Economic Opportunities and Labor Conditions for Women

Perspectives from Latin America: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras

A project funded by the Office of Women in Development, Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support and Research, U.S. Agency for International Development under contract number FAO-Q-00-96-90006-00 Task Order 10, with Development Alternatives, Inc.

April 2003

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Small Grants Supporting Women's NGOs in
Program Implementation and Advocacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000, USAID's Office of Women in Development provided funding for a 16-month competitive small grants program to support local NGOs working to improve women's economic status in Latin America and on women's legal rights issues in Africa and Asia. About 200 proposals were reviewed, and in May 2001, 50 grants of up to $25,000 each were awarded, for a total of $1.2 million. The program was titled "Small Grants Supporting Women's NGOs in Program Implementation and Advocacy", and will be referred to in this report as the NGO Small Grants Program. These grants supported innovative activities that addressed the following three areas:

- Conservation-based Economic Opportunities for Women, awarded in South America;
- Women's Working Conditions, awarded in Central America; and
- Women's Property and Inheritance Rights, awarded in Africa and Asia.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were selected as target countries for small grants addressing women's working conditions. The purpose of these grants was to support activities aimed at improving working conditions for women, who work in manufacturing and/or agribusiness firms engaged in international trade. Examples of efforts to improve women's working conditions might include awareness raising related to local labor laws and codes and/or avenues of redress for laborers with complaints about working conditions. Examples also include efforts to promote quick and fair resolution of labor disputes, development and enforcement of national laws protecting workers, or advocacy for corporate codes of conduct.

From September 18-20, 2002, 21 participants representing the grantee organizations, local NGOs and USAID gathered in Panama City, Panama to participate in the conference on Economic Opportunities and Labor Conditions for Women: Perspectives from Latin America supported by the Office of Women in Development, USAID. The purpose of this conference was to provide a forum to share lessons learned and to discuss pressing issues that affect all NGOs and community organizations working within this area.

LESSONS LEARNED

The projects have revealed the need to understand the economic and social context of the countries and of their employment situation in order to clearly grasp the limitations and opportunities working women are confronted with, especially when dealing with the political agendas of the significant actors.

Some of these projects were able to increase the visibility of women workers and their needs and problems. Some developed legal assistance and protection programs for issues such as sexual harassment, occupational health, dismissals due to pregnancy, wage discrimination, and others.

The majority of the groups financed by USAID were able to elicit a high level of interest from both the working women and some of the companies for which they work. The gap between the women workers, the employers, and labor unions is narrowing based on tripartite meetings and dialogue that has opened the door to discussions about the precarious working conditions.

The ability to establish to dialogue between women's organizations, trade unions and public institutions was a significant breakthrough and a significant element in the most successful projects. This is especially commendable as this is a complex situation that has a high potential for conflict.

The groups reaffirmed the need to strengthen and extend this dialogue between government, businesses, and women's organizations. The aim would be to promote the adoption of national standards and codes of conduct for the maquiladora companies, and to have these consistently applied to improving working conditions. These codes and standards would include national laws, international labor agreements and companies' codes of conduct.

Interest among trade unions has also increased with regard to addressing labor problems from a gender perspective. They have begun to question the effectiveness of their union work for women employed in the maquilas.

Some of the projects also conducted research on working issues and used the results to inform authorities and employers on existing conditions. An example of this was the research carried out by COVERCO in Guatemala on women coffee harvesters. This research confirmed previous theories on the overexploitation and triple work loads of women, as well as serious gaps in statistical records, since coffee plantations and harvesting groups only recognize men as workers. In order to gather the information, researchers had to go to the communities where these workers live and use innovative research strategies.

The educational activities promoted by some of the organizations funded by this program enabled women to learn about their basic rights and to learn about ways to defend their rights and report violations. The projects used creative approaches to reach women such as radio campaigns and church activities. They used means that are closely linked with the daily lives of women and that enabled them to maintain links with the women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The projects participating in the USAID program chose a path for the empowerment of women through the provision of access to knowledge. This path can only be developed with a focus on educational processes and not on short-term activities. Therefore, a participative methodological approach must be promoted. This approach must ensure an exchange of information and the collective development of knowledge, as well as the appropriation and reproduction of information by project participants.

Regarding efforts to help working women, economic issues cannot be treated separately from social issues. Projects must take into consideration in their design working women's triple load: those related to the factory, those at home, and those related to the community or the organization. It is also important to defend women's right to rest and recreation as a human right, and this issue must be considered in any pertinent proposal.

Successful projects would reaffirm the need to foster and develop dialogue between government, businesses and women and labor organizations, as well as promote the implementation of national standards and codes of conduct of the maquiladora companies. The goal is for these codes and standards to be consistently applied to workers. This includes national laws, international labor agreements and codes of conduct.

It was proven necessary to increase the visibility of women workers, their problems and needs by developing legal assistance and protection programs for specific labor problems, such as sexual harassment, occupational health, dismissals due to pregnancy, and wage discrimination, among others.

Insufficient and incomplete statistical information is a recurrent problem. It is a well-known fact that working women's economic contributions are often under-reported. This includes contributions to the household income as well as to the gross domestic product (GDP), which denies these women's economic and social rightful recognition. Also, reliable statistics are not available on women's working conditions in plantations and factories. This is another reason why research must continue to be supported.

Finally, future projects should be geared towards the development of simple educational products with innovative designs, easily understood by women workers and so they can be used by women's organizations, unions, and regular workers on behalf of women's working and human rights.

CHAPTER ONE
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Central America is a region with a population of 35.2 million inhabitants and fragile social and economic institutions and democratic systems. The political systems in the majority of the countries in Central America lack credibility among their citizens, both men and women. The social conditions in these countries have deteriorated in recent years as a result of natural disasters, economic crisis and severe poverty affecting nearly 20 million people or 56 percent the population, primarily women, adolescents and children.

The following country profiles on Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras describe some of the development problems of the region.

GUATEMALA

Health conditions for Guatemalan women have improved little in the past forty years. Given the bleak situation forty years ago, women today experience some of the most severe health deficiencies in Latin America.

The main causes for these deficiencies include basic economic and demographic factors, such as poor nutrition, unsanitary housing conditions and the lack of education. There are also deficiencies in the Guatemalan health system. In the case of women, in particular, continuing high fertility levels pose an additional risk.

The deterioration in health services spawned the emergence of non-governmental health organizations, mutual support networks and other social initiatives, most of which were either initiated or primarily comprised of women. In 1987, the system of Urban and Rural Development Councils was created, made up of a national council and local and regional councils. The objective was to coordinate social development projects aiming to improve basic sanitary conditions. Experts agree that because of the crisis of the 1980's women took on responsibilities once reserved for the State.

Available statistical information shows that the educational status of Guatemalan women is, on average, among the worst in Latin America and that there are serious differences in educational levels among Guatemalan women. These differences are due to social stratification and ethnicity. Broad segments of the female population, primarily indigenous women, show severe, basic deficiencies particularly illiteracy and interrupted primary schooling. These deficiencies for women are considerably higher than those suffered by men. Very few rural women, indigenous women and poor urban women have the opportunity to go to secondary school. However, the proportion of non-poor urban women that reach the secondary level is quite similar to that of their male counterparts.

The women of Guatemala have participated in the country's economic development in many ways, most notably in domestic work and market activities. In a rural country with a large indigenous population, domestic work and market activities are often difficult to separate. In fact, this is one reason why rural women report in the census and other surveys that performing certain agricultural tasks—including those directly aimed at the market—are merely a part of their domestic tasks.

It is a paradox that national statistics show that only 19 percent of indigenous women work for pay particularly when the heavy workload of these women is easily observed. It is reported that Guatemalan women have one of the lowest levels of labor participation in Latin America; however, due to the obvious amount of Guatemalan women in the workforce, these reports just reinforce the fact that administratively, the labor participation of Guatemalan women is to a large extent invisible.

EL SALVADOR

A national survey of urban and rural women was conducted in 1999 to determine the opinions of the problems faced by women in El Salvador. The survey found that nearly half of the population of El Salvador, 48.2 percent, was not familiar with the rights of women and that a large percentage of the female population believed that domestic abuse (or violence) and the economic crisis were the main problems affecting women in the country. Furthermore, it was found that over two-thirds of Salvadoran women felt they received little or no support in their daily lives from services offered by the government, such as legal consulting for domestic violence, irresponsible or absent fathers, and sexual and reproductive health.

Overall, the survey revealed the wide range of problems faced by Salvadorean women, the result of a patriarchal society and a culture dominated by machismo. Many women lacked knowledge not only of their rights, but also of the institutions responsible for protecting those rights. The lack of formal education and low socio-economic levels contributed as well to women's ignorance on these issues. However, three years after the signing of an agreement to implement the National Policy on Women, there is still little knowledge among the Salvadorean population with regard to government services for women.

Although there is a perception by some of the people of El Salvador that there is an increase in opportunities and services provided to women, these services do not seem to influence and support women in their daily lives much less encourage women's development.

HONDURAS

Honduras is ranked among the lowest of countries in Latin America on a scale of social and economic indicators. The country's public expenditures for social services decreased in the 1990's to US$ 57 per capita. Only 7.4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product is used for public spending. There has been a drop from 4.2 percent (from 1980 to 1985) to 3.8 percent

(from 1995-2000) in the economically active population. Although the urban unemployment rate of 5.3 percent (1999) is perhaps the lowest in Central America, the absence of data on rural unemployment makes it difficult to know the national unemployment rate.

In 1999, Honduras had nearly 5 million inhabitants, or 79 percent of the population, living below the poverty line. Of these, 56.8 percent were considered indigent. 66 percent of the poverty and hunger is concentrated in rural areas, compared to 47 percent in the cities.

The income distribution of Honduran households in the 1990's is similar to the rest of the region. 36.5 percent of wealth is held by the wealthiest 10 percent of the population, while 11.8 percent of income is distributed among 40 percent of the poorest inhabitants.

This grim and troubling situation has a greater effect on the country's female population than it does on the male population, particularly on rural women. It could be said that poverty in Honduras has the face of an indigenous, rural woman, reaffirming ethnicity as a critical factor in matters of inequality.

In the "Gender and Human Development" index, Honduras ranks in the third lowest position of the countries in the region (Honduras 113, Nicaragua 116, and Guatemala 120). Only the women of Guatemala have a lower life expectancy (67.2 years) than the women of Honduras (72.3 years). In other Central American countries, life expectancy for women is higher. In Costa Rica, for example, women are expected to live until almost 80, and in Panama to 76.4 years.

On average, illiteracy affects more women than men in the region. Nearly a third of the Honduran population is illiterate, but this disability affects more women, 17.2 percent. The illiteracy rate for men is 13.2 percent.

Research studies confirm that poverty affects men and women differently. In Honduras, two-thirds of homes have a female head of household. Therefore, given the demographics, the survival of a large majority of the poor is dependent on poor, indigenous, peasant women.

Like all Latin American countries, official statistics in Honduras tend to overlook women's contribution to the national economy. Household tasks are not counted as these tasks "by nature" are female jobs that must be performed by women.

Over two-thirds of Honduran women work in the service sector. It is estimated that their participation in the agriculture sector is largely undocumented, because their work in agriculture is not viewed as an economic contribution, but rather as an extension of domestic work - the "natural" responsibility of women.

According to empirical observations, the problem of irresponsible or absent fathers (e.g. refusing to recognize their children or paying for food allowances) exists in all countries of the region. Complete and systemized data is not yet available for each individual country (Costa Rica is the only exception, and related surveys are being conducted in Nicaragua and El Salvador). It is established, however, that the situation is very serious. From the surveys

conducted in Costa Rica, other concerns related to irresponsible fathering have been identified, specifically the growing rate of extramarital births. Many extramarital births are by young mothers, mostly adolescents. It is assumed that the same situation exists in Honduras and other countries in the region.

Finally, according to statistics, it is estimated that a third of the female population of Central America has been the victim of at least one form of violence in their relationships with men (physical, sexual, psychological, etc.) and of sexual abuse or harassment at work. In response, laws have been passed in some countries to protect women and to institutionalize policies in favor of children, adolescents and women at the governmental level. Assistance, support and health care programs have also been created. (Source: Old and New Challenges for a Diverse Central America. Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. San José, Costa Rica, 2002).

CHAPTER TWO
PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS: LEARNING OF THE WORKING CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN IN CENTRAL AMERICA

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were selected as target countries in Central America for small grants from USAID to address women's working conditions. The purpose of these grants was to support activities aimed at improving working conditions for women who work in manufacturing or agribusiness firms engaged in international trade. The eleven projects supported by the NGO Small Grants Program in Central America were presented at the workshop. The participants then analyzed their experiences, by identifying common achievements and common obstacles.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS

Increasing the Visibility and Awareness of Gender Issues

The main achievements of the projects as identified by the participants included the collection and analysis of information on women working in maquilas, information that included their educational and work-related experiences. This information provided insights into the reality of the lives of these working women and their families. The information also provided insights into the social environment in which the women work and how that environment is shaped by gender.

The projects addressed the need for legal knowledge and tools so that working women can know and exercise their rights. Furthermore, the participants became aware of the need to merge labor rights and human rights. Training sessions supported by the grants enabled women workers to increase their leadership skills and to help other working women. Today, there is more interest among the women workers to learn and prepare themselves to work with better tools in the world of the maquila.

Often times women workers, many of whom come from rural and indigenous areas, find that neither authorities nor unions nor society understand or are concerned with their human rights. Therefore, legal assistance and protection for specific labor-related problems have been included as part of these projects. These labor-related problems include sexual harassment, occupational health, dismissals due to pregnancy, and wage discrimination, among others.

The campaigns addressing the working conditions in the maquilas that have been developed in some countries have played a role in putting this issue on the agendas of governments, trade unions and other organizations working for women's human rights. Some trade unions have begun to tackle gender-related work problems in the maquilas, although the participants

recognized the significant limitations that still exist in these organizations when working with a gender approach.

The work of consciousness-raising in the maquilas has only just begun. The organizations of women working in the maquilas must be strengthened to continue this awareness building.

Strengthening of Alliances

All the women from the projects who participated in the workshop agreed that in order to achieve a greater impact on labor policies, they need training on forming networks and alliances with different sectors. They also need training on how to develop strategies for effective dialogue and negotiation with public agencies involved with the issue.

A first step in forming alliances is to strengthen the organizations of women working in the maquilas. These organizations are necessary in dealing with governments and in establishing agreements and alliances with unions and other organizations working within civil society and social movements.

Some projects that worked with training on social issues with a gender perspective have included men as a way of sensitizing them, and thus broadening the base of support for women's rights. Women who work in the maquilas have participated in these projects and, as a result, women's leadership within a variety of organizations has increased.

Other projects have had highly positive outcomes in establishing relations between women, unions and public institutions. This has resulted in legal initiatives and agreements with the business sector, which have improved conditions for working women.

Methods Used to Empower Women

There are several paths leading to the empowerment of women. Projects participating in the NGO Small Grants Program, chose the path of knowledge. Past experience has shown the importance of maquila women having access to information on gender issues, labor organizations and knowledge of the laws that protect them as workers.

The experience of the Izabal labor union in Guatemala is exemplary. Nearly 700 women have participated in the occupational health workshops of this labor union, and health and hygiene committees were formed as a result. The project mobilized women "occupational health experts" who also were leaders among the women workers and could represent the workers with companies. The project then demanded that factories be in compliance with the environmental health regulations. The women reported that worker-employer agreements on health conditions were implemented and that they were able to achieve an improvement in health conditions.

Research on the situation in the maquilas is crucial in substantiating the claims of the women workers. Different types of research, from diagnostic research to case studies on factories and product lines, have made it possible to find commonalities in the lives and inequalities these working women face. This research has been used to sensitize authorities and businesses to underscore the need for corporate social responsibility. Research has also made it possible to raise awareness among the public, making the problems of working women the problems of society.

The projects generated a large amount of bibliographic material with information analyzed from a gender perspective. This material allows women access to data and documentation that can be used for their awareness-raising campaigns and actions with regard to labor issues.

In summary, women workers are gaining knowledge of their basic rights and they have developed skills to defend their rights. The awareness-raising campaigns of the conditions in the maquilas have motivated women to report poor working conditions and have inspired them to organize.

Political Impact

The projects funded by the NGO Small Grants Program had important political impacts. One example is that of the Guatemalan Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH). CALDH provides work-related legal assistance for both individuals and groups. It has processed 122 legal cases and has advocated for 38 amendments to the Labor Code with a focus on gender-issues.

Other projects reported on programs working in coordination with national governments on the regulation of the maquilas in the region. The expansion of the maquilas, regulated only under "special laws," had created situations of abuse and discrimination for workers.

The majority of the groups supported by the NGO Small Grants Program received a high level of interest in the projects from both the women workers and from some of the companies. Because of joint meetings and increased dialogue, the gap between the women, their employers and the unions narrowed. This opened the doors to discussions on intolerable working conditions and the discussions led to successful negotiation processes. The groups reaffirmed the need to foster dialogue among government, businesses and women's organizations. This dialogue strengthens and encourages the implementation of national labor standards and the codes of conduct of the maquilas.

Project Integration

The experience of the maquilas show that social rights (i.e. the right to work) are closely tied to human rights. Using this integrated perspective, the leaders trained under the projects are training other women. This training introduces this perspective which is both useful in the

women's lives and useful for their analyses and arguments in preparing and negotiating proposals. Within this context one project had an impact on a group of women intellectuals who then included among their topics the recognition of rights of the women working in the maquilas. Such alliances are important in influencing labor policies.

In the project work on education and training, there has been an integral approach to human rights which includes dealing with legal protection issues and applying them to specific work problems encountered by women in the maquilas. The human rights work has expanded into other areas of the lives of the women workers, for example, domestic violence and its social and economic repercussions. Companies have shown that domestic violence represents a cost for their organizations. As a result, some businesses have provided assistance in dealing with the problem, thereby facilitating support for abused women.

The organizations for women workers in the maquilas have attracted the interest of unions as the unions begin to confront labor problems from a gender perspective. The work of the organizations confirmed the limited effectiveness of union work with women, especially given that women are the majority of the workers in the maquilas.

Because of the diverse characteristics of the working population—ethnicity, origin, age, education—and the diverse impacts that the maquilas have on women's lives, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to working with the women of the maquilas. Therefore, alliances have been created among organizations in support of the women workers, which include a variety of different, yet complementary, approaches, disciplines and strategies to deal with the labor issues.

In summary the NGO Small Grants Program's projects have underscored the need to understand the economic and social context of each individual country and the situation of labor within that context in order to clearly understand the limits and opportunities for organized women workers as they confront the economic and political realities of their lives.

Innovations

The NGO Small Grants Program's projects have developed creative methodologies and tools to reach the women working in maquilas. The educational and organizational work carried out in the women's communities is an example. Within their communities women have both practical and strategic needs linking their several realities as working women, village women, rural women, and indigenous women. The diverse characteristics of the women - religion, culture, ethnicity - are considered in deciding the best way of strengthening the women's organizations (e.g. alliances with church leaders).

The projects have used creative methods to develop educational and organizational programs. They have used means closely linked with the daily lives of women such as radio and churches for communication and to maintain contacts, independent of geographical distances that may separate them.

Furthermore, the projects have adapted and created methods that are easy to learn and easily available that relate to laws and other issues that are crucial for the defense of human rights. As a result of the simplicity of the methodology, the multiplier effect has been high in these women's programs, with results reproduced successfully.

Additionally, the research conducted on women's conditions in the maquilas has provided bibliographic material that enables women leaders to substantiate their claims, document discussions and prepare proposals. This research has revealed common truths that show the maquilas as a part of a transnational production model that fails to consider individual country contexts. The model also promotes the reduction of costs through discrimination of women living in poor countries.

The Obstacles

Structural Exclusions Suffered by Working Women

Women live in a hostile context in Central America. Patriarchy and machismo persist, and poverty, along with its various manifestations, is worsening. Democracy is embryonic and weak, as countries emerge after long years of crisis - the product of capitalism, class conflicts and harsh civil wars. With civil regimes restored, the new international economic order calls for privatization and the globalization of technology and markets which promote, primarily in Asia and Latin America, employment in maquilas under grueling and "exploitative" conditions.

A reality of poverty is that a large number of these maquila workers are undocumented and therefore cannot exercise their civic rights and duties. This limits the ability of working women to become involved with employment laws and their own defense against abuse.

Working days at the maquilas are grueling. On average, the women work between 18 and 19 hours per day, a reason the factories make an effort to hire young women with no children. The time spent at the factory greatly limits their time to care for themselves and to pursue education. Young women who want to continue their studies find it extremely difficult to do so, if not impossible.

From birth to death, women are affected by a patriarchal system that makes it impossible for them to make decisions with regard to their lives, especially decisions concerning their own bodies. First their fathers make decisions for them, then their husbands, and later in life, their children, which has negative effects on their self-esteem, most notably, a sense of powerlessness to change their own lives. Therefore more time needs to be invested in proactive actions such as training in self-esteem and identity.

Another facet of the discrimination against women is the limited access women have to resources such as land and credit. Structural weaknesses, particularly the volatile state of labor, health, and safety, have had severe consequences for families. Domestic violence, the

rate of family abandonment by men and unstable family environments for children have been on the rise. The link between unemployment, poverty and violence towards women and families translates into social and economic impacts that represent a high cost for society. Economic and social problems cannot be treated separately. The magnitude and complexity of these problems required an integrated approach in the projects centered in human development.

Despite the fact that the governments have accepted the Convention for the Protection of Childhood Rights promoted by UNICEF, there are gaps in public policy with regard to child labor. It is a known fact that maquilas and agro-export plantations (e.g. coffee) hire underage females. The labor used for the harvesting of coffee is also comprised of a large percentage of male and female minors.

Traditional Methodological Approaches

A difficulty often encountered in research on the situation of women working in maquilas is the failure to apply a gender-based approach. This results in a failure to understand the lives of the women workers or their human rights. It also results in the frequent use of stereotypes about women.

Scarce and incomplete statistical information on women workers is also a recurring problem. It is well known that working women and their economic contributions are often under-reported. This includes contributions to their household income as well as their contributions to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Additionally, reliable statistics on the work conditions for women workers in factories and plantations are not available.

Research conducted by the Commission for Verification of Corporate Codes of Conduct (COVERCO) in Guatemala on women coffee harvesters was based on a sample of 652 women from 49 plantations. The results confirmed the exploitation and triple workdays of women, as well as the serious defects in statistical records, which only recognize men as workers. Neither the coffee plantations nor the families of the workers acknowledge that women work as many or more hours than men. Children are not registered as workers either. In order to access information, researchers had go to the communities where these workers live on non-working days.

In research carried out on the people of these communities, the researchers found it difficult to gain access to government informants who underestimated the importance of the research. (This was particularly true for the project undertaken by Kichin Konojel in Guatemala).

The strong presence of numerous evangelical churches in Guatemala must be recognized as a source of potential allies in the effort to help working women. Project experience indicates the need to know religious leaders, since these leaders often have influence in communities and are generally more open to change than local elected leaders.

Trade Union Crisis

The lack of credibility in regional institutions not only affects public institutions but also trade unions. Notable is the emergence of women's organizations, some headed by ex-union women, who have managed to formulate education and capacity building programs for women working in the maquilas. These organizations are neither unions nor traditional non-governmental organizations. Rather they promote organizational change and conduct political advocacy. There is even now a network of these organizations from many of the Central American countries.

As a result of the poverty and corruption that afflict the region, the values and credibility of union leaders have been weakened. Women workers tell of their experiences with the patriarchal power of the unions. Not only are decision-making positions held exclusively by men, but the leadership is vertical, authoritarian, male-biased and insensitive to the needs of women. According to former women union members, if "they" (the leaders) have to negotiate or sacrifice any part of the union agenda, the demands of women are the first to be conceded. Women have found other ways to advocate for their needs outside of unions, for example through networks of women worker organizations. The male bias of unions explains women's resistance to unions and their efforts to look for new ways of protecting and defending their rights as workers.

Another issue is the traditional manner in which unions handle conflicts. Women give considerable thought to the consequences of strikes and work stoppages and prefer to negotiate and advocate with authorities and employers. They report that "when the men strike", women are the ones that maintain the household and look for solutions to daily problems, while the strikers carry out their "heroic undertaking". But if women strike, the majority of their friends and husbands would not support them in this way - not even their families. Rather, they would reproach the women for the lost income these women provide in support of their families. Therefore, women are compelled to search for other methods to deal with work problems - from creating better conditions that enable women to know their rights, to understanding the laws in order to negotiate for the implementation of laws and codes of conduct of the maquilas.

Some unions view the new organizations for women workers as "competitors" eroding their membership. This is the reason some unions believe these organizations to be "pro-management". Now, however, people have realized that these organizations are representing a new form of work and that they respond to new times and to the needs of women.

One weakness is the lack of coordination within unions. Disorganization is a constant at the very time when more organization is needed to react to the effects of globalization and the impacts of privatization on employment and working conditions.

One important challenge is to foster the integration of union women and other women's organizations. This is a complex task, as union women come from a political culture where the unions themselves have difficulty breaking with the traditional view of alliances and the exercise of leadership. Union women have grown up with these traditional ideas and it is

hard for them to trust and relate to women's organizations whose feminist discourse and practices they often do not share. Furthermore, it is difficult for feminist organizations to relate to groups with patriarchal structures.

Limitations on the Organization and Participation of Women

"I don't believe that women lack interest in participating in the organization", the coordinator of a project in Honduras commented. Rather, she said, there are "structural, political and cultural factors that impede their participation and development." Based on these observations, diverse strategies need to be developed in order to achieve women's authentic and continuing participation.

It is necessary to understand the scope and circumstances of women workers in order to prepare organizational and training methods that focus on "women's schedules", that is, that use a comprehensive approach in dealing with women's work (domestic work, factory jobs, community work).

The conditions that limit the participation of women in educational and organizational processes can be divided into two areas: the dynamics and conditions of the context in which women live and work. The dynamics of their surroundings include lack of time, the means used by boyfriends, husbands, parents and children for control and power over women's lives, the low self-esteem that makes women fearful of organizing and finally, a disbelief that things will improve if they participate. These dynamics create in these women an apathy towards accepting the work proposals presented to them—this apathy is the most difficult to change.

The second set of determining factors affecting the participation of women involves the conditions in which these women work and live. There are obstacles placed by businesses to prevent them from participating - for example, employers do not allow time off or they threaten to fire the women. Given the level of job instability, many women are afraid to organize and participate. These environmental conditions also include the distance from their homes of the meetings and study sessions and the frequency of travel needed to attend. Many women speak of incorporating distance learning in the projects. Other determining factors are the women's ignorance of their labor rights and other human rights, the limited education they have had on this issue and in many cases, the high level of illiteracy among working women - especially indigenous women.

Limitations to the Education and Awareness-Raising Processes

The women working in maquilas are poor and for the most part, have received little formal education. In the case of Guatemala, the studies conducted identified a high level of illiteracy among these women, and in the other countries functional illiteracy (minimal reading and writing skills) affects a large number of working women. Therefore, projects with educational content are greatly needed, although these projects face cultural and political

challenges. One of the main challenges is that the value of training is often considered a waste of time, not an investment in human development.

For most employers, training is part of the organization (unionizing) process. They see training as a threat and prohibit such activities at the work site. Employers consider training as limiting their control over the women workers because as these women learn more about their labor rights, they are in a better position to negotiate for them. Many women have problems with their families as some family members view training as a waste of time that could be better spent on additional work hours (to earn more money) or in "fulfilling their domestic duties". Also, family members can plant fear in the working woman, telling her that she will be fired for "knowing too much" or for having unionized.

Given their long and strenuous work days women are left with little time for training and participation. These working women value the little free time they have. Therefore, education programs must be flexible, accessible, attractive and useful to all aspects of their lives.

Working women have a "triple work day": the day at the factory, at home, and within the community. This reality must be recognized and properly planned for in projects where these women participate. It is important to defend their time for rest and recreation as a human right, and educational programs must take this into account.

Institutional Crisis in Working Women's Rights

The Central American region suffers from an institutional crisis within its governments. This crisis is due to the emerging democracies developed after the wars and dictatorships that plagued political structures and civil society. Today, its citizens, women in particular, feel that governments do not guarantee their human rights, particularly their economic and political rights, two areas where women are increasingly participating.

For many analysts, corruption is moving into Central American countries as a parallel system to formal institutions. As a result, legal frameworks and laws are not obeyed or observed by either nationals or outside entities. Laws have been subject to purchase and sale in the markets, and the general perception is that human rights and labor laws are not observed.

This environment, where laws are not considered seriously by the authorities, has fostered a lack of trust in government institutions by unions and working women's organizations. These organizations point to the persistent human violations such as child labor, harassment in the workplace, wage discrimination, the persecution of female leaders, lack of supervision from authorities in maquilas and the lack of safety and health regulations for women workers and the non-performance of agreements by the employers.

There are women who do not believe it is possible to change the conditions for women in the maquilas in the presence of corrupt systems and without political will from employers and governments.

CHAPTER THREE
KEY DISCUSSIONS

This chapter discusses some of the more relevant topics for participants that were contained in the presentations by Homero Fuentes of the Commission for the Verification of Corporate Codes of Conduct (COVERCO) -Guatemala; María Luisa Regalado of the Honduran Women's Collective (CODEMUH)—Honduras; and by Sandra Ramos from the María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (M.E.C.) of Nicaragua.

EFFECTS OF LABOR RELATIONS ON THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOR

1. Central American economies are developing within a framework of a new international division of labor.

2. The growth of Central American economies via exports to developed countries or countries with more extensive markets, depends on the production quotas given to each country in the region.

3. The relationship between Central American governments and the maquilas operating in the region that are exporting to large markets makes it difficult to establish policies for their control. Often, their form of production makes it hard to locate a company, to verify that the company is fulfilling their obligations to employees and the government and to verify adherence to work regulations.

International Context

Through the evolution of globalization and international trade, trade agreements have become the means of communication between countries. There are a variety of such agreements:

- **Unilateral Trade Agreements:** An economically powerful state, based on its interests, decides to negotiate with a group of less powerful countries. Example: the United States of America decides to develop a General System of Preferences and a trade relationship with the Caribbean region through the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

- **Bilateral Trade Agreements:** Trade agreements between two economies. Example: the treaties that Mexico is promoting with each of the region's countries.

- **Multilateral Trade Agreements:** Trade agreements are reached among several economies. Example: Free Trade Agreements (FTA).

- **Regional Trade Agreements:** Agreements among countries of the same region. Example: the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); the Puebla Panama Agreement (for the Mesoamerican region) and the MERCOSUR Agreement (for South America region).

Central American countries are carrying out simultaneous negotiation processes with various "economic blocks" and of various types. These negotiation processes have taken place between trade ministries and commercial entities, without the participation of the civil society, which, nevertheless, is directly affected with regard to both consumption and employment. It is a concern for the citizens that there is a lack of a coherent economic policy and vision in these countries.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT ON LABOR RELATIONS

Profits are the logic behind all businesses and in the case of the multinational companies in Central America, businesses pressure governments to maximize profits through:

1. Reforms of national laws (labor codes that are more flexible for employers where only minimal rights are guaranteed, and even those are negotiable).

2. Deregulation of the eight hour work day (minimum wage is lost).

3. Flexibility of current applicable laws (inequalities and discrimination in women's jobs and non-compliance with laws protecting working women).

These conditions have negative impacts throughout the economies of Central America. Therefore, job growth is occurring increasingly within the informal sector of the economy. These new jobs in the informal sector are not covered by the social security system or by employment regulations.

The agriculture crisis and agro-export activities that generate rural employment increase internal and external migrations and the maquilas expand into rural areas.

It is in this context that a culture of non-compliance with labor regulations by both labor authorities and employers has been established, and Central American governments are increasingly weakened before large corporations.

Existing Social Standards that Affect the Region

Nevertheless, as a result of social struggles and agreements regarding human rights in Central American countries, there are social standards that seek to protect workers. The first is the content of national legislation, contained in the Constitution of each country, as well as in each country's labor codes. Other standards include the International Labor Agreements

signed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) for the protection of children, women and others.

Another mechanism is the so-called "Social Clauses" that promote civil society and that are applied to businesses that wish to export to large markets (for example, prohibiting pollution). Codes of Conduct promote an ethical vision within companies and include the respect for human rights (for example, prohibiting child labor). It is known that over 50 Codes of Conduct exist in maquilas in Central America but what is not known is their level of compliance.

In Europe, monitoring of transnational companies is increasingly more frequent. The monitoring is a joint effort among governments, companies and civil societies. In this way, they are able to monitor the compliance of national and international regulations, and of codes of conduct adopted by companies.

If Central American countries can establish regional, integrated strategies, they would be able to develop a system to monitor regulations and laws that protect workers and to adopt trade agreements that are better suited to those economies, together confronting the political decisions that are behind the assignment of country quotas.

Formal integration is taking place only slowly. Even Panama has not yet decided to become a part of a joint economic area. Nevertheless, the integration process between Central American countries is occurring. Some indicators of this include the increasing number of migrations between countries. For example, in Costa Rica, a large part of the workforce in agriculture and for domestic work comes from Nicaragua. The issue of immigration is not dealt with clearly among the governments in the region. Existing legislation and regulations on immigration are not observed, resulting in human rights violations of people working in their neighboring countries.

Civil society provides a space for organizing. For years now organizing within the region has been taking place in labor union organizations (COCENTRA), Centroamérica Solidaria (created as a result of Hurricane Mitch), Women's Forum for Central American Integration and in several development organizations working in the region.

It is imperative to deal with the problem of corruption in Central America to assure a democratic system and a healthy economy. Tax evasion and "corrupt alliances" involving transnational companies are factors that diminish the trust of serious investors, both national and international.

A related situation is the lack of trust of the people in government labor offices and labor courts. Almost no one wants to take on labor cases, as they have doubts regarding the transparency of the process. There are almost no labor attorneys in these countries, since for many law professionals, there are no guarantees of legal work in this field.

In some countries, national laws are being replaced by the codes of conduct of transnational companies. These companies must be supervised by officials from the labor ministries, but

oftentimes maquilas are not supervised due to corruption. These situations have been reported by workers and their organizations, but without much success.

Because of the accusations stemming from civil society, some groups now believe that the application of codes of conduct and the monitoring actions of civil society weaken the authority of the national governments. This suggests that compliance with all national and international laws, agreements and regulations that protect the working population should be guaranteed. In order to comply with these laws, alliances should be formed among the governments, businesses and civil society.

Backward Steps have been Taken in the Region with Regard to Labor Laws

As mentioned, Central American economies are weak, at both institutional and market levels. As a result of this, some transnational companies have assets and earnings greater than Central American countries' gross domestic products. A transnational company can have more economic power than some of the governments in the region. This is why some companies, when negotiating with a weak government, manage to establish their rules as those that will be followed. For example, these companies have codes of conduct as their framework for labor relations. In practice, this results in the privatization of labor rights in the majority of companies as these standards do not stand up to the rigor of local laws. In order to protect the interests of the country and its workers, it is best to apply the following formula: "codes of conduct + labor code + international agreements".

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the negative impact of the maquilas on the life of rural communities. Experience shows that the quality of life and cultural traditions of these communities are weakening.

The Puebla Panama Plan, within the context of economic integration in the region is another source of concern for participating organizations. The limited participation of civil society and the lack of available information causes civil society to view the proposal to stimulate development in the region with a high level of skepticism.

Proposals and Actions to Influence Public Policies

The following ideas are based on the experience of Sandra Ramos of Nicaragua from the María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (M.E.C.).

The María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (M.E.C.) has over 7,000 registered female members and has developed a network of women whom work in maquilas. The structure of this network has enabled them to develop a flexible organization with the potential to expand to wherever working women are found.

Ms. Ramos' experience as an ex-union member and working woman enabled her to identify problems for women in unions. One, shared by a majority of female workers, is that unions

will only defend women if they are in good standing and they are working. In other words, union organizations do not have a sense of solidarity with the realities facing women.

Experience has shown that one of the main problems faced by maquila women is their health and its relationship to the work environment. There are programs to educate health promoters who then work both inside and outside the factories with the women workers. They offer educational and awareness-raising activities. These activities include colloquiums and yearly national summits to discuss problems and possible solutions on work-related health issues.

Advocacy and promoting public awareness is fundamental to placing the rights of the maquila women on the public agenda. Thus, they celebrate several activities each year, including the annual campaign "empleo sí... pero con dignidad" (employment, yes... but with dignity) which has been celebrated for the last three years. A different campaign with radio spots, logos and other communication tools is run every year. A network of friends of the organization and volunteer journalists support this campaign.

It is vital to have data and research that verify the reality of maquila women. Therefore, another activity carried out by M.E.C. is a survey based on a representative sample, 20 percent of female workers at the factories. The objective of the survey is to provide information to influence labor policies. The survey has had an impact on legislation, the code of ethics applied to codes of conduct, reform of the Foreign Trade Zone Act, and amendments and additions to the Labor Code. Furthermore, it assured the inclusion of the women's agenda in, for example, the Tripartite Board on Minimum Wage and the Social Labor Negotiation Board.

One of the major lessons from this experience has been that women's organizations search for ways to address labor issues other than through unions. In these new spaces, they feel they are active participants capable of promoting and protecting their rights as workers. They are trained as leaders and educators. In the training they deal with strategic subjects - gender, self-esteem, intra-family violence, sexual rights, human rights, sexual and reproductive health as well as work-related subjects such as mediation, negotiation and conflict resolution.

M.E.C. has identified 2003 as the year of the Economic Literacy Campaign. During this year, a campaign will be held to disseminate information regarding promotion and defense of economic human rights. M.E.C. will also develop a Mobile Law Office, which will prepare documents for dissemination on laws protecting women in response to the inadequacy of legal processes dealing with women's issues. For example, labor inspectors lack proper training, are poorly paid and are therefore open to corruption. This situation has given the women the opportunity to support the modernization of the Ministry of Labor.

M.E.C. is using a strategic approach with companies. They conduct an advocacy campaign in the United States with companies who have subsidiaries in Central American countries on codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility, among other topics.

This organization is critical of the unions as they have concluded that the world of work is still a male domain. Many women do not believe that unions will solve the problems of the

maquila women. It is hard to find union leaders who, in practice, understand that the union is the means and not the end to guaranteeing a decent life and the rights of workers. Unions tend to be exclusionary and it is difficult for them to incorporate the women's agenda into their agenda.

Women workers who organize outside of unions do not intend to replace the union movement. What they hope for is to empower working women and to support the democratization of these patriarchal organizations. Furthermore, the unions have not changed with the times and are still working only with confrontational methods that impede their finding constructive solutions.

It is known that in negotiations with companies there is a limit. This limit is the defense of the rights of workers. There have been interesting experiences where women, government, and businesses have come together to advocate for rights.

Currently, there is a Central American Network for Women Maquila Workers that has little relation to the unions in the region. For example, they do not communicate with the women's union, C.O.C.E.N.T.R.A., (Central American Workers Coordinating Committee). Last August, this maquila women's network organized a meeting on women and the economy.

CHAPTER FOUR
LESSONS LEARNED

This section will attempt to re-examine the main lessons learned from the eleven projects that have participated in the small grants program on working conditions of women in Central America. Also included will be the main recommendations stemming from the obstacles and limitations encountered in the projects.

The projects underscored the need to understand the economic and social context of the countries and their labor conditions in order to clearly understand the limitations and opportunities women workers face, especially due to the economic ideology of the maquilas and the political ideology of the governments. Additionally, they have become aware of the need to integrate labor rights with human rights.

The lack of credibility in regional institutions has led to the emergence of women's organizations, some of which are headed by ex-union women. These women have managed to formulate educational and organizational programs for the women working in the maquilas who are not associated with a union.

The majority of the groups responsible for the projects funded by the NGO Small Grants Program have received a high level of interest from both women workers and some companies. They have closed the gap between the women workers, the employers and the unions through meetings and dialogues. This dialogue has opened the door to discussions on poor working conditions and led to successful negotiation processes.

The groups reaffirm the need to foster dialogue among governments, businesses and women's organizations, to advance the implementation of national labor standards and codes of conduct of the maquilas. The goal is for these codes and standards to be consistently applied to workers. These include national laws, international labor agreements and company codes of conduct.

These projects have served to increase the visibility of women workers, their problems and needs by developing legal assistance and protection programs for specific labor problems - sexual harassment, occupational health, dismissals due to pregnancy, wage discrimination, among others.

Despite the fact that some unions have begun to address gender-based labor problems in the maquilas, still they are hampered by cultural limitations and lack of training.

A great success of the projects was to create alliances with the organizations of women workers in the maquilas and to assist in their strengthening.

The ability to establish coordination among women's organizations, unions and public institutions has been a common element in the most successful projects. This coordination is especially commendable, as this is a complex situation that has a high potential for conflict.

The research conducted under the projects has had a high impact as it has been used to sensitize authorities and even businesses to increase their commitment to social responsibility.

The research carried out by COVERCO in Guatemala on women coffee harvesters confirmed the exploitation and triple workdays of women. It also uncovered the serious deficiencies in the labor statistics. Both the coffee plantations and the coffee workers and their families only reported men as workers.

Supported by data and research, the campaigns addressing working conditions in the maquilas played a role in putting this issue on the agenda of governments, unions and other organizations working for the human rights of women.

The educational activities of projects have enabled women to gain knowledge with regard to their basic rights and to develop their ability to defend their rights, as well as to organize themselves autonomously.

Based on the work of organizations for women in the maquilas, interest in addressing labor problems from a gender perspective within unions has increased, as they have begun to question the effectiveness of their union work for women workers who represent the majority of the workforce for the maquilas.

The projects have creatively developed educational materials and materials for strengthening organizations by using methods closely linked to the daily lives of women such as radio and churches. They also use systems of communications to maintain contact with women workers independent of geographical distances.

Although it has been noted that there is a lack of coordination at the organizational level, there is not a duplication of efforts. The needs surpass the few resources of support provided to women in Central America. It is therefore imperative to guarantee the continuity of these projects so that the achievements are not lost.

Finally, the projects have fostered a dynamic similar to that found in social auditing, leading to the development of programs and methods to strengthen interactions and for democratic negotiation. The participants affirm that the exchange of experiences has been a key factor in identifying the potential for regional coordination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The projects participating in the NGO Small Grants Program chose a path to empower women by giving them access to the power of knowledge. This path can only be developed

through long-term educational processes and not short-term activities. Therefore, a participatory approach must be used. This approach must ensure an exchange of information, the collective development of knowledge, as well as the appropriation and reproduction of information by project participants.

The magnitude and complexity of these problems require that the projects use human development-centered approaches. Experiences from the maquilas stress that social rights (in this case the right to work) are closely tied to human rights. Projects must be supported taking into consideration the needs of individual populations within the particular context of their lives.

Economic issues cannot be treated separately from social issues, nor can social issues be separated from economic ones. Projects and their designs must take into account that working women have three daily tasks: those related to the factory, those at home, and those of the community. This reality must be considered in planning. It is important to defend women's right to rest and recreation as a human right, an issue to be considered in proposed programs.

Projects geared to women workers need to take into consideration that many of these women are undocumented and thus cannot exercise their duties or rights as citizens. This imposes increased limitations on women in their relationship to employment laws and in defending themselves against abuse.

Research must continue to be supported, as insufficient and incomplete statistical information is a recurrent problem. It is well known that working women and their economic contributions are often under-reported. This includes contributions to household income, as well as to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), where women's economic and social contributions are invisible. Furthermore, reliable statistics are not available on the conditions under which women work in factories and plantations.

Future projects should be supported to develop simple education materials with engaging designs. Their content should be easily understood by workers and useful for women's organizations and unions that work for human rights.

One important challenge is to foster the integration of union women with other women's organizations. This is a complex task, as the union culture adheres to a traditional view of alliances and the exercise of leadership. Union women have grown up with these traditional ideas and it is hard for them to trust and relate to women's organizations whose feminist discourse and practices they often don't share. Furthermore, it is difficult for feminist organizations to relate to other groups with patriarchal structures.

Projects with educational content are greatly needed, although they face cultural and political challenges. One of the main challenges is that many people doubt the value of training for women. It is considered a waste of time and not an investment in human development.

It was pointed out that the duration of the projects has been very short. Some projects required that results be evaluated. It was agreed that one year is too short a period to develop activities with long term impact. Those that did have an impact that could be evaluated had been incorporated into projects already underway.

Cooperation with USAID requires that the projects work with USAID forms and systems and that communication be carried out in English. Communication should be carried out in the official language of the target country for this program, and the various administrative systems should be adapted to the institutions of the countries. Strong organizations with extensive institutional experience should not be treated the same as grassroots organizations, which often lack technical resources and experience to manage financial and administrative tasks.

Development organizations are currently affected by the "short-term" logic of cooperation, which focuses more on financing concrete actions rather than processes. Administrative work is overly-bureaucratic and taxing, as financial backing arrives "in bits and pieces." This has a negative effect on the ability to administer funds quickly. For organizations, these situations make it difficult to follow up on results and lead to frustration because it is impossible to respond to the demands of the people and the communities involved.

In these projects there are concrete monitoring activities and plans for the continuity of results. There needs to be a commitment to follow-up on the results and achievements of completed projects. One interesting result, for example, is the Maquilas' Women's Network that is being organized in the region.

Regarding the type of cooperation needed in the region:

The consensus is that the basis of a good relationship is a respect for national processes and horizontal development between donors and support agencies. A horizontal relationship allows for transparent work processes. Effective cooperation is supported by an exchange of ideas among all the stakeholders.

It is important for donor agencies to recognize the actual "value" of process and it is also necessary for them to have as a primary goal to strengthen the lead organization. It is important to recognize the diversity of the strategies and the richness of the processes of the projects in order to properly evaluate their results.

Recommendations on Strengthening Future Alliances:

An important next step would be the development of "strategic regional alliances." In order to form these alliances an exchange of experiences should be promoted to allow the grant participants to evaluate their work in comparison to others. The exchanges would also provide a forum to learn of the major achievements and challenges others have experienced. Over time, this will lay the base for the establishment of alliances among countries, beginning with those that share geographic proximity and other commonalities.

New organizational strategies are needed that would address the new ideologies of companies.

There is a need to continue with awareness-raising and training to increase the visibility of women's circumstances and to place their demands and issues on the public agenda. In this regard, it is crucial to strengthen key actors and to promote education and awareness-raising programs in unions so that unions will deal with the challenges of working women with determination and seriousness.

Recommendations on the Sustainability of Advancements:

At the methodological level, the development of educational processes is recommended. These processes would strengthen leadership among women workers and would also strengthen their organizations. Methodological strategies should be developed that take into account the realities of the women's lives and their work environment. The focus of the work should be on human rights, which would allow for a comprehensive approach and would make it possible to address the various levels of discrimination and exclusion that these women suffer.

At the organizational level, work should be carried out with a vision that would promote synergy and collaboration among working women. This would stimulate geographical unification which could lead to alliances for implementing international, national and regional activities.

The documentation of experiences is considered vital. If this documentation does not take place many lessons provided by the organizations and the communities are lost and cannot be used in future projects.

It is recommended that material and data on maquilas in the region be organized and systematized so that organizations have access to updated material and records for educational and organizational activities.

The grant participants agreed they will maintain communication, conduct exchanges and promote work relationships among the participating organizations. An effort will be made to see that they receive the names and addresses of networks from other regional groups that are working with maquilas.

The participants greatly valued the presence and support of Sharon Phillips of USAID. Her knowledge of the region and technical contributions were invaluable to the success of their projects.

ANNEX A

TABLES

Table1: Central America: Gender and Human Development, Year 2000

Country	Human Development Index (HDI)	Gender-Related Development Index (GDI) (a)	Gender Empowerment Index (GEI) (b)
Belize	58	60 (+2)	40 (18)
Costa Rica	48	46 (+2)	24 (24)
El Salvador	104	83 (21)	30 (74)
Guatemala	120	100 (20)	...
Honduras	113	94 (19)	48 (65)
Nicaragua	116	97 (19)	...
Panama	59	52 (7)	46 (13)

Notes: The HDI is prepared based on several indicators that allow for a comparative classification of the advancements made with regard to human development in each country. The country with the highest index is farthest from reaching an optimum human development and the country with the lowest is the one that is closest to reaching the goal of human development.
The GDI measures inequality among men and women in each of the HDI components, that is, it shows the differences in terms of human development achievements by sex.
The GEI shows the participation of women in the political and labor world, as well as the generation of income with regard to men.
Source: Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Development. Old and New Challenges for a Diverse Central America. San José, Costa Rica, 2002.

Table 2: Central America: Male Female Population, 2000

Country	Percentage	Women	Men	Total
Guatemala	49.57%	5,645,000	5,741,000	11,386,000
El Salvador	50.90%	3,195,000	3,081,000	6,276,000
Honduras	49.33%	3,210,000	3,269,000	6,506,000
Nicaragua	50.27%	2,551,000	2,523,000	5,074,000
Costa Rica	49.29%	1,983,000	2,040,000	4,023,000
Panama	49.54%	1,415,000	1,441,000	2,856,000

Source: Ibid.

Table 3: Central America: Index of Life Expectancy at Birth, by Country 1995-2000

Country	Both Sexes (years)	Men (years)	Women (years)
Belize	74.8	73.5	76.5
Costa Rica	76.5	74.5	79.2
El Salvador	69.4	66.5	72.5
Guatemala	64.2	61.4	67.2
Honduras	69.8	67.5	72.3
Nicaragua	68.2	65.8	70.6
Panama	74.0	71.8	76.4
Total	**68.5**	**65.9**	**71.1**

Source: Ibid.

Table 4: Illiterate Urban Population by Sex and Age Group, 1998

Country	Sex	Percentage
El Salvador	Men Women	10.2 18.78
Honduras	Men Women	13.2 17.28
Nicaragua	Men Women	9.58 13.88
Costa Rica	Men Women	7.26 8.2
Panama	Men Women	4.74 4.64
Average	Men Women	7.4 10.46

Source: Ibid.

Table 5: Central America: Incidence of Poverty by Head of Household Gender (%)

Country	Women	Men	Total	Year
Guatemala	36	40	38	1998
El Salvador	39	32	34	1999
Honduras	68	65	66	1999
Nicaragua	65	56	59	1998
Costa Rica	25	12	16	1999
Panama	25	12	21	1997

Source: Ibid.

Table 6: Rates of Female Participation in Economic Activity

Country	Years					
	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Costa Rica	20.8	23.6	26.2	28.9	31.8	34.6
El Salvador	23.6	24.7	28.0	31.5	34.5	37.2
Guatemala	15.2	17.8	20.5	23.5	26.6	29.8
Honduras	18.4	21.0	24.3	27.6	31.0	34.5
Nicaragua	32.3	33.7	34.6	37.0	38.9	40.7
Panama	25.9	28.0	31.0	33.6	36.1	38.4

Source: Ibid.

Table 7: Structure of the Economically Active Female Population, by Sector of Economic Activity, 1990

Country	Activity Sector		
	Agriculture	Industry	Services
Costa Rica	...	...	...
El Salvador	6.5	22.6	68.4
Guatemala	17.9	14.8	67.3
Honduras	13.6	19.7	66.7
Nicaragua	9.1	11.1	79.9
Panama	4.9	12.1	83.0

Source: Ibid.

Table 8: Central America: Average Income of Women Compared to the Average Income of Men, 1997

Country	Total
Costa Rica	78
El Salvador	72
Honduras	60
Nicaragua	61
Panama	74

Source: Ibid.

Table 9: Central America: Heads in the total of urban households.(%)

Country	Women	Men	Year
Guatemala	28	72	1998
El Salvador	31	69	1999
Honduras	30	70	1998
Nicaragua	35	65	1998
Costa Rica	28	72	1999
Panama	27	63	1999

Source: Ibid.

ANNEX B

PARTICIPANT LIST

Economic Opportunities and Labor Conditions for Women: Perspectives from Latin America

U.S. Agency for International Development

WOMEN'S WORKING CONDITIONS

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ANNEX C

PROJECT SUMMARIES

USAID Office of Women in Development's Small Grants Supporting Women's NGOs Project

Addressing Women's Working Conditions: Central America

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were selected as target countries for small grants addressing women's working conditions. The purpose of these grants is to support activities aimed at improving working conditions for women, who work in manufacturing and/or agribusiness firms engaged in international trade. Examples of efforts to improve women's working conditions might include awareness raising related to local labor laws and codes and/or avenues of redress for laborers with complaints about working conditions. Examples also include efforts to promote quick and fair resolution of labor disputes, development and enforcement of national laws protecting workers, or advocacy for corporate codes of conduct.

El Salvador

Asociación Movimiento de Mujeres "Mélida Anaya Montes" (MAM), El Salvador
July, 2001 - October, 2002

A newly produced pamphlet illustrating workers' rights within the local maquilas.

In 1996 Las Mélidas began providing counsel to women in maquilas whose labor rights were violated, and today has grown and broadened its mandate to improve women's labor and human rights through educations activities and legal assistance. With the support of this grant, Las Mélidas is working with 13 municipalities where the maquilas and/or free zones are located. Activities include workshops, media outreach, distribution of publications on labor issues of concern to women, dispensation of legal advice, and counseling for women traumatized by the earthquakes of 2001.

To date, they have held workshops, which evaluations are showing have been greatly appreciated by and useful for participants; and they have published and distributed 3,000 copies of a pamphlet on labor rights. In addition, they participated in a media campaign with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and national NGOS that highlighted workers' rights to overtime compensation. Finally, their lawyer has been providing legal counsel to a large number of workers, guiding them through processes and institutions that are supposed to address their grievances, and in some cases acting as a representative for these women.

Asociación Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas (ORMUSA), El Salvador
June, 2001 - June, 2002

ORMUSA is a women's NGO that works on issues such as health and the environment, violence against women, and women and the economy. This last area includes work to improve women's labor and human rights using a multi-faceted approach, including educational activities, research, public campaigns, and dialogue. This grant is supporting trainings on a variety of topics concerning women's labor rights, the development of a campaign to promote a better understanding of the national labor laws for both workers and employers, and ORMUSA's efforts to bring together government officials, maquila employers, and other groups to discuss ways to improve working conditions.

To date, ORMUSA has held 32 trainings, with positive feedback from the women participants, who have indicated that they are feeling more empowered as a result of their participation. They have also conducted a survey of women in the maquilas and are drafting a report as part of the process of investigating the existence and application of codes of conduct in free-trade zones. Finally, ORMUSA has arranged informal meetings with mid-level management in the Ministry of Labor. They have secured an agreement with them on the mechanism through which inspectors will receive complaints about labor conditions, carry out inspections of those complaints, and keep ORMUSA informed so that they can follow the cases.

Instituto de Estudios de la Mujer "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera" (CEMUJER), El Salvador
May, 2001 – May, 2002

A newly produced pamphlet illustrating workers' rights for women in labor unions.

CEMUJER's work focuses on promoting the advancement of women, based upon a human rights perspective. This grant is supporting CEMUJER's work to empower women in labor unions to improve their working conditions. They are achieving this by raising women's awareness of their rights, by helping women in unions develop leadership skills, and by working with women already in leadership positions.

This project includes the design and execution of an information campaign to promote better working conditions and end discrimination against women. So far in the grant period, CEMUJER staff have designed and implemented workshops for women in the union leadership, produced three pamphlets on labor rights for women, presented educational activities with women union members, and have been providing legal advice for women.

Guatemala

Center for Legal Action in Human Rights (CALDH), Guatemala
July, 2001 – August, 2002

CALDH is a human rights NGO that, among its other programs, works to support women's labor rights. This grant is supporting CALDH's training program and legal clinic for women in maquilas in Guatemala City and surrounding areas. The training is in the form of workshops, while the legal clinic provides advice and support for women in the maquilas whose rights have been violated.

Women workers participate in a labor rights workshop.

To date, CALDH has been using this grant to support the workshop component of their training program, as these are extremely popular with women workers and an effective form of outreach and awareness-raising. In addition, CALDH is refining their workshops to better meet the needs of the participants. For example, they had originally assumed certain activities would not be possible given relatively low education levels among some of the women. Upon realizing that women had greater capacity to benefit from more complex activities, CALDH trainers have adjusted the workshops accordingly: The emphasis of the workshop style has been shifted from a lecture format to a more participatory style. Feedback from women who have participated in CALDH workshops under this grant period to date has been very positive. The workshops have also enabled these women to meet other women in the maquilas with similar grievances, providing extra support and solidarity.

Commission for Verification of Corporate Codes of Conduct (COVERCO), Guatemala
June, 2001 - August, 2002

COVERCO is a NGO that monitors and verifies the working conditions in various sectors of Guatemala's economy such as the maquilas and coffee industry. COVERCO is using the grant funds to conduct a survey of women coffee workers in the municipality of Colomba Costa Cuca, Queztaltenango. This survey will be incorporated into a study, which will provide important data that will help define mechanisms to improve the working conditions of these women and protect their labor rights.

The COVERCO Survey Team

The survey effort is being led by a Project Coordinator with extensive experience in using research methodologies, along with the assistance of an indigenous anthropologist and interviewers from the local area. A Catholic priest is using his knowledge of the research area to assist the researchers in defining the survey sample and is facilitating access to potential survey participants.

In addition to conducting these surveys, COVERCO held a workshop for some of the women workers and their children to obtain a better understanding of how the dual demands of paid work and domestic responsibilities are affecting families. COVERCO has identified issues of self-esteem and nutrition as additional areas of concern for women and their families, and hopes to facilitate more workshops that will address these issues.

Kichin Konojel, Guatemala
June, 2001 – October, 2002

Kichin Konojel, an NGO that was founded and is staffed by indigenous Mayan women, focuses its work on three areas: conducting workshops to raise awareness among workers and their families of their rights; impressing upon owners the importance of respecting the law; and coordinating with the Labor Ministry to create better working conditions for women. This grant is supporting the first of these three areas, awareness-raising.

The entrance to a maquila; workers are not allowed to leave during breaks.

Chimaltenango and Sacatepequez have large populations of Kaq'chikeles Mayan women who work for transnational clothing companies. Women working in maquilas often complain about working conditions but because of a lack of knowledge about their rights and their need for income, they are afraid of doing anything that might jeopardize their employment. The awareness-raising workshops are proving to be particularly effective because the Mayan staff of Kichin Konojel understands the various cultural nuances and most effective means of communication with other Mayan women. Their work is not just with the young workers, but also with their families and communities because their jobs in the maquilas often challenge their cultural practices. Based on the results of these workshops to date, Kichin Konojel is considering refining their training approach, substituting smaller, more intensive yet intimate workshops for the fewer, larger trainings as envisioned in the original work plan.

Kichin Konojel, Guatemala (Complimentary Project)
June, 2001 – April, 2002

This grant covered the costs of conducting a survey of young indigenous women working in the maquilas and their families in Chimaltenango and Sacatepequez. The goal of this survey was to assess the knowledge and awareness of their rights as workers. The survey was conducted by indigenous women, and indigenous women social scientists are analyzing the results. This was extremely important to ensure reliable results for the survey, as indigenous women, with their own dialects and customs, are often discriminated against despite the fact that they are the majority of the population in Guatemala.

An indigenous family with several daughters in the maquilas participates in the survey.

The study was conducted successfully, as originally proposed by Kichin Konojel, and a report is currently in the process of being finalized. The final results will be presented to the public in an open forum.

Sindicato de Trabajadores Bananeros de Izabal (SITRABI), Guatemala
June, 2001 - July, 2002

Workers on banana plantations learn about labor rights and occupational health issues by attending workshops organized by SITRABI.

SITRABI is the trade union of workers on banana plantations in the state of Izabel, Guatemala, in the eastern part of the country. This grant is financing SITRABI's development of workshops on occupational health for the 800 women in the union and their families. The goal of these workshops is to develop the women's understanding of their labor rights. This work will be supplemented by a second activity: the publication of a union newsletter that will discuss issues of women's occupational health, publicize the workshops, and explain health problems in the workplace.

To date, SITRABI has been conducting two workshops per month, on target with their workplan. Attendance is strong, as SITRABI has a union contract that allows them to excuse workers with pay to attend a certain number of union events. The government agency responsible for worker safety issues, the Social Security Administration, has been amenable to providing training about occupational health through these workshops, which compensates for plant owners' lack of interest in worker's welfare. The women have been interested and appreciative of the opportunity to participate, and evaluations have been positive.

Honduras

Asociación Andar, Honduras
June, 2001 - June, 2002

Asociación Andar, which began to work in the Choluteca region in southwestern Honduras after Hurricane Mitch, provides assistance with housing, gardening, public and reproductive health, and organizing communities to better advocate for themselves, especially women. It is the only NGO working with women in the agro-export industries in the region. This grant is designed for women who work with sugar, melons, and shrimp industries in the Marcovia zone to increase their knowledge of their rights and to strengthen their capacity to negotiate for those rights. The project began with an investigation into the working conditions

and labor rights of the women and children who work in these areas.

The association has compiled the results of their survey, discussed their findings with the workers and the business owners, and presented the preliminary results in a public forum in February. Their goal is to bring both groups together to develop joint proposals to address the problems with working conditions, which will then be presented to the Minister of Labor in order that they can be formulated into a Business Code of Conduct.

To further increase women's knowledge of their rights, Asociación Andar has proposed to mount a campaign that includes radio spots, the distribution of one hundred copies of a summary of the laws on women's rights, two workshops on negotiation with the women workers, and a tour to learn about the experience of other women workers who have defended their labor rights. In addition they are organizing two gatherings for women to discuss problems they have had in their workplace and receive advice and assistance on how to address them, whether it be filling out forms or obtaining information on where to get additional help.

Colectiva de Mujeres Hondureñas (CODEMUH), Honduras
July, 2001 - September, 2002

CODEMUH has worked to defend Honduran women's rights for over ten years, organizing their first workshop for women who work in the maquilas in 1993. Since 1995, they have worked in Choloma and Villa Nueva, two cities with a high number of maquilas, where 80 percent of the workers are female. Their work in San Pedro Sula began in 1998. This project consists of providing workshops for women who work in the maquilas of these three cities. The workshops teach women how to identify the relationship between health and work, to evaluate the work environment, and to recognize the risk of repetitive movements and other occupational hazards, sicknesses, and accidents.

Examples of brochures addressing the legal rights and health safety of women working in the maquilas.

The information gathered through the workshops and personal testimonies is being compiled in educational brochures to be widely distributed. These materials are being designed to be accessible to the workers in terms of language, culture, and their daily reality. Additional training sessions are planned to discuss the national and international legal rights of the workers and resources available to help them access those rights. The role of Codes of Conduct will be presented as a means of improving women's working conditions.

Federación Central de Sindicatos de Trabajadores (FECESITLIH), Honduras
May, 2001 - October, 2002

The goal of this project is to develop the leadership capacities of women in the over twenty trade unions affiliated with FECESITLIH. The federation seeks to organize women's committees in each union so that women will be able to play a more active role in defending their rights in the workplace, ensuring that local labor laws are enforced, and that the labor code is respected. Through two series of educational workshops, sixty-four women are being trained in various topics related to women's rights, working conditions, health, and safety. The first series of workshops has been held in Tegucigalpa and Comayagua, and its success has created an enormous interest in the unions' membership and many more members are asking to participate.

By the end of the series, the participants will be prepared to act as Legal Promoters (advocates) who can assist other workers in defending their labor rights. In addition, through the workshops, women leaders will

be identified and recruited to organize and/or participate in women's committees within their unions. The final objective of the project is to design proposals to improve women's working conditions and present these proposals to the national Congress.

Project Global Village, Honduras
September, 2001 - August, 2002

Proyecto Aldea Global ("Project Global Village") runs a multidimensional program that includes a focus on economic development, building civil society, environmental protection, reconstruction, health, youth, and domestic violence. This grant supports their work to increase labor law literacy among maquila workers in the municipalities of Siguatepeque, Villaneuva, and San Pedro Sula. This group is working with a wide range of actors in the process: the state and local governments and agencies, a large number of NGOs, trade unions, business associations, schools, employers, as well as the women working in the maquilas.

Workers from the Siguatepeque, Cortes and San Pedro Sula maquilas attend a workshop on working conditions.

The project organized a conference on trade union principles with representatives of the Independent Federation of Honduran Workers (FITH) to provide the maquila workers with information about alternatives that they could chose to improve their working conditions. They also arranged an exchange with women maquila workers from other areas. The project has developed a handbook on labor law, and produced twenty television spots on labor issues that are currently airing on local television stations. They have trained workers from their domestic violence program to advise women of their labor rights as well. And they have secured agreements with various district offices of the Secretary of Education to allow them to train teachers in labor rights. Finally, the project organized a forum, in which they assembled political leaders, union representatives, the regional director of the Ministry of Labor, and representatives of the Catholic Church to listen to the maquila workers talk about their problems and respond to their inquiries about what the authorities could offer.