

OP-ED Maquiladoras: Job Opportunity or Exploitation?

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By Jessica Aslett

“They showed us into the locker room, and the same supervisor who had interviewed us quickly read us the factory regulations, so quickly that we didn’t catch any of it. It was apparent that his instructions went intentionally brisk, they didn’t want us to completely grasp how we were supposed to conduct ourselves. We were told to show up the following Monday at 5:40 A.M., in order to begin working at 6:00 A.M.,” Elena, hired to work in a *maquiladora* in Tijuana, Mexico.

During the 1970s, the US closed its border with Mexico, ending the *bracero* program that permitted Mexicans, mostly men, to legally enter to take jobs as migrant farmworkers. Almost overnight, thousands of people lost jobs and returned to Mexico. Due to the staggering increase in Mexico’s unemployment rate, the government opened factories, called *maquiladoras*, along the border in the hopes of decreasing male unemployment. Maquiladoras are assembly plants found along the border between the United States and Mexico, which receive supplies and parts from foreign countries, assemble them partially and then ship them out for final processing elsewhere. The advantage to foreign companies is that they can partially assemble products where labor costs are cheap and environmental regulations are lax while avoiding the taxes they would have to pay if the bulk of the work was done in the home country. Mexico earns the U.S equivalent of over \$29 billion annually in export earnings from maquiladoras, and these factories employ approximately 908,000 Mexican workers, about 68% percent of whom, contrary to initial plans, are women.

The hiring of women began because females in Mexico were not working in large numbers when the plants were started but as the overall agrarian economy declined, this reserve pool of women needed to find employment to help their families survive in rural areas. These young, rural women often had very little formal education and no prior work experience. They were grateful to get jobs and because of that, were more likely to be compliant employees who would work for lower wages than men would. In addition, plant supervisors felt that women were often “naturally” suited to work that required manual dexterity and that women were more responsible than men. For factory owners, the one drawback to a largely young, female labor force, however, was time lost to pregnancy.

The Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project discovered that the big-name U.S corporate-owned factories forced female job applicants to undergo mandatory urine testing, invasive questions about their contraceptive use, menses schedule or sexual habits in order to screen out pregnant women and deny them jobs. Maquiladoras owned by major corporations, including General Motors, General Electric, Zenith, Panasonic, W.R. Grace, Sunbeam-Oster, Carlisle Plastics, Sanyo, and AT&T, all require pregnancy exams as a condition of employment, thereby subjecting women applicants to different hiring criteria than men. Evidence was also found of some maquiladoras forcing, or mistreating pregnant women in the hopes that they would resign. Zenith is one of the companies that admitted to screening out pregnant women from its applicant pools in order to avoid the costs of company-funded maternity benefits.

Forced pregnancy testing violates the Mexican federal labor law, which explicitly prohibits distinctions among workers for such reasons as sex and ensures equality between women and men in the workplace. Under Convention No. 111 of the International Labor Office (ILO), Mexico is required to prohibit discrimination based on gender in employment, including

pregnancy-based discrimination. The Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obligates Mexico to prohibit sex discrimination, explicitly prohibits pregnancy-based employment discrimination and obligates governments to take positive measures not only to remedy discrimination against women, but to ensure that women lead lives free from discrimination.

Maquiladora workers, in general, are paid between \$37 and \$60 for every 48-hour work week. A worker's salary often depends on the particular machine they operate and its relative importance to overall production. A worker's seniority also affects their salary. The Committee of Women Workers (CFO), however, claims that some corporations offer only temporary contracts that they continually renew in order to undermine workers' seniority rights. A number of expenses can be taken out of a worker's weekly paycheck. These include health insurance, which is required by law, government housing (shanty towns), union dues, transportation to and from work and savings accounts that accumulate interest. Some companies also take money out for what they call strike insurance. Strike insurance is an annual lump sum returned to the worker only if there were no strikes among the workers that year. Companies use this as a way to prevent losing money from the lack of production caused by a strike, and as a preventive measure to keep workers from striking if they want the withheld funds back.

An estimate of the amount of groceries necessary for three Mexicans to subsist in any given week includes items such as beans, salt, soap, toilet paper, sugar and water. Costs for these average 551.50 pesos or about \$55.15, \$7 more than a worker's average weekly paycheck. Excluded from the grocery expenses are other costs such as rent, utilities, transportation, school supplies, clothing, chicken, milk, fruit and veggies. One family must keep at least three people working overtime to generate enough income to spend only half of it on adequate amounts of

food. Some workers must sell their own plasma to make ends meet. A number of plasma banks - private businesses that sell their supply to American hospitals - are located just across the border, within walking distance of the maquiladoras.

Because of low wages, maquiladora workers have to find housing in the shanty towns, or *colonias* that have sprung up around the plants on unclaimed land. Houses are hastily built out of scrap materials and most *colonias* have no municipal services like running water or sewers. In addition, because they are located close the plants, many of these neighborhoods draw their water supplies from surface sources that have been polluted upstream or from aquifers that have been contaminated with chemical wastes and human sewage, causing health problems for the female workers and their children.

The rapid population growth fostered by industrialization of the border has placed stress on an environmental health system already overburdened with air and water pollution, waste management issues, and water shortages. No planning was made at the federal, or state level to support this anticipated industrial growth. Toxic effluents from maquiladoras have also been documented. In one study of drainage facilities in Reynosa and Matamoros, the effluent was considered to be the equivalent of untreated sewage. Contaminants included xylene, ethylbenzene, methylene chloride, acetone, and toluene. Lead, cadmium, and chromium in levels exceeding EPA standards for drinking water were found in drainage ditches adjoining residential areas that were partially served by shallow water wells. Mexican laws are similar to those in the United States, but poor compliance with and weak enforcement of these laws occurs because of Mexico's lack of resources for enforcement.

Water quality is a problem for nearly all of the Mexican border communities. Maquiladoras have contributed directly to these problems by placing large demands on the water

systems. This is especially true of some components of the textile and garment industries where large volumes of water are required for the manufacturing process. The maquiladoras have also risked contamination of the water supply by using city drainage systems and by failing to control their own toxic chemicals. Even with comparatively well-developed water treatment programs, water supply is often limited in volume. In only two of eight major communities is there complete treatment of wastewater. Even in communities with treatment facilities, they are often outdated and inefficient.

Peace Corps workers have tried speaking with company heads and with different managers at different maquiladoras about the issues facing female employees all resulting in death threats from corrupt officials. Safe organizations such as Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador (CAT) Puebla, Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO) and Centro de Apoyo Capacitación para Empleadas del Hogar (CACEH) have been set up as a way to help those women who suffer from working at maquiladoras, without involving possible harm from the government. (CAT) Puebla helps build homes for the women working at the maquiladoras, since majority of the women left their homes in order to work at the factory. (CFO) is designed to help women find decent jobs and teaches women how to become leaders in hopes of them starting their own union against corrupt managers. (CACEH) follows women who have been sexually harassed, or raped in the work force. (CACEH) provides victims with safe shelters and proper care away from their attackers.

Involvement in any of these groups is a great way to assist these women who desperately need your help in fighting for their basic human right, to be able to work without discrimination and invasion of privacy. You can also donate to this website <https://www.hrw.org/donate->

[now?promo_id=1009&variation=5344140064_2](#) to help save a fellow human's life from poverty and mistreatment.

Jessica Aslett is an undergraduate student at East Carolina University planning to major in biological anthropology and minor in ethnic studies. She hopes to graduate in 2018. Her dream job is to work in the artifact labs at the Natural History and Science Museum in Raleigh, NC and maybe to become a museum curator. By accomplishing this dream Jessica hopes to keep the future generation's eyes sparkling with wonder and knowledge every time they explore the magical world museums have to offer.