Mujeres en el Mundo: Multiculturalismo, violencia, trabajo, literatura y movimientos sociales

Yamile Delgado de Smith
María Cristina González

Argentina
Claudia Hasambegovic
Mariela Martí

Bolivia
María Galdino

Canadá
Mariela A. Gutiérrez

Colombia
Alejandra Restrepo
Gloria Patricia Zuluaga
Juliana Tabares Quiroz

Inglaterra
Marta Zabaleta

México
Cirila Quintero
Raquel Gutiérrez Estupiñán

Perú
Sara Beatriz Guardia

Suecia
Edmé Domínguez Reyes

Taiwán
Lucía Chen
Yin–Zu Chen

Venezuela
Belkis Zoraida Tovar
Dalia Correa Guía
Lubiza Osio Havriluk
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Mónica Abellana Chaybub
Yamile Delgado de Smith
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Yamile Delgado de Smith
María Cristina González

Coordinadoras

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Labour organizing among women workers linked to globalization: the case of El Salvador

Edmé Domínguez R.
Suecia

Introduction

Women’s organizing, both at the local and global level has been one of the new social movement phenomena in which the role of human agency to resist global restructuring is most significant. However, such resistance strategies are particularly difficult when the challenge is not only confronting economic globalization as such but also part of the comrades in arms in such confrontation, that is trade unions that as such embody part of this resistance to transnational capital. The entanglement of the identities of class and gender is not unproblematic but it also opens new possibilities for example in the way of the creation of alternative labour organizations rejecting the traditions of authoritarianism and patriarchal hierarchies plaguing classical trade unions.

The aim of this paper is to show one such example of labour organizing among women workers within maquiladora (assembling factories-outsourcing) industries, the case of San Marcos in El Salvador. As it is well known, these industries have traditionally, in the first phases of their establishment and specially within textile manufacture, recruited mostly female workers, that is to say cheap labour. The story of their exploitation is quite well known, what is less well know is their organizing experiences, and these are quite varied. Taking as point of departure the example of El Salvador I want to illustrate how these women have been able to overcome many difficulties and sometimes form their own trade unions in alliance
with NGOs. I will try to present their strategies and challenges as well as their potential for the near future. Thus, one can perhaps delineate the different factors that make this organizing possible, the importance of the local context vis a vis the international and the possibilities and limits of this kind of local resistance to the conditions imposed by globalization.

Women and trade union participation

In spite of the fact that women have a growing share in labour markets (they represent about 1/3 of the world labour market) and that they represent about 40% of all organized within trade unions their active participation in trade unions has been very modest. According the ICFTU (International Confederation of Trade Unions) women are badly represented at the level of decision making in most trade unions. The crystal roof that many feminists argue is a fact in most working places is also quite present within trade union structures. These structures seem to be one of the strongholds of patriarchal practices, difficult to eradicate.

For a long time, union leaders expressed that there were no differences between men and women inside of the unions, that union represented both men and women’s interests regarding wages and other benefits. However, they overlooked the differential treatment that men and women receive in many working places. While men enjoy the best positions, wages and benefits, women are for the most part in subordinate positions and they are over represented in part time labour, thus loosing benefits and wages as well as stability. This situation is more than reproduced within trade unions although now days many unions have recognized the need to make structural changes so women can have their fair share at all levels. Gender equity should thus be an integral aspect of trade union structures and policies. (ICFTU, 2006: 7). According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions a gender perspective implies: 1. The establishment of a women’s committee or the inclusion of several women members in the executive committee, 2. The creation of gender units provided with sufficient financial support and with decision making power, not only in an advisory role, 3. To ensure that gender equity is taken into consideration in all decision making as well as enforcing gender quotas in all eligible positions, to observe a principle of proportionality so women are represented at all union levels and at all educational and training courses, 4. To develop a gender mainstreaming policy in order to create awareness as to the importance of gender roles and their consequences in the design, the implementation, the monitoring and the evaluation of all policies and programs within the union (ICFTU, 2006: 7-8)
In spite of the advances of these proposals they still represent a liberal-quantitative interpretation of a gender perspective leaving outside such important problems as wage discrimination and sexual harassment. Also, these recommendations are extremely difficult to implement in the unions that are still patriarchal strongholds based on the traditional idea that the man is the main bread winner within the family as well as the main responsible of taking decisions about public issues such as wages and labour benefits. The participation of women in these issues is still minimized.

Thus, the distinctive features of women’s work are seen from an andocentric perspective, as deviations and not as constitutive of a different form of relations between the state, capital and the unions (Solis de Alba, 2002: 31). Within the framework of men’s privileged access to the public space sexual differentiations in the labour space are reproduced inside the unions. This situation is even more accentuated in corporative unions, those controlled by the party in power, where women are expected to support the men who are aspiring to public office.

Also, in spite of the increase of women in the labour market most of them do not join the unions either because their work is in the informal sector or because they work only part time or because they don’t know how the unions could help them, they don’t have time (“double burden”), trade unions are seen in a very negative way, not sensitive to women’s needs, women are afraid of losing their jobs if they join an union, they have to pay a quota, or the husband does not approve of their joining (ICFTU, 2006: 3). Moreover trades unions have not launched major campaigns to recruit women. Finally, one has also to notice the crisis affecting trade unions affiliation in general.

It is also a fact that the study of women inside the unions has been quite poor. Whenever such studies have taken place women have been studied only as victims not as agents capable of generating changes or even cumulating power and exercising relations of domination (Sánchez, 2000).

In this paper I try to present women’s strategies to confront several challenges: for an equal treatment in wage and labour benefits, for the integration of a gender perspective but also of a feminist agenda inside of the unions/labour organizations and for the improvement of strategies to fight both transnational capital, the state and the patriarchal structures that still dominate trade unions.¹

**Trade union, women and the social context in El Salvador**

El Salvador was one of the first countries in the region to have an organized labour movement since the late 19th and early 20th century. The
first nationwide labour organization, the Regional Federation of Salvadoran Workers, (Federación Regional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños, FRTS) was established in 1924 and grew closer to the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCES) in 1930 (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 65) The world crisis on early 1930 together with the declining coffee prices provoked a widespread social unrest in a background of lack of respect for elections and a military coup. The result was a popular insurrection gathering together indigenous people, farm labourers, peasants, students and workers under the leadership of the FRTS and the PCES with the legendary Komintern activist Farabundo Marti as part of its leaders, in January 1932 (Ibid: 65). The revolt was stopped with a bloodshed, la Matanza (massacre) where about 30 000 people were killed by the military whereupon the whole labour movement disappeared.

El Salvador, like most of the rest of Central America, was dominated by military or conservative authoritarian governments up to the end of the 1970s. Whenever moderate reformist government happened to win the elections these were blocked by the conservative elites from taking power. This polarized the situation and radicalized several social movements among which labour. Several labour federations became linked to popular-revolutionary organizations, like the Revolutionary Trade Union Federation (FSR) to the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) or the National Federation of Salvadoran Workers (FENASTRAS) to the National Resistance (RN), all forming part of the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). During the national insurrection started in 1980 (unleashed by repression and by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in 1979) labour federations were among the first victims of repression and had to go underground. However, labour organizations were also politically affiliated to either conservative parties like the Christian Democrats or to American funded-organized continental federations like the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD).

In January 1992, after a 12 year civil war (and about 100 000 fatal victims) peace accords were signed. However, peace and transition to democracy did not restore labour’s strength because some of the alliances among the labour organizations and the FMLN were broken, some of the federations like FENASTRAS moved to the right and because the ones remaining with the FMLN, like FEASIES (the federation of Associations and independente unions of El Salvador), or FESTES, (Union Federation of Salvadoran workers) could not cope with the challenges of organizing workers in the maquiladora era. By 1996 there were only 118, 000 workers unionized in El Salvador, and only 1000 among the 60 000 maquiladora workers. (Armbruster 2005:69). In the year 2002 there were about 130 active trade unions in El Salvador with about 138 000 affiliates, the affiliation index being of only 5,4 % (Analisis
sobre El Salvador 2003). By 2006 there were 191 trade unions with 163,000 affiliates among which 24,432 belonged to the manufacture sector (UNDP 2007-2008: 355). Within the maquila industries there were only 6 trade unions in 2003, of these two disappeared that year (Wolf Herrera et al: 42).  

At the level of the whole Central America, while maquiladoras increased in 37.5% the trade union’s presence decreased in 17.5%.

The maquiladora industry started in the 1970s but did not flourish until the 1990s by the creation of free trade zones and recintos fiscales (fiscal precincts). Both of these forms offer foreign (and national) investors tax exemptions, duty free import of machinery, raw materials and unlimited repatriation of profits. This development was encouraged by the US backed CBI (Caribbean Basin Initiative) and the GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) that guaranteed certain specific exports, like textiles, access to the US market, “based on the protection of international labour standards”. Maquila exports rose from 18% of total Salvadoran exports in 1991 to 48% in 1998 and from less than 5000 workers in 1990 they were about 60,000 in 1996 and about 90,000 in 2003. (Armburster-Sandoval 2005:70 and REDCAM 2005: 5). There are two important differences with the maquilas for example in Mexico; while all kind of industries (electronic, chemical car industry, textiles) have maquila production in Mexico, in the case of Central America: 1. about 80% of their production is concentrated in clothing and apparel goods and 2. these are sub-contractors, not big corporations, about half of these maquilas belong to Salvadorean owners, American owners represent about 21% and Asiatic owners about 20%, the rest is mixed ownership.

Other important information: like in Mexico, in all Central American countries labour legislation and national labour codes are applicable in free trade zones and related areas (like precintos fiscales) (Wolf Herrera 2003, Armburster-Sandoval 2005, REDCAM 2005). That means that at least in theory maquiladora workers have the same rights as in the rest of the industries, working places in the country. However, as we shall see, these are not applied because of the classical collusion between the justice authorities and other ministry officials, maquiladora owners and some co-opted trade unions.

**Women workers within maquiladoras**

As already mentioned, most maquila workers are young women between 16 and 30 years old. They represented in the mid 90s about 78% of all maquila workers and 87% of all women labour force. About 50% of these women were single mothers (Armbruster_Sandoval 2005: 70 and REDCAM 2005: 5). Most of them perceived a minimum salary of about 150 doll per month.
while the basic food basket would amount to 5 times that sum (Connor et al 1999: iv).

As in most other Central American countries, women workers in free trade zones in El Salvador, are not attracted by trade unions. According to official figures in 2002 from 138,000 trade union affiliates only 11,740 were women, that is only 9% of all affiliates (Analisis sobre El Salvador 2003). In order to reach a collective contract in El Salvador, trade unions must affiliate at least 51% of all workers in the factory. According to UNDP figures by 2006 within the manufacture sector there were about 8 enterprise collective contracts supporting 1,211 male workers and 433 female workers and 1 industrial collective contract protecting 1,829 male workers and 1,455 female workers. (UNDP 2007-1008: 356). This from a total of about 80,000 workers in maquila industries in the whole country.

What are the obstacles for more trade union affiliation within the maquila industries? One is the volatile character of these factories that open and close in a very swift way. Another factor is the vulnerability of these factories to frequent cycles of economic depression like the one in 2001, the end of the MFA (Multifiber Agreement) in 2005 and the recent one 2008-2010. And of course there is the well known mistrust and hostility of factory owners to any kind of labour organization that they do not control or use for their own purposes thus the use of threats and black lists. Government official have most of the time hindered working organizing and discouraged conflicts, siding most of the time with maquila owners. Also workers have adapted and resigned themselves to permanent instability, they don’t see any point in organizing and sometimes they even use trade union affiliation to bring the management to fire them in order to obtain certain indemnities and thus be able to change their working place. Thus worker rotation has become a tactic of resistance and survival in times when the offer is plentiful. Also trade union organizing has become sometimes a one time solution in order to solve a certain state of affairs but rarely a permanent solution to bad labour conditions or low salaries. The bad reputation of many trade unions, like FENASTRAS that uses labour conflicts only in its own benefit, has also contributed to a strong rejection to trade union affiliation. And last but not least is the lack of interest of male dominated unions to women’s interests and problems and the lack of time of women workers (with double burdens: work and home) to organize. (Wolf Herrera et al: 44-46, Armbruster-Sandoval: 71 and Martinez, Quinteros 1997)

This does not mean that there are no labour conflicts in the maquilas in El Salvador. On the contrary, several such conflicts have taken place given
the very precarious working conditions, the long working hours, the low pay, the rarely paid overtime and the mistreatment and harassment (particularly sexual harassment). The conflict of Mandarin International in 1995 was one such effort to organize an union affiliated to one of the big union federations. After many defeats the workers within Mandarin managed to put together a factory trade union (sindicato de empresa): SETMI (Sindicato de empresa de Trabajadores de Mandarin Internacional) that was attacked and undermined by both factory owners and government officials. The conflict continued during most of 1995 and 1996 and was solved in favour of the workers only because of the intervention of external support- the American NLC (National Labour Committee) who together with UNITE and other US NGOs decided to target GAP, one of the main customers of Mandarin in a classical “Moral leverage and Boomerang effect” that appealed the general public and specially GAP’s potential buyers (Armbruster-Sandoval: 75-80). The establishment of an independent monitoring group GMIES (Grupo de Monitoreo independiente de El Salvador) composed by academics, members of human rights organizations and church associated legal aid as well as labour specialists, was a victory and working conditions improved but salaries didn’t because SETMI never managed to gain a collective contract. Part of this failure may be explained by the disagreement of tactics of the American supporters, NLC, AFL-CIO and UNITE. (Ibid).

According to our interviews from July 2009, the Mandarin factory changed its name to Charter and the successor of SETMI was a new trade union called STECHAR (Sindicato de trabajadores de la empresa Charter). This trade union was quite strong in spite of the fact of not being able to affiliate the majority of the workers, at the most there were 250 affiliated workers in 2005 from a total of 11000. However the plant management tried to weaken the trade union and made several readjustments firing always the affiliated workers. Finally, after a long process of harassment towards the trade union in spite of the existence of the monitoring group GMIES the factory closed and the trade union was dismantled. According to the former leader of the union, GAP was co-responsible of the outcome because they rejected any contact with the union in spite of the efforts of the latter to reach them. Apparently there were no further efforts from NLC, AFL-CIO and UNITE to give any further support to the workers (Ibid).

Women workers organizing in El Salvador: three study cases

In what follows we shall try to give an overview of women maquiladora workers organizing efforts in El Salvador taking the concrete case of San
Marcos. We focus on some of the organizations, trade unions and NGOs that try to organize or support these workers. In El Salvador, in contrast to the Matamoros case, it’s NGOs that have focused most and been more successful in their efforts to help women maquiladora workers although, as we shall see, some trade unions also continue to struggle. Among the women NGOs involved in this terrain we have: ORMUSA, Mujeres Transformando MT, Movimiento Salvadoreños de Mujeres MSM, Las Melidas and Las DIGNAS. Among the trade unions there are several but among the more active ones we have the federations: FEASIES (Federacion de Asociaciones y sindicatos independientes de El Salvador), FENASTRAS (still considered to be a “yellow union” negotiating directly with the managers without any concern for the workers’ interests) and smaller trade unions like SGC (Sindicato general de Costureras), SGTV (Sindicato de gremio de Trabajadores del vestido) and other factory trade unions. Taking as part of departure the information gathered through interviews and direct observation during the summer 2009 I will take the case of two trade unions: SGC and SGTV as well as their joint MSTSM (Mesa Sindical de Trabajadores de la Maquila) and that of a trade union federation FEASIES in alliance with an NGO, Mujeres Transformando (MT). I will present these organizations’ strategies and challenges (within the trade union world but also in relation to enterprises and the government), as well as their links and coordinating efforts at the national, regional (Central America or Latin America) and international level.

Trade Unions on their own: The Mesa de la Maquila (CGC and SGTV)

The trade unions around the MSTSM, specially the SGC and SGTV try to organize women workers focusing on what they call “labour clauses”, that is to say concrete issues negotiated by trade union groups called “seccionales”. They have already managed to organize 6 seccionales, 4 by SGC and 2 by SGTV with a total affiliation of about 1654 women (and 118 men), most of them in San Marcos. The issues taken up with the factory owners are very concrete and sometimes small as demanding good toilets or subsidized lunches or fighting at court for the re-installation of fired workers. But this negotiation is bound to be unsuccessful if it’s no supported by a larger group of workers and by alliances with other organizations like the National Commission for Human Rights or with foreign organizations that can help to exert pressure on the brands for which maquilas work, that is why corporate codes of conduct may be useful sometimes. However, every factory demands different strategies according to its own situation according to the leaders of the SGC and the MSTSM. The ideal solution would be a collective contract
but that is extremely difficult to achieve given the fact that they would need to affiliate 51% of the workers. However, according to its general secretary, the SGC was near to conclude such a contract in Empresas GAMA, an enterprise with Palestinian owners. Needless to say, this would be a historic achievement.

These trade unions had integrated a gender perspective in their training courses for women workers and their leaders. This training encompassed not only labour rights but also more general human and specially women rights, focusing on improving women’s self esteem so they could cope with other private problems like domestic violence or access to health care services. For this they tried to get the assistance of government entities like ISDEMU (Instituto Salvadoreño para el desarrollo dela Mujer). Moreover, they also tried to make women conscious of their responsibilities for example, the cleanliness of the toilets at the factory which sometimes was boycotted by women as a personal vengeance against the factory but that affected the rest of the workers.

Trade union meetings and training courses were organized during the worker’s free time but never immediately after a working day because that delayed the women’s coming home and created problems for her. Most events took place during the week ends and for the training courses women were encouraged to bring their children and a sort of day-care center was organized so the children would not disturb the mother’s training. Social events were organized so the women workers would bring their husband and relatives in order to demystify the image of the trade union as dangerous agitators and replace it by one of “caring” organizations, thus increasing their credibility and legitimacy. Also, women workers were given some money to cover their transport costs to come to the meetings and during these meetings or social events free food was provided. Moreover, affiliated workers were not asked to pay trade union quotas given their low salaries.

The challenges these trade unions are facing, apart from their struggles against the companies and sometimes the official authorities (Ministry of Work or Labour courts) had to do with the maquila’s inherent instability, the workers reactions to the conflicts, new forms of production recently enforced and trade unions traditional bad reputation. Regarding the maquila’s inherent stability the problem was not only that the factories closed and disappeared in a quick way. Affiliated workers or those defended by the unions suddenly had to leave the plant and abandon the conflict because of pressing economic needs forcing them to migrate, or personal problems (criminality related to the Mara gangs) affecting their families. There was also the problem of those
The introduction of new forms of production was also seen by these trade unions as a threat to worker solidarity. The system of team work in modules, where a group of workers were given a certain amount of work to be done, a target, created an enormous stress among these women workers. They were forced to control each other, for example limiting the amount of time to go to the toilets, in order to accomplish the target. Another challenge these trade unions were concerned with was the increasing recruitment of young men instead of women workers. Men were preferred by the owners because they did not have maternity leave problems, neither did they ask for special permits to take the children to the health services or to solve problems at school.

Finally, the *machista* trade union culture was also seen as a problem. Not so much within the SGC as 98% of their affiliates were women (and the interviewed, the general secretary, was a woman) but at higher levels, within their federation and confederation where only men occupied the decision making positions. Finally, there was the lack of legitimacy of many trade unions with a bad reputation of dishonesty or ex-workers trying to make a *modus vivendi* of their fights against their former enterprises. The latter damaged the image of organized workers and trade unions with their stories of women workers having to prostitute themselves to survive.

Relations with other trade unions or NGOs organizing women workers, were not very positive according to these trade union leaders. They expressed a feeling of being utilized, even manipulated or invaded in their territory by such NGOs that only approached them when they needed them to justify their work in front of the donors. Although women NGOs had a training capacity that these trade union leaders admitted they needed they could not trust them because of some bad experiences like taking advantage of the previous work carried out by trade unions like SGTV to gain adherents. And there was also the fact that NGOs were driven by middle class women not by women workers active or previously active and that these women made a living of these activities. Moreover, even if NGOs could help to train workers on their rights they would never be able to represent them in front of the company as trade unions would. Finally these NGOs had a network of international contacts and access to international funds they didn’t share with trade unions.

Their own international-regional contacts where quite limited although they had a certain contact with the International Trade Union federation and sporadic support of regional offices of international organizations like
UNICEF (helping in their training-related children day-care activities) as well as with certain regional forums. At the national level, their main coordinating effort is the “Mesa Sindical de trabajadores y trabajadoras de la maquila”, the MSTM formed by two industry trade unions, SGC + SGTV, four “seccionales” belonging to different factories and a trade union federation, FESTES (Federación de sindicatos de trabajadores de El Salvador). This is an umbrella space meant to drive women workers interests responding to a widespread feeling that these interest were not really represented by neither trade unions nor women’s organizations. But it is also conceived as a juridical shield that stops the blows against the trade unions themselves. Moreover, it’s a step on the path to create a federation of maquila trade unions that represent these interests in front of the government and of the maquila owners. And finally, it’s a promoter of trade union organizing with special brochures to be spread among the workers.

Trade Unions in alliance with NGOs: FEASIES (Federación de Asociaciones y sindicatos autonomos de El Salvador)

As the name implies this is a trade union federation gathering independent associations and trade unions in El Salvador. Their political affiliation is more to the left, as FMLN sympathizers (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005: 68). Although a latecomer to the maquilas FEASIES has already 4 seccionales in the dress industry, some but not all of them in San Marcos, with around 450 affiliates. Even more than in the case of the trade unions we have just presented FEASIES is very conscious of the need to transform trade unions to women friendly organizations capable of dealing with the enormous challenges of organizing labour in this kind of factories.

For FEASIES it is necessary to spread information on the advantages but also on the risks and realities concerning trade union organizing. These risks have to do not only with the confrontation with managers and owners but also with the realities of a trade union culture that is still a stronghold of machista structures. It’s necessary, according to FEASIES general secretary, to create seccionales, that is to say industrial trade union branches and not factory trade unions as the first may survive even if the enterprise closes while the second may not as the case of STECHAR, already mentioned, proves.

FEASIES has trade union promoters, that is, former maquila workers who try to create what they call focal maquila groups, to spread training and information on trade union organizing. They use for example classical celebrations, like the mother’s day or social gatherings around Christmas, to organize events to make information rallies on trade unions.
The foremost strategy FEASIES is betting on is the development of a strong gender perspective in trade unions culture and this is being done, in contrast to the previous trade unions, with the support of women’s NGOs, (see below). FEASIES is focusing on all those themes that the classical trade unions have neglected: sexual and reproductive rights, intra-family violence, mental health, flexibility in working schedules, taking care of women’s children while the women attend training, coming to the workers neighbourhoods so they don’t have to travel, etc. Even the promotion of women’s own spaces and own trade unions is being discussed. Also statutes reforms must be carried out to create women secretariats in all trade unions, quotas in trade union’s boards and a real integration of women’s demands into collective contracts. Moreover, men who want to become part of the trade unions boards must go through two “processes” of masculinity so they become aware of their attitudes.

But this is not an anti-men crusade, according to these FEASIES leaders, it is a pragmatic realization that male trade unions must transform their machista image in order to attract women who make the majority of workers. Steps have to be taken to erase these bad images, specially after bad experiences where for example male leaders have nearly forced women affiliates to take to extreme tactics, like hunger strikes, when women workers were neither ready nor willing. Machista mentalities must disappear, trade union men should no longer see women as competitors or accept to include them “just because the donors demand it”. The right meaning of feminism must also be restored so “it’s no longer taken a synonym of lesbianism”. Moreover according to the FEASIES leader this is not to idealize women’s relationships, as these can be also problematic, it’s only a recognition of realities.

As a step forward in this feminist activism FEASIES is one of the leading organizations within the “Commission of Trade Union Women of El Salvador”, CMSES (Comisión de Mujeres Sindicalistas de El Salvador). This group started as the “Comisión de Mujeres de las Centrales sindicales de El Salvador” in 2003 as an including space for trade union women (financed in its beginnings by the OIT). All union women are welcome even if they do not represent their sector. Women affiliated to journalist or university or services trade unions are part of this space where they discuss common problems, specially related to the machista trade union structures, and strategies. Issues such as sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and the glass ceiling are part of these discussions as well as the need to clean these practices and enforce certain rules like the expulsion of all trade union activists that have been proved guilty of sexual harassment and domestic violence. The need of courses to train women leaders that include mental health, self esteem and
psychological assistance has also been acknowledged by the Commission. As most of the trade unions to which these women are affiliated are critical of the Commission they house in the FEASIES main offices. Moreover, FEASIES has accepted that their general secretary may devote part of her time to support the work of the Commission.

Apart from this, the problems that FEASIES confronts regarding the difficulties to organize workers and to help them solve the problems these workers experience in their daily struggles are very similar to the ones already described in the case of the trade unions belonging to the Mesa de la Maquila. The only problem that the FEASIES representatives emphasized more was the deficient care the workers receive when they seek medical attention and the fact that many factory owners are said to have an agreement with the health care centres of the ISSS not to give the workers any disability permits in case of illness. This became particularly serious when the H1N1 influenza attacked the country.

In contrast to the previous trade unions, FEASIES is very positive to strong alliances with women’s NGOs and with the women’s movement in general. They participate in all women’s events like the celebration of March 8th and the 25th of November, the day against violence against women. FEASIES gets support from these NGOs in several ways related to the promotion and training on women’s rights and has an alliance with one of them Mujeres Transformando (MT, see below) to provide with trade union organizing to MTs women workers groups. FEASIES also seeks to collaborate with government authorities like ISDEMU (Instituto Salvadoreño para el desarrollo dela Mujer), the national joint attorney for women’s issues, the new female Labour minister and the also new female health minister as well as with the commission on Human Rights.

In 2005 they participated in a Latin American meeting of trade unions women from which the idea to create a Central American forum, the Union of women workers of Central America and the Caribbean started to take form. This developed into a project and a new meeting at the regional level, with the support of a women NGOs, la Dignas, but the process has not advanced because of the lack of finance.

Coordination with other trade unions has been difficult both at the national and Central American level. Even if they sometimes coincide and even share contacts there is a problem of strategies, tactics and sometimes territorial strongholds (as in the case of San Marcos where FENASTRAS tries to predominate). But also political affiliation is a dividing factor both at the national and the regional level. Some Central American trade union networks
are more to the left than others who prefer to follow a social democracy orientation. Not even CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade agreement) has succeeded in encouraging a regional cooperation. However, FEASIES had just got a financial support of Comisiones Obreras in Spain to organize a National Encounter of trade union women and they hoped such a meeting would take place in 2010.

**A women NGO in alliance with trade unions:**

*Mujeres Transformando* (MT)

*Mujeres Transformando* (Women transforming) is a NGO that started in 2003 with the aim to organize maquiladora women workers through new strategies. The idea was to carry out this organization in the communities where women lived within the Santo Tomas municipality. Women leaders were identified for each community and through these leaders women groups were formed and started receiving courses basically on labour rights from a gender perspective but also on mental health and self esteem through a participative methodology. By July 2009 MT had already organized 7 groups of maquiladora workers and 7 groups of women (many of them ex-maquila workers) working in all kind of activities: street vendors, domestic workers but also maquila house-workers (embroidery). These groups amounted to about 200 women July 2009.

As in the case of the trade unions we have presented, MT is flexible regarding the time of the meetings-training for these women, most of it taking place in the evenings or during the week ends when family members are welcome and food is served. The trainings take place once a week in the case of beginners and once every two weeks for more advanced groups. Training sessions switch from labour rights one week to mental health and relaxing the next.

Even though this is a women NGO whose main organizers are not active or previous maquila workers MT has managed to legitimize its class credentials through the creation of the “municipal committee of maquila women workers” there all MT organized women are represented. This committee was born in 2005 as a consultancy space for MT decisions but gradually it became a space on its own right with the aim to have political incidence. The Committee organizes women mobilizations, they have negotiated with the municipal authorities to make the 5th of July, the maquila women’s day, a municipal holyday and they are trying to make the same at the national level. The leaders of this committee receive a special leadership training on how to speak in public acts, how to deal with the microphone, how to
breath (theater training) but also in computer skills and general knowledge of international trade and the international economy. A delegation of the committee participated in the Social Forum of the Americas in Guatemala in 2008 in a special event called: the women’s trial against neoliberal capitalism. This event was part the regional campaign against labour flexibility in which MT participates. The municipal committee of maquila women workers has also representatives in the MT steering board.

As most NGOs working with maquila women workers MT had traditionally been very critical of trade unions. This started to change when one of the women workers they train turned out to be the general secretary of a newly created factory trade union, organized in reaction to FENASTRAS manipulations. This union ran into a conflict with the management, the leading members of the union were fired and they received the advice from another male trade union activist to resort to a hunger strike, a tactic they refused to follow. The MT trained leader took contact with the MT who helped her and the other trade unions leaders, with legal assistance to be taken back into the plant and to register the trade union. Fortunately they got help from the fact that the new labour authorities, belonging to the recently elected FMLN, were more sympathetic to labour demands.

This event together with previous contacts with FEASIES made MT rethink its skepticism towards trade unions. The whole leadership of MT went into a trade union organizing course in which they found their previous prejudices on male chauvinism within trade unions well confirmed. However, they also learned how to respond to provocations as well as the need to reinforce their training on mental health to help women enrolling into trade union organizing to cope with such a milieu. Moreover, they got the skills to encourage such trade union organizing even if they admit that this has to be a personal decision of each woman worker. Through their alliance with FEASIES, MT is already offering courses on trade union organizing skills. These are training sessions with a gender perspective taking place on Saturdays or Sundays in MT headquarters, they are given through participatory techniques and are meant to be reproduced afterwards in the communities.

MT received most of its financing from a Swiss agency: Brock le Pont but also regional resources, like the Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Central American Fund of Women) have financed for example the activities of the municipal committee of maquila women workers. Like most other women NGOs they were also part of regional coordinations like the Concertación por un empleo digno de las mujeres CDM but otherwise their regional or international contacts were not so well developed.
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MT was, in the summer 2009 in a phase of restructuring of strategies. They didn’t want to expand but to consolidate with two new orientations: a broadening of the trade union path (aiming for example at the creation of a new and big industrial trade union focused on women) and the search for alternatives to confront unemployment. A bridge between the two is the organizing of self-employed embroidery workers. They are discussing the possibility to organize them as an independent workers trade unions or as a micro enterprise so the workers themselves can deal with the commercialization of their products instead of being forced to sell these products to maquila plants.

Final reflections

From the cases we have presented we can see the problems that confront women labour organizing and the fulfilment of women’s demands in these kind of industries in El Salvador. This seems to be also the case for the rest of Central America.

However, the situation in El Salvador, through the observation of the organizations we have presented seems to encourage a certain optimism. Maquiladoras in San Marcos and in El Salvador in general are not the giant foreign owned corporations we see in many places in Mexico, they are mostly sub-contractors of well known brands, a fact that makes them more vulnerable to transnational pressures via consumers boycotts. However, such pressures and transnational support from solidarity groups have not been able to compensate for the lack of strong unions that can improve working conditions and wages in a substantial way. And part of the problem regarding the weakness of unions has to do with their inability to organize women workers. Some of these unions have understood the problem and are working in a positive sense as we have seen. Their labour consciousness has merged with an increasing feminist awareness and although still a minority their projects and advances seem rather promising. However, there is still the problem of alliances and class differences regarding the cooperation of women friendly unions, like the SGC and SGTV, with women’s NGOs. But even this problem seems possible to overcome if one judges by the example of the alliance FEASIES-MT where both sides have understood the necessity to learn from each other and to cooperate.

Global restructuring and economic and financial crisis have made of women workers, specially those working in free trade zones, some of their worse victims. Therefore it is so important to look for ways in which the agency of these women breaks through in order to cope with the challenges they have to face confronting both transnational and national capital as well as their
male class comrades whose class struggle aims ("patriarchal order dressed in red") blinds them to any kind of gender justice within this struggle.

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Notas

2 According to other accounts there were 13 trade unions in maquila industries during 2003 and they represented about 7 % of all maquila workers. See. Analisis sobre el Salvador 2003.

3 Interview with Roxana Alvarado-july 2009, former leader of STECHAR and nowdays trade union trainer within FEASIES

4 Regarding the SGC, the SGTV and the MSTSM the information in this section comes from the interviews carried out with Aracely Martines (general secretary of SGC) and Gloria Flores coordinator of MSTSM and the attendance to their training courses, during the first part of July 2009.

5 The interviewed emphasized the fact that the general secretary of the SGC herself was still an active worker, not a full time trade union leader.

6 Most of the information on FEASIES that we are presenting here comes from the interviews with their secretary general, Martha Saldaña (MS), and with the FEASIES promoter Roxana Alvarado (also former leader of STECHAR a trade union from the Charter enterprise, recently closed) and from workshops-meetings observations carried out during July 2009.

7 Interviews with Montseraat Arevalo, leader of MT and Rosemarie de Rosario former maquila worker and promoter within MT. July 2009. Also: attendance to their training course on women’s rights and on trade union organizing.

8 Most of the workers living in this municipality work in the San Marcos maquila area. MT limits its activities only to this municipality as their juridical status limited them geographically. Recently theyobtained a national juridical status but they were cautious with any geographical expansion other than to close municipalities where potential new groups could be created like the case of Pachimalco where a substantial amount of home made broidery sold to factories was taking place. Ibid.