

# **“Maquiladoras: Liberation or Exploitation”**

By

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Abstract  
Maquiladoras: Liberation or Exploitation?  
April 2004  
Amanda Wadel

Maquiladoras: Liberation or Exploitation, is a examination of women who worked in Free Trade Zones of Nicaragua. The key basis of the research has been to discover whether working in the maquiladoras is benefiting and liberating to the women, which some academics argue, or whether the work in this formal labour sector is exploitative, which other academics argue. This study was performed through a four month, in country stay, and with the help of a local non-government organization Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "Maria Elena Cuadra" (MEC).

The first section of the paper takes a thorough examination of the history of Nicaragua, looking at issues such as political, social and economic sectors. The history of women is also examined since Nicaragua has a unique history of women. The revolution of 1979 is also detailed, and the involvement of women within the revolution. Because Nicaragua has had Free Trade Zones for several decades, these areas are also examined, along with their development to the present research period.

The second section of the paper examines the organization MEC, their previous work, and their present work. Since MEC also researches the area of women in the maquila's, their research is also examined, along with some of their findings which is relevant to the research performed. The key methods of research for this study were through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with the staff of MEC, and also through a discussion group that was performed with seventeen maquila working women. The discussion group had specific topics to discuss, and also other discoveries were made during this discussion group.

## **MAQUILADORAS: LIBERATION OR EXPLOITATION?**

### **Section One**

#### ***1- Introduction:***

In the past several decades the world has been experiencing globalization at an increasingly rapid rate. The methods that the expansion of globalization has taken have been of various forms depending on the country and its stance within the world economic system. This would more specifically relate to the countries status of First World, Second World, Third World or Fourth World. In the First World globalization has been experienced through the rapid growth of technology. While the Second, Third and Fourth Worlds are also experiencing this form of growth; however the difference for these other Worlds from the First World is the rate of growth. As for Nicaragua, a country that has been categorized as a Third World state, its experience of globalization has been through the method of expanding the Free Trade Zones in order to be a larger participant within the global market system. The persistent attempt to grow within the world economic system is extremely relevant when travelling through the country. Billboards encouraging the people to consume items such as Coca-Cola, Shell and Texaco gasoline, Pizza Hut, and McDonalds are all common sites to see. The problem however lies in the inability for the majority of people to consume these Western products, when there is a lack of money passing

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through the majorities' hands. In response to this poverty in which Nicaragua has been engulfed, and the attempts to expand the country's global market, Nicaragua has created Free Trade Zones.

The expansion of Free Trade Zones has been a strategy used by many developing countries. The developing countries incorporate the neo-liberal concept as a way to address and improve their economic crisis. The pressure from organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have mandated neo-liberal reforms to the developing countries in exchange for economic support. The strategy of Free Trade Zones has resulted in the majority of workers being women. Women have been stereotyped as the cheap labour force that is passive and less likely to formally organize. As a result women are also paid very little, and the working conditions are undesirable. In various studies on the Free Trade Zones, most especially by feminists such as Tiano and Fernandez-Kelly, the working situations have been noted as being exploitative to women and their rights. Regardless of these working standards high numbers of women are employed within these regions, and the numbers continue to grow. Therefore the question lies, why do women work in the maquiladoras? And are working in these sectors exploitative or liberating for women? These questions are to be answered more specifically from the maquila women's perspectives.

There have been numerous theorists that have performed research with regards to maquiladoras. The key consensus has been that maquiladoras are exploitative. Yet, various other academics disagreed. From the perspective of theorists such as Mitchell Seligson and Edward Williams (1981), the expansion of women in the formal labour sector has given women the opportunity to expand their working base into the formal sector and in turn, has shifted the



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women's labour from being strictly traditional female work in the homes. The most common stereotype of a woman is that the women are considered to be the key home caretaker, this stereotype believed in being a part of their traditional role and responsibility. Theorists as such Seligson and Williams argue, through encouraging and hiring women within the Free Trade Zones, the women are breaking the stereotype of being strictly care-givers. The theorists note that women are instead gaining liberation by working within the formal labour sector of society <sup>1</sup> and also economic independence is assumed to follow with this form of liberation. It should also be noted that Ver Beek (2001), studied women maquila workers in comparison to women maquila applicants in Honduras, and discovered that the conditions for maquila women were neither better nor worse than the working conditions of the applicants. Yet, the women maquila workers did benefit economically from working in the formal labour sector.

Due to various perspectives of labour and gender theorists, such as economists and academics it is then crucial to ask, is working in the maquiladoras liberating or exploitative to women? This has been the focus of my research within Nicaragua, where I was volunteering with the local grass-roots organization, Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "**Maria Elena Cuadra**" (MEC). The objective of my research question was to address what are the benefits for women who work in this sector and why it is that many women come to work in the Free Trade Zones, and from their perspectives what are the benefits and downfalls of working in the Free Trade Zone regions. Other issues were also addressed, such as the women's perspectives on the availability of other income sources and places of employment, and finally the women's views of the impacts that MEC has made within the women's labour movement. The area that

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<sup>1</sup> Fussell, 2000

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was specifically focused upon was the Zonas Francas of Managua, Nicaragua. This is the largest Free Trade Zone in Nicaragua, although several other states are expanding or already have expanded their Free Trade Zones.

Before specifically examining women in the Nicaraguan Free Trade Zones, it is relevant to establish and examine the history of Nicaragua and more specifically the history of women in Nicaragua; in order to have a greater comprehension of what has brought this country to its place today. The country holds a rare past in that at one point women made a strong move towards equality with government support. This is the first country in Central America where the government once encouraged women rights in Central America. Therefore it is necessary to have a better understanding of the country's history, in order to gain the tools to understand the country today.

## ***2- Expansion of Free Trade Zones:***

### ***2.1 Foreign debts***

For many decades developing countries' have been placed into the positions of adopting different international economic strategies that would therefore enhance the countries' economic growth as a response to the countries' high indebtedness. One such strategy has been the creation of Free Trade Zones. These zones have existed for many decades, however during the past decade (1990s) these zones have been on the rise within the region of Central America, not excluding

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The Republic of Nicaragua. Although a more popular example is Mexico with their increased Free Trade Zones that drastically grew as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Unfortunately at present, many Central American countries are under pressure to become a part of the Free Trade Agreement, known as Plan Puebla Panama. This form of economic pressure stems from two different sets of organizations. The first group is the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These two organizations have forced the Nicaraguan government to put in place structural adjustment policies upon the indebted country in order for Nicaragua to pay back their foreign debt. The second group that Nicaragua is pressured from comes from First World governments, and also Mexico who sees the opportunity to become a developed nation through the exploitation of deeper underdeveloped countries.

Many of the indebted countries have been forced to accept the international policies in order to receive further loans. The stipulations for receiving further foreign loans from the IMF and WB have come under a variety of different conditions for the developing countries, some of which include the process of decentralization of the government, democratization, and the opening of borders to foreign businesses. The opening of borders has led to an increase in free-trade zones in order to attract foreign investment.

### ***2.2 Benefits of factories***

Within these zones there have been two types of companies encouraged to create businesses. The first of these is exclusive ownership and control of the production and plant and

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sale of textiles, while the second is through the method of subcontracting. Subcontracting requires Northern manufacturers to contract with company owners of Nicaraguan factories for their goods instead of building and managing a company of their own<sup>2</sup>. Therefore the sub-contracting of companies requires these companies to hire workers who cut, sew, label, and iron the garment (maquila production).<sup>3</sup> Through Free Trade Zones governments encourage both of these types of companies to invest within the developing country through the use of incentives such as low wages, infrastructure subsidization, and failure to enforce legal rights such as the right to unionize. These zones are therefore created to benefit the companies that invest in these regions. It should also be recognized that although this form of business benefits the company and the producers, it is uncertain of the level of benefit for the workers of core countries (developed countries) and periphery nations (developing countries) in terms of wages, stable employment and working conditions. However, it has been argued that the periphery receives employment with minimum pay, minimum working standards and relaxed regulations, while core countries face the loss of employment.

The effect of industrial development within peripheral countries has been the result of adopting the neo-liberal policies. Moreover, these policies damage core countries through decreasing manufacturing within the First Worlds while also harming periphery economies, social welfare, and cultural individualism and independence. This damage occurs through the First Worlds forcing Third Worlds to open their borders and supply cheap labour. This in turn permits large corporations to either expand or completely move their companies into the Free Trade

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<sup>2</sup> Bensted, 1999; 17

<sup>3</sup> Bensted, 1999; 18

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Zones. The key goal of these exploitative companies is the “...accumulation and concentration of capital and maximization of profits...”<sup>4</sup> It can therefore be also noted that these corporations move into the Free Trade Zones for the “free movement of capital to gain access to low-wage labour, natural resources, low environmental or safety standards and low corporate taxes”<sup>5</sup>. The companies also aspire for freedom of movement between countries and control over all the financial aspects of the country as well some influence on the governments<sup>6</sup>. The benefits of this type of business strictly remain within the company, while the workers are highly exploited through forced overtime, low pay, and hazardous working conditions, which often lead to health problems. Many women also experience sexual harassment and blackmail in these working environments. Despite the downfalls of working in the maquiladoras, many women continue to fight for jobs in these sectors, and many more continue to work in the regions. Therefore, the question continues to remain why do the women work in the Free Trade Zones of Nicaragua? From the women’s perspectives what are the benefits versus the downfalls?

### ***2.3 Growth of FTZ’s and effects***

Nicaragua has not been exempt from the level of repressive working conditions similar to the other six Central American countries’ experiences. Due to Nicaragua’s ever-growing abysmal economic position, the government has been placed in the position to address the unemployment

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<sup>4</sup> Urgent Action Network, 1994; 4

<sup>5</sup> Urgent Action Network, 1994; 4

<sup>6</sup> Urgent Action Network, 1994; 4

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rate of at least 60%, through the promotion of Free Trade Zones<sup>7</sup>. This expansion of foreign companies in Nicaragua may also enable the country to become a larger player within the world market. The created competition of the Free Trade Zones between underdeveloped countries' is looked favourably upon by western governments, the IMF and WB, especially since the shift into the world market is seen as one of the stages of becoming an industrial country and therefore a profitable nation. Therefore, the rapid expansion of Free Trade Zones is Nicaragua's way of competing with other developing countries. The benefit of this created competition for the companies has been the freedom to move to the cheapest area, the area that will offer the most profits<sup>8</sup>. This however, has only benefited the companies and in turn left Nicaragua to fend for itself. Although this expansion has been a venue for many people to be employed, the conditions are still undesirable for the workers.

The Free Trade Zones in Nicaragua have been growing at increasingly rapid rates. To date in Nicaragua there is discussion and movement towards opening other free trade borders in the cities of León and Granada, as well as the other smaller cities that are already a part of the capital model. This is exemplified during an analysis of the growth of the maquiladoras. In 1992 within Nicaragua there were 8 maquiladoras, which generated approximately 1,003 jobs, and made (according to the country of export destination) \$ 2,922.5 million. To date the Free Trade Zones have grown considerably. In 2001 there were 43 maquiladoras, employing 32,575 people and making \$296,183.7 million<sup>9</sup> (see Chart One). During the period between 2001 and 2002 there was a growth of 6 maquilas, equating to a total of 49 maquilas with an unknown amount of

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<sup>7</sup> IDEX, 2002

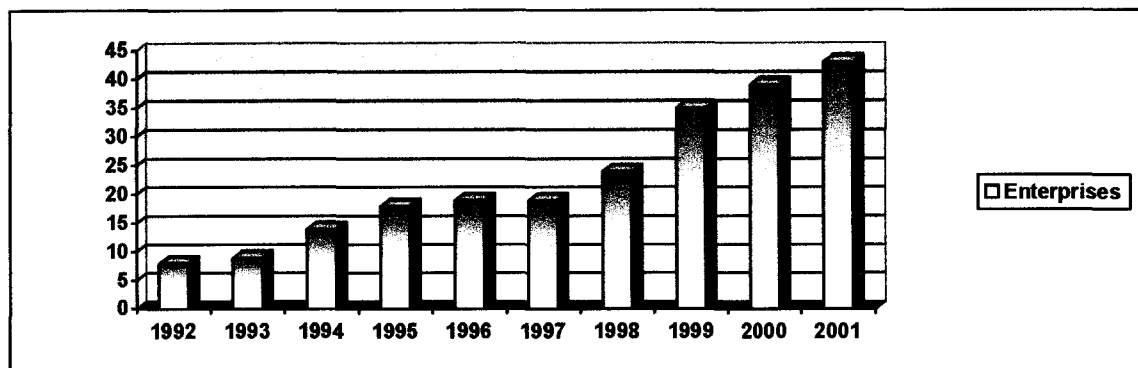
<sup>8</sup> Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983

<sup>9</sup> Gerencia de Estudios Económicos, May 2002; 22

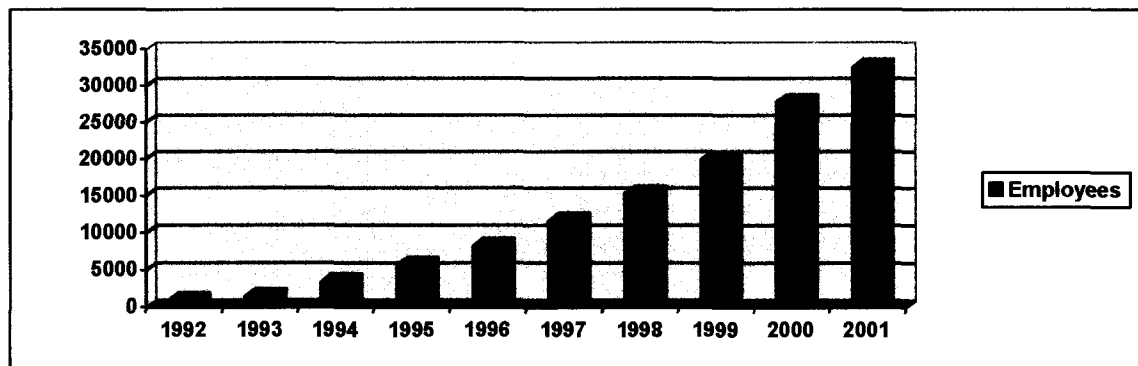
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employees and an unknown amount of money that these companies produce<sup>10</sup>. However if one considers what the statistics are for 2001 and the amount that these companies produce it may be assumed the sum total is quite substantial and continuing to grow (see Chart Two).

**Chart One<sup>11</sup>**



**Chart Two<sup>12</sup>**



<sup>10</sup> Gerencia de Estudios Económicos, May 2002; 22

<sup>11</sup> Gerencia de Estudios Económicos, May 2002; 22

<sup>12</sup> Gerencia de Estudios Económicos, May 2002; 22

### ***Maquiladoras: Liberation or Exploitation***

There have been several outcomes from the result of the expansion of the Free Trade Zones. It has supplied labour, however at an extremely cheap price. It has effectively brought into Nicaragua foreign investment; although the investments are also cheap and generally benefit the companies more so than Nicaragua. The Free Trade Zones have also resulted in an indirect labour supply. This refers to the people who have created work on the outskirts of the Zonas Francas as a reply to the demand from the maquila workers. Many of these workers sell shirts, foods, and other items. They have designed stalls similar to the ones created in the markets, and use this area as a source of livelihoods for themselves and their families. In turn the Zonas Francas are supplying more labour and creating more employment than strictly the factories, however unintentional.

The neo-liberal governments and international organizations such as IMF and WB believe that through opening of the country's borders it will lead to an increase in foreign investment by the creation of workplaces such as factories. The openings of borders will in turn (it is assumed) result in addressing the underdeveloped countries' problem of high unemployment. However, a small outcome has been the opportunity for occupations, which are commonly designed to be unskilled, and the companies are able to avoid environmental legislation and safety regulations<sup>13</sup>. The main result of the Free Trade Zones has been the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies, which do not address the issue of poverty and unemployment; and instead create massive unemployment, under-employment and harsh living conditions for the working classes, and their families. This has been the case for Nicaragua who has a long history of international interference that has effected various different forms of development progress. This intervention has resulted in various social movements, where people attempt to confront these realities.

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<sup>13</sup> Saxberg, 1993; 5



## **2.4 Plan Puebla Panama**

Many theorists who examine the Free Trade Zones, usually focus upon Mexico, with the exemption of Ver Beek who studied Honduras. Interestingly, Mexico was closely examined during the period of the pre-NAFTA and post-NAFTA eras. Interestingly, Nicaragua is in the initial stages of experiencing common problems that Mexico has experienced. However in the case of Nicaragua, it is experiencing the expansion of Free Trade Zones and outside interference through the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), while for Mexico it was expanded through NAFTA. According to the magazine *El Machete*, the expansion of the PPP is to further benefit the capital of the corporate owners. The governments of Mexico and the United States are proposing the plan of the PPP. These two governments noted that the plan will benefit the development of the Central American countries, and "...contribute to a higher level of life to those inhabitants..." in which the plan involves<sup>14</sup>. It is estimated that this plan will effect approximately 65 million people. The majority of the funding for this project will come from private funders such as the International Paper Company, Texas Connection, Ford Motor Company, and others<sup>15</sup>.

The PPP specifically plans to create and further develop many different areas within Central America. These areas include roads, railways, harbours, airports, energy, maquila industry, communications, agriculture, and other industrial sectors. However, the problem that remains is that the PPP is designed to address only areas that the governments and capital investors see as a further profit excluding any concerns for the people who will be effected. The

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<sup>14</sup> *El Machete*, Mayo/Julio 2002; 8

<sup>15</sup> *El Machete*, Mayo/Julio 2002; 8

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end result of the PPP will be similar to Mexico and the end product will be environmental devastation and degradation, poor people losing homes and land and a further impoverishment for the Nicaraguan people. Similar to NAFTA, the PPP ignores the needs of the neediest and further exploits for the capital investors. Also the PPP is a continuation of the neo-liberal globalization demands and strategies of capitalism, through the emphasis on open borders and relaxed regulations with cheap labour. The overall strategy of the PPP is to melt all of Central America into one hegemonic region, ignoring the uniqueness of different countries<sup>16</sup>. The expansion of the Plan Puebla Panama exists because of the historical pasts shared within Central America. Yet it is a further contribution of the negative occurrences that have existed and continue to expand within Nicaragua. As well, the plan further continues the neo-liberal ideals of border openings through expanding the Free Trade Zones. Nicaragua is one country that would have difficulties enduring this form of expansion due to its historical political, economic and social experiences.

### ***3- The Political and Economic Causes of FTZs in Nicaragua:***

#### ***3.1 The FSLN***

Although Nicaragua has been a country that has been under international interference for decades, it is especially during the 1970's and beyond that the intervention has made the most influence the free trade zones. In 1979 the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza government after several years of civil war. The Sandinista government at

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<sup>16</sup> El Machete, Mayo/Julio 2002; 10

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the time suppressed the already established Free Trade Zones that had been created by Anastasio Somoza in 1976<sup>17</sup>. Because extreme poverty had increased due to the corrupt Somoza regime, the people responded to the poverty through creating large groups of social activism and were led during the time of revolution by the Sandinista government.

For a short period of the FSLN's ruling they were able to address social issues such as literacy, health, agricultural and mechanical production and also the infrastructure devastation from various natural and revolutionary disasters. These issues were placed on the top of the government's agenda<sup>18</sup>. The FSLN made attempts to better the Nicaraguan society in all means. For example, in the economic sector the key goal of the FSLN was to have a mixed economy with four separate sectors. These four sectors consisted of "...private, capitalist, state urban and rural production cooperatives, and private peasant and artisan..." development<sup>19</sup>, artisan because it is believed that everyone in Nicaragua was a poet until proven otherwise. Previous to the FSLN economic objectives, the Nicaraguan economy was based on agriculture; export oriented production, and heavy dependence upon the United States<sup>20</sup>.

The achievements of the FSLN government were impeccable in all sectors of the country. Literacy rates rose from 50% to 87%, the number of teachers across the country grew by 400%, along with the amount of students doubling, and there was also a 70% increase in physicians<sup>21</sup>. Unfortunately, due to the counterrevolutionary army that was being financially supported and

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<sup>17</sup> Bensted, 1999; 13

<sup>18</sup> Urgent Action Network, 1994; 2

<sup>19</sup> Close, 1988; 73

<sup>20</sup> Close, 1988; 75

<sup>21</sup> Urgent Action Network, 1994; 2

### ***Maquiladoras: Liberation or Exploitation***

trained by the United States, these social and economic priorities of the FSLN had been forcibly placed on the back burner, due to the attention needed to fight the contras. In fact the CIA prepared a manual for the contras on methods of how to sabotage a government and remove the Sandinista government<sup>22</sup>. During the 1980s, when the Sandinista government held power and there was continuous fighting with the contras, many different important infrastructure sites, including schools, daycare centers, hospitals, health clinics, industrial plants, and farmlands were destroyed<sup>23</sup>. This destruction of peasant lands and people was a result of the main members of the contra force being original members of the National Guard, whose brutality did not end with the National Guard. To further the support of the United States, during 1981 President Regan had "...signed a secret directive authorizing an expenditure of \$19 million U.S. to conduct paramilitary operations against..." the Sandinista government<sup>24</sup>. However, in 1982 the House of Representatives passed the Boland Amendment, which formally prohibited the United States from financially supporting the contras<sup>25</sup>. The amendment was passed because of Americans awareness of the destruction that the U.S. governments support was causing. Although the Boland Amendment was passed, other forms of support continued from the American government, however the support was in other ways, such as military assistance for counter Sandinista groups. Despite the amendment the FSLN could not continue their rule.

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<sup>22</sup> Brody, 1985; 10

<sup>23</sup> Brody, 1985; 10

<sup>24</sup> Brody, 1985; 11

<sup>25</sup> Brody, 1985; 12

### **3.2 Chamorro Regime**

After a decade of devastation and war it was during the 1990 elections that the Sandinista government was voted out and an American supported party was voted in. The new party that took office was under Violeta Chamorro of the Union Nacional Opositora party. During this time the Free Trade Zones were re-implemented due to the extreme financial stress that Nicaragua was under<sup>26</sup>, while the implementation of the Free Trade Zones also followed the governments ideologies. Chamorro followed the strict neo-liberal policies of the World Bank and IMF through legalizing these zones under policies, such as the Export Promotion Law, a Foreign Investment Law, and a Free Trade Zone Law<sup>27</sup>. The structural adjustment policies that the Nicaraguan government had been pressured to apply resulted in consequences that are common characteristics of structural adjustment policies on underdeveloped nations. These consequences were the lowering of wages, cuts in social programs and social spending, and an opening of its borders to core countries<sup>28</sup>. Since the implementation of structural adjustment programs, the Free Trade Zones have been expanding. In 1998 Bensted <sup>29</sup> estimated that there were 23 factories, which employed approximately 15,000 people, with 85% being women compared to 7 factories in 1992. By the end of 1998 Nicaragua's national debt was the highest per capita in the world, standing at \$1,300 per person<sup>30</sup>. The expansion of free trade zones was in response to this enormous external debt. As of 2000 Nicaragua's total debt was \$6.4 billion U.S. <sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Bensted, 1999; 13

<sup>27</sup> Bensted, 1999; 13

<sup>28</sup> Nazombe, 2000

<sup>29</sup> 1999; 16

<sup>30</sup> Oxfam, 2002

<sup>31</sup> CIA, 2002

### **3.3 Present Government of Nicaragua**

Since President Enrique Bolaños has been voted into presidency of Nicaragua and due to the depressing economic situation that was left and stolen by the former president, and now head of the National Assembly Arnoldo Alemán, Nicaragua is in an extremely poor state. There have been statistics noted that Alemán stole over U.S. \$ 15 billion <sup>32</sup>from the country and the people. Most of the foreign aid that was lent to Nicaragua only benefited Alemán and his family, and the majority of people in Nicaragua at present are far below the poverty line, with 44% of Nicaraguans living with under U.S. \$1 per day<sup>33</sup>. Within the country there are poverty indicators such as high levels of prostitution, including child prostitution. A high percentage of people are employed within the informal sectors, areas that include the retail markets, one of which was the Oriental Market, located in Managua, and was 88 city blocks long and full of stalls and vendors. Many of the children do not attend school and those that do mostly go half days, spending the other half of their day selling goods on the streets or begging. The reason for children not going to school or only going half days is because the schools require uniforms that the parents must pay for, which many people cannot afford.

Another indicator that is a sure sign of inequitable distribution within Nicaragua is the crisis that is presently taking place in the northern state of Matagalpa. Several people have died due to starvation, many of which were children. Despite these problems that Nicaragua faces, President Bolanos is going ahead with the structural adjustments that the IMF and WB are pressing the Nicaraguan government to implement. Water is soon to be privatized, electricity has

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<sup>32</sup> source unknown

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been privatized, and much of the native land is being sold to the government or capital investors, due to lack of government support. In addition, little funding, if any is being directed towards social spending, including education and health care. Bolaños recently discussed with the state the discovery of oil deposits within Nicaragua. “President Bolaños opened bidding for further exploration and exploitation of these resources, which it is estimated will provide Nicaragua \$300 million a year in benefits starting in 2007...”<sup>34</sup> Most of the resources within Nicaragua are being sold off in attempt at getting Nicaragua to receive more foreign loans and further foreign debt.

Presently Nicaragua is experiencing common political problems that are rooted in its past. During the period after the revolution the FSLN experienced problems with ruling due to the US supported contra, just as today, Bolaños is having problems with decision making due to the allies of the previous Alemán government. Recently during a survey that Bolaños initiated on what the solution to the problem of corruption would be, 51.9% of the national survey respondents noted that the solution would be to “...close the National Assembly”<sup>35</sup>.

The forms of governments and types of ruling within Nicaragua have all been similar and common. Governments have ruled for the rich, and their own profits, and in turn have forgotten or ignored the needs of the rest of the population. Although during the initial ruling times of the FSLN, there was an attempt to improve the people’s livelihoods, now that party has also gone corrupt, and has tied a bond to the Alemán party in order to maintain limited power. Bolaños continues the cycle of inequitable distribution in Nicaragua. At present the president is being paid

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<sup>33</sup> PNUD, 2002: 164

<sup>34</sup> Envío, July 2002; 15

<sup>35</sup> Envío, July 2002; 12

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for his past work as the vice-president and now in combination is being paid for being the president, both of which he will receive for life. When confronted by social activists with this unjust pay, since there is extreme poverty in the country, Bolaños noted that in the past his family had land stolen from them which was not returned, therefore he deserves what he is receiving<sup>36</sup>. Nicaragua has followed the advice and recommendations of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for many years. The result of the neo-liberal policies has been a further impoverished people and a richer and more powerful government. The policies have also led to the outcome of Nicaraguan people who have lost much of the land which they owned and cultivated. The loss of land has resulted in many people building their homes where they can find a place, especially in the larger cities such as Managua, where many people have migrated to and now work in the informal sector. Due to the way in which Nicaragua has been ruled, and remains to be governed, the people are left with very little opportunities for survive and even less to prosper with. This is notably apparent in the social indicators; however Nicaragua does not keep adequate indicators for the country.

#### ***4- Social Indicators within Nicaragua:***

##### ***4.1 Poverty***

Nicaragua a Central American country with a population of approximately 5,071,000<sup>37</sup> has been categorized by the World Bank as one of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries of the

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<sup>36</sup> Envío, July 2002; 12

<sup>37</sup> UNICEF, 2002



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world. To date Nicaragua stands as the second poorest country within the Western Hemisphere, with a GNP per capita in 1998 of \$410 U.S. There are estimates that in 2000 the percentage of children who suffered from malnutrition was 12%. The illiteracy rates of adults from 15 years and above in 2000 were at 31% of the population<sup>38</sup>. However after further examination it is noted that in 1999 the percentage of the population under the age of 15 years that is illiterate is 43.1% of the total youth population<sup>39</sup>. The GDP of 2000 was \$2.4 U.S. billion, with Nicaragua's gross domestic savings, and gross national savings in the negatives<sup>40</sup>. These negatives exemplify how little opportunity people have within Nicaragua to hold any savings, and also shows how the Nicaraguan government has lost control of their economy due in some part to international interference, and also the irresponsibility of the government with regards to their financial programs. These two factors are an intrinsic part of Nicaragua's history, and the historical past of corruption within the governments.

Nicaragua has endured many different hardships, which include the four-decade rule of a corrupt government, the duration and sacrifices of the overthrowing of corrupt government, that has resulted in harsh poverty. These hardships have now placed Nicaragua in a present state of extreme poverty, unemployment, and underemployment. The people have endured many hardships and continue to do so, through also continuing to cope with the devastation of Hurricane Mitch from 1998<sup>41</sup>. These hardships have made Nicaragua sensitive to any more destitution, which could be caused by the further expansion of the Free Trade Zones. It has been

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<sup>38</sup> World Bank, 2002

<sup>39</sup> UNDP, 2002

<sup>40</sup> World Bank, 2002

<sup>41</sup> IDEX, 2002

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estimated that over 50% of the Nicaraguan population lives in poverty<sup>42</sup>, while 19% live in conditions that the World Bank<sup>43</sup> notes as “extreme poverty”, although it may be argued that now this statistic is considerably low in comparison to the reality of the number of poor people. Also, 44% of Nicaraguans survive on under U.S. \$1 per day<sup>44</sup>. Nicaragua is ranked at 118 out of 173 within the Human Development Index<sup>45</sup>. Within the population close to half the people have inadequate access to safe water <sup>46</sup>, and many who do have water often experience water shut downs for extended periods of time. The inequality gap between the rich and poor is also very pervasive and continues to grow in Nicaragua. The richest 10% share of income of the countries total is 70.7%. This means that the other 90% of the Nicaraguan population shares 29.3% of the national income<sup>47</sup>.

### ***4.2 Effects of Hurricane Mitch***

Hurricane Mitch increased these sufferings. The hurricane has effected approximately over 3 million people within Nicaragua, either by the loss of their homes, lives or livelihoods<sup>48</sup>; this is over half the population. Productive agricultural lands have been devastated, and transportation infrastructure such as roads, were destroyed, leaving the country in a difficult

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<sup>42</sup> IDEX, 2002

<sup>43</sup> May 1999

<sup>44</sup> IDEX, 2002

<sup>45</sup> PNUD, 2002; 164

<sup>46</sup> IDEX, 2002

<sup>47</sup> UNDP, 2002

<sup>48</sup> Oxfam, 2002

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situation for the ability to export. The hurricane devastated important social services and infrastructure, such as schools. An example of this is 343 schools were destroyed, which equates to 1,600 classrooms. The hurricane also made an impact on hospitals (90 health centers destroyed), crops, houses (145,000 effected), bridges (3,800 km. destroyed) and roads (8,000 km. destroyed) with also approximately 2,400 people deceased<sup>49</sup>. Even though Nicaragua was predominantly an agriculturally productive country, the hurricane has increased the number of peasants migrating to urban regions for work, due to their losses, which has led to further poverty and squatting. The devastation of Hurricane Mitch has increased migration, to a now estimated 60% of the population living in urban regions. In surrounding rural areas of Nicaragua's capital, Managua, close to 75% of these people live without access to sufficient housing, water and electricity,<sup>50</sup> while Managua itself has an enormous amount of people living in the same type of standards due to the effects of Hurricane Mitch. Many people in Managua manage to access electricity through pirating the electrical lines; in turn, many people have died during the installation of the connections because of the live wires. Because the government has not rebuilt the destroyed areas from the hurricane, people have been left to their own devices. Many migrants and urban people are displaced due to the destruction of land and infrastructure, from the hurricane and lack of government involvement. In turn this leaves the inhabitants as a group of vulnerable people, which are also a reserve army of labourers for the maquiladoras.

In combination with the devastation to Nicaragua's infrastructure that Hurricane Mitch has left, there has also been the problem of post-effects hurricane effects that Nicaragua is still

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<sup>49</sup> Oxfam, November 1998; and Revista Envío, 1998

<sup>50</sup> IDEX, 2002

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dealing with. These effects include specific issues such as loss of land, loss of income, and health problems. With the Hurricane came problems with sewage systems in Nicaragua back flooding, causing more health issues. Illnesses such as malaria, dengue fever, malnutrition, poor water supplies and improper food handling have erupted from the Hurricane. These illnesses have in some areas continued to be problems for the population of Nicaragua, four years after the Hurricane.

## ***5- Status of Women in Nicaragua:***

### ***5.1 Women in the 1979 Revolution***

During the period of the Revolution and the 1980s women began to voice their rights in Nicaragua, as in the period of the civil war between the Sandinistas and the Somoza government. In response, the revolution expanded itself to incorporate women because it was mainly many women who were forced to find techniques to survive, and fight for daily necessities for themselves and their families. The revolution became an area of space where women who were experiencing common struggles were able to cross the class lines and unite for a common cause, this predominantly being the cause of their children. Many of these women who came together did so because of commonalties, such as the role of the mother, or grandmother, or spouse<sup>51</sup>. During the revolt against the Somoza regime many youth became political targets because the students formed a large part of the voices against the oppression that had been imposed by the

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen, 1997, 58

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government. As a result mothers were forced, to defend their children from their homes and consequently made a shift into the streets to protest, defend, and express their outrage. Women initially began organizing for the sake of their children, which in turn altered the relationships between men and women within the household; as women's attention began to focus more on the protection of their children and less on domestic duties<sup>52</sup>.

During the time of the revolution women developed and voiced their own views on the political, social, and economic events of Nicaragua. Women began to disagree with their husbands, and become more involved in political issues. These political issues were considered the realm outside the home and a place not fit for women. This in turn further effected the division of labour within the homes. Women became less concentrated on the domestic realm, and more focused and united in the public sphere. The beginning of the women's movements in Nicaragua began in support for the FSLN. Women gained much of their support from the FSLN because the party wanted as much social support as they could gain from the people of Nicaragua during the 1979 Revolution. The movement of Nicaraguan women has been the model which many Central American countries have tried to follow, including El Salvador. The first noted Nicaraguan women's organization, began in 1977, and its ideological roots were based on the demand for respect for women in Nicaragua. The organization Asociación de Mujeres Frente a la Problemática Nacional (AMPRONAC) a year later in 1978 altered their demands by also including the demand for the Somoza regime to be removed from the political system<sup>53</sup>. During the initial early stages of AMPRONAC the organization had not anticipated what exactly would

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<sup>52</sup> Randall, 1995; 13-14

<sup>53</sup> Stephen, 1997, 57

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take place after the overthrow of the Somoza regime, however the organization's initial remarks pertained to women's double burdens within the Nicaraguan society, and the intense discrimination that women experience on the basis of sex<sup>54</sup>.

The organization of women during the revolution addressed several different issues through campaign topics, such as the cost of living, high rates of children and citizens imprisonment and many other social issues. The women also set up underground clinics during the revolution, which provided medical attention to the FSLN combats and training skills for women<sup>55</sup>. Women during this highly political time brought to light what they considered to be their actual roles and challenged the dominant ideology of a women's role that was based on a care-giver. It was expected that a woman was to take care of the children, however as the children became political targets of the Somoza government during the revolution women stepped up to the front line to protect and support their children<sup>56</sup>.

During the shift women made into the public realm they experienced extreme suppression and harassment from the National Guard. Regardless the women continued their fight and grew stronger through an increase in membership and support from the FSLN. Women not only became involved in the political activist sphere, but they also became key figures in specific areas of combat of the Revolution; this made a large distinction for Nicaragua from other Central American countries during times of revolts. Many women literally fought in the civil war as combatants, while some even reached positions of command. This incorporation of women in

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen, 1997, 58

<sup>55</sup> Randall, 1995; 23

<sup>56</sup> Chinchilla, 1983; 6

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combat was supported by the FSLN, who strongly supported women's rights and views and also the idea of equality for women<sup>57</sup>. The equality that women experienced during the revolution diminished once the revolution was over. Chinchilla<sup>58</sup> notes that equal participation in important matters "...does not guarantee long-term changes in men's participation in the housework or women's access to work but, does set important standards and ideals". Therefore, women's participation held some value although in today's Nicaragua at times it is difficult to see.

### ***5.2 Women's Role and movements under FSLN***

The involvement of women within the revolution had been extremely important. Throughout the Nicaraguan cities there stand wall paintings with women who participated in the arms of the revolution, and helped free the Nicaraguans from a repressive government. It is however important to further examine women's roles within these times since this was a leading country in women's equality and rights within Central America, and also because this equality did not persist; and therefore at present continues to be a battle for women in Nicaragua. In turn the inequalities that women confront have reproduced themselves in the maquilas.

Under the Sandinista government, women continued to express their rights and demand that men respect them. For this cause women had united from all different sectors of Nicaragua

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<sup>57</sup> Chinchilla, 1983; 1

<sup>58</sup> 1983; 12

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and played many important roles in the accomplishments of the FSLN. One such women's organization was the AMPRONAC. This group began as a woman's organization for the bourgeoisie and later expanded to represent women from all sectors of Nicaragua, particularly the urban women who became the largest group of members<sup>59</sup>. As Chinchilla<sup>60</sup> notes, "women integrated into the Revolution completely." The united women were able to put aside their political differences in order to address the practical and strategic needs for the Nicaraguan women. The united women also addressed a number of laws through the National Assembly. These included: "a law for abandoned women, penalties for the sexual abuse of children and pregnant women, labour laws to provide equal opportunities and equal pay for men and women, family code, and a Women's Medal to improve the image of women"<sup>61</sup>. In 1984 the Sandinista government began to ease their support of women's causes and also other social issues because of the pressure that was applied by the contras.

Once the FSLN took power in 1979, the women continued to express the desires of wanting to continue with their demands. During the FSLN creation of the 7 sectors within the government, one of the structures was the Asociación de Mujeres Nicargüenses "Luisa Amanda Espinoza" (AMNLAE). The organization was named after the first women in the revolution that had died during the struggle to overthrow the Somoza regime. Initially this organization was developed to tend to the needs of the women within Nicaragua, and to also "develop women as an organized sector", and to further support the FSLN<sup>62</sup>. It was through the initial design of the organization that had been developed by the FSLN, and was therefore constricted to the beliefs of

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen, 1997, 57

<sup>60</sup> 1983; 1

<sup>61</sup> Radio Netherlands, 2002

<sup>62</sup> Stephen, 1997, 58



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the existing government. During the rule of the FSLN, the government took leadership of AMNLAE and throughout 1982 women continued to work towards recruiting more women for the struggles against the contras. The struggle that the FSLN was involved in against the contras had resulted in the government's inability to continue with the social gains which they had made, including the benefits to women's struggles<sup>63</sup>. The government had begun to incorporate women into the society through common sectors that the men were involved in including the political and agricultural spheres. At the time this was similar status as that of men and viewed as a big step for the women's movement and women themselves throughout the Nicaraguan society.

During 1984, the first elections since the FSLN had taken power, the government began to worry about women's concerns about the increasing lack of government interest with women's issues, since the government became less supportive of the women and had left the organizations on their own. The FSLN therefore took the initiative to evaluate AMNLAE. The end result was that within the organization created, there had been the development of diverse opinions on the role and purpose of AMNLAE. Some of the women believed strongly in supporting the FSLN, and their decisions, while other women felt it would be more beneficial for women to take their concerns and concentrate them in an autonomous organization that would better represent women's needs, and less the FLSN's <sup>64</sup>. Due to these opposing viewpoints, the group began to divide.

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen, 1997, 59

<sup>64</sup> Stephen, 1997, 59

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During 1985 AMNLAE called for a national assembly campaign that promoted and represented women's needs in the areas of "sexuality, workplace discrimination, and domestic violence"<sup>65</sup>. A group of about 80 women from AMNLAE began to diversify their organization through meeting and creating a group of women called "Party of the Erotic Left"<sup>66</sup>. This group of women were strong in their criticisms of organizations that were headed by men and the women's group considered the men's groups limited in their decisions and capabilities. The group took an interest in discussing issues of violence against women, abortions and child bearing, sexuality and sexual preferences, domestic work and its value, women's rights to political participation, and gender issues overall<sup>67</sup>. These women then went further in the attempt to democratize AMNLAE, and broaden the agenda of the 'narrowed' range views that the FSLN controlled on the overall organization. The women believed that in order to be classified as a woman's organization, it also included being a feminist organization, which meant that women's needs could only be encompassed by women.<sup>68</sup>

The debate on whether a women's organization could evolve and fully encompass women's issues, while also being a part of a male dominated structure continued to be a hot debate. This question further sparked the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro in Taxco Mexico in 1987. It appeared that AMNLAE was being organized on autonomous principles; furthermore, 1989 when there was a vote to elect the general secretary, the vote was defeated by the FSLN who noted that they would choose the head of the

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<sup>65</sup> Stephen, 1997, 59

<sup>66</sup> Stephen, 1997; 60

<sup>67</sup> Stephen, 1997; 60

<sup>68</sup> Stephen, 1997; 60

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department<sup>69</sup>. AMNLAE continued to face similar struggles throughout the existence of the organization.

In 1990 the FSLN set up several workshops as a forum for women to join the existing autonomous women's organizations. This forum included many different existing women's organizations from a number of different facets, which supported a plethora of women's needs. The end goal was to organize a National Women's Meeting that would represent all Nicaraguan women. At the forum the final proposal was declined by AMNLAE, which resulted in many women's organizations moving away from AMNLAE, and tending to their own organizations<sup>70</sup>.

There were several attempts made to form one women's feminist organization that would encompass all the needs of the Nicaraguan women; however they all failed. Another attempt was made in 1992 during the First Women's Encuentro (Unity in Diversity), where a group of about 800 women met. This was where the women's organizations diversified themselves and organized instead into a variety of different organizations based on themes such as sexuality, health, violence etc.

Another attempt at creating one women's organization was in May of 1992 when women from the First Women's Encuentro who were unsatisfied with the earlier forum results, attempted once again to unite the women's organizations. These women were determined to build an autonomous women's movement. They were "committed to participatory democracy and

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen, 1997; 60

<sup>70</sup> Stephen, 1997; 61

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consensus decision-making, and endorsed the following agenda: fighting violence against women, insisting on respect for sexual preferences, defending voluntary motherhood, and fighting against all forms of oppression including those based on race, sex, ethnicity, and age”<sup>71</sup>. The autonomous organization lasted for one year, until it was terminated due to an inability to have collective decision-making. Yet, during its existence, the organization held workshops and seminars on important issues, such as the ability to learn from women’s collective and individual experiences<sup>72</sup>. The importance of the attempt of Nicaraguan women with regards to organizing as a collective is that the women had recognized the need to be united, and were able to mobilize themselves into groups for the representation of women’s needs. Despite this, the collapse of the organization lay predominantly in the inability to agree as to how and what needed to be done in order to further address the issues of women. Also, the members of the organizations tended to run into problems from men and the belief that it is unacceptable for women to join organizations, and in turn that did what they could to pause or stop the collective of women; this is the result of the dominant machismo attitudes in Nicaragua.

During the FSLN’s leadership of the women’s groups, women’s needs went on a downward slope, which then civilian women responded to by forming activist groups. These groups had enormous access to people for support because they were grassroots organizations. The grassroots organizations also held ties with the FSLN who rested obvious constraints upon them, and tried to force upon the women the return of the ideology of male superiority<sup>73</sup>. Under different circumstances women may have had the potential to continue with the struggle for their

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen, 1997; 61

<sup>72</sup> Stephen, 1997; 61

<sup>73</sup> Isbester, 2001; 64

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rights, however due to the increasing economic disparities Nicaragua was experiencing, machista attitudes returned.

An example of the types of economic troubles Nicaragua was experiencing at the time, which had a direct effect on the status of women in 1984, was the decline of agricultural productivity in Nicaragua, and it was also a direct result of the rebellion. There had been interruptions caused by the contras throughout the planting seasons, which meant fewer seeds were sown and little food harvested. Nicaragua was also experiencing problems due to the weather conditions, with one year a flood and the next a drought. The contra war was destroying approximately \$50 million per year in infrastructure and an interference in the farming across the country, which its damage had been calculated to be much more. During this time Nicaragua also experienced the tremendous burden of a U.S. embargo<sup>74</sup>. During 1981 the Sandinista government had created the Agrarian Reform Decree and Cooperative Decree. Women were included in this decree as having equal rights and equal pay. However due to little advertisement, many women did not know of the reform, and therefore were forced to accept being underpaid and restricted to their rights to land<sup>75</sup>. As a result of the economic problems and lack of knowledge, the sexism continued, even though women had at one point been considered as equal. Women in turn had also been incorporated into all of the Association of Agricultural Workers' policies and agenda<sup>76</sup>. Women continued to fight for equality, and in 1988 the FSLN government issued a revision of its policy on women's issues and status within society. The government (FSLN) recognized that women were repressed by patriarchal subordination and noted that women should have access to

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<sup>74</sup> Isbester, 2001; 67

<sup>75</sup> Isbester, 2001; 70

<sup>76</sup> Stephen, 1997, 59

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their rights; this however, was never acted upon<sup>77</sup>. Many Nicaragua women to date acknowledge that the gender roles are worse today than they were during the revolution. For women the contributing factors and burdens for achieving equality cannot be achieved due to the massive economic disparities and lack of alternative employment opportunities<sup>78</sup>, outside the Free Trade Zones.

### ***5.4 Gender Inequality***

Nicaraguan women continue to confront the same issues today. Organizations such as the coalition of women, which had formed into the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, continues to fight for women's issues. This committee was established "under the terms of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against women adopted by the [United Nations] General Assembly"<sup>79</sup>. Moreover, CEDAW has concluded that due to the machista attitudes in Nicaragua, women are prohibited from gaining equality, proper health care, inclusion into the political sector, and labour rights with regards to types of jobs and level of pay. The recognitions have led the CEDAW to make recommendations to the Nicaraguan Treaty Bodies. Some of the recommendations include "strengthening measures to change stereotypical attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men..."<sup>80</sup> The CEDAW also addressed the other issues and gave recommendations. The importance however of

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<sup>77</sup> Isbester, 2001; 88

<sup>78</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27, 2002

<sup>79</sup> CEDAW, 2002

<sup>80</sup> CEDAW, 2002

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the CEDAW is the recognition of the continuing dominant male attitudes towards women and the consequent subordination of women. CEDAW notes that their key position is to reveal and potentially remove these constraints with the purpose of empowering women in today's society.

The machista attitudes found throughout the Nicaraguan population continue to be re-enforced in the maquiladoras, where many women work in the Free Trade Zones. Many of the Free Trade Zone companies are operated or controlled by foreign owners. These foreigners extend the already existing stereotypes of women such as, women are easy to control and a form of cheap labour, and use these stereotypes to hire more women than men, and control the work places and conditions to benefit themselves. The general machista attitudes and stereotypes against women are extremely dominant in Nicaragua, and still exist today in the society and working sectors. Many women are disrespected and treated as objects, not as people by the men and in some cases by other women outside the Free Trade Zones. These negative attitudes are prominent in the labour sector, and therefore women continue to be stereotyped, and the machista attitudes continue. This was exemplified in 2000, in the Human Development Index where it was noted that women would make 1.431 while a man would make 3.310, more than doubling the women's pay<sup>81</sup>.

The machista attitudes along with the social and economic poverty have had drastic effects on women. These types of common oppressions women have had to deal with have been in combination with violence against women. Violence against women in Nicaragua has been a serious ongoing problem. Within Nicaragua it is estimated that one out of two women experience

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<sup>81</sup> PNUD, 2002; 224

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physical abuse at one point in their lives. One out of four women are currently being abused, and 60% of the abused women suffer serious injuries. There are also incidents of pregnant women who are abused; 30% of the abused women are beaten during pregnancy, this may be related to the relatively young ages of the parents, and also the economic burdens of caring for a child places upon the parents. For certain, however this abuse is due to the machista attitude that is inherent within the Central American region. In this region, women are taught during a young age that they "...are the property of men, and men are taught that women and children are their property"<sup>82</sup>. In combination with these ingrained beliefs, people's economic, political, and social power is extremely limited, and as noted by Radio Netherlands all these factors in combination could produce "explosive conditions"<sup>83</sup>. These explosive conditions could also be related to an increase of violence against women. Within Nicaragua many women are in fear of greater violence if they speak out about their inequality and experiences of violence. Nicaraguan women also believe much of the violence against themselves stems from lack of employment opportunities, especially for men. This leaves the men feeling powerless and without a purpose. This lack of purpose for men had created a large space where many men spend their days drinking. This situation in many cases leaves women as the only home provider for all its needs.

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<sup>82</sup> Radio Netherlands, 2002

<sup>83</sup> Radio Netherlands, 2002



**6- *The Status of Women in the Free Trade Zones:***

**6.1 *Disadvantaged Women: the key to maquiladora success***

The majority of workers in the Free Trade Zones are women. Maria<sup>84</sup>, an employee of MEC, notes 80% are women and 20% are men in the Zonas Francas of Managua. In Nicaragua, there is a minimum salary of approximately U.S. \$83 per month that each employer is forced to abide by, yet, the main concern remains to be the poor conditions of the workplaces. The undesirability of the employers to improve the poor working conditions is related to the stereotypes that women are a flexible labour force, in combination with a large number of women who are waiting and wanting employment within the Free Trade Zones, which in turn has created a surplus of labour. When discussing poor working conditions, this includes low wages, forced overtime and long hours, poor ventilation, and inappropriate working equipment such as masks, gloves etc. With regards to Nicaragua, in some maquilas the women are forced to buy their own equipment, and therefore since the women cannot afford to pay for the tools, they work without. Therefore health hazards are a big concern for the maquila workers. The poor working conditions also correspond with the belief that women who work in these regions need not have equitable employment because of the existing machista stereotypes that are displayed within the society. The stereotypes that have evolved within the labour sector towards women include ideas that women are passive workers with extreme dexterity and have a higher tolerance of poor working conditions and longer hours of work in comparison to men. It is also assumed that women are

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<sup>84</sup> Interview at MEC; October, 2002

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secondary wage earners within the family unit, this stereotype creating the justification of the employer for underpaying women's work<sup>85</sup>.

Women have been considered to be the key to the success of the Free Trade Zones. The stereotypes noted above, regarding women's status has allowed Nicaraguan and foreign companies to exploit women's labour. It is believed by some academics such as Tiano (1994), that the role of women within [Mexican] maquiladoras is related to the change in women's work from the domestic realm to the formal labour sector, which has also led to a change in the division of labour. Tiano's remarks can also be related to Nicaragua, where a change in the division of labour during the Revolution throughout women's participation resulted in the movement of women into the political and economic spheres, therefore, out of the private domestic domain. Tiano<sup>86</sup> also comments on how for some economists who examine this shift, the economist sees women's extension into the workforce as providing women, through a change in the division of labour, the opportunity of breaking down the gender stereotypes, which would eventually result in equality for women. To date, the result of this transformation in the division of labour has resulted in a large surplus of labour and women being used as the ideal exploitable labour force.

Many of the maquilas within the Free Trade Zones have a high turnover rate of women workers, known as the surplus of women's labour. This is due to the generalization that women only work until they get married at which time they will then quit in order to fulfill their domestic duties<sup>87</sup>. As Fussell<sup>88</sup> notes in the case of Mexico "... throughout the border region maquiladora

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<sup>85</sup> Fussell, 2000; 60 and ILO, 1985; 28

<sup>86</sup> 1994, 200

<sup>87</sup> ILO, 1985; 28

<sup>88</sup> 2000; 64

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workers tended to be young, single, childless...” during the 1970s. The reason for this may be related to the above-mentioned stereotypes, where the employer believed that the younger women were “docile and dexterous, traits demanded by tedious assembly processes”<sup>89</sup>. Fussell<sup>90</sup> also notes that the change in the labour composition altered in combination with the changes of the economic status of the countries. The more economically impoverished the countries became, the more the employers moved from hiring the young women, to the mothers of these young women. The older women were in a more desperate need for work, and would therefore be even more docile<sup>91</sup>. Presently in Nicaragua, many of the Free Trade Zone workers are young, mostly due to the lack of employment options, early ages of motherhood, and the availability of the employer to pick and choose the ages of their workers.

Fernandez-Kelly (1983) examines Free Trade Zones in Mexico and notes that the companies are gaining large profits through the exploitation of women workers. Nicaragua following the Mexican example, also has provided foreign investment with the same opportunity of gaining mass amounts of profits in order to stay competitive with other developing countries. In order for Nicaragua to be competitive within the world market and foreign investment it has kept the wages low, in fact so low that the Free Trade Zone workers in Nicaragua are the lowest paid within Central America. An average Free Trade Zone worker makes approximately \$83 per month. Many of the women are forced to work overtime with no adequate pay. For women in these sectors it is not uncommon for them to work 12 hours in a day, with less than an hour for breaks<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> Fussell, 2000; 65

<sup>90</sup> 2000; 65

<sup>91</sup> Fussell, 2000; 65

<sup>92</sup> IDEX, 2002

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Investigators such as Prieto have also examined the labour violations of women within the Free Trade Zones of Mexico. Although her research is not specific to Nicaragua, it is still relevant data, since the working conditions and social situations of both working women have many similarities. Prieto's research methods, similar to my own, consisted of formal and informal interviews. Prieto also held an open space discussion where women had the opportunity to voice their maquila experiences. The most commonly addressed issues by the women throughout this open space were concerns over the formal organization of working women. The working women noted "they have us by the neck!". Women throughout Prieto's interviews stated, "How many maquiladoras operators have told us not to strike because the workers will just get the worst of it? How many of the owners have told us that we need to cooperate because they represent work for so many people?"<sup>93</sup> Another relevant aspect of Prieto's study is the context in which she examines the workers. Prieto specifically studied the women of the Tijuana and Mexican maquiladoras through the women expressing their views and conditions. Prieto also examined the women as exploited workers and as oppressed women in a patriarchal society. Nicaragua and Mexico are very similar societies in that both are predominately patriarchal societies that have consequently resulted in the oppression of women. With regards to both Nicaragua and Mexico many workers are exploited, most especially women, due to the variety of methods of violations that women experience, and the integrated patriarchal beliefs that have entwined themselves within the Free Trade Zones. This in turn has also effected other women's working conditions, specifically those who work in this formal sector.

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<sup>93</sup> Prieto, 1997; 26

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In contradiction to what the previous academics noted about the conditions of the maquiladoras, other researchers such as Seligson and Williams (1981) have noted that for women who work in the Free Trade Zones, the work has benefited the women in many ways. The benefits included women having access to financial freedom, and also women shifting from strictly household duties to having more substantial and defined duties of formal labour. However, another academic that has studied women who work in maquilas was Kurt Alan Ver Beek (2001), who studied women in Honduras. Ver Beek used survey methodologies for his research, and used women who work in the maquilas in comparison to the women who were applying for maquila work. Ver Beek's results were such; with regards to the income of women, women who worked in the maquilas made more money than women outside the Free Trade Zones, yet men earned more than both<sup>94</sup>. Regarding household relations, Ver Beek noted that women who worked in the maquilas had husbands who helped more with household chores and provided more financial support to the family<sup>95</sup>. According to Ver Beek's study, one downfall of maquila workers was health problems. Ver Beek noted that more women who worked in the maquilas had health problems in comparison to women who were not working in the Free Trade Zones<sup>96</sup>. Ver Beek also concluded that women who work in the Free Trade Zones has less free time than the women who did not work in maquilas. Yet, Ver Beek remarked that men had more free time than women, therefore women still carried more responsibilities towards the household<sup>97</sup>. Ver Beek also examined the situation of women and unionization. Ver Beek noted that there was little difference between men and women with regards to attitude and participation of unions. Ver Beek then concluded that women were in fact not hired because they were more passive and less supportive

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<sup>94</sup> 2001; 1558

<sup>95</sup> 2001; 1558/1559

<sup>96</sup> 2001; 1560

<sup>97</sup> 2001; 1561

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of unions<sup>98</sup>. Ver Beek remarked that for women who worked in the maquilas their education was not enhanced nor diminished. Working in the maquilas had not stopped women from attaining an education. Instead according to Ver Beek, the women had already discontinued their education before working in the maquila<sup>99</sup>. Ver Beek therefore concluded that for women who worked in the maquilas, in comparison to the women applying to work in the maquilas, it was neither better nor worse, however, the key benefit for the women was the pay<sup>100</sup>. Ver Beek did however remark that within the maquilas of Honduras women were illegally fired for being a part of a union<sup>101</sup>.

Unionization has been an ongoing problem in the Free Trade Zones across Central America. Although Nicaragua is a country that to some has been considered progressive in the realm of female formal organization, in comparison to the rest of Central America, the rights of women who work within the Free Trade Zones are still violated. This can be seen through the large participation that the Nicaraguan non-governmental organization Marie Elena Cuadra received while protesting legislative changes for working women. However, many people within Nicaragua also recognize the gender setbacks that have occurred since the revolution, which has been mostly attributed to foreign involvement and the extreme poverty that engulfs Nicaragua. The poverty and gender setbacks continued to result in the company power to terminate women on the basis of union memberships. This was the case for one woman in Nicaragua, Cristina Sanchez, who “was fired for sympathizing with the union”<sup>102</sup>. Sanchez was receiving 25 cents for every pair of jeans she made; these jeans were then being sold for U.S. \$25. The union Sanchez

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<sup>98</sup> 2001; 1561

<sup>99</sup> 2001; 1564

<sup>100</sup> 2001; 1565

<sup>101</sup> 2001; 1561

<sup>102</sup> Brown and McKinney, 2001

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supported requested an 8-cent raise for each pair of jeans<sup>103</sup>. These forms of exploitation are common in all the Free Trade Zones, including in Nicaragua. The exploitation of workers has led to the development of organizations that are working to respond to the needs of the workers and the violations that some of the women have come to accept as an integrated part of the Free Trade Zones.

### ***6.2 Free Trade Zones and Women's Empowerment***

With regards to the research proposed on women in the Free Trade Zones, Susan Tiano's *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender and Ideology in the Mexican Industry* (1994) work is extremely relevant. Tiano's work is especially relevant when considering the possibility that there are positive effects that this formal labour expansion has brought to women in the Free Trade Zones. Although Tiano focuses on Mexico, the information gathered from her research is relevant to the Nicaraguan research proposed, since it is important to consider the possibility that women who work in Free Trade Zones are benefiting in some aspect. Tiano outlines the negative effects that the maquiladoras have had upon women; however she goes deeper into the exploration of the potential positive effects that these working regions have had upon women. Tiano considers women's awareness of exploitation and inequality within the working sectors and other aspects of their lives; which is especially important to the field research proposed in Nicaragua. Tiano (1994) deciphers a distinction between women and the relation of empowerment gained from

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<sup>103</sup> Brown and McKinney, 2001

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formal labour employment and how these elements extend themselves beyond the work place. Tiano also examines the level of women's consciousness and characterizes the consciousness of inequality and exploitation as empowerment. Furthermore, Tiano uses valuable categories in order to create a distinction between the women's level of empowerment that has derived from working in the Free Trade Zones.

Tiano notes that there are six dependent variables of awareness that measure a woman's understanding of her empowerment. The first variable measures the amount of comprehension a woman has with regards to her self-autonomy. Self-autonomy makes a distinction between how much control a woman feels she has over her life. This also includes how much power the woman has in the area of decision-making in her life, and the strategies that the women choose to implement their decisions. The second variable is the primacy of women's domestic roles, which relates to women's awareness of their appropriate female roles, and the "...perceived conflicts between reproductive and productive duties"<sup>104</sup>. The third category of a maquila worker's level of empowerment is the awareness of the "...importance of gender equality within the labour market..."<sup>105</sup> This third division focuses on the comprehension of working women's awareness of different attitudes that are directed towards the differentiation of women's work with men's work. This includes the existence of differences in issues, such as wages and job opportunities in comparison to men's. Tiano's fourth variable examines the women's awareness of similarities and shared experiences that these women may have with other women who are from different classes and have separate histories. The fifth level of awareness is regarding the extent of the women's

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<sup>104</sup> Tiano, 1994; 200

<sup>105</sup> Tiano, 1994; 200



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recognition and comprehension of similarities between themselves and the men that they work with, and share common work experiences with. The final variable of awareness that relates to empowerment for women according to Tiano is the amount and level of criticism that women understand with regards to their workplaces in areas such as their wages and working conditions<sup>106</sup>.

The results of Tiano's research of women who work in the Mexican Free Trade Zones regarding their empowerment and social autonomy, Tiano finds are related to social indicators; indicators such as, the level of income from work in the Free Trade Zones, the level of education the woman has had, and previous labour force experience. The results are as such: the better the woman's social standing the more autonomy the woman worker is aware of. Throughout Tiano's survey women maquila workers introduced issues including the feelings of importance and self-assurance, feelings that had evolved during the periods when the women worked in the wage sector, which they then related to their employment<sup>107</sup>. With regards to women feeling a bond due to the commonality of their working situation, it appeared that women who were raised by working mothers experienced solidarity with other women workers, while women with higher level of education sympathised with non-working women. The higher educated women believed that the non-working women might not have the strength to develop their own autonomy and in turn the educated women recognized the uneducated, poor women's oppression and sympathized for the poor women's dismal living situations. On the other hand Tiano's survey discovered that women who were forced to work, due to economic status, were less sympathetic with non-

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<sup>106</sup> Tiano, 1994; 200

<sup>107</sup> Tiano, 1994; 206

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working women<sup>108</sup>, possibly due to the lack of choice in work. The key findings within Tiano's<sup>109</sup> study are that different women's levels of consciousness are related to their status of "...education, income, and economic need for employment". As the women's levels of these factors were greater, Tiano notes that the women themselves had a higher level of consciousness of themselves and their status<sup>110</sup>. Therefore the women's consciousness relates to economic status and previous work experiences.

### ***6.3 International Labour Organization Conventions***

Many of the organizations or researchers that examine the working conditions of the maquila worker look into the ability of the worker to access a variety of rights. Nicaragua belongs to the United Nations Organization and their department of the International Labour Organization. This organization in part with the governments, unions, and employers come together as a tripartite in order to create conventions. Once the conventions are created the various governments choose which conventions the country will become signatories of, and therefore support through laws in its own country. Nicaragua is a signatory of various conventions. However, although a signatory to conventions, does in practice very little to implement the international laws to its own country. Nicaragua is a signatory of the ILO Convention numbers 87 and 98, the right to association and collective negotiation. Nicaragua also signed onto the

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<sup>108</sup> Tiano, 1994; 208

<sup>109</sup> 1994; 208

<sup>110</sup> Tiano, 1994; 208

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Conventions 29 and 105, which relate to the elimination of compulsory and forced labour and Convention 100 and 111 the elimination of discrimination within the workplaces, and 138 and 182 the prohibition of child labour<sup>111</sup>. Since Nicaragua is a signatory of many important labour conventions it is therefore important to examine why labour violations continue to occur and what preventative measures women are taking against these violations.

### ***6.4 Central American Solidarity***

Across Central America some different organizations have united to become a solidarity group and in turn strengthen their organizations. The solidarity groups have been called, Red Centroamericano de Mujeres en Solidaridad; this includes the organization Mujeres en Solidaridad and Grupo Pro Mejoramiento de la Familia both from Guatemala. From El Salvador two organizations are involved called, Coordinadora de Organismos de Mujeres and Asociación de Mujeres “Melidas Anayas Montes”. Another organization that is included in this solidarity is the Colectiva de Mujeres Hondureñas from Honduras, and also Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas “Maria Elena Cuadra” (MEC) from Nicaragua. These organizations have joined in the fight against the neo-liberal expansion of Free Trade Zones where women and workers are exploited for the benefits of the employer. Instead these groups believe in the

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<sup>111</sup> PNUD, 2002; 249

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possibility of having a place of employment that does not exploit the workers and is profitable for all involved<sup>112</sup>. As MEC notes, “Employment Yes...But with Dignity”<sup>113</sup>.

Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas “Maria Elena Cuadra” (MEC) is an established Nicaraguan grassroots organization that has been focused on the issue of women maquila workers since 1994. MEC’s main focus within their organization is the promotion of dignity and respect for women workers. The key policy approach that MEC takes on the issue of maquila workers is the promotion of rights and advocating for legal changes. In 1997 MEC was successful in changing two laws. The first was implemented in February 1998 on the Code of Ethics, while the second was put in place in November 1999 on Reforms to the Free Trade Zone law.

### ***7- Rationale and Research Question:***

The increase in maquiladoras has led to an increase in female labour because women have become known as the keys to the success of these industries. In many cases women are fired due to fighting for their rights and companies blacklist any women who try to formally organize. For the reason of these inequalities it is important to gain further understanding of women’s experiences and to bring this knowledge to the forefront as a learning tool. However there has

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<sup>112</sup> Torrez and Miranda, 2002; 1,2

<sup>113</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 13

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also been debate within literature on whether the maquiladoras benefit women or repress them. Therefore, the key research question remains, whether women define their working status in the Free Trade Zones as liberating or exploitative?

Although many academics have made attempts at recognizing and bringing to the forefront many of the problems of maquila women face, it is an area that has been neglected most specifically in Nicaragua. Most researchers have also excluded women's opinions throughout their research, more specifically researchers have not had a space that allows women to directly express what the women deem as important to them. In cases where women do express their concerns and stories, many researchers have not examined how these women attempt to resolve their problems, what methods are taken, and if they choose to join organizations for assistance. In addition, an investigation into what change in their working situation they perceive as the most important and necessary to them has been neglected. And lastly, women's views and needs of the importance of the maquila work for a woman has not been assessed. This research includes areas of the economical benefits of working in the Free Trade Zones; and also, if working in these formal labour sectors is liberating for the women in sectors such as their communities and families. However, the possibility remains that the poverty which the women experience may give the women no other options, but to work in the Free Trade Zones. It is important to study this area of women in Nicaragua, and to have an discussion area where the working women can express their views of rights as women and maquila workers in order to further understand why women work in these sectors and what needs to be improved in the Free Trade Zones to better the women's situations. Throughout the research that has previously been done, women have not been investigated in this fashion, especially in Nicaragua; therefore it is crucial for the Nicaraguan

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women who work in the Free Trade Zones to be studied. Research has been carried out most especially in areas such as Mexico (Tiano and Fernandez-Kelly) and Honduras (Ver Beek), yet Nicaragua has not, and is more impoverished than Mexico. Also, Nicaragua is important to study since Mexico is in the makings of proceeding with Plan Puebla Panama, an extension of Free Trade Agreements, which is similar to NAFTA.

Another important reason for studying Nicaragua's working women is because of the harsh political and economic conditions that the people have been enduring for the past several decades. As previously noted, this situation has recently worsened with the former president, Arnoldo Alemán, stealing close to U.S. \$15 million from the country. Presently President Enrique Bolaños has been forced to respond to the debt crisis in the same fashion that most developing countries have been pressured to do so by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, mainly Structural Adjustment Programs. However the difference between Nicaragua and other Central American countries is that Nicaragua is a country that cannot afford to be underpaid, for in Managua alone there is an approximate unemployment rate of 60-70%. A further reason to examine Nicaragua is that, the country is now rated by the World Bank as one of their Highly Indebted Poor Countries.

**8- Methodology of Research:**

Due to these gaps in research on Nicaraguan women who work in the Free Trade Zones, it is important that my research question focus on what types of benefits and disadvantages the women who work in the maquiladoras gain or believe is important to gain. In order to conduct this research I spent a four-month period in Nicaragua. The last three months involved carrying out a voluntary work period five days a week for about six hours a day with the Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas “Maria Elena Cuadra” (MEC) organization. Through this period I employed two main methodologies used to carry out the research question. The first of these was through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were held with five staff of MEC, one of whom was a founder and now director, and also with seventeen women maquila workers. Through the relationship with MEC and my participation in about seven workshops for six hours each regarding human rights, sexual rights, labour rights, I was able to develop friendly relationships with the women maquila workers. Questions pertaining to the extent of maquila worker’s knowledge that they had regarding their rights were also addressed. As well, the women maquila workers were asked why they worked in the Free Trade Zones and what were the personal and familial benefits they received from working in the maquilas. In addition, women were asked if this form of work liberated them, and if they had found that they gained empowerment. Are the gender stereotypes still prominent experiences that these women had endured, or did they find they had more power in terms of community and family as a result of working in the Free Trade Zones? The sub-questions that had been explored in my research in Nicaragua were: what did the women perceive as the benefits of their workplace? What are other

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options of employment for the women in the Free Trade Zones? What were the barriers for women to pursue the alternative options of work? How could the women's workplaces be improved, if at all? Did women maquila workers feel that these workplaces were liberating for them, more specifically if there were any benefits as a result of their employment outside the Free Trade Zones? If women did not perceive the Free Trade Zones as having benefits outside the workplace, was this labour sector a barrier to women's empowerment?

Participant observation was the other methodology that was used for the proposed research. During the research I observed women's response and participation with MEC and its staff. The role that I took within Maria Elena Cuadra was of voluntary nature. The position with MEC was specifically created in order for me to achieve my research objectives. In turn, I offered MEC prior research on the organization surrounding issues of ILO policies, specifically with regards to Nicaragua. I also assisted the organization with their weekly workshops and daily duties. The primary learning objectives that I had were to learn more from the maquila workers themselves on why they worked in the Free Trade Zones. It is through this research and voluntary experience that I intended to learn more about women who work in the maquiladoras and more specifically women in Nicaragua who work in the Free Trade Zones. I also had intentions of learning more about MEC and the ways in which a grassroots organization in Nicaragua operated.



## **Section Two**

### **Research Findings in Nicaragua:**

#### **9- Initial Research:**

##### **9.1 MEC**

During the initial period with MEC, I spent the first part of my time, a week or two, collecting various forms of information from their library. Moreover, before beginning the discussions of the semi-structured interviews with the women and the Movimiento de Mujeres “Maria Elena Cuadra”, it was important to first discuss their existing publications and findings that MEC has already acquired. It became apparent at the very beginning that the women and men who participated in MEC’s organisation and whom I would be interviewing needed time to adjust to me being there. In return, the research collected through my participant observation and time spent at MEC gave me a better understanding of the Zona Franca workers and MEC.

The first workshop I attended was for domestic workers, since I believed it would be important to understand how people would react to my participation. The workshops that MEC offered were for workers of the Zonas Francas and also a separate workshop for domestic workers. The latter workshop pertains to women who work in wealthy families as nannies or home cleaners. MEC provides workshops for strictly these two groups, though it emphasizes the

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Zona Franca workers to a greater extent, with a vast assortment of information on their working rights provided for the participants. Through initially using MEC's library and my own findings I gained a better understanding of the context in which I was about to ask questions, and to also better understand what the organization researched and the methods that the organization had used. Before embarking into the research, some important information on MEC was discovered.

In an investigation that I had made to better understand MEC and its origins I had looked further into the person that MEC had named its organization after. Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "Maria Elena Cuadra" was founded in May of 1993. The name of the organization "Maria Elena Cuadra" refers to a woman who throughout her life had been devoted to the liberation and equality of Nicaraguan women. Maria Elena Cuadra began her work in 1977 when she was involved with the "Association of the Women before the National Problem". Maria Elena Cuadra had devoted her life to working for the rights of youth, most especially women<sup>114</sup>. Maria Elena Cuadra passed away in an automobile accident on March 11 1994 at a young age and at an early stage in her career,<sup>115</sup> yet continues to have had an influence on MEC. In dedication to the beliefs and friendships to Maria Elena Cuadra the goals of MEC followed what Maria Cuadra had begun.

The objective of MEC has been to be a part of the women's movement, with the specific purpose of being an autonomous, vast, and pluralistic organization. MEC noted they have no aims with profiting from their work with women, and make it their mission to ensure that the

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<sup>114</sup> La Boletina, 2001; 57

<sup>115</sup> La Boletina, 2001; 59

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incorporation and participation of women takes place with regards to the equality of Nicaraguan women in society. This incorporation and participation has been based on the principle of universal equality, liberty, and social justice. MEC notes that the importance of their work stems from the remembrance of the extreme poverty that people endure in Nicaragua. More than 80% of the poorest people are women. This statistic is the inspiration for MEC to work with women<sup>116</sup>. MEC for about eight years now has been working in favour of issues of women's rights, specifically surrounding labour and human rights of women who work in the Zonas Francas; however, the basis of MEC's work originates from the Zona Franca women's input into the organization. The women of the Zona Franca propose benefits they would like to see in the work places and MEC in turn makes these suggestions a reality.<sup>117</sup> In combination with books and information that MEC provides for the Zona Franca workers, MEC also has lawyers readily available in their office, to ensure the women receive things such as proper wages, and to help enforce the women's working rights within the Zonas Francas.

It was during my final interview with the director of MEC on October 17 2002, Sandra Ramos, that I learned of the origins of MEC and its history. The beginning of the interview was directed towards the reasons for initiating the organization and its importance in the women's movement. Sandra began with noting that 80% of the women who founded MEC were trade union leaders. In 1993 these women had conflicts with the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (CST) trade union. The contradictions were regarding agenda conflicts. In the CST there remained the machismo attitudes although women were a part of the leadership. The women's

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<sup>116</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 12

<sup>117</sup> Bensted, 1999; 36

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concerns and needs were not being represented by the union. Sandra commented that the rights of men have been established globally where as the rights of women have not; furthermore, these problems continue to exist.

Sandra began by discussing a period during 1990, when the Chormorro regime made an agreement with the unions that the unions would have 25% of the industrial properties, which would go to the workers and their representation, the unions. However, once the unions received this property, the unions began working for the employers and not the workers. This led to a major crisis within the union. Many women lost their jobs, while the corrupt union members continued to take from the workers. The unionists stole company shares and sold these, many to corporations (i.e. Colonial and Pali, two key Nicaraguan supermarkets)<sup>118</sup>. Ramos commented “the crisis in the union movement led to two groups of workers, those who were corrupt with the union, and those who fought for their rights.”<sup>119</sup> The women workers and trade unionist had been arguing with the unions that it was impossible to be a union representing the workers, and also working for the companies. This in turn led to a crisis in the union, and the organization split. From this point the men trade unionist went to the political parties and leaders for support, and told the parties of the women’s that they wanted to divide. This led to the stigma that women in the workplaces were bad and unwanted. The president at the time, Daniel Ortega, then fired the women from the trade union leadership positions. Sandra continued to note that at the time of being fired she had to leave her position because there had been a emergence of violence against women, and the women had been isolated within the political and social systems. Oppressive acts

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<sup>118</sup> Interview at MEC with Ramos; October 17 2002

<sup>119</sup> Interview at MEC with Ramos; October 17 2002

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had been placed upon the working women including their telephones being disconnected and their electricity cut off. Many of the men friends of the FSLN, who were also friends with the women, were afraid to be seen with the women; the women were therefore left with no political support. From this point, many of the women became stay at home mothers with no money and no work. The women decided to get together for a meeting, and at this point the beginnings of MEC formed.

The women knew that they had few opportunities in the formal labour sector, and because they had specializations in working rights, decided they wanted to continue helping workers without being a member of the unions that existed. In 1994 MEC was founded and formed, although during the initial stages MEC ran into many problems with the existing unions. Sandra Ramos was specifically targeted and charged by the courts due to a theft allegation from the CST. The union alleged that Ramos stole files and projects from the CST. At this time corrupt judges maintained the unions charge and supported the unions. During this violent time for Ramos she was forced to flee and take refuge for a year, which in turn delayed much of MEC's continuance. In combination with a delay of MEC's continuance, Ramos' court case led to the organization holding little credibility, and many people withheld their support for MEC, in fear of being isolated with MEC. During 1995, Ramos was still occupied with her case, and the Austria government helped her in clearing her name and winning her freedom. In November 1995, Ramos was freed of all charges and was able to return her attention to MEC. Due to Sandra Ramos' experience, the goals and objectives of MEC became clear; represent the women in the most vulnerable sector, including women working in mines, unemployment sectors, and the Free Trade Workers, domestic workers, and the invisible women workers.

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Ramos further discussed international unions. Ramos stated that “international unions, they have the same machismo/patriarchal attitudes that are also entwined within their structures”<sup>120</sup>. Sandra commented that the unions were the organizations that had little interest in gaining a balance between the men and women’s working rights. Ramos noted that it was difficult to be a representative union when they don’t say anything about women’s rights. Due to her leadership Ramos’ outspokenness regarding women’s rights, many people did not support her position in the union. Throughout the organization MEC, Ramos stands as the strong stem that women depend on. Her strength in women’s rights has been a view that has long been a part of her personality. Ramos commented that “I’m not a woman from the left because I was born this way, my mother and other people taught me, I learned this”<sup>121</sup>, which she hopes to teach other women. Ramos noted that many feminists took off her “blindfolds” and she learned what society “teaches” people. Learned ideas, including the idea that men cannot be kicked out of work for being pregnant but women can, men don’t get sexually harassed and women do, and this was what she fights against with the support of women.

Ramos noted that the importance of MEC now, was to maintain transparency to the people it represents, allowing these people to see and be an integral part of MEC; which was something lacking in many union organizations. In turn the transparency was how MEC displayed its failures and accomplishments. MEC has continued to be different from all other organizations by representing the workers dreams. MEC strives “to make these dreams come true, not create them for the workers”<sup>122</sup>. The women represented by MEC are who create and design the

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<sup>120</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

<sup>121</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

<sup>122</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

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priorities of MEC. With regards to this form of organization, Sandra commented “if the dream of the women is small, then MEC is small, if the dream is big, then MEC is big”<sup>123</sup>. An original organization through their format of organizing, MEC works at the pace of the workers. Ramos commented that in order to be able to help the workers, the organization needs to understand the problem; this comes directly from the women. “Without the voice of the women, MEC can’t work”<sup>124</sup>. In turn, the organization is completely based on the women and their needs.

Throughout the interview with Sandra Ramos, she specifically commented on the overall goals of MEC. The goals included giving the women the recognition of the value of women’s work. The values did not only include the workers in the formal labour sector but also the informal labour sector, which specifically included housemothers. For Ramos the “idea of work goes beyond the factories”<sup>125</sup>. The long-term goal of MEC was to make the invisible face of the woman worker visible. Sandra noted that the general view of work is seen as the male worker, and also as the paid employment sector, those without these characteristics were seen as non-workers. Sandra used the term ‘traditional conservative concept of work’ as the theory that MEC challenged. This theory included the concept of remunerated vs. non-remunerated workers, visible workers vs. invisible workers, and also the concept of productive work vs. reproductive work. The concept in many cases excluded women, and believed that work was considered to be male, while women had always been seen as invisible within these sectors that hold value. However Ramos commented that throughout the male work environment, many changes had erupted due to women’s demands and fights, an example that Ramos used was the international workers day,

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<sup>123</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

<sup>124</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

<sup>125</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

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which came about from women. Sandra also noted that the unions, which enforce the idea that work is part of the male sector and therefore, women are excluded and the male concept of work was then reinforced. Ramos continued with noting that the traditional conservative concept of work was the largest barrier to MEC and also to the inclusion of women's rights being represented in the workplaces.

Sandra observed from her personal experiences with the male dominant unions that the unions behave in a manner of owning everything, and having a mission of specifically excluding women. Ramos continued the interview with regarding the unions as organizations that are afraid of change, and from her experiences, have become defensive when new movements come to light. In response to the new movements the unions have called women many different disrespectful names. Within Nicaragua the unions had extended their views to the international sphere by telling other unions to not support MEC due to their anti-unionism. Sandra noted that the problem of patriarchy within the international union sector exists because the views that the Nicaraguan unions spread found fertile grounds. This in turn had placed MEC in the position of being sandwiched between the male dominated Sandinistas and the male conservatives. Sandra noted that due to common patriarchal ideological similarities, the groups had been able to easily unite. Ramos recognized that for men, when their patriarchal power was under threat, the men in response united, while women on the other hand do not, this for Ramos was a problem. Ramos stated that...

“this is something women should work on, we reject each other, don't have a pact, not joining forces is the largest part of the problem. Women should be like men and have a



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general alliance among women, instead women are socialized to compete, not value what women do but what men do, and to vote for men. The system maintains this for convenience, however it will be broken down over generations, but it is strong and difficult and something women have died for”<sup>126</sup>.

Another obstacle for women and MEC had been the lack of networking between women. Ramos observed that she was used as an example to other women throughout Central America, to scare other women into not standing up for their rights and to keep women from fighting back. Throughout time and work, women had begun to talk to each other, and had noted that they had common experiences. Many women had been forced out of unions through harassment. Women had gone through these experiences in silence, having no women’s network. Women had been forced to work on the patriarchal levels; to date MEC still has this expectation forced upon them. Sandra stated that it is difficult not to fight, like she did as a guerrilla, but rather to work on negotiations. Sandra commented that many northern observers expected MEC to literally, be loud and shout, however Ramos noted that this has been a method used by unions and men, not MEC yet the expectations are still imposed.

MEC has been successful throughout its work, through having a strong voice in the rights of the women of the Zonas Francas. As well, MEC has had many accomplishments with the help and co-operation of the National Public Opinion, a survey performed by the government, the Zona Franca Workers, and the mass media, the National Corporation of the Zonas Francas, the Worker’s Ministry, and the Parliament of Nicaragua. These groups had come together on several

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<sup>126</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

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issues in order to better the working situation of the workers of the Zonas Francas. MEC has been very successful in gaining the support of the Zona Franca workers. An example of this was during 1998 when MEC was striving towards the signing of the Code of Conduct by the Ministry of Labour. With the support of 30,000 signatures of Zona Franca workers and the National Public Opinion, the Code was signed on January 23 1998<sup>127</sup>. MEC had many other accomplishments for the benefit of the Zona Franca workers. MEC had added and reformed some of the Decrees and naming the Zonas Francas the Industries of Exportation, gaining 51,000 signatures in order to pressure the National Legislation for the approval<sup>128</sup>. MEC was part of the movement to demand an increase in Minimum Salary during 2000, with the assistance of union organizations<sup>129</sup>. In 2002 a document outlining a comparison between the minimal salaries of Central America was published by Boletina Red Centroamericana de Mujeres en Solidaridad con las Trabajadoras de las Maquilas<sup>130</sup>.

The results of the minimum salaries were as such:

### **Chart Three** <sup>131</sup>

Central American Country	Industrial Minimum Salary U.S. \$
Costa Rica	\$10.61
El Salvador	\$ 4.78
Honduras	\$3.14
Guatemala	\$3.07
Nicaragua	\$1.59

<sup>127</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 12

<sup>128</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 12

<sup>129</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 13

<sup>130</sup> Torrez and Miranda, 2002; 4

<sup>131</sup> Torrez and Miranda, 2002; 4

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Nicaragua had the lowest minimum salary in all of the Central American countries examined. There was a drastic difference of \$9 between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, the highest and lowest paid countries. The low minimum wage was ideal for the capitalist companies wanting to exploit the labour of other countries. However, due to Nicaragua's extreme poverty, the low wage further contributed to the people's rates of poverty. Also the poverty of the country forced the wages to remain low in order to remain competitive with other countries and create labour in the country.

In combination with these issues that MEC has worked on and continues to work on, MEC has also expanded their offices. MEC has offices in León, Estelí, Granada, Posoltega, Juigalpa, and Managua, its head office. Throughout each office the focus varies. Offices focus on issues such as Tobacco workers and Zona Franca workers. Throughout these cities MEC has also helped with many developments. In Estelí for example, MEC has helped re-build homes that were destroyed in Hurricane Mitch. MEC has extended itself to represent many people's rights in many different issues. This organization has become a central part of representation of people's needs and had enabled people to have an organization which can contribute to the bettering of their lives.

In order for MEC to gain an understanding of the needs of the people they have used a variety of research methods. For the most part, MEC actively created questionnaires and surveys for the Zona Franca workers, in attempts to continue to understand the changes and new situations of the workers. MEC workers in the form of surveys go to the Zona Franca workers in the Zonas Francas and relate the questionnaires. The surveys are read to the workers by one of MEC's

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employees. These surveys take place as the workers are leaving their workplace; also from this data collected, MEC is able to better understand the needs of the workers.

In response to the needs MEC had created many data information books and also booklets that each woman can keep. These booklets vary in information depending first if the women are Zona Franca workers, and secondly based on specific issues. For instance, MEC had a small handbook called, the “Manual Pocketbook on Labour Rights”<sup>132</sup>. MEC also had other handbooks that cover areas of violence, family and incest, workers rights, and human rights. There are books that covered the area of occupational health and hygiene, and methods of negotiation and how to mediate conflicts. All these handbooks have been designed as a resource for female workers in the Zonas Francas. These books have been made easy to read with examples of workers situations, ones in which the women who access the books can relate to.

In addition to the numerous resources, MEC also employed various people to help extend their resource base with the Zona Franca workers. One example is the work of an economist<sup>133</sup>. This economist offered economic classes to Zona Franca women workers to help them better understand the dynamics of their workplaces. The course covers basic calculus, macroeconomic indicators, national and social government spending awareness, national accountability, comprehension of international financial organizations, the process of globalization, and poverty and equity within Nicaragua. In turn through their topics these courses also contribute to a greater understanding of social, political, and economic situations of Nicaragua. Outside of manual

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<sup>132</sup> Ramos and Kopke; year unknown

<sup>133</sup> due to privacy a name will not be used

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handbooks, workshops, and educational programs that MEC has designed, the organization is also continuously updating its resource of data books as well.

## ***10- Zona Franca Workers Situations***

The research that has been found in MEC's database is extremely important. Due to MEC's ability to acquire information from an otherwise extremely difficult situation, many companies within the Free Trade Zones around Central America do not permit their workers to be a part of worker organizations, and consequently many women have been fired for being members<sup>134</sup>. MEC, however has been a different organization within Central America. The workers who have participated within MEC do not get fired from their place of employment. MEC employees have been permitted to walk through the Las Mercedes Zona Franca in Managua. MEC has received these privileges through their status of working with government, unions and workers.

### ***10.1 MEC's findings of Nicaraguan Zona Franca Working Women***

Throughout MEC's history of data collecting, the organization had been able to encompass many different aspects of the Zona Franca women's lives. MEC collected a variety of

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<sup>134</sup> Bensted, 1999; 21

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types of information on the maquila working women. The reason for MEC's collections has been to better understand the situation of the maquila worker and their lives, and also to note whether the situation of women is improving or diminishing. The stark realization, however, has been that from the data that was received in 1996 to data that was collected in 2002, in some cases there was very little differences in the responses. Questions with little differences included, maternity leave and how much the company pays for the delivery of a child. This led me to believe that the experiences of the maquila workers have changed very little over the past six years. Although there are a variety of reasons for the continuation of past working conditions and types of workers, one such reason may be the extreme governmental corruption. International organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have been continuing to force Nicaragua to open its borders to foreign investment, and in turn giving the companies the opportunity to exploit in the same fashion that was experienced by the workers six years past. The expansion of the Free Trade Zones is exemplified through, in 1997 volume of exportation was U.S. \$164,000 million. In turn, it had doubled over the past years to a total of U.S. \$ 380,000 million in 2001<sup>135</sup>. Governmental corruption had also left little employment options for the Nicaraguan people; other employment sectors were not expanding, and therefore little options were left, unless the workers choose to move into working in the informal sector.

One important area that MEC has studies was the understanding of the women's sexual reproduction and experiences and how this effected their livelihoods. Of the study carried out in 2002 the number of Nicaraguan women who were adolescent mothers was 45%. This in turn left the women in vulnerable situations and in desperate need for work so that they could provide for

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<sup>135</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 10

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their children. When MEC examined 11 maquilas in 2002, the majority ages of the women were young. 26% (390) of the women were between the ages of 16 to 20 years old, while 31.93% (497) of the women were 21 to 25 years old. An interesting fact was that as the ages got older the percentages dropped<sup>136</sup>. These statistics however, were similar to the data collected in 1996, by Sandra Ramos who noted, that the majority of workers were from ages 15 to 18 (20.5%), and 19 to 23 (25.0%). Following these ages of women, the next largest age group of working women was from 24 to 28 (15.5%) of women<sup>137</sup>. Throughout the data collection, it became clear that the women remained to be mostly younger. Therefore, the younger population have continued to be poorly educated, and remained to be a vulnerable group with regards to employment options. However it may also be possible that there were simply, very little employment opportunities available for the younger women, except maquila work.

With regards to the level of education of the maquila women, in 2002 the results were such, that 0.47% (7) of the women had self taught themselves to read and write, 15.67%, 235 women had begun primary education but not completed the program, and 19.67% (295) had finished primary school. As for secondary schooling, 38.40% (576) had attended secondary schools, but not finished, while 18.20% (273) of women had finished the program and received their certificates. Only 2.87% (43) of the women had attended university and 3.27%(49) went to a technical college<sup>138</sup> (see Chart Four). These statistics also resemble 1996 situation of Zona Franca workers. 45.5% of the women held a primary education, while 44.5% held a secondary education. 6.5% of the women workers have a technical degree and 3.5% had gone to university<sup>139</sup>.

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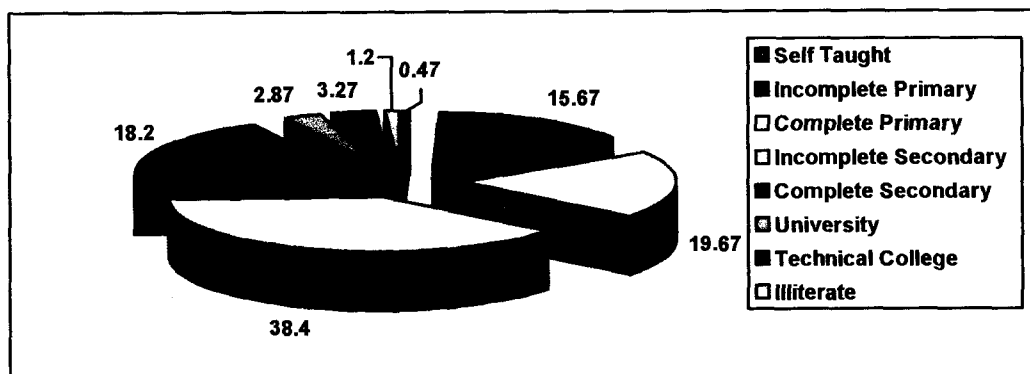
<sup>136</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 16

<sup>137</sup> Ramos, 1996; 70

<sup>138</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 19

<sup>139</sup> Ramos, 1996; 71

**Chart Four**<sup>140</sup>



Through examining these statistics, it became clear that many of the women who worked and continue to work in the Zonas Francas have a limited amount of education. For many women, the opportunity to further their education may not have been an option, or a desire, however many of the women have a basic level of education. This therefore, leads me to believe that maquila work is the predominant option for work for women. The next profitable sector would be to work in the markets, or own a pulpería (small store), or a restaurant. However, most of these need money to begin, while working in the maquiladoras, involves no organization, set hours, and a basic pay.

With regards to the women's family situation, it became apparent during the 2002 study that 45.40% (681) of the workers owned their own property and homes, while 37.87% (418) of the women and their families still lived with their parents. Also 20.27% (304) of the women lived

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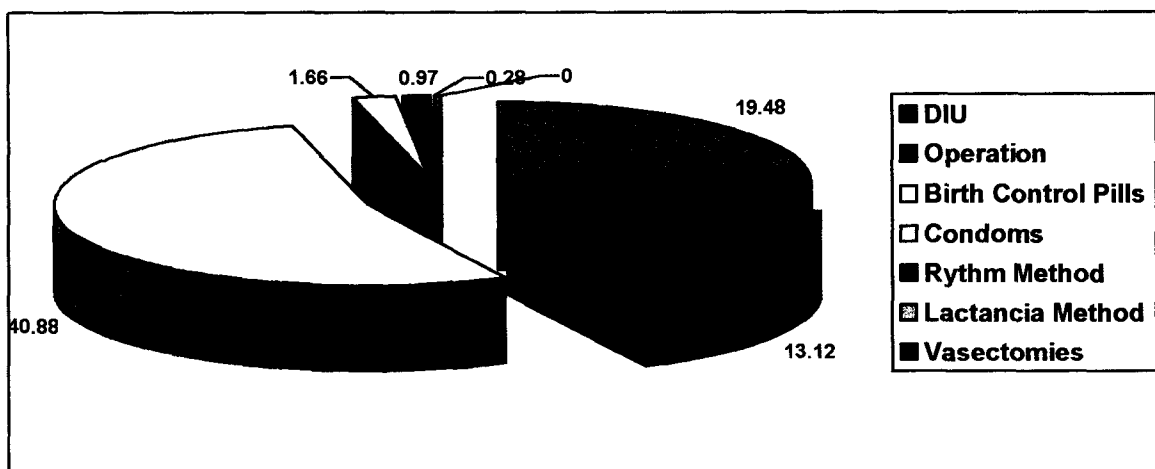
<sup>140</sup> Ramos, 1996; 71



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with relatives, and 6.2% (92) of the women rented their homes<sup>141</sup>. Of these women, 1, 079 women had children. 65.8% (710) had one to two children, and 31.05% (335) of women had three to five children. Only 3.16% (34) had six or more children<sup>142</sup>. The percentage of children may however be due to 48.27% (724) women who work in the Zonas Francas have used a family planning method of one sort or another. The most common method of family planning that had been used was birth control pills with 40.88% (296) of the women who have used this. The majority of the women, who have used a family planning method, had decided on the methods themselves. Other forms of methods, DIU was one, with 19.48% (141) women had used, and 13.12% (95) of women received operations, and 0% of men received vasectomies<sup>143</sup> (see Chart Five).

**Chart Five**<sup>144</sup>



<sup>141</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 20

<sup>142</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 24

<sup>143</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 30/31

<sup>144</sup> Ortuño, 2001; 30/31

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The results of these statistics show that many women have experienced some form of empowerment, which may have resulted from economic independence and the burden that women have traditionally carried as the key home carer. The women have gained the opportunities to be decision-makers within important areas of their lives, such as family size.

Throughout the study that was performed in 1996 other questions that were relevant to the proposed research were asked. One of these important questions was where the women worked before the Zonas Francas. 20% of the women noted they were previously domestic workers, and another 20% of women were unemployed. Also 17.5% of the women were previously students, and the rest were taxi drivers, self-employed, nurses, part of the military, or secretaries<sup>145</sup>.

### ***10.2 Maquila Products, Ownership and Working Conditions***

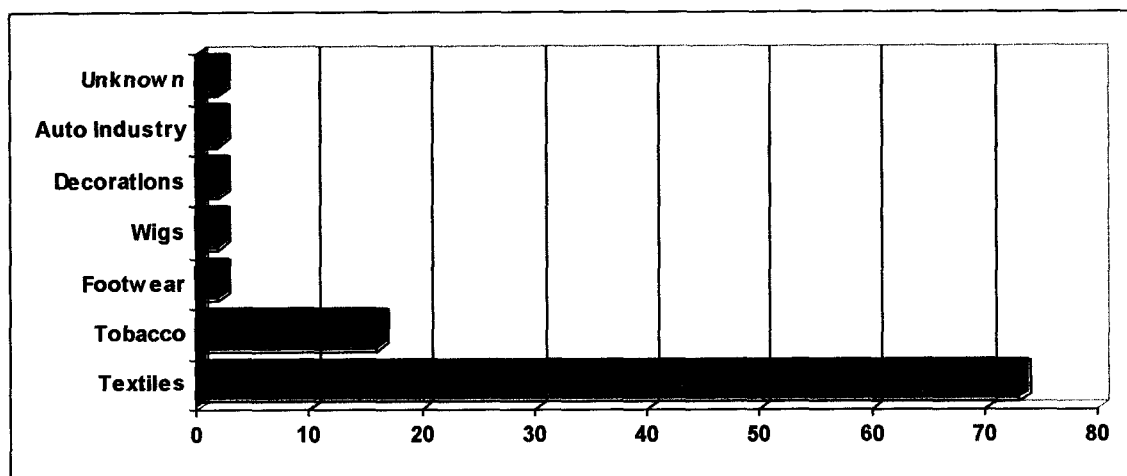
MEC had done extensive research on the ownership of the maquiladoras. Of the present maquiladoras that were examined by MEC, 73% of the companies produced textiles and clothing, 16% of the maquilas were in tobacco production, while another 3% were communication producers, 2% produced footwear, another 2% produced wigs, and another 2% produced decorations and the final 2% were in the car production industry<sup>146</sup> (see Chart Six).

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<sup>145</sup> Ramos, 1996; 72

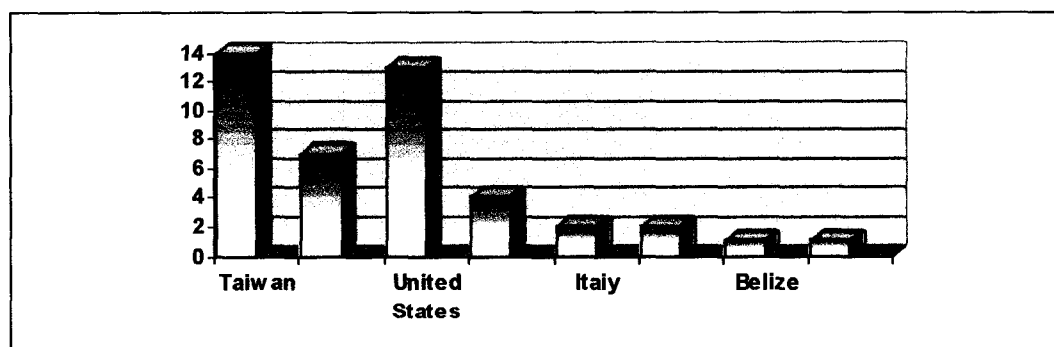
<sup>146</sup> Ramos, 1996;71

**Chart Six**<sup>147</sup>



The place of origins of these factories were 14 from Taiwan, 13 from the United States, 7 from Korea, 4 of Nicaraguan origin, 2 were Italian, 2 from Hong Kong, 1 from Belize and another from Mexico<sup>148</sup> (see Chart Seven).

**Chart Seven**<sup>149</sup>



<sup>147</sup> Ramos, 1996;71

<sup>148</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 8

<sup>149</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 8

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Within the factories it had been noted that most of the women (94.17% / 4,492) who worked in this formal sector had a signed contract with their company. However, only 36.18% of the women had a copy of the contract to which they had signed<sup>150</sup>. Many of the women who worked in the maquiladoras also were forced to work overtime, with 83.58% (3,987) women noting that they did, and 16.39% (782) of women stated they did not. Close to half the women stated that they had to work between 6 to 10 hours extra per week<sup>151</sup>. The forced overtime in the Zonas Francas was in violation of the women's working rights. Under the ILO Conventions 29 and 105, which relate to the elimination of compulsory and forced labour. Nicaragua is a signatory to these conventions, yet forced overtime still occurs according to the women who work in the maquilas<sup>152</sup>. Therefore the women's working rights continue to be violated.

Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "Maria Elena Cuadra" had also done extensive research on the conditions of the women who work in the Zonas Francas. One of MEC's employee, Maria<sup>153</sup> noted<sup>154</sup> that the strenuous working conditions in the Zona Francas were the most prominent struggles and challenges that maquila women have had to date. Another problem that was facing the workers in the maquiladoras of Nicaragua was the issue of bathroom allowances. Although 79.94% (3,813) of the respondents noted that there were no limitations to their bathroom visits, 18.81% (897) of the women noted there was<sup>155</sup>. Along with the lack of freedom to use the bathrooms, women were also deterred from using the clinics that were established within the Zona Francas by their supervisors. Recently within Nicaragua, one woman

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<sup>150</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 21/22

<sup>151</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 31

<sup>152</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27, 2002

<sup>153</sup> false names are used for privacy reasons

<sup>154</sup> MEC employee; September 4, 2002

<sup>155</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 36

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lost her 3-month child in the bathroom of a Chinese maquila, John Garments Company due to the lack of freedom to use the restrooms. The woman was experiencing pains earlier, and was not permitted to go to the clinic for her stomach pains. When the young 18-year-old girl asked to go to the clinic her supervisor responded, "Work or go home"<sup>156</sup>. As in this case, many severe situations erupt when people's health are not tended to. The women in many maquilas were treated as flexible and disposable workers, due to the large surplus of labour that the companies have. In most cases the maquila women 68.09% (3,248), if absolutely have to use a clinic, are *expected* by the company to use clinics that the company picks. The women in turn pay to be members of these clinics. In reality however, 14.86% (709) women used hospitals, 10.46% (499) used work clinics, and 2.98% (142) women used private clinics, and the rest was unknown<sup>157</sup>.

Other problems related to working condition are the long continuous work period without eating that women in the maquiladoras are faced with. Maria<sup>158</sup> of MEC noted that this was an especially prominent problem within the Zona Franca. Many of the women eat in the mornings before work at about five or six am and do not get to eat again until noon. Many of the women work in hunger, making their working condition and employers expectations more difficult.

Other conditions of concern had been the pay for maternity. The survey results were unclear. Although within the Managuan Zona Franca, there were childcare services available, the distribution of who pays for the birthing of the children was questionable. MEC's attempt to gain information on the amount that the employer paid for the birth of the child, including the hospital

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<sup>156</sup> Lara, 2002; 1

<sup>157</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2002; 45

<sup>158</sup> Interview at MEC; September 4, 2002

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bill, had resulted in 93.69% of the interviewed women who would not respond. With regards to the amount of time off that was available for women on maternity leave, the results were 88.20% of the women who did not respond to this question also. However, it is known that within the Las Mercedes Zona Franca in Managua some of the maquiladoras offer child care services, known as the Guaderia Infantil. In 2000 when women were interviewed by MEC, 79% (1, 837) of the women noted that there was a service available<sup>159</sup>. Yet in all these instances the women were forced to pay for the service, although in some cases the companies contributed a small percentage of the cost. To pay for this service was difficult for many of the women, and it was also more efficient and economical for the women to leave the children in the care of family since the women work such long hours.

It should however be noted that according to the women involved in the interview of October 27, 2002, the conditions of many of the women who work in maquiladoras and also who participated with MEC, have improved in comparison to other workers in both Nicaragua and other Free Trade Zones. According to the women, these improved conditions have stemmed from knowledge gained through participation of MEC, and also through women consulting with MEC when their working rights were disregarded by the maquila owners. MEC had used many of their resources and connections with the employers, unions and lawyers to fight for the women who were willing to defend themselves.

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<sup>159</sup> Ramos and Vargas, 2000; 10

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***11-MEC's Weekly Workshops***

***11.1 Participant Observation of the Workshops***

Workshops were offered for Domestic Workers and also Zona Franca workers, yet separately. Both the workshops were held on Sundays. One workshop that I attended on August 25 2002 had approximately 30 domestic workers. This workshop's theme was working rights. The participants of this workshop varied in age, ranging from about 15 to 65 years old. Many women noted that there were some domestic workers as young as 10 years of age. The majority of these participants were however in their late teens, early twenties. The workshop discussed issues of social security, pay, working hours, contracts, the termination of a contract, and the days in which the women had as paid holidays.

Other issues that were covered within the Domestic workshops consisted of learning the skill to negotiate and mediate contracts and working conditions. Within these workshops issues such as violence against women within the Nicaraguan communities and the women's workplaces were offered. Also, there were discussions to help women deal with conflicts at their working homes. One such workshop that I attended on September 8 2002 dealt with these. The workshop was organized and ran by Irene (a MEC worker), who with the women discussed issues of machismo attitudes within the Nicaraguan society. Irene also discussed feelings that initiated conflict from both the employer and employee stance. Irene further went to discuss the potential reasons for conflict and the negative effects that these conflicts had upon the women who work in homes. The workshop also offered other methods of dealing with these disagreements, that the

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working women themselves might utilize in their own workplaces. Another common theme held in the domestic workshops was the issue of gender and how it effected the domestic workers and also family violence. During these domestic workshops there were about 30 women who attended, many of whom were repeat attendees. The purpose of these workshops was to enlighten the women with regards to their labour rights, and also human rights. The workshops helped women in dealing with common problems in their workplaces. The domestic worker workshops also had formal sessions regarding their labour and human rights.

Of the Zona Franca Worker's workshops, there was far more variety in theme and numbers of people who attend; since this was the main focus for MEC. The attendees of the workshop included both men and women together, although women remained to be the majority partakers with approximately five male participants. There were also age variations within the participants of the workshop. In some cases there were mostly middle-aged women, while in other cases the majority of participants were in their early twenties. There have also been workshops for the Zona Franca workers where the groups had been separated from new members and old members, who were the promoters for MEC. The people who gained promoter status were trained by MEC in ways to promote the office services in the Zona Francas.

The majority of the workshops that were available through MEC were formal in structure. The Zona Franca workers were informed of their formal labour rights, human rights, and international human rights. In many cases the workers were lectured for several hours, where afterwards there was an exercise to reiterate what the workers had learned from the day. The facilitators of the workshops varied from doctors in sociology and human rights experts, to people



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with their Bachelor of Arts, whom MEC hired to teach their area of specialization, and in other instances workers from MEC. The workshops informed the workers of the labour codes, labour conditions, and what the law required from the employers. In these workshops the participants used this time to ask questions that pertained to their experiences and advice on what method of resolution should be used.

Throughout most of the workshops that I attended, the workers strictly listened to what the lecturers had to say. The participation of the people was very little. These workshops consisted of formal lectures on labour rights, and human rights. The participants were drained at the end of the day due to a long time of strictly listening. During one such workshop a few of the maquila women participants noted to me that the director of the workshop was distinctly different from them, the director was a capitalist, who was strictly doing her job with little concern about the women. As for myself, an observer, I did also get the impression that her interests were not to necessarily help these specific women, but more to state her information and leave. These women had some very specific questions, that continued to be vaguely answered. Also some women in the workshop felt that due to their lack of participation and opportunity to state their opinions, that the director's attitude was to only be the teacher to the group, not to truly help the women with their diverse problems. This created hostilities between the organizer of the workshop and the participants. The participants felt they had a lot to contribute to the workshops and would appreciate the opportunity to do so.

Women were also confronted with the problem of participation in the workshops when the men were there. During the Zona Franca workshops there were about four or five male

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participants. Although the women participated during group dynamics, the men dominated, or the women would insist that the men take charge. The gender structures were completely entwined in the Nicaraguan society. In most cases the men were the final decision-makers, or at least the firmest voice for the families and this was apparent throughout the workshops.

One of the workshops that I attended and as a participating member of a group was on the topic of human rights for Zona Franca workers. This workshop was administered by an outside expert that MEC had brought in frequently for workshops. The workshop took place on September 29 2002. During one exercise the women were asked to speak about the rights that women had. My group strictly spoke of rights such as the right to not be mistreated, the right to respect, the right to not be physically and verbally abused (leaving out emotional abuse), and the right to be diverse, to rest, and to walk freely. These women did not consider labour rights as part of their human rights. This group was composed predominantly of women in their late twenties and thirties/forties. During the presentations, age variations between the women became relevant. A group of younger girls (late teens) noted their rights to equal opportunity within the home and the work place. The group of younger women also noted the right to not be violated in any manner by their fathers. The young women were very strong and passionate in what they were saying, while the older women were shy and needed to be encouraged to read their list to the group. It was also during this workshop during a specific exercise that another realization arose related to the distinct gender roles of Nicaraguans. The exercise was to dance to a popular song that the facilitator had chosen, there was then a break in the music where the group discussed what was being said in the song, and then the group re-listened to the song again. The song was a man singing and telling a woman that she could not go out on the street by herself, she could not

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go out with her friends, and could only do the things that the man gave her permission to do. The women were dancing to this song, enjoying the time. However, after listening to the song again the women were not surprised by the words of the song, yet instead the women were enlightened by how music was another method for re-enforcing gender roles, stereotypes and the machismo attitudes.

Another workshop that I attended for the Zona Franca women was directed by an experienced person MEC had brought in for the workshop on October 6 2002. The instructor had also done this workshop previously for the Domestica Workers. The workshop included information on the basic aspects of the Nicaraguan Labour Legislation. It involved the basic principles of the fundamental labour code, obligations of the employer to the worker, and also the worker to the employer. Issues such as contracts were discussed, as well as paid holidays, and vacation allowances. Problems related to the maquilas that were discussed, were regarding concerns of when in the working day there were no raw materials provided by the employer, and in turn the women were sent home, without pay. The women were concerned about this issue because they knew it was a violation of their workers rights. Another problem that the women noted was regarding the bathrooms in the Zona Franca. Many of the companies did not have water in their toilets, this led to women relieving themselves outside, at times, close to where many of the women sit and eat on their breaks.

A downfall of the workshop was when the women discussed their problems with a instructor that MEC had hired to facilitate the workshop. This instructor voiced her opinion that the women should write out their complaints, or tell the boss. In theory this was a fair suggestion,

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however in practice many of the women had complaints about their bosses, so therefore the women knew it would be pointless to make a complaint. Although many women noted that these workshops were beneficial to them to learn their labour rights, a problematic area that remained was that the participants see themselves as separate from the women who were administering the workshops. Many of the women who offered the workshops on behalf of MEC also gave the women little opportunity to participate in the workshops. It also appeared that the instructor was not very interested in teaching the women since during this specific workshop the women were given eight questions that the instructor on the spot found out of MEC's Manual on Labour Rights, and then asked the women to find the answers, write them out in groups, and then each group presented the same eight answers, with six groups in total. At this point in the day, and with three hours of strictly listening to the instructor lecture, the women were tired and bored, and were not interested in listening to six groups of eight of the same answers.

However when I discussed what I had observed in the workshop with some of the staff from MEC, it was noted that this was the common method of learning in Nicaragua, as it was also a common teaching methodology. The people who I had spoken to commented that many of the schools, beginning from an early age, dictate information to the students and permit very few questions, therefore exclude any analyzing of the information. As a result, the women have learned how to write out information but not to not truly understand it. In turn, it can then be noted that this is not a problem originating in the workshop as much as in the schooling system of Nicaragua. Therefore the end result has been that this teaching methodology has been adapted to all forms of teaching in Nicaragua, teaching people to be passive and non-independent thinkers.

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The workshop was also beneficial for each of the women who learned that their minimum wage in Nicaragua was Cordoba's 960 per month, equating to approximately US \$80 per month. Throughout the workshop there was also discussion regarding violence in the women's workplaces. One woman noted that violence was frequent in her workplace. It was noted that the working women were slapped in the face, or their hair was pulled by the women bosses. After learning firsthand from the maquila women about their working situations, I had a conversation with a man who works in the office of the Zona Franca on September 4, 2002, during one of my tours. This employee makes and oversees the maquila men's and women's contracts. During this conversation with the office employee I asked why there were no workshops available for women and men in the Zona Francas regarding violence against women, since it was a prominent problem of Nicaragua. The employee had replied that the violence that women experienced in Nicaragua was not in the Zona Francas but instead it was an issue of domestic problems. He also noted that the Zona Franca had addressed and avoided that problem by hiring women as the bosses. In contradiction to what the Zona Franca man had noted, the working women stated they experienced extreme psychological violence in the Zona Franca because the women bosses had called the women many names, and yelled at them abusively. The Zona Franca women also noted that the worst maquila to work in for violence and abuses was the Chinese factories. All women agreed that it was these factories that were the most oppressive.

Another workshop that I attended was on October 13 2002. The workshop objective during this Sunday was for the Zona Franca women workers and focused on violence. MEC brought in an expert who administered this workshop. Many important issues were raised within this workshop including the different types of violence that women continued to endure in

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Nicaragua. Of these abuses included sexual violence, emotional and psychological violence, physical violence, and economic violence. Women related these abuses to their homes, their interaction within their communities and workplaces, the Zonas Francas. Women were informed on gender violence, and also the stages of violence and factors that violence stems from, such as inequalities between men and women.

During this workshop the women were very active. The women had the opportunity to speak and express their views, which in turn the instructor valued and gave attention to. During an exercise the women were asked to make a list of different forms of abuse, which all women were a part of. This workshop was a space where women were able to discuss many different aspects of violence in all areas of their lives, not specifically the Zona Franca. The importance of the workshop was for all the women to develop and learn a more thorough understanding of the process of the different forms of violence. In turn, MEC and the facilitator believed that the women were gaining empowerment by knowing when violence was beginning and occurring. During this workshop the facilitator also ensured that the women understood that the violence was not their fault. The women enjoyed this workshop more so than I had seen before. The women had an open space to talk of their experiences, and when required ask questions, which were well answered, and in some cases answered by other women participating in the workshop.

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***11.2 Zona Franca Tours***

***1- Las Mercedes Zona Franca***

My first visit to the Zonas Francas was on September 4 2002 with a guided tour given by Maria (MEC employee). The tour was of the Las Mercedes Zona Franca, which was also the largest and most famous in Nicaragua. Before entering the Zona Franca, there were people who had set up stalls for selling goods, similar to what was found in the markets (items such as clothes, soaps, foods etc.). Upon entering the Zona Franca, I had to first go through security, which encompassed verification that those who were entering had permission to do so from the head office that organized the Zona Franca businesses, and was directly beside security. After entering the Zona Franca, it was acutely obvious that the area was well kept. There was no littered garbage, unlike the area outside the Zona where the vendors were. Also there were garbage cans dispersed, lawns maintained, flowerbeds kept, and an atmosphere of organization held within the Zona Franca. The Zone was then divided into streets, that served as a place where one could walk. There were some companies who had sitting areas outside set up, while there was also a main area that has been developed for the women during breaks, however this area was less taken care of than the companies lawns. The companies were well organized, the hospital within the area, was very large and situated amongst the factories. There was one plant that took up about a full block where textiles were made, while on other blocks there were generally two to three factories.

Maria who had been a long-term employee of MEC was well known throughout the area. Many employers and employees recognized her throughout the Zona Franca, and said hello.

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When walking into the main office of the Zona Franca, the secretary also recognized her and was very friendly. It was obvious that MEC had been working a long time on building a foundation with this Zona Franca in order to achieve co-operation with the employers, for the benefits of the employees. MEC also had permission to stand within the gates where the Zona Franca workers exited. During the end of the day, there was a steady stream of employees, some of whom already knew MEC and were sure to come by and say hello. While in another instance, a woman asked if we were from MEC and if she could have directions to the office for she wanted to talk regarding a working situation, which Maria then handed her a pamphlet, one of many which she carried with her.

### ***2- Second visit to Las Mercedes Zona Franca***

The second visit to the Zona Franca Las Mercedes took place on October 9, 2002. During this visit it was not possible to enter the zone. Instead we stood throughout the gates where the women and men were exiting to catch their buses to go home. Many women who were promoters for MEC would stop by to talk with Maria, regarding problems that are existing in the Zona Franca. Many women make complaints regarding wages, and long working hours with forced overtime.



**3- Los Brasiles Zona Franca**

This visit was once again with Maria on October 7 2002, to the Zona Franca Los Brasiles. This Zona Franca was on the road heading towards the city of León. Within this Zona Franca there was a district of factories called the Saratoga, which encompassed Jón Garment (the sweatshop where the 18 year old lost her child in the toilet), Yu Jin, and Chao Siu. This Zona Franca did not permit people who did not work in the Zona Franca or MEC employees (although MEC was in the process of negotiating entrance) to enter the Zona Franca sector. The people who were permitted to enter were employees and certain vendors selling food items whom were constricted to times when the employees were on breaks or at the end of the shifts.

While speaking with some women exiting the Zona Franca, women from the Jón Garment factory had informed us that they were paid Cordoba's \$80 bi-weekly. However in order to be paid this amount every worker must work a ½ hour a day extra without pay, and cannot be late or sick. If a person is late or sick they lose all their pay for the week. Many of the factories within this area were dumping their waste into the creek just on the outskirts of the Zona Franca; a fence solely separates this area from the rest. Within this area there were no governmental regulations, and there was no order to the structures besides being rows. Many of the companies in this section received their raw materials from the factory across the street, a sister German company. The companies within this area were known for their extremely harsh conditions; which may be a result of the area being new. This Zona Franca region has only existed for a couple of years and has not had the time to develop, like the Las Mercedes zone.

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***12- Conversations with MEC staff:***

***12.1 1<sup>st</sup> Staff Member***

The first of these conversations took place on October 10 2002 and was with one of MEC's staff who will be noted as Angela. Angela was a 21-year-old woman who had been working with MEC since late 2000. At the time of my working with MEC, she was the secretary of the office in Managua, however before she worked in the resource centre. Angela noted that within the office of MEC many of the workers have the opportunity to move around and learn different areas of the office, therefore avoid being over specialized in one area. Previous to her work at MEC Angela worked in the Zonas Francas as an operator. During that time she became a promoter for MEC, who later offered her a position in the office.

When discussing MEC, most specifically with regards to the type of assistance the organization offered the Zona Franca women, Angela noted that the most important aspect for the women was the opportunity to learn. MEC, as Angela noted was a school for learning about issues of worker's, domestic, violence, and human rights. This in turn enabled the women to be empowered through knowledge of these rights. Angela also noted that MEC helped the women with dealing with their problems of the Zona Franca, by using methods such as the lawyers who are readily available for the women when legal issues are at hand. Angela noted that in combination with available knowledge from MEC, and other encouragements and support, the results had been that the working women were becoming more empowered through building their self-esteem. MEC taught women to respect the women workers, and also themselves, and how

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then apply the knowledge they have gained, which then leads to empowering themselves in the communities and their working places. Angela also commented that MEC offers various ways for the women to partake in exercising their rights, through demonstrations, and also the workshops. MEC has offered itself to the women as a place to go; a family to be a part of, the women are members of this community and in turn have gained unity from it.

During the discussion on the Zona Franca workers, Angela noted that the pay within the zones does not differ from men to women who worked on the same job. Yet the majority of male jobs in the Zona Francas involved physical labour, such as lifting and moving heavy items and boxes. Angela noted<sup>160</sup> that the reason men worked more in these sectors was because men could do the work more easily, while women were better at working on the machines. Many of the women were operators because they had the ability to work long hours at dextrous jobs. Men in turn were not as fast on the machines, and in turn had a problem with meeting the daily quota.

Angela noted that within Nicaragua there were a lot of machista attitudes. These attitudes were not excluded from the Zonas Francas. She also commented that there was a lot of gender discrimination within the Nicaraguan society, which was the reason for the differences between men and women jobs, and also related to many problems within the homes. Within Nicaragua there was a lack of opportunities, most especially with regards to employment.

While talking with Angela, she commented on what has been deemed as the most relevant to change within the maquiladoras. First and most importantly were the salaries.

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<sup>160</sup> Interview at MEC; October 10, 2002

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Although there was a minimum wage, the salaries were still not sufficient. Outside of the salary changes needed, safety mechanisms needed to be improved or implemented. Many people who worked in the Zonas Francas inhaled many chemicals or dust that was prominent in the workplaces. Mechanisms such as proper footwear, masks, and aprons were needed. While some factories had these in the workplaces, many women must pay for the safety devices, and some of the safety tools available were not satisfactory.

Also during the conversation with Angela, I had asked about the status that women gained from working in the Zonas Francas, and Angela noted there was none. Angela commented that women who worked in the MEC office, however gained liberation, because the women had a job that was not forced upon them, but a choice. Also the women who participated within MEC gained some liberation. She noted that these women were enabled to learn about their working and human rights; the women gained some education and in turn were able to stand up for their rights as workers and people. However overall, the women who worked in the Zonas Francas were still exploited. Angela commented that the women who worked as street vendors had more liberation, because they could choose when to go home, when not to work, the hours that they would work, and what their work will be. However in the Zonas Francas, the women did not have the choice to make these types of decisions. Many women were told they would work longer, and in many instances if the women did not, they were replaced. Angela noted that many women who worked in the Zonas Francas were in fear of losing their jobs. This in turn allowed the women to be a easily exploited labour sector.

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For Angela there were several advantages to working with MEC. First there was the opportunity to continue with her studies. While working in the Zona Franca Angela did not have this choice. Angela noted that while working in the Zona Franca, she had to work until 8 or 10 pm, while her classes began at 6pm, therefore many classes would be missed. MEC also offered Angela the opportunity to learn different parts of the office, and therefore gave her the chance to improve on her office skills. In addition, she has learned to value the working women as people who do an excellent job within their workplaces and outside. Lastly, she realized that the women were good people who appreciated her help.

According to Angela the women who work in the Zonas Francas continued to be an exploited labour force. Although women worked in the formal labour sector these women were still insufficiently paid, and still struggled to maintain their families, in combination with extra working hours. Angela noted that an appropriate wage was the most important change needed within the Zonas Francas. She also commented that the women in the streets had more liberty compared to the Zonas Francas women. This was due to the street seller's extension of decisions and choices, which the Zonas Francas women lack. Furthermore, this illustrates the idea that the extension of women into the Zonas Francas has not in fact liberated the women, but instead has increased their workload and limited their autonomy in their work lives.

**12.2 2<sup>nd</sup> Staff Member**

The second interview took place with the previous mentioned staff member Maria, on October 10 2002. This staff member has worked with MEC for 8 years. Before working with MEC, Maria worked in the textile industry and with a Nicaraguan trade union. Maria for several years previous to MEC was a part of the labour movement in collaboration with Sandra Ramos. In October 1993 Maria and Sandra organized a strike in the Maquila Fortel 20. At the time the factory wanted to pay the women 50 Cordobas a week, however today they pay between 250 to 300 Cordoba's. Maria noted in the previous union before MEC, only the men had the power to speak, and would therefore "represent" the women's needs. At the time of my involvement with MEC, Maria was the key promoter for MEC. Maria spent much of her time communicating with the Zona Franca women as they would leave their workplaces and spread awareness to these women about the existence of MEC and the services they provided.

During the years of 1992 to 1994 Maria commented that there was only maquila work available, therefore leaving little opportunities for the people of Nicaragua, with no other employment sectors expanding. During these years, under the Chormorro regime, MEC had made reforms within the Zonas Francas and the Ministry of Labour had signed the Code of Conduct, which therefore forced the maquilas to give the women their deserved respect. Once Alemán took power he refused to respect these improvements and noted that the laws only existed for the benefit of the employers. This had led to struggles that MEC has had to overcome. Maria noted however that the power of MEC and the demands made by the organization were directly from

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the maquila women workers, therefore empowering MEC with the support of the women. It was because of this representation of women that MEC has been able to overcome the Aleman government and continued to work in defence of the Zona Franca women.

With regards to how MEC had helped the Zona Franca women, Maria noted that MEC had given women training in areas of labour and human rights. MEC had also given the women the space and opportunity to say what they needed improved and to participate in these changes. MEC has also given women a place to come for help when having problems with their employers, and giving the women the assistance with law advice and the access to lawyers. As Maria<sup>161</sup> remarked in the interview, “MEC gives women their own fighting instruments”.

When speaking of the gender differences within the Zonas Francas Maria commented that there were 80% women who worked in the factories. Women had obligations to their families, while the men had no or little responsibilities, therefore leaving the women vulnerable with regards to choices for employment. Women could easily be coaxed, manipulated and controlled due to their responsibilities and pressures to support the family. Women therefore were in fear of losing their employment. Within the Zonas Francas, Maria noted that the women were treated worse than men. This was due to their vulnerability and responsibility, however in combination with women’s behaviour in the Zonas Francas. In many instances men would fight with their bosses while the women would not and remained to be a passive workforce.

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<sup>161</sup> MEC interview; October 10, 2002

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During the interview I asked Maria if women who worked in the maquiladoras were liberated or exploited. Maria noted that the women who were participants of MEC were liberated through learning and using the tools that MEC provided for them. Maria said that today for the women who participated with MEC they were talking more, sharing more information and experiences from their work, and in many cases the women were now discussing issues with their husbands, thereby challenging the existing gender roles within Nicaragua. The MEC women were raising their voices, making demands, changing their situation and beginning to compare themselves to men. This had led to the beginning of women defending themselves at work and within their families.

With regards to what needed to be changed the most within the Zonas Francas Maria noted that the most important change needed was the salaries of the workers. Maria remarked that through a salary change women would be able to completely change their lives and situations as workers and as women. Women could then improve their lives, which included being able to pay for all the items within Nicaragua that have now been privatized, such as water, health care, education, electricity. Maria commented that it was important to have foreign investment within Nicaragua; yet the existing situations was not ideal, and at that point in time it was the only opportunity that the country had, and the women had for employment. In turn these foreign investors needed to give better attention to the women, as does the government of Nicaragua with regards to the laws being implemented in these sectors.

According to Maria the women who worked in the Zonas Francas were not more liberated by their participation in the formal labour sector. Yet, Maria noted that the women who



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participated with MEC were more liberated because of their increased awareness of their rights and methods of fighting these rights. However, within the maquiladoras there are many conditions including wages that were not sufficient, and do not give the women the opportunity to be self-sufficient, and therefore liberated. Maria also noted that this one improvement in the women's workplace would change their whole lifestyle, including their gender status and roles.

### ***12.3 3<sup>rd</sup> Staff Member***

Rosa was the third interview with a staff member of MEC. This interview took place on October 15 2002. Many people within the office had noted that Rosa would be a beneficial person to interview due to her diverse experience with MEC. Before Rosa had come to work at MEC she had worked for the company of Mil Colores for four years. Although Rosa was no longer on MEC's payroll she still spent much of her time in the office participating in workshops and helping with the promotion of MEC. Rosa noted that MEC was extremely beneficial to the women who work in the maquiladoras. MEC gave women the opportunity to work in another sector and therefore gain different skills other than the repressive sweatshops. MEC had become a place to work for women who were between jobs or recently wrongfully fired from maquila employment. With regards to the question of how MEC helped the maquila workers, Rosa noted in combination of the already mentioned assistance of having a place to work, MEC also was a place where women were informed and taught about their rights as workers and women. In some cases MEC would help women with paying for new job skills and training, financially assist in

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psychological attention, political and policy help, and the assistance in having a lawyer to help with the women's claims against the companies that repress the women's working rights.

During the interview, Rosa noted a substantial difference between the two genders and workplace attitudes. Rosa commented that women were the key caretakers of the family; this in turn effected the workplace. It is these domestic responsibilities that ultimately tie the women to the workplace. The competition for work was fierce within Nicaragua, and therefore the women must endure the hardships if they chose to keep their place in the maquiladoras. Men on the other hand do not carry the burden of family responsibility. This in turn gave the men the power to stand up for their rights without the cares of being fired or unemployed. Although there was this differential treatment within the working attitudes, Rosa noted that there were no drastic differences between the behaviour towards men and women in the maquiladoras. However when questioned on what was the most important change that women needed in the maquiladoras, Rosa could not specify one specific thing, instead she noted that everything needed to be changed. This response from Rosa is very likely to be a result of her workplace experiences. Perhaps Rosa felt very unsatisfied with her job, or MEC had given her the opportunity to raise her standards with regards to her workplaces.

Throughout the interview with Rosa, I also questioned her on her opinion of whether women gained liberation from working in the maquiladoras. Rosa commented that the women within the maquiladoras were liberated minimally. She noted that some of the women were now talking with less fear than earlier, and women were commenting on what they wanted in the workplaces and in the homes. However, when asked to compare the work within the Free Trade

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Zones to that of the street vendor, Rosa commented that the Zonas Francas were better for more or less consistent pay, but the street vendors had the liberty of being their own bosses and they were not subordinated to someone else.

Rosa noted that MEC has helped women through knowledge of their rights, self-respect, and having someone who listens to the women, and helps them with moving forward in their lives, and most importantly MEC gives women an area of space for solidarity. Rosa commented that overall working in the maquiladoras was not liberating for the women on any other scale other than an economic benefit, which was only available if “the want for the money was there”<sup>162</sup>.

### ***12.4 4<sup>th</sup> Staff Member***

Irene was the fourth interviewee of MEC. This interview took place on October 15 2002. Irene had been working with MEC for 3 and a half years, since March of 1999. Before working with MEC Irene had been working with a co-operative in the area of training and negotiation techniques and how to deal with conflicts. From that point forth Irene had been helping Sandra Ramos in the office of MEC. Irene’s work in the office was based on seminars on conflict and organizing workshops. Irene noted that MEC’s general aim was to improve the situation of women in the work, home, social systems, and politics. MEC did this through training women on

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<sup>162</sup> Interview at MEC; October 15 2002

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human, worker, social, and sexual rights. Irene stated that MEC was an area where women could take their working complaints to be dealt with, and was also a place for women to organize, which was where the promoters work especially hard with the maquila women. MEC also influenced public opinion through the network of television and newspapers. Irene also commented that MEC was a place where women were able to come for support in non-traditional female professions.

When discussing the psychological and emotional benefits of MEC to the maquila women workers Irene pointed out that MEC also was a place where women could feel that their needs and wants were represented. MEC offered a place for women to expand or build their self-esteem and self-growth and therefore had led to many women speaking out and releasing the fears that women in the past held onto. For Irene, MEC had also become a place where women could be supported in the changes needed within their families, and also in the process of changing family relationships.

During the interview Irene was asked, based on her experience with the maquila workers what was the most important change that could be made within the Free Trade Zones. Irene commented that the most important change would be salary. Irene noted that it was important for women to be paid fairly for the work that they performed. Second to the increase in wages, would be a change in the manner in companies policies and bosses respected the workers rights, and for these to be increased.

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Irene remarked that the benefits of the Free Trades Zones for women who worked in the maquiladoras was varied. For some women who utilized the tools of MEC, the benefits had been increased. These women learned to use their knowledge and apply this to their working environment and home lives. Women learned to talk more, make more decisions, and examine their family relations. For other women, whom Irene knew, they were previously country housewives and would remain in the kitchen and be obedient to the men in the households; therefore just through entering the Free Trade Zones, these women had already expanded their knowledge and freed themselves from the limitations of what they previously knew.

### ***12.5 Final Interview: Director, Sandra Ramos***

As noted earlier the final interview in the MEC office took place with the director Sandra Ramos, on October 17 2002. At the beginning of the interview Ramos discussed the initial stages of MEC and why the organization began. Sandra continued the interview with discussing the women's working world. For women, this sphere differed drastically from men in the case of Nicaragua. Women needed to work for the sake of wages. Women in many cases were single with children, or were supporting unemployed men. If MEC was to behave similar to unions, the women would be in worse positions and MEC would therefore not be helping the women. Sandra acknowledged that first the concept of a working movement needed to be changed. Women were demobilized from taking action against the injustices of the working sector due to their social responsibilities. "In machista Hispanic countries the women were responsible for the kids, they

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were the women's children"<sup>163</sup>, Sandra continued by noting that if women had more support by spouses that they would be capable of making more changes, however women had no backup and therefore suffered the restraints within the working sector. Women's roles within the social division of Nicaragua included administration of the family, and economic hardship from government on families and international market policies (IMF) "How can you expect someone to live a distant dream with all this on their backs"<sup>164</sup> she said. Due to the burdens and responsibilities that women endured within the Nicaraguan society, working in the Free Trade Zones was one response to help women achieve a means to their ends.

During the interview with Sandra, a discussion on the benefits of working in the Free Trade Zones arose. Sandra commented that one key benefit for the women who work in this sector was that it had given a space for women, which had been traditionally been a male space. In turn, the expansion of women into this sphere had broken paradoxes, such as myths and taboos, and in response had led to the opening of space for new things. Sandra remarked that the benefits of MEC working in the Free Trade Zones had been that previous to MEC's work no one really knew the conditions of women and MEC had brought these situations to the public and placed them in the fore front. MEC had also improved some labour conditions. MEC noted that it was important for their work to continue in order to open more space for women. Due to women's burden it was essential that women had economic equality in order to fully tend to their families needs. However, women will only gain equality when women were no longer expected to wash clothes, clean and cook, but could be viewed as equally essential to men's work. Ramos remarked

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<sup>163</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

<sup>164</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

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that people “needed a rethinking of work and to have equal conditions for women’s work in order to be apart of the world”<sup>165</sup>, which was what MEC strived to bring about.

Sandra Ramos noted that in the case of jobless women with five or more children, or for women without work for several years, or young women who left primary or secondary schooling for work in the Zonas Francas, these formal labour jobs were liberating in terms of having a place for specific female employment. Yet, Ramos noted this was mostly due to the lack of other options. Within Nicaragua the large companies such as Coca-Cola and Pharmalat have their employees; the agricultural sector are in a slump along with the cotton and coffee sectors, therefore leaving women very little options for places of employment. When women were in the jobless situation, the Zonas Francas were seen as a point of salvation, and also because there remained a crisis in Nicaragua for employment options, however Ramos commented that the conditions of work were not what the women wanted. Ramos noted there were many effects of the Free Trade Zones that had been left out from the examination of women in these sectors. Such effects that Ramos is referring to include the maquila work and exploitation on women’s health, which had been ignored, along with the environmental repercussions or the future existence of the Free Trade Zones and women’s work in this sector. Due to these holes in research Ramos was uncertain of the Free Trade Zone benefits regarding long-term effects. In terms of short-term benefits, the women achieved employment in a country where employment was difficult to gain. In some cases, women also gained economic independence from men, while also breaking out of the expected socialized role of being strictly a wife and mother and instead being incorporated into the formal economic sector. However, the exploitation remained throughout the women’s

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<sup>165</sup> Ramos, October 17 2002

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work that extended itself into the employment sector and home lives, leading to women experiencing double workdays. Another benefit for the women was the social aspect. The maquiladoras had given women an area where they could socialize with other women and build bonds, this did not happen when a woman was only exposed to homework. Ramos concludes with noting that women would not gain liberation in the workplace until the union decided to become flexible and pick up the movement to help change power relations. Without this change, women would not get ahead.

### ***13- Discussion with Zona Franca Working Women***

A discussion with 17 maquila-working women took place through MEC on October 27 2002. The women who participated were all promoters for MEC in the Free Trade Zones. Therefore, all participants had experience discussing formal employment and home issues within Nicaragua. There was a sense of comfortableness between the participants and myself because they all had a thorough understanding of MEC, as well, I was familiar with all the women through previous contact through MEC's office. During the initial stages of the discussion, I organized several exercises where we each took turns asking questions to each other. This in turn produced a confident and comfortable place for the women and myself to discuss the issues at hand. Due to my experience in other workshops I recognized that a potential issue would be to maintain the women's attention and to keep them engaged with one another for a full day. In response to these problems I organized the 'telephone' game, to show women how important it is to listen to each other closely. Through modelling the message it was made apparent that the message the women



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were making would become distorted and the discussion would then be disorganized. Although I set out the discussion questions with the assistance of Amanda<sup>166</sup>, the women noted key themes that were relevant to the day's topic. The four issues that came out were labour conditions within Nicaragua, working conditions in the Zona Franca, gender relations, and whether the Free Trade Zones were liberating or exploitative for women in Nicaragua.

### ***13.1 Labour Opportunities in Nicaragua***

During the discussion with the 17 maquila working women, the first issue that was brought to the forefront was concerning the labour opportunities in Nicaragua. The women discussed the different options available to women in their country. One woman worked previously in the food industry, making vinegar, ketchup and mustard. While other women noted the options of becoming a nurse, fruit and cotton picking (this was no longer available, but was popular during the 1960's and 1970's). Other employment options were security workers, vendors, domestic workers, which women also noted was a dangerous working field because if something was lost the domestic worker was blamed for stealing the good. A final option that the women noted was to gain a technical degree. However, the women also commented that there were no opportunities for places of employment in this field, which was the reason for why men and women worked in the Zona Francas. The women in the group also commented that the

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<sup>166</sup> Amanda, a Canadian friend who lives in Nicaragua, helped with the organization of the discussion group, and also the translation of the discussion

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available employment opportunities were even less for men. Men's employment options ranged from taxi drivers to garbage collectors, neither of which field was desirable, and both of which were dangerous.

The women in the session also discussed the impacts that the Free Trade Zone maquilas have had upon Nicaragua. The women were aware of the job opportunities that the factories provided, but also recognized that the poor conditions should have been improved. The women commented that the pay within the Free Trade Zone industry was exploitative, along with the high demand of production. The women noted that working in the Zona Franca was a "double edged sword". The money was better than other employment opportunities; however one must sacrifice their physical well-being and child rearing in order to gain these benefits. The women recognized the lack of support from the government, unions, and the Ministry of Labour who refused to hear their complaints. Therefore, the government came out ahead, along with foreign investment, and the workers were left behind.

The question was asked, "why do the women work in the Zona Francas?", as a result to the women's comments with regards to the labour conditions in Nicaragua. Most women responded that there were no other options, no other types of employment available. An example of Costa Rica was used, where there they have relied heavily upon the industry of computers. In Nicaragua, however, the majority of work has been in the textile industry, instead of incorporating other industries. The reason for this was the lack of investment put forth by the Nicaraguan government. Other reasons for working in the maquila industry were, the women were forced to support the family. Only half of the women had partners, and four of the women had older men

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living in their homes, therefore the women were forced to work. Of the 17 women, 2 noted that they enjoyed working in the maquila's, however both of these women were single, and worked more for personal expenses, with some help to the family. Many of the women noted that they "didn't like it, but what other choice do we have?"<sup>167</sup> One of the women, who noted they enjoyed working in the maquila, also commented that the factory she worked in was more leisurely and less strict than others. An example was given in the Korean factory that this woman worked in, where the workers were permitted to play music, talk to the inspectors, and received a reasonable salary, and the company supplied dinner for overtime and nightshift, along with snacks and coffee. Within this factory the women were permitted to do as they wish, provided the work was completed. While discussing these alternate conditions in the Free Trade Zones, all the women in the discussion group agreed that the pay was reasonable, along with the conditions.

Throughout the group discussion, the women addressed specific labour conditions in Nicaragua; such as labour hours, and different forms of harassment that had appeared in the Zona Francas. The women noted that most of the factories' hours of work were continuously changing. For many women this had become an enormous problem because of their household and family responsibilities. Women also ran into the problem of no vacation pay, which meant that the women could not afford to take time off to rest their bodies, or spend quality time with their families. The women also commented that they had noticed that the amount of work within the zones has decreased since the September 11 Twin Towers devastation. This also worried the women that the amount of investment was decreasing due to international security issues. In fact

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<sup>167</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27 2002

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one woman specifically commented that a North American company had decreased their hiring and work.

### ***13.2 Labour Conditions in Nicaragua***

One issue that the women spoke intensely about was the fighting that occurred between the women who worked in the factories. These fights were mostly about men, and between women claiming certain men to be their own. In fact, while visiting the Las Mercedes Zona Franca a fight had broke out between several women at the bus station. This in turn resulted in many women and men gathering around to watch and cheer, and also the police intervening.

All the women who attended the workshop agreed that the main problem within the factories was the issue of harassment. Women endured not only provocation from the women at work, but also from the bosses. Women were timed while using the restrooms. The women at the workshop noted, this had become an enormous problem, since it takes more time for the women to use the restroom during menstruation times, this however was not accounted for in the factories. In some factories, the companies have placed security guards at the restroom doors in order to maintain the control of the women and their use of the bathrooms. Throughout other factories the women needed passes in order to use the restroom.

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Another problem that was a large concern for the women of the workshop was regarding age discrimination in the factories. The women discussed that if a woman applied for a position and was young she would be working in the areas of sewing and production. However, if a woman was older, she then would be placed in the cleaning department of the Zona Franca. This had resulted in conflict and competition between the younger and older women. One woman of the workshop pointed out that at 28 she had difficulty finding a position, while the younger and prettier women were being hired. The women of the workshop agreed that the importance of the employee should be based on experience, not looks or age.

The women in the factory were also responsible for their punch cards, and if lost or stolen, the women lost the day's work. The workers were also responsible for counting the clothing sewn throughout the day. Therefore if a woman lost count, she had also lost this work in her pay. The women believed that the company incorrectly pays them for their work. The women received their pay in small amounts instead of receiving a full week's pay. In recent years the women were paid in weekly sums, however due to high number of robberies, the method changed. Yet all the women in the workshop agreed that they preferred the weekly pay, to the now used bit by bit approach.

Other concerns that the women had with regards to the conditions of the maquiladoras were health issues. One woman noted that since she had been working in the factory, she had developed asthma, due to large amounts of lint in the air. Many of the women have developed sight problems, asthma, or bronchial infections, and back or other muscle problems, among other issues.

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The maquila women noted that within the factory, there were specific changes that were considered the most important. The first change, in which all the women agreed upon, was the respect for workers rights by the companies and bosses. The women all felt that their rights as women and workers had been abused. The women also commented that within this respect for workers, the employers lack the respect for piece-work, and the women in most cases were underpaid, or stolen from by the supervisors or employers (1 out of the 17 noted this did not happen in her work place, which was a new factory). The women recognized the need for the companies to properly pay them for the work in which they have produced. For a number of the maquila workers, forced overtime had also become an issue. Many women were single parents who for weeks may only see their children for a couple hours in a week. This leaves the children to raise themselves or places burdens upon other members of the family.

Other changes that the women would like to see within the maquila zones were safe and secure transportation. Many women had been robbed, raped or murdered on their way to or from work. Most women live a fair distance from the Free Trade Zones and travelling alone was very dangerous. Women were in fear of working overtime due to the travel home at late hours. The women recounted incidents where this happened to women in Tipitapa. Women are also concerned with the issue of food, most especially during overtime hours. On Sundays there were no vendors, and during overtime hours the food was either expensive and/or horrible.

The women of the workshop noted that “with the right conditions it’s worth it”<sup>168</sup>, to work overtime and late at night. One woman commented that in her workplace she does work overtime,

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<sup>168</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27, 2002

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which was not forced. When she does choose to work the extra hours, she will tell her boss only until 9:30pm, and be paid an extra 30 cordobras, and dinner was available. When the extra money was budgeted out it left 10 cordobras to get home, and 20 for breakfast in the morning for her children. Another woman in the group noted that it was important however to balance between work and home, which in many cases was needed, since the women were becoming more and more concerned with their children joining gangs for solidarity.

### ***13.3 The effects of a working Maquila Mother***

The women in the workshop noted that there had been many changes made to their families since they have begun working in the maquilas. The women noted that the hardest sacrifice had been the lack of control and care giving to their children. Many women noted that their children were asleep before they go to work and when they arrive home again. In these cases the women only had their weekends with their children, because a number of them were forced to work overtime. Another effect had been a greater responsibility placed upon the older children, most especially the girls. Since the mother spends most of her time outside the home, the oldest girl normally took on her role and tended to the other children and home. As noted previously, many of the working mothers were also single parents. As for the women in relationships, the women commented that most of the men spent their time drinking, instead of tending to their families.

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Another effect upon the single-parent families had been the increase of the children being taken care of in other places, such as daycares. The working women were not content with this idea, and were in fear of their children being mistreated, or sexually abused. As noted by Amanda, who helped with the workshop, the women in Nicaragua lacked confidence in others tending to their children. Within Nicaragua there was a belief that only mothers know how to take care of the children properly<sup>169</sup>. Many women in the interview noted that their children were growing up alone, without guidance due to the excessive maquila working hours. Women noted that due to this lack of guidance, their children were growing up alone, increasingly becoming involved with drugs, abuse, delinquency, and gangs. Moreover, children were forced to make responsible decisions at a young age, and without the mothers tending to their social and emotional needs.

However, a positive effect has been the increasing exposure of boys and girls interacting with women in other sectors other than the household, thereby exhibiting that women are deemed worthy whether working inside or outside the household. One woman noted that her boys and girls are treated equally, therefore both sexes are expected to equally assist in the household duties. This has lead to greater sexual equality within households, potentially defraying the traditional female stereotype that a woman belongs strictly to the households.

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<sup>169</sup> Amanda, 2002



### *13.4 Liberating or Exploitative?*

The final section of the discussion was focused upon the centre of the research; from the perspective of a working woman was work in the maquilas liberating or exploitative? The women were asked to answer this question from their own perspective. This part of the discussion was heated. All women within the group had something to say with regards to their perspectives of their workplace. Many women noted and agreed that working in the maquilas did not really pay. Women outright stated that working in the Free Trade Zones had only left the women to “end up back where we started”<sup>170</sup>. The women felt that working in this sector had not opened a new horizon to them, because they had not been freed from the home, only expected to carry more burdens. Other women commented, “Does it liberate us from the house, from the drunken husband, no”<sup>171</sup>. Women regarded their pay as full exploitation, since it was not enough to support their families and their needs. Women remarked that their pay was not even half of what they needed to support their families, or what they needed to eat in a week.

Women also remarked that within the Nicaraguan society there were many barriers and stereotypes that maquila women workers were confronted with that prevent them from being liberated. One such stereotype was that women were perceived as “easy”. Women commented that society at a general level discriminated against them. Women in the maquila zones were viewed as “easy” because they would go out to relax and have a beer, this was deemed as non-

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<sup>170</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27 2002

<sup>171</sup> Interview at MEC; October 27, 2002

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feminine. Nicaraguan society sees these characteristics as improper, and characterized the women as “fallen women”. It was believed that the women who worked in these zones were prostitutes, or the men were gang members. The women in the discussion noted that in some cases this was true, where the men were trying to change, or the women were looking for better opportunities other than selling themselves. However due to the unfair wages, many of these people were forced to continue with their illegal ways. One woman commented that when her mother-in-law discovered she worked in the Free Trade Zone, her mother-in-law stated she wanted to know nothing about her employment because the girl would eventually become a prostitute. However, other women noted that their families understood why they worked in the maquilas, and therefore held a different view of the women from the rest of society.

Overall view of the maquilas by the women in the discussion was that working in maquilas can be liberating on one hand because overall the women did not have to deal with extreme hunger; yet, on the other hand it was exploitative because of the long hours, insufficient pay, and hard work. Another factor that made the maquilas exploitative was that the women had no opportunities for professional development due to long hours. Many women have tried to continue their schooling while working in the maquilas, but the forced overtime had abruptly stopped their education. Therefore, overall the women viewed the maquilas as non-liberating.

Once the workshop had been concluded, a discussion was formed to give the women an opportunity to make comments about the day’s discussion, and whether the women felt it was successful and beneficial. Throughout this discussion, and with regards to the fieldwork and their conclusions, many things were learned. First, the women were appreciative of the discussion held.

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Many women noted that the workshop was a space where they could talk about things that normally were not talked about in workshops. The women were happy with the open discussion, and the opportunity to vent and discuss with each other their day-to-day situations, and also teach the researcher, myself, what it meant to be a working Nicaraguan woman<sup>172</sup>.

### ***14- An Alternative:***

Throughout my time in Nicaragua I had the opportunity to visit an alternative to sweatshops. There was a co-operative of women in the community Nueva Vida, Nicaragua. The co-operative consisted of women from this area and surrounding communities who were attempting to build a business that makes t-shirts and tanktops without the social and emotional abuses that the Zonas Francas offer. The group hopes at some point gain the financial status of a maquiladora and have the benefits that the Zonas Francas experience. The women had funded, through excessive borrowing, a factory, which they had built by hand. During the initial stages of this program the women worked for two years on the construction of the building themselves. Many of the women held fundraisers within their communities and surrounding communities in order to hire electricians to help with the construction.

An American NGO Center for Development in Central America (CDCA), which had now moved their office to Nicaragua in order to better assist with ongoing projects, had also supported

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<sup>172</sup> MEC discussion October 27 2002

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this program. The women have been receiving orders from the United States and had been shipping the products then north when completed. The products were made in non-repressive situations; however the deadlines given by the Northern companies were based on the work that the Zonas Francas produced. This in turn created a problem for the co-operative, since they did not have enough people to carry out the work and give leniency to delays. There were about 45 women now working in this co-operative from the initial 9 that started. They had several sewing machines, many of which broke down. The women who were originally part of the group that started the factory had moved to higher positions, leaving new women to learn to sew under the pressure of a deadline. During my visit to this factory, August 31, 2002 the women had an order of 30,000 shirts that were needed within a month's time. There were two shifts created both of 8 hours. My visit was during the end of the group's second week when they had 10,000 shirts cut out and only 6,000 sewn. Due to many unforeseen problems the women were having problems meeting the deadline. The American NGO organizers had noted that they have kept in close contact with the person requesting the order, and that there may be a potential for a week or two extensions, however they were still uncertain if the deadline would be met.

Many of the women who were a part of this program had originated from Managua. Due to Hurricane Mitch many people were displaced and re-located to Neuva Vida. This area was a long travel to Managua via bus and also very expensive. These women were paying 2 to 4 Cordoba's a day in travel, and now due to the move to the new city would spend 10 to 15 Cordoba's in a day. The program was started in order to give an alternative option to the women in this extremely poor region. Many of these women originated from the shores of Lake Managua where their sustainability was fishing. Many of the women had learned to sew in the program,

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along with the help of CDCA. During the initial phases of the co-operative in order to be a member the women had to work for 620 hours, and would then have shares of the company. However, to date the new members must now pay a certain percentage of their pay that then enables them to be members and own membership status. This money was garnished off their wages.

The shirts that the women made were from organic materials or 100 % conventional cotton. The women worked very hard to maintain their operation but depended largely on the patience and help of American consumers. At present the women were attempting to expand the market for a demand of organic non-sweatshop products. The women hoped that this co-operative would help these women and their families out of the impoverished situation that they endured, while giving better opportunities to their families and most especially their children. Although the women of this co-operative were learning as they went, they were hoping for a better future through owning their company and products. At present the organization was enduring many hardships, however if successful, this would be an excellent example of an alternative to the Zonas Francas and working in sweatshop factories.

### ***15- Conclusions***

Throughout the academic research and most especially the field research, certain conclusions came to light. Although many researchers such as Seligson and Williams (1981)

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noted that the Free Trade Zones gave women economic freedoms and the opportunity to enter the formal labour sectors, which therefore would move women out of the traditional work, this had not been the case for Nicaragua. As a result it had increased the workload for women. Women who entered these employment sectors were still handling the “home work”, which was also known as the women’s traditional work, on top of their “formal” labour. Ver Beek also noted that women were wrongly fired in Honduras for being a part of unions. This also was a problem within Nicaragua, however, women were permitted to be a part of MEC; due to MEC’s many years of working to build relationships with the maquila owners. A similarity that was found throughout Nicaragua and Honduras, was the economic benefits. Although the money for maquila was not necessarily better, it was stable in comparison to women who did not work in maquilas. Ver Beek also noted that women had substantial health problems from Honduran maquilas, which was also a commonality with Nicaragua. Ver Beek did make one substantial difference between Nicaraguan maquila women and Honduran women and that was the household relations. As noted previously in Honduras, women who worked in the maquilas had help from their spouses with household chores. In Nicaragua however, many women did not have spouses, and the father of their children did not help with the raising of the children. Within Ver Beek’s study, he left the voices of the women out. Surveys tend to be impersonal, and individual voices are forgotten, which was something I was able to cover in my study. Due to my workshop and interviews and having the opportunity to personally know the women, I gained information about what the men are specifically like in family relations, and how many of the men do not help the women. I also discovered that there were not many job opportunities for men and that many of the women preferred to be unattached. I also discovered that many of the women who work in maquilas are considered to be similar to prostitutes, which was information that a survey would not be able to

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discover. The workshop was also very important in obtaining the women's personal views, that although the companies exploit the workers, that if some conditions were to change maquilas would be a good place to work.

Throughout the research performed it was discovered that many companies that entered the Free Trade Zones understood some of the cultural boundaries and stereotypes and used these for their own economic benefits. Therefore, women who worked in the maquilas were exploited in several ways. First by the companies who underpaid the women's work, and second in many cases, by their husbands who spent and control the money. This related to women being exploited due to their social and cultural roles; meaning it was acceptable for a man to control the money and spend it where he sees fit, even if he was not the bread winner. As it had been noted previously women in Nicaragua bear the responsibilities of the children and households, while the men tend to leave if they did not like their working situation. This form of exploitation was a result of the Nicaraguan women's social and cultural roles.

Women who work in the Free Trade Zones were also exploited by the companies who managed the factories. These companies knowingly used the social and cultural roles and the belief that women were easier to control in order to gain more economic benefits. This again was a result of the responsibilities that women had to their children and other family members. The companies manipulate with threats of job loss, as a method to maintain their high number of employees that have been considered cheap labour. The companies used these stereotypes as a reason for greater numbers of women workers compared to men. For example, in most cases the men would leave their job if they did not like the pay, or hours. A woman was more likely to

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tolerate the abuse and exploitation in order to continue having a paycheck, even if the pay did not nearly cover her costs. Most especially this was the case within Nicaragua. This was directly a result of a continued decrease in government spending and policies in other areas, such as agriculture, mining, and technology. The lack of spending by the government had resulted in a high migration into the urban areas of Nicaragua, and an even higher rate among women in the maquila sector. As noted before, the garment factories were the largest growing sector in Nicaragua, due to the government's priorities.

Throughout the workshop it became very apparent that if women had other opportunities, they would see them as being more beneficial than the Free Trade Zones. Women were concerned with the lack of time available that they had to spend with their children. Women noted that in many cases they were most concerned that their children would become involved with the wrong type of friends. Many women in the workshop agreed that "with the right conditions it's worth it"<sup>173</sup> to work in the maquilas; however, in today's present state the conditions were not right. The women felt that the maquila work was better during the 1980's when the Sandinista ruled. The women noted that the conditions were not as poor, and the pay was more equitable to the economy. As a result, the women felt that the exploitation throughout the Free Trade Zones had been on the rise, and would continue to be so.

Women also characterized the exploitation in the Free Trade Zones as an occurrence that took place "collectively and individually". The companies not only degraded women as a whole through being underpaid with forced overtime, but also individually picked on different women

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<sup>173</sup> interview at MEC; October 27, 2002



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for various big and small issues, such as seam lines or taking a bathroom break. An example of individual exploitation was not being paid properly for the work that had been produced by the women. Collectively the women were harassed not only by the company managers, but also by other women who worked in the maquilas and consequently were afraid of losing their position to a newer and younger employee. Many women in the workshop noted that women who worked in these sectors could in fact stand up for their rights, therefore the problem lies in the fact that many women who worked in the maquilas did not know this and consequently tolerated the situation. One woman noted in the interview that she stood her ground four times with the supervisors, and now the managers do not bother her. However, many companies also tried their hardest to remove the women who did fight back, as a message to other women to not stand up for their rights. In many instances this type of harassment and exploitation worked, because the women had children and families to worry about, and very few options of work left outside the Free Trade Zones.

Through the research carried out, it is concluded that women who worked in the Free Trade Zones were in fact exploited. However, in order to better the situation of women, changes were needed on various levels; including social, cultural, economic, and political. These were all changes that could only occur slowly, and with the help of organizations such as MEC, who believed that women were the key to the changes needed. It should also be noted that within Nicaragua there were also other organizations that have attempted to assist in the change, however their methods vary greatly from MEC, and this was discussed in more detail in section

***16- Barriers to the Investigation:***

It is important to note that there had been barriers as an outcome of this investigation. First and most importantly was the barrier of language. Due to my lack of knowledge of Spanish, there had been gaps missing within my investigation and interviews. Although I attended several Spanish schools prior to my investigation, I was still not fluent in the language. However, I had received help along the way. Within MEC's office there was a co-worker who was able to help me throughout the office and with much of my research that had taken place in the office. I also received some help from a German student with some of the interviews held with the MEC staff. Also, I was also given help from a Canadian friend whom I met in Nicaragua, with various ideas, and most especially with the discussion that I organized and carried out. There were various people within MEC's office that also were patient with my lack of Spanish and worked through various conversations with me. However, the women who worked in the Zona Francas and who I had various conversations with, and made many friends with, were also patient and helpful. I was able to have conversations with these women and to get to know about their lives, not only their work in the maquilas. These women were by far the most understanding and patient people, regarding to my language limitations.

Another barrier within my research was the problem of gender relations within Nicaragua. Due to gender divisions there were problems within the office of getting to know many of the women. Because many of my initial friends within the office were men, some of the women held judgements, and in turn I was unable to have conversations with these people

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regarding my thesis investigation. Many of the people who worked in the office were also very busy doing their jobs, and consequently I was unable to have the opportunity to get to know them.

While there were a number of limitations in my research, the research obtained held different opportunities of experiences and views that were seen; such as the opportunity to enter the Free Trade Zones, and also to tour the alternative to maquilas. In combination, the time spent in Nicaragua was an excellent learning experience for me. I experienced some of the common issues that were entwined in Nicaragua, and which were issues within all sectors of society. I was able to learn about a country that has a unique history, one very different from my native country. I was able to overcome some of my barriers with some people, such as my language barrier, while they existed with others; overall it was an excellent learning place for me. I became a friend to various people in the office, whom I was able to have some very interesting conversations with, regarding the office, women workers, and Nicaragua in general. I was also given the opportunity to learn from other international students, and friends while in Nicaragua.

Despite the limitation in my investigation, my hope still remains that I have contributed to the greater knowledge of women and their work in Free Trade Zones in Nicaragua. In turn, I also hope that I contributed to the betterment of the women who participated in MEC through holding the workshop for them, and participating in other workshops. By far, the most educational and moving experiences were with the women of MEC and learning from them, about them, and about the women of Nicaragua.

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**Visits To The Zona Franca**

- 1- September 4 2002, Las Mercedes Zona Franca, permitted entrance
- 2- October 9, 2002, Las Mercedes Zona Franca, no entrance permitted
- 3- October 7 2002, Zona Franca Los Brasiles, no entrance permitted