



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 11
Feminizing Unions

Article 12

1988

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"This Is How It Starts": Women Maquila Workers in Mexico

Abstract

[Excerpt] In the United States, where news about Mexico is sporadic at best and usually rife with stereotypes, Mexican workers are largely invisible, portrayed mainly as competitors for U.S. jobs — whether as undocumented immigrants or as laborers in international runaway shops. Women workers are doubly invisible, discounted as a marginal element of the paid workforce. Yet it is women who are taking the most initiative to break through the barriers of silence and invisibility, seeking friends and allies on the other side of the border and drawing support from church, community, labor and women's groups in the United States. Such efforts, while still in their infancy, could play a major role in strengthening the hand of the labor movement against transnational corporations and in building coalitions among these groups.

Keywords

Maquila, women's rights, Mexico, solidarity

Sisters at the Borders

“‘This Is How It Starts’”

Women Maquila Workers in Mexico

■ *Rachael Kamel*

It is 4:00 Friday afternoon, the end of the week before Holy Week, the most important holiday in the Mexican calendar. A group of 15 women—accompanied by an assortment of husbands and children, a lawyer, and a “promotora” or organizer—enter a bank in Ciudad Victoria.

The women have arrived that morning by bus from their home town of Matamoros, which lies just opposite Brownsville, Texas, on the Mexico-U.S. border. They have spent all day in the offices of the Arbitration Board signing settlement papers with their former employer, a subsidiary of a U.S. firm known as Booth Fisheries, and now they have come to the bank to receive their \$50,000 settlement in cash.

There is a problem. The manager says the funds are not available; he can pay only a portion of the total today. The lawyer is furious: he visited the bank that morning expressly to ensure

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- Rachael Kamel is managing editor of Listen Real Loud: News of Women's Liberation Worldwide, a quarterly publication of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). This article is based on conversations with women industrial workers, organizers and members of support groups in Mexico City, Matamoros and Reynosa. Where only first names of people are given, the names used are fictitious at the request of those involved. Interested readers may contact AFSC's Maquila Project at 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 (215/241-7134).

the arrangements were all in order. The women insist on receiving their money, and then they sit down and refuse to move. It is after hours and the holiday is beginning, but the bank workers cannot leave because the bank has not closed. Tempers are growing short. The women are unconcerned: they have waited for three years to receive this settlement, and now they will wait until the bank manager gives in.

Two of the women are pregnant; one, Cristina, is only days away from delivery. When Cristina begins to groan in pain, the bank manager's resolve breaks, and his staff begins counting out the settlement. The women agree to accept a portion of their payment in a check. Even so it takes until 8:00 to count out the huge stacks of pesos. Finally the women return home, their three-year struggle successfully concluded. The bus arrives back in Matamoros in the small hours of the night. On Monday morning at 11:00, Reina María, Cristina's baby girl, is born.

Such small, step-by-step confrontations, multiplied dozens of times, are increasingly coming to characterize life in the *maquiladoras*. *Maquiladoras*, from a Spanish word for "sub-contracting", are U.S.-owned assembly plants that line Mexico's northern border.

The low wages received in the *maquilas*—currently about forty cents an hour—have been the major incentive for U.S. manufacturers relocating in Mexico. But another key attraction has been the supposed docility of the *maquila* workers, 85% of whom are women with little tradition of participating in the paid labor force. And while economic conditions continue to favor the transplanted U.S. firms, more and more workers are becoming involved in small-scale but persistent battles over health and safety, wages and benefits, sexual harassment, and union democracy.

In the United States, where news about Mexico is sporadic at best and usually rife with stereotypes, Mexican workers are largely invisible, portrayed mainly as competitors for U.S. jobs—whether as undocumented immigrants or as laborers in international runaway shops. Women workers are doubly invisible, discounted as a marginal element of the paid workforce. Yet it is women who are taking the most initiative to break through the barriers of silence and invisibility, seeking friends and allies on the other side of the border and drawing support from church, community, labor and women's groups in the United States. Such efforts, while still in their infancy, could play a major role in strengthening the hand of the labor movement against transnational corporations and in building coalitions among these groups.

The Maquila Economy

The Mexico-U.S. border has been described by Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa as a "1,950-mile-long open wound." It is the only border in the world where the Third World meets the industrialized north. The maquila economy, currently growing by leaps and bounds, is one of the institutions that derives from the meeting of two countries on such unequal terms.

Mexico's Border Industrialization Program, as it is formally known, traces its origins back to 1964, when the U.S. Congress unilaterally suspended the *bracero* program, which had allowed Mexican farmworkers and other laborers into the United States for set periods of time. A major relief valve was thus denied the Mexican government, whose economic policies have for decades forced vast numbers of peasants out of the countryside without providing adequate urban employment.

To ease unemployment pressures stemming from the loss of the *bracero* program, the Mexican government modified laws that had restricted foreign ownership of Mexican corporations to 49%. A border zone was created where foreign firms could operate wholly owned Mexican subsidiaries, usually with a "twin plant" on the U.S. side. Parts and raw materials could be shipped into the country duty-free. U.S. customs regulations also support the program: when the finished goods are shipped back to the United States, duties are paid only on the value added during assembly—with the tariffs assessed on the basis of low Mexican wage rates rather than the considerably higher U.S. market value.

Maquilas, of course, are simply the Mexican version of the now worldwide free trade zones that since the 1960s have exported manufacturing jobs from the United States and other industrialized countries to the Third World. In nearly every case the transnational corporations that have instituted this "global assembly line" rely heavily on the labor of young women—often daughters of peasant communities which have been displaced from the land by agribusiness. For many such women, factory jobs are their only alternative to prostitution. Inside the factories, sexual harassment is rampant; Asian women speak often of the "lay down or laid off" policy in many transnational plants. The system has also caused a huge rise in the number of single mothers bearing family and breadwinning responsibilities alone.

In the U.S., this new international division of labor is associated with deindustrialization, the growth of the so-called "service economy," and a wide range of corporate attacks on organized labor. Those Third World governments that have opted to accom-

moderate the transnationals, meanwhile, have committed themselves to an industrial development policy that depends integrally on the economic and sexual exploitation of young women.

Throughout the 1970s—except during the 1974-1975 recession—Mexico's *maquila* economy grew at a steady pace, with the number of plants increasing from just 64 in 1970 to 420 ten years later and the number of workers from 22,000 to nearly 100,000. Then in 1982, declining oil prices had a devastating impact on the Mexican economy, which was depending on income from oil exports to service its huge foreign debt. Overnight the peso dropped from 25 to the dollar to 150. Since another major devaluation in 1985, the peso has continued to plummet, from 1000 to the dollar in the fall of 1986 to 1500 a year later.

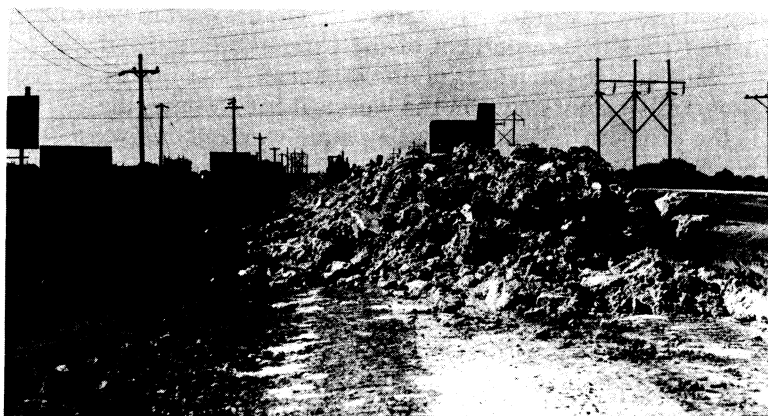
The most serious economic crisis in Mexico's history has become a bonanza for U.S. corporations, and Mexican wage rates have become the cheapest in the world. In response, the *maquila* economy has begun growing faster than ever, with some 700 *maquila* plants employing 250,000 workers by late 1986. As Japanese and Korean firms join the ranks of *maquila* owners, corporate analysts predict a growth in the *maquila* workforce to 1.5 million by 1990 and to 3 million by the year 2000.

In its desperate search for dollars, the Mexican government in 1986 dropped the requirement that *maquilas* locate in the border zone, opening up the entire country to transnational corporations. Most of the plants, however, have stuck close to the border—partly for the lower cost of transporting goods back to the United States, partly so that management personnel can work in Mexico while living in Texas, California, or other border states, and partly so that the plants can operate in the protected environment of company towns.

“The Door Shut in Our Faces”

Before 1980, there was little labor activism along the border. One Texas Chamber of Commerce brochure even boasted of the *maquilas'* ability to deliver a “strike-free workforce.” During the current decade, however, spurred by the sharp decline in their living standards, more and more of the workers have begun to fight back.

The case described at the beginning of this article illustrates this trend. That particular story began in the summer of 1984, when Empaque y Congelación, a Matamoros shrimp packing firm owned by Booth Fisheries, closed for two weeks, sending its 497 workers



Isabelle Lacey

Matamoros workers pointed out piles of chemical waste that were being used as fill in local road paving projects.

on vacation. When the women returned, the plant had closed down and its U.S. owners had fled Mexico. Commented one worker, "They left us standing in the street, with the door shut in our faces."

Losing their jobs was a severe enough blow for the Empaque workers, three-quarters of whom were women, most over the age of fifty. Even worse, though, Empaque had closed without making legally mandated severance or "liquidation" payments. Such payments are a worker's only protection against unemployment in Mexico, where there is no welfare or unemployment insurance, and they are substantial, amounting to three months pay plus twelve days for each year of seniority. Under Mexican law, the employer, not the government, is held responsible when workers lose their jobs, and a firm's assets may be seized by the government to settle compensation claims.

When some workers filed suit against Booth Fisheries, corporate management signed over Empaque's assets—not to the individual workers, but to the union representing all *maquila* workers in Matamoros. This union, known simply as the Union of Industrial and Day Laborers of Matamoros, is a branch of Mexico's official trade union confederation, the CTM. The head of the union, Agapito Gonzalez Cabas, who is a powerful political figure in Matamoros, then sold the building and most of the equipment for about a third of its market value to Empaque's former manager—coincidentally one of his own relatives—who promptly opened a shrimp processing plant under a new name. The proceeds of the sale were distributed—more than a year after the plant had

closed—to any worker who agreed to withdraw from the suit and accept roughly ten percent of the compensation owed.

"Mexico," in the words of one organizer, "has one of the most progressive labor codes in the world. It is enforcing the law that is the problem." Most of the Empaque workers, skeptical of the possibility of enforcing their rights, accepted the settlement. Those who remained involved in the suit—and their relatives—were blacklisted from all industrial employment in Matamoros. Their only means of survival was to take in laundry or ironing, or cook tamales to sell in the street. "It was very hard," confessed one woman. "The schools did not care whether we had good jobs or not—we still had to buy shoes and uniforms and books for our children. With this kind of work, if it rains you cannot do anything. Sometimes we did not even have enough to eat." By the end of 1985, a scant 20 workers continued to press for their legitimate compensation, decreasing to 15 by the time the settlement was made in 1987.

In mid-1985, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker service organization with various educational and advocacy programs along the border, responded to requests to assist the Empaque holdouts.

Research coordinated by AFSC revealed that Booth Fisheries, which owned Empaque, was in turn a subsidiary of the giant Sara Lee Corporation, headquartered in Chicago. And Sara Lee Corp., according to activist lawyer Pat de Carlo, who helped AFSC investigate the case, "is very sensitive to publicity—they want to keep a clean corporate image." After meetings with AFSC representatives and a letter writing campaign, Booth Fisheries management agreed to settle with the workers. Although the firm never acknowledged any legal obligation, they did express their "genuine admiration" for the courage of the small group of women who refused to accept less than they were owed. Still pending is a suit the women filed against Agapito, charging him with defrauding the workers.

An Experience for All the Workers

Not long before the settlement was paid, Gloria, a former Empaque worker, commented that "if our problem is solved there will be even more workers who don't just submit to what they are told. This experience is not just for us, but for all the workers."

Since the early 1980s, women in many border towns have been coming together to discuss their immediate problems and, where possible, take joint action to solve them. Hoping to avoid the notice

of management and union officials alike, the women begin by meeting in their neighborhoods, away from the factory. Often they organize informal study groups where they learn the details of Mexico's labor code.

Such groups can also be mobilized to pressure management to obey labor laws and call on the union to back them up. "Before," recalled one activist worker, "we might be suspended from work for 29 days if we did something management did not like. Now we will no longer accept this treatment." Women's committees have forced management to provide exhaust fans in one plant and safety equipment in another.

In Matamoros, Reynosa, and other border towns, the women's committees have won dozens of such victories and have begun to coalesce into a regional network over the past year. Recently, when 130 workers went out on strike in Piedras Negras, women from Matamoros raised \$1000 to buy food for their families. Yet despite their string of successes, the women still prefer to keep a low profile, fearing blacklisting or even violence if they work too openly.

Health and safety issues are of paramount importance to the *maquila* women. Of more than a dozen women interviewed for this article, not one was free of chronic pain or illness caused by her working conditions. The Empaque workers told of standing in ice water and working all day with their bare hands in ice while packing shrimp. Women under 30 who suffer from arthritis or rheumatism are common. Electronics workers told of working with toluene, PCBs, and unknown solvents without any safety precautions or equipment. Chloracne, skin cancer, and leukemia are widely reported. But, the workers say, the government Social Security clinics will not classify their complaints as work-related, in one case diagnosing a problem as due to "reluctance to work."

One of the most haunting stories is told by Dr. Isabel de la O Alonso, head of the Matamoros School of Special Education. In the late 1970s, Dr. de la O began to notice a series of children arriving in her school who appeared to be suffering from a birth defect. They were mildly to profoundly retarded and shared a common appearance, "in some ways like that of children with Down's Syndrome," the doctor said. "Their condition does not correspond to anything that has ever been described in medical literature. But clearly they are all the same." In taking histories from parents, the school learned that all of the mothers had worked at a single *maquila*—Mallory Capacitors—during their pregnancy. Twenty such children have been found. Mallory left Matamoros in 1975 and its parent firm, P.R. Mallory, no longer

exists, swallowed up in a series of corporate takeovers. The women do not know the names of the chemicals they worked with, and an exhaustive search has failed to turn up similar cases anywhere in the world. "At this point," said Dr. de la O, "we see no possibility of seeking compensation." The doctor does what she can to prevent another Mallory, cautioning women about workplace chemical exposure and helping them obtain information about specific hazards.

One successful health project took place in 1985, when a support organization known as SEDEPAC brought *maquila* workers together with medical students from the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana of Mexico City. The two groups collaborated on a series of three booklets on workplace hazards, medical rights, and related legal issues. The booklets have been widely used in educational workshops.

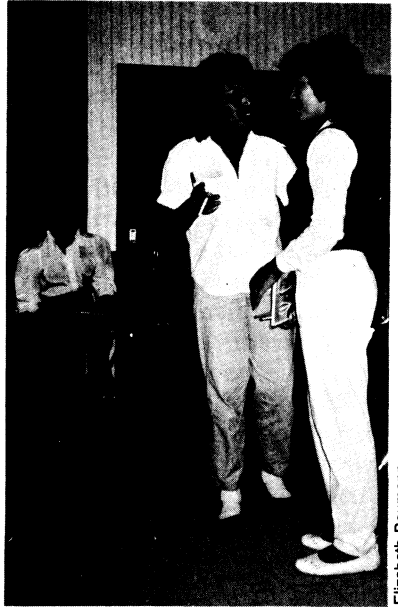
The drive to find out what chemicals they are working with has proved to be one of the greatest incentives to cross-border organizing. As one organizer explained, "There is no right-to-know law in Mexico. Management does not give out any information about hazards. In the warehouses, sometimes the Mexican workers will find data sheets on the materials they are unpacking, but these sheets are in English. This is where U.S. unions can help us tremendously."

In the past, mainly churches have been involved in cross-border campaigns—sometimes with very useful results. Some months before the Bhopal disaster, for example, representatives of the United Church of Christ met with Union Carbide officials, conveying to them the concerns of workers at Kemet, as Union Carbide is known in Mexico. As a result, Union Carbide's U.S. management instituted strict safety procedures in the Matamoros plant.

As the workers become better organized, they are increasingly seeking to expand their U.S. contacts to include unions. "We have met with representatives from ACTWU, UAW, and IUE (International Union of Electronics Workers)," commented one organizer. "Workers on both sides of the border have many concerns in common. They may be working in different factories but for the same corporation—this is often the case with garment and textile plants. We met some people from UAW in Buffalo when Trico, which makes windshield wipers, closed its Buffalo plant and moved to Matamoros. Expanding these contacts is a top priority for us."

In another sign of their growing maturity, the women's groups are launching a campaign around *utilidades*, or legally mandated

profit-sharing benefits. Because of their financial structure, *maquilas*, in the words of one corporate promoter, are "cost centers rather than profit centers"—that is, their account books are set up so that the Mexican subsidiaries show virtually no profits. By permitting this practice, the Mexican government allows the *maquilas* to evade its own law requiring 10% of all corporate profits to be distributed among workers. A leaflet from Matamoros points out that workers in a Mexican-owned chemical plant in the border region received between \$2000 and \$4000 in *utilidades* last year—in comparison to \$1.20 received by workers at a Zenith plant. Notes the leaflet, "if they divide \$4000 among 3000 workers in the plant as their share of the profits for making a million televisions in 1986, this means that Zenith made only four cents of profit on each television. If this is true, maybe Zenith should fire all its managers as incompetents!"



Elizabeth Baumann

Members of an organizing group role-play a confrontation with management.

Using the Official Unions

Union democracy is another key issue in *maquila* organizing. The official CTM unions are closely tied in with Mexico's ruling party, the PRI, which has dominated the country's politics since the 1910 revolution. In the isolated border towns, union officials also hold great political power. Workers are overwhelmingly cynical about union leaders, accusing them of corruption and pandering to management.

At the same time, many see the unions as the best structure available for representing their interests. While the Empaque workers defied the official union and won, most activists in Matamoros and other border towns have focused on making the union more responsive to their needs. "The union uses us," Lupe,

a worker activist, said bluntly, "and we should use them." Union officials generally discourage individual workers from taking action, but the union is far more likely to back a group of workers, fearing to lose its hold on the workforce if it stands aside.

In a recent example at a GM plant, women learned that a majority of them were to be temporarily laid off, without required notification of labor authorities. (Although more male workers are entering the *maquila* workforce as auto plants move south, women are employed in these plants in soldering and similar jobs.) When a small group of women visited the secretary general of their local union, he dismissed their complaint as insignificant; when 100 women returned the next day, the official negotiated an agreement giving the women half their normal salary during the layoff.

Recently in Matamoros, the union has begun training workers to participate in the Comisiones Mixtas, joint commissions with worker, union, and management representatives that are legally mandated to monitor health and safety within each plant. Making these commissions more effective has been a key focus of worker activism for several years, and "our work is having an effect," noted a border organizer. "The union probably figures it should climb on the bandwagon. In the past, they always opposed our efforts."

The question of union affiliation is a controversial one throughout Mexico's labor movement. The border is far more isolated than other industrial areas, and the power of the official confederation is correspondingly greater. There are a few independent unions in Piedras Negras, where *maquilas* are newer and the CTM is less entrenched. Women there have organized independently in an electrical assembly plant as well as plants assembling toys and novelties. For the most part, though, in the words of one organizer, "working through the CTM is the only feasible approach. Many workers would like to have independent unions, but we are a long way from being strong enough to do that."

The most sustained struggle for union democracy has taken place in Reynosa, where in 1983 more than 12,000 workers staged a spontaneous wildcat strike when one of their number was fired and then arrested on trumped-up charges. Replacing the union leadership emerged as a central issue in the conflict, and after a complicated struggle a new secretary-general was installed and a large number of rank-and-file activists were permitted to take office.

Clara is a Zenith worker in Reynosa who became shift representative for her plant through the 1983 strike. "While we were out-

side the factory," she recalled, "cars full of masked men with machine guns came up and told us to get out, but we stood our ground. When we went back to work, management told us to forget about our struggle or we would be fired. Later they offered supervisory positions and raises to those who were most active in the movement. But I said no, I prefer to stay with the union."

The large-scale movement of 1983 has died away, Clara said, but some things have changed permanently. "Now, as soon as there is a problem, people come to me to discuss it, and we go together to the union office to try to resolve things. Now we have union meetings—we never had that before. We are talking about having classes and study programs. People are much more ready to protest—for example, if they are short-changed in their pay. Before they would just take it, there was nothing they could do. Now they will come to the union."

"This Is How It Starts"

Clara spoke for many women when she recounted the changes that activism has brought to her life. "Before," she said, "I was silent. I might listen and take notes, but I could not talk. Even when they asked my opinion I would not say anything. No one ever knew who I was. But then I went to some meetings with my friend Mari where she and I were the only ones [from the rank and file]. I had to speak up to support her. And I found that the more I talked, the more people liked it. I couldn't believe it. This is how it starts: you begin to look at your own problems and it wakes you up so that no one can make you turn back."

Like many activist women, Clara had to overcome strong opposition from her family. "My mother was very angry when I joined the strike. She said I would lose my job and gain nothing. She said, you're mixing in this without knowing anything. I told her, well, I'm learning—we all have to start somewhere. I would come home from union meetings at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning and she would accuse me of walking the streets. I said if she didn't like it I would move out, and she relented. By now she accepts that this is who I am." Today, Clara attends school as well as holding union office.

Once started, the courage to speak up keeps growing. When the workers won their demand for a new union leader, José Morales was sent up from Mexico City to take over. "He met with the shift representatives," Clara recalled, "and started telling us what to do. I told him, you forgot to take us into account. First ask us if we agree—and then if we like your ideas we will follow them. We

are the ones who will pay the price if your ideas are bad ones."

In one way or another, Clara's comments were echoed by virtually every woman who was interviewed for this article. Time and again, women spoke of how they had gained the confidence to stand up to authority, to trust their own judgement and voice their own opinions. Through coming together and organizing, their understanding of themselves as women and as workers is undergoing a profound transformation. And that, as much as any concrete gain, is a sign that conditions at the border are changing irreversibly. ■

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Costureras' Struggle Continues

The struggle to build an independent union in Mexico's huge garment industry began in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, killing 1,000 garment workers and leaving 40,000 more unemployed, most of them women. After more than two years, the September 19 Garment Workers Union—which takes its name from the date of the quake—continues its efforts amid deeply altered, and more difficult, circumstances.

The earthquake, in ripping the facades from buildings housing garment sweatshops, had literally revealed to public view the conditions of extreme exploitation that had endured in the industry unremarked for decades. Because their suffering was so great, the women garment workers, or *costureras*, came to symbolize the trauma of the quake, and the first uprush of their movement was extensively and sympathetically covered in the Mexican press. The Mexican government, facing heavy criticism from many quarters for its handling of relief efforts, lent its active support, and material and moral support came pouring into the young union from every quarter—feminists, leftist and popular organizations, ecumenical groups, and other independent unions. These people's movements have remained committed to the garment workers' cause, but the media and government have not. A mantle of invisibility once again cloaks the Mexican garment industry.

September 19 now officially represents workers in 12 factories, but

Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory*, Institute for New Communications, 1983; distributed by South End Press.

The Global Assembly Line, a one-hour film by Lorraine Gray showing the impact of the global assembly line on women workers in Mexico, the Philippines and the U.S. Available as video (VHS) or 16mm film, for rent or purchase, from New Day Films, 22 Riverview Drive, Wayne, NJ 07470.

Listen Real Loud: News of Women's Liberation Worldwide, a quarterly bulletin on grassroots women's movements in the U.S. and around the world, published by the American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102.

June Nash and Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, eds., *Women, Men and the International Division of Labor*, State University of New York Press, 1983.

its organizing has been hampered by opposition from the official CTM labor federation and by the failure of the government to fairly enforce the labor code. In Mexico, independent unions like September 19



Isabelle Lacey

are generally perceived as a threat to government domination of labor through the CTM, which has strong ties to the government party. In many plants, garment workers have been officially represented, without their knowledge or consent, by company unions affiliated with the CTM. Sexual harassment and violence have been used to dissuade women from voting for September 19.

In response, September 19 members are taking their case directly to the public, staging sit-ins and leafletting actions in Mexico City's central plaza. They also are building their organization internally, providing training and education for their members and recently opening a permanent day care center for members' children. Support from other groups inside and outside the country continues to play an important role. Funds for the day care center, for example, came from Mexican and U.S. ecumenical groups.

September 19 organizers will rally support in the U.S. with a speaker-movie tour and photo exhibit in late April of 1988. For more information, contact the Women & Global Corporation's Project, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102—(215/241-7160).