

for HUNGER- proof CITIES

Sustainable Urban
Food Systems



Edited by Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae,
Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Jennifer Welsh

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Published by the

International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

in association with the

Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson Polytechnic University
Toronto, ON, Canada M5B 2K3

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title :

For hunger-proof cities : sustainable urban food systems

Includes bibliographical references.

"Most of the papers in this volume were presented at the International Conference on Sustainable Urban Food Systems, ... at Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto..." — p.4.

ISBN 0-88936-882-1

1. Food supply — Congresses.
2. Food supply — Developing countries — Congresses.
3. Nutrition policy — Congresses.
4. Sustainable agriculture — Congresses.
5. Urban health — Congresses.

I. Koc, Mustafa, 1955-

II. International Development Research Centre (Canada)

HD9000.9A1H86 1999

641.3

C99-980227-5

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IDRC Books endeavours to produce environmentally friendly publications. All paper used is recycled as well as recyclable. All inks and coatings are vegetable-based products.



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Women Workers in the NAFTA Food Chain

Deborah Barndt

Introduction

Central to a restructured global labour force are women workers — particularly young, poor, and indigenous women — who have always been engaged in food production and preparation under subsistence agriculture but are now key actors in industrialized plantations, *maquila*¹ processing plants, retail sales, food preparation, and services. Free-trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have made it easier for multinational agribusinesses to control continental food production.

"Free trade regimes have a distinct colour as well as a gender," charged Palacios (1995), "because of the exclusionary nature of the decision-making process [in which] a small group of white males [is] determining the fate of all races in the North as well as in the South." The feminization of poverty (Tinker 1990) has continued through these latest developments. For example, in agricultural production, indigenous women who previously practiced subsistence agriculture are now migrant labourers or salaried workers for agribusinesses in Mexico. Women also make up the large majority of the work force in the burgeoning *maquila* industry, which contributes to growing internationalized and specialized production in free-trade export-processing zones, including food processing. In the Northern markets that are the destinations for these agricultural products, women also predominate in the low-paying jobs in the food-processing plants and fast-food outlets (Reiter 1991).

The Tomasita project

In a cross-border research project that began in 1995, a group of women academics and popular educators in the three NAFTA countries has been examining the impact of globalization, with a focus on food. The project has applied a variety of research methods, including corporate research, interviews with managers and workers, participatory

NB: This paper has benefited especially from the contributions of academic collaborators in Mexico, Maria Antonieta Barron and Kirsten Appendini (now with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, in Rome); Sara San Martin and Catalina Gonzalez of the Mexican Institute for Community Development; and Lauren Baker, graduate research assistant from the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, who worked with me during the Mexican fieldwork. Lauren Baker and Stephanie Conway, another graduate student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, helped design and facilitate the film workshops; Todd Southgate videotaped the responses.

¹ *Maquilas* are foreign-owned factories in Central America's free-trade zones (tax- and tariff-free enclaves); these factories use low-paid workers to manufacture cheap goods or to assemble imported parts into cheap products, almost exclusively for export to US markets.

research, and the use of photographs and videos. By following the journey and life cycle of a tomato (from a Mexican field to a McDonald's restaurant in Canada) and by calling this tomato Tomasita,² we are hoping to make visible the bigger picture revealed by the experiences of the women who plant, pick, sort, pack, process, sell, and prepare the tomatoes we eat.

Of particular interest is how women's work in the various stages of production in this continentalized food system gets framed, interpreted, and understood. Our research confirms that the system of globalized food production marginalizes women and that Mexican women, for example, work under even more exploitative conditions than Northern women in this system. When you listen to these women and observe how they engage with and survive in this system, however, the story becomes more complex. Many may be bound, for the sake of their survival, to this unjust system, but they also have multiple ways of resisting its effects, even as they perpetuate it. In some cases, their work in producing our food has liberating elements, so we must challenge the simplistic framing of these women as victims. The metaphor of the "chain" is useful, because it can be interpreted in multiple ways to refer to oppressive experiences, as well as to connective ones. I'd like to explore these various meanings of the chain: bound, freed, connected.

Bound by gender, race, and class

The decentralized production that characterizes these export-processing zones and the deregulation that is turning whole countries into giant *maquilas* have resulted in the feminization of labour. Appendini (1995) noted that this phenomenon has been integral to the growth of fruit and vegetable export agriculture in Mexico, which is one of the markets that has benefited from NAFTA and maintained an international competitiveness. Appendini (1995, p. 7) suggested that "firms use gender ideologies to erode stable employment and worker rights where women are concerned," and workers themselves seem to internalize the notion that women are better suited for certain jobs, such as packing, because of their accuracy, speed, compliance, sense of responsibility, and obedience. The prevailing macho view that a woman's primary role is in the home helps to maintain this "flexibilization" of women's labour.

Clear class and racial divisions separate the women who work in the fields, cultivating and picking the crops, and those who work in the packing plants. We found at least three different kinds of women workers in the tomato fields in Jalisco:

- Those from the town of Sayula who were hired year round to prepare the ground and cultivate it, as well as to pick tomatoes (though most townsfolk looked down on this work);
- Those who were brought daily by truck from surrounding villages during the harvest period; and
- The indigenous workers who came with their families from the poorer states in Mexico, again only for the peak harvest period.

² Using a Mexican name in its feminine form draws attention to the fact that the most marginalized players in this process are Mexican and women.

Although their wages were the same,³ their living conditions were strikingly different. The indigenous workers had been recruited with great promises of good wages, benefits, and housing. They arrived to find only shells of homes in camps without running water, sewage, or electricity; disease was rampant, and no health services were provided.

Whereas indigenous women of all ages, from grandmothers to grandchildren, were relegated to the fields, young *mestizas*⁴ got the jobs in the packing plants. The working days in these plants could be longer, stretching to 10 or 15 hours, but the wages were three to five times better, up to 100 MXP a day. Selectors were paid by the hour, but packers were paid by the box, which was an incentive to increase productivity. These women fell into at least two categories:

- The locals hired mainly for the harvest period; and
- The migrants who, like company girls, were transported from plant to plant, a kind of moving *maquila*.

These women were either very young, between the ages of 15 and 24, or older and single, having been “wedded” to the company for years. Their living conditions were much better than those in the indigenous camps, as they spent their (mainly sleeping) hours in company-owned houses, cooking communally and creating a woman-centred family.

The gendered nature of food production, then, is complex, integrating issues of race, class, age, and marital status. As Gabriel and Macdonald (1996, p. 167) contended, “the mobility of international capital is predicated on the politics of race and gender.” Multinational corporations, as well as domestic companies competing on the international market, take advantage of deeply ingrained and institutionalized sexism and racism in their constant search for cheaper labour. And women, no matter what their ethnicity, are caught within this system and are the most exploited, whether moving from plant to plant in the packing jobs or taking their families to work in the fields and performing their double-duty household tasks before and after a grueling day under the hot sun.

Forms of resistance

Women workers resisted in a variety of ways. To break the monotony, packers in the San Isidro greenhouse played mental games and joked around with each other, especially when the foreman was out of sight. One young packer took photos inside her workplace when we were unable to do so; her act of resistance helped to make visible the experiences of women greenhouse workers.

Most tomato workers were unorganized; the official union, Confederación de Trabajadores de México (confederation of Mexican workers), operated in one plant, but workers were not even aware of it. There was greater organization around working conditions in the town of Sayula, where a group of popular-health promoters advocated for the rights (health, housing, and education) of indigenous workers living in squalor in the migrant-labour camps. Resistance was limited, of course, by the lack of other work options. Families depended on the income of several family members, and young women were expected to contribute, both through salaried work and at home.

³ The average field worker earned 28 MXP a day, working from 07:00 until 14:30 (in 1998, 9.95 Mexican pesos [MXP] = 1 United States dollar [USD]).

⁴ A *mestiza* is a woman of mixed European and American Indian ancestry.

Liberating elements

For young women packers who were moved by companies from plant to plant, these jobs may have represented a kind of liberation. They offered an escape from a repressive family dynamic that overprotects the daughters and gives the sons more freedom. Although the long work days left the young women with little time for a social life outside the plant, meeting young people from many different places broke the monotony of the work and of small-village life. It was especially striking to see young women all dressed up, complete with high-heeled shoes, standing up for a 10–12 hour day of packing tomatoes. Women far outnumbered men in the plants, so there was a kind of competition for potential husbands.

Connecting across borders

The Tomasita project has ultimately been a popular-education project and has attempted, even in the research stage, to engage the women involved in the food chain, both in the South and the North. One means we have used to do this is to show films or videos about food production to the women workers along this chain of producers and consumers. In 1996, we collaborated with FoodShare's Focus on Food program and 25 women who had been living on social assistance (see Barndt 1997). In a workshop series called *Women to Women: Connecting Across Borders*, we showed four films:

- *Dirty Business*, about the flight south of Jolly Green Giant and the subsequent environmental degradation in Mexico;
- *From the Mountains to the Maquiladores*, showing women who had lost their jobs in Tennessee visiting Mexican women workers who had gained those jobs when the plants moved to a *maquila* zone;
- *Jungle Burger*, exposing the razing of Costa Rican rainforests for beef cattle destined to become Northern hamburgers; and
- *Fast Food Women*, revealing the oppressive conditions of women working in fast-food kitchens.

These films acted as catalysts: the Focus on Food participants were inspired to tell their own stories related to food production; immigrant women remembered what they had seen and experienced in their own countries of origin. The women revealed a tremendous knowledge, both of how the global system operates (being part of cash-crop agro-export economies) and of traditional food and agricultural practices that could be more sustainable.

We eventually videotaped their responses to these films, creating a "video letter" addressed to the Mexican workers shown in the documentary films. The video letter is one way that women in the food chain can share their experiences and talk to each other. The Tomasita project has developed other popular-education visual aids on the journey of the tomato and the role of women workers, including a comic book, "Tomasita Tells All: The Story of the Abused Tomato," and a photo-testimony, "Teresa, Food Producer — At Work at Home." See also Barndt (1998).

Food has a tremendous educational potential as an entree to understanding — in a more holistic and integrated way — the massive and often overwhelming forces of globalization that seem to be engulfing us. When women break the silence, they begin

to loosen the chains. And when they begin to share these stories across borders, they not only unveil the complexity and injustice of a system that binds them but also discover their own capacity to survive, to resist, and to create healthy and just alternatives.

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