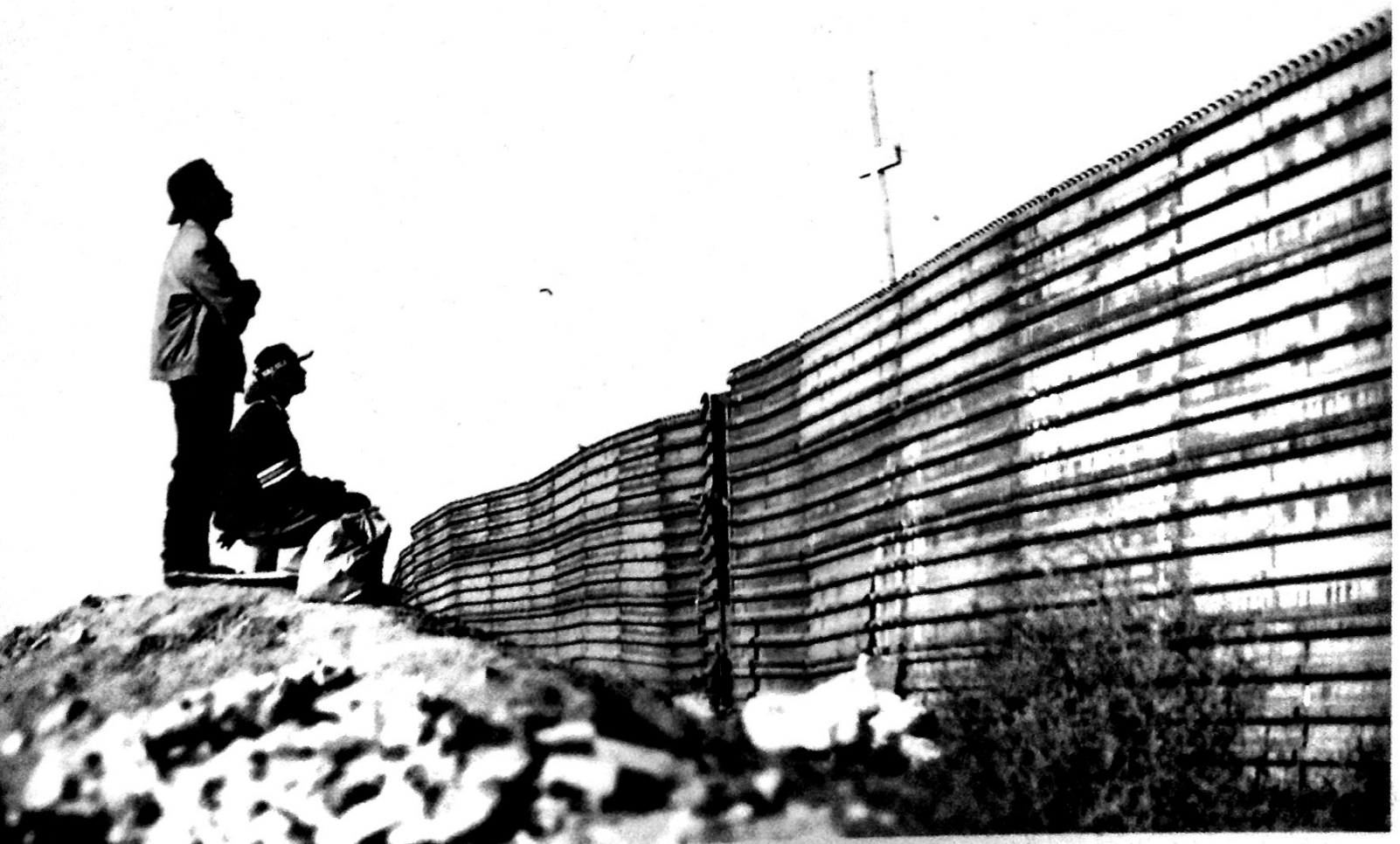


MEXICAN VOICES

OF THE BORDER REGION



Home, Sweet Industrial Home



The Border and the Maquiladora Industry

Toward the end of the 1960s, major cities on Mexico's northern border began an industrialization drive based on export assembly plants called *maquiladoras* or *maquilas*. These plants would import raw materials or components, along with the machines needed to process or assemble them in Mexico. The finished products would then be exported, with import taxes charged on only the value added in Mexico.¹ Mexico's border region held a number of attractions for manufacturing firms, most of them U.S. owned, that were interested in establishing offshore assembly operations. Principal among them were Mexico's low labor costs and the border region's proximity to the United States. At the same time, jobs in Mexico's interior were becoming increasingly scarce, and many thousands of migrant families flowed to the border in search of work. They came to fill jobs in the border region itself or to wait on the border for an opportunity to cross into the United States and obtain work on the other side.

In the years that followed their initial appearance, *maquiladoras* became ubiquitous on the border and came to define much of the social and economic contours of the cities where they took root. Most of these cities had no important industrial history, nor did they possess a working class or an entrepreneurial class with ties to the secondary sector. Further, they lacked an urban infrastructure suf-

ficient to accommodate the newly arriving residents. These workers had to construct their own improvised housing on the cities' outskirts, often invading land with support from civic leaders, and they began to coalesce into a new border working class (Barajas and Kopinak 2003).

From 1965 to 1975, the maquiladoras created more than sixty thousand new jobs, most of which were filled by young women who lacked previous work experience and were not affiliated with a union. From this period forward, the number of new jobs doubled every five years, and male workers' share in this labor force rose, though only gradually, while women continued to constitute the bulk of people employed in the sector. Job growth in the maquiladoras peaked between 1985 and 2000. At the close of 2000, there were 3,703 maquiladora plants, with the majority located in the border region. They employed just over 1.3 million workers, and employment was rising at 13 percent annually, far faster than in any other sector of the Mexican economy, making the maquiladoras the primary source of industrial job creation and the second most important source of foreign currency earnings in Mexico (Contreras 2000).

Maquiladoras are one of the principal sources of employment in Tijuana, even though the city's labor market is extremely diverse and dynamic owing to its strong economic links with Southern California. This close relationship is directly responsible for a large proportion of employment in tourism services and business in Tijuana more generally. The maquiladoras made a substantial contribution to job growth in Tijuana from 1985 to 2000, with 810 maquiladoras employing 199,000 workers by the end of 2000. This figure represents one-fourth of the economically active population in a city that would soon reach a population of 1.5 million inhabitants (INEGI 2009; COESPO 2008). Since then, and especially following the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, both maquiladora employment and the total number of maquilas have dropped considerably. By December 2002, 320 plants had closed and 61,000 jobs had been lost. Some of these jobs were recovered beginning in 2003, but employment in the maquiladoras has never again reached the peak levels attained in 2000.

During their first twenty years in operation, the maquiladoras' workforce was overwhelmingly female and young. However, as available young female workers became increasingly hard to find, the composition of the labor force gradually diversified with the inclusion of more male workers and of women over the age of thirty-four (Carrillo 1993), including large numbers of married women and female household heads (López 2003).

The majority of the maquiladoras produce electronics and auto parts, and the electronics industry alone accounts for most maquila plants and maquila jobs in Tijuana. Nevertheless, alongside these more formalized and modern enterprises, such as brand-name television manufacturers,² there has been a proliferation of less stable, more precarious businesses, typically small workshops producing clothing or furniture. These businesses rely heavily on industrial homeworkers. They operate through formal and informal subcontracting chains, and they follow a strategy of externalizing social costs and responsibilities from the companies to

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the workers, most of whom are women. In the prevailing pattern, formal plants are linked with informal production structures that subcontract simple assembly tasks to homeworkers. Industrial homework is characterized by flexible hours, low salaries, and piecework, and this type of work is done only by women, though the women are frequently assisted by other family members (López 2005).

Studies of women's participation in the maquiladora labor force, especially as industrial homeworkers, have shed light on the nature of this work. On one hand, these jobs carry additional workplace risks: Worksites are often inadequate for the tasks being performed, workdays tend to exceed standard work hours, and it can be difficult to combine work and family life within a single space (Alonso 2002; López 2005). On the other hand, industrial homework allows women to earn an income, which increases their ability to make decisions concerning their own lives, and it offers more flexibility in their use of time than a factory job would (López 2005). Though these jobs are generally routine and tiring, the women undertake them not only as workers subordinated to capital but also as part of a personal strategy that favors the interests and concerns they have outside the world of work (Contreras 2000).

Elena, Mother to All

The Infonavit Latinos housing complex lies to the south of Tijuana and is flanked by two major roads that cross the city from north to south. This residential complex was constructed in the 1980s by Infonavit,³ the government agency responsible for building worker housing and providing workers with affordable credit so that they can purchase these homes. The two broad avenues are not visible from inside the barrio, partly because the neighborhood is tucked into a twisting landscape and partly because of the intricate interweaving of its streets, named for the peoples of Latin America (Argentines, Cubans, and so on). From the outside of the barrio, the dull four-story buildings appear to be symmetrical, impersonal blocks, but once inside, one finds crowded, bustling streets, even during work hours on a weekday.

Locating Elena's house is a challenge because all the buildings look alike, there are no street signs, and neighbors either do not know the names of nearby streets or have no desire to give directions to strangers. When we finally reach the correct building, Elena is waiting for us on the patio of the house next door, along with two neighbors: María (who is fifty-four years old, a native of Veracruz, and the daughter of fishermen) and Selene (thirty-three, born in Sinaloa, and the daughter of a farmworker). Both have lengthy work histories in Tijuana maquiladoras that produce electronics, clothing, and medical equipment.

After talking awhile with us, the neighbors leave and we are left alone with Elena. She is a plump woman with a broad face, short hair, and an easy smile. She tells us that today is her forty-ninth birthday. Inside her apartment, preparations are under way for the family celebration that will begin later, but first she tells us her story as the afternoon fades.

A Wagon, a Hammer, and a Crowbar: Coming to Tijuana

I was born in Mexico City on July 8, 1959. I'm the daughter of a single mother; I don't know what my mother was doing at the time I was born. What I do know is that forty days later we went to Poza Rica, Veracruz, and my mother worked there. Doing what? I don't know that either. She went there with one of her sisters, the one who raised me, my Mama María Luisa.

I suspect that my Mama Socorro had always worked at men's jobs. She always wore men's pants, men's boots. . . . She's eighty-one years old now.

I remember that when I was about two or three years old we were living in Gutiérrez Zamora, Veracruz. Mama Socorro was a fisherwoman; she fished. I remember that we were poor, very poor. We didn't have shoes or clothes, just underwear, and it was really hot. My aunt who lived in Mexico City was my Mama María Luisa; she would send us clothes. My mother wasn't the feminine type. . . . What can I tell you? She dressed like a man. Did she cook? No, she didn't cook! Did she wash clothes or change? Never! None of that! But she did struggle to make a home for us. She cut wood; she cut tree trunks; she hauled the huge branches. I have a brother four years younger than I am, and my mother would carry him while she climbed trees to cut down the branches. That's my mother, a real workhorse! But she was more man than woman.

Why did you go to live in Gutiérrez Zamora?

Well, they said there wasn't work in Poza Rica anymore. There was no work, and my mother always liked to fish. And fishing was good there because of the river.

We didn't know anyone there, nobody, but my mom was like that. She'd just get a notion and . . . "I'm off," and she'd go, just like that, and that's how she'd arrive at a new place and start from zero. She went and bought a piece of land in Cerro de la Cruz; that's where she built our little house. I remember that we'd go with her to gather wood, me and my brother.

And when it was raining and the fishing was bad, I'd run errands and that's what fed us. I earned about 4 pesos a day. One peso's worth of beans, one of this, one of that, and I've been at it ever since. My mother would take care of the house, and I'd get money for food, and that's how we got along because I couldn't go to school. . . . There was no money for school, no money for uniforms, no money for anything. I remember being envious when I saw women with their children on the way to school, and I said, "I want to go to school," and she'd say, "No! You're not going to school." "Then what am I going to do?" "You're going to fish." But I didn't like fishing; I liked to walk around the streets, so I was better off running errands.

But then my mother came here to Tijuana after the boyfriend she had at the time raped me. I was five years old. My brother and I stayed behind in the care of a godmother, and after about a month Mama Luisa [the aunt] came for us and took us to Mexico City. We went to live with her. She enrolled us in school; she stopped working in order to take care of us. . . . She had worked as a domestic, cleaning houses, but she stopped working.

She enrolled me in a private school; it was a drastic change. The school was run by nuns. I took ballet classes, because there was a fine arts extension program there, and also catechism class. So my life was very different. My Mama Luisa didn't know how to read, but she wanted us to go further in school than she had. And she stopped working in order to care for us. She rented one room and then a second room for us. I stayed with her until I was eleven. . . . I completed first, second, and third grades.

My Mama Luisa had two daughters, my sister Rocío and my sister Carmen. When Carmen divorced and came to live in Tijuana, my Mama Luisa said to me, "Your sister's going to Tijuana. Would you like to go there with your mother or stay here with me?" "Well, I'll go to my mother in Tijuana."

I would always ask my mother, "Why don't we live with you?" And she'd tell me that it was because she didn't have a house and didn't have a job. But I was now eleven years old, and my mom had a place to live, a little room downtown, and she had a job, and I said, "I'm on my way!" When I got to my mother's, she was really angry: "What are you doing here?" she said. "Well, I saw that you have a place to live and you have a job, so I came." And she said, "No! Go back; here you're just in the way. Why do I want you visiting me here in Tijuana?" I just stared at her. . . . Well, a week later she rented a place in Colonia Libertad, and that's where I went to live, twelve years old, all by myself in a big house. Well, it seemed really big to me; there were two bedrooms, a living room. It was one of those American-style houses, very pretty.

She stayed in her little room. The problem with my mother was that she never wanted us to live with her. I don't know what problems she had; I still don't. We lived in the same city, but she lived in a different part. I stayed in Colonia Libertad for three months, and then she came to get me and said, "Come with me; I've got a plot of land."

So we started over again! What we did was this; she bought one of those little red wagons, a hammer, and a crowbar. In those days in Tijuana, they'd throw the trash out in big wooden crates. The stores threw their trash away like that, so we'd pry the crates apart and throw the wood in the wagon . . . and that's how she built the house in Colonia Lázaro Cárdenas, where she had the lot. That was our job every day; we'd start at four o'clock in the morning. First we'd buy some copies of the *El Mexicano* newspaper and deliver them all around the Zona Norte. We'd deliver the newspapers and finish at five-thirty or six in the afternoon. Then we'd go help out at the

terminal. My mom worked in the Tres Estrellas de Oro bus terminal, cleaning bathrooms and selling things. She sold everything: cosmetics, clothing, everything. . . . We'd finish there at ten o'clock at night, every bloody day, and we'd go for the wagon, the hammer, and the crowbar and take crates apart. . . . That was our life. I was so sorry I'd come!

Between School and Work

When I came here from Mexico City, I was in fourth grade, but my mom wouldn't give us money for school. . . . That's why when my Mama Luisa came, I said, "I'm saved!" My mom didn't have a stove, so she never made food for us. She'd go and buy bread, and that's what we ate . . . bread in the morning, bread at noon, bread in the evening . . . but not my Mama Luisa; she's a cook. We went with her to Colonia Lázaro Cárdenas, my brother and I. My mom stayed in her little room downtown; she's never left there. That's when I was able to go back to school, there in Lázaro Cárdenas. I worked in the bus terminal in the morning, from six o'clock until one, and then I'd go to school. And when it wasn't a school day, I'd work from six in the morning until ten at night. I worked a double shift.

I cleaned bathrooms at the bus terminal; I managed our stand. . . . We earned most of our money from sales; everybody who was headed south who didn't already have some memento would buy it there . . . and that was my life, from fourth grade until sixth grade, going back and forth to work and from work to school. When I was in sixth grade, I told my mom that I wanted to go to junior high school. "What for? Take sewing classes, study dressmaking, hair styling. You're a woman, and that's what women are for!"

I remember that I cried from May until June . . . because my teacher told me that I could get a scholarship for junior high. All my mother had to do was sign a permission form, because I was going to work as an intern teaching at a preschool called the Future of Man. But my mom said no. Then my teacher told me, "Do you know what my sister did when they wouldn't let her continue her studies? She told her boyfriend to ask for her hand in marriage, and the next day they enrolled her in school." I had a boyfriend then, and I went and told my mom, "Mama! Guess what? Pancho wants to talk to you. . . . His parents have come and they want to talk to you." Her response was "But don't you want to continue studying?"

So it worked. But not for junior high school, because there were too many expenses. Instead, they enrolled me in a technical academy that's well known here in Tijuana, with Professor Mauro. He taught classes in accounting; there was a bilingual secretarial program, a business secretarial program. . . . It was downtown, on Second Street, and that's where I went because he didn't require junior high school or anything; and after two years Professor Mauro offered me a scholarship to a high school in San Diego. He told me I could

go to high school and teach Spanish classes. But my mom said no, and if she wouldn't give her permission, what good was the scholarship? No good at all, and so that's why I didn't go to school anymore. I got married when I was sixteen.

Family Life: Living with Three Husbands, Working without Pay

We went to San Luis Potosí to get married because that's where he was from. Five months later we came back to Tijuana. He didn't want to come because he wanted to be with his mother. But I told him, "You want to live with your mother? Then stay." And I came back to Tijuana alone. He arrived three days later, with my mother-in-law. At first we stayed with my mom in Colonia Lázaro Cárdenas, and a year later we moved into a little room, just big enough for a bed and a tiny kitchen. That was in 1977. We were living there when my mother came to visit one day. She made herself comfortable, lay down, and there she stayed. She stayed with us for more than twelve years.

We lived in that little room for a year. My second son was born there, eleven months after my first. I moved out because it was such a little room and we didn't fit . . . my mother, my brother, my children, and us; we couldn't all fit. Then we rented an apartment, also downtown. There near Negrete Street; it had two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and a private patio.

With my mom in the house, I didn't have just one spouse, I had two . . . and when my brother came to live with us, then there were three. My husband would tell me, "Hey, when's your mother leaving?" But I didn't say anything; I was always very quiet; I just put up with it.

I never asked her why she came to live with us. She had her own place, her room downtown. We never talked about it! I just came to see myself as mother to all of them. Ever since I was little, if there wasn't anything to eat I'd go do some errand and bring back money for tortillas or for beans. And when we came here to Tijuana, I was the one who handled the money at our stand in the bus terminal. I was the one who washed the clothes, ironed, cooked, and I kept on doing it even after I had the children. It was always the same.

My brother never married. He had his first child when he was forty years old, but he never gave my mom a nickel. He never helped out. That's how she raised him, and that's why he thinks he doesn't owe anybody anything. Now he's into drugs, and my mom pays his water bill, his electric bill, and she's still taking him food.

You didn't look for a job for yourself?

No, I couldn't. How could I leave my mother all alone at her job? But I didn't get any salary; she kept all the money. She said that's the reason she'd had children, to support her, to take care of her. I'd take my son

Javier, and after Jesús was born, I'd take both of them. I'd get the stroller, put my two kids in it, and take them to work, starting at five o'clock in the morning. I'd take the two of them with me, and when the third was born, I'd take him to the bus terminal with me as well. But when my first child started kindergarten, I did leave my mother's job to her alone. We had a big fight. "What do you mean you're not going to work? What's stopping you? You can take the kids." But I couldn't open up at five-thirty, come back and drop off my son at kindergarten at nine, and then come back at two. . . . I've always worked for her, ever since I arrived in Tijuana and all the time I was married . . . always. After I got married, I returned to Tijuana and went straight to the bus terminal, all day, every day. No days off, no salary, no nothing. I worked in the terminal until 1983, when Antonio, my third son, was born.

When I got married, all I gained was that I didn't have to work in the bus terminal until ten at night, only until two in the afternoon. When I was going to school at the technical academy, I'd start work at five in the morning, and I'd leave at ten minutes before ten because school started at ten o'clock, and at one o'clock I'd go back to the terminal to work my shift until four-thirty. But that's because my Mama María Luisa was here. She fought hard so that they'd let me go in the afternoon and I wouldn't have to work two shifts. She's the one who fought to provide us a house, food, clothing. . . . When we were in elementary school, before Mama María Luisa arrived, our meals were just a piece of bread with pickled chilies. Now when my brother and I get together we say, "How was it possible that she didn't even know whether or not we were getting something to eat?" We'd take ten cents out of our bus fare and use five cents to buy a piece of bread and three cents for chilies, and that was our meal. On Saturdays and Sundays, we'd wish for Monday to come. We hated vacation days. My brother says that it wasn't so bad for him because he'd walk around and find food somewhere. But me?

She didn't know; she never wondered whether we were eating or not. My mom kind of kept her distance, like she was living her own life; I don't know. By then she was secretary general of the Shoe Shiners' Union, part of the Confederation of Mexican Workers. For her, the union was her life. If you wanted to talk to her, you had to talk about the union. If you didn't, there wasn't any conversation, nothing; the conversation would end. If we wanted to talk about ourselves, about how we were doing, nothing. "How's it going in the union? What are you going to do? Do you need me to do something for you?" Then, yes, my mom would be very talkative. When she'd go to the union meetings, the workers would invite her to share a meal. But she didn't worry or even remember whether we ate, and that's always been a sore spot with us. When she tells us, "I worked, I slaved for you," my brother and I look at each other and he says, "Your mother's talking to you!" and I say, "She's your mother!" My poor mother.

In 1983, I moved to Colonia Guerrero when the owners asked for my

apartment back. The new place had only one room, a big bedroom, along with the kitchen. So we had a living room and a kitchen, everything in just those two rooms. Antonio, my third son, was born there. So was Aaron, my fourth. I remember that my mother came to visit a week after we moved in. It was nine o'clock at night, and when I saw her I said, "She's going to want to stay; she's not going to leave. Just like the first time!" My mom said, "Daughter, I've come to see you! Open the door!" I was pregnant, and I told her, "I can't open the door, Mom; I've hung a rug over it, and I can't open it until Pancho comes home and cuts the rug down." She answered, "But open up, child, it's nine o'clock at night!" "Yes, Mother, but I can't open the door; I can't cut down the rug to get it down. It's too heavy." She left then but she came back a week later and she stayed. She didn't leave. "Daughter, may I stay?" Bloody hell, I thought, because I'd have to wash her clothes for her, do her ironing, prepare her food, everything. She never did anything for herself. I had to do everything for her; I had to wash her clothes, I had to wait on her. And I was never brave enough to say, "No, Mother." Or to say, "Leave, Mother; let me take care of my own house." I was never that brave—until we moved here.

A House of One's Own, a Salary of One's Own

In 1985, we moved here. My husband was working at the Tres Estrellas de Oro bus terminal too, as a janitor. He was a staff employee, so he had benefits. When they offered him this house,⁴ he didn't want to take it. His dream was to go and live with his mother in San Luis Potosí. I told him that he should go with his mother but also take the house. By then I was working again. My husband told me that the owners of the Tres Estrellas de Oro bus company were coming from Mexico City and they wanted someone trustworthy to iron for them, so they hired me.

When my husband took me to their house, I remember that I was crying, crying, and I said to him, "You wouldn't let me work as a secretary; you wouldn't even let me work as a receptionist; you didn't let me do anything, and now you're bringing me here to iron." My eyes were swollen. "Why should I do other people's ironing if I'm capable of doing other things? I know how to do other things! Why do I have to iron?" But at bottom I was grateful to him, because when I started doing their ironing I began earning some money of my own. The lady of the house liked my work, and she hired me to do the housecleaning. Then her other two daughters came to Tijuana, and I worked in all three houses.

So when we moved to this house, when he didn't want to buy the house, he said, "You're never happy!" And I said, "Go to San Luis, but let me have the house. Sign the loan papers and leave me the house." We got into a real fight that time; we knocked each other around. But he signed the loan papers for the house. And I said, "Now go, and I'll stay here in my house." When I moved here, I didn't bring my mother's things or his things. But then, of

course, my mother arrived, and then he came, and they both stayed. But I didn't do their laundry or their ironing after that.

One day I ran them both out because I heard them talking about some woman my husband had gotten pregnant. My mother told him, "How can you leave that woman alone and pregnant?" My mother said, "I know what that's like. That's how it was when Elena was born. It's awful when they leave you, alone and pregnant, with no money." I felt so bad. Why didn't my mother defend me? Why didn't she? I didn't say anything right then; I just went out. But the next day I made them leave the house.

They both left, but he came back a year later . . . and there I go again. I let him stay, and I got pregnant again. I had a daughter. I had two daughters, one in 1987 and one in 1991. But my mother never came back to live here in the house. . . . I'd like to bring her here now, because she's eighty-one years old. She doesn't work. I don't know; I think I'll bring her here. . . . I can see that she can't fend for herself. She's old, and I tell myself, "What do I gain if I tell her what I heard that day?" I don't think it would do me any good. In any case, I don't live with him anymore. I have a different partner now, so I don't see any point in mentioning it.

When I ran them out of the house, my life changed, because before, I couldn't go out without the two of them coming along. I was always with my mother, or with him, or with both of them. I could never go out by myself, and there was always an argument if I said I wanted to go out alone. But I was also terrified of getting on a bus. I didn't even know how to cross the avenue. That's why he'd tell me, "What are you going to do? You can't do anything; you don't know how to do anything. You don't even know how to cross the street. You'd die without me; you'd starve to death." But no. When I got the house, when I ran them off, that's when I was able to fix the house up a bit with my own money. I worked for those people who came from Mexico City, and I used my earnings to buy things for the house. I had furniture made, I put in flooring, I had the interior plastered, they made closets, beds. I had everything made, everything. I bought a living room set, a water heater, everything new. I was better off without them, very content. I learned how to cross the streets, because sometimes that scared me. Oh, that was really awful. It's horrible when somebody's got you under their heel.

But like I'm telling you, I was a fool and I took him back, even after I had all of this. I'd already bought all of this, and he came back. But it was different then, because I didn't put up with anything anymore. Things changed after I'd been on my own, and I started doing new things. For example, there was no school here, and my children didn't have a school to go to. . . . So we women organized; we started by taking a census, we asked for teachers, and they loaned us some buildings so they could begin teaching classes. I was on the board of directors, and I started lobbying for a piece of land to build a school and then to level the lot and begin to build. . . . And I didn't let anything stop me. I'd go out, I'd come and go and accomplish things.

And that little school there is one of my proudest achievements because it came about thanks to the struggle we waged here in Infonavit Latinos. And then there was none of the "You have to stay home; you can't go out." I'd just say to him, "I'm going out; I'll see you." Or I'd leave a message: "I went to such and such a place; I'll be around there." And then they'd know that I was busy with the school issue and things like that, but I was never their servant again. I wouldn't sacrifice myself for them anymore; no more of that.

Working in the Maquiladoras

During all that time, I was working part-time for the family of the bus company's owners. But I was looking for another job, one that would pay more but still let me take care of my family, so that I wouldn't have to leave my children alone. My daughters were still very young. My next-door neighbor was working in a factory, and she said to me, "Elena, there's work we can do at home, and it pays good money." "What would we be doing?" I asked. "We'd be painters," she said. "Painters? But what would we paint?" "Well, lawn and garden plaques, decorated signs for Halloween, for Christmas." "But I don't know how to paint," I said. "Well, they'll teach you."

That's how I started painting, and I liked it a lot because I was earning good money; I was making 1,200 pesos a week.⁵ We'd paint signs like the ones you see in yards and gardens on the other side of the border . . . the ones that say, "Welcome" or "Home, Sweet Home" and things like that. And the signs for Christmas, and Halloween, and springtime; those were the ones I liked most, and that's what we painted.

They paid us 79 or 89 cents each for the hanging signs. The pay varied depending on the kind of sign. The ones with stakes paid US\$1.17, \$1.19, or \$1.15; I started out painting the signs with stakes. First they gave me ten signs to paint, then twenty, then thirty, and then forty. . . . After six months they'd give you your order to complete and say you were now a part owner. That was a lie, because we weren't really partners. We just became regular employees, and we got social security and benefits. Then they'd give us an order for ninety signs to finish in ten days. You'd have to deliver them all at the end of ten days, but the problem was that they didn't give us all the signs on the same day, so we'd have to keep going back for more. . . . Today they made staked signs or today, hanging ones. By then we were going to the factory three or four days. The good thing was that we always delivered our work on time. . . . There were two of us here [in the same building], three across the way, and another woman behind us. We'd all go together in one truck. What we'd do was this: We'd have to produce a copy of the sample sign. So some of us would get in line for paint, others would line up for wooden signs waiting to be painted, and the rest of us would get the samples and the molds. We'd paint from a sample. We'd get a sample of what we were going to paint and we'd make a copy of what it was supposed to look like. Then we'd all take

some of the work; each of us would do our share. Sometimes ten of us worked together on a single order. We'd work like this: You do this, you do that, and you take that, and we'd finish the job up fast. They'd lend us the sample, and we'd make a copy of it on our first sign.

The factory was called Gran Tenochtitlan, even though it was a U.S. company. All the workers were Mexicans, but the owners were from the United States, and everything we made was for sale over there. Rubén was the one who gave us our jobs; he's the one who contracted us, and he's the one we delivered our work to. And if we had a problem, we took it up with him directly. I liked that job because we got turkey at Christmas; we got a holiday dinner, benefits, profit sharing, a Christmas bonus. . . . We even had a savings program. I listed my son Javier as well, so that I could earn more, so they would give me two orders to do and everybody would help me complete the work. Everybody in the house worked on it. Somebody would sand the wooden signs, others would paint, and still others would do the measuring. I did all the painting myself, but they helped me with sanding and tying stuff.

I always had to have the sample in front of me to look at while I worked. But I always added something to it. When I first arrived, Rubén said, "You're going to make your signs, and you're going to put your name or a pseudonym on them, whatever you want, so they know who painted them." I said, "Wow! Where are the signs going, to Poland?" Because on the back it said, "Handmade by . . ." Ever since then, I tried very hard to do good work because each sign had my name on it so that they'd know who'd made it, and I always added something in addition to what was on the sample design. And I was lucky enough that when I turned in my first ten signs, they used them as samples, which means they liked my work. They presented it as an example of the very best work, to show the others how to do it well. Because I always used a lot of color, or more foliage, more stars, I don't know, something extra. That's how I liked it; I painted the signs to suit my own taste, and I never had any problem. And we earned a good income; between my son's order and mine we'd make nearly 2,000 pesos a week.⁶

I did that job until 2000. Apparently sales were dropping, and they switched to a lower-quality paint. Before, a single coat of paint was sufficient to produce a good finish, but now we had to apply four coats of paint because the paint was of such poor quality, really thin. The brushes weren't what they should have been either, and the wood was of lower quality too. . . . But that wasn't our fault; it was their fault. They started giving us smaller orders. I went from earning about 1,800 pesos a week to only 1,600, and then 1,400. When we dropped to 800 pesos a week, we held a meeting and asked them to buy better materials or, if they didn't, they should at least stop returning the work to us to be done over. Instead of painting a sign once, we had to paint it five times. We told them it wasn't our fault. It was their fault, because they were the ones buying poor materials, and we wanted to earn what we had before.

So then the American owner, Johnson, told us that if we didn't want to accept his terms, he'd move the work to Brazil, where people were willing to make the signs for just a bean taco. "Well, make them in Brazil then. We won't do it; we earn this amount of money, and it's our jobs" . . . and he moved to Brazil. He left us stranded. We already had orders ready to go. The factory was jam-packed with signs everywhere.

There were meetings in the factory. They told us that we didn't have social security coverage anymore because they couldn't pay for it, and that anyone who wanted could claim severance pay. "We lost this buyer, but we could find another one. The space belongs to you, and you'll have to decide what you're going to do with it or what kind of work we'll do." A year earlier they'd bought some lots to build a painting factory, and there were people who kept that land. The factory was going to be located in the middle, with painters all around it. . . . They paid for the land out of their salaries; the money was deducted from the workers' salaries. I couldn't take part because I'd been working there only a short time. The factory had been in operation for twenty-seven years, and there were people who'd been working there their whole lives, and that's why some claimed the land without paying. . . . Anyway, when the factory closed, many of the workers decided to stay on as partners and try to find other clients for their paintings, and I was one of them. I said, "I'd rather have this place and a space to work; all we need to do is find a new client, so I'm going to go look for one." I was so confident; I thought it would be easy. . . .

I wanted to stay on as a worker. Those who quit got nothing; they paid them a little something, but very little. But now there were no clients and no work, and we weren't earning any money either. They told us, "Take whatever you want." So then we divvied up everything that was in the factory: machinery, sewing machines, lots of fabric, a lot of paint, a lot of wooden boards. I asked for the boards. I took boards home and some paint, some fabric. . . . I took a lot of stuff. I still have some fabric left. I sell it by the yard at Christmas and for events with dance music, like on November 20 [Mexican Revolution Day] and all that. My neighbor Elvira still makes tablecloths, curtains, napkins, chair seat covers, and skirts for dances, so she's also still making some money from the materials we took.

Did you have other jobs after you worked in the maquila?

I was working for INEGI.⁷ I'd already worked for them in 1995, and they hired me again in 2000 for the census. That's where Alfonso Mesa met me; after the census work was done, he hired me to do survey work. I started working as a recruiter, and I began putting my team together. I got a lot of people to do market research and other kinds of research. Because I had already put a team together, people from Mitofsky and Gallup⁸ sought me out, and now the companies that we'd worked for hire me directly. I worked for

Mitofsky covering all of Baja California. I had 150 people in the study, and I was getting paid very well. I liked that. Ten thousand pesos. Who can earn that much money in three days? I'd take my truck and get some other cars. I felt really good, working really hard, me and my friends. . . .

But that's when I first got involved with Factor X.⁹ That's where I started to learn about labor laws and obligations, and I realized the risks to uninsured people, and it scared me. I started looking into workers' rights, and I got scared and I started easing out of that work. But when I left that job, I got another one. Gallup offered me a job recruiting people for market studies and, later, for focus groups, and my job was to take the people to the office: "We'll pay this much to the people you bring and this much to you." I think this is better because I didn't want to run any more risks, so I started to work at that. And that's what I'm still doing today, for several companies.

But sometimes there aren't any studies, and that's why I returned to work in the maquila in 2003, making piñatas. I combined the two jobs, making piñatas and recruiting for research studies. Making piñatas was a homework job. They paid us US\$1.49 for each piñata, but I had to buy my own materials, so in effect I was selling each piñata at a \$1.00, because I bought the cardboard, newspaper, all the materials. I ended up earning about 500 pesos a week, but that helped because it brought in a steady income for the household when there weren't any focus studies. Besides, everybody in the house did something; everybody participated in making the piñatas. But I had to leave that job last year when I had health problems with my liver and gall bladder, and I couldn't make the piñatas anymore or even do housework. . . . I didn't have any strength, and I had to leave the job. I lost it.

How do you see yourself in the future?

When I joined Factor X, we took trips to get to know women workers in Central America, Brazil, Chile. . . . I didn't see myself as an industrial homemaker, just like the women I was going to survey. "And what do you do?" "Well, nothing, I'm just here at home, though I do some work that I bring home and then deliver back to the factory." Then I began to see the world in a new light, and I realized I could do more for my community, for myself. My outlook had changed so much.

That's why I have no interest in talking to my mother anymore, or to the father of my children, because my life is different now. My outlook isn't just one of sorrow, of suffering, anymore. Now I see myself in a different place, and my goal is to work in the community, to help women do better, or at least help them to realize, to understand what's happening, the causes that underlie violence and low self-esteem. . . . That's why we established Latinos¹⁰ six years ago. Its full name is the Industrial Homework, Latinos Group. We have psychologists, training workshops in human rights. . . .

The core element is the psychological support services, because women

come to us suffering, crying, with low self-esteem, with their husband's foot on their neck, with children bumming around and using drugs, and we don't realize that sometimes we share the blame because we don't take off the blindfold; we let them keep walking all over us. We help women coming from violent, abusive homes, women who are suffering in the factories. . . . The first thing is psychological support, and from there we direct them toward other services they need—legal help, training. . . .

We've been in operation since 2003. We've already produced three or four generations of promoters, and they are now working on their own in the community. That gives me so much satisfaction. My daughters are grown up now; one is in her fifth semester of junior high, and the other one is getting an undergraduate degree in social work. And when they finish school, I intend to become even more involved in community work. I think I'd like to work for an institution because I'd gain more knowledge. They give people additional training so that they can better help others. Working alone, we can't do as much. When we started working with women doing industrial homework, we saw that it wasn't just a matter of informing them about their labor rights. Lots of other issues come into play. This one has one problem, another one has a different problem, and you have to help all of them. But what I tell them is "I can't help you with everything, but I'm going to take you somewhere where they can help. You're the ones who are going to do this; all I can do is to go along with you."

We've made progress; we don't hold meetings at my house anymore. We fought for months to get a community center, and now we have it. I could see that it wasn't a good idea holding meetings in my home. The kids were there, and they had things to do, and me, always with people and with my meetings. That's why we promoted the idea of a community center, and we got it a month ago. Now we receive the women there, and we'll be able to offer more services, to help more people. The next step might be to establish a nongovernmental organization and have a location, an office, a space for our group, so that we don't have to use family spaces. That's how I see myself in the future.

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