and their leaders. This training encompassed not only labor rights but also more general human, and especially women's, rights, focusing on improving women's self-esteem so they could cope with other, private problems like domestic violence or access to health care services. For this they tried to get the assistance of government entities such as ISDEMU (Instituto Salvadoreño para el desarrollo de la Mujer). Moreover, they also tried to make women conscious of their responsibilities; for example, the cleanness of the toilets at the factory, something that women sometimes boycotted as a form of personal vengeance against the factory but that affected the rest of the workers, according to the leaders of the SGC.

Trade union meetings and training courses were organized during workers' free time, but never immediately after a workday because that delayed the women's arrival home and created problems for them. Most events took place on weekends, and for the training courses women were encouraged to bring their children and a sort of daycare center was organized so the children would not disturb their mothers' training. Social events were organized so the women workers could bring their husbands and relatives in order to demystify the image of a trade union as dangerous agitators and replace it with one of "caring" organizations, thus increasing their credibility and legitimacy. Also, women workers were given some money to cover the transportation costs of coming to the meetings, and at these meetings or social events free food was provided. Moreover, given their low salaries, affiliated workers were not asked to pay trade union dues.

The challenges these trade unions are facing, apart from their struggles against the companies and sometimes the official authorities (the Ministry of Labor or labor courts), had to do with the inherent instability of maquilas, the workers' reactions to the conflicts, new forms of production recently enforced, and the traditionally bad reputation of trade unions. Regarding the instability of maquilas, the problem was not only that factories closed suddenly and disappeared. Affiliated workers or those defended by the unions might suddenly have to leave the plant and abandon the conflict because of pressing economic needs forcing them to migrate, or personal problems (criminality related to the Mara gangs) affecting their families. There was also the problem of those workers who were starting to be threatened or harassed by other workers loyal to the factory owners.

The introduction of new forms of production was seen by these trade unions as a threat to worker solidarity. The system of team work in modules, where a group of workers were given a certain amount of work to be done, a target, created enormous stress among these women workers. They were forced to control each other, limiting the amount of time for going to the toilet, for example, in order to accomplish the target. Another challenge these trade unions were concerned with was the increasing recruitment of young men instead of women workers. Men were preferred by the owners because they did not have maternity-leave problems, nor did they ask for special permits to take their children to the health services or to solve problems at school.

Finally, the *machista* trade union culture was seen as a problem. Not so much within the SGC, as 98 percent of its affiliates were women (and the person interviewed, the general secretary, was a woman), but at higher levels, within the federation and confederation, where only men occupied the decision-making positions. Finally, there was the lack of legitimacy of many trade unions with a bad reputation for dishonesty or of ex-workers trying to make their fights against their former enterprises into a *modus vivendi*. The latter damaged the image of organized workers and trade unions with their stories of women workers having to prostitute themselves to survive.

Relations with other trade unions or NGOs organizing women workers were also a challenge that entailed a certain degree of failure in the crossing of class borders. These trade union leaders expressed a feeling of being used, even manipulated or invaded in their territory, by NGOs of the kind that only approached them when they needed them to justify their own work to donors. Although women's NGOs had a training capacity that these trade union leaders admitted they needed, they could not trust them due to some bad experiences in which they had felt manipulated. Part of the problem was that NGOs were run by middle-class women, not by women workers who were or had previously been active, and that these NGO women made a living from these activities.⁶ Moreover, these NGOs had a network of international contacts and access to international funds that they did not share with trade unions. But NGOs needed trade unions, because even if they could help to train workers about their rights, they would never be able to represent them in front of the company as trade unions would.

These trade unions had certain international and regional contacts – for example, with the International Trade Union Confederation – and sporadic support from regional offices of international organizations like UNICEF (helping in their training-related children's daycare activities) as well as with certain regional forums, but all in all, these contacts were quite limited. At the national level, the trade unions' main coordinating effort was the Mesa Sindical

de trabajadores y trabajadoras de la maquila (MSTM), formed by two industry trade unions (SGC and SGTV), four “seccionales” belonging to different factories, and a trade union federation, FESTES (Federación de sindicatos de trabajadores de El Salvador). This was an umbrella space meant to promote women workers’ interests, responding to a widespread feeling that these interests were not really being represented either by trade unions or by women’s organizations. But MSTM was also conceived as a juridical shield to stop the blows against the trade unions themselves. Moreover, it was a step forward toward creating a federation of maquila trade unions that represent these interests vis-à-vis the government and the maquila owners. And finally, it was a promoter of trade union organizing with special brochures to be distributed among the workers.

A women’s NGO in alliance with trade unions: Mujeres Transformando (MT)

Mujeres Transformando (Women Transforming) is an NGO that started in 2003 with the aim of organizing maquiladora women workers through new strategies.⁷ The idea was to carry out this organizing in the communities where women lived in the Santo Tomas municipality.⁸ Women leaders were identified for each community, and through these leaders women’s groups were formed and started receiving courses, basically on labor rights from a gender perspective but also on mental health and self-esteem, through a participatory methodology. By July 2009 MT had already organized seven groups of maquiladora workers and seven groups of women (many of them ex-maquila workers) working in all kinds of activities: street vendors, domestic workers, but also maquila home-workers (doing embroidery). These groups amounted to about two hundred women in July 2009.

As in the case of the trade unions we have presented, MT is flexible regarding the time of the meetings and trainings for these women, most of them taking place in the evenings or on weekends, when family members are welcome and food is served. The trainings take place once a week in the case of beginners and once every two weeks for more advanced groups. Training sessions alternate between labor rights one week and mental health and relaxation the next.

Even though this is a women’s NGO whose main organizers are not active or former maquila workers, MT has managed to legitimize its class credentials through the creation of the Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers, in which all MT-organized women are represented. This committee was born in 2005 as a space for consulting about MT decisions, but it gradually became a space in its own right with the aim of having political incidence. The committee organizes women’s mobilizations, it has negotiated with municipal authorities to make July 5th, Maquila Women’s Day, a municipal holiday, and it is trying to do the same at the national level. The leaders of this committee receive special leadership training in how to speak in public, how to deal with the microphone,

how to breathe (theatre training), but also in computer skills and general knowledge of international trade and the international economy. A delegation of the committee participated in the Social Forum of the Americas in Guatemala in 2008, in a special event called the women's trial against neoliberal capitalism. This event was part of the regional campaign against labor flexibility in which MT participates. The Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers also has representatives on the MT steering board.

Like most NGOs working with maquila women workers, MT had traditionally been very critical of trade unions. This started to change when one of the women workers they trained turned out to be the general secretary of a newly created factory trade union, organized in reaction to FENASTRAS manipulations. This union ran into a conflict with the management, the leading members of the union were fired, and they were advised by a male trade union activist to resort to a hunger strike, a tactic they refused to follow. The MT-trained leader contacted the MT, which helped her and the other trade union leaders, with legal assistance, to be reinstated in the plant and to register the trade union. Fortunately, this went well, as the new labor authorities, who belonged to the recently elected FMLN, were more sympathetic to labor demands.

This event, together with previous contacts with FEASIES, a federation of independent trade unions, led MT to review its opposition to trade unions. The whole leadership of MT went to a trade union organizing course in which they found their previous prejudices about male chauvinism in trade unions well confirmed. However, they also learned how to respond to provocations, as well as the need to reinforce their training on mental health to help women enrolling in trade union organizing cope with such a milieu. Moreover, they gained the skills to encourage such trade union organizing, although they admit that this has to be a personal decision by each woman worker. Through its alliance with FEASIES, MT is already offering courses on trade union organizing skills. These are training sessions with a gender perspective that take place on Saturdays or Sundays at MT headquarters; they are given through participatory techniques and are meant to be reproduced afterwards in the communities.

MT received most of its financing from a Swiss agency, Brock le Pont, but regional resources, too, like the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Central American Fund of Women), have financed, for example, the activities of the Municipal Committee of Maquila Women Workers. Like most other women's NGOs, MT was also part of regional coalitions like the Concertación por un Empleo Digno de las Mujeres (CDM), but otherwise its regional or international contacts were not very well developed.

In the summer of 2009, MT was in a phase of restructuring strategies. It did not want to expand but to consolidate with two new orientations: a broadening of the trade union path (aiming, for example, at the creation of a new, large

industrial trade union focused on women) and a search for alternatives to confront unemployment. A bridge between the two was the organizing of self-employed embroidery workers. MT was discussing the possibility of organizing them as an independent workers' trade union or as a micro enterprise so the workers themselves could control the commercialization of their products instead of being forced to sell these products to maquila plants.

Final reflections

From the cases we have presented, we can see the different degrees to which these women workers have crossed the border of gender and class by assuming the identities of workers and trade union activists. We have also seen how they have confronted the physical challenges of having a woman's body in rather risky working places.

The Matamoros case shows that male-dominated traditional unions are far from releasing their grip on power and that numerical superiority does not mean access to decision making. Women may be the majority of workers and those most affected by bad working conditions and economic crisis, but their interests are no priority, however, for traditional unions like this. On the other hand, women in these trade unions seem to accept this situation, and though well trained in labor mobilization, they do not seem ready to cross the border of questioning male authority. Nevertheless, changes may be under way through a generational shift, due to the loss of privileges previously taken for granted. The question is whether there is any process of awareness of feminist alternatives among the new generations, something which could encourage the crossing of borders, as seems to be the case in El Salvador.

Although difficult, the situation in El Salvador seems more encouraging. Maquiladoras in San Marcos and in El Salvador in general are not the almighty transnational corporations we see in Matamoros; they are mostly subcontractors of well-known brands in the garment industry, a fact that makes them more vulnerable to transnational pressures via consumer boycotts. However, such pressures and transnational support from solidarity groups have not been able to compensate for the lack of strong unions capable of winning collective contracts that could improve working conditions and wages in a substantial way. And part of the problem regarding the weakness of unions has to do with their inability to organize women workers. Some of these unions have understood the problem and are working in a positive sense, as we have seen. Their labor consciousness has merged with an increasing feminist awareness (lacking among the Matamoros union women), and although they are still a minority, their projects and advances seem rather promising. However, there is still the problem of crossing the border of class regarding the cooperation

of women-friendly unions, like the SGC and SGTV, with women's NGOs. But even this problem seems possible to overcome if one judges by the example of the FEASIES-MT alliance, where both sides have crossed such a border and understood the necessity to learn from each other and to cooperate.

Finally, all these agencies (trade unions and NGOs) have to solve the challenge of the physical risks these working women have to face in their everyday work. Many of them are single mothers, so they have no alternative but to accept these hazardous jobs. The confronting of these challenges can be successful only if these women really do manage to cross the borders of active participation in trade union struggles and of becoming feminist worker activists as well.

Notes

- 1 "Maquiladoras" are foreign-owned "offshore assembly plants" that started being established during the 1960s along the Mexico-U.S. border, relying on Mexico's abundant supply of low-wage labor. Nowadays they can be found everywhere in Mexico. Whereas in the 1970s, women represented about 100% of labor in the maquiladora sector, this percentage had diminished to 55% in 2000. See Quintero 2002.
- 2 For a detailed account of the creation of the RMSM, see Domínguez R. 2007.
- 3 The main part of this campaign led by the Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project took place in 1995, after NAFTA was signed. See Domínguez R. 2002.
- 4 According to other accounts, there were thirteen trade unions in maquila industries in 2003 and they represented about 7 percent of all maquila workers. See *Análisis sobre el Salvador* 2003.
- 5 Regarding the SGC, the SGTV, and the MSTSM, the information in this section comes from interviews conducted with Aracely Martines (general secretary of SGC) and Gloria Flores (coordinator of MSTSM) and attendance at their training courses, during the first part of July 2009.
- 6 The person interviewed emphasized the fact that the general secretary of the SGC herself was still an active worker, not a full-time trade union leader.
- 7 Interviews with Montserrat Arévalo (leader of MT) and Rosemarie de Rosario (former maquila worker and promoter within MT) and attendance at an MT training course on women's rights and on trade union organizing, July 2009.
- 8 Most of the workers living in this municipality work in the San Marcos maquila area. MT limits its activities to this municipality alone, since its juridical status limits it geographically. MT recently obtained national juridical status but was cautious with any geographical expansion other than to nearby municipalities where potential new groups could be created, as in the case of Pachimalco, where a substantial amount of home-worked embroidery sold to factories was taking place.

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