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An Understanding of the Relationship between *Maquiladoras* and Women's Rights in Central America

Mara D. Giles

Abstract: The impacts of globalization, deregulation, and free trade on Central American women, whether married or single, are numerous. On either side of the political borders, individual lives and cultures are impacted, often with dire results. Because of traditional gendered roles in these cultures, women's entrance into the formal economic sector has been slow and difficult. Maquiladoras created by globalization provide jobs for poor and undereducated women with few other options of employment. Because of the natures of the global economic system and issues of gender, the positions of these women of poverty are easily exploited. Though the consequences can be devastating, out of chaos and conflict also comes growth. As people become more aware of the negative effects of globalization and its counterparts, changes, though slow, are made.

Introduction

Globalization, the expansion of capitalism with an emphasis on production across national borders, eradicates the once self-sustaining trade networks of local economic systems, and forces them instead to become players in the larger production-focused market system that is controlled by transnational corporations (TNCs) and the dominant political governments where they reside (Robinson 2003). Globalization pushes for the central ideology of production, because it is through the resultant selling of the products that wealth is produced. This wealth is not distributed among the population at large, but rather is concentrated among the few and powerful elites of the politico-economic areas involved. Hence, the greatest effect of globalization is the creation of strong class distinctions: a few wealthy and a mass of impoverished.

Women and their children in the peripheral countries of Central America have been affected the most by globalization

(Martinez 1995). As humans, we have become dependent on elaborate economic systems to live in our environments. Women struggle the most to stay alive, since generally speaking they have traditionally been kept out of the formal economic sphere (Babb 1996; Carrillo 1996; Kopinak 1995; Putnam 2003; Ready 2003; Wilson 1998). Women have been disempowered and subjugated throughout time because they are the sex that invests more in offspring. They are the caretakers who spend the most time nurturing and educating their children from conception to adulthood, and societies formalize these responsibilities into roles that women are expected to perform (Goody 1976; Pasternak et al. 1997). Those that fight against the gendered roles of mother and nurturer not for a political stand, but for their children's survival, are the ones that are caught up most in a desperate conflict.

In cultures that encourage competition and independence, single mothers are often forced to figure out how to care for their children on their own. In addition, in cultures that advocate for strongly demarcated gendered roles, which push for women to be reproducers and caretakers over all else, women, and especially single mothers, are up against obstacles that make it difficult to provide for their children (Alvarez et al. 1998; Babb 2001; Kopinak 1995; Martinez 1995; Putnam 2003; Robinson 2003; Rodriguez 1998). In Central America, globalization and the TNCs that support it have managed to combine the ideologies of independence and competition with those of strongly gendered traditional roles to create a large feminized poor class (Alvarez et al. 1998; Robinson 2003). For economic, social, and political reasons, a growing number of households in Central America are headed by women, but the globalized economic system is not matching their needs. On the contrary, it is taking advantage of the traditional gendered roles to keep them subjugated and oppressed, thereby entrenching them deeper into poverty (Franco 1999; Kopinak 1995; Wilson 1998). The dichotomy is apparent: women are expected to be housewives and mothers, but as single parents, they must turn to the economic sphere in order to care for their children properly. Yet these women are told that their place is in the home and men should be providing for them and their children. For poor women (married or single) trying to care for their children, complete or partial exclusion from the formal or informal economic world is fraught with barriers and pain.

Exploitation of women's positions is common because local and transnational businesses know that these women have limited safe options for work. They are essentially given a choice to work for very low wages or not to work at all. In view of that, women of the lowest social class suffer the most. This negatively affects their and their

children's health and wellbeing. This in turn affects women socially because they are culturally reprimanded for not being good wives and mothers.

Although in Central America women and their children suffer the most from globalization, the countries are impacted down to their cultural roots. Because Central America has a history of colonialism and of being a center of extraction in the economic world, it has remained poor and Third World (Babb 1996). Moreover, this has created corrupt governments. Corruption here occurs when the elites of these poor countries struggle for world recognition, power, and respect (Higgins 2004). Consequently, efforts to gain power on an individual level have created class disparities with few privileged and many underprivileged and disenfranchised. As a result of corruption and highly stratified societies, as well as not having strong or self-sustaining economies, Central American countries have needed to borrow funds from wealthier countries to maintain themselves. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have provided loans at high interest rates to the countries in need. Because the Central American countries are not independent, self-sustaining economic systems for reasons already outlined, repaying the loans has been difficult.

The Maquiladora Industry

One of the options the World Bank and the IMF have given these indebted countries is to increase privatization and allow foreign investors to set up production centers and factories, or *maquiladoras*, within their borders. With their origins in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the *maquiladoras* are "free trade zones". This means that although local owners or managers run them, the factories are considered to be on the foreign capital investor's soil. Debt to the investor's government is forgiven because "as long as the goods produced in these zones are exported" they are not subject to "taxes or import duties" (Global Change Game 2000). Although the products themselves are exported across *political* borders, they are not moving across *economic* borders since "the factory is treated as if it were on the soil of the company that owns the factory" (Global Change Game 2000). The corporations that own the factories, therefore, are trading labor for the indebted country's debt reduction. Mexico, for example, has a \$100+ billion foreign debt to the United States. The Mexican government acquires profits "in the form of foreign exchange that helps to pay off the foreign debt" through the *maquiladoras* (Cooney 2001).

The *maquiladora* industry, since it is privatized and not regulated by Central American governments and their policies, is considered a superb means to reduce the debt these countries have incurred. Ostensibly, by building *maquiladoras*, Central American nations improve their own national economies by lowering unemployment and creating jobs for a large population of poor, undereducated, unskilled people who otherwise are using governmental funds for survival or not contributing to the national economy. In this way, these populations supposedly build self-esteem by not relying on public monies and instead contributing to the national economy. The countries reduce their debt, and the TNCs make a profit (Babb 1996; Kunhardt & Ochoa 2001).

Central American countries that have agreed to the conditions set by the World Bank and IMF are in competition with one another to reduce their debt by competing for factories. However, production and profit are the goals of these TNCs, so their interest is in finding locations that will offer cheap labor and low expenditures in order to maximize their profits. Debt reduction on the part of the Central American nations is not what concerns them, and they are more than willing to satisfy the rules of the World Bank and IMF to increase privatization since the benefits to them are higher net earnings (Armbruster-Sandoval 1999; Global Change Game 2000; Kopinak 1995; Kunhardt & Ochoa 2001). Thus, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are all attempting to outbid one another by offering the cheapest labor and the fewest benefits, also known as “the race to the bottom” (Herbert 1995). The “race to the bottom” is characterized by promoting economic incentives for the TNCs to build factories and hire local workers in countries that have high debts with the World Bank and IMF. These economic incentives include minimum or below minimum wages, minimal benefits such as health care, long work shifts, and a promise of increased production.

The Formal Economic Sector

Because women in Central America have fewer resources and economic opportunities than men, they are more likely to be poor. For the undereducated and poor woman, employment in the formal sector is limited to very few options, with secretarial work and the *maquiladoras* being two of the best. According to Kopinak (1995), secretarial advertisements specified “personal characteristics of the candidate” and “mentioned good or excellent appearance...responsible, honest, and perseverant.” The targeted population for these advertisements is

young and attractive women, which limits the pool of potential and successful applicants to a small number.

The remainder of the undereducated female employment seekers in the formal economic sphere, especially those women that are single heads of households, is thus even more restricted. *Maquiladoras* provide formal jobs for many of these women, the majority of whom are single mothers. However, in the unskilled manufacturing arena, although above minimum wages are offered, they are rarely paid to women (Herbert 1995; InterReligious Taskforce 2005; Miller et al. 2001; So & Brown 2003; Wirpsa 1995). The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, Central American cultures adhere to the ideology of gendered division of labor in which women are encouraged, taught, and expected to be housewives and mothers (Alvarez et al. 1998; Babb 1996). The men that own the factories intimate or directly tell female employees that it is a privilege to work in the formal economic sector. Therefore, they can exploit women's positions of economic need by hiring them at lower wages. Secondly, TNCs take advantage of the gendered roles as well as the "race to the bottom" situation that Central American countries are in by demanding lower wages are paid. Since men have been in the economic world much longer, even if unskilled or undereducated they have more options and more control over the type of work they do, where to find or create that work, and the wages they earn. Women are therefore socially and economically forced into a position of taking jobs that do not provide even minimum wages, if they are to enter into the formal sectors. So it is that "foreign capital takes advantage of Mexican patriarchy to exploit women" (Kopinak 1995) by hiring them into unskilled labor positions that earn less than enough money to support their families, but earn more money than if they were not working at all.

In Mexico, more than half of the workers at *maquiladoras* are women, targeted for employment because it is easy to exploit their economic circumstances and use the traditional gendered roles to the national economy's advantage (Herbert 1995; So & Brown 2003). The "race to the bottom" issue goes hand-in-hand with this. Since countries are competing for the *maquiladoras* and the debt-reduction benefits, they advertise that their employees will accept the lowest wages and the fewest perquisites. At best these wages are the national minimum wage, but more often are far below that amount. This pay does not cover the basic necessities a woman has to fulfill her role as household caretaker. Herbert reports that one employee working at a garment factory in Honduras was paid 38¢ per hour, and another in El Salvador was making 56¢ per hour at the time that she was fired. These amounts are fairly standard throughout the *maquiladora* industry in Central

America, yet are several dollars below the minimum wage (Herbert 1995; Global Change Game 2000; Wirpsa 1995). According to So and Brown (2003), "in Mexico, 54 million individuals live in poverty, 21 million of them in extreme poverty...Mexico's minimum wage has declined 23% following NAFTA's implementation." Taking into account the rate exchanges and cost of living differences, the results are that "by the middle of the week, single-mother heads of households do not have any money left" (Wirpsa 1995).

This is the case not only in Mexico but in other countries in Central America as well. Wages are low because the TNCs want to increase their profits, both through increased production and decreased expenses. For instance, despite federal labor laws about making provisions for maternity, *maquiladora* owners in Mexico screen job applicants and employees for pregnancy by means of intrusive exams and questions. If an applicant is pregnant, she is denied employment. If an employee becomes pregnant during her employment at a *maquiladora*, she is sometimes assigned "to more physically difficult work or demand[ed] overtime...may be mistreated or forced to resign" in part to keep costs down (Human Rights Watch 1996). Pregnant women who have been fired for pregnancy are put on no-hire blacklists across the *maquiladora* sector as well. This causes severe problems for households where that woman is the primary wage earner. Mexico has strict maternity regulations that provide pregnant women and new mothers the opportunities to keep their jobs while on leave or to be reassigned to less dangerous or physically intensive work while pregnant.

Transnational corporations do not want to lose profits, and governments need to keep production at the *maquiladoras* high. Although the government regulations are in place, officials look the other way or block human or women's rights group's efforts to change women's conditions in order to appease TNCs and ultimately the World Bank and IMF. To these Central American governments, the financial matters are more important than individual human lives and survivorship. This makes sense on one level because, to the governmental authorities, these women are single beings in a virtual ocean of struggling poor. The government's opinion is that it is better to let a capable, non-pregnant woman, who is just as poor and undereducated with few opportunities, have the job and allow the pregnant one to take care of her infant. Government officials are far removed from the daily struggles of these women, though, and a closer look at the individuals involved reveals a more oppressive, humiliating, and abusive picture. Women in the *maquiladoras* must deal with sexual harassment, rape, torture, poor environmental conditions such as

exposure to toxins, long shifts (sometimes lasting 22 hours), factory lock-ins, limited bathroom and other breaks, and strong discouragement from seeking medical attention – all in order for the *maquiladoras* and the TNCs to increase production and lower costs (Armbruster-Sandoval 1999; Cooney 2001; Global Change Game 2000; Muñoz 200).

Aside from girls and women having better eye-to-hand coordination and the ability to concentrate on complicated and meticulous work (Herbert 1995; Pasternak et al. 1997), one of the reasons that *maquiladoras* seek female employment is because girls and women are less likely to complain about their working conditions. As they have traditionally been kept out of the economic environment and are un- or undereducated, women are often unaware of what their rights are in the workplace. *Maquiladora* owners and managers lie to their employees about their rights, or tell them that it is a privilege to be working because they are taking a man's position in society (Armbruster-Sandoval 1999; Cooney 2001; Human Rights Watch 1996). Additionally, since these women are poor and undereducated, they have few skills that can be used in the formal economic sector, so there are not many other choices for employment. When women do complain about the conditions of their work environments, they are physically, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually abused, fired, and blacklisted (Babb 1996; Human Rights Watch 1996; Kopinak 1995; Wirpsa 1995; Wilson 1998).

Unionizing Efforts at Maquiladoras

Many women have attempted to and sometimes successfully implemented *maquiladora* labor unions. In one such case in Guatemala, it took eight years of perseverance, negotiations, and assistance from cross-border unions to organize a union at the Phillips Van Heusen *maquiladora* (Armbruster-Sandoval 1999). In the process, many female union organizers were bought off, tortured, intimidated, threatened, and forced to resign. Van Heusen also threatened the Guatemalan government that it would lose trading benefits if it did not find a way to vanquish the movement. The movement succeeded and the union was formed. However, soon after, the Van Heusen factory closed down and moved to another location, leaving all of its workers, unionized or not, unemployed. Most union movements do not get as far as the one at Van Heusen. Often, the women who try to organize are tortured, raped, disappeared, or killed. Women, whether unaware of their rights as workers from lack of education or knowledge, or fully aware, are afraid to fight for those rights because they do not want to lose their jobs or their lives. Certainly for the women that are single mothers, these are

consequences they are not willing to risk. In most cases though, the TNCs simply move their *maquiladoras* to another place either in the same country or preferably to a different one where there are no rumblings of dissent among the workers. Because the indebted countries need to keep the *maquiladoras* in order to pay off their debts to the World Bank and the IMF, the “race to the bottom” issue comes into play again. Pressure is put on the factory owners and managers to increase production, lower costs, subjugate workers, and dispel any unionizing efforts. Hence, conditions worsen, and the process is perpetuated.

Gendered Roles in Central America

For the women that are poor but married, the employment they have is considered to be ancillary to their husband’s paychecks. Men tolerate their wives’ work because the husbands know that without it their own earnings are not enough to support the household financially (Babb 1996; Carrillo 1996; Franco 1999; Putnam 2003). Still, it is considered “shameful for men to allow their wives to work...because it calls into question men’s ability to support their households and second because it undermines men’s ability to control their wives’ movements” (Wilson 1998). Although the family economy is highly dependent on their economic resources, women tend to downplay their contribution to the household in order to make certain that their husbands feel as though they are the true breadwinners. Married women know that if they out-earn their husbands and openly admit their head of household status, they run the risk of increased physical abuse or abandonment.

Putnam (2003) indicates that in Chilean court cases between 1964 and 1973, “women said men beat them to police social interactions, while men justified violence as appropriate punishment for transgression of female duties” because “men give the orders at home.” The physical beatings sustained by women in the households were the consequences of men trying to retain control over the economic structure after their wives had to take on jobs to help support the family. Although Central American history and cultures differ from Chile, many values including the subservience of women are shared. Consequently, for many married working women in Central American states, their work, though acknowledged as necessary, is considered only as ancillary to that of their husbands. Keeping in line with the subservient behavior, women often apologize for having to work outside of the home. Although they would like to earn more money, wives do not necessarily want to be dominant figures in the household or to be considered equal partners (though many women do say money

makes them equal and raises their self-confidence (Blumberg 2000)). Their primary goal is to raise their children's standard of living (Ready 2003). Women accept the lower wages in order to placate their husbands, in addition to being placed by their employers into a position where they have no choice. This double exploitation comes from instilled cultural values (Babb 1996; Muñoz 2001). The TNCs take advantage of those values to justify lower wages for women and higher profits for themselves (Kopinak 1995).

Employed women in Central America, whether single or married, tend to spend their income on the family, whereas men tend to spend more on themselves (Babb 1996; Blumberg 2000). Because women are the caretakers of the family, when national employment rates and food costs rise, and healthcare and education is lowered, women are expected to see to family needs. It is considered their responsibility to make sure that the children are fed and healthy and that other family members who live in the household are well cared for too. Husbands tend to pocket more of their earnings for themselves. Since women are discouraged from working outside of the home, and when they do they are not paid well, they suffer social (and sometimes physical) abuses for not being good mothers to their children. Castillo et al. (1999), quoting Chapkis, explain that, "women are expected to do emotional labor and to do it willingly." In other words, they are supposed to respond to the conflicting demands of society and watch the suffering of their children while trying to alleviate it without complaint.

Single motherhood, low wages, and recalcitrant fathers

When women are single mothers, it is even more difficult to care for their children on their low *maquiladora* wages. Although many women seek the biological fathers of their children to demand child support, the process is labor intensive, time consuming, and does not always result in responsible payment (Ready 2003). Women of Central America also need to be re-educated about their rights to demand the financial accountability from the children's fathers without having to give in to the men's demands for sexual relations in return. Clashes between feminist ideologies and traditional gender roles also cause turmoil. The group *la Asociacion de Madres Demandantes* (AMD) that has tried to help women in El Salvador get access to the recalcitrant fathers, for example, has attempted to help the *madres demandantes* (mothers asking for child support) understand that their place in society is not solely as mothers and caretakers and that this role "should be challenged" (Ready 2003). Yet these *demandantes* derive pleasure from

being mothers, one that no one can take away from them, and the outcome has been a resistance to the efforts of the AMD. Not all women in Central America, either because of the long history of the division of labor by sex or because they see children as their lifeline, are ready to give up their roles because motherhood gives them some control and a sense of power in their lives. So suggesting that they have fewer or no children in order for the low *maquiladora* wages to go further is neither a successful option nor is it an ethical one. What the women want is for the fathers of their children to be more financially responsible to them. This would alleviate the economic straits these mothers, especially single mothers, are in since the *maquiladoras* do not pay enough.

Another problem for *madres demandantes* is that court dates sometimes coincide with workdays. When they work in the informal sector, they lose a day's wages but the job is still available upon their return. Conversely, when they work in a *maquiladora*, the effects can be much direr, including being fired. The outcome of trying to get the negligent fathers to pay is that the women may lose their jobs and end up in a worse situation. Naturally, women that have seen this happen are reluctant to even pursue the idea of demanding the fathers be held financially accountable. So they remain in a state of indigence.

The Informal Economic Sector

There are few other employment options than the *maquiladoras* for poor and undereducated women. As mentioned previously, secretarial work is one, but limited to a small percentage of that population. Domestic service, such as housekeeping is another. However, these women run the great risk of being repeatedly raped by the men in those houses because the housework is done out of the view of the community (Babb 1996; Wilson 1998). So the informal economic sphere, "self-generated employment with [direct and indirect] links to modern industry" (Wilson 1998) is another option to which many women turn. These include such enterprises as street-vending, brick-making, garbage-picking, and prostitution. There are several problems that come with this type of employment. As Wilson indicates, "women who work independently of their husbands are disadvantaged in setting up microenterprises...because women have fewer opportunities to establish the contacts required for developing successful businesses". Single mothers have the most difficult time finding even these kinds of work, for they have to compete not only with men engaged in this type of occupation, but also with other

women who are married and helping their husbands maintain the households.

Street vending is comprised of three main sub-categories: commission, dependent, and independent. Commission and dependent vendors depend on suppliers to provide them with products to sell from carts or stands, such as newspapers, soft drinks, or ice cream (Wilson 1998). Men dominate this arena because they know where to find contacts, and suppliers are more inclined to negotiate with men than with women. Independent vendors, on the other hand, mostly sell uncooked or prepared foods, such as *tamales*. Women are often independent vendors because they are traditionally the cooks in a household. One drawback for women in this sector is access to carts or materials for a food stall. Men generally have more access and stronger negotiation power for these items. This puts unmarried women at a great disadvantage. Another gendered issue is that in many instances husbands sell the products while the wives remain at home preparing them. This puts the men in the public view and economic sphere but the wives are seen only as ancillary, or *helpers* to the family economy. While again this reduces women's power in the economic arena, on the positive side, a family can work together to produce more goods. Once more, unmarried mothers are at the highest disadvantage.

Brick making is very labor intensive and is next to impossible for single mothers to profit from. Wilson (1998) explains that women who are married "perform work in the brickyards as an extension of their domestic labor" either by feeding the brick-makers or helping to mold the bricks. To run a full informal business in this area, one needs equipment such as wheelbarrows, ovens, and trucks, all of which are difficult to obtain. In view of the fact that men control the selling of those necessities, single mothers are unlikely to buy them at a decent price, if at all.

Garbage-pickers work in the dumps collecting discarded articles that can be recycled in one way or another. Clothing and diapers are commonly resurrected, cleaned, mended, and resold. Cardboard is also gathered and sold to paper companies for mass recycling. Women, whether married or not, get a lower price from the paper recycling companies than men do. Married women have the advantage of their husbands selling the cardboard to the companies. In addition, most often they do not have the trucks with which to haul the paper to the recycling factories, so they have to rely on intermediaries, which are men. The intermediaries buy the paper from the women at prices much lower than the women could sell on their own at the recycling plants. Either way, someone other than the woman struggling to fulfill her role as mother and caretaker is making a profit.

As these occupations are in the informal economic sector, there are no rules, regulations, or policies that prevent the exploitation of women's economic circumstances. There are also no benefits, like medical care. But whether a woman working in this sphere is helping her husband or toiling on her own, she is taken advantage of "for reasons peculiar to prevailing gender ideologies" (Wilson 1998).

Another informal economic occupation many indigent women turn to because of single parenthood or unendurable working conditions in other jobs, is prostitution. Many women are already sexually harassed or raped at their formal employment and feel there "is no way to avoid being forced into sexual relations" (Castillo et al. 1999), so they prostitute themselves voluntarily and increase their income several-fold. Castillo et al. (1999) maintain that prostitution is an economic necessity to support a family and "for many of these women, maternity is both a precondition of the work and the single most important factor in defining their sense of self." In other words, they go into the profession because they can make more money, which they use to provide food, clothing, medical care, and education for their children.

There are many repercussions from prostitution. Aside from the obvious (rape, pregnancy, murder, drug abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases), there are also social stigmas. Prostitutes are seen as unclean, not simply because they work on the streets, but because they are selling sex. Central American women are not supposed to enjoy sex for their own physical pleasure, for that would make them deviant and "whores". Castillo et al. (1999) explain that "the prostitute who accepts money for a service she finds unpleasant fits more readily into the social norm" because she is doing it for her children's survival. Yet because of the nature of prostitution, women engaged in this field of work find it necessary to be constantly justifying and defending their work. Prostitutes admit that their occupation offers them a better living than other unskilled work because they earn many times over the wages they would make at places such as *maquiladoras*. But it is often the unendurable working conditions at the factories that drive them into prostitution.

In some ways, prostitutes enjoy more freedom than women who are not. Their time is their own, they earn more money as prostitutes than as unskilled laborers, they do not have to compete with men for work or earnings, and many feel good about the fact that they can now afford to take good care of their children by providing the basic necessities of life. But in other ways, these women are the most exploited of all the ones in these economic predicaments. They are constantly justifying their behaviors to prove that it is for a good cause,

as well as putting their lives in jeopardy. Although the prostitutes that Castillo et al. (1999) interviewed said they were careful about protection from sexually transmitted diseases, not all prostitutes are. The men that have sex with them also are not necessarily conscientious and can be sex bullies, meaning that they force women into anal or unprotected sex. Prostitutes are also not immune to violent rapes and subsequent murders simply because they are considered “throwaway women.” Local moral values aside, these women face dangers that are just as harmful if not worse than in the *maquiladoras*.

The Dichotomy of Rising Socio-economic Positions and Gendered Roles

Although women increase their status by working (because money equalizes the household duties between men and women), they are punished for their rising socio-economic positions. They are physically abused by their husbands or other men, and deliberately discriminated against by their male employers. Ironically, this keeps Central American countries in the same position of subjugation with the nations to which they are indebted. When women are maintained in their roles of caretakers, even if they are employed, men dominate. So culturally, Central American men feel superior to women and preserve their own higher gendered status. The TNCs benefit from this because capitalism uses sexism to suit its purposes of profit-making. The indebted countries gain from TNCs benefiting because they reduce their debt faster with an oppressed workforce. So women’s labor participation is directly “related to state policy, household strategy, and labor market dynamics” (Kopinak 1995). Yet one would think that by allowing women to enter the economic spheres fully, by becoming educated, self-sufficient, healthy contributors to the society, the countries of Central America would be able to reduce their debts to the World Bank and the IMF more rapidly, as well as raising their overall self-esteem and self-respect. One might imagine that if female employees are in better financial and healthy conditions their output would be higher. As it stands, Central American states are prostituting themselves in much the same way that women with no other options do. The nations are doing so in order to reduce their debt and government spending that has had to be spent on the millions of unskilled, undereducated people (Robinson 2003). In other words, the states are selling their women in order to feed their population.

Lack of education for Central American poor women leads to low self-esteem and limited choices for employment or survival. The societies at large benefit from having a large population of unskilled

laborers who will accept employment under unbearable conditions. Educating the employees would mean the factories would have to pay more people to fill shifts left empty by their workers attending school. In the long-term, educating girls and women leads to skilled workers (that require higher pay), knowledge of rights (which means possibilities of successful union formation), and self-sustaining women that are economically independent of men. But this would result in the inability to exploit a valuable labor resource that benefits a few privileged people.

Women in Central America are taught from birth through legends, stories, and other avenues that their roles are to please men, be submissive, depend on men for their well-being, and play the nurturing role to their parents, husbands, brothers, and children (Carrillo 1996). Even their physical activity, which has been proven to increase self-esteem when accomplished for the self, is limited to their roles as caretakers. Gendered roles are inculcated directly or indirectly by watching others' behaviors in society. Central American cultures have centuries of sexual discrimination to overcome. The economic difficulties of the governments and populations are not improving women's, children's, and even men's lives.

Conclusion

Social transformations such as the labor movements, feminist and gender movements, and increased awareness are helpful, but they take time to bring about change. Better education for girls is a path that some are trying to forge while also working towards greater structural changes. Central America today is in chaos, but out of conflict always comes growth: revolutionaries such as the union organizers or the AMD personnel, or even the women that trade traditional views on morality for a pair of stiletto heels so they can earn enough money to educate their children and hopefully teach them how to have a better life.

But the changes cannot be made only in Central America. The TNCs, the World Bank, and IMF, with their appreciation only for capital, are just as responsible for the conditions of women in Central America as the maquiladora owners and managers are. So long as consumers continue to buy the products the TNCs sell, women in Central America will suffer the consequences created by greed unless something is modified. Boycotting is not the answer, for that results in unemployment and ignoring the situation. Women in Central America want and need their jobs. They simply want attractive, responsible workplaces where their rights are not violated. Consumer activism,

awareness, support for social movements, and education of the population will help to change their circumstances from abhorrent to celebratory.

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