The Development of the Maquila Industry in Honduras: A Holistic Approach to the Industry's Effect on Women and Honduran Society

Andrea Mencia Viery

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone

Part of the Latin American Studies Commons, and the Other International and Area Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/807

This Honors Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
The Development of the Maquila Industry in Honduras: A Holistic Approach to the Industry’s Effect on Women and Honduran Society

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

Andrea Mencía Viery
Candidate for B.A. in International Relations Degree, and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in International Relations

Capstone Project Advisor: _______________________
Doctor David J. Robinson

Capstone Project Reader: _______________________
Doctor Francine D’Amico

Honors Director: _______________________
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: April 23, 2014
Abstract

The maquila industry in Latin America has received much attention due to its predominant presence in Mexico and several Central American countries. Numerous studies explore the nuances of the maquila industry in Mexico, yet few studies focus on other nations. This project concentrates on Honduras, the country where I was raised for eighteen years. Many Communities affected by this industry believe maquila owners prefer to employ young women over male applicants. This is also true for Honduras. Many scholars believe the owners’ motives lie behind the so-called docility characteristic of these young females. Critics of the industry argue that maquilas in Honduras permit inhumane abuses of young women and girls. On the other hand, supporters argue that maquilas offer financial independence to thousands of women who would otherwise grapple with poverty and a lack of resources. This study investigates the industry and its effects on Honduran women and society overall. It rejects all preconceived notions that envelop maquilas and focuses on structural issues that surround the country. If the maquila industry is unfair, it is only because Honduras currently finds itself struggling with corruption, violence, and other circumstances that hinder many processes from becoming full-fledged industries that will benefit the country and its citizens, not just foreign investors.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................... 2  
Executive Summary ........................................................................... 5  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................. 10  
Introduction ......................................................................................... 11  
Maquilas in Latin America ................................................................. 12  
  Mexico ............................................................................................. 15  
  Central America .............................................................................. 16  
Maquilas in Honduras ........................................................................ 19  
  Stages of Development .................................................................. 19  
  Economic Contexts ........................................................................ 22  
  Traits of the Industry ...................................................................... 23  
  Obstacles ......................................................................................... 24  
    Hurricane Mitch ........................................................................... 24  
    Honduras and “Yellow” Journalism .............................................. 25  
    The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights ................... 26  
  The Legal Framework ..................................................................... 29  
    Decree No. 356 ............................................................................ 29  
    ZIP: Industrial Processing Zones for Exports ......................... 32  
    Other Relevant Laws .................................................................... 32  
  Consequences of Maquila Development ........................................ 34  
    Honduran Association of Maquiladores ...................................... 35  
    Maquilas and Gender Roles ......................................................... 37  
    Education Goals ........................................................................... 40  
    The Economic Impact of Maquilas in Honduras ....................... 41  
    Spatial Impact on Honduras ......................................................... 44  
  Wages ............................................................................................... 47  
Primary Field Research ...................................................................... 52  
  Methodology ................................................................................... 51  
  Interviews and Analysis ................................................................. 54  
    Age .............................................................................................. 54  
    Marital status .............................................................................. 54  
    Numbers of Years Worked at Current Maquila ........................ 55  
    Education ..................................................................................... 55  
    Numbers of People Supported with Salary ................................. 56  
    Weekly Expenditures ................................................................... 55  
    Weekly Salary .............................................................................. 56  
    Other Observations ...................................................................... 56  
  The Big Question: Do Maquilas Really Help? ................................. 58  
  Case Studies ..................................................................................... 64  
    Angela Castro .............................................................................. 64  
    Carmen Palma ............................................................................. 72  
Conclusions ......................................................................................... 79  
Works Cited ........................................................................................ 82
Executive Summary

In Latin America, maquilas are manufacturing companies located in free trade zones (FTZ) that import material and equipment for assembly, processing, or manufacturing and export the finished product to the international market. The importing country generally waives tariffs or duties on the raw material. The explosion of the maquila industry in the region of Latin America is largely due in part to this FTZ arrangement, low labor costs, and many other advantages that developing countries grant the developed world to attract foreign investment.

Honduras, a small Central American nation, has quickly become a favorite among foreign investors to establish maquilas. Honduras is also the place I call home. Thus I embarked this project to learn as much as I could about this national industry that many Hondurans consider essential. I remember growing up in San Pedro Sula hearing how it was mostly young girls who worked for long hours and low wages. Given my new-found awareness of the blatant patriarchy permeating my nation’s society when I moved to the United States for college, I became curious as to why maquilas are so female-dominated. It is not the norm in Honduran society for women to work outside the home; men still hold the bread-winning title. More importantly, under what conditions do these women work? Are they victims of a vicious system or are they moving forward thanks to these jobs?

I thus decided to spend a summer in Honduras to interview female workers from different maquilas operating in these. I asked several relatives and close friends if they knew anyone who could grant me access to different maquilas to
carry out some field work. Surprisingly, this was not as easy as I expected. Even though some of my relatives hold higher positions in some maquilas, their bosses feared that I did not have the right intentions, denying my requests. As frustrating as it was at first, it was all a matter of patience.

My uncle’s good friend, an engineer with a very high position, said he would be more than willing to open the doors of the maquila he runs. He even expressed enthusiasm, for he felt that the international community needs to see that maquilas are not the monstrosities that people make them out to be. My best friend’s father, another prestigious engineer who runs a different maquila, also proved to be nothing but welcoming. The “snowball” method (connections) thus made INHDELVA and Fivaro, both a 30-minute drive from San Pedro Sula, the sites for my primary research.

I prepared a set of approximately 40 questions regarding both personal and workplace data to ask maquila laborers. I designed the questionnaire so that many of them yielded short answer responses, such as age, marital status, place of residence, and transportation method. Other questions, especially those under the workplace category, were more open-ended and generated more complex answers such as problems involved in the subject’s specific task or general problems in the workplace perceived by her or him. Out of 18 laborers interviewed, only two were men due to the research’s focus.

I was ushered by Maritza Molina, the Assistant of Cooperative Direction of Operations, at INHDELVA throughout the duration of the entire process. After formalities and introductions, she showed me a descriptive PowerPoint
presentation about INHNDELVA. She walked me through all the maquila’s facilities and would let me pick any female worker as we went along. She stayed next to me while the interviews took place, which may have had a chilling effect, inhibiting employee responses. I interviewed a total of nine women workers ranging in age from early twenties to early forties that day.

I visited Fivaro the following day, where General Manager Junio Marsan (my best friend’s father) appointed a very polite lady to give me a quick tour of the maquila. She then led me to a room where I conducted private interviews as she sent in different workers, one by one. A sample bias might also exist in this situation since she selected the workers I would interview. I conversed with a total of 7 females and 2 males that day. I recorded every conversation, took notes and pictures, with the interview subjects’ permission. The workers might have been more reserved during the interviews because these took place in their actual workplace. Furthermore, a class difference between subjects and interviewer might have skewed their responses.

I purposely held the interviews first to avoid any preconceived notions when I heard the subjects’ responses. An overall consensus appeared to exist among the majority of my interviewees as many claimed that their job at these maquilas did in fact help them progress. I chose two specific stories to feature on this project for different reasons. One recounts the success story of a woman who climbed her way to a managerial position through hard work. The other, while still a success story, almost moved me to tears because this woman overcame so many obstacles and was still striving for success. She seemed so determined.
The next step was secondary research yet I did not know where to start. I was fortunate that my advisor David Robinson, DellPlain Professor of Latin American Geography at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and expert on the region, provided an incredible array of sources and encouraged me to explore outlets that I would never have considered relevant.

Even though I failed to notice this initially, the first academic document I read intentionally portrayed the maquila industry in Honduras as an extremely successful economic contributor and job generator. Come the next document, the author’s point of view was on the opposite side of the spectrum; he strongly criticized maquilas. The curious part was that these authors are two Honduran men with vast knowledge on the topic. This is when I noticed a distinct pattern: most, if not all, of the authors I read held a very polarized opinion of the maquila industry in Honduras. They all used the same facts and statistics to make a case for opposing arguments.

Professor Robinson then noticed that my Capstone was heading in a different direction. As I continued to read on the topic, my fascination for the development of the national maquila industry itself grew, as well as my curiosity as to why both national and foreign authors had such contrasting opinions. I was no longer exclusively studying the gender issue. I was also trying to analyze all the data at my disposal objectively to create my own opinion on the Honduran maquila industry. Nonetheless, I found myself enraged at times when authors painted Hondurans as greedy, retrograde, and closed-minded savages. I was
moved when I read atrocious stories of abuses. I was proud when I encountered success stories.

All these thoughts and emotions evolved into the heart of my Honors Capstone. I want to let people know that the maquila industry is not a matter of good or bad, of failure or success, of black or white. Its complexities are rooted in deeper structural issues within the nation such as education and culture and religious beliefs. Honduras currently offers limited opportunities for lower- and middle-class citizens due to the country’s corruption, poverty, and weak education system. Additionally, I believe that the Honduran maquila industry is far too under-researched to make a sound judgment. My ultimate goal is to raise awareness that the problems mentioned above are far more pressing than making a rushed judgment of the Honduran maquila industry.
Acknowledgements

This entire project would have been impossible had it not been for Professor David Robinson’s guidance. His invaluable help and words of encouragement are the main reasons behind the development and completion of this project. Not only was he an advisor but a mentor, guiding me every step of the way. Thank you does not do justice to your wise words.

I also want to thank my reader Dr. Francine D’Amico for taking the time out of her extremely hectic schedule to read my project. Finally, none of the field research would have occurred if Mr. Simmons Gough and Mr. Junio Marsan had not opened the doors to their maquilas. I owe a big thank you to both these men.
I. Introduction

Honduras is the country I very proudly call home. I have come to expect puzzled looks or polite “Ohs” when I make this statement, since Honduras is not very well-known. This does not bother me: it grants me the opportunity to paint a positive yet accurate picture of my home. Nonetheless, I catch myself using terms such as “poverty-stricken,” “crime-ridden,” and “dangerous” to describe this country time and time again. I sat down to think about this and found it heart-wrenching: I must first reconcile my divergent views if I am to truthfully describe the very complex situation that for many defines this overlooked nation.

This is how maquilas come into the picture: as the largest industry in Honduras, their influence seeps through the economic cracks into the political and cultural spheres. I clearly remember a childhood episode in which a seventeen-year-old girl who assisted my Mom with household chores decided to leave us to work in a maquila. We were all crushed, for she had become a part of our family, but I was also curious as to why my mother was so disappointed that she was leaving us to go to a maquila. She exclaimed that the girl did not know what she was getting herself into, but I quickly brushed it away – I was too young to understand the implications behind that. From that date, maquila was a word I heard very frequently; it represents, after all, the largest industry in the nation with 122,000 new jobs just last year (Yanes, 2013). Unfortunately, I never really delved deeply into the issue of what maquilas were and their significance.

Now, a decade later, I find myself absorbing everything I can about something I should have explored earlier. A question loomed in my head as I was
conducting my research: is the maquila industry good or bad for Honduras? More precisely, is it good for the thousands of women who toil in it every single day? I have lost track of the number of times I changed my opinion regarding the subject, yet I know something is certain: it is our duty as Hondurans to ask these questions, to find the answers, and to propose solutions. We must eliminate our apathy and educate ourselves on such pressing matters. This is the heart of this project – I attempt to answer these questions to craft an educated opinion and to inform later action on this issue.

II. Maquilas in Latin America

_The First World needs less and less from the Third World: it needs ever less of our raw materials, our market and our labor force. Perhaps we are still interesting for tourism or as a dump for toxic matter, but it is clearer every day that they do not need of the great poor majorities of the Third World._

Chilean priest and theologian Pablo Richard made the above remark for Nicaraguan-based magazine _Envío_ back in 1993. This remark could not be more removed from the truth nowadays, as current patterns show that the developed world needs the developing world more than people generally believe: maquilas are a prime manifestation of this interdependence. Highly industrialized countries find it easier to use cheap labor in assembly plants in less-developed countries than paying high-cost labor in the United States once Free Trade Zones (FTZs) have been established.

Early U.S.-Latin American commercial relations from the 1940s in the transfer of product “finishing” in Latin America (Mexico and Puerto Rico) developed slowly (González, 2000: 232). According to Honduran expert Jorge

Interiano (2011), the global maquila business model can be traced back to two fundamental situations in the 1960s: the desperate need for jobs in underdeveloped nations to palliate unemployment quickly and at a large scale, and the search of foreign investors for cheap labor (7). Mexico and other Latin American countries responded to this challenge from the 1960s to mid-1980s, and now enjoy success as commercial and industrial powers. Initially, maquila development focused on garment production, later transitioning into electric appliances, pharmaceutics, and auto parts in the region.

This economic scenario stirred regional competition among Latin American nations – especially those in the Caribbean Basin – as to which would offer the most appealing benefits to foreign investors. The countries involved thus began a pursuit of laws to lure these companies by granting benefits that were just too hard to resist: access to infrastructure, highways, ports, airports, telephones water, electric power, customs procedures, and most importantly, cheap labor of acceptable quality. All of this was written within the context of new trade agreements exempt from import and export taxes, such as the North American Free Trade Agreemen (NAFTA), the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and the Central American Common Market (CACM).

Maquilas surprisingly did not originate in Mexico as many people might believe. U.S. corporations first transferred factories to produce offshore on a grand scale to the Panama Canal Zone and Puerto Rico in the late 1940s (González, 2000: 232). These local governments submissively eliminated tariffs or local taxes, agreed to low wages and minimal enforcement of environmental
and labors laws, and granted federal tax exemption for companies’ repatriated income. Even though Panama was crucial in this process, Puerto Rico’s role was far more substantial: the whole island became a virtual free trade zone that exempted the income of U.S. subsidiaries from federal taxes (Ibid.).

The U.S. industrial conglomerate known as Textron was the first company to relocate in Puerto Rico after shutting down several of its U.S. mills, leaving 3,500 U.S. workers without a job (Ibid.). New U.S. factories in the island created 37,300 jobs during the first ten years since the program’s inception but proved insufficient to ameliorate the soaring unemployment (Ibid., 233). Consequently, the greatest number of Puerto Ricans in history migrated to the U.S.

Puerto Rico set the model for the maquila trend: U.S. corporations moved in to establish low-wage factories, which in turn attracted laborers to the cities from impoverished rural areas. The number of these migrants was larger than that of the available jobs, thus pushing surplus workers to migrate to the United States either legally (mostly in the case of Puerto Rico) or illegally.

A distinguishing factor separates Puerto Rico from the rest of what would become “maquila nations”: the island is U.S. territory, thus federal laws protects maquila workers and their rights. Factory laborers demanded improvements in wages and working condition, subsequently pushing U.S. factories to other Caribbean countries. Nevertheless, once these left U.S. territory, they no longer enjoyed duty-free entry to the United States, thus fighting to reduce tariffs as much as possible wherever they went (Ibid.).

a. Mexico
Much of the manufacturing industry relocated to Mexico in 1965 thanks to the Mexican government’s project Border Industrialization Program (Tuttle, 2012: 65). The federal government needed to generate as many jobs as possible to pave the road to modernization. This is also where the term *maquiladora* became popularized (González, 2000:233.). Maquilas were originally meant to be the “twin plants” for partner factory in the U.S. maquilas “would assemble a product from components imported from its twin plant in the United States, then ship the finished product back across the border for sale in the American market, and when the product crossed the border only the value added by the Mexican labor would be subject to a tariff,” revealing the motive behind incredibly low maquila wages (*Ibid.*, 234).

The Mexican government initially allowed maquilas only near the border to create jobs on both sides of the border and to reduce emmigration. It is now evident, though, that this is far from what occurred in reality. While the twin plant in the United States usually turned into a warehouse where only a small number of people labored, maquilas became massive job generators as is proven by General Motor’s title of biggest private employer in Mexico during the 1990s (*Ibid.*).

Mexican maquilas also sparked the trend of recruiting young women as the main labor force. González seems to take a more traditional stance and claimS that this new occurrence “disrupted social organization in rural villages, where women historically provided critical unpaid labor” (*Ibid.*, pp.234-235). This,
however, might not be entirely negative for, as I will argue later in this paper, it challenges the patriarchal system in most of the Latin American nations.

Maquila wages plummeted 68% in Mexico between 1980 and 1992, whereas the industry’s productivity increased 41% (Ibid., 235). This followed the devaluation of the Mexican peso in the 1980s and in 1994, which halved its value (Ibid.). The explosion of maquilas combined with meager wages brought forth the escalation of immigration to the United States just like in Puerto Rico, which made the U.S. government’s attempts counterproductive.

This free trade juggernaut, however, owes much of its current power to the 1994 NAFTA. Created to eliminate all tariff barriers between Mexico, Canada, and the United States, NAFTA originated a new common market that relocated thousands of factory jobs from Canada and the United States to Mexico. NAFTA removed said barriers “by eliminating custom duties and tariffs and offered ‘tax holidays’ to foreign companies that established operations along the border and in the Mexican interior” (Tuttle, 2012: 66).

Twenty-seven Mexican states out of 32 accommodated maquilas by 1998 (Ibid., 69). In addition, after NAFTA, many maquilas moved to the “Mexican side of the border, between Guatemala and Mexico” which boosted unemployment rates in Guatemala (Goldín, 2008:34).

b. Central America

It is not until the 1980s that the U.S. government decided to replicate these “experiments” as journalist and author Juan González calls them. The government named this new phase the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which
essentially equipped Caribbean nations with direct federal aid targeted at the establishment of as many Free Trade Zones (FTZ) as regional conditions allowed. The new manufacturers were either direct subsidiaries of U.S. companies or Korean and Taiwanese middlemen that supplied to the United States.

By 1992, the government had spent almost $700 million since 1980 on CBI-related projects, which secured the opening of over 500 facilities and the expansion of an additional 300 factories. By the end of the 1990s, the Caribbean Basin was the world’s chief supplier of clothing to the United States (González, 2000: 238-240). The first companies that closed domestic facilities to flock from the United States to the Caribbean and Central America were Farah (apparel), GTE (telecommunications), Kellwood (apparel), Sara Lee (consumer goods), and Leslie Fay (apparel) which no longer operates, according to González.

Most Central American countries, especially Honduras and the neighboring nations of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, joined the maquila bandwagon with full force. It became the standard in these countries for employers to represent either international capital or the national bourgeoisie, not only separating producers from the product of their labor but also making it virtually impossible for their own citizens to consume the product (Goldín, 2008: 31).

The establishment history and industrialization stages of the maquila industry in this region are almost identical, subsequently replicating the industry’s repercussions in most Central American countries as well. Guatemala, for example, observed new migration paths along with a wave of social and cultural
trends linked to increased violence, inter-ethnic relations, and changes in marriage forms (Ibid., 32). All of these come as the aftermath of the urbanization of rural areas, something its neighbors also experienced.

Guatemalan “women in maquila households also tend to receive cash contributions from their daughters and sons, and are able to have access to more consumer items than those in non-maquila households,” a regional-wide occurrence that challenges patriarchy across these nations (Ibid., 40). I was pleased to learn that some Guatemalan female workers said that they contributed to the education of their younger siblings with their earnings from maquilas. This very closely resonates with some of the stories I heard from some of the Honduran women I interviewed.

Similarly, the situation in Nicaragua, featured steep unemployment and poverty levels (which is characteristic of the area as a whole) due to political instability, corruption and natural disasters. The informal sector composes about 67% or one third of the economy, leaving much of the population without insurance and other basic rights, and making underemployment fairly common (López & Partanen, 2011: 2). Currently, one third of Honduras’s population force is underemployed, making the country’s plight parallel to that of Nicaragua. Maquilas are thus “the light at the end of the tunnel” in both countries, as similar presidential decrees state that this industry and its implications are in the nations’ best interest.

In addition to these traits, the Nicaraguan maquila industry is also almost indistinguishable from the Honduran industry: young women are the most coveted
employees and wages fail to cover the cost of the basic food basket for a family of four (Bickham Mendez, 2002: 13).

These patterns persist throughout the Central American region, where developing economies eagerly began their industrialization processes and protected the nascent maquila industries through the creation of laws in the midst of the last century. Panama, which ironically saw the first archetypes of what would become maquilas, shifted its economy towards the service sector and finances (Vargas-Hernández & Núñez-López, 2011:256). All Central American countries constructed legal regimens to support and promote the maquiladora industry in the 1970s. The industry thus quickly erupted, transforming into a source of employment for females that offered low wages, small deference to labor rights, and appalling working conditions (Ibid., 256).

Guatemala achieved the highest gross domestic product (GDP) in the region, with approximately $32,000 million, while Costa Rica and Honduras have shown the greater stability indicators and annual growth. Honduras, however, suffered from political unrest between 2009 and 2010, detracting foreign investment. Since 2000 and until 2008, Honduras and Costa Rica received the highest foreign direct investment (FDI) in the area, with the latter achieving the best quality of life and competitiveness of the area (Ibid.).

III. Maquilas in Honduras

a. Stages of Development

The Honduran industrial sector found itself at a stalemate in the 1950s, with artisanal activities dominating the economy. What were considered factories
were merely rudimentary units limited to the manufacture of a few beverage, food, and tobacco products to be sold only in the domestic market (Moncada Valladares, 1996:183). Honduras then joined forces with four Central American nations in December 1960 to initiate a process of economic integration, known as CACM and substitute imports. Despite the need for a joint Central American economy due to the narrowness of the markets as individual states, such efforts were thwarted for Honduras when its economy became subordinate to U.S. capital. Thus, for some, the revamped industry of import substitution of this decade was “fictitious,” for laborers needed only to assemble or add a few final touches to foreign semi-finished products. Since such tasks were considered domestic, they would be exonerated from any export fees (Ibid., 184). Thus most workers in the CACM clang to the traditional predominance of agriculture and homogenous internal markets a decade after the project’s inception.

In the early 1970s, the Honduran market took a step towards transnationalization to embrace foreign- or mixed-capital factories that not only assembled but also produced and commercialized goods. The Honduran government – as well as that of other Latin American nations – fumbled to acquire external credit to sustain the necessary infrastructure for the incoming factories. This allowed foreign companies to monopolize the industry as part of their diversification of local investments in the “Third World”. While it is true that the government considerably improved much of the country’s infrastructure, it was done so mainly in selected areas of the Department of Cortés to attract
foreign investment. These benefits failed to reach thousands of poor living on the outskirts of maquila production zones.

Nonetheless, the large sums of borrowed money the Honduran government acquired proved futile, for a lot of the projects failed. This created a snowball effect for Honduras’s external debt and heightened the prominence of international financial institutions. The external debt crisis exploded in the 1980s due to the aforementioned factors, leading to scant financial support from the international community. This is when maquila production shifted from mere assembly to a “more traditional” industry.

A little over two decades after the outburst of maquilas, the year 2000 saw two crucial markers in the maquila industry: the signature of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Mexico and the CA3 group (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) and U.S. approval of the expansion of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI). Some experts, such as Adrienne Pine (2008), consider the CBI to be the main catalyst for the growth of Honduran maquilas because of the “incentives offered within it such as Guaranteed Access Levels – an exemption from quotas on clothing assembled from cloth made and cut in the United States” (138). Nonetheless, she sheds a negative light on the CBI, explaining that as “Reagan’s 1983 creation, [it] was a Cold War strategy at a time when those in power in the U.S. government believed that Nicaragua, El Salvador, and other countries could join Cuba as a Soviet bloc threat in the U.S. backyard” (Ibid.). A trade program ostensibly meant to bolster regional economies was really an initiative to provide military funds to El Salvador and even channeled over $10
million to Honduras for this same purpose. CBI’s military aspect is still
downplayed according to authors such as Pine.

In 2000, the U.S. government approved the “Expansion of Benefits” of the
Caribbean Basin Initiative. This allowed the Caribbean Basin countries to export
products into the North American market with the same privileges that Mexico
acquired when it signed NAFTA: the elimination of export taxes on all
merchandise assembled with U.S. textiles.

b. Economic Contexts

In the mid 1990s, Moncada Valladares argued that the industrialized world
adhered to the motto “produce in developing countries and sell in developed
ones.” Some of the factors that brought about such a view include the U.S. desire
to halt immigration by providing jobs in Central America, as well as the
devaluation of developing nations’ currencies. Thus, the Honduran government
allowed an entirely free market seeking nothing but to assist foreign companies to
achieve high profits and attract foreign investment at any cost. This results in
factories that are not related to the regional market, Central American integration
or regional development, and are not supervised by the State to protect workers or
the environment (Moncada Valladares, 1996: 190).

Additionally, internal factors in the late 1970s and early 1980s – such as
natural disasters (see below under obstacles), unleashed a strong economic
decline in Honduras that was prolonged until the 1990s. The maquila industry was
the answer to the pleas of the dire situation in Honduras during this decade: In
1996, UNICEF estimated that 72.8% of Honduran citizens lived in extreme
poverty, and at least one million of them were single females with mouths to feed and no resources \textit{(Ibid., 195)}.  

\textbf{c. Traits of the Industry}  

Expert Interiano describes features of the Honduran maquila industry that differentiates it from other countries. He identified the following: differences in the development of the industry; outsourcing as the supplier of transference of technology; inter-firm interaction as a source of technology education; maquilas’ staff associations; commitment to the community; and the power of human resources.  

First, the amount of foreign investment in South East Asia and its neighbors is far less significant than it is in Honduras. Diversification in the origin of capital for maquilas flourished in the former, whereas in Honduras most capital stems from the United States. Furthermore, the majority of international companies have merged into the local South East Asian market, while the opposite can be said about Honduras.  

Second, local factories in South East Asia have shed their enclave nature, breaching the gap between parent and local companies through outsourcing\textsuperscript{2}. This practice allows for technical instruction and assistance targeted towards the hired company, resulting in a transfer of knowledge that would otherwise not take place due to economic factors. The Honduran economy has yet to profit from outsourcing.  

\textsuperscript{2} Outsourcing is a work arrangement made by an employer who hires an outside contractor to perform work that could be done by company personnel. See http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/647998/work
Third, inter-firm interaction between Honduran engineers and foreign subsidiaries might sometimes result in the development of local enterprises based on the knowledge gathered by local engineers about industry techniques.

Fourth, maquilas thrive where politicized unions are virtually nonexistent, thus Honduran officials attempted to offer alternatives for worker-employer relations to comply with the employees’ freedom of association.

Fifth, Interiano claims that the maquila industry must support social projects and strive for better salaries through training, productivity, and efficiency. Lastly, he calls for an emphasis on an improved education that will genuinely prepare citizens for the labor market and shift Honduras away from its dependence on agriculture.

d. Obstacles

The process of industrialization in Honduras was far from smooth – it saw, still sees, and will continue to see hindrances that threaten to topple the maquila system. The issue has sparked arguments among experts and garnered both supporters and opponents. However, all agree that three key complications harmed the maquila industry: natural disasters, sensationalist journalism on workplace abuses, and negative international coverage.

i. Hurricane Mitch

Hurricane Mitch, a devastating natural disaster in 1998, hit both the industry and the nation as one of the major misfortunes in decades. The catastrophe scarred the country in every way it could; it ended thousands of lives and reversed “fifty years of progress in the country”. According to Interiano
(2011), approximately 2.2 million maquila exports were halted during the length of the hurricane, from October 26 to November 1, 1998 (36).

When translated into finances, this represented roughly 42 million dollars in exports and a loss of 11 million dollars in gross value added (GVA)\(^3\) for a nation that could not afford to lose anything. Given that most recoveries advance gradually and not immediately, the export of over 50 million dollars in production had to be cut short following the disaster in the next four weeks, adding an additional loss of 13 million dollars in GVA. Furthermore, many maquilas could not count on many of their employees returning to work for they had to cope with the crushing consequences Hurricane Mitch had left behind.

\[\text{ii. Honduras and “Yellow” or Sensationalist Journalism}\]

Nonetheless, the most persistent obstacles seem to exist within the maquila itself, or so report Honduran newspapers. These regularly issued reports on atrocious abuses attributed to maquila owners, managers, and supervisors who verbally and physically attacked female laborers during the early 1990s. A curious pattern is identifiable: most, if not all, of these maquilas were of Korean origin. Moncada Valladares (1996) provided an extensive list of news stories that graphically recounted such abuses, which include profanities, slaps, extreme monitoring, limited bathroom breaks, and disregard for health conditions. One must question just how accurate these stories were for sadly, Honduran journalism is not known for its truthfulness. There is no regulatory body to stop sensationalist or biased reports or prove their accuracy.

\(^3\) “A measure of the contribution to GDP made by an individual producer, industry or sector” Retrieved from https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1184
The reports, found in Moncada Valladares’ document, portrayed high-ranking Korean administrators and overseers (as well as some Hondurans under their supervision) as evil bosses preying on innocent women and subjecting them to inhumane and degrading practices. According to one of these stories, female laborers in some maquilas had to shed all of their clothes before leaving to prove they were not stealing anything. Furthermore, according to Moncada Valladares, managers fired large numbers of women if they tried to unionize. He even authored an article titled “The maquila: Eden or Hell?” for a national newspaper and painted a horrific picture of all the methods bosses used to bully employees such as lengthy and labor-intensive shifts, monotonous working conditions, shift rotation, extra hours, rigid surveillance, and similar intimidating practices.

### iii. The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights: the Hunt for Honduran Maquilas

Such reports captured the attention, in 1994, of Charles Kernaghan, the current executive director for the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights – a U.S. “non-profit 501(c)(3) human rights organization dedicated to the promotion and defense of internationally recognized worker rights in the global economy.”

He began to dig for anything that would shed a negative light on Central American maquilas. Kernaghan financed a campaign to discredit the maquila industry and stir unrest among maquila employees by promoting strikes, the blocking of access to maquilas and roads by burning tires, and similar demonstrations – at least if one is to believe Interiano’s claim. Given the amount of international attention Kernaghan managed to obtain—exactly his goal—

---

numerous documents used for this paper discussed this issue from varying standpoints.

Interiano rejects Kernaghan’s claims and actions: the former suggests that it was greed motivating the latter’s campaign. According to this claim, Kernaghan’s objective was to halt North American investment in Central America to protect jobs in the U.S. and trigger the growth of unions, which in turn would finance Kernaghan’s activities. His inquisition-like process began with the “indoctrination” of Honduran citizen Lesly Margoth Rodríguez, a former maquila employee, who would later testify in the name of 65,000 maquila employees against the industry. Kernaghan arranged all the necessary travel details so that the young girl could tell her story his people had worked on at the U.S. Congress. The testimony was meant to tug at the world’s heartstrings by targeting an audience “with common desires and ideals of achievement for the distant poor deeply ingrained in [their] habitus” (Pine, 2008:154).

Adrienne Pine, who personally met Rodríguez, heard the story in 1999 and described it as a “nearly verbatim rendition of the script she and others had prepared for her appearance before Congress” in 1994 that “made sense only to foreigners” (150). Rodríguez told Pine that she “had seen workers taken to the factories on school buses and thought it would be fun, like a big school,” yet yellow school buses in Honduras are used for public transportation thus Hondurans do not associate them with school (Ibid., 150).

Pine’s book blatantly condemns maquilas, yet the author still implies that Kernaghan’s campaign was not as generous as he made it sound. The campaign
unfolded on 1994; however, according to Pine, Lesly Rodríguez was looking for a job in a maquila in 1999 once again. Kernaghan had set up a high school scholarship for Rodríguez but due to conflicts – such as sexual harassment accusations – with the head of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH), Rodríguez opted out.

Moncada Valladares – who does not seem very fond of the maquila industry himself – also mentions the case of Lesly Rodríguez. However, he only emphasizes how her denunciations led three other Honduran women to speak about the exploitations they suffered. Nonetheless, Kernaghan failed to follow through with his promise of bettering these girls’ lives, and his campaign gradually faded to oblivion.

The Asociación Hondureña de Maquiladores (to be further discussed below) sought the support of Honduran migration services and the private sector to declare Kernaghan and his people as *persona non grata* and thus avoid their meddling in national matters. Interiano believed that Kimi Factory (a Korean maquila in Honduras) declared bankruptcy due to Kernaghan’s coercive machinations. Whether he acted with good intent or not, Kernaghan’s actions were far too intrusive, violated national sovereignty, and did not result in any positive outcomes.

According to Interiano, Honduras is only one of the many states in which Kernaghan employed questionable tactics. The international labor rights activist has posed as a corporate investor to research factory conditions and once wore a pair of eyeglasses with a hidden camera to document conditions in Bangladeshi
factories for an NBC "Dateline" segment. If this were to be done in the United States, it would be considered illegal and a violation of privacy; it is almost as if he takes advantage of the naiveté of laborers. Furthermore, Kernaghan seems to pay such visits with the intention of identifying every negative aspect. He does not stop there: he uses extreme public shaming, telling audiences that “if he took the shirt off your back and showed you the blood of children in the fabric, people would snap alert” (Bowden, 2003).

It is true that the maquila industry requires much support and attention and is very far from perfect, yet Kernaghan’s entire movement merely used propagandistic methods rather than exposing just how complex and intricate this industry is. It is not a black or white matter: the vast majority of issues exist in a gray area. These women have very limited options. Honduras is a nation where an advanced education or good social connections are necessary to climb the ladder of social classes. However, the education system is frail and a minority elite runs the nation. In the eyes of many, the maquila industry is the lesser of two evils. It might be a temporary solution while the country restructures itself and strives to improve the education and living conditions of Honduran citizens. This is where activists must place their admirable passion: a maquila is just a small branch of an enormous landscape of problems.

e. The Legal Framework within which Maquilas Operate

i. Decree No. 356

The origins of the maquila industry in Honduras can be traced to Decree No. 356: Constitutive Law of the Free Trade Zone of Puerto Cortés of July 19,
1976, developed and approved during the government of General Juan Alberto Melgar Castro (Melgar Castro, 1976: 1). General Melgar Castro and his Cabinet Council developed the rationale for Decree No. 356 based on several considerations. Noteworthy reasons include Honduras’ advantageous geographic position with regard to Central America and its proximity to the United States; increase in employment opportunities; enhanced development in commercial and industrial activities, and other economic benefits. The government’s major participation in the national economy to ensure benefits for the majority of the population also played a key role in the approval of the Decree.

Chapter I of the Decree is divided into five articles and carries the most weight in terms of content, given that it provides details on the creation, definition, objectives, and applicable regime of Decree No. 356. The first article establishes that the Free Trade Zone (FTZ) of Puerto Cortés is meant to facilitate national and international commerce and industry. The second article defines this same Free Trade Zone as an area of national sovereignty under fiscal surveillance and with no resident population. Furthermore, the Executive Power designates or creates the institution in charge of its administration (currently the Secretary of Industry and Commerce of Honduras). The following article delineates the extension and limits of the zone’s territory, both determined and approved by the Executive Power.

The fourth article lays out the specific rules in terms of the Zone’s operations. The introduction of merchandise to the FTZ of Puerto Cortés is exempt of tariff taxes, charges, recharges, consular rights, internal or consumption
taxes, and any other levy related to customs operations. The sales and productions occurring within the FTZ as well as its commercial or industrial facilities are also exempt of taxes and municipal contributions. All utilities obtained throughout the FTZ’s operations are exonerated of income tax payments. Wage and personal income of the Zone’s employees must pay income taxes in accordance to relevant law.

The fifth article exempts the Administrative Institution of the Free Trade Zone of Puerto Cortés of any aforementioned payments. All funds must be regularly deposited in a State Bank, and net profits obtained by the Free Trade Zone will form part of Public Finance. The only exception to the latter will be the profits designated for inversion and operation programs for the Free Trade Zone.

Chapter II deals with the administration and control of the Free Trade Zone and charges specific responsibilities to the institution in charge, such as the construction of facilities to carry out the operations of the FTZ, and the handling of necessary public services. The Secretary of Finance and Public Credit is designated to work in conjunction with the said institution to prevent smuggling and tax fraud. Security fencing is mentioned in the last article: it will surround the Free Trade Zone of Puerto Cortés to control the movement of people, vehicles, and shipments.

Chapter III discusses operations and consists of nine articles that list a set of activities that national or international individuals, and natural or legal citizens are allowed to perform with previous authorization from the Administrative Institution. The articles also mentions what type of merchandise –national,
foreign, manufactured, and so forth – can be exported and imported. Chapter IV is divided into five articles; it describes general and transitional provisions and affirms that the law would come into force twenty days after its publication in the official journal “La Gaceta,” which occurred in 1976.

ii. ZIP: Industrial Processing Zones for Exports

The Law of Industrial Processing Zones for Exports (Zonas Industriales de Procesamiento Para Exportaciones abbreviated as ZIP) regulates these areas that are located within the actual FTZ (Free Trade Zone). A ZIP is privately owned and administered and contains no resident population; the Secretariat of Industry and Commerce delineates its geographic territory. It usually houses commercial and service companies, freeing them from the payment of custom duties, consular rights, charges and recharges, consumer excise, and the rest of taxes, levies, and surcharges (Interiano, 2011:12). The exemption from state and municipal taxes over sales and production within the zone is valid for ten years, while income taxes are absolved for twenty. All laborers must pay municipal and income taxes for their salaries and personal incomes.

The law of ZIPS requires that these institutions create a minimum of 5,000 jobs in five years. To request the construction of a ZIP, project organizers must comply with the requisites that the Secretariat of Industry and Commerce demands, such as a financial and administrative structure, ten-year projections, economic justifications for the zone, and layout of the installations. All ZIPS must adhere to the national Labor Code.

iii. Other Relevant Laws
Other laws have been important in establishing the bases of the Honduran maquila industry: the 1987 law of the “Industrial Zones for Export Procedures” and the extension of the “Law of the FTZ of Puerto Cortés” in 1979 became milestones. The former validated Industrial Parks – where it all takes place – while the latter extended all the benefits from the FTZ of Puerto Cortés to the municipalities of Amapala, Tela, Choloma, Omoa, and La Ceiba (Figure 1).

![Map of Honduras showing the maquila region](image)

Figure 1. The maquila region of Honduras (2014)

These two offered both national and foreign investors (refer to Table 4) more incentives to risk their capital in Honduras in the form of a legal framework. This is how the inauguration of the INHDELVA Free Zone and ZIP Choloma (two crucial zones for the industry) occurred in 1989. These laws also triggered a domino effect, for the extension of the Free Trade Zone benefits spread to Choluteca, Danlí, Juticalpa, Santa Rosa de Copán, and Santa Barbara in 1994 and to the entirety of the national territory in 1998. *La Gaceta*, Honduras’s official
publication, published all this content under the denomination of Ley de Zonas Libres [Free Trade Zones Law] on July 19, 1999.

Table 1 below depicts just how much freedom foreign maquilas possess in Honduras.

Table 1 – Incentives for Investment in Honduras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentives</th>
<th>Free Trade Zone (FTZ)</th>
<th>ZIP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Import Taxes</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export Taxes</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal and Municipal Taxes</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes on Income</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
<td>100% Exempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repatriation of Capital</td>
<td>No Restrictions</td>
<td>No Restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange Market</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Oportunidades de inversión en sector de Maquila Textil, de Transformación y Servicios Globales (2011). Honduras is Open for Business.

f. Consequences of Maquila Development

Kurt Alan Ver Beek begins his article “Maquilas: Exploitation or Emancipation? An Overview of the Situation of Maquiladora Workers in Honduras” with an emphasis on how both the absolutist and relativist sides of the ‘maquila debate’, “often speak past each other by citing those factors that support their arguments or by comparing workers to control groups which best support their theses” (2001:1553).

5 Conversion of foreign currency into one’s own currency


In other words, a commentator’s stance depends on the factors they consider, and the standards they use for comparisons. Different experts with very polarized standpoints offer statistics to strengthen the framework for their arguments. I strove to be as unbiased as possible as I took their data to create my own framework and debunk some erroneous (in my judgment as a Honduran) arguments. It might even confuse readers at times as I attempt to play devil’s advocate for both proponents and critics of maquilas. Nonetheless, I do not intend to discredit or laud any author; instead I aim to shed light on the incredible complexity that permeates the industry itself. Maquilas cannot and should not be thought of as either good or bad. The data that follow are part of an intricate web of facts meshed my interpretation of what I presume to be their underlying meaning and repercussions.

i. **Honduran Association of Maquiladores: Engine of the Maquila Development**

The tremendous expansion of the maquilas and their position as the largest generators of jobs in the country stimulated a group of entrepreneurs in the industry to create the Asociación Hondureña de Maquiladores [Honduran Association of Maquiladores], commonly known as the AHM. Founded in October of 1991 as a private institution with an independent legal character, the AHM oversees the development of all maquilas operating in Honduras and represents its associates in the public, private, national, and foreign spectrums. Other institutions, such as industrial parks, shipping companies, and contracting agencies can also become members of the AHM. Interested parties must only pay $1,000 for an application fee followed by a $110 monthly fee, making it both
accessible and affordable for investors (Korn, 2005: 33). These fees are nothing compared to the revenue the maquilas produce.

According to the AHM’s official website, “investment capitals in the manufacturing garment assembly industry currently include: the United States, Canada, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Germany, Denmark, France, Korea, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and other[s]” (2014).

**What are its functions?**

Some of the Association’s many responsibilities include managing the Executive Office of Quotas along with the Visa System, as well providing “statistics about the Honduran manufacturing industry, institutional support to facilitate customs and immigration procedures, legal and technical assistance, and help with training programs” (Korn, 2005: 33). The AHM also prides itself in spearheading social responsibility campaigns. Its latest endeavor, titled “Smile at a Healthy Summer” focused on handing out pamphlets, posters and other materials to anyone interested health topics such as HIV prevention (Asociación Hondureña de Maquiladores, 2014).

The following is a list of the AHM’s fundamental purposes as described by Interiano:

a) Promote and stimulate the maquila industry  
b) Propose and negotiate the formulation and execution of national policies relevant to the industry  
c) Develop international market programs to increase development  
d) Propose incentives for the industry, such as administrative or credit-related, to further industry development  
e) Assess and guide associates to ensure that their products and services meet market standards  
f) Sustain relations with international institutions with interests parallel to that of the AHM
g) Promote national and foreign investment in maquila projects

The AHM’s also provides the following services:

a) Training seminars  
b) Contract and opportunity acquisitions  
c) Services and products for the companies  
d) Human resources facilitations  
e) Exports monitoring  
f) Resolution of work-related problems  
g) Attention to investors  
h) Presence in the international community, among other tasks

ii. Maquilas and Gender Roles

Ever since its inception, the industry has brought at least one thing that is undeniable: it has provided jobs. The Central Bank of Honduras issues yearly reports on the maquilas titled “Report on Goods for Processing 2012 and Outlook 2013-2014”. The most recent report cites the following figures: maquilas saw a 2.4% employment decrease in 2012, providing 118,380 jobs (2012). The textile and clothing sector still is, however, the largest employer within the maquila industry with 76.5% of the jobs.

The year 2012 also saw a slight decline in female labor force going from 52.6% (63,067 women) in 2011 to 50.6% (59,920 women) in 2012. This seems to be a steady trend, for the percentage was of 52.8% in 2010 and an overwhelming figure of 76% back in 1993. Earlier data show equal declines in female employment between 1993 and 2003 (Table 2).

Table 2 - Employed Staff in the Maquila Industry by Gender 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage Female</th>
<th>Percentage Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>25,332</td>
<td>7,999</td>
<td>33,331</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Female Workers</td>
<td>Male Workers</td>
<td>Total Workers</td>
<td>Female %</td>
<td>Male %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>30,204</td>
<td>12,337</td>
<td>42,541</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>37,736</td>
<td>17,259</td>
<td>54,995</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>46,804</td>
<td>19,146</td>
<td>65,950</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>59,639</td>
<td>23,825</td>
<td>83,464</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>72,523</td>
<td>26,382</td>
<td>98,905</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>73,035</td>
<td>30,236</td>
<td>103,271</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>67,677</td>
<td>38,853</td>
<td>106,530</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>57,424</td>
<td>36,992</td>
<td>94,416</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>60,588</td>
<td>44,968</td>
<td>105,556</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>66,651</td>
<td>47,586</td>
<td>114,237</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Personal ocupado en la actividad maquiladora según género 2003*. Banco Central de Honduras. 7

The industry was thus heavily female-dominated in the early nineties, yet men are steadily entering the field every year. Not only are more male laborers entering the textile and clothing factories but women are also taking jobs in the manufacture of automotive parts and harnesses as seen in Table 3 below. It must be noted that a discrepancy exists between the Central Bank of Honduras’s reports and Pine’s book in which she claims that “in 2003, about 70 percent of maquila workers were women” (2008:141). Even though she cites the same institution as her source for this statistic, these do not add up as can be seen in the above chart.

---
Table 3 – Employed Staff according to Economic Activity and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Activities</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th></th>
<th>2012</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles, clothing and leather</td>
<td>48,654</td>
<td>38,736</td>
<td>52,604</td>
<td>42,866</td>
<td>44,265</td>
<td>46,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4,772</td>
<td>5,918</td>
<td>5,291</td>
<td>6,287</td>
<td>7,459</td>
<td>4,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of automotive parts and harnesses</td>
<td>4,096</td>
<td>6,251</td>
<td>4,561</td>
<td>6,899</td>
<td>6,349</td>
<td>6,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>1,237</td>
<td>1,146</td>
<td>1,227</td>
<td>1,557</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services rendered to enterprises</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>58,636</td>
<td>52,317</td>
<td>63,761</td>
<td>57,484</td>
<td>59,920</td>
<td>58,460</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Personal Ocupado según Actividad Económica y Sexo* (2012). Banco Central de Honduras

Note that Honduras is a highly traditional, religious country where for centuries society has relegated women to the customary roles of devoted wives and mothers. Maquilas, however, opened a new door for young Honduran women: financial independence. Even though this sounds like a positive aspect many, including Hondurans, see it as a threat. Take Pine’s argument that “the gendered shift in employment brought about by the industry in Honduras, as elsewhere, threatens the core of the patriarchy both by denying men the chance to provide for their families and by employing women in masculine ways” (2008: 145). At first, one might think that Pine supports such occurrence but she later refutes it by claiming that such independence is outweighed by labor exploitation and the frustration of class immobility due to low wages.

The author further describes how Honduran men perceive maquila women as “easily corrupted, diseased, and sexually loose” (Pine, 2008:147). Their colonialisst mindset states that “poor Hondurans are not prepared to – and therefore should not – receive even small amounts of money” for they are

---

“inherently too volatile” to handle it. Pine then agrees with the claim that money is dangerous not because of the above mentioned reasons but because it makes the poor maquila laborers easy targets for thieves of their own social class.

To put it in Pine’s own words, “Honduran maquiladoras are portrayed in a number of ways, each too simplistic on its own,” yet she does just that in her book. She assumes that every man thinks the worst of Honduran female workers and that all such workers will be robbed. Pine almost sounds condescending for calling these individuals vulnerable; it is thanks to these wages that many women can afford an education for themselves or their children and a roof for their families. It is true that not many women have a success story, but she makes it sounds as if none of them do. It is also time for Hondurans to realize that the existing patriarchal system does more harm than good, for it hinders the economic and social progress of entire families.

iii. Education Goals

According to an early report, the typical maquila worker possesses 6.9 years of formal education, which is more than two years higher than the average Honduran yet a low standard in international terms (Ver Beek, 2001:1564). Some laborers choose to pursue their education further to acquire higher positions whether at the maquila or at another place: the former is more common as seen in primary field research presented later in this document. Ver Beek found “no significant difference in the percentage of employees and workers currently in school” thus he hastily concludes that maquilas neither “enhance nor diminish workers’ ability to continue their education.” He proceeds to tell his readers that
“it is not their employment in the maquiladora which discourage workers from continuing their studies but they had already discontinued their studies before entering the maquiladora work force” (Ibid).

Nevertheless, he fails to mention that many workers halt their studies before entering the industry because they wanted a full-time job at a maquila in the first place. Hondurans are aware of the national education’s system calamitous state: high school and sometimes even university education does not guarantee a stable job. Social class mobility is virtually unachievable (or so it seems) for those who cannot afford higher education, do not wish to work in the business sector, have no social “connections,” or were not born into an already-privileged family. This encompasses the majority of the nation’s population, thus they must make ends meet with what they have.

This is where maquilas enter the scene: if even education might lead to a dead end if someone does not fulfill the above requirements, why continue it? Such is the thought process behind the choice of many Honduran citizens, which demonstrates how maquilas can be a factor in the disruption of education.

iv. The Economic Impact of Maquilas in Honduras

Maquila-advocate Interiano claims that both exports, as well as the domestic-added-value generated by the industry have shown a steady increase, producing over 130,000 new jobs in a decade after 1990. More than 600,000 Honduran citizens depended on these salaries during that period of time. Maquila employment increased from 11 percent in 1990 to 27 percent 1998; the number of employees reached 125,000 in 2000 and fell to 107,000 in 2002 (Pine, 2008:139).
The latest figures show that the industry employed a total of 118,380 individuals in 2012 as mentioned above.

Job opportunities in the maquilas attract citizens from all across the country – especially rural areas where employment is scarce. This leads women to migrate in large numbers, offsetting the gender balance between ages 15 and 35 for the San Pedro Sula region where most maquilas are found. Since the country had approximately seven million citizens in 2000, this meant that approximately eight percent of them were either directly or indirectly benefitting from the industry. Additionally, the maquila effect involved a total of over a million more jobs stemming from the establishment of not only maquilas, but also restaurants, snack spots, cab services, urban transportation, and banks (Interiano, 2011:3).

On the other side of the spectrum, critics of the maquila do not regard the statistics as beneficial as do their advocates. The GVA (gross value added) or the purely national contribution was of 354.7 million Lempiras (65.7 million dollars) in 1992. Nonetheless, the intermediate expenditure (maintenance, transportation, rent, utilities, and the like) for that year reached the staggering amount of 97.8 million Lempiras or 5.1 million dollars (Moncada Valladares, 1996:197).

Moncada Valladares, along with other detractors, believes that maquilas are contributing more to the wealth of the rich than to the progress of the poor. He pointed out how rent prices for maquilas showed an exponential increase from 1991 to 1992 and suggested that property owners are becoming rich from one day to another by charging elevated prices per square meter. He calculated that property owners earn around one million dollars by renting space to maquila
owners at the rate of $5.00 per square foot. However, George Korn – a Master’s student who examined this same industry almost a decade later in 2005 – called renting space “very cheap,” costing a minor expense of $3.50 - $5.50 per square foot. It is curious that rent prices did not rise after the early 1990s.

Korn also added in his study that the maquila facilities included “power, security, waste collection and cleaning services, legal services, in-house customs, employment agencies, health clinics, cafeterias, and banks” which sound just like the perks every investor covets. Moncada Valladares’s and Korn’s assertions properly exemplify how it is all a matter of perspectives: Moncada Valladares tacitly displayed more concern about maquila workers and the lower classes rather than about the industry’s growth and success, which seemed to be Korn’s focus.

Moncada Valladares further discussed the notion of an increasing wealth disparity. He explained that the GVA (the contribution to the economy of a specific industry) in terms of the GDP was not as significant as people might think for – according to his calculations – it was a mere 0.4% in 1990, 1.1% in 1991, and 2.2% in 1992. Statistics for 2012 were not promising either: the GVA for maquilas was of 118, 388 million Lempiras which seems insignificant next to a GDP of 354,224 billion dollars (World Bank, 2012). The CIA World Factbook broke down Honduras’s GDP according to its composition by sector of origin: agriculture constitutes 14%, while industry composes 28.2%, and services make up for 57.8% in 2012. Industry does not refer to maquilas exclusively; sugar, coffee, and cigars are still relevant economic contributors.
Although maquilas do generate thousands of jobs, national unemployment is still on the rise. According to the Central Bank of Honduras, the maquila industry grew 4.5%, in 2013, generating 122 thousand jobs, yet unemployment also increased. Approximately 3,254,100 individuals were employed or economically active back in 2010. This number decreased to 3,243,900 individuals in 2012 and continues to decline (Central Bank of Honduras, 2012: 4). This is the argument that many maquilas detractors vehemently quote.

Things are not as simple as a few statistics and numbers. Note that out of the entirety of 8,385,100 people of Honduras, not all of them are employable; children and the elderly compose a vast part of this number (Ibid.p.1). The unemployment rate in Honduras is 4.5% in 2013 (up by 0.1% from 2012), which is considerably lower than the rate of its neighbors Nicaragua (7.2%), and El Salvador (6.3%), which have comparable populations (CIA World FactBook, 2013). There is some writing in fine print though: One third of the labor force in Honduras is “underemployed,” meaning that their skills are much more advanced than their jobs. This then hints at the dubious quality of work in the nation.

v. Spatial Impact on Honduras

According to the Honduran government, processing factories in Honduras totaled 330 companies in 2012, with 39.1% of them dedicated to the production of textile and clothing, 2.7% to harness and vehicle parts, 31.5% to commercial services, 4.2% to the sale of services to companies (such as restaurants, transportation, accounting, and the like), and 22.4% to other activities (Central Bank of Honduras, 2010-2012:12). As noted in the legal section, foreign investors
revel in the freedom to establish a facility in the Free Trade Zone anywhere within the Honduran territory and enjoy all of the agreement’s benefits previously outlined. Industrial parks exist throughout the entire country including Amareteca, Bufalo, Choloma, Comayagua, El Progreso, La Ceiba, La Lima, Naco, Potrerillos, Puerto Cortés, Rio Nance, San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and Villanueva (Korn, 2005:27) (Figure 2).

The majority of maquilas exist and operate near Puerto Cortés for it is home to the closest marine shipping port to the United States. Korn goes as far as calling “the best equipped country in Central America to handle the exports of goods” due to its advanced facilities and the stark contrast between a 48-hours shipping period as opposed to 43 days for competitors from East Asia (Ibid.).
As a result, the national government strategically places most of its development efforts on the North Coast. Just San Pedro Sula – deemed the nation’s “Industrial Capital” – and the Valley of Sula yielded 50% of the nation’s industrial production, owned a third of manufacturing companies, and absorbed 40% of these jobs in the mid-1990s (Moncada Valladares, 1996:198). The same predominance is true nowadays: in 2012, a total of 83.3% of maquila laborers operated in the Northern region of the country in 2012 (Central Bank of Honduras, 2010-2012:11).
Table 4 – Number of Maquilas according to Country of Origin 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian countries</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5 – Number of Maquilas and Employees according to Region and Department

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region and Department</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Companies</td>
<td>Number of Employees</td>
<td>Number of Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Region</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>98,367</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortes</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>88,228</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlantida</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3,372</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoro</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,766</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Region</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8,160</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7,264</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Region</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2,631</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco Morazan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,211</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comayagua</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Region</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,620</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paraíso</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,620</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Region</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choluteca</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>110,953</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**g. Wages**

One of the strongest criticisms of maquilas is that these pay below market wages. The average minimum wage in Honduras was $317.17 a month in 2012, while a maquila worker made approximately $237 a month (Central Bank of Honduras). 

Honduras, 2010-2012:43). This means that a worker earns the incredibly low salary of $0.99 an hour and $7.90 during an eight-hour shift. The only other wages that compare to these are those of agricultural laborers in the country, who make around $0.99 an hour as well. Every other industry, from mining to banking, seems to pay higher salaries to their employees. These numbers were even more astounding in 1992, when the average hourly wage for a maquila worker was of 39 cents (González, 2000: 240).

Male employees earn more than their female counterparts, given that men usually become the machine technicians (Ver Beek, 2001:1558). Even though this position inherently requires higher pay, men also tend to have a slightly higher salary even if they are machine operators. Sewing machine operators get paid by production or volume, not skill, raising the question of whether men work faster or women are simply discriminated.

The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, discussed earlier in this document, released a report under the name “Race to the Bottom: U.S. Free Trade Debacle in Central America” authored by none other than Charles Kernaghan. This is when I first came across the frightening fact that maquila workers “earn all of 99 cents an hour, one cent more than the poorest peasants” (Kernaghan, 2012: 5). Given his extreme bias and sometimes questionable practices, I was hesitant to believe this. It is, however, accurate. He then adds that “no one, and especially not a single mother with children, can possibly survive earning just 99 cents an hour,” and that “the workers are trapped in an endless cycle, borrowing money from local loan sharks” (Ibid.). He attributes Honduras’s
“regression” to maquilas, for these “workers return to cooking with wood,” as “their children go barefoot to save on shoes, except […] on Sundays” (Ibid.).

Even some Honduran critics might concur. According to these, the maquila is nothing but a desperate attempt to palliate unemployment in the country. This is a fact that even Interiano (a steadfast supporter of the industry) mentions in his study, although he uses a different tone. While the average maquila worker earned $237 a month in 2012, the price of the Basic Food Basket in December of 2012 for a family of six was $364.09 (Vásquez, 2012). Clearly, the numbers do not add up.

Ver Beek offers quite a different outlook. He believes that maquila workers of both genders “are much more likely than [maquila] applicants to consider themselves the head of the household,” and that the “worker usually provides an additional income to the household” (2001:1558). In other words, even if the wage is low, it is still some sort of contribution to the household – sometimes the largest contribution. Ninety percent of Guatemalan households with members working in maquilas also work in agriculture, proving that diversification is a key strategy to sustain a family (Goldín, 2008:39). Given that all Central American cases in terms of the maquila industry are similar, some might even say identical, these wages do not fulfill or replace subsistence production but complement it. Lastly, the Basic Food Basket is intended for a family of six, yet many maquila workers are single females who wish to help their parents or to put themselves through school.
Low wages in maquilas are unsurprisingly not exclusive to Honduras. According to reporter Tim Johnson, an automobile maquila worker in Mexico, the poster child for the industry, earned $7.50 an hour in 2012, 40 cents short of the archetypal Honduran maquila worker. This is just enough to “provide for the family dinner table, the cost of bootleg water and electricity, and an occasional article of discarded clothing for his wife or two girls, but rarely anything else” (Johnson, 2012). Tim Johnson, who authored the article, explains how “some four decades after welcoming foreign assembly plants and factories, known as maquiladoras, Mexico has seen only a trickle of its industrial and factory workers join the ranks of those who even slightly resemble a middle class” because “the poverty trap clutches them tightly” as they earn the same wages for years (Ibid.). Thus it stifles class mobility.

The author mentions that “without deep political and social reforms, experts say, the thousands of maquiladora plants that cluster at the U.S. border and around cities in the interior will remain a fixture for decades to come, and Mexico won’t build a middle class that’s big enough to fuel faster economic growth” (Ibid.). The relevance of this phrase is found in the words “deep political and social reforms,” which is what I have mentioned throughout the document. The maquila industry can only operate as unfairly as it does due to structural problems within these nations that can only be fixed from within.

This bibliographical data grants a clearer context for one of the many questions Hondurans should explore: Do the maquilas’ economic benefits outweigh the negative aspects of the industry? Even though many describe the
maquila system as inhumane and unfair, many regard it as helpful. I consider it a
shaky first step towards something much bigger. The industry unintentionally
brings beneficial social effects: It is shifting gender roles, granting independence
to women, gentrifying cities, and contributing to some sort of income to many
families who desperately need it.

We cannot, however, ignore the fact that there are plenty of downfalls and
defects within the industry: Wages are unfairly low while hours are tediously
long; the labor itself is repetitive and exhausting; supervisors and managers tend
to discriminate against women for they are considered more docile; the majority
of the revenue is meant for the maquila’s owners in a rich nation; and it stifles
class mobility. This last one results in an exodus of frustrated Hondurans to the
United States who want to achieve better lives in “the land of opportunities”. This
explains why remittances contribute the largest portion of the national GDP.

There are far more serious problems in the country that should be taken
care of before trying to discredit maquilas. If the government improves education
and corruption decreases, then this cycle of poverty can be broken. Maquilas are
not all to blame, for “there are no simple ways to describe the impact of the
factories as either positive or negative,” and “conflicting assessments are part of
the necessary re-elaboration constituted by capitalist expansion in the periphery”
(Goldin, 2008: 52).

IV. Primary Field Research

a. Methodology
I spent ten days of May 2013 in my hometown of San Pedro Sula, Honduras to interview female workers from different maquilas. Connections in Honduras is how most things get done, thus I asked several of my relatives and close friends if they knew anyone who could grant me access to different maquilas. As I previously mentioned, I was shocked to find that it was not as easy as I expected. Several of my relatives held higher positions in maquilas, yet their bosses feared that I did not have the right intentions, thus shutting their doors.

My uncle’s good friend, Simmon Gough, and my best friend’s father, Junio Marsan, opened the doors to the maquilas they managed. I carried out my primary field research at IHNDELVA and Fivaro, both a 30-minute drive from San Pedro Sula.

I prepared a set of approximately 40 questions regarding both personal and workplace data to ask maquila laborers. I designed the questionnaire with the help of my advisor, David Robinson, so that many of them yielded short answer while others resulted in more complex responses. The following are the questions I used:

**Personal data**

1. Age
2. Marital Status
3. Children with ages
4. Place of residence
5. How long have you been working in this maquila?
6. Travel time from home
7. Travel method (provided transport?)
8. Where have you worked before (if ever)?
9. Do other family members work (where)?
10. Other family members or relatives work at same place?
11. If so, in what job?
12. Weekly expenditures of family (guesstimate)
14. Spouse work
15. If so, where?
16. Did you go to school? For how long?
17. How many people do you support with your salary?
18. Do you earn more here than you did in your last job?
19. Can you describe your house? (number of rooms, electricity, running water?)

### Workplace data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Details of job (specify what she does)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Manual or machines(s) included?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hours per day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Breaks (number and length of time)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Weekly pay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How does one get promoted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ever changed job in this maquila?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What would be a “better” job within maquila?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Problems involved in specific job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. General problems in maquila (between workers or machinery)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Is there a method of solving them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Does it work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What benefits do you receive? Can you give me any examples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Vacations, insurance, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. What do you like from your job? What don’t you like?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maritza Molina, the Assistant of Cooperative Direction of Operations, at INHDELVA guided me throughout the duration of the entire process. She allowed me to choose any female worker as we walked around INHDELVA’s facilities. I must mention that she did stay next to me while the interviews took place. This might have not allowed the interviewees to be as candid. I interviewed nine women that day.

I visited Fivaro the next day, where General Manager Junio Marsan placed a lady in charge of giving me a quick tour of the maquila. She also led me to a room where I conducted private interviews while she sent a different worker, one at a time. I talked with a total of seven females and two males since I did not get
to choose the interviewees, they were chosen by the management. I recorded every conversation using a digital voice recorder, jotted down notes when necessary, and took just a few pictures with the subjects’ permission.

I thus interviewed a total of 18 subjects, 16 of whom were females, admittedly a small sample of the total number of maquiladora workers but all that I could manage in my short summer research.

b. Interviews and Analysis

I focus on seven aspects of the interviews for thematic purposes: age, marital status, number of years worked at current maquila, education, number of people they support with salary, weekly expenditures, and weekly salary.

i. Age

My findings do align with other authors’ claims: most female maquila workers are fairly young. Out of 18 subjects, 50% of them were between the age 20 and 25, about 16% ranged between 26 and 30, 16% between 31 and 35, 11% between 36 and 40, and 6% (one woman) between 41 and 45. Even the two male subjects I interviewed were 25 and 27 years old, falling within a fairly young age range. I can then assume that the reason behind this lies in not only females’ so-called docility, as other authors are quick to conclude, but also in their overall strength. Every job and task description from maquila laborers who were not in higher management positions sounded far from easy. Whether manual or not, all of these jobs required lengthy hours of physical, repetitive labor-intensive tasks. These would be much harder for an older person to complete.

ii. Marital Status
My findings in this area also coincide with my expectations: most women were going to be married given Honduras’s traditional notions of religion, marriage, sexuality, and so forth. Out of 18 subjects, approximately 44% were married, 28% were single, 22% were part of a free union, and only 6% (one person) was divorced. Enduring cultural traditions maintain a strong hold on Catholic Honduran society. As a Honduran myself, I can attest that a large number of parents still teach girls that one of the main fulfillments in life is to find a good husband, preferably at a young age.

iii. Number of Years Worked at Current Maquila

The majority of women, approximately 72%, had worked at either INHDELVA or Fivaro for a fairly short period of time: the length of their career ranged between one and five years. Only 17% had worked between six and ten years, while 6% (one person) had worked between 11 and 15 years, and one person had been there for over 20 years. These are not surprising figures given that half of the interviewees were between 20 and 25 years old. It is also noteworthy that 61% (11 subjects) had never worked at another maquila prior to their current job while 33% had labor in one maquila preceding INHDELVA or Fivaro, and only one subject had worked in three maquilas.

iv. Education

The proportion of subjects who had completed either primary or secondary education was perfectly halved. Out of 18 subjects, 39% completed primary education, 39% completed secondary education, 11% were currently enrolled in a university, 6% had a university degree, and one subject declined to
respond. The subject with a university degree was not an operator but the Assistant of Development. One of the subjects enrolled in a university was the Head of Production, while the other was a young 20-year old machine operator paying for her education with her salary. I believe that the government should pay more heed to the public education system in Honduras if so many students graduate only to carry out jobs that do not require any sort of education. Hondurans have a right to apply skills they acquire at school, and maquilas do not provide such opportunity.

v. Number of People Supported with Salary

These findings challenge the notion that maquila wages are so low that they are almost useless. Approximately 44% of interviewees claimed to support between one and three people with the salary obtained at the maquila; 22% supported between four and six people; 22% did not support anyone else but themselves; and 11% claimed to split costs with their partner. A discrepancy caught my eye: even though eight of the subjects (44%) were married, only two (11%) split costs with their spouse. Many of the interviewees’ spouses were unemployed, forcing the maquila worker to become the family’s breadwinner. Thus, as little as these workers earn, they still managed to provide their households with at least the very basics.

vi. Weekly Expenditures

Weekly expenditures were all across the board since they depend on numerous factors such as number of people supported by the interviewee, whether they were currently studying, and so forth. About 28% of subjects spent between
$25 and $35 a week; 22% spent between $46 and $55; 11% spent between $36 and $45; 11% spent between $56 and $65; 6% spent over $100; and 22% either did not respond, replied that it varies, or did not know because they were financially dependent on their family. The one subject who spent over $100.00 a week was the Head of Production at INHDELVA, had four children, and an unemployed husband at the time.

vii. Weekly Salary

Even though these findings were more uniform than the previous statistics, they were more uneven than what I expected. One must keep in mind that maquila workers earn by production, meaning that their salary will depend on the amount of work they received that week and the amount of work they could complete. They do have a base salary consisting of about U.S. $58.00. Half of the interviewees earned between $60 and $70, 33% between $71 and $80, 11% between $90 and $100, and 6% earned over $100 a week. Again, the one subject who earned over $100 a week was the Head of Production at INHDELVA, while one of the subjects earning about $90 was the Assistant of Development. The one maquila operator who claimed to earn about $94 said she worked as many extra hours as possible and attended as many Saturdays shifts, which are optional.

viii. Other Observations

Most of machine operators at INHDELVA carried out their tasks with sewing machines or irons, whereas many Fivaro employees did manual work such as counting, packing, or attaching labels. Textile factories involve operations other than sewing or ironing such as the spray-blasting, hand-sanding, and vertical
ironing of denim. Some of these operations even require the handling of chemicals, which demands the use of protective gear such as mask, suit, cap, ear plugs, goggles, and gloves. These tasks are usually assigned to men.

Re-entry is also a common phenomenon at maquilas, such as in Fivaro, where two of the interviewees were laid off in the past only to be called again once clients’ orders and production increased.

c. The Big Question: Do Maquilas Really Help?

It is extremely difficult to answer this question, perhaps even impossible. After interviewing 18 maquila workers and analyzing the responses, I was inclined to say yes. Many of them claimed to sustain relatives or an entire family just with their salaries, while others were paying for either their or someone else’s education. Nonetheless, my assertion began to falter after reading extensive secondary research. After all, the opposition’s main criticism lies in the low wages that maquilas provide, which makes it impossible for people to even eat.

I must disagree with them. It is true that struggles might ensue due to the low wages, but it gives them \textit{something}. Do I think this is right? Absolutely not: their arduous efforts and patience deserve much higher rewards. This, however, is the unfair structure that supports capitalism which rules many other industries, not only the maquila industry. This is why I insist that one cannot focus on modifying the maquila industry itself, for it is the equivalent of placing a band-aid on a broken bone.

Additionally, this should not be considered an absolute or representative study, given the small pool of interviews I conducted compared to the numerous
amount of actual maquila workers. I began this study aiming to label the maquila industry as good or bad, but instead I discovered a larger picture that had eluded me all along. Honduras needs help in terms of corruption, education, and violence first and foremost so other problems can gradually fix themselves.

Unfortunately, I do not know how one can begin such changes at the moment, for this would require an entirely new study in itself.
Table 7 – Personal and workplace data of Fivaro Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Current Job</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Time to Work</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Family Assistance</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Travel Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olga Medina</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bus Driver</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>$61</td>
<td>$37 (includes bus)</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyna Esther Castillo</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Sitter</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>$62</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Mejia</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Maquila</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$79</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damaris Ramos Cubas</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Plastic Factory</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>$78</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Ascenso Lopez</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Same maquila</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>$61</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. María Ascenso López, a worker at INHDELVA

Figure 4. Nelly Marely Hernández, a worker at INHDELVA
Figure 5. María Santos Chirinos attaches a cuff to a shirt at INHDELVA

Figure 6. Yahaira Samanta Escobar, Assistant of Development at INHDELVA
d. Personal Case Studies

Some stories usually stand out more than others after one interviews a sizable group of people. This is just what happened to me after I talked to Angela Castro, Head of Production at IHNDELVA, and Carmen Palma, a worker at Fivaro. These two women noticeably fall in different categories: Angela holds a high position in terms of maquila stratification whereas Carmen is at the very bottom. However, I could not help but notice how both of these women are fighters. The following recount tells their inspiring journeys, which unsurprisingly have been filled with some hardships.

i. Angela Castro

Maritza, the Assistant of Cooperative Direction of Operations and Quality at INHDELVA mentioned earlier, led me to Angela. It became apparent since the moment we were introduced that she was very charismatic. She greeted me with a large smile and happily consented after I asked if I could interview her for a project. We talked for approximately fifteen minutes.

Angela was 42 years old when I interviewed her in May of 2013. She was married with four children; their ages were 23, 20, 12, and 6. Her eldest daughter also worked at INHDELVA in the Quality Check department. Angela and her family lived in Choloma (see Figure 1) just about fifteen minutes from her job, and she also owned a car. This is not common at all for workers of maquilas, but she could afford such commodity given her higher position.

Now, Angela’s most admirable trait was not her charisma but her incredible diligence. I can only infer that this car did not come easily; after all, she
had been working at INHDELVA for 23 years. She even exclaimed, “This is my home, it’s a home,” after I asked her if she had worked in any other maquila prior to this one. She added, “This is the only maquila where I have worked; it’s the best maquila in the world in my opinion. It’s my first and only job and I hope to give it many more years” (Castro, 2013).

Her career is one of humble beginnings at INHDELVA, where she began like any other worker, inserting necks at the mere age of 19. She was then transferred over to work with the hems of shirts’ posterior parts. According to her, she reached an efficiency of 200% in this specific activity. This proficiency combined with her being a quiet worker, and other desirable traits exceptional employees possess, were key catalysts for her first promotion one step above a laborer: supervisor. She dipped her toes in a wide range of areas as supervisor, so much that she learned the entire assembly process for a shirt. Her enormous potential became conspicuous to her managers once again, who then promoted her to her current position as Head of Production.

Even though she seemed happy where she was at the moment, it was obvious that she wanted more. She was aware that she needed what she called “ampler knowledge” to become manager. Thus she enrolled in the Technical University of Honduras (UTH) to pursue a Business Management degree in the hopes of yet another promotion. She was taking 20 classes at the moment, all which tied back to her current job such as Accounting, Accountancy and Reengineering.
Angela seemed to be a very selfless person overall. She decided to put all her children through a university education before she even dreamed of acquiring a degree herself. Even last year when all her children had long graduated, she was a bit hesitant just because of the expenses this implied. She ultimately pursued it knowing that the long-term results would outweigh current expenses.

Additionally, she was very invested in her employees as well. Not only did she try to get to know them on a personal level, but tried to take as many classes on Human Relations as possible. “I am doing a self-evaluation so I place my weaknesses and I try to learn how to work on them. This is how I see it in terms of employees too: there are strengths within them as well as weaknesses. This is where I come in. According to a need, I place them where they will perform best,” Angela explained. When I asked what she considered the main factor in her promotion, she attributed this to her attitude and her desire to advance. Even though I agree with her, I think her people skills and selflessness were also very relevant.

The only instance she displayed a tad bit of reluctance or perhaps fear to answer a question occurred when I inquired about her salary. I can only assume this had to do with Maritza’s presence, as discussed earlier. However, after pausing for a few seconds, she finally disclosed that she earned 23,000 Lempiras a month, or $1,201.68. Her weekly expenditures ranged between 2,000 and 3,000 Lempiras, which is the equivalent of $104.50 and $156.74 respectively. It must be noted that just her weekly expenditures constitute more than half of a maquila laborer’s monthly salary.
Predictably, a large discrepancy is apparent between maquila workers operating machines and people holding higher positions. One of my cousins landed a job as the Merchandising Coordinator (the person who keeps merchandise and stock in check) at a maquila right after obtaining his degree about four years ago. He earned a monthly salary of 18,000 Lempiras or $940.44, a figure that more than triples what a worker operating a machine makes. Thus Angela had to work extremely hard and for an extended period of time to reach such ranks. Unfortunately, I think that Angela’s success story is not the norm.

She was also facing some difficulties at the time: her husband, who had always worked in custom agencies, was unemployed. She was thus the only source of income in her house. Even though her daughter also worked at INHDELVA, she had just given birth, making it very difficult for her to share any of her income with her family. If anything, Angela shared her money whenever her daughter found her salary insufficient. In addition, Angela’s husband had been handing out his resume to several employers without any luck. He was also enrolled in a university taking 40 classes, which meant that his expenditures were most likely higher than usual. Thus Angela found herself providing for her four children, her mother who had a heart condition, and her husband, which totals six people.

Angela told me that she owned a small house for which her family was still paying. Given her situation at the time, I imagine she was paying for most of it. She described it as a 2-bedroom house with all utilities but without a fence and explained that this was due to their “unbalanced situation,” meaning her husband
was not working. This might have been taking a toll on her, yet it was admirable that she still put this responsibility on her shoulders. It comes to show how jobs in maquilas, or any job for that matter, are challenging traditional notions of patriarchy in which males must be the main provider of a household.

I then proceeded to ask about her job and tasks. As expected, Angela dealt mostly with people: she coordinated a group of supervisors and ensured that they all knew their functions, guaranteeing that all tasks run smoothly. Angela also played a backup for supervisors whenever conflicts arose, offering solutions so that supervisors learned how to cope with these whenever they presented themselves again. She added that her job is not repetitive and far from monotonous, which can be attributed to her high position. No other worker who operated a machine told me such thing about their tasks. Angela also deals with some sort of technology, such as her personal desktop, a printer, a phone, and various programs that require training such as PolyPM\textsuperscript{11}.

Demonstrating yet again just how humble she was, Angela told me that she learned something new every day:

“I have to work with quality check, different processes, I especially like dealing with people. Every person is different. You get to read your employees’ mood. I visit them sometimes, [get to see] how they live, they invite me over to eat. It’s something \textit{muy bonito} [very nice], you get to care about them. But of course there are also employees who don’t want to be cared for because that’s their private space, their life, their home. But here we are; we have to learn with them. So my functions are coordinating, taking out containers, look at quality issues, so problems with the maquila and employees. [See] how the employees feel, we want them to feel comfortable, for them to enjoy coming to work. This is a

\textsuperscript{11} PolyPM enables an enterprise to integrate all aspects of the product development, supply chain and manufacturing processes, allowing brands, manufacturers and distributors to collaborate with anyone within the organization and/or with customers and suppliers during the product development and delivery process. Retrieved from http://www.polypm.com/polypm.html
business where we win, our employees win, and the maquila wins. We have some *lindísimos* [very sweet] bosses who have given me a job for a very long time so I want to give them even more” (*Ibid.*).

The above quotation comes to show just how involved she is in her employees’ lives, both professionally and personally. Angela’s gratefulness is also palpable from her words. I have purposely left some words in Spanish such as *muy bonito* or *lindísimos*, for I believe that their English translations do not do them justice. These phrases mean utter sweetness, a trait that Angela exuded herself but used to describe other people and experiences.

Religion undoubtedly constitutes a main component of Angela’s professional life according to our conversation. She explained how she had begun that day by calling a meeting with all of her coworkers from Staff, reading the Bible, saying a prayer, and finally setting the goals for the day. They all arrive to the facility ready to work towards the same objective. She added that every day is different, but that “these problems in the end are opportunities” (*Ibid.*). Honduras owns a long tradition of Catholicism and Evangelism, explaining why no one would protest against public religious displays. Christianity, especially Catholicism and Evangelism, are uniform throughout the vast majority of the society: it is rare for someone *not* to be a part of these groups. Angela’s positive outlook can thus be traced back to religion: if something ever goes wrong, she tries to keep calm and ask God for help first and foremost.

Angela’s main problems at work do not deal with machinery malfunctions or extreme heat like her employees’ complications: her main challenges are lethargic workers. Given the monotony and heat that most machine operators
must cope with, many find it challenging to muster the desire to work or to do so with optimism. Angela explained that since supervisors do not work with machines they must “know how to endure, to be prepared, keep a balanced line with more personnel, so that if a person is not feeling well, we can work with another team to compensate. Maybe we are not working [with] 100% but with 80%” (Ibid.). Efficiency, however, is not the only problem: many workers carry their emotional burdens to the workplace such as domestic abuse, as mentioned by Angela. Nonetheless, they do tell their supervisors a lot of the time. These take them to the doctor at their disposition, who then excuses the worker, provides counseling, and takes care of any other necessary transactions. “We are like psychologists, we care about people and we know how to get to each person because we know their situation at home,” Angela explained (Ibid.).

After talking mostly to machine operators, Angela’s recount provided another perspective of the different levels of problems faced at maquilas. While the majority of other workers either found the maquila atmosphere too dull to think of conflicts or refused to tell me, Angela opened up a bit more. The above quotation might imply that domestic violence is not a rare happening, yet naturally not one machine operator mentioned this in interviews given just how intimate such detail is. Most women who answered this question merely mentioned that they had to deal with broken machines a lot of the time, which meant that their production suffered and consequently, so did their pay.

Angela’s benefits are the same as any other employee in Honduras, for the government mandates all employers to provide a salary, vacations, a Christmas
bonus, a bonus in June called the *catorceavo* (translated as “the fourteenth”), and severance pay. Given Angela’s long-term career at INHDELVA, she has the right to 20 days of paid vacation, for this is the amount of vacation days any employee accumulates after working at the same company for four years or more.

My last question for Angela, and all other interviewees, was, “What do you like and dislike about your job?” Despite the fact that most women replied just like Angela, claiming that they could not think of anything they disliked, Angela’s response seemed genuine. She paused and pondered for a second, finally answering “I do not know what to tell you” (*Ibid.*). All throughout our conversation, Angela made references to greatly enjoying her job and missing it whenever she was not there:

“When I wake up on Sundays at home, I miss coming to work. I feel tired sick, and I want it to be the next day so I can come to work. To this moment I have not found something I dislike because every difficulty is a learning opportunity. And we all get along very well here. Of course [bad] situations happen but this normal” (*Ibid.*)

Once again, one encounters her notion that problems and difficulties are learning opportunities, and it is this that truly makes Angela stand out, not only as an employee, but as an individual in general. It is now rare to find individuals who carry themselves with humility and exude optimism and encouragement.

The conversation’s conclusion came full circle, when Angela, once again, mentioned her approach towards people:

“Of course, I get to know [my employees], we have the time. Look, if we do not have the time, we have to make the time because our manager, the plant’s manager, Mr. Simmons Gough [who I personally met] tells us that people come first. The owner of the company also tells us that it is people and that we have to stop doing whatever we are doing to serve them. This is the philosophy of the company. We want to give [employees and
clients] personalized attention. Are there mistakes, are there failures? Yes but it is about trial and error and we learn something different every day. In the heart and in studies, in knowledge we want to learn [better] ways to treat people.”

Figure 6 – Angela Castro, Head of Production at INHDELVA featured in one of the Case Studies

ii. Carmen Palma

I selected Carmen Palma as the other admirable woman to be featured in this text for she, like Angela, falls within a small category of diligent, relentless, optimistic, charismatic, and selfless women. Angela’s story, as aforementioned, is not the norm: she broke barriers while ascending within the maquila. It was my perception of Carmen that she was headed towards that same successful path despite the many difficulties I am about to recount. Our conversation lasted about 31 minutes, almost three times as much as most other interviews.
Carmen was a 35-year-old machine operator at the second maquila I visited, Fivaro, going through a divorce. She had one son, who was nine years old back in May, 2013, and lived with Carmen and his grandparents in what she described as a very tiny house with two bedrooms. She used public transportation every morning to get to Fivaro, and could even walk from home if she wished. Carmen’s time in this maquila had only spanned three years as of April 2013. She was employed in a different maquila prior to Fivaro, but had always felt a desire to work here for they paid better, it was closer to her house, and she had heard it was an overall a good workplace. I quickly realized that she was an ambitious woman when she added that “one always wants to improve in a job” (Palma, 2013).

Carmen began to reveal some complications she had to endure in life when she explained why she was forced to leave her former job. The previous maquila situated in the Industrial Park of ZIP Buena Vista unexpectedly closed, leaving Carmen and her coworkers unemployed and blindly searching for another job opportunity. Her sense of loyalty became apparent as she disclosed that she had dedicated eight years to the last maquila for she does not enjoy switching around different jobs. Her loyalty however proved pointless when the owner declared bankruptcy, even though, according to Carmen, he was not.

Carmen, who seemed to be an observant individual, argued that he could not have been struggling financially, for “there was an exaggerated amount of work” (Ibid.). She lamented that “it was his word against ours,” exposing how maquila employees might feel belittled and powerless in such cases and reducing
their will to fight back. Carmen then confessed that she felt fooled after this occurrence, yet she had seen it coming all along: the owner had stopped paying rent, water, and other utilities’ bills for a while, allowing these to accumulate to a great sum. He was aware that if he declared bankruptcy, he could avoid both the bills and payment of several employees’ benefits.

It seems as if this man got away with his scheme. According to Carmen’s remarks, he only paid some Christmas bonuses and vacations, disregarding other benefits he was held accountable for, such as the fourteenth (explained earlier) and severance payments. She even accused him of going to the Ministry of Labor to lie, claiming that an agreement was reached between him and his employees when in fact, this was false. Despite a visit from a Ministry of Labor representative – who according to Carmen was paid to lie – the owner easily managed to cheat his employees. I must admit that I was not shocked at all to hear such a story, and even though there is no tangible proof at my disposition, I do not find this hard to believe. Honduras is a country filled with corruption that extends far past the maquila industry: it pervades in numerous ambits within Honduran society. Carmen noted that former coworkers tried to fight back only to find disappointment for absolutely nothing was achieved.

Carmen decided to leave that Industrial Park for good, even if it meant struggling through months of unemployment. Holding on to her optimism and the belief that not all parks are the same, she ultimately found an opening where she wished to work: Fivaro.
Currently in the Labeling area, Carmen began at Fivaro in the Ironing department. Her first job consisted of ironing pants, whereas she now just folded these and examined them to ensure they had no imperfections. This, however, is an oversimplification that makes her job at the time of the interview sound easier than her first job of ironing. Carmen found ironing to be easier and more enjoyable, even if it required more manual labor and avoiding contact with water for a few hours as her body was “heated up”. As I wondered what could be less enjoyable than this, as I am sure most readers will, Carmen explained that Labeling was far more exhausting and pain-inducing: her back hurt after hours of standing up, crouching, and moving around. Luckily, her supervisors alternated her shifts between Ironing and Labeling.

Her salary, like other maquila employees’, fluctuated based on the week’s production, and usually ranged between 1,500 Lempiras ($783.71) and 1,800 Lempiras ($940.45). She generally worked eight hours a day, from 7:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., and could work an extra hour from Monday to Thursday if she wished. Fivaro employees are also welcome to work Saturdays from 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. if they wish, yet Carmen left at noon to attend high school from 1:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. She made sure to enroll in a school that she could attend only on Saturdays to dedicate all of Sunday to her son.

I got a glimpse of Carmen’s curious nature and thirst for knowledge when she told me another anecdote. Even though she was placed in “flat ironing,” a maquila term used for traditional ironing, she confessed to once venturing off to try vertical ironing. Supervisors usually assign the latter to men for it is
considered much more labor-intensive due to the high amount of steam it emanates. Carmen simply wanted to know what it felt like and indeed found out that it was exhausting. After she explained that people sweat a lot and these machines have three pedals, making the job more complex, I remarked that it sounded quite hard. She then smiled and replied, “Yes but not impossible” (*Ibid.*).

Her high school tuition, her son’s education, transportation, and about $21 for her mother constituted Carmen’s weekly expenses in 2013. Even though she did not entirely support her mother financially, her dad and Carmen split the costs to sustain the household. When I inquired if the father of her son contributed at all, she replied “My son is mine, well of the Lord firstly, and then mine,” and that the son did not know the father (*Ibid.*). This woman is thus a single, working mother who studies, assists her parents financially, and provides entirely for her son’s education and overall sustenance.

Her ultimate goal and dream was to acquire a university degree, which clearly resonates with Angela’s story. Even though she had always longed to study, she had just begun her educational journey due to her family’s limited resources. This is when I discovered just how selfless Carmen was:

“I don’t think I was selfish in this aspect. When my sister finished the sixth grade, my parents could not afford to put her through high school [this is right after the sixth grade in Honduras]. But I thought to myself that even if I had not had the chance to study either, I wanted my sister to have it. So I decided to help however I could and divided the expenses with my parents. This is how she graduated from high school. That’s how I fulfilled her dream but she is no longer with us. She died two years ago back then [three years now]. I have no regrets because I helped her with what I could. She was going to look for a job right after her graduation two years ago but God decided to take her away” (*Ibid.*).
After such a devastating time in her life, Carmen decided that she could no longer waste her time and decided to complete her high school education.

In addition to her inner strength and perseverance, Carmen had an admirable work ethic. While most interviewees replied that they were not sure on what to do to be promoted, Carmen confidently said that it was all about effort and following rules. She also came off as a humble employee who knew her boundaries: “One simply has to obey and know your limits as to what you can and cannot do at work. Don’t feel entitled to certain privileges because you have been working here for a long time. Orders are passed through levels. My supervisor is simply following orders from his boss so I just have to follow through” (Ibid.). As to what jobs she would prefer over what she did at the moment, Carmen kept an open mind:

“Well, having a degree, I don’t know – I want to be able to apply the skills I learn. I don’t discriminate being a machine operator but if there is a chance to move up, then great. When you look for a new job, the first thing they ask for is experience. I already have the experience so I am trying to better myself through education.

One has to be positive in life and create goals. If I couldn’t do it yesterday, I will do it today. One cannot be negative or wonder what if I do it wrong or right? No, if you couldn’t do it, well at least you tried. Don’t get stuck; keep trying because it will work out in one of those attempts.”

Just like Angela, not many people speak with such a positive outlook on life. Just like Angela, I believe greater things are waiting for Carmen either at the maquila, or somewhere else. It is usually people who speak like these women who succeed.

Carmen proceeded to open up more as our conversation progressed, providing longer answers, thus better discernment of her personality and life philosophy. When asked if she had problems with other workers, Carmen replied
that she is the type of woman who wants peace. According to her, she just does not enjoy problems and lets people lead their lives as they wish:

“I just had a bad experience at church, bad enough to have a problem with two people but I told myself [that] I know God’s word and the first thing I need is a heart without hate. It’s useless, it’s bad. If something is good, I thank God and if something is bad I thank Him too. This is what His word says, that we have to thank God at all times. It’s easy to say thank you when things are good. The difficult part is thanking Him in times of pain or when I am lacking everything. But I say, if I have you, I have everything because you are everything” (Ibid.).

She then added:

“I have this friend at work who always says, ‘mi vida’ [my life or sweetie]. She tells me, ‘You know what, mi vida? I admire you because even though you have had to cry you have overcome these [obstacles]. I just tell her, ‘Listen, it’s not that I can, I get the strength from God. My salvation is worth too much to hold grudges; it is worth much more than everything in this world. This is why I try to be friends with everyone and keep peace. If someone is going through something hard I try to help them.’ I tell myself that maybe I won’t reap [from ‘you reap what you sow’ saying] but I have a son. If I want my son to reap good things, I must start by sowing them myself. I like leaving places with my head held high, not exiting through the back door like the saying goes” (Ibid.).

Carmen’s honesty carried out throughout the entire interview. She is one of the few women who actually told me what she disliked from her job. Even though these were minor things – a ban on sandals and MP3 players at the workplace – she did not hesitate to have her thoughts heard. She also did so respectfully, acknowledging that these new regulations were imposed for the safety of employees, and that safety came first. Carmen then concluded her thoughts stating, “You just have to adapt” (Ibid.).

Significance of Feature Stories

The bitter reality is that these low-remunerated jobs as machine operators trap individuals for years, even decades, for they cannot find the motivation to
further their education as discussed earlier in this work. This is especially true for women who must deal with sexism and a long-established patriarchal system in Honduras. These long shifts drain their energy, leaving just enough time to care for their children. I have yet to come across a Honduran family where the father willingly stays home to care for the family while the woman works (I am sure they exist but they are rare). Chances are that if he is unemployed while his female partner works, she is still the chief homemaker.

This is the beauty of these two stories. I chose two success stories to demonstrate that exceptions do exist. Angela and Carmen challenge the stereotype of ignorance and vulnerability that authors such as Pine enforce with their literature. These women possess admirable life philosophies, proving that not all maquila employees are retrograde victims who just do not know better. What, then, would it take to make these exceptions the norm? I believe it all boils down to tackling problems I have repeatedly mentioned before such as corruption and education.

V. Conclusions

The realization of this project has brought me a sense of fulfillment much different from what I originally imagined. I initially embarked on this investigative journey to find an answer, or at least an educated conclusion, to the oft-studied question: Is the maquila industry benefitting or harming Honduran women? This was until I realized that many researchers were not approaching the issue with unbiased intentions. The majority of the texts I quoted in this project appeared to be very selective in terms of the data and statistics utilized. Many
would in turn weave their analysis in a literary framework that allowed for both benefactors and detractors of the maquila industry to back their arguments using “thorough” research.

Then, it all clicked: scholars tend to oversimply this intricate industry by constructing a dichotomy between its benefits and its detriments. To act as an objective reader, a challenge I personally had to overcome given I am Honduran, it is possible to find feasible arguments for both sides of the discourse. Yes, the average maquila machine operator does earn only about 99 cents an hour after extended periods of strenuous labor, yet many of the individuals I conversed with used this money to educate their family and themselves. It is also true that an enormous gap exists between the monetary compensation offered by the industry and the required labor. After much research, I can only conclude that both men and women find themselves forced into this system after years of financial hardships and social immobility. The country does not exactly offer a plethora of opportunities, thus Hondurans must carry on with the limited number of options at their disposition.

This paints a sad scenario. I cannot say whether the maquila industry is good or bad, but I can say that my country needs urgent attention. Both Hondurans and the international community find themselves in a dormant state, leaving most workers as mere receptors of numerous challenges brewing in the country. Scandalous stories circulate both national and international media portraying cities such as San Pedro Sula as violent, poverty-stricken areas. Authors describe many Hondurans as incompetent, rural characters who are
incapable of recognizing they are victims of exploitation. When does change truly begin?

I believe the first step to be education: not in the traditional schooling sense, but in a path to inform citizens. As a Honduran, I recognized my duty to dig deep into the story of an industry whose influence reverberates across the entire spectrum of social classes. This project gave me the tools to grasp the reality that the maquila industry is simply a piece of a much larger picture. My goal evolved into something more abstract, but as Carmen said above, not impossible. The government must reevaluate its current strategies and place more focus on public education, ethics in national journalistic practices, and informing citizens with transparency. Only then can the system that allows all of these injustices be transformed.

One might also suggest, as been repeated on numerous occasions, that the benefactors of the cheap labor provided by the maquila workers—the women in the developed world who buy cheap clothes—might occasionally think of who make them, and whether they are being paid adequate wages. That small label at the back of the blouse or dress “Made in Honduras” should provoke the profound question why.
Works Cited


