



Maquiladoras: Exploitation or Emancipation? An Overview of the Situation of Maquiladora Workers in Honduras

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Summary. — Are offshore assembly workers being exploited or emancipated? The answer depends largely on what factors are being considered and with whom the workers are being compared. This paper presents data on 12 indicators, including both economic and social factors, which together provide an overview of the situation of maquiladora workers in Honduras. Second, it uses an alternative control group, first time applicants to the maquiladoras. Finally, this paper presents data collected in Honduras in 1998—providing insights into the industry as it is operating post-NAFTA and in a non-Mexican setting. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key words — Latin America, Honduras, offshore manufacturing, maquiladoras, gender, welfare measures

In praise of cheap labor: Bad jobs at bad wages are better than no jobs at all.

Paul Krugman

For we are sold, I and my people.

Maria Patricia Fernández-Kelly

1. INTRODUCTION

The question addressed in this paper is not a new one, but it is one that is receiving ever-increasing attention. The question usually posed is this: What is the situation of offshore assembly industry workers? Are they being exploited and mistreated or are they relatively well off? The question has received a fair share of popular press attention, including accusations of child labor, “slave” wages, sexual harassment and very occasionally, “success” stories. Cultural icons as diverse as Ross Perot, Kathy Lee Gifford, Michael Jordan and Michael Eisner have been pulled into the fray. Worker welfare has been the focus of ever-increasing scholarly attention. Since Fernández-Kelly (1983) carried out her study in Mexico in 1978–79, many others have sought to gauge the overall situation of workers, including Tiano (1994), Young and Fort (1994), Kopinak (1996) and Cravey (1998).

Despite the attention the question has received, however, the debate continues, often characterized more by heat than light. The two titles at the beginning of this paper reflect the polarization of opinion. Rather than engaging their critics, the parties involved often speak past each other by citing those factors that support their arguments or by comparing workers to control groups which best support their theses. The maquiladora literature is also almost exclusively focused on Mexico, which hosts only a small percentage of the global industry, thus failing to explore the diversity of contexts where maquiladoras are functioning. Some of these studies have also been questioned methodologically, which compromises the validity of their findings (Lim, 1990; Seligson, 1994). Finally, there is a dearth of recent (post-NAFTA¹) rigorous research on the situation of maquiladora workers and as a result, much of the debate relies on data collected in the 1980s and early 1990s.²

This paper seeks to shed light on the debate in several new ways. First, it will propose 12 indicators, including both economic and social factors, which together provide an overview of the situation of maquiladora workers. While further in-depth analysis of single factors is also

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necessary, the purpose here are to give a summary of overall conditions. Second, this paper will propose an alternative control group, first-time applicants, with which workers can be compared. Methodologically, because we were able to negotiate access to the factories, the data presented here are the result of a random sample of workers, including men (who comprise 37% of workers). Finally, this paper presents data collected in Honduras in 1998—providing insights into the industry as it is operating post-NAFTA and in a non-Mexican setting.

(a) *The debate on workers' conditions*

Conclusions regarding the situation of maquiladora workers vary widely based on the questions posed. First, what factors are being compared? By highlighting one set of factors over others, the situation of the same group of workers may be made to appear either relatively good or bad. Authors such as Krugman (1997), Feenstra and Hanson (1997) and Sargent and Matthews (1997) look at economic factors, principally jobs, wages and occasionally skills, to describe the benefits of maquiladora employment. Other authors such as Tiano (1994), Cravey (1998) and Kopinak (1996) cite wages but also social factors such as sexual harassment, health risks and the “double shift” of women to critique maquiladora employment. Until researchers agree to address a common set of factors, applied to varying settings and times, the discussion cannot go forward. In the study presented below, I will address 12 factors, including both social and economic issues that I believe address the concerns of both camps.

The second source of dissension in the debate is the question: with whom should maquiladora workers be compared? As Tiano (1994) argues,

At the heart of the debate is the question of whether assembly jobs improve women's lives both absolutely and relative to their options. Advocates ... tend to take a “better-than-nothing” approach to export-processing jobs and view them as superior to their options. [Critics] ... are unsatisfied with this relativist approach and prefer to evaluate export-processing jobs in terms of absolute standards of human fulfillment and economic well-being.

As Tiano asserts, the debate has its “absolutist school” as well as several “relativists schools,” each of which evaluates the maquiladora workers' situation based on their own

criteria—contributing to the “heat” of the debate. The absolutists will not be satisfied if maquiladora workers are better off than some comparable group, but argue that maquiladora jobs should provide opportunity for human development in its broadest sense. Problems with this school include determining what these absolute standards should be and identifying who will do the evaluating. It is easy to discern that not only maquiladora sector jobs but also most jobs in Southern³ countries (and probably in Northern countries as well) will fall short of such (yet undetermined) standards. While it is possible to compare how well different occupations measure against some absolute standard, such comparisons are necessarily “relativistic.” Despite the problems with this “absolutist school,” some objective standards could be applied when evaluating the situation of maquiladora workers, such as whether the job provides the income necessary to meet basic needs or upholds internationally recognized human and workers' rights (US Department of Labor, 1989–90). When applicable, I will cite such standards below.

One of the relativist schools compares the situation of maquiladora workers to that of workers in Northern countries. This comparison is most common in popular media but is also implicit in some scholarly work (Balcazar, Denman, & Lara, 1995; Kopinak, 1996; Moure-Eraso, Wolcox, Punnett, Mac Donald, & Levenstein, 1997). For example, wages are often cited in US dollars and working conditions are described or health complaints are cited without comparisons. As a result, the reader is left to compare these wages or conditions with their own. The problems with these comparisons are obvious. Until both trade and labor are “free,” workers in the South do not have access to Northern wages and conditions. In addition, factors such as labor laws, cost of living and cultural work patterns differ from country to country. Workers in the North are rarely the most appropriate comparison group for maquiladora workers.

The most common relativist school in the maquiladora literature compares maquiladora workers to workers in the service sector, such as restaurants, stores or local manufacturing (Balcazar *et al.*, 1995; Cravey, 1998; Guendelman & Silberg, 1993; Howell, 1988; Moure-Eraso *et al.*, 1997; Tiano, 1994; Young & Fort, 1994). Several studies that have used this methodology have concluded that maquiladora workers' wages and conditions are worse than

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