

# Improving Workplace Conditions in the 'Maquilas' of Central America



IDRC Photo: Negotiating a "Code of Ethics" with the owner of a maquila factory in Nicaragua.

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*Pattie LaCroix*

Hot, unventilated and overcrowded workplaces, abuse, sexual harassment, unpaid overtime, and dismissal for pregnancy: these are just a few of the labour issues faced by more than 335,000 factory workers — most of them female — in Central America's five free trade zones.

A few years ago, women's groups from Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras met in El Salvador to address the deplorable working conditions in the region's rapidly growing 'maquilas' — factories in free trade zones that manufacture cheap goods for North American markets. The meeting resulted in the launch of the Network of Central American Women in Solidarity with Women Maquila Workers, which is dedicated to improving working conditions in each country.

The Network's research — which underpins training, education, lobbying and other activities — is supported by the International Development Research Centre, the Vancouver-based Trade Union Group (TUG) and CoDevelopment Canada (CoDev), [Oxfam-Canada](#), [Oxfam-Quebec](#), and the [Canadian International Development Agency](#).

## Major success

In February, the Network celebrated its first major success when 500 maquila workers saw the Nicaraguan Minister of Labour sign into law a Code of Ethics, which was developed by Network members in consultation with the workers. Leading up to this event, the Network had persuaded each maquila factory owner in Nicaragua to endorse the Code, which includes such basic guarantees as a safe working environment, the right for pregnant women to retain their jobs, and payment for overtime work.

"You can imagine the impact this had on these women, who are not educated, who have never played a role in public policy, and who suddenly see that their vision is now the Minister's vision too," says [Barbara Wood](#), one of the project's supporters and Co-ordinator of TUG.

## **Passion and energy**

"Many of the women in the Network came out of the union movement and they have a lot of passion and energy to change conditions for women workers," she adds. "But they saw that the confrontational approach of unionization is not going to work at this point because women workers are afraid of losing the only source of income they have, and because the factory owners are very closed to unions. So the Network chose to work directly with women in their communities on issues of health education and labour rights."

So far, research conducted by the Network has helped to establish base line survey information, document working conditions, and bolster lobbying efforts with hard evidence of workplace abuse. The Network has also developed various resources, ranging from brochures explaining the rights of women workers and where to go for help, to a regional public awareness campaign named 'Jobs Yes, But With Dignity.'

## **Improvements**

"Even though the research is still being completed there have already been improvements," says Wood. "Beatings, sexual harassment, and firings due to pregnancy still occur, but are now less frequent. It is still common, however, for companies not to pay their portion of health benefits."

In future, the Network plans to continue its involvement in lobbying factory owners and government officials for workplace changes, as well as in education and training of female maquila workers. Other priorities include monitoring regional compliance with the Code of Ethics and increasing international awareness of the issues facing maquila workers. Last year, for example, the project mounted a public education campaign in Canada, in which two maquila workers discussed their experiences with students and union workers. "The Network has asked us to make the Canadian public aware of their situation and of their struggles. The importance of international solidarity can not be stressed enough," concludes Wood.

*Pattie LaCroix is a Vancouver-based writer. (Photo: Courtesy of the Network of Central American Women in Solidarity with Women Maquila Workers.)*

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