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COPING WITH CONTINUOUS CRISES IN MAQUILADORAS. THE CASE OF MEXICAN WOMEN WORKERS¹

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Abstract: This article explains how the women workers in Mexican maquiladoras have learnt to cope with the continuous contingencies of these industries linked with the international economy and shows how they have also crafted different strategies to overcome them. Abandoned by the state and sought after only for investing reasons, the workers, in special women, in this industry have been constantly forced to endure continuous recessions. Finally, the text substantiates the worth of smaller local institutions, such as unions, which, in spite of the magnitude and weight of the global economy, are meant to assist workers in confronting their frequent crises in *maquiladoras*.

Keywords: Women workers, maquiladora, crises, North of Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

The development of assembling companies in Mexico, known as *maquiladoras*², has been characterized since its early stages by a series of crises, instability and a high dependency of the international economy. A thorough research, spanning for more than 50 years, on several cities of Mexico close to the American border, has demonstrated the importance of economic interest in this particular industrial project and at the same time a lack of consideration for an improvement of the labour conditions of the workers of these companies. The majority of these employees, many of them women, have learnt to cope with the continuous contingencies of their profession and have also crafted different

strategies to overcome them. Abandoned by the state and sought after only for investing reasons, the workers in this industry has been constantly forced to endure continuous recessions. The following text substantiates the worth of smaller local institutions, such as unions, which, in spite of the magnitude and weight of the global economy, are meant to assist workers in confronting their frequent crises in *maquiladoras*.

This article is divided in four parts. The first part presents notes about the actual model of these assembling companies in developing countries and the special characteristics of the Mexican model. The second part discusses the importance of the role that women workers have inside this industry. In this section of the article it is also displayed how the growth rate of women workers was smaller in comparison with the rate of men workers since the first half of the 1980s. The third section analyzes the various procedures employees in *maquiladoras* have devised in order to endure the calamities inherent to their professions and, furthermore, how they've managed to resolve these struggles all by themselves. The fourth and final part considers how the workers, especially women, because of the constant strain caused by their particular labour, have resolved in joining unions.

The research is based in the personal experience of an author with 30 years in writing, reading and working in the field of the most prominent border cities with these kinds of assembling companies. The analysis of literature about *maquiladoras*, the

² *Maquiladoras* were an industrial program adopted by the Mexican government in order to solve the unemployment problem on the main border cities. The program began in 1965 and its main objectives were the creation of jobs, an alliance with the national industry as a supplier of raw material, and the training of Mexican workers in industrial activities, (Secretaría de Programación y Presupuesto, *Programa de Industrialización de la Frontera Norte de México*, 1971). The companies were properties of US industries dedicated to textile and electronic articles. They delocalized the assembling of some of their phases to Mexico, mostly unskilled activities. The main advantages for companies were the low wages given to their employees, free payment of taxes in the importation and exportation of their products, and the closeness to industrial headquarters. The Mexican government implemented between 1970 and 2000 different decrees to support its growth. In 2006, the *maquiladora* joined national export industries within the program "Programa de la Industria Manufacturera y Maquiladora de Exportación". The main objective was to favour exporting industries. *Maquiladoras* began producing electronic and textile parts.

inspection of statistics and local newspapers, as well as the interviews in depth with women working for these companies are the most crucial sources in this paper. The period of analysis spans from 1965 to 2006, when Mexican government registered regional and gender statistics about Maquiladoras. Later, the data were more general. Posterior analysis is based in newspaper and interviews with women workers. It is considered with special importance the case of Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

SOME NOTES ABOUT THE MAQUILADORA INDUSTRY AND ITS CRISES AS A PIVOTAL CHARACTERISTIC

Maquiladora was the name given to foreign companies set up on the Mexican side of the border with the United States in the mid-1960s. The definition of this industry is stated by the perspective of the new international labour division, where the jobs which did not require many skills were allocated to developing countries with abundant labour force, whereas skilled jobs were assigned to developed countries. (Folker, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1981)³ *Maquiladoras* can also be studied from the mobilization of capital perspective, where the industrial companies move across from the border without problem. (Harvey, 1982)⁴ Transnational companies moved according to their own needs of having a bigger profit rate

(INEGI, INEGI, Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, 1985-1989, 1991)⁵ (Adler, 2001). (Cowie, 2001) (Folker, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1981) Commonly, the least skilled workers laboured in developing countries and the most skilled with more technical understanding stayed in the more advanced nations. One of the most important aspects in this industrial mobilization was the payment of low wages to the unskilled hand.

The closeness to the American border was essential for the installation of these companies in Mexico. For Mexico, a *maquiladora* was conceived as a transitional manufacturing. In theory, this type of industry would serve to link the more domestic industry to a larger international production as a supplier of raw materials, and thus, contributing on the training of skilled workers. However, in reality these presumptions took a different path. Companies maintained their unskilled activities (especially the assembling of parts and products) with very few exceptions that showed an interest in the upgrade of the industrial position. For instance, assembling companies within the economies of the “Asian Tigers” used a similar industrial model but managed to get a higher technological industry due to investing an important budget on the technical training of their workers. Mexico, on the other hand, chose not to invest on the training and qualification of its employees⁶. (INEGI, 2007) (Schmidt, 1998).

3. Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye, *The new international division of labor. Structural unemployment in industrialised countries and industrialization in developing countries*, Cambridge University Press. (Great Britain, 1981).

4. David Harvey, *Limits to capital*, Basil Blackwell (Oxford, 1982).

5. A wide explanation about delocalization of capital can be found in Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye's *The new international division of labor. Structural unemployment in industrialised countries and industrialization in developing countries*, Cambridge University Press (USA, 1981). More specific studies about how the capital is moving to places with cheap costs are found in Jefferson Cowie's *Capital, Moves, RCA's Seventy Year Quest for Cheap Labor*, The New Press, (USA, 2001) and William M. Adler's *Mollie's job. A story of the Life and Work on the Global Assembly Line*, Touchstone, (USA, 2001). INEGI, *Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, 1985-1989*, (Mexico, 1991).

6. According to Samuel Schmidt's *En busca de la decisión: la industria maquiladora en Ciudad Juárez*, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez/University of Texas at El Paso, Colección Sin Frontera, (México 1998), Mexico, with the adoption of the *maquiladora* model, preferred assembling companies instead of turning these companies into national industries with skilled workers. In 2006, 41 years after the installation of *maquiladoras*, 77.9% of the jobs were taken by unskilled workers, and only 13.5% were given to skilled (technical) workers. INEGI, *Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación*, (Mexico, 2007).

Maquiladoras were originally set up in order to assemble imported parts. The finished products meant to be exported, free of taxes, back to their respective countries. The Mexican government has favoured the setting up of these industries in an attempt to diminish the unemployment rate in the border region of the nation. The first border cities willing to venture in this type of investment (such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Matamoros) were cities without any industrial past; they were cities known for a commerce strongly linked to the economy of the United States, and erected these assembling companies as their first industrial experience.

Even considering the early stages of the *maquiladora* as a transitional industry, the Mexican government gave it a central position in the national manufacturing as long as the installations were located inside the country's territory. This permission was congruent with the openness of Mexican economy. *Maquiladoras* turned into an important component of the new model of development in Mexico, more strongly dependent to the international economy than to the national. At the end of the 1980s these companies turned into the second most important source of foreign exchanges (petroleum being the first), and it represented 20 percent of the country's manufacture.⁷ (Carrillo & Kopinak, *Condiciones de trabajo y relaciones laborales en la maquila*, 1999) The most notable advantages a *maquiladora* can offer are: the exemption of taxes when importing raw materials and exporting products, closeness with the US market, and most importantly, a payment of low wages to the unskilled (as well as the more qualified) hand they employ.

The major contribution of these assembling companies to the Mexican economy was, until

the 1990s, the creation of thousands of jobs. However, most of them were unstable due to the dependency of this industry with the international market. Despite these negative characteristics, *maquiladoras* have had a significant role within the Mexican industry. An assessment of the numerical evolution of these companies, with its four decades of existence, would lead us to believe that this industrial program has been successful (see Figure 1).

However, this evolution should be analyzed carefully. The first formal statistics of *maquiladoras* were published in 1974. Before these publications some authors mentioned the importance of the industry near the border. According to Carrillo & Hernández,⁸ (Carrillo & Hernández, 1985) in 1971 these companies employed over 17,000 workers. By 1974 the number of workers increased to 75,977. Subsequently, the evolution of *maquiladoras* was entwined with a continued period of crisis. We can distinguish in the development of this industry four major crises:

The first crisis, taking place between 1974 and 1975, was characterized by a massive firing that costed the jobs of almost 32,000 workers.⁹ (Carrillo & Hernández, 1985) The second period of crisis, registered between 1980 and 1983, was again caused by another recession in the US economy. The third crisis happened between the years 2000 and 2003. 200,000 jobs were dismissed due to an adversity in the electronic and textile sectors. The last one occurred in 2009 after a breakdown in the automobile industry in the US market.

Crises have been a recurring feature in the evolution of the Mexican *maquiladora*. This can be explained more for external factors than internal factors. Fröbel pointed out: since the 1980s, the national industrial policies

7. Jorge Carrillo and Kathryn Kopinak, "Condiciones de trabajo y relaciones laborales en la maquila", en Enrique De la Garza, *Cambios en las relaciones laborales*, vol. 1, UNAM/UAM (Mexico, 1999).

8. Jorge Carrillo and Alberto Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas en la industria maquiladora*, SEP/CEFNOEMEX, (Mexico, 1985).

9. Ibid.

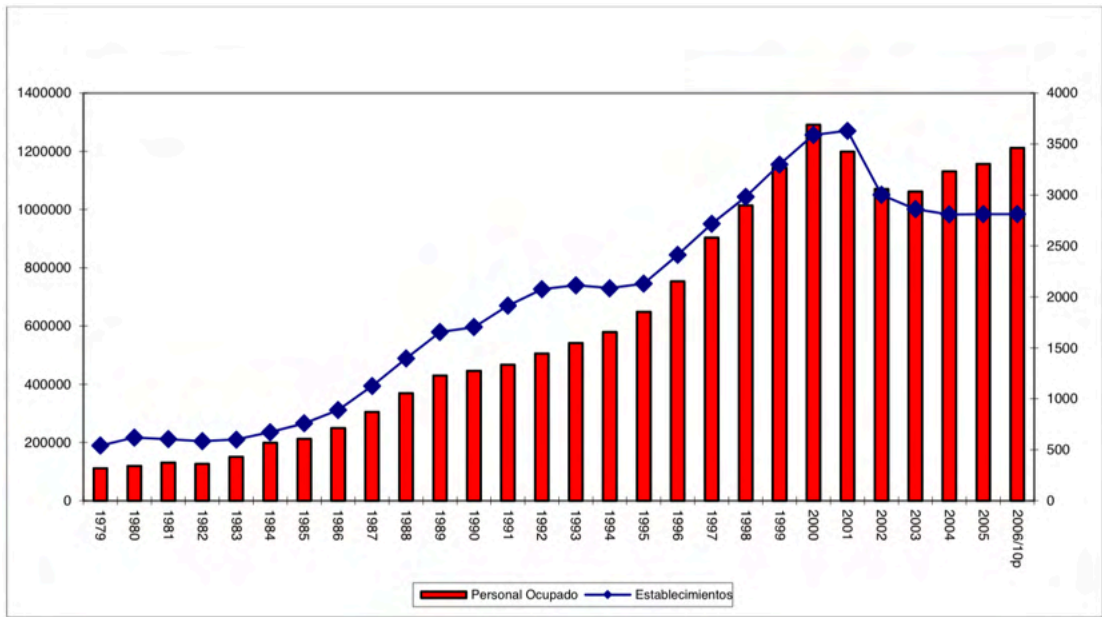


Figure 1. Companies and employment in Mexican maquiladora, 1979-2005.

Source: INEGI, Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1979-1989. México, 1991:1., Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, México, 1995: 1; Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1995-2000, México, 2001: 3; Estadísticas Económicas, Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, Diciembre 2004, México: 8, 37. [www.inegi.gob.mx/bie/industria maquiladora de exportación](http://www.inegi.gob.mx/bie/industria%20maquiladora%20de%20exportaci3n).

were less relevant in comparison to the international companies. (Folker, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1981)¹⁰. These crises have affected the labour and social dynamics of thousands of workers.

The supposed success of *maquiladoras* is mainly questionable because of the industries remaining strongly attached to an international context. The ups and downs of these companies are subordinated to the evolution of the companies and market at an international level that surpasses national policies. For example, at the end of the year 2000 to 2001, the crisis in the automobile sector in America resulted in the loss of 200,000 jobs in Mexico (almost 14 percent of the total jobs). Although there has been technological advancements in some companies, most

part of the work continues to be destined to unskilled activities, such as the assembling of different components. According to official statistics, in the year 2000 only 11.8 percent was technical work while the remaining 88.2 percent consisted of unskilled labour. (INEGI, 1991)¹¹

A detailed analysis of the laws and decrees meant to support this industry (especially since 2003) shows how the Mexican government changed its initial objective in order to favour exportations. With this decision, the government afflicted the principal advantages this industry had provided for almost 40 years. (Quintero, De la industria maquiladora a la IMMEX en el norte de México: ¿continuidad o cambio económico?, 2016)¹² The decision to make exportations a priority facilitated

10. Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye, *The new international division of labor*.

11. INEGI, *Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación*, 1985-1989, (Mexico, 1991).

12. Cirila Quintero, "De la industria maquiladora a la IMMEX en el norte de México: ¿continuidad o cambio económico?";

business for the industries belonging to any country within the NAFTA. Hence, companies arrived from the US, Europe and Asia (especially of the automobile industry) and proceeded to make a huge profit as a result of this new agreement. Mexico now becomes an exportation platform for the main automobile companies around the globe.

The potential crises innate to the industry have been a structural characteristic of the *maquiladora* dynamic. These constant adversities modeled a labour force that is always moving and adapting with sufficient speed to respond to the productive demands.

WOMEN IN MAQUILADORAS. NEW CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THEIR IMPORTANCE IN LABOUR

Work in *maquiladoras* has been associated to women employment throughout the years due to the fact that in most of the countries with this kind of companies the use of women is frequently sought after. The main reasons being the cheaper cost and the compliant labour force frequently observed amongst the female workers. Historians of the industrial revolution documented the early recruitment of women (particularly young unmarried women) as a highly flexible, inexpensive, and easily disciplined source of labour". (Mills, 2003)¹³. The same argument has been used at different times hitherto. Women and other segments of the population, like children, have been constructed, ideologically, as supplementary or devalued workers; as cheaper hand in comparison with the male labour force. (Mills, 2003)¹⁴.

Other explanations about the use of women is related with the sexual division of labour, supported by arguments which claim that the

productive activities in these companies are more suitable to women than men mainly because these tasks are usually perceived as a continuation of the activities which women are expected to comply at home. Thus, activities done inside the facilities of these assembling companies (e.g. working with textiles and fabrics) harmonized very well with the traditional activities assigned to the female gender. Jobs consisting of sewing, assembling and cutting are evidently a continuation of the housework given to women and the possibility for a technical preparation for these activities is dismissed because of its apparent redundancy. These previous arguments concerning women and female workforce were clearly used for *maquiladoras* in Mexico, providing a supposedly ideal work for them. In the beginnings of the *maquiladora*, some authors exposed the arguments given by managers when employing women: "They have delicate fingers... ability, patience and liking for repetition (of tasks). The ideal employee for *maquiladoras*... Women don't get tired of repeating the same operation nine hundred times a day". (Muñoz & Murayama, 1977).¹⁵ The first studies about *maquiladoras* presented a new type of worker for this industry: women, young, single and without family responsibilities, preferably migrant and with low wage expectations.

According to some authors, such as Carrillo, (Carrillo & Hernández, 1985)¹⁶ more than 50 percent of the Economic Active Population (EAP) inside border cities, such as Matamoros and Ciudad Juárez, constituted employment in tertiary sectors during the 1960s and 1970s. Labour force in this sector was predominantly masculine. The economic participation of women in these cities was

Ponencia para el XXV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Económica del Norte de México (Monterrey, 2016).

13. Mary Beth Mills, "Gender and Inequality in the Global Labor Force" in Annual Review of Anthropology, No. 32, 2003, 41-62.

14. Ibid.

15. María Elena Muñoz and Guadalupe Murayama. "Las obreras y la industria maquiladora", Fem, Vol.1, no. 3, (México, 1977).

16. Jorge Carrillo and Alberto Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas*.

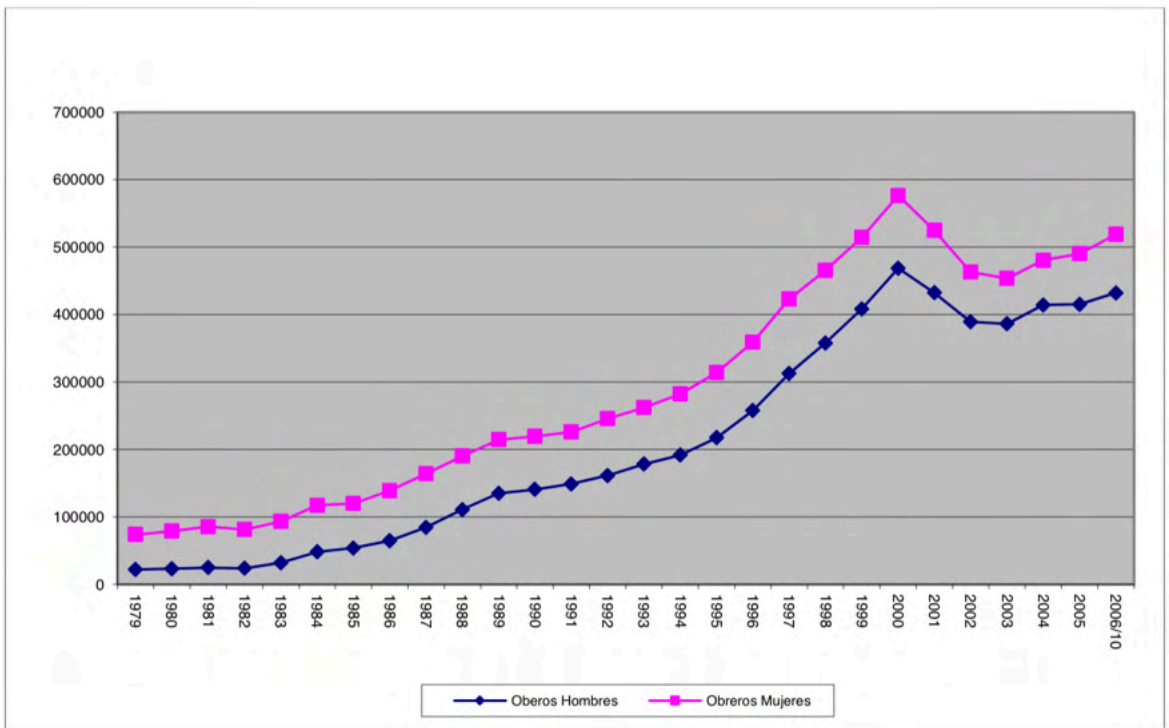


Figure 2. Women and men in Mexican maquiladora, 1979-2005.

Source: INEGI, Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1979-1989. México, 1991:5., Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, México, 1995: 4; Estadística de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1995-2000, México, 2001: 13,14; Estadísticas Económicas, Industria Maquiladora de Exportación, Diciembre 2004, México: 8. www.inegi.gob.mx/BIE.

almost nonexistent. After the appearance of the first *maquiladoras* thousands of women residing near the border found themselves employed. Various interviews with older female workers have showed that local women perceived the opportunity for joining these companies as a new experience to work closer to the border. Nonetheless, this point of view was not equally shared and other local women “preferred to cross the line to work in the US”. (Lupita, 2004)¹⁷

However, in spite of the feminine hegemony, it is important to point out that the participation from men was never absent in the constitution of this industry. Different authors, such as Carrillo and Hernández

17. Interview with Lupita, 2004.

18. Jorge Carrillo and Alberto Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas*.

(Carrillo & Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas en la industria maquiladora*, , 1985)¹⁸ have mentioned percentages between 20 and 23 of male participation during the 1970s. Figure 2 shows the growth of *maquiladoras* and the participation of women and men within this industry. In the same figure we can also appreciate how the masculine participation has gained more relevance throughout the years (especially since the 1990s).

The “feminization” of *maquiladoras* has been explained from different perspectives. One of the first explanations is related with the industrial changes in the productive process of the industry. It was at this time when investors started to be more interested in

technological advances and decided to spend more money on new machinery. For instance, the automobile industry started to introduce more complex and advanced machinery into fabrics. This equipment demanded more skilled workers, and women employees (according to managers) were unable to respond adequately to these requirements. Thus it was now necessary to hire men because women were not technically qualified enough to handle the new machinery. (Lara, 1995)¹⁹

Another explanation derives from studies that have attributed the affluence of the *maquiladoras* with the changes in the local economy of the border and northern cities of Mexico. These assembling companies were turned into one of the main sources of employment for women and men. There were no other alternatives in the local labour market. Traditional masculine industries (such as metallurgical and mining) were affected by the Mexican industrial reconstruction taking place between the 1980s and 1990s. Nowadays, men are competing with women for a job in a *maquiladora*.

Another possible explanation is related with the incapacity of the female labour market to fulfil the growing demand of workers by the companies. The evolution of the industry shows a constant growth in the female participation, nevertheless, the increasing number of *maquiladoras* has been superior. This problem was especially accentuated in the old *maquiladora* cities, where the demand for women workers exceeded the offer and, in consequence, producing a shortage of women workforce. This issue changed the

requirements for hiring. According to Carrillo and Kopinak, (Carrillo & Kopinak, 1999)²⁰ in the actual labour market of these companies there is a strong competition between working women; a competition so prominent they can even choose between companies which of them offer the best wages and the best labour conditions. This have caused employers to tone down their hiring requirements. Other plausible explanations claim that the increase of men in *maquiladoras* is the outcome of managers of these companies opting to hire men instead of increasing the wage and labour benefits in order to attract more female workers. (Kopinak, 1993)²¹

Most of the scholars who have discussed the “masculinization” of *maquiladoras* have especially concentrated in the study of this industry during the 1990s. Although, a calculation of the growth rate has proven that since the beginning of the 1980s the number of female workforce has decreased. The massive hiring of women took place exclusively in the early stages of the industry. In the following years the hiring of men started to increase and eventually surpassed the number of the women’s workforce (See Figure 3).

This figure gives a new perspective on how the predominance of women in *maquiladoras* was later replaced by an increasing number of male workers since the first half of the 1980s. The growth rate nearly tripled in the period of 1981-85 and it doubled in the period of 1986-90. The substitution of female work force with an increasing number of male workers jeopardizes the premise of the *maquiladora* as an industry of women. (Quintero, 2006)²² In a

19. Arturo Lara “Cambio tecnológico, demanda cualitativa de fuerza de trabajo y estrategias de aprendizaje en la industria electrónica” en Soledad González et al, *Mujeres, migración y maquila*, El Colegio de México, (México, 1995), 215-240.

20. Jorge Carrillo and Kathryn Kopinak, “Condiciones de trabajo y relaciones laborales en la maquila”.

21. Kathryn Kopinak, “The Maquiladorization of the Mexican Industry” in Ricardo Grinspun and Maxwell Cameron, *The political Economy of North American Free Trade*, St. Martin Press, (USA, 1993), 141-161.

22. In other papers by the same author (Cirila Quintero, *Female Work in Mexican Maquiladoras: “Naturally” Unskilled Work or Creating Unskilled Work for Women Workers?* Paper prepared to the Panel of Gender Studies of XIV International Economy History Congress, (Finland, 2006)), it has been argued that the consideration for women as the suitable worker for a *maquiladora* has been a business creation in order to keeping low wages associated with unskilled workforce.

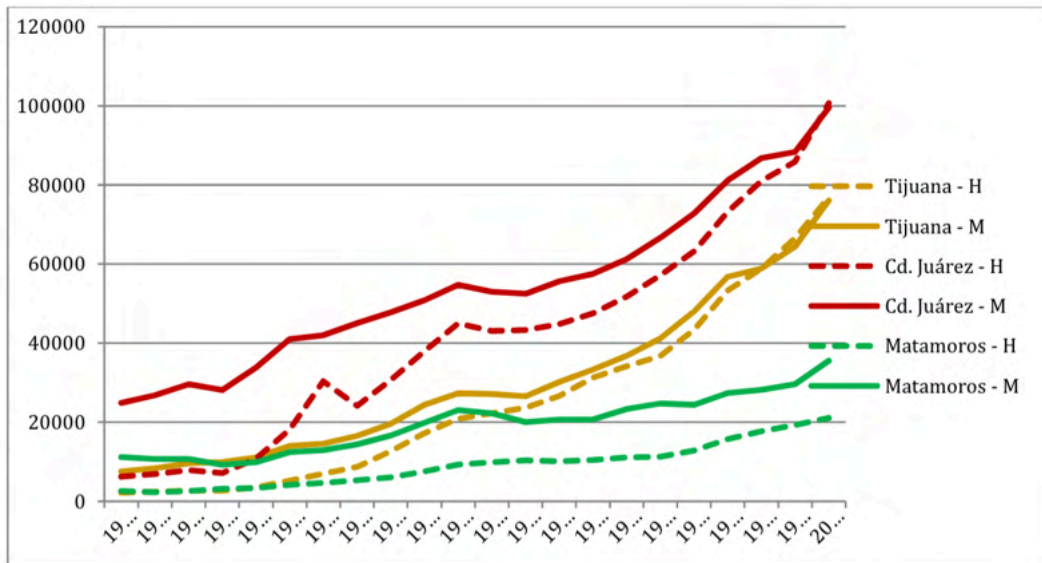


Figure 3. Women and Men workers in Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros, 1979-2005

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía e Informática (INEGI), 1991, "Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1979-1989", México, p. 7. INEGI, 1995, "Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación", México, p. 3. INEGI, 2000, "Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación. 1994-1999", México, p.13., INEGI, 2001, "Estadísticas de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportación 1995-2000", México, p. 13.

relatively recent study, (Quintero, 2006)²³ it has been pointed out that these companies have done a pragmatic use of the female workforce: hiring them in times of prosperity and getting rid of them as soon as crises appear.

This new perspective shows that the massive hiring of women took place only in the beginning of these companies. Since then, the hiring of female workforce was less frequent and the firing of them more usual. This phenomenon should be examined more thoroughly, in an attempt to situate objectively the participation of women workers in this kind of industry. At the present time we can assure that the different crises that have emerged throughout the history of *maquiladoras* have resulted in the loss of thousands of women's jobs. In the next section it is displayed how women workers deal with

the recurrent periods of crisis in *maquiladoras* and how they manage to adapt to the eventual work contingencies when labouring for one of these companies.

LIVING IN SOCIAL INSECURITY AND COPING WITH INSTABILITY AND CRISES IN MAQUILADORAS. THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN WORKERS IN MEXICO

The Mexican model of *maquiladora* was originally a mere economic project but it ended up affecting thousands of workers and their families. Policies destined to protect and assist employees and their respective families, as well to improve the quality of life in the cities where these companies were located, were absent from the start. The only decrees the government pronounced were business

23. Ibid.

related (e.g. seeking after more investors). The Mexican government has been exclusively concerned with the workers compliance with the law. *Maquiladoras* hardly pay the minimum wage to its workers and provides the very basic labour benefits. The wages of these companies, in spite of producing to international market, were slightly superior to the minimum. Regardless of the production for international economies, the salary provided to the workers of these assembling companies has been very low paid. Approximately, the amount paid oscillated between four and eight dollars per day.²⁴ Other labor aspects such as the state of seniority, labour mobility, benefits, varies depending on each *maquiladora* or in the existence of authentic trade unions.²⁵

The government has also failed to take care of the cities with *maquiladoras*. They have become filthy and the basic services are absent in the *colonias* (popular settlements) where many of the workers dwell. In contrast, the companies and industrial parks count with all the public services needed. Fuentes (Fuentes, 2018)²⁶ has examined how the border cities with these companies have grown according to the power of businessmen and governmental interest in attracting more investors.

Even when having a major role in the labour market, women find themselves responsible of the upbringing of their families and taking care of their children. Very few companies have offered services such as nurseries, and the nurseries handed by the state have been also very scarce. According to a study by Ganster and Hamson (Ganster

& Hamson, 1995)²⁷ only 14.2 percent of the interviewed female workers in *maquiladoras* had been provided with a nursery service. The rest of their colleagues had to come up with their own strategies in order to take care of their children. Women workers often develop social problems, especially with their own families, because of the time spent working in the *maquila*. Some studies (Cortés & Rubalcaba, 1993)²⁸ have pointed out that an important percentage of women workers' children were deprived of education or work. This issue is most likely owed to the fact that women cannot supervise or take care of their children if they're confined at work. These same women often feel guilty for not having sufficient time to spend with their families since they spent most of the day working. "One as a mother wants to be close to her children... but because you are at work you neglect your children... it is a problem to us" (Verónica, 2004)²⁹ Women workers consider the well-being of their families as their own responsibility.

Female workers have learnt to work in a profession of frequent instability and have also learnt to cope with these calamities all alone. The first *maquiladoras* (which assembled electronic devices and textiles), supplied with rudimentary machinery, were highly dependent of the costs of labour. After the improving of these labour costs many of the industries preferred to close. The lack of stability in the first *maquiladoras* earned them the name of "swallow" companies, because of their facility to close and move to another

24. In Mexico, a workday is equivalent to eight hours per day and it is always paid per day and not per hours. It is important to have in mind that companies save money by keeping the wages as low as possible.

25. Unions in *maquiladoras* have been led by the managers with no intentions of protecting the workers. Since the 1980s this type of unions appeared with the complacency of the bosses and still persist nowadays.

26. César Fuentes, "El manejo del suelo urbano en las ciudades fronterizas", *Comercio Exterior* (México, 2018).

27. Paul Ganster and Dana Hamson, "A Resource Guide for Child Care and Family Planning Services in the Maquiladora Industry", Institute for Regional Studies of the California, San Diego State University.

28. Fernando Cortés and Rosa María Rubalcaba, "Desocupados precoces: ¿otra cara de la maquila?" in *Estudios Sociológicos*, El Colegio de México, Vol XI, no. 33, (México, 1993).

29. Interview with Verónica (Mexico, 2004).

place. Most of these industries were closed during the crisis of 1974-75. This behaviour has continued for five decades, although it is increasingly seldom. Most of these companies stay in Mexico for a long time, e.g., in Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros there can still be found *maquiladoras* with more than four decades of activity.³⁰

In spite of the durability of some of these assembling companies, instability is an intrinsic condition to them. The impossibility to reach some kind of steadiness or security exists on account of different economic problems and also because of industrial and commercial crises. This instability innate to the industry is deeply associated with the firing, the labour flexibility, and the production contracts. Evidently, the consequences of this instability have been only endured by the workers, who are compelled to adapt their time and their lifestyles to these never-ending changes. *Maquiladoras* have a labour nature different to other industrial activities. Their cycles of production, related with the headquarters in their countries of origin, have a different speed depending the time of the year: from the opening of the year to the summer, employees work intensively; during fall, the production begins to decrease until almost reaching inactivity by winter. Most of the labour contracts are signed during the start of the year, while at the end of December most of the firings take place. Employees, some of them migrants, are used to these cycles, and if they take holidays to visit their families in different points of Mexico at the end of the year they have to return to their workplaces at the beginning of the next one and resume work. Many others continue working during this period of holidays but with a lower production intensity. Generally, *maquiladoras* have a core

of permanent workers: approximately 70 percent of their total workers. The remaining 30 percent constantly moving.

The unreliability of these companies increased during the 1980s with the industrial restructuring occurring in Mexico, and in the 1990s, when the productive and labour flexibility was central. After *maquiladoras* were modernized thousands of workers lost their jobs.

“With the (introduction of) machines, I see a lot of differences... I think that 80 or 90 percent of jobs were lost because of the technology... The past year (companies) unemployed one line of production... (companies) look for (technological) advances and pay less for work force”. (Lupita, 2004)³¹

Some of them recall times when being young enough helped them in the process of finding a new job:

“Then (in the 1980s) we have the option (of employment) because we were young, we got out from a *maquiladora* and enter a new one because all of them paid the same. Now is different because they (*maquiladoras*) pay little and you work so much”. (Eloisa, 2004)³²

Other workers were hired again in the same companies but with poorer salaries and benefits, and with a longer workday. Still, they considered themselves fortunate to have a job. The labour instability was more accentuated during the crisis of the end of the 1990s, when an important percentage of companies implemented adjustments regarding the workday. Workers need to modify their time to the needs of the companies:

“In (the) last (*maquiladora*) I was in group two, that is working three (work)days a week... (it) to the company is good, but not to the worker because when you (worker) need a day to do something the company discounts one

30. Throughout time, *maquiladoras* have used different strategies in order to survive: merging with other companies, changing names or products frequently.

31. Interview with Lupita, (Mexico, 2004).

32. Interview with Eloisa, (Mexico, 2004).

and half days (from the payment)...” (Nancy, 2016)³³

The outcome of the labour’s instability and uncertainty has been assumed by the workers without any repercussions for the companies. Workers dealing with the unreliability of the industry are obliged to make changes in their personal life. A woman worker said:

“...in my case (I work from 11 pm to 6 am), (the problem) is the way to make changes in order to take care of my children, because in the morning I arrive home and sleep a little. Then wake up to attend them and sleep a little more... I don’t have a determined time of sleep. I sleep in fractions while my children go to school... Then I wake up to make the tasks at home and wait for my children to come back to give them food... And then I go to work...” (Ana, 2017)³⁴

In the year 2000 the production dynamic changed. *Maquiladoras* were not only producing for a company but for many. Most of the actual *maquiladoras* await for production orders from different companies around the world. After completed enough work, dozens and hundreds of workers are dismissed. This new dynamic has given a lot of complications to the employees, who find it harder to confront the struggles in their profession since the production rhythm lacks any logic:

“I don’t understand... (why) the companies hire a lot of workers... And then suddenly... From one day to another... They fire them... The point is that they (the companies) don’t say why they are firing the worker... (maybe) to them is not important but for us is very important to know what we did wrong... In

33. Interview with Nancy, (Mexico, 2016).

34. Interview with Ana (Mexico, 2017).

35. Ibid.

36. *Maquiladoras* are obliged to respect the Mexican labour code regarding labour rights (Ley Federal del Trabajo (LFT) in http://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/desarrollo_social/docs/marco/Ley_FT.pdf. 2012). However, the same labour code considers, in the article 427, the partial or definitive suspension of activities, **without responsibility from the employer** (bold are ours), in cases of lack of material or problems in the market. This article has been commonly used by companies to layoff or finish their activities in Mexico.

my company I was working very well. I was very happy... Then from one day to another, the company fired close to 50 percent of workers... Fired only to hire new workers... They (the company) don’t think that (with layoffs) we are losing not only ourselves but all of our families?... Because we have commitments, debts and other things... Why do they do it?”. (Ana, 2017)³⁵

This testimony is an example of how the workers not only have to cope with the instability and vulnerability of these companies, but with the subordination of the international dynamic in the production and in the market of these industries.

Fifty years of *maquiladoras* in Mexico have demonstrated a facility in the mobility of capital and industry when it comes to earning more profits. In this case the nation’s doors are always open for foreign countries. However, the same history presents labour stuck at the same national level. The model of *maquiladora* and the Commercial Agreement such as North American Free Trade Agreement does not include any considerations regarding labour as part of these projects. Issues concerning labour will be solved in the national level at all time.

The vulnerability of Mexican workers in *maquiladoras* has already been presented in this article. As well as the absence of the national government and its inability to set limits to instability of these companies (Ley Federal del Trabajo (LFT), 2012)³⁶. The following strategies intend to help workers to cope more effectively with the crises. It is of great importance to have institutions backing up and assisting the employees of

any assembling company like the mentioned before. A recent study by Quintero and Manzanares (Quintero & Manzanares, 2018)³⁷ has proved the positive result owed to the existence of representative unions in matters of wage and benefits. In the last part of this article it will be analyzed how female workers endure periods of crisis and recession in an environment provided with strong unions.

COPING WITH RECESSION AND CRISIS IN MAQUILADORAS. THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN WORKERS IN MATAMOROS

One of the reasons why Matamoros has been chosen as a primal example of coping with crises and recessions is because of the still predominant feminine presence in its labour force (see Figure 3). Matamoros was one of the most affected cities during the 1980s. As a result, an important percentage of women workers lost their job. Although women were a majority, in Matamoros (just like in many other cities with *maquiladoras*) the growth rate of men was superior to women. However (in contrast to the national evolution), in this northern city the growth rate increased evenly with the rate of men until the 1980s. This decade, famous for the modernization of *maquiladoras*, lost an important percentage of jobs belonging to women, and men gained ground in the working industry. In the beginnings of 1990s, women workers surpassed the growth of men. The reasons being various but it primarily stands out the technological changes in favour to turn the *maquiladora* into the only option of employment to both men and women in

the area. (Catanzarite & Strober, 1993)³⁸

The second reason to consider Matamoros as a primal example regarding the dealing with crises in the industry, is because of the strong presence unions have there. These organizations are not popular inside the companies. Most *maquiladoras* are not supplied with unions or they have subordinate or protective unions (yellow unions) to control workers in the case that workers rebel against their employers. It is important in an economic system to keep the workers in line and obedient.

In Matamoros, *maquiladoras* have been part of a union since 1964. The powerful cotton union originated in the 1960s got the first collective bargain with *maquiladoras* in the middle of the decade. Since then, this union (called Sindicato de Jornaleros y Obreros Industriales y de la Industria Maquiladora (SJOIIM))³⁹, continues as being one of the most important unions within the industry. It integrates almost 70 percent of the workers in Matamoros (40,000 workers and 60 percent of them female workers).

The most remarkable characteristics of SJOIIM are: a 100 percent of the unskilled and technical workers being in the same union, and having control over the workers (men and women), from their hiring to their firing. The union policy of SJOIIM is common to other industrial sectors, where the most important objective is obtaining the best wages and benefits among the collective bargain. For this union, the *maquiladora* was not different to any other industrial sectors, even when considering their foreign ownership; and demanded rights equally as the other sectors.

37. Cirila Quintero and José Luis Manzanares, "Un análisis de los salarios y prestaciones en la maquila del norte de México desde la perspectiva de Thomas Piketty: alcances y límites", en *SOCIOTAM*, Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, UAT-UNAM, Vol. XXV. No.1, 2018.

38. Lisa M. Catanzarite and Myra Strober, "The Gender Recomposition of Maquiladora Workforce in Ciudad Juarez" in *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 32, no.1, University of California, (USA, 1993).

39. "SJOIIM was founded in 1932 as a union of cotton labourers. In 1964, when the *maquiladoras* arrived to Matamoros, SJOIIM got the first collective bargains inside this industry. The majority of clauses obtained during cotton stage stayed in the first *maquiladora* collective bargains."

This equality in treatment within *maquiladoras* by SJOIIM made possible that these companies gave the workers their deserved labour seniority as well as good wages and benefits. Matamoros turned into the best *maquiladora* city on the north of Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, due to its economic development in their central companies. In these decades the most important assembling companies in Matamoros were working with General Motors, and later with Delphi. The line of success came to an end with the opening of a new century. Women were strongly benefited by the protection of the unions. Here are some of the most important strategies presented in the unions of Matamoros:

The first strategy is related with the right to receive a settlement by the *maquiladora* when the women workers are fired. The compensation is according to the time worked in the company. SJOIIM demanded that the compensation should respect the labour codes. In doing so, every dismissed worker is getting an economic payment according to their time laboured. This payment serves as a backup until women workers (with the help of a union) find another job:

“(When I’m fired) I’ll survive with my settlement (*finiquito*), every time (that I had been fired) the settlement has been good... Since I only have my daughter, it’s sufficient... I do not pay rent, the receipts of electricity and water are cheap... I’m organized. I know how to administrate money...” (Marcela, 2016)⁴⁰

In Matamoros, it’s very difficult to find one worker who hasn’t received his or her settlement: they’re very aware about their own labour rights. Also, the union constantly reminds them that they should look after them if there’s any labour problem, especially payment related issues.

The second strategy for women to cope with the possible unemployment in the

40. Interview with Marcela (Mexico, 2016).

41. Interview with Amor (Mexico, 2016).

company, is to start looking for employment in other sectors, for instance, commerce or services. Nevertheless, if they decide to try luck in one of these sectors it probably won’t last long because these sectors are badly paid. Furthermore, they have even less control of the time destined for work in these alternatives sectors. Even after considering, the instability and vulnerability of *maquiladora*, it is a better job than others in the same local level.

“Nowhere else you’ll receive the benefits that *maquiladoras* are giving you. Neither you’ll find a union to help you or defend you against the companies. For example, in *maquiladoras* when the companies do not pay you your profits or benefits, you just go to the union and they bargain with the managers to reach an agreement”. (Amor, 2016)⁴¹

The former testimony shows the better side of labouring in *maquiladoras* and the importance of having a union inside them. Other aspect worth mentioning in this industry, in spite of the low wages, is the affiliation to social security and medical care provided to the female workers and their children. This allows women workers to stay more time inside the *maquiladoras*.

The third strategy when coping with crisis is linked to the informal economy. When the employment was scarce, especially in the 2000s, women workers started buying clothes in the US and proceeded to sell them in their own houses or in a *tianguis* (informal markets). Yet this was not a full time job, and they complemented this activity with cooking food or baking cakes to sell them later. Women workers pointed out that while they find another suitable job they’ll need to do something to make money:

“If you don’t find a job in the *maquiladora*, you clean houses, you carry your children to school and then go to clean houses and then do your housework... You also prepare

things to sell in the weekend at your home or at the market... The important thing is to do something". (Amor, 2016)⁴²

They know perfectly well that selling products is just a temporal activity. Women workers (at least in Matamoros) are always thinking of returning to the *maquiladora*. A woman worker said:

"I'm more of an employee of *maquiladora*, not a house cleaner, nor I want to work on the streets... It is better to be in a factory because you have social security and benefits... Then you know that you do your work and you're safe. There's no risk because others are working with you... If you suffer any accident in the way to the *maquiladora*, the company covers your expenses... You don't have these benefits in other employments". (Amor, 2016)⁴³

The women workers are aware about the lack of stability when working in *maquiladoras* and of the problems they have at their jobs. At the same time they know that, at least in Matamoros, it is the best job that they can obtain. This doesn't change the fact that some of them are very critical about the industry:

"A lot of companies are paying low wages but this is because women workers are working in their own business selling clothes, food or other things... The *maquiladoras* blame it on the dollar... It could be true... Though they are not paying us in dollars but in Mexican pesos... although they sell our products, that are Mexican, and get paid in dollars. They are gaining four times more than what they're paying us... It's twelve dollars (per each sale) but we are not doing only one piece, we do a lot, they (the company) sell them for five or ten thousand dollars, then what is the problem with the dollar?". (Marcela, 2016)⁴⁴

A last comment about the critical position of women in *maquiladoras*. It can also be considered a strategy to the dealing with crisis

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Interview with Marcela (Mexico, 2016).

in the companies. Women have the option to refuse to work in any *maquiladora* that doesn't appeal to them. Unions arrange meetings every week or when jobs are available. If the offered job doesn't appeal to women workers, they could easily say "I don't want to", and proceed to wait for the next offer. The decision to go or not go is not sanctioned by the union.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has analyzed the evolution of *maquiladora* as an industry deeply dependent of international changes in the production of the market. Their booms and crises are irremediably linked with the international economy and not exclusively with the national economy. We show how a developing country, like Mexico, adopted this model first as a solution of the unemployment in certain areas. After the opening of its economy *maquiladoras* have been used as an exportation platform without actually creating more jobs or favouring the domestic industry. The *maquiladora* is the archetype of industry where the movement of capital has no limits or borders.

This industry also represents the opposition against traditional industry in labour issues. Their main characteristics are instability, vulnerability and a high dependency to the international economy. These companies mobilize only because of the profit without caring for their workers. The absence of accountability with host societies is possible because of the permissions given by the national governments.

The association of these companies with the female workforce is questioned because although they were numerically more relevant, the growth rate shows that women were the most affected workers after the modernization of the industry. The costs of the instability

and vulnerability have been withstood by the workers only, whom have adapted their life and their family dynamics to the course of this industry.

Lastly, it is worth considering the importance of unions within the industry. Without these syndicates workers would have to confront massive international companies by themselves. The case of Matamoros shows how *maquiladoras*, despite of their high mobility, could be perceived as traditional industries when bearing in mind their compliance with labor rights.

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