



LIFE ON THE LINE

Violence Against Women Working in Factories in Mexico

WOMEN'S RIGHTS WORKERS' RIGHTS

IN ALL OF MEXICO, there are more than 3,000 *maquiladoras* (assembly factories) employing more than 1 million workers. Women make up nearly half of all the workers in these factories, and in labor-intensive operations such as electronic parts assembly, women represent 70 percent of the workforce. Factory management especially prefers to employ young women (between the ages of 16 and 30) without children but with nimble fingers and docile minds. Under such circumstances, a perverse gender dynamic has developed and women workers experience various forms of violence. In the border city of Ciudad Juarez, the level of violence has become a phenomenon that is costing women, some of whom have been factory workers, their lives.

In general, women workers in Mexico experience the following forms of violence in the workplace and in their communities:

Violence against reproductive rights

When applying for a job in a *maquiladora*, a woman is often subjected to a pregnancy test and questioned about her sexual activity, use of contraception and menstrual cycle. During employment, some employers conduct random pregnancy tests and force women workers to show used sanitary napkins to prove they are not pregnant. Pregnant women are often forced to resign without receiving the maternity benefits required by Mexican law. Many women continue to work in dangerous environments through their pregnancies, endangering their health and the health of their babies. *Human Rights Watch*, "A Job or Your Rights: Continued Sex Discrimination in Mexico's Maquiladora Sector," December 1998

Sexual harassment

Stories of sexual harassment in *maquiladoras* are common. In one case, 180 women fought back and used U.S. laws to sue an American-owned *maquiladora* for sexual harassment. At a company picnic, a male manager demanded women workers put on a bikini show that he then videotaped. *Jean Bowdish*, "Sexual Harassment at Maquiladoras," January 1995. See also *International Labor Rights Fund*, *Assessment of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in Mexico*, May 2003

Economic violence

Women working in factories typically work 10-hour shifts, six days a week for poverty wages. The average

minimum wage in Mexico is \$4.20 a day (less than 50 cents an hour). The weekly sum of these earnings is far less than the \$175 required weekly for a basket of basic food goods for a household of five—which does not include any medicines, clothing or nonessential items. *Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática*, *census 2000*

Structural economic violence

Maquiladoras workers toil under inflexible and stringent working conditions: limited and timed bathroom breaks, being locked out of the factory for tardiness, repetitive and tedious tasks without adequate safety equipment. Working women typically live in shantytowns that lack basic services such as running water, electricity, paved roads, public lighting or a sense of public security. While many employers provide work-related transportation, background checks on drivers' are not always carried out, bringing into question women's safety. Their daily commute entails a journey down unsafe streets that threaten women's lives. *Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua News*, October 2001

A scarcity of other employment opportunities forces many women to accept these conditions as a means to survive. Ingrained cultural norms mean many women accept these circumstances as their fate in life. Women who organize to improve conditions or challenge the status quo experience further harassment or violence.

For more information on violence against women in Mexico's *maquiladoras*, please visit www.aflcio.org/issues/politics/globaleconomy/ns10092003.cfm.

WHAT IS A MAQUILADORA?

It's an assembly plant producing goods for export. Usually *maquiladoras* are foreign-owned factories attracted to Mexico by "positive business conditions" (cheap labor and shoddy enforcement of workers' rights and environmental laws). Since the 1980s, the number of *maquiladoras* in Mexico has increased from 620 to more than 3,000. They employ more than 1 million workers. The average worker is female and between the ages of 16 and 30. Workers across the country work 10-hour days, six days a week and earn on average 50 cents per hour.