

Emancipation or Exploitation?

A study of women workers in Mexico's maquiladora industry

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1 Introduction

The countries that do not make themselves attractive will not get investors' attention. This is like a girl trying to get a boyfriend. She has to go out, have her hair done up, wear make up... (David Mulford, U.S. Under-Secretary of the Treasury during the George Bush administration [quoted in Runyan 1996: 238])

As Marchand (1994) has observed, gendered metaphors are often used in international relations without much thought being given to their implications. This statement, implying a (hetero)sexual invitation to the penetration of foreign capital, is a case in point. At the same time, however, the gender perspective is curiously absent from most debates about the implementation and consequences of strategies of economic integration. With this essay, I seek to contribute to the understanding of gender in the context of the global economy. More specifically, I intend to explore the impact of paid work in export-processing factories on Third World women workers.

During the last four decades or so, Third World countries have increasingly been integrated into the global economy. This is in part the result of strategies to "open up" their economies to world markets, that have been implemented under a general belief in export-orientation as a highway to growth and development, and in some cases under pressure from the international financial agencies. But it is also connected to the increased importance of the multinational corporations (MNCs) in world affairs. Since the mid-1960s, MNCs have found it profitable to locate parts of their labor-intensive production into low-wage areas of the Third World. This has caused the proliferation of export-processing zones (EPZs) in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and – more recently – mainland China. Low-skilled, blue-collar workers are here assembling consumer goods for export to the companies' home markets, or to other markets in the advanced North. Decreased production costs make the companies' goods competitive as consumer prices fall. Reduced consumer prices is commonly held to be one of the advantages of economic globalization – which causes a more "efficient" world allocation of production and resources. But what about the workforce assembling these goods? A salient feature of the workforce composition of the EPZs worldwide is that women workers constitute the great majority. Whereas these women have previously been largely

marginalized from the labor markets, they have suddenly become the preferred workers in this new type of industry. Is the fact that these women are now holding paid jobs to be considered as conducive to emancipation, or are they only subjects to exploitation from the MNCs?

This is a case study about the impact of paid work on women workers in the export-processing industry in Tijuana in northern Mexico. Mexico is one of the developing countries that have gone the farthest in implementing strategies for the integration into the world economy (Watkins 1997), which makes it a particularly interesting case. The maquiladora industry, as it is known in this area, was established along the U.S.-Mexican border in 1965 and has grown explosively since then. This industry, which mainly consists of subsidiaries to U.S. and Asian MNCs, is almost exclusively producing electronic equipment, garments and auto parts for export to the U.S. market. Because of its importance in attracting foreign currency and providing jobs, the maquiladora industry has become vital for the Mexican economy. Just like in other EPZs all over the globe, women have been targeted for work in this industry since the outset. What I will seek to find out is whether or not the integration into capitalist relations of production can be considered a liberating experience for these women. My central question reads as follows: "Is the work in the maquiladora industry conducive to the emancipation of women workers, or does it merely signify an exploitation of the same?" To answer this question properly, I have divided it into two sub-questions: "In what ways can it be argued that the work is exploitative to women maquiladora workers?", and: "Are there any reasons to believe that the women's new situation as waged workers contributes to their emancipation?" When pursuing the answers to these questions, I hope to fulfill the more general goal of my thesis, which is to shed light on the gendered aspects of economic globalization.

1.1 Theory, method and material

At the core of my theoretical framework are the diametrically different views offered by the liberal "integration thesis" and the socialist feminist "exploitation thesis". These will be used methodologically as *ideal types*. Ideal types can be thought of as internally consistent intellectual constructs, presenting stylized versions of a phenomenon's properties. They serve as measures with which to compare reality and for noting to which extent one's findings diverge from the types (Lundquist 1993: 82). What must be explained from the outset is that the great majority of the literature on my subject has been written from a socialist feminist perspective. That is, most of the previous work on Third World women workers in EPZs is consistent with the "exploitation thesis". However, including the contrasting view of the "integration thesis" creates a tension between the two and allows me to make comparisons, which will be useful for the analysis. It should be noted that the two central concepts of this essay – emancipation and exploitation – are not easily compared since they work in different directions. In this context, "emancipation" signifies a process directed *from* women *towards* men or society in general, whereas "exploita-

tion” is directed *from* MNCs *towards* the workers. Therefore, the concepts need not be mutually exclusive.

To increase the understanding of the subject of women and work, I also include theories on gender and the gendered division of labor. In order to situate the women workers of my study in a wider context, I dedicate one section to women in the new international division of labor. These theories are mainly (but not exclusively) elaborated from a socialist feminist perspective. When presenting my empirical findings, I will sometimes refer to other, non-feminist, theories to clarify subjects such as alienation, migration and social movements.

Since this is a case study, it is mainly of a qualitative nature. Qualitative methods include (as is the case in this work) field studies, in-depth interviewing, and participant observations (Lundquist 1993: 104). The main base of the qualitative data employed consists of in-depth interviews with women workers in the maquiladora industry in Tijuana, conducted in the summer of 2000 as part of a field work financed by the Swedish international development cooperation agency (Sida). It also contains interviews with scholars, public sector representatives from the state level in Baja California and the federal level in Mexico City, and representatives for various NGOs in Tijuana and Mexico City. However, it also includes quantitative data, such as information on wage trends and workforce composition, which I believe is vital for a more thorough understanding of the subject. Other material includes previous research on the subject, internet resources, and material supplied by some of my interviewees.

According to Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 5), “any system of domination can be seen most clearly from the subject positions of those oppressed by it”. In-depth interviewing allows for the researcher to gain insight into the lived experiences of the interviewees, and is therefore an invaluable method when conducting feminist analyses. My interviews were performed by “the general interview guide approach”, using both closed- and open-ended questions. An interview guide was prepared to make sure that essentially the same information was obtained from the different interviewees. The interviews were conducted more or less informally, principally as discussions about different topics. The merits of this approach include the possibility of discussing issues that the researcher had not thought of when designing the interview guide (Patton 1987: 111). It should be admitted that some of the questions on my interview guide (*see* Appendix) were not there from the beginning. During the conversations, my attention was drawn to matters I had previously not taken into account. Most of the interviews were conducted in the women’s homes, which gave me invaluable possibilities for observing the material conditions as well as the family situations of these women. In my opinion, the women also seemed to feel more at ease when interviewed in their homes, which made them speak more open-heartedly. The interviews were made in Spanish and, in most cases, taped. Some parts of the interviews have been extracted, translated into English and included in this study for illustrative purpose. The interviewees will be referred to by their *names in italics*. The maquiladora workers will be referred to by their first names only.

This study is about the women workers of the maquiladora industry in the city of Tijuana on the U.S. – Mexican border. A more thorough work would include a comparison with alternative employment options for the women in question, but that is beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, my focus is on the female blue-collar workers, exclusively. Since gender relations are culturally determined and vary over time and space, no generalizing conclusions about women workers in export processing in other parts of the world can or should be drawn. Moreover, the number of interviews (12) certainly does not make the results statistically significant, which further limits any generalizing claims. My ambition is rather to achieve an understanding of the experiences of the women in my specific case, and the extent to which this essay may have value for further research is restricted to comparisons with situations in other maquiladora cities in Mexico.

The structure of the essay is as follows: the theoretical framework is introduced in section 2. Section 3 provides background information in the subsections “Mexico in the global economy”; “Women and work in Mexico”; and “The maquiladora industry”. The findings of my case study is presented in section 4, under the headings “Conditions of work”; “Living conditions”; and “Organization and resistance”. The main results are summed up in section 5.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender

An exploration of women in the international political economy needs an understanding of gender and gender relations (Krause 1995: 136). Unlike “sex” – the biological distinction between males and females – the term “gender” refers to “the social differentiation of women and men through processes which are learned, changeable over time and vary within and between cultures” (Elson 1996: 70). The gender perspective does not deny that biological differences may constrain behavior, but biology should not be used deterministically to justify practices and institutions that could be different from what they are (Tickner 1992: 7). We are socialized into stereotyping certain characteristics and institutions as “male” and others as “female”. But the social construction of gender does not merely separate between these two categories. It also constitutes a power system in that it typically places men, and what is associated with masculinity, above women and what is associated with femininity. Because in almost all cultures, the gender difference signifies the domination of men over women – the secondary status of women in society is “[...] one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact” (Ortner 1996: 21). This is not solely attributable to men’s domination over women in the direct sense, but also to a process of “internalized oppression” (Rowlands 1998: 14) whereby women come to identify with the prevalent oppressive structures and thus partake in upholding them. Women actively participate in the process of repro-

ducing their roles as well as being actively involved in controlling other women (Anthias – Yuval-Davis 1994: 316).

The understanding of gender is based on a set of culturally determined dichotomies, deeply embedded in Western epistemology, such as: man/woman, public/private, self/other, reason/emotion, autonomy/relatedness, objective/subjective, center/periphery, and culture/nature. The first of each pair is typically associated with masculinity and accorded primacy, the second is associated with femininity and perceived as inferior. Yet the two terms are interdependent; the first needs the second for its formation – the “self” needs the “other” for its own definition (Wright 1997). Although all cultures use categories of comparison, dichotomies have a special status in Western thought because of the importance of science for Western culture. Science is based on two dichotomies: the categorical separation of fact from value, and of the knower (subject) from what is known (object). Because of their association with science and its claims to “objective knowledge”, we tend to perceive these oppositions as “natural” and value-free, usually not paying attention to their gendered implications and hierarchical structures, privileging the first term over the second. Feminists find it imperative to challenge these dichotomies since they obscure the actual power structures, promote patterns of thought and action that are static and oversimplified, and create stereotypes. Male/female stereotypes are *political* because they both reproduce and naturalize (depoliticize) unequal power relations (Peterson – Runyan 1993: 22).

Gender interests. My questions implicitly ask whether the work in the maquiladoras can be thought of as conducive to the interests of these women. Maxine Molyneux (1985) stresses the impossibility of generalizing about “women’s interests”, since women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means – among them class and ethnicity – that shape their interests as a group in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. Instead she talks about “gender interests” as those women (or men, for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes. She also makes a useful distinction between “strategic gender interests” and “practical gender interests”. *Strategic gender interests* are those that seek to overcome women’s subordination; such as the abolition of the gendered division of labor, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing, and the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination. These sorts of demands are often termed “feminist”. *Practical gender interests* arise from the concrete conditions of women’s positioning within the gendered division of labor. They are the response of an immediately perceived need, and they are generally of an economic nature. For example, because of women’s place within the gendered division of labor as those primarily responsible for the wellbeing of the households, it is often argued that women have a special interest in public welfare. These interests are closely connected with class. They do not challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, although they arise out of them.

Molyneux also emphasizes that a relationship between strategic gender interests and women’s recognition of them and desire to realize them cannot be assumed. Even those that seem most uncontroversial – like complete equality with men, and control over reproduction – are not readily acceptable to all women. This is not only because of a lack of consciousness, but also because such changes could threaten the short-term practical interests of these women, or signify a cost in the loss of forms of protection which are not compensated for in other ways. This distinction between strategic and practical gender interests will be useful when analyzing the impact of paid work on women workers. Does the job only satisfy an immediate economic need, or does it also challenge gender subordination?

Gender and empowerment. Gender relations are power relations. Changing them in the sense of challenging the public/private divide implies a shift in power. The concept of empowerment therefore merits some attention.

In its formal sense, empowerment includes opportunities such as the vote, the right to work, and open access to the legal system. But this is not enough; it also requires a change in the personal perception of the empowered subject (Craske 1999: 23). Hence, the concept of power has to be problemized. According to Jo Rowlands (1998), power is usually understood in an outcome-focused, dominant, masculine “power over” way. “Power over” is in finite supply – if some people have more, others have less. If power is perceived in this way, then the notion of women becoming empowered can be seen as inherently threatening. There are, however, other ways of understanding power, focusing not on outcomes but on the *process* and the experience of the subject. To Rowlands the core set of necessary elements in women’s individual empowerment is comprised of self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of agency, dignity, and a sense of “self” in a wider context. The increase in these elements is crucial for the empowerment process, and the increase has to be in all of them. The area of change that comes hardest is in close relationships, where the woman is “up against it on her own”.

Feminists also stress the connection between processes of empowerment working at the individual as well as at the collective level (Andersen – Elm Larsen 1996: 69). Karl (1995: 14) states that it is mostly through involvement in *groups* that people develop awareness and the ability to organize to take action and bring about change. She views women’s empowerment as a continuum of mutually reinforcing components: collective awareness building that creates a sense of group identity; capacity building and development of skills to organize and carry out activities; participation and greater decision-making power in the home, community and society; and action to bring about greater equality between men and women.

The women of my study have been granted the right to work and have thus become empowered in a formal sense. But apparently this does not mean that they automatically become empowered in the “deeper” meaning of the word. I will use this concept as a complement to the notion of emancipation, assuming

that if aspects of work in itself seem to counteract empowerment as defined here, it is also opposing emancipation.

2.2 Women and work

The gendered division of labor. Central to all thinking about women and work is the special role women have in the reproductive sphere of activity, and how this conditions their role in the productive sphere (Moghadam 1995: 3f). The public/private dichotomy is therefore of utmost importance. Social and political structures have been based on the separation of public and private spheres, and the gendered nature of this distinction is most clearly observed in the different citizenship duties for men and women: bearing arms and bearing children, respectively. The public sphere has been associated with such activities as politics and production, and has traditionally been conceived of as the male arena. The private sphere, on the other hand, has been the women's domain and the place for reproduction and consumption. (Craske 1999: 20ff).

The *gendered division of labor* means that some types of work are strongly associated with women and others with men. This is usually explained with the association of women with the private sphere, which shapes their participation in the labor market. For socialist feminist Maria Mies (1986: 100ff), capitalism and patriarchy are closely entwined. She argues that the gendered division of labor was created in the 18th century, with a process she calls *housewifization*. With the rise of capitalism, the proletarian woman had to be domesticated in order to breed more workers. In the interest of the bourgeoisie, the state had to interfere in the reproduction of people with help from the church and legislation to "housewifize" the proletarian woman. The nuclear family with the man as head and breadwinner was made the norm with legal reforms. The private sphere was created and pictured as women's domain – her primary role being mothering – and the ideology of romantic love was created as a compensation for the sexual and economic independence she had previously enjoyed. This way, the propertyless proletarian man got his colony – family and domesticated housewife – which was a sign that he had risen to the status of citizen and become a full member of the culture-nation. This was paid for by the subordination of women. *Housewifization* had not only the objective of producing workers but also to make the housewife an agent of consumption. Nina Björk stresses that modernization required not only the rationality and work ethic necessary for production, but also the irrationality and impulsiveness necessary for consumption of the ever-increasing number of consumer goods produced. The traditional perception of women as irrational and emotional made her seem predestined for the role as consumer; early advertisements were directed to women and shopping soon became a female affair. The department store that came about in the second half of the 19th century became the first public space for women: a place for dreaming, looking and consumption, a place to be "seduced" – but also a place where traditional gender roles were reinforced. In the U.S., women accounted for 80-85% of the consumption of consumer goods in 1915 (1999: 65ff, 104f).

The dichotomy between the private sphere of reproduction and consumption and the public sphere of production and politics has made women's work in the home invisible. The rationale for confining women to the domestic sphere rests in defining women's primary role as mothering. And if it is their "natural" role to mother, then mothering is not work in the true sense of the word and, by extension, neither are any of the associated domestic chores considered production (Wright 1997). Feminist economists thus criticize neoclassical macroeconomics for its neglect of the whole area of unpaid production, and for ignoring the interdependence between this area of production and the areas that macroeconomics is concerned with. In capitalist economies, the market is viewed as the core of economic activity. Since household work does not take place on the market of paid exchanges for goods and services, it is not considered economic activity and not included in national accounts (Elson 1996; Waring 1989: 227f; Krause 1995). Hence, women's time is not admitted any value, and her work is taken for granted: "Women's labor is considered a natural resource", writes Mies, "freely available like air and water" (1986: 110). According to calculations made by the UNDP (1999: 237) on selected developing countries, women carry on the average 113% of the total burden of work compared with men, measured in minutes per day. Yet only about one third of this is defined as "market-oriented production" and included in the national accounting data, which is the basis for economic analyses, development projects and so forth. Since women's invisible labor would have to be done anyway, placing it outside the market system makes it an "externalization of costs". According to calculations made by the UNDP Human Development Report 1995, women's economic contributions globally are undervalued by US\$ 1 trillion (cited in Cockcroft 1998).

Apart from rendering women's household chores invisible and devalued, the public/private divide has another important implication for her labor market participation. The association of women with the private sphere creates the *ideal* of a non-working woman, whose main role is as mother and housewife. It has been argued that many women tend to identify with this ideal regardless of personal circumstances (Craske 1999: 11). This might make them consider their waged work as complementary, although it is a vital part of family income. It also explains why, once women enter the labor market, they are disproportionately represented in low-wage caring professions such as teachers and nurses – vocations that are chosen on the basis on female socialization rather than on profit maximization. Feminists therefore critique liberal economists' basic unit of analysis, the "rational economic man" – portraying human beings as primarily driven by rational self-interest – and call for a different understanding of rationality (Tickner 1992: 72f).

Two perspectives on women and capitalist development. Southern countries' integration into the world capitalist system has transformed their internal social structures and reshaped existing divisions in the populations. Each phase of the evolving world system has also restructured the labor pools. To explore the production in export-processing factories properly, one must gain under-

standing of the social relations of production and reproduction on which it is based (Tiano 1994: 30). Since “the worldwide expansion of capitalism is at the core of the dynamics of globalization” (Ghai 1997: 28), this subsection presents two different views on how Third World women are affected by capitalist development.

Susan Tiano classifies the approaches to development’s effects on Third World women into three perspectives, that she denotes “the integration thesis”, “the marginalization thesis”, and “the exploitation thesis”, respectively. The marginalization thesis basically states that capitalism marginalizes women by confining them to the private sphere. Since the women subjects of my study obviously have entered the public sphere of paid work, this perspective has been left out. The two remaining perspectives reach radically different conclusions about women and waged work, and will be used as a point of reference in my study.

A. The integration thesis represents the view of neoclassical economics and modernization theory. According to this thesis, capitalist development emancipates women by involving them in their society’s political economy. Traditional societies are permeated by patriarchal values that bar them from politically influential positions and subordinate them to a strictly gendered division of labor. Socioeconomic development transforms these conditions by introducing new technologies – that lighten women’s work load and give them the means to control fertility – and by replacing the traditional patriarchal values with more egalitarian ideals. Proponents of this thesis especially call attention to labor-force participation in this liberating process. Waged work offers an alternative to economic dependence on a male partner and increases bargaining power within the household. It enhances women’s self-image and increases her autonomy, it enables the forming of social bonds with coworkers and increases well-being. It also enables them to develop the productive skills and modern attitudes necessary for advancement in the labor market where success is determined by achievement and not by ascribed characteristics such as gender and race. Whether or not a woman chooses to enter the labor force, the capitalist development process undermines patriarchal structures and enhances her personal autonomy (Tiano 1994: 37f; Tiano 1987b: 78; Lim 1990: 110).

In explaining what motivates women to enter the work force, the integration thesis stresses “pull” factors. Pull factors include a range of conditions such as the availability of suitable jobs, the weakening of norms that traditionally have confined them to the household, and the desire for increased personal autonomy. A woman’s participation in paid employment reflects her personal choices – based on rational cost-benefit analyses – in response to positive incentives (Tiano 1994: 50f).

B. The exploitation thesis is consistent with socialist feminist analyses of women’s role in capitalist societies. This view holds that women’s oppression is tied to the emergence of the monogamous nuclear family, which is a creation of capitalist society. Nuclear family relations simultaneously ensure a male labor force for capitalist production and make women an economically dependent category of workers providing free labor for individual men and for

the capitalist economy. Women’s unpaid labor is legitimized through ideologies of motherhood that also obscure their oppression. They are taught to view themselves primarily as wives and mothers, which makes them ambivalent in their roles as waged workers. The notion of women’s waged work as a temporary complement to their “proper” roles as housewives and domestic reproducers makes them exploitable once they enter the labor market. It makes them willing to work under unstable conditions, and confines them to low-status, poorly paid jobs with little prospects of advancement. Capitalism reinforces rather than eliminates patriarchal relations, oppressing women in both the private and public spheres. This is especially pronounced in the Third World where racism and imperialism reinforce their exploitation (Tiano 1994: 39f; Ruiz – Tiano 1987: 6f).

For the proponents of the exploitation thesis, “push” factors are paramount for explaining female labor market participation, the major one being economic necessity. Capitalist development implies financial difficulties for many Third World families, and women’s wages become essential for family income. With no other options, they enter a gender-segregated labor market where women are condemned to unstable, poorly paying jobs. In addition to their paid work, women also have domestic duties, and this double burden threatens their mental and physical health. A woman’s entrance into the labor market does not increase bargaining power within the household, since her wages are part of the household’s survival strategy, but only deepens her oppression (Tiano 1994: 51f).

These perspectives offer diametrically different views on the causes and consequences of women’s labor force participation. They use different assumptions about the nature of capitalist development and its effect on the gendered division of labor, and they also offer opposing views of the results of paid employment for the well-being and the household status of women. The integration thesis believes paid work to be conducive to strategic gender interests, whereas the exploitation thesis most certainly does not. It should be noted, though, that these ideal types do not account for changes over time, nor do they differ between groups of women.

Women in the New International Division of Labor. The concept of the *International Division of Labor* (IDL) was originally used to describe the structural division existing between the colonial powers and their dependent colonies. Basically, this division consisted in the “periphery” countries supplying primary resources for production in the industrial “core” countries – they were the “hewers of wood and the drawers of water” for the developed world (Sanderson 1992: 199).

A common view is that a new international division of labor has emerged within the world economy. The distinction between an industrial “core” and a raw material producing “periphery” no longer holds. Many commentators seek a systemic explanation, arguing that long-term tendencies in the development of capitalism has led to the relocation of production to low-wage areas from the mid-1960s. In short, the *New International Division of Labor* (NIDL) consists of firms from industrialized countries seeking to maximize profit by relo-

cating labor-intensive production to low-wage developing countries. The goods produced are subsequently exported to the companies' home markets, or other markets in the advanced North. The availability of a worldwide reservoir of potential labor, combined with certain technological developments, such as the decomposition of tasks, has made it possible for firms to employ Third World workers with a minimum of training. The fluidity of capital investments, along with the growing importance for the MNCs, has also contributed to this change. (Jenkins 1992: 33ff).

This has caused the proliferation of export-processing zones (EPZs) throughout the globe and it has changed the pattern of South-North trade. In 1992, almost 60% of developing country exports to the industrialized world consisted of manufactured goods, compared with 5% in the mid-50s (Watkins 1997). Decreased industrial investment and increased unemployment within the advanced industrial countries have paralleled this trend. Already by the late 1960s, U.S. electronics firms had moved 90% of their labor-intensive production to the Third World (Tiano 1987a: 19; Nash 1983).

A remarkable fact about the new international division of labor is that women in large numbers have entered the industrial workforce. It has been estimated that about 85% of the workers in the world's export processing zones (EPZs) in the mid-80s were women (Peterson – Runyan 1993: 100). Moreover, it is particularly *young* women, typically 16-24 years old, who have been absorbed into the workforce (Tiano 1987a: 19). The rise of women's share in industrial employment parallels the rise in manufactured exports from the Third World to such an extent that Pearson writes: "industrialization in the post-war period has been as much female-led as export-led" (1994: 345). There are several factors explaining the preference for hiring women to work in the export-processing factories. One is the widespread assumption that women are better at enduring monotonous tasks, and that they have a "natural" talent for work requiring dexterity and "nimble fingers". Commentators argue, however, that to the extent that women really do possess this "advantage" over men, it is because they have been socialized by gender stereotyping into carrying out detailed work over sustained periods (Young 1987: 109; Pearson 1994: 347).

Another explanation is that MNCs target women instead of men in the Third World because patriarchal ideology makes them the cheapest and most easily manipulated workers, allowing firms to lower production costs as much as possible. Women, especially young Third World women, are supposed to be docile and less likely than men to organize in labor unions (Bullock 1994: 70ff). And since women are primarily associated with the private sphere, their income is considered only complementary to their husbands' wages. If women are considered as working only for "pocket money"- no matter how unreal this stereotype is- their labor can be bought at a much cheaper price. But MNCs not only require low labor costs. They also demand labor to be flexible, that is, subject to as few regulations as possible. Women are "superexploitable" (Cockcroft 1998) in the sense that if their work is merely seen as a temporary departure from their "natural" domain of the household in times of hardship, they do not require stable working conditions. Deregulating labor standards

has been an integrated part of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs), introduced in Third World countries under pressure from the international financial agencies, and it coincides with women's increased labor force participation (Standing 1989). Following this line of argument, MNCs' profitability depends on the existence of patriarchal structures, and the maintenance of the public/private divide. The patriarchal ideology, "the 'mystification' of women as housewives" (Mies 1986: 120) is what lowers labor costs – although it has no empirical base since most Third World men cannot afford a non-working housewife. Maintaining the ideology in spite of reality becomes essential for the functioning of the new international division of labor where women are central, not marginal, to capital accumulation (Cockcroft 1998). Capitalism, then, reinforces patriarchy, as predicted by the exploitation thesis.

According to Mies, the NIDL not only requires the exploitation of the world's cheapest labor. It also demands the mobilization of consumers in the North (Northern women – traditionally conceived of as consumers – have an important role here). Because in this division of labor, the Third World does not produce what its own people need, only what consumers in the North will buy. When Northern markets are saturated with necessary consumer goods, workers of the Third world have to produce luxury items, that because of the low labor costs will be affordable to more people in the North. Then, in spite of rising unemployment and decrease in real wages in the North that follows from the relocation of production to the South, the new international division of labor guarantees a level of mass consumption that prevents social unrest (1986: 114ff). Expanding capitalism eventually also requires Third World people to consume. Sklair (1994: 178ff) claims that this is obtained by the creation and maintenance of "the culture-ideology of consumerism", defined as "a coherent set of practices, attitudes and values, based on advertising and the mass media but permeating the whole social structure, that encourages ever-expanding consumption of consumer goods and services". Since the masses cannot be relied on to keep buying, especially when they do not have access to spare cash or credit, maintaining this culture-ideology is vital for Third World consumption.

3 Background to the case study

3.1 Mexico in the global economy

The transition of the closed, state-controlled Mexican economy to integration into the world economy is said to have signified "a shift as revolutionary as in the former communist countries" (Watkins 1997). This subsection briefly outlines this process.

Mexico experienced a period of rapid economic growth in the wartime and postwar years. The growth was connected to the import substitution strategy for industrialization (ISI)¹ then employed, shielding the industry from foreign

competition and involving the government in important strategic decisions. But the “boom” was offset by side effects such as the enormous increase in population, rural unemployment and urbanization. In the early 1970s, Mexico experienced high inflation and price increases. In 1976, however, new oil reserves were discovered. The price of oil at this time was highly elevated as a result of the oil crisis, which allowed the Mexican ruling party to borrow heavily on the world capital market to modernize the economy. By 1981, the price of oil dropped very fast, and interest rates were on the rise. The debt of around \$100 billions put Mexico in a situation of capital flight, inflation, and chaos on the financial markets. In 1982, the Mexican government declared a moratorium on its debt, launching the global “debt crisis” of the early 1980s (Mason 1997: 85ff).

During the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88) Mexico had to implement the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) demanded by the IMF and the World Bank in order to qualify for loans. Between 1980 and 1991, Mexico was handed more loans from the World Bank than any other country had received. In exchange, the country was “redesigned”. The role of the state in relation to the market was severely limited and government spending was cut by half. The economy was “opened up” by a change from a focus on the domestic market to a focus on the export market. In 1985, Mexico formally reversed the ISI strategy for export-orientation, and in the following year joined the GATT whereby tariffs were lowered. The social costs of this redesign were high: unemployment grew, wages were frozen and prices increased – the buying power of the minimum wage dropped by 67% from 1982 to 1991 (Mason 1997: 90ff; Skott – Larudee 1994). In the much-disputed elections of 1988, charged with accusations of electoral rigging, Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the PRI² defeated the PRD³-candidate. According to the PRI-controlled media, he won by a 50,3% majority. Supported by neo-liberal technocrats, his government moved rapidly rightwards. The longstanding antipathy toward close economic relations with the U.S. also changed during this period, and Mexico joined Canada and the U.S. in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which became effective on January 1, 1994. By the end of the same year, Mexico was hit by a new economic crisis, and radical devaluation was the only choice. The weaker peso meant a huge increase in Mexico’s dollar-denominated foreign debt, which passed the 1982 crisis level. The amount of people living in poverty increased from 13 to 18 million in less than a year and inflation reached 35% (Mason 1997: 95ff). Per capita income is, in constant dollars, lower today than in 1980, and excluding Africa, Mexico ranks sixth from the bottom in income inequality (Castaneda 1996).

As we have seen, Mexico was relatively “open” even before NAFTA. The main function of the agreement is therefore to attract further investment and establish credibility for the domestic reforms already implemented, by “locking in” the free market arrangements against future changes in government (Skott–Larudee 1994). It also entails a secure access to the U.S. market, which counts for 85% of Mexican exports. NAFTA is a less deep form of integration than the EU in several respects: it does neither include the establishment of a

Common External Tariff (CET) nor the provision of resource transfer from stronger to weaker members. And it most certainly does not include the free movement of labor. Unlike the EU members, the NAFTA countries are complementary rather than competitive. Thus, trade will be based on differences in factor endowments rather than competitive, intra-industry trade (Robson 1998: 287ff). Since Mexico’s comparative advantage is in cheap unskilled labor, the income distribution might be more skewed to the disadvantage of the poorer segments of the population (Skott – Larudee 1994). This has been one of the main arguments for Mexican anti-NAFTA activists, among them several of the NGO representatives I interviewed.

3.2 Women and work in Mexico

Female suffrage was introduced in Mexico in 1953. Tuñon-Pablos (1999: 105) argues that this was not a result of changed gender roles or of a genuine concern about gender equality, but rather a decision based on the desire to imitate developed countries, where female suffrage was the norm. The fact that the Constitution was not amended to establish gender equality until 1974 might lend support to this hypothesis. Before that year a man could lawfully prevent his wife from working because it was considered his duty to provide for the family. Women were allowed to work only if it did not interfere with household obligations.

The real economic situation for women workers today can be difficult to determine since 50% of the workforce is employed in the informal economy. One of the effects of the economic reforms has been to increase the number of women in this type of insecure, low-paid jobs. But structural reforms have also increased women’s participation in the formal labor market – there has been an “added worker”-effect; meaning that when the primary worker is laid off, another member enters the workforce in order to protect the family’s standard of living (Holt 1994: 181ff). This has caused a growing number of women “heads of household”, signifying that they increasingly function as the main supporters of the families.

Women’s wages, however, have dropped considerably. Whereas average real wages dropped for all workers in the formal sector (the 1994 average wages were below their 1980 level in real terms) they declined even more for women. This occurred in spite of an increase in women’s average level of education. Thus, structural adjustments in Mexico did not reduce labor market discrimination against women, and in fact appear to have contributed to it. Alarcón and McKinley (1999: 103ff) find this indicative of a general problem of the way in which labor markets function in Mexico: earnings are not linked to education, training or skills. This contradicts the “integration thesis”, which states that achievements, and not ascribed characteristics such as gender and race, determine success on the capitalist labor market. Mexico’s labor markets obviously do not correspond to this description.

Today, 35% of all Mexican women work outside the home compared with 19% in 1970, dedicating on the average 39 weekly hours to formal employment

and 33 to household chores. On the aggregate level, then, it seems that women still perform most of the household work although employed within the labor market. This could indicate a weak or non-existing effect of paid work on gender relations. This interpretation is reinforced by the persisting occupational segregation, clustering women into “female” jobs: women constitute 90% of the domestic workers, and 62% of the teachers. Even businesswomen tend to devote themselves to services, sales and alimentation – activities considered typically female. In general, women are also paid less than men. Overall, women’s take home pay represents about 81% of the wages of male workers. In part this is because women are over represented in minimum wage and less-than-minimum wage jobs. But at all levels women’s wages and salaries are lower than men’s and the higher one climbs the career ladder, the smaller a percentage women’s wages. For the “supervisors and bosses” category, the difference between men’s and women’s earnings is of 48% (Villaescusa 2000; MLNA 1999). Women workers, independent unions, feminist and human rights organizations have proposed that a number of changes be made in Mexican labor law to protect women workers. But this is further complicated because there are so few women legislators – while women make up about half of the population, they represent only 13,9% of all legislators in the state legislatures or Federal Congress (MLNA 1999).

3.3 The maquiladora industry

The word “maquila” used to be the portion of flour that the miller kept after he had grinded the corn. Nowadays, it is the MNCs that provide the “corn” (for example cut cloth or electronic components), Mexico keeps the “portion” (U.S. dollars changed into pesos for wages and production costs) and the assembled goods (garments, TVs or auto parts) are shipped to the U.S. (Sklair 1993: 10).

The maquiladora, or maquila (the words are used interchangeably) industry was established as a result of the “Border Industrialization Program”(BIP), initiated in 1965. The idea was to reduce the (male) unemployment along the country’s northern border resulting from the conclusion of the “bracero” or day-laborer program which previously had allowed Mexican farm workers temporary work in the U.S. Another related reason was to avoid social unrest or an outright political rebellion starting among all these, mostly young, men suddenly out of work (*Elsa Jiménez*). The BIP was also thought to contribute to industrial development by creating linkages to local industry. For U.S. firms, that were the first to outsource production to the border zone, the arrangement provided low labor costs that would ensure the competitiveness of their products. The companies were allowed tax incentives and enjoyed very favorable tariff laws, and the geographical closeness to the U.S. markets lowered transport costs enormously compared to similar investment in Southeast Asia.

The maquiladora industry is the equivalent of foreign assembly, and is defined as “an industrial process or service designed to transform, process or repair goods of foreign origin that are temporarily imported for subsequent

export” (Cardero et al 2000: 49). Since the beginning of the BIP, textiles, electric-electronics, and auto parts have been the most important activities (Carrillo – Kopinak 1999: 85) Originally, 100% of the goods had to be exported back to the U.S. since Mexico employed the ISI strategy to protect domestic industry. The BIP also caused industrialization of the U.S. side of the border. The U.S.-based plants made the components, which were assembled at the Mexican-based plants and then shipped back for final processing and sale, creating “twin cities” like Tijuana-San Diego, Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, and Matamoros-Brownsville. The growth of these border municipalities is directly related to demand and circumstances in the U.S.

After oil sales, the maquiladora industry is now the second largest source of foreign exchange in Mexico, and it accounts for 42% of total exports. It is also important in absorbing the workforce, currently employing a little bit more than a million people. Economist Macario Schettino (2000) asserts that these are the industry’s main purposes – creating jobs and attracting dollars. It does not contribute to industrial development to any considerable degree, since it has hardly created any linkages to local industry. To keep up with its main functions, the wages must necessarily be kept at a low level. According to his calculations, average maquila wages (including the salaries of technicians, administrators etc) must not surpass \$3,50/hour, or else the industry stagnates. His results suggest, then, that the possibilities of ever getting a substantial raise for the maquila workers are actually zero.

As the demand for labor is a *derived demand*, the demand for labor in the maquiladoras is directly connected to U.S. consumer demand. On the other hand, it is also connected to the Mexican economy in the sense that the maquiladora industry booms when the Mexican currency drops. Currency devaluations make maquiladora investment cheaper for foreign companies, and hence the state of the maquiladora industry can be thought of as contrary to the state of the Mexican economy.

Since its inception, the BIP (subsequently known as the “maquiladora program”) has been subject to harsh criticism. In the U.S., the most outspoken critics have been representatives of organized labor who perceive it as challenging the interests of U.S. workers. In Mexico, intellectuals have considered it threatening to national sovereignty (Fernández-Kelly 1983: 35f). The program has also been condemned by human rights organizations, and by environmentalists, since firms have tended to take advantage of Mexican lax environmental regulations by dumping hazardous waste and locating their dirtiest industry on the border.

Oscar Margain Pitman of the Mexican Directorate of Labor reminds me that one has to bear in mind that the maquiladora industry is dynamic and has gone through many changes since its inception. For example, it is no longer located solely in the border zone, but exists in other parts of the country as well. Another important change is the diminishing share of U.S. companies, especially in the border zone. Asian MNCs, especially Japanese and Korean, have established themselves rapidly during the 1990s and now make up a large part of the maquiladoras all over the country (*Junichi Yamamoto*).

4 Women of the maquiladoras

My fieldwork was carried out in Tijuana, the largest city in the state of Baja California, bordering San Diego in the U.S. A central characteristic of maquiladora production in Tijuana is its specialization in television sets and related products, which has given it the nickname “Television Valley” (Carrillo–Kopinak 1999: 92). During the 1990s, it has also come to be the leading city along the border for Asian foreign direct investment, as Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese MNCs increasingly have established plants for production for the U.S. market. The great majority of the women I interviewed were working for Asian firms.

As already mentioned, the industry has gone through some important changes. Measured in relevance for my case study, the most important change is the enormous strength of the U.S. economy in recent years. Remembering that the demand for labor is a *derived demand*, the increased buying power of U.S. consumers has increased the demand for labor in the maquiladoras to the point where supply can no longer meet demand (*Efrain Ortiz Castillo*). The Mexican devaluation in 1994 obviously contributed to this development. As will be pointed out, this has important implications for the results of my fieldwork.

4.1 Conditions of work

Recruitment and female workforce characteristics in the maquiladora industry. From the outset, young women were targeted for employment in the maquiladoras. Plant managers based their preference for women on the presumed anatomical and “natural” features of manual dexterity and patience. They were also supposed to be more tractable in general than men (Fernández-Kelly 1983: 43). A brochure for businesses setting up maquiladoras stated: “from their earliest conditioning women show respect and obedience to authority, especially men. The women follow orders willingly, accept change and adjustments easily and are considerably less demanding” (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983:30). Their recent entrance into the labor market, rather than youth in itself, made *younger* women the preferred employees, according to what managers in Mexicali told Susan Tiano (1987b: 84f). They had usually no previous contact with labor unions, and were less likely to become “troublemakers”. Since most of them were single and childless, household and childrearing responsibilities would not interfere with their work performance in the forms of absenteeism and lack of concentration, and they were therefore considered better employees. After the recession in 1974–75, the Mexican government exempted firms from various existing labor laws, which caused a further proliferation of plants. The maquiladoras were now able to dismiss “inefficient” workers without severance pay, and to adjust the size of the workforce as needs required (Tiano, 1987a: 22). As we have already seen, patriarchal ideology make women ideal workers when labor standards are deregulated. Moreover, because of the maquiladoras’ preference for hiring young

female workers, the BIP did not reach its original goal, which was to reduce *male* unemployment.

The maquiladora industry has grown explosively; only in Tijuana, the number of workers employed has increased by almost 50% – reaching about 180,000 – since 1995 (INEGI 2000). The numbers of both female and male workers have increased in absolute terms, and women’s relative share has decreased, from 78% in 1980 to 58% in 1997 (Cardero et al 2000: 50). Does this mean that the companies’ preference for docility, passivity and obedience, that once made women the ideal workers, has changed? Leslie Sklair (1993: 171ff) has another explanation. According to him, “the litany of docile, undemanding, ‘nimble-fingered’ women workers, uninterested in joining unions or standing up for their rights” is an ideological tool for manipulating working class consciousness and behavior. The “ideal worker” has become institutionalized, and serves as a model also for male workers, conveying the notion that only those who comply with the non-aggressive stereotype will be hired and retained by the MNCs.

Except for the change in gender workforce composition, there has also been a change in the age composition of women workers. The “young, single, childless girls” are still in majority, but by 1991 a substantial proportion (38%) of women workers were mothers. Whereas before young girls were ideal because their lack of experience made them less likely to become “troublemakers”, managers now seem to have developed preference for (somewhat) older women with children. According to the interviews conducted by Tiano (1994: 90ff), managers perceive young women (and men, for that matter) as more likely to be “job-hoppers”, whereas women with children tend to stay longer at the job. Also, being responsible for supporting their children actually makes *mothers* the least likely to risk their jobs by engaging in union activities. The most reliable workers of all are the single mothers, who are solely responsible for the welfare of their children (Carrillo–Kopinak 1999: 113).

Anyway, with the industry booming and companies competing about the workers, there is not much room for preferences of any kind. *Juan Carlos Palacios*, quality control manager and partly responsible for recruitment at a Japanese plant, tells me: “All we care about is that they can read and write. Nowadays, one cannot require more...”. Judging from all the job-ads that can be seen everywhere in the industrial zones of Tijuana, typical requirements include to be 17–35 years old, having passed *primaria* (6 years of schooling), and possess a birth certificate. For women, another absolute requisite is to be non-pregnant. All the women I spoke to had had to take a pregnancy test before they were employed. For feminist activists, like *Ana Enriquez* from the NGO Factor X, this is a violation of reproductive rights, which has become so institutionalized that people do not even notice it. “It is done so systematically that the women don’t even question it. Because there is a lack of rights education, the women don’t know when their rights are being violated”. It is also contrary to “strategic gender interests”, which includes the freedom of choice over childbearing.

Wages and other benefits. The minimum wage level used to provide both the “floor” and the “ceiling” for maquiladora earnings. Nowadays, however, the average maquiladora wage is about 1,5 times the minimum wage. (Carrillo – Kopinak 1999: 131). This is partly a result of the increased demand for labor. But it can also be explained by the fact that with the latest devaluation minimum wages lost half their former value in U.S. dollars. Paying the workers more than required does thus not mean spending more money on wages. The crises have lowered real wages and thereby increased the competitiveness of the maquiladora industry. When compared internationally, this is particularly dramatic: whereas in 1975, maquila wages were on the average 3 times as high as the average EPZ wages in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, in 1996 the Asian wages were 4 times as high as the Mexican ones (ibid: 133).

According to Mexican law, companies have social and medical obligations toward their employees. Firms register the employees with the Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS), which covers maternal benefits (42 days before and 42 days after delivery), and pays workman’s compensation in the case of workplace accidents. Whereas maquiladoras in the past often tried to escape the IMSS payments, they now seem to comply to a greater extent (*Jaime Cota*). In May 2000, 317,000 maquiladora workers were insured with the IMSS in Baja California (IMSS 2000). Employment in the maquiladora industry offers more security than employment in the informal sector. On the other hand, informal activities of similar kind pay more than maquiladora work (Staudt 1998: 21).

The minimum wage in the state of Baja California, currently 52 pesos/day, is the highest in Mexico. When performing the same tasks, women and men are remunerated equally. The women I interviewed earned between 415-780 pesos for a 45-50 hour week, the difference depending on the company, seniority and position – some of them had acquired the status of inspectors instead of assemblers. Workers do not get paid for the first week of employment. This payment is instead deposited, to be paid out as “compensation” when workers get laid off as companies cut employment as a response to declining U.S. consumer demand for the goods produced (*Teresa*). This tells us something about the vulnerability of these workers, who constitute the “flexible labor force” required for offshore production.

Considering the high demand for labor, it is remarkable that wages are still kept at such a low level. According to regular micro economic theory, labor shortages should lead to upward pressure on wages. The explanation is, of course, that the whole existence of this particular kind of industry depends on low labor costs. As we have already seen (section 3.3) a substantial wage raise is essentially impossible. There is no doubt that wages are very low, especially when compared to what the companies earn from selling the products. “There is no doubt exploitation in the Marxist sense of the word” says *Junichi Yamamoto*. But, though wage increases are impossible, there are other ways of attracting workers. *Efrain Ortiz Castillo* tells me that, with the competition between the companies grown fierce in the course of the last couple of years, they use special bonuses (for punctuality, productivity etc) and provide certain

services, like offering transport and canteens in order to retain the workforce. The maquiladoras offer generally much nicer, cleaner, less sweatshop-like workplaces now, compared to only a few years ago. Some of the bigger maquiladoras even offer daycare centers for the workers’ children. But *Ana Enriquez* from Factor X is not impressed. According to her, access to daycare should be considered natural for employers who largely depend on female workers, not as a service offered out of the consideration of the companies – which is how it is often described. What is remarkable is not that they provide the daycare centers now, but that it has taken them so long to do it.

Some companies offer courses and training to their employees. At *Letitia*’s firm, the workers who have not finished *preparatoria* can stay on after work and receive elementary instruction. English classes are sometimes also offered. But, as she says, “that’s just for the girls who are single, who don’t have obligations in the household”. *Teresa* tells me about a course in “family integration” for women workers: “Here, many times the families are disintegrated, many people have problems with their mothers, with their children. . . . And then there are problems, some people ask for lots of *permisos* [leave of absence] to take care of the children, of someone who is sick. So the course is for this, to help people deal with these issues”. It is obvious that workers who repeatedly have to leave work to attend to personal problems signify an economic problem for the companies. But although this kind of course might be helpful to some people, it also reinforces traditional gender roles and it is indicative of women’s double burden: women are supposed to be the ones responsible for the “family integration” at the same time as managing a full-time job in the public sphere. The suspicion that companies have an interest in preserving the traditional notion of femininity among their women workers is reinforced by the occurrence of female beauty contests, arranged by the companies for the workers’ entertainment (*Lucrecia*). Although workers might find it an amusing interruption on a boring workday, it reinforces the patriarchal understanding of women as objects. Interpreted from the view of the exploitation thesis, it could be argued that this kind of seemingly innocent entertainment is arranged in order to keep the women in an object position. Because if women keep identifying primarily with their roles as wives/mothers/beautyobjects, it makes them more exploitable.

Work and alienation. If paid work is to be considered emancipating, women must experience it as something more than just a temporary widening of their roles as mothers and housewives. Empowerment can occur when groups develop a collective identity. For paid employment to imply a crossing of the public/private divide in any real sense, then, it must carry with it the possibility of developing a new identity as a worker, or at least not counteract it. In this section, I will look more closely on the actual work performed in the maquiladoras.

The concept of *alienation* appeared with the breakdown of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, in the work of Hegel and Marx. Alienation is understood to be inherent in the division of labor, and it is experienced by the worker in the

forms of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. *Powerlessness* since organization is hierarchical and the worker is treated as just another piece of machinery; *meaninglessness* since work is fragmented into lots of different tasks and the worker's contribution to the final product is minimal. Moreover, the worker has a limited idea about how the product, and thus his own activities, are related to greater society. *Isolation* because the workers do not come together to make decision about production. These three make the worker treat work merely as a means toward the end of material security, but since work is so important to a person's self-definition she/he comes to view her/himself as an instrument, in this manner developing *self-estrangement*. Apart from the individual experience, this also precludes solidarity and cooperation (Gintis – Bowles 1978: 274ff). According to Gintis and Bowles, all workers under capitalism – white-collar as well as blue-collar – experience alienation, and it is not my aim to confirm or oppose this. But it seems that if alienation is a salient feature of the production process, then the potential for work as an identity constructing activity is reduced, as are its empowering capabilities.

The maquiladoras have traditionally relied on a production method known in the field of industrial sociology as “Fordism”. This is characterized by assembly line production involving a high degree of division of labor, which simplifies tasks to routine operations requiring minimal skill or training. The pace of work is controlled by the machine through the speed of the line, rather than being under the control of individual workers. The worker is thus effectively reduced to an “attachment” of the machine. Apart from being a highly inflexible method, it also tends to dehumanize work and contribute to worker alienation (Jenkins 1992: 26f).

The kind of work performed in the maquiladoras are minute, monotonous – alienating – tasks. *Teresa* works at a big Japanese company, assembling television sets. Her job consists in inspecting the upper part of a channel convertor. 7500 little square gadgets pass before her eyes on the production line every day. *Elisabeth*, who works at the same company – inspecting the bottom part of the same things – says her sight has deteriorated during the 3 years of doing the same work. *Judith* spends her workdays putting together two components of a ventilator for a Taiwanese firm. *Rosario* uses a big, noisy machine to perforate one side of a metal plate with four holes. The plate, which is part of a VCR, then moves on to her coworker who uses a similar machine for making another four holes. The *meaninglessness* of the work is also suggested by the women's little knowledge about their company and its role on the market. Most of them knew the nationality of the company (although a couple of them were hesitant), but nobody knew the name of its CEO. They had little idea about which countries – apart from the U.S. – that import the goods they spend their days producing, and what they knew about their companies' market status was limited to what they were informed by management when it was time to cut the workforce because of decreasing demand.

Since the workers contribute minimally to the final product, and do not have a clear conception of the greater context of the production, the job in the

maquiladoras can hardly be considered empowering, one of the elements of which is “sense of self in a wider context”. It also seems obvious that the *isolation* of the job itself does not enhance the development of a worker identity. Apart from the boredom that is inherent in this kind of work, it also precludes the acquirement of transferable skills that can be used in other workplaces, which implies a problem for those interested in seeking other jobs (Solórzano-Torres 1987: 54).

Labor turnover. Labor turnover is the principal human resource problem for the companies. The rate of turnover in Tijuana is 13% /month, and the average length of staying at a company is 3,5 years (Carrillo – Kopinak 1999: 140). In *Juan Carlos Palacios' firm*, the majority only stay for 4-5 months.

Some of “my” women regret the labor turnover, because it makes it harder to get friends among the co-workers. Few of them see their co-workers in their spare time. Apart from constituting an economic problem for the companies, then, the great flow of people renders comradeship between workers more difficult. Remembering the connection between the individual and collective levels for female empowerment, workplace socialization seems vital if paid job is to be considered a source of emancipation. Labor turnover is also a real problem for workers' organization in the maquilas, because when people keep coming and going, there is no learning from the history of the fights. *Jaime Cota* says: “Every time we start a new struggle it is like starting from zero again”.

Relations with management. According to the ILO, the women who are most likely to experience workplace violence – physical and psychological – are women workers in EPZs, together with migrant workers (Rodgers 1999). In the earlier writings about the maquiladoras, it was commonly held that the women workers were used by the male bosses and managers whose hierarchical position was “higher” than their own (Young 1987: 110). According to the NGOs MAS, Yeuni and Factor X, sexual harassment is still common in the maquiladoras.

The women I spoke to, however, seem to have little complaints about the treatment from male managers. Some say that there have been problems with sexual harassment, but when higher-ranking employees have got notified, the men in question have been sacked. This might have to do with the shortage of labor. The workers do not have to endure harassment if they can get work someplace else, which makes companies more concerned about workplace relations. What seems to be common, though, is that some women workers go out with men who might help them to advance to a somewhat better paid position within the firm. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't – in either case the women in question are despised by their female co-workers. Although not outright sexual harassment, this phenomenon is indicative of women's vulnerability in the workplace. In order to achieve a better job (on which the wellbeing of their children might depend), they have to please men in power position. Advancement is thus not based on performance or skills as the integration

thesis argues, but on the ability of acting out the traditional female role of pleasing men.

Ana Enriquez tells me that although firms no longer sack women who are pregnant or people who fight for their rights as workers to the same extent as they used to—much because of the international attention that the maquiladoras have received—they have other, subtler methods for getting rid of problematic workers. For example, these workers are often transferred to doing much heavier or harder tasks, until they resign voluntarily.

Another issue concerning labor-management relations that is also brought up by the various NGOs, is their omission of informing workers of workplace health and safety hazards. The workers are often exposed to toxic chemicals that, in the case of pregnant women, can hurt the fetuses. Many accidents occur because the workers have not been sufficiently informed about the workings of the machines, and productivity bonuses may contribute to negligence. Many times, safety equipment is insufficient or not provided at all. The state government has at least part of the blame for this. Nowadays, Mexican laws are rather strict on workplace health and safety, but authorities rarely inspect that standards are followed. It is in the interest of the state that the companies stay there, while it is in the interest of the companies to pay as little as possible for safety. Thus, there is a tacit understanding between the two, and state authorities neglect inspections (*Jaime Cota; Elsa Jimenez; Ana Enriquez*).

4.2 Living conditions

Reasons for working: Push and Pull factors. My impression is that female work in the maquiladoras is above all part of the households' survival strategies. "Not working" is not an alternative for the majority of these women. Most of my them would rather stay at home with the children, but see themselves compelled to take up paid work. This seems to lend support to the exploitation thesis, according to which women work out of a lack of other options.

It is interesting to note, however, that although economic necessity is the main push factor that makes the women take up the job, some of them experience positive "side effects" in the forms of increased autonomy and less dependence of the husbands' incomes. *Araceli, Judith* and *Teresa* manage to combine maquiladora work with education. They do work out of need, but the maquiladora work also gives them a possibility to study, although at a slow pace. They all state that they would work even if their husbands could support them, but that they would prefer better-paid jobs, which is why they study. Apparently, they experience some sort of satisfaction. For example, *Araceli* tells me: "I like to work. I really do. Whatever they tell me to do, I like it. Staying home would drive me crazy, I want to move ahead. But I want to move ahead for my own sake. Well, my husband earns more than I do, but in any case one feels good when contributing... even if only a grain of sand [...]. And what if I can't be with my husband all my life? Maybe something happens to him so that he can't work. I can't be sure. Because of this, I have to work". It must be

noted, however, that of these three, one is childless and the others have relatives who help them with the children.

This seems to contradict the exploitation thesis, which states that paid work only deepens women's oppression and does not increase their bargaining power within the household. Even if women enter into waged labor because of necessity, they may experience the liberating effects predicted by the integration thesis.

Material standards and family constellations. As mentioned above, the minimum wage in Baja California is the highest in Mexico, but so are living expenses. The repeated devaluations have eroded purchasing power and wages have not kept pace with the increasing costs of living. Between 1983 and 1991, purchasing power dropped by 66%, and in 1998, it was at the same level as 1988 (Tiano 1994: 149, Cardero et al 2000: 60). In 1996, the San Diego based "Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers" determined the average numbers of work required to buy basic consumer goods in Tijuana, consistent with prices in January of the same year: 4 hours to buy one kilo beans, 11 hours and 30 minutes to buy a box of thirty diapers and 43 minutes to buy one roll of toilet paper (cited at corporatewatch's homepage). The lower purchasing power makes it almost impossible to live on a maquiladora wage only, not to mention supporting a family. Among the women I interviewed, the majority shared the financial responsibility for the household with at least one other family member. Two were single mothers who could not afford having their children living with them. Instead, the children were growing up with their grandparents at the place of origin, and their mothers sent back whatever money they could afford to save from their meager maquiladora incomes. One was a widow with teenage children who worked.

Even for those with working spouses, supporting a family with growing children can be hard. *Elisabeth* tells me about her economic difficulties now that all her three children go to school. Although Mexican schools are supposedly free of charge, they require a registration fee, which in the case of her children is 370 pesos each. Apart from the fee, parents have to buy school uniforms, books and other equipment. To manage, Elisabeth works 7 days a week, whenever there is work at the factory at the weekends. This brings her a total of 790 pesos. She regrets that the money does not allow any pleasures for the children, and that she has so little time to see them. In general, the money does not allow for much entertainment. Many spend their weekends visiting friends or relatives, but few can afford to go to amusement parks, restaurants or to the movies. Economic hardship is worsened by the fact that maquiladora workers are not allowed visitors' visa to the U.S., since because they earn so little in Mexico, authorities fear they will stay on as illegal aliens. This way, the workers are barred from the otherwise unique possibility for border inhabitants in both countries—to economize by buying what is cheaper on respective sides (for example: pharmaceuticals and medical services in Mexico; groceries, used furniture and kitchen appliances in the U.S.) Not everyone was living in complete misery, though. My impression is that living standards among

maquiladora workers are quite varying. Some of the younger women, married or not, reduced living expenses by sharing a house or an apartment with friends or relatives. A few had husbands who earned a lot more than they did, and they could therefore afford a better standard.

Does work change gender roles? The stereotyping of Mexican women classifies them as either sainted mothers or “loose” women. They are perceived exclusively in terms of their domestic functions, as wives and mothers supported by male breadwinners. Except for selflessly committing themselves to childbearing and caring for the sick and elderly, they must also maintain their purity by remaining in the household (Ruiz – Tiano 1987: 4).

According to *María Rosario Galbán*, however, gender roles have changed a great deal during the last decades. The stereotype of the Mexican woman is no longer consistent with reality. Now, women taking up paid work is normal, which increases their bargaining power within the household. *Claudia Barrón* emphasizes that the effects of globalization have changed gender relations as women are increasingly heads of households. But *Elsa Jiménez* has another opinion: working in the maquiladoras does not change gender relations. The fact that having a paid work outside the household has become the norm only institutionalizes women’s double burdens. They also have to live with the constant guilt of not spending enough time with their children, and not having time to sort out family problems, which is still seen as women’s responsibility.

Concerning household chores, my findings reinforce *Elsa Jiménez*’ argument. Among the women who lived only with their husbands and children, most had total responsibility for the household, spending about 3-6 hours a day cleaning, cooking, helping children with their homework etc. Some of the younger ones, however, state that their husbands “help” in the household – which illustrates that they still find it mainly their own responsibility.

But gender relations are not only about household work. The integration thesis states that paid work increases women’s autonomy. Some, like *Rosario*, believes this to be true. When asked about whether work changes the traditional role of women, she says: “I think so, because... One notices the difference because one can do what one wants. Many times, the men decide, *ay*, they command us, they want to command and do whatever they want but they no longer can. Now we [the women] can work and value ourselves for our own sake, and not let us be used by the men because they think they are more valuable than us”. *Rosaura*’s experience is different. Her husband being unemployed, she is now the main provider of the family. Apart from living in poverty and bearing the double burden of work and household, she is regularly exposed to sexual and physical violence from her husband. This is a common situation for female maquiladora workers, says *Elsa Jiménez*, who has represented a number of battered women in lawsuits against their husbands. According to Tuñón Pablos (1999: 109), the proliferation of women-breadwinners has led to a crisis in values, since mentalities shaped over centuries cannot automatically adjust to these changes. This seems to be in accordance with the notion that it is in close relationships that empowerment comes hardest.

Migration. Tijuana is a city that has grown explosively with the influx of labor migrants. From being a small town only 30 years ago, its population now surpasses a million (*Efrain Ortiz Castillo*). With one exception, all of my interviewees had migrated to Tijuana in search for work. “Push” and “pull” factors are also used to specify the reasons for migration. These can be economic, political, environmental or ideological. However, Héléne Pellerin points out that the problem with the push-pull approach is that it misses the dialectical dimension when portraying migrants as merely subjected to structures they do not control. She argues that migrants should be seen also as *participants* of structural change. Their movement imply changes in the organization of production, as well as in social production of ideas and identities, both in regions of origin and destination (Pellerin 1996).

In my case it is obvious that the reason for migration is above all economic. Poverty makes people leave their place of origin (push), and the availability of work in the border zone makes them go in that direction (pull). It used to be taken for granted that men were the ones migrating in search for better opportunities, whereas women followed them in their roles as keeping the family together. Now, however, it is increasingly admitted that women also migrate in order to improve their lives (Woo Morales 1997). In this sense, migration might contribute to women’s autonomy and independence. *Judith*’s history is a case in point. Tired of poverty and lack of opportunities in her home village in the state of Durango, she moved to Tijuana on her own at the age of 19. She got a job in a Taiwanese maquiladora and has now worked there for 4 years. Migration might also offer an opportunity to break out of traditionally restrictive gender roles in the countryside (Crummett 1996:513). *Araceli*, for example, says that in her home state of Zacatecas, it is much more common that women dedicate themselves only to the households. This, she says, is one reason for her not wanting to return there. She finds women in Tijuana much more independent. Maybe, then, the labor migration to the border region can signify a change in gender roles, although as we have seen, patriarchal ideology is reinforced in other ways in the maquiladora industry.

But arriving in a new place with different customs and traditions brings the migrant in a vulnerable position. Not having a supporting family around makes them more dependent on their jobs. Not to mention the confusion experienced when suddenly involved in a new production system. Many of the migrants who arrive in Tijuana come from the predominantly traditional and agrarian southern states and have never got monetary remuneration before. No wonder, then, that the concept of MNCs, and one’s own rights and responsibilities within the international division of labor, might be a bit complicated to grasp at first. These are the people who are most easily exploitable in the industry, because they often do not know about their rights and are therefore easy to manipulate. For example, if they have a workplace accident, the companies manage to convince them that it was their own fault, thus avoiding to pay the legal indemnification. For women, the vulnerability inherent in the migratory status is even more pronounced (*Yosefina; Jaime Cota*).

4.3 Organization and resistance

Different forms of resistance. Mexican law requires that each company sign a contract with a labor union, supposedly representing the workers. They are affiliated with either the CTM or the CROC—Mexico’s umbrella organizations for labor unions. These so-called “white” or “ghost” unions are however representing the interests of the companies rather than those of the workers, and are never present at the workplaces (*James Samstad*). When independent unions do arise, they are often opposed by the state and by the non-independent unions. The independent unions are small, lack resources, and mainly organize academics (*Sara Román*).

None of the women I interviewed had experience from organization in labor unions, not a single one of them knew which union was supposed to represent them, and most of them did not even know about the existence of these unions. However, women are generally less interested than men in organizing in labor unions. Since the public sphere of work traditionally has been a male arena, so have labor unions traditionally represented “male” interests – and issues such as child care and sexual harassment are rarely central to their concerns (Craske 1999: 93f). To take active part in a labor union struggle would involve the crossing of the public/private divide “twice” – as workers and as political activists.

But the low level of trade unionism should not be misinterpreted as compliance. Joanne Wright (1997) stresses that what looks like passivity or acceptance to the West can be culturally embedded forms of resistance. Staudt (1998: 167f) also emphasizes the importance of taking all forms of “counter-hegemonic practices” into account when determining organization and level of consciousness. There are indications of informal struggles in the *maquiladoras*, in which women are participating. They take such forms as sabotage, work slowdowns and output restrictions. This is interpreted as resistance to the degradation of the “mass worker” under the Fordist production system – as a desire to experience human dignity in a dehumanizing system in a way that does not fit the model of collective workers’ movements (Ong 1997; Peña 1987; Peña 1997: 135ff). However, these types of informal resistance may constitute a form of political socialization, preparing the way for higher levels of struggles. Participating in informal struggles can thus be considered a form of empowerment processes. Among “my” women, only one was outspoken about having participated in such a struggle. Upset about her *maquiladoras*’s decision to keep up production on a religious day, *Judith* organized an informal strike with her co-workers on the assembly line. They actually managed to reach their goal. The Korean company let them have the day off, and excused itself by not knowing about all the religious traditions in this foreign culture.

Yosefina told me about another type of informal struggle. She is a self-taught rights activist, and her private mission is to inform her co-workers about their legal rights. When someone has a workplace accident, gets mutilated by a machine or damages her/his skin from chemicals, she approaches them and

informs them about their rights. She hopes that she contributes to the formation of a greater collective consciousness by creating networks of knowledge, as people spread the rights information. She says that there are many activists like herself, operating clandestinely in the interests of the workers. The feminist NGO Factor X works in a similar way: they give empowerment courses in labor, reproductive and women’s rights to a certain number of women “promoters” who are then responsible for forming small groups with other women in their workplaces and to instruct them about their rights. This sort of activities must be done “under the water”- secretly, to avoid repercussions from the companies. CITAC is mainly an information center but also sometimes gives courses in labor rights to both men and women workers. This organization also participates in supporting the few independent unions when they sometimes arise. *Yeuan* offers free legal advice to workers of the *maquiladoras* in both private and collective matters. When accusing a company for abusing labor law, the strategy is not to settle for monetary compensation, but to make the company change its practices. This is achieved by pressure from the media, and the spread of information to solidarity organizations in other countries.

International cooperation. Several commentators have noted that the international, state-centric system is not only threatened from “above” – from the collaboration between states and the main agents of capitalism – but also from “below”- from social movements or groups reacting to the new circumstances. Both capital and its antisystemic opponents are thus promoting state-undermining processes (Falk 1993; Taylor 1995).

The rationale for international labor cooperation in the case of the manufacturing plants on the U.S.–Mexico border is obvious: since the same companies often have subsidiaries on both sides of the border, the workers would gain a greater leverage by cooperating (LaBotz 1995: 149). And there have been various attempts at transfrontier labor organizing at the border. A case in point is the collaboration between the UE (U.S. electricians’ union) and the FAT (independent Mexican union). So far, the attempts have principally been *pro forma*, not doing much concrete action, but they have been important in the manifestation of shared values. Although the labor cooperation might surge in the future, it is so far a barely emerging process (*Kevin J. Middlebrook*).

But beginning with the alarms about exploitation in the *maquiladoras*, and intensified with the resistance to NAFTA, a cooperation between NGOs working for solidarity has taken form and even managed to pressure the governments to include a (very weak) side accord on labor standards in the NAFTA agreement (Kay 2000). The power of specialized groups increases if they manage to organize themselves and act collectively but, on the other hand, large-scale organization tend to develop new monopolizations of power (Mennell 1994: 183). In the case of network organizing, the asymmetrical distribution of power is structured between center and periphery, as opposed to the formal member organization’s hierarchy (Thörn 2000: 214). This seems to be the drawback of the transnational NGO organization. *Jaime Cota* from CITAC says that the solidarity movements in the U.S., although benevolent, treat their

Mexican counterparts as somewhat less able, and they usually lay down conditions for the granting of financial aid or solidarity. “I suppose it has to do with that they always have seen us as part of their colony”. The cooperation is also complicated by conflicts among the various U.S. organizations—which diverts attention away from the actual cause. The cooperation with Canadian NGOs is perceived as much smoother, because of the lesser asymmetry in power relations. All the NGO representatives I talked to, however, stated they considered the increased international cooperation as the main advantage of globalization.

5 Summing up

In this study, I have sought to explore the effects of waged work on female workers in the export-processing maquiladora industry in Tijuana, in order to find out whether this work can be considered conducive to the emancipation of these women, or if it merely implies the exploitation of the same. Since each woman’s experiences from work are affected by a range of factors that have not been covered by this investigation, and since my study only includes a small number of women, the difficulties in making any general statements based on my results are obvious. Nevertheless, I will now sum up my findings, based on the questions posed in the introduction.

In what ways can it be argued that the work is exploitative to women maquiladora workers? Women have traditionally been targeted for work in the maquiladoras because of supposedly “natural” traits such as manual dexterity and “nimble fingers”, but also because of the perception that they are less likely than men to organize and become “troublemakers”. Patriarchal gender ideology that assumes the household to be women’s natural domain has enabled the companies to pay women workers even less than men, and it has also justified unstable working conditions. The companies have developed preference for hiring women with children because their situation as mothers makes them the least likely to risk their jobs by standing up for their rights. That is, this group is targeted because of the female characteristics that make them more exploitable. Over the years it seems that the image of the ideal worker has become institutionalized so that the fact that men now constitute an increasing share of maquiladora workers, does not imply higher pay or better working conditions. Instead, the exploitable labor pool just seems to have broadened to include men.

Compared to what the companies gain from the low labor costs, wages could no doubt be considered exploitative. The fact that it is almost impossible to survive—let alone to support children—on a maquiladora wage only, limits the possibility of financial independence that could be conducive to emancipation. The great majority of women works out of economic necessity, which limits the likelihood of emancipation and increase their vulnerability to exploitation. When women enter into paid labor as a part of the households’ survival strategies, it is likely to impose on her the double burdens of work in the private and

the public sphere. Although it is hard to comment on gender roles it seems that women still perform most of the household chores, which could be indicative of her “double oppression”. This might not be surprising, considering that the ideal worker has always been depicted in “feminine” terms (docility, dexterity etc), which has conveyed the notion of maquiladora work as non-threatening to her proper role in the household. Female maquiladora workers might have internalized this notion, and it might have made their husbands feel more secure, knowing that their wives’ jobs in the public sphere will not alter power relations within the household. Firms also use women-directed courses and beauty contests in order to reinforce traditional notions of femininity. There are also indications that male managers take advantage of their power positions in relation with their female employees, and the migratory status of most workers makes them more exploitative. Finally, the type of work performed, together with the high rate of labor turnover, seems to counteract (although not totally obstruct) the forming of social bonds on the workplace, that could increase wellbeing in the integration thesis’ sense.

Are there any reasons to believe that the women’s new situation as waged workers contributes to their emancipation? Even though the great majority takes up work in the maquiladora industry out of financial necessity, some women do experience “side effects”, like increased autonomy, once employed. A few women stated that they would work even if their husbands could provide for them, which shows that they are experiencing some sort of satisfaction out of their job. Several women believed that work contributed to changing gender roles.

The women who are the most likely to benefit from the maquiladora work are those that are young, single and childless. To them, even the meager factory pay might offer financial independence and an alternative to being supported for by husbands. In the companies that offer training after work, women without household responsibilities have an opportunity to study. These women are less dependent on their jobs, which makes it easier for them to resign if they are not content with working conditions—at least as long as there is no risk of becoming unemployed. Also, if gender relations are changing in Mexico, it is most likely to affect the young.

Is the work in the maquiladora industry conducive to the emancipation of women workers, or does it merely signify an exploitation of the same? The sheer size of the above sections suggests the answer to my main question. The results of my study—the nature of the labor market, the conditions at work and the material and personal situation at home—seems largely consistent with the exploitation thesis. It does seem that maquiladora work mainly (but not merely) signifies an exploitation of the female labor force. It also seems that the better conditions (like cleaner workplaces, more benefits etc) are the result of economic pressure rather than genuine interest in human rights. Considering the competition between the companies about the maquiladora workers, which in turn is the result of the strong U.S. economy, there is no guarantee that these

somewhat better conditions will prevail once the U.S. economy experiences a downturn. It has been calculated that Mexico's GDP will contract by about .89% for every 1% drop in the U.S. GDP (WNUA 2001), which shows how dependent Mexico is of the U.S. economy. As we know, maquiladora workers are particularly vulnerable to the fluctuations of the U.S. economy.

Although the job *might* relieve immediate economic need I do not think that it, in general, can be thought of as conducive to strategic gender interests. However, one should not belittle the testimonies from women who do experience greater autonomy as a result of their work. Also, it has been argued that both structures and actors tend to affect the world system, although in different time frames (Pellerin 1996). In the section about organization and resistance (4.3), I have interpreted the resistance and the struggles in the maquiladoras using the dynamic empowerment concept. The feminist notion of empowerment stresses the connection between empowerment processes working on the individual and collective levels, so that greater empowerment in groups could cause greater individual empowerment. It could be, then, that the types of resistance conducted by women inside the maquiladoras – informal, semi-formal and formal – might bring about the liberating experiences as predicted by the integration thesis, although from an unexpected angle.

Notes

1. The ISI builds on the infant industry argument which states that the creation of a local industry needs the protection of an import tariff to shield it from foreign competition until it has reached a sufficient size to be able to compete fairly. This strategy has not only been used in Third World countries, but has constituted an important stage in the industrial development for almost all early industrializers, including the U.S. and Britain.

2. PRI = Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), created in the wake of the Mexican revolution. Originally a workers' party, it has increasingly come to represent the interests of big business. Ruled Mexico for a period of 71 years, ending with the election of Vicente Fox in 2000.

3. PRD: Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Democratic Revolution Party), a leftist workers' party created in 1988 as a reaction to the increasingly right-wing PRI.

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- la Mujer (CLADEM), Mexico City, May 9, 2000.
- Oscar Margain Pitman, Director General, Mexican Directorate of Labor; Mexico City, May 10, 2000.
- Eva Lundgren and Guadalupe Espinoza, of UNIFEM, Mexico City, May 10, 2000.
- Carmen Rodríguez C., COLEF, Department of social sciences, Tijuana, May 19, 2000.
- Junichi Yamamoto, COLEF, Department of population studies, Tijuana, May 25, 2000.
- Kevin J. Middlebrook, Center for U.S.-Mexican studies, University of California, San Diego, May 24, 2000.
- James Samstad, COLEF, Department of social sciences, Tijuana, June 1, 2000.
- Ana Enriquez of Casa de la Mujer—Grupo Factor X, Tijuana, June 2, 2000.
- Juan Carlos Palacios, Quality control manager at Japanese company, Tijuana, June 5, 2000.
- Elsa Jimenez of Yeuaní, Tijuana, June 6, 2000.
- Efraín Ortiz Castillo, Director General, Baja California Directorate of Labor, Tijuana, June 9, 2000.
- Jaime Cota of Centro de Información para trabajadores y trabajadoras (CITAC), Tijuana, June 26, 2000.
- María Rosario Galbán, social worker at Casa de la Madre Assunta, a shelter for women and child migrants, Tijuana, June 27, 2000.
- Reyna Assad Vázquez, temporarily staying at Casa de la Madre Assunta, Tijuana, July 1, 2000.
- Interviewed women workers of the maquiladoras:

Name	Age	Day of Interview	Civil status/Children	Birth state
Veronica	31	June 5	Single/1	Chiapas
Araceli	23	June 5	Married/1	Zacatecas
Rosario	27	June 5	Single/1	Chiapas
Yosefina	55	June 6	Married/?	México
Rosaura	31	June 11	Married/4	Zacatecas
Judith	23	June 11	Married/1	Durango
Rosa	46	June 11	Widow/3	Jalisco
Teresa	25	June 22	Married/0	Nayarit
Letitia	29	June 29	Married/2	Baja California
Elisabeth	34	June 30	Married/3	Chihuahua
Lucrecia	24	July 6	Married/2	Sinaloa
Yisela	29	July 6	Married/3	Sinaloa

Appendix: The interview guide

Basic:

Name; Educational level; Age; Place of birth; Number of children

Working conditions:

What exactly are you doing when you are working? How many hours do you work (day/week)? How much do you earn/week? For how long have you worked in this factory? What made you decide to work? From which country is the company? What is the name of its CEO? Do you know who buys the products? In what country? Do you know if your company is the “leader” in its field? Is it a very competitive industry? Do you know the price of your product on the market? What do you think of this, compared with the cost of production (e.g. your wages)? Have you worked in any other maquiladora before this one? (Reason for resigning?) Did you have to take a pregnancy test before you were employed? (How was this explained?) How do the managers and bosses treat you? Have you ever experienced any kind of sexual harassment? How is the atmosphere among the workers? Are you friends? Are you well informed about workplace dangers? Have you ever had any accident? (How were you taken care of?) Are there any possibilities for advancement within the factory? (Do you think it is different for women compared with men?) Have you done any training within the company? Which is the union that represents the workers of your company? Have you ever participated in union actions? Have you participated in non-union action to improve working conditions?

What are, in your opinion, the major advantages and disadvantages of your work?

Family and living conditions:

How do you live and with whom? How do you distribute your wages (rent/food/transport/leisure/sending to family)? Are you married? (Is your husband also working?) How many people in your household bring home a wage? Who takes care of your children while you are working? How many hours do you spend on household chores/day? Who makes the decisions within the household? Since you started working, has the division of labor within the household changed? Does working make you feel more independent? What do you do in your time off?

Migration:

For how long time have you been living in Tijuana? What made you decide to come here? Did you arrive on your own or with somebody? (Who?) Have you got other relatives here? (Are they also working in maquiladoras?)

Future:

How long time do you think you will stay in this factory? Afterwards, would you like to work in another maquiladora? Do you want to return to your place of birth? Do you think that you one day will try to go to the U.S.? With what would you like to work in five years? Do you believe you can achieve it? Would you like your children to work in maquiladoras? If not, what would you like them to do? What other future plans do you have?