

should be treating us. We had these meetings in a restaurant over coffee.

We women understand that we are more responsible and that this is partly why the factory owners prefer us as workers. Many maquiladora workers are single mothers and women whose husbands have abandoned them. It's not so easy for them to walk away from a job. This is an advantage for the owners because the girls have to provide for their children.

Many, the large majority of us, only went to primary school, which is why we have to take whatever work we can get. We can't afford the luxury of being too choosy about work. It wasn't because women didn't have the opportunity that many didn't go to school. Rather, it's because many Mexican women still embrace the idea that there is no reason to study if they are going to get married and be supported by their husband. So many times we've heard the girls say, "Now, I'm going to get married because I want to relax." And everything just gets worse for the poor girls because they end up with even more work, at home *and* in the factory.

I think a lot of men marry these women because they see they are workers, because with their job they can make an economic contribution to the household. Women just really get ground down. [Working a job and earning a salary do not exempt women from the domestic expectations men have of them.] The man has to prepare himself [educationally] to a much greater extent. Women also should prepare themselves because sometimes their luck is not so good and they have to go it alone.

Because most of us women are not qualified, we have to accept the worst work. I'm not here because I have chosen to be. I don't care for manual labor; it was the only opportunity I had.

Traditionally, Mexican women have not had consistent access to wage-labor experience. And when they do become wage earners, women's subject position in society is reproduced in prevailing relations of inequality between male employer and female employee. One way to avoid conflicts is to hire young women. The historical oppression of women—inscribed in relations of domination between husband and wife, father and daughter, brother and sister—has fostered a widespread attitude of docility and obedience among women. In capitalist societies, men have exercised power over women within and outside the nuclear family structure, in relationships that reinforce women's economic and sexual subordination.

Women's historical dependence has an ideological correlate: the supposition of a feminine essence whose naturalized qualities and roles are presumed to condition an aptitude or capacity for particular kinds of

"OBDULIA PT. I"

START

work. Hence, women in our society have grown up assimilating cultural standards of submission, self-denial, and resignation, together with qualities of modesty, patience, and reserve. All of these are seen as indispensable for maquiladora employment. These values attributed to women and transmitted through family life, schooling, and society in general condition the attitudes and norms of feminine behavior that the maquiladoras exploit to maximize production.

Obdulia was a married girl of seventeen, among the few female workers actually born in Tijuana. While she looked for something to give her seven-month-old son to make him stop crying, Obdulia commented in a low voice:

I never considered working in a factory. I always believed that my life would be centered in my home. Maybe that's why I was never interested in studying. What I wanted was to get married so I could stay at home all day tending to the household.

In my home, all the females had to help my mother around the house while the males had no household chores; all they had to do was study or go to work. Now, since I've gotten married, I have to work in the factory, care for my son, and maintain the house. As you can see, this room we live in isn't big; it always gets dirty and I'm constantly cleaning. For this room we pay 650 pesos [U.S.\$20.00] a month in rent. We share the only bathroom with twelve other rooms, and we get along well with our neighbors. We have to wash the dishes outside in the laundry sinks, because there is no water in the room. We hang our clothes to dry in the adjoining vacant lot.

I have to get up at 5:00 in the morning to take my son to my sister's house. I take him so early that my sister is still asleep. I put my son in bed, and there he stays until 7:30 A.M., when my sister gets up to begin her daily chores.

When I get out of work at 5:00 in the afternoon I go straight to pick up my boy, then I go to buy something to give him to eat. As you see, I have to put aside a part of my salary to buy milk for my son and some vegetables for stewing, to eat with beans and tortillas. My money almost never goes far enough to be able to afford any meat. I go home to cook, tidy the house, and give my husband, Martín, something to eat. The poor guy comes home dying of hunger. After that I wash the dishes while Martín steps outside to chat with our neighbors on the block. And around 10:00 we go to bed.

Saturdays I wash all the clothes and put the house in order. Martín works Saturday mornings, comes home around midday, and then goes out with his buddies to see a movie or go dancing. I go

with my son to see one of my sisters. On Sunday I visit my mother and Martín goes out again with his friends. We don't usually go out together because there's no place to leave the boy. But yesterday my mother took care of him and Martín and I went out dancing together. Frequently, all the girls from the factory go out dancing together to the Río Rita Club. I never go with them because Martín never gives me the chance. Going out dancing allows you to think less about work and housekeeping.

Housekeeping, like factory work, is a repetitive and interminable task that by no means favors the development of one's intellectual or creative capacity. Work in the factory and at home represents a double shift for women; it is obligatory work, although household tasks are not compensated monetarily and rarely accorded social value.

Clearly, employment in the maquiladora or any other industry does not make housework more attractive and does not liberate women from the responsibility of domestic work (Costa and James 1979: 14). It is also plain that the idea of spending one's life doing electrical wiring, assembly, soldering, or sewing is untenable. The majority of female workers reject these things in various ways and resist doing them. There can be no doubt that the ensuing struggles, at the individual or collective level, spring from receiving a paycheck. While they detest their jobs and the conditions under which they labor, work in the maquiladora is their first experience with social independence, an opportunity for female migrants to expand the limited worldview of their place of origin, and for women in general to leave behind their domestic isolation. Alma observed:

When I think about work I realize that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. They pay us badly and endanger our health, and the work is boring and tedious. We have no job security, we are stuck in the factory so much of the time that we have no time to do anything else, and we can't take care of our children and homes as we should. We have to get up very early in the morning, then I spend the entire day in a bad mood, angry and annoyed. And when they make decisions, they don't take my needs into account. Still, I've gotten to know a lot of people, and I've learned to make demands, and to recognize the problems of women and of all of us who work. I've learned that we should struggle in unity.

In this respect, employment in any industry has its positive aspects. In the factory, women come to see what they considered to be their life's destiny in a social context and see that they share problems. They

communicate with one another and transcend the level of mere family complaints. Their experience in the maquiladora enables them to understand that their own particular life circumstances are not the product of bad luck, poverty, the number of children they have, or an alcoholic husband; rather, these phenomena are the product of the broader social system (de Leonardo 1976: 22). For many of the maquiladora workers who are migrants or single mothers or both, their employment signifies economic "independence." They achieve this independence via a total dependence on the paycheck, however, because in many cases the woman's salary is the household's only source of income. The majority of migrant female workers assert and believe that to make it to Tijuana and work in the maquiladoras has been an improvement, as they have freed themselves of the influence of their father, mother, brother, or husband.

As a woman begins working outside the home, she gains a sense of independence as she gains some authority and control with regard to household decisions. By maintaining or helping maintain the household in economic and material terms, she has a greater say in what to do with her money and participates to a greater degree in other family matters that had been the province of the husband or other male household head. So as a woman begins to participate in economically productive activity, behavioral patterns change, modifying the family structure in some ways, without, however, diminishing women's own exploitation or oppression.

STOP

and I had to do everything, even the laundry sometimes. The work was demanding, but the people treated me well; they paid me in dollars and I worked at my own pace.

I came back to Mexico and no longer felt like returning to the other side. Without my border-crossing card, it was more difficult to cross the border, even though they were less strict then than they are now. Before, with a border-crossing card you could go as far as Los Angeles and nobody hassled you like they do now. You have to have papers to get any farther than San Diego, and everywhere you go they're after you. I stayed in Tijuana and met my future husband. We met in the Independencia district of Tijuana, and every time I was back in town we would see one another, until we became sweethearts.

Here in Tijuana I was working in the home of the old lady's daughter-in-law. Then I went to live with a girl who some time before had come from Rancho Nuevo also to work as a domestic. She suggested that I move in with her, so I did. Because I needed money, I went to work in a maquiladora.

I told my boyfriend that I wanted to work in a factory, and he told me to go see his uncle, who was a maquiladora administrator. I met with him, he gave me a recommendation and told me to take it to the office, where they would give me a job. And they did.

In the maquiladora they didn't give me any exams; I just filled out the application. I knew nothing of factory work; I wasn't interested in the question like I am now. When I worked on the other side I didn't know that the maquiladoras even existed. The girls who had worked for the old lady were working in the factory by then. When I told them I was going to work on the other side, they said, "The factory is hiring. Why not stay and get a job here?" I applied, but I had no idea what the work involved.

From the beginning I got along well with the other factory workers because what I wanted to do was work. It was different from domestic employment, where you work alone at your own rhythm. In the factory there were a lot of people and everything had to be done rapidly. In those days I made nineteen dollars a week, because they used to pay in dollars.

When I started working in the factory I knew it would be for a while, because they told me that with proof of employment it was easier to get a border-crossing card. And so it was—I got the card on that basis.

After that I didn't go to the other side because I got married, and we went to live in a little house near the factory where I worked. My husband was the manager of a supermarket, and with what he

"MARÍA LUISA" START

earned we managed to make a living. I kept on working; it was important to me because that way I could continue to help my mother. I always sent her money, and I still do.

After I was married I brought one of my sisters, who helped me with the house while I went to the factory. I stayed at the job for something over a year, but because I got pregnant shortly after starting there, I got subsidized maternity leave, and only shortly after I returned to work they closed the factory because the rest of the girls went on strike. They say the factory closed because of the strike. The owners left—that was in 1970. I didn't take part in the strike. I wasn't so inclined because the administrators had other factories, and they told us, "If you stay out of the strike we can find you work elsewhere." I was more interested in working than I was in the strike, and within two months of the factory closing, they found something for us elsewhere. Those administrators could hire us because they control five or six factories, even though each one has a different owner.

When it closed, the factory had about four hundred workers, and only one hundred were on strike. Those of us who weren't on strike went every day to the administrators' new offices and they gave us bus fare. While the others were fighting, we reported at the office. The administrators told us a new factory was about to open and that they were going to take care of us.

It didn't affect me much to be without work because my husband gave me money for the household expenses. I was without work for about two months, and when the new factory opened they called me to work. They did some very exacting soldering work, so they only had people with soldering experience. The factory people taught us how to solder. They gave us a course in soldering, and they gave us diplomas.

After I was there for three years they closed the factory because they said it was what they had to do. Nobody complained. Some approached the administrators, who gave them work in other factories. I got a job in another electronics plant, but this was rare; most were not rehired.

In the factory the supervisors were women, and we got along well. At times they were bossy, but I always got along with them. Those who didn't get into the routine would be called down, but because I didn't like being reprimanded I always tried to do my job well. After I worked there for two years the factory moved out around Mexicali, and they found me a job in another factory in Tijuana, where for seven years I did the same kind of work.

Since coming to Tijuana I've learned a lot of new things and met

