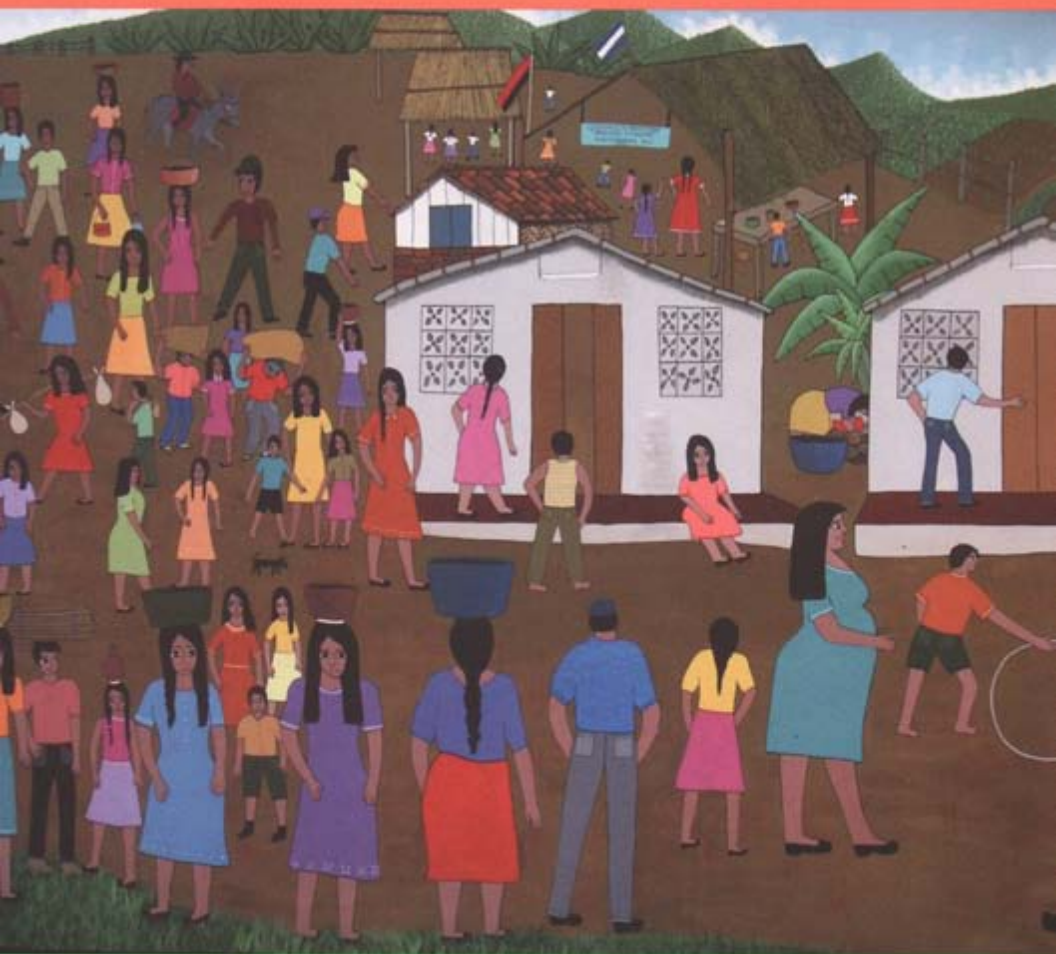


FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE MAQUILADORAS

Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua



JENNIFER BICKHAM MENDEZ

**FROM THE
REVOLUTION
TO THE
MAQUILADORAS**

**AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS /
GLOBAL INTERACTIONS**

A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph
and Emily S. Rosenberg

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Jennifer Bickham Mendez

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AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS / GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

A series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph
and Emily S. Rosenberg

This series aims to stimulate critical perspectives and fresh interpretive frameworks for scholarship on the history of the imposing global presence of the United States. Its primary concerns include the deployment and contestation of power, the construction and deconstruction of cultural and political borders, the fluid meanings of intercultural encounters, and the complex interplay between the global and the local. American Encounters seeks to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between historians of U.S. international relations and area studies specialists.

The series encourages scholarship based on multiarchival historical research. At the same time, it supports a recognition of the representational character of all stories about the past and promotes critical inquiry into issues of subjectivity and narrative. In the process, American Encounters strives to understand the context in which meanings related to nations, cultures, and political economy are continually produced, challenged, and reshaped.

PREFACE

MAKING THE GLOBAL HAPPEN

In 1996, just before I left for a research trip to Nicaragua, my seventeen-year-old brother-in-law William died suddenly and unexpectedly while exercising in a PE class at school. Like many Nicaraguan migrants in the 1990s, my husband's family was spread between his home town of Jinotepe and several cities in the United States. Upon hearing of his brother's death, we traveled to Miami to make the funeral arrangements and join the rest of his U.S.-based family members to mourn this tragedy. After the funeral, as we packed to return to California, my mother-in-law began going through her recently deceased son's belongings. "*Tomá, hija,*" she said to me. "It would be a shame to waste these new blue jeans. They've never even been worn. Take them to Nicaragua and give them to my cousin Agenor." As I placed the jeans in my suitcase, I noticed the label: "Made in Nicaragua."

As I reflected on the intersecting movements of this piece of clothing and the people who would come in contact with it, I came to see this garment as a powerful symbol of the intersections between globalization and the daily lives of ordinary people. Contrary to the abstract notion of globalization as best understood through macro-level analysis, the experiences of everyday people—people like William—have much to tell us about global and transnational processes. These do not simply happen to the economy or to political systems. People on the ground engage and participate in these processes—in effect, making them happen.

U.S. cotton stitched together by Nicaraguan women in the Free Trade Zone, William's Levi's must have traveled to a distributor in the States (probably in New York or Los Angeles) and finally to a retailer in Miami. There they were sold for approximately a week's wages of the workers who produced them and were purchased for a teenage boy in Miami who himself had made this voyage on more than one occasion.

William was conceived in the late seventies, just before his mother

came to the United States, where she gave birth to him. The only U.S.-born child in the family, William would return to Nicaragua with the rest of the family just after the Revolutionary triumph occurred in 1979 only to migrate once again to the States in 1981. In 1990 William, along with his mother and sister, would return to a much-changed Nicaragua, where the newly formed Chamorro government had recently displaced the revolutionary party of the FSLN. During this visit with extended family, he would have to adapt to speaking in Spanish, not just responding in English as he and his brothers and sisters were accustomed to doing at home. William would never wear the jeans assembled in his parents' homeland. The garment, however, would make the return trip to be worn by an older cousin who had recently been deported from the United States and whose unemployment left him no way to provide for his many children.

The "Made in Nicaragua" label on William's jeans tells a familiar story about globalization. Economic production has "gone global," and a new international division of labor has emerged in which the manufacturing of many goods has been moved to sites in the developing world. Global commodity chains link the economies of various nation-states, and the countries of the Global South provide transnational corporations with inexpensive labor in the assembly of goods like garments, toys, and electronics. Central America's proximity to the United States, the world's largest market for clothing, as well as the high levels of unemployment throughout the region, which have driven down wages, make it an attractive location for production of garments for transnational corporations. This economic story, however, only reveals a small piece of what is a larger and more complex plot. Looking "behind the label," as the saying from the anti-sweatshop movement goes (see Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000), can reveal how people engage with global processes—participate in them, accommodate them in different ways in their daily lives, and sometimes actively *resist* them.

To use a popular Latin American image, resisting the negative consequences of economic globalization for women and working people is "ants' work." This book is about the "ant-like" effort of one group of women. The case of the Working and Unemployed Women's Movement, "María Elena Cuadra" (MEC) and its efforts to improve the lives of unemployed women and women workers in *maquila* factories brings gender

and power to the forefront in considering the intricate ways in which local actors participate in, react to, create, and influence transnational processes.

The efforts of this group have occurred as part of a larger phenomenon of transnational political activity. Social movements' struggles for social justice have also gone global. For example, transnational networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, religious groups, women's organizations, and student groups have coalesced around the issue of sweatshops. In 1999 the global justice movement was born, with a wide spectrum of groups mobilizing in Seattle, Washington, to decry global injustices and the antidemocratic practices of the World Trade Organization. The early 2000s saw mass mobilizations to protest globalization occurring in Washington, Davos, Genoa, Quebec City, and other cities where global decision-makers came together. The transnational anti-sweatshop movement was a loud and important voice at these protests.

Although smaller in scale than these mass mobilizations, the story of resistance (and sometimes accommodation) that this book recounts is equally important. By focusing on the "ants' work" of a relatively small group of women within a broader national and international context, I hope to show how this case contributes to a clearer understanding of the complexities involved in social justice struggles in an era of globalization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A colleague once said to me, “A book will break your heart.” Although the written book has broken my heart many times over, the book’s many unwritten texts tell a story of deep and fulfilling connections with colleagues, family, and friends who have enriched a decade of my life and work. First and foremost, this project would not have been possible were it not for the generosity of the women of MEC who took me into their lives, work, and world and taught me so many valuable lessons about solidarity, justice, and the power of collectivism. Though confidentiality does not permit me to thank the women of the MEC collective by name, I am honored and humbled to tell their story and can only hope that these pages do it justice. The woman I call Sara Rodríguez deserves my deepest and heartfelt gratitude. Her courage, commitment to social justice, and tireless efforts give me hope for the possibility of a more equitable world.

The research for this project was funded by a Fulbright Study Abroad Fellowship, the University of California Humanities Institute, the University of California Pacific Rim Research Program, Soroptimist International, and Sigma Xi. Generous financial support for the writing of this book came from the University of California, Davis, and The College of William and Mary.

There would be no book without Gül Ozyegin. She read countless drafts of the entire manuscript, providing comments and feedback with sisterly patience and love. During the long revisions, she pulled me back from the brink of despair many times. Diane Wolf believed in this book well before it was written and has always believed in me even when I lost faith in myself. Kate Slevin deserves my warmest thanks for keeping this project and myself afloat during the years it took to write this book. Her reminders to be “kind to myself” mattered in infinite ways. Michael Lewis and Tom Linneman consistently awed me with their good-natured willingness to read the manuscript—*again*. Ronald Köpke’s unflagging encouragement kept this project alive through these years. This book has benefited from his intellect, his frank criticism, and his unwavering gen-

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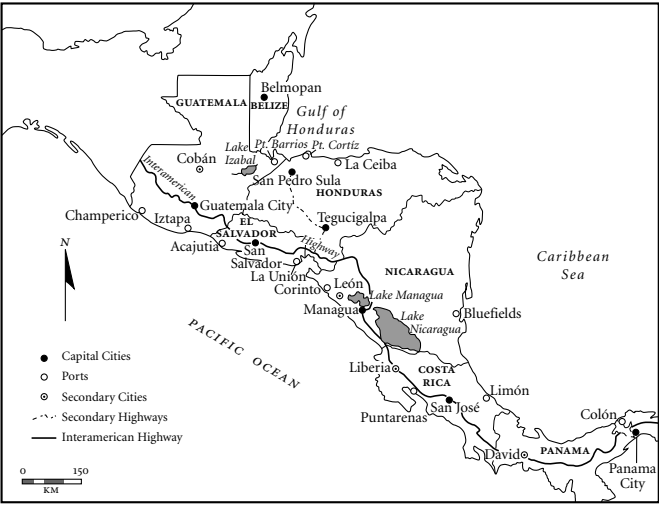
AN EARLIER VERSION of material presented in chapter 4 appeared as “Organizing a Space of their Own?: Global/Local Processes in a Nicaraguan Women’s Organization” in *Journal of Developing Societies*, 18 (2–3; 2002): 196–227.

An earlier version of a portion of chapter 5 appeared as “Creating Alternatives from a Gender Perspective: Central American Women’s Transnational Organizing for Maquila Workers’ Rights” in *Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*, edited by Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai, pp 121–41 (Routledge, 2002).

Material from select portions of chapter 5 appeared in “A Place of Their Own?—Women Organizers Negotiating the Local and Transnational in the Maquilas of Nicaragua and Northern Mexico,” an article coauthored with Joe Bandy in *Mobilization* 8 (2; 2003): 173–88.

An earlier version of material presented in portions of chapter 6 appeared under the title “Gender and Citizenship in a Global Context: The Struggle for Maquila Worker’s Rights in Nicaragua” in *Identities: Journal of Culture and Power* 9 (2002): 7–38.

**FROM THE
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1 “Just Us and Our Worms”: The Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, “María Elena Cuadra”

Organizers from the Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, “María Elena Cuadra” (MEC) like to talk about how nervous and insecure they felt in their early days as members of a newly formed autonomous women’s organization. They were intensely aware that “no one knew who we were.” They felt like “cuatro loquitas hablando allí” (four crazy women talking there) when they attended public events organized by national and international organizations or meetings with government officials—a labor conference organized by the Nicaraguan labor movement and its international supporters, an audience with the Ministry of Labor, an international women’s conference, or a forum organized by international NGOs. The story goes that at such an event someone in a position of authority would ask the women, “Who are you? Whom do you represent?” (In other words, “What gives you the right to participate in this event?”) To which the women would reply defiantly (and this is the reoccurring phrase that they would repeat in different renditions of the same narrative), “Sólo nosotras y nuestras lombrises”—“Just us and our worms.”

The Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, “María Elena Cuadra” was born in May 1994, when it emerged as an autonomous women-only organization from a deep-seated crisis within the Sandinista Workers’ Central (CST), the largest trade union confederation in Nicaragua. Since its birth as an independent organization, much of MEC’s work has revolved around organizing women workers in the country’s free trade zones (FTZs) and working to improve conditions in *maquiladora* factories.¹ In addition, MEC’s programs provide job training and income-generating opportunities to unemployed women and sensitize women to gender issues such as domestic violence and reproductive health while teaching them about their rights. In their work in the FTZs, MEC has struggled to raise national, regional, and international public

awareness regarding the situation of *maquila* workers and to lobby for pressure on *maquila* factory owners to uphold workers' human rights and comply with local labor laws. Since 1994 over seven thousand female *maquila* workers have participated in MEC's programs (Köpke 2002). Although currently workers in the FTZs number around forty thousand (*Observador Económico* 2002), no other organization in the country can claim to have reached so many workers—men or women. MEC's struggle to improve conditions for *maquila* workers has transcended national borders, and the organization coordinates its efforts with other Central American women's organizations through a regional network that lobbies state officials and factory owners in several countries in the region.

Although I interviewed and had regular contact with women at different levels of the MEC organization—unemployed women who participated in MEC's job-training and microcredit programs; *maquila* workers who acted as "promoters" (*promotoras*) within FTZ factories; and workers who participated in MEC's workshops or whom MEC assisted in filing grievances after experiencing violations of their human or labor rights—the major actors portrayed in this book are the teams that made up MEC's leadership. I worked closely as an international volunteer, or *cooperante*, with these organizers, who numbered approximately twenty-five (with some fluctuation as some women left and others joined over the course of my research).

Why write a book about this relatively small organization? *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras* offers an ethnographic account of the strategies and practices of the Working and Unemployed Women's Movement, "María Elena Cuadra" in order to demonstrate the implications of this case for the study of grassroots engagements—both resistance and accommodation—to economic globalization. Three large-scale political and economic phenomena set the stage for the story that unfolds in this book: (1) the dramatic growth of global capitalism and its incorporation of women as assembly workers; (2) political and economic transition within Nicaragua from a revolutionary socialist regime with a state-centered economy to a neoliberal "market democracy" (Robinson 2003) that emphasizes free trade, privatization, and the reduction of the public sector; and (3) the growth of women's autonomous political organizing in Latin America and around the world.

Gender is an integral component of globalization, with gender-

specific consequences for women's lives. The worldwide shrinking of public services that has occurred under the global hegemony of neo-liberalism has increased women's labor burden as they struggle to meet the needs of their families. More women participate in the paid labor force than ever before,² and women increasingly take on breadwinner roles in the global economy in ways that both draw on and undermine traditional gender roles (Peterson and Runyan 1999: 130–47; Mies 1998: 112–44). In search of an ever cheaper, more docile workforce, transnational corporations locate production in the developing world, targeting a young female labor force for employment in assembly factories where they face long workdays, harsh working conditions, sexual harassment, and other human and labor rights violations. The International Labor Organization (2003b: 21) estimates that some 42 million people are employed in FTZs around the world and that 90 percent of the workforce is female, prompting some to hail women workers as the “paradigmatic subjects” of the international division of labor (Spivak 1988: 29).

Although there have been many excellent studies about women workers in the global economy, far fewer studies examine women's movements in a global context.³ A primary theoretical goal of *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras* is to examine how transnational, national, and local processes interact in complex ways to shape the politics of local actors and how local movements participate in and sometimes reconfigure aspects of globalization. In order to do so, this book explores both structural and cultural elements of MEC and applies a gender analysis to the politics of resistance and accommodation under globalization.

THE WORKING AND UNEMPLOYED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, MARÍA ELENA CUADRA

MEC's birth was precipitated by repeated conflicts between the CST's national and regional women's secretariats, on the one hand, and union federation and national confederation leaders on the other, regarding the administration of project funds and program priorities. Such conflicts came to a head at the CST's 1994 national congress, when to the horror and outrage of the membership of the women's secretariats, the CST's national leadership (all male) failed to appoint to the national executive council even one of the seven women nominated at the women's national

congress, held a month earlier. Even more shocking—the secretariats’ elected choice for the next director of the National Women’s Secretariat lost in favor of the rumored lover of a CST leader. In addition, the national executive council revoked the financial autonomy of the National Women’s Secretariat, making all of its projects and programs subject to administration by the CST (male) leadership.

Disillusionment stemming from the election results fueled plans by a group of disgruntled women unionists and former leaders of the women’s secretariats—among them Sara Rodríguez, who had recently announced her resignation as the director of the National Women’s Secretariat—to form an independent working women’s organization.⁴ In May 1994 former leaders of the women’s secretariats, along with approximately four hundred women workers and unemployed women, voted to create a new, autonomous women’s organization. Following the Sandinista custom of naming a group for a hero or martyr, they chose the name the Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, “María Elena Cuadra,” after a domestic worker and union organizer who had recently been killed by a drunk driver.

The general secretary of the CST was quick to react with a bitter defamatory campaign against these women, which was whipped into a national “scandal,” resulting in the issuance of a warrant for the arrest of two former secretariat leaders. The CST also ousted all the women who were working on the various projects that the former secretariat had implemented, closing the clinics and day-care centers opened by the local secretariats, ousting women from small businesses established through the secretariat’s micro-credit program, and expelling the domestic workers’ union from the CST’s national office.

As one MEC leader contends, then, the organization was “born out of a storm”—a storm resulting from a group of women claiming their own voices as leaders and asserting their autonomy as political actors. But what is the significance of this case? Sociologists often worry about the issue of generalizability—that is, can we learn anything from an *n* of one? All over the world women have organized around their multiple identities as mothers, workers, nationalists, and members of racial minorities; and each case helps build a better understanding of possibilities for struggle and action (Basu 1995). The struggle of the women of MEC who created a space for “just ourselves and our worms” deserves to be a focus

of intellectual inquiry because of what it represents—a group of women from poor backgrounds, from the second poorest country in Latin America, who have taken up the struggle to improve women's lives under global capitalism. But beyond this, MEC stands at the intersections of some key theoretical debates regarding globalization, the global hegemony of neoliberalism, and women's organizing in postsocialist contexts.

MEC's efforts as an autonomous organization that deals with working women outside of the framework of unionism raises important questions for scholars, students, and activists interested in the struggles of women and workers under global capitalist conditions and in the intersections of feminism and labor organizing. What does it mean to organize and support women workers as both women *and* workers in this context? What kinds of local, national, and transnational struggles have resulted as women are increasingly incorporated into the global economy and organize to defend their rights?

In order to counter the mobility of transnational corporations, MEC has engaged in political strategies and practices that span national borders. Through its membership in the Central American Women's Network in Solidarity with Maquila Workers, a transnational association of women's organizations that addresses issues facing women in maquila factories, MEC coordinates with other women's organizations to lobby state officials and negotiate with factory owners in Nicaragua as well as in other parts of Central America. Furthermore, MEC's formation and continued existence have been supported and sustained by the organization's transnational linkages with NGOs and solidarity groups in Europe and North America, upon which the group depends for financial support. Global discourses, such as human rights, and global trends, such as transitions to neoliberal democracies and the accompanying importance of national discourses of rights and citizenship, have shaped MEC's strategic orientation and informed its practices.

Exploring deeper subtextual meanings behind MEC organizers' self-description as representing only themselves and their "worms" (*lombrises*) elucidates some of the complexities regarding these women's identities and perceptions of themselves as political actors. For example, it is perhaps significant that the Spanish word *lombriz*, a general word for *worm* in Nicaragua and most of Latin America is used here, as opposed to *parásito* (parasite), which, as in English, refers more specifically to crea-

tures that reside in the human body. On the surface, the word choice of *lombriz* in “just us and our worms” simply reflects a common saying in Nicaraguan Spanish—comparable to “no one here but us chickens.” But “lombriz” can also refer to earthworms or any other kind of worm, and the organizers’ association with the humble, but hard-working, worm carries symbolic significance. The parasite connotes a disgusting creature that feeds off the lifeblood of its victim, but any gardener knows how beneficial it is to have earthworms in one’s flower garden. Parasites suck the life out of their hosts, but the earthworm’s productive and largely invisible activities create the possibility for life. The rather crude mention of being afflicted with worms also reflects these women’s stubborn identification with the poor. The women of MEC see and talk about themselves in this way to portray the work that they carried out within the popular organizations of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and they see themselves continuing this kind of “grassroots” work with and as *mujeres de base* (grassroots women) in the autonomous, women-only space of MEC.⁵

But MEC cannot be understood without considering its historical and geographical location. Nicaragua’s relatively late integration into the global economy of the latter part of the twentieth century, as well as its history as a postrevolutionary society makes it an ideal site for the study of oppositional initiatives under globalization. Emerging four years after the ruling Sandinista party was defeated at the polls, MEC is illustrative of the shifting challenges and opportunities that Nicaraguan social justice groups confront. In some ways the case is unique, as MEC is the only organization in that country that applies a gender perspective in its efforts to organize maquila workers and address their needs. On the other hand the case of MEC is representative of a larger process that is occurring throughout Central America and, indeed, in many parts of the developing world where societies are undergoing transitions to democracy. Social justice movements have shifted their orientations away from the revolutionary goal of state takeover and, instead, make claims based on rights and citizenship, addressing not only state, but also global institutions, such as the United Nations, and even multilateral lending organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In this study I employ the research strategy of “global ethnography”

(Burawoy et al. 2000) and use local participant observation to theorize “the global.” This approach recognizes that the “global” and the “local” are not separate realms (Freeman 2001; Grewal and Kaplan 1994), nor are global conditions merely ethnographic backdrop for a local case study. Rather, globalization itself becomes an object of study, and micro-level processes are seen as an expression of the macro (Burawoy 2000: 27, 29). This research strategy calls for the examination of local movements within a “global here and now,” “strategically situated” within a national and globalized political economy (Marcus 1995: 111).

This approach specifies the ways in which power and inequalities, particularly those based on gender, shape transnational politics. Contrary to the cooperative image of a global village, what emerges is a picture of transnational political fields that are also arenas of struggle, presenting the actors in social movements with daunting obstacles as well as sometimes surprising opportunities.

Although over the years MEC organizers have been successful in obtaining funding and building their organization, they face continual challenges. As the upcoming chapters will explain in detail, they face a constant struggle to have their programs viewed favorably by NGOs and other donor organizations. They also contend with conflicts that emerged beginning in 1996 with unions and with their sponsoring federations, most of which have close ties to the Sandinista Workers’ Central (CST) and to the Sandinista party and which to a certain extent vie with MEC for legitimacy as representatives of maquila workers. Organizations and activists in the United States and Europe who made up the solidarity movement with Central America during the 1980s were accustomed to dealing with unions and labor federations and other organizations tied to revolutionary fronts, like the FSLN. As the transnational anti-sweatshop movement emerged and gained strength in the late 1990s, these solidarity organizations expected that the union federations would be the logical partners to provide with assistance and funding, despite the fact that in Nicaragua the labor federations had neglected the maquilas and their predominately female labor force during their negotiations with the state in the early 1990s. Finally, MEC is dependent on international NGOs and the Canadian and European labor organizations that fund its initiatives. With this dependency come inequalities and in some cases the reproduc-

tion of neocolonial relations. Faced with traditional leftist views about unions and union organizing, MEC sometimes finds it difficult to defend its position as an independent working women's organization that is not a union.

An ethnographic approach to MEC and its strategies and practices that situates them within larger national, regional, and global contexts broadens the scope of analysis to reveal how MEC both responds to and participates in global and transnational processes. For example, when MEC organizers address state officials and call for state enforcement of the National Labor Code in the garment-assembly factories within the FTZ, such lobbying might appear to be a national strategy. But, in their claims to the state, MEC organizers use discursive tools that are globally recognized, such as human rights, and draw from international ordinances, such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Indeed, the very act of addressing state agents as a social justice strategy and the accompanying emphasis on civil society which occurs under transitions to neoliberal democracy suggest its more regional and global significance.

In one case detailed in a later chapter of this book, MEC organizers activated their personal networks of contacts established during the Sandinista years to gain access to the Minister of Labor in order to lobby for his support of the campaign to establish a code of ethics within the factories of the FTZ. Their long history within the popular organizations of the Sandinista party meant that they had worked closely with many of the individuals who were current officials in the Ministry of Labor, and these networks gave them influence in this office which eventually resulted in organizers' being granted permission to enter the restricted area of the FTZ as necessary in order to meet with workers.

MEC, however, did not engage in this lobbying effort on its own. Its efforts were bolstered by its participation in a transnational network of women's organizations, the Central American Women's Network in Solidarity with Maquila Workers (the Network), and it was pressure garnered through media attention surrounding this transnational initiative that helped MEC achieve leverage with the Ministry of Labor. The Network's campaigns and strategies cross borders, as members launch public opinion and lobbying campaigns in several countries at once, traveling to

different Central American countries to lobby state representatives and factory owners. The Network and all its activities are funded by Canadian and European NGOs, and Network organizers travel on a regular basis to Canada, Europe, and the United States in order to participate in activities of the larger transnational anti-sweatshop movement. Organizers, like Josefina from MEC and María Angela from the Honduran Women's Collective (CODEMUH), take part in speaking tours, conferences, and workshops organized by organizations like Global Exchange in the United States, the Central American Women's Network of Great Britain, and the European Clean Clothes Campaign.

The transnational politics of MEC, through its activities as a member of the Network and as a participant in the wider transnational anti-sweatshop movement, are made possible by several "global" phenomena such as the Internet and increasingly accessible air travel. The transfer of information through e-mail enables MEC to maintain its contact with the international NGOs that fund its local activities and organize international workshops and sessions, bringing together organizations from around the world that work on sweatshop issues. A global discourse of human rights, the existence of international conventions like CEDAW, and the near global reach of feminist discourses (thanks in part to the UN conferences on women) create an internationally recognized framework for building arguments that MEC can employ in demanding improvements in work conditions in the maquilas.

NICARAGUA IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

During the last thirty years Latin American countries have experienced a gradual, contradictory, and conflictive reorientation toward the global economy. Facilitated by multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, neoliberal political and economic agendas have spread among Latin American state regimes to facilitate the mobility of capital, reduce the role of the state in economic decisions, and promote free trade through structural adjustment. To achieve these goals and reduce inflation, neoliberalism prescribes the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the drastic reduction of the public sector and state-supplied social services (Robinson 1997). Multilateral institutions

have touted the establishment of free trade zones as part of the solution to the persisting debt crises of countries in the region.

The globalization of capitalism has been accompanied by sweeping political transitions in Central America. In the late 1980s and early 1990s many Central American military dictatorships gave way to elected governments. As early as 1980, Honduras's military dictatorship was deposed. And in the 1990s, civil wars ended in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and a peace treaty was reached in Guatemala.

Nominally democratic, these neoliberal state regimes engage in heavy competition to attract foreign investment. Free trade zones have been seen as a way to provide desperately needed jobs. The transnational apparel industry plays off the state's desire to provide employment by selling its operations to the country that offers the most benefits and the cheapest production costs. Indeed, the expansion of this industry in the region has prompted some to observe that Central American countries are quickly leaving behind their status as "banana republics" to become "sewing republics" (Fonseca Tinoco 1997a: 22), what one researcher deems the United States' new garment district (Rosen 2002).

Nicaragua's path to economic globalization has in many ways been unique within the region as it experienced a transition from an authoritarian to a revolutionary regime and then to a neoliberal democracy. Thus, the country moved away from and then back to a global capitalist system and has only relatively recently fully reinserted itself into the global economy (Robinson 2003: 71). In 1990 the revolutionary FSLN lost at the electoral polls to a coalition of opposition parties, the National Union of Opposition (UNO), and a new neoliberal regime, headed by President Violeta Chamorro, took power. This transition in state rule brought with it dramatic changes in Nicaragua's political economy. The consumer subsidies and emphasis on public welfare of the Sandinista era gave way to the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the drastic reduction of public spending.

The new government strove to stimulate economic growth by reinserting Nicaragua into the global economy. To this end and as a response to austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, the Chamorro government issued new legislation to attract foreign investment and increase export production. A series of 1991 laws established the

existence of free trade zones in Nicaragua, and the state-owned Free Trade Zone “Las Mercedes” opened the following year, with eight factories in operation (Renzi 1996).

This trajectory continued with the 1996 electoral victory of the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance’s candidate, Arnaldo Alemán, the former mayor of Managua. The new president quickly made it clear that his administration’s political and economic policies would be squarely in line with neoliberal principles. In a 1997 television interview he remarked: “Nicaragua is open, is ready for globalization. The doors of the country are open to foreign investment. . . . They will not be charged a cent until they recuperate their initial investment” (quoted in Fonseca Tincoco 1997a: 24). Since coming to power, the Liberal Alliance regime, which has continued with the 2001 election of former Vice President Enrique Bolaños, has worked to further dismantle the country’s previously extensive cooperative system (particularly peasant-held land in agricultural regions), privatize worker-owned and state-owned enterprises, and diminish the public sector in an effort to promote the market economy.

And yet the changes of the last decade also set the stage for Nicaraguan women’s autonomous political organization, as a broad-based and vibrant women’s movement emerged out of the mass organizations of the FSLN. Ironically, the postrevolutionary context opened spaces for women’s increased entrance in the political sphere, as they construct alternative resistance strategies and new ways of doing politics (Babb 2001, 1997; Criquillon 1995).

Despite the continued politicization of civil society within postrevolutionary Nicaragua, export-oriented production remains central to the country’s economic development plans. Since the first state-owned FTZ was opened in 1992, five other privately owned zones have been established. By late 2001 there were forty-four assembly factories in operation, the great majority of which produced garments for the U.S. market (*Observador Económico* 2002: 5). The number of workers employed in export-processing has grown exponentially from a little over a thousand in 1992 (*Observador Económico* 2002: 1) to nearly forty thousand in 2002 (Comisión Nacional de la Zona Franca 2002; *La Prensa* 2002), and about 90 percent of these are women (ILO 2003a: 9). Export production through the free trade zones has increased from \$2.9 million in 1992 to \$230

million in 2000, to an estimated \$250 million in 2001, or 30 percent of all exports from the country (*Observador Económico* 2002: 1).

Notwithstanding, the country continues to face enormous social and economic challenges. Although Nicaragua has experienced some economic growth (9.3 percent average annual growth in GDP in 1998 and 7.3 percent in 1999; World Bank 2000), recent UN statistics estimate 80 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day, with undernourished people making up 29 percent of the total population (UN Development Programme 2003).

THE STUDY

I first met MEC organizers from Managua in 1994, shortly after the group's succession from the CST. I was in Nicaragua conducting Master's-level research on domestic workers and their unionization. It was through the domestic workers union that I learned of the formation of this new autonomous organization and decided that it should be the subject of a more in-depth research project that would become my dissertation. I designed my research to allow me to observe and analyze both cultural and structural dimensions of MEC. The research incorporates three main components: (1) in-depth individual and group interviews with MEC leaders and MEC program participants and beneficiaries, including maquila workers; (2) participant observation as a *cooperante* in the daily events and activities of MEC; and (3) the collection of public statements, speeches, and texts written by MEC and the Network.

The first component of my research involved interviews with MEC organizers. In 1994 I met MEC organizers for the first time and conducted semi-structured intensive group and individual interviews with five of the movement's founding members. I returned to Nicaragua the following summer to conduct participant observation in MEC's Managua office as well as to continue interviewing MEC leaders. During this summer, as well as during the first half of an eleven-month research stint in 1996–97, I conducted several more interviews with movement organizers in Managua as well as Granada, León, Chinandega, El Viejo, and Chichigalpa.

I also conducted individual interviews with participants in MEC programs and collected "testimonials" through small group meetings. I interviewed nine participants in MEC's programs, including promotoras

from the FTZ. I conducted six group sessions with program participants, such as participants in MEC's job-training and microcredit programs. Finally, I conducted eight nonrandom structured interviews with maquila workers, and I also surveyed forty-one maquila workers, administering a questionnaire that I had developed as part of the initial stages of a diagnostic study that MEC was in the process of conducting and that it later published (MEC 1999). The survey queried workers about working conditions, benefits, and salaries within their factory. The questionnaires, as well as numerous meetings, informal discussions with maquila workers, and trips to the FTZ, made me familiar with their experiences on and off the shop floor.

While I initially relied on interviews to examine participants' and organizers' experiences in the organization, their shifting identities, and their subjective perceptions as political actors, in the end participant observation proved a better strategy for effective data collection. As my time in the field progressed, I noticed that in many cases interviewees were unaccustomed to analyzing their own biographies and engaging in deliberate self-reflection. It would take considerable probing and redirection to prompt participants to reflect on their own thoughts and perceptions. I learned this was a symptom of a larger problem. The "language of identity," reflecting Western individualist assumptions, was not a good match with the experiences and perspectives of MEC participants (Rouse 1995a). In some cases, I believe it obstructed my ability to hear what the *compañeras* were telling me⁶—which often came from outside this individualist framework. Framing questions of identity in terms of self-reflection turned out not to be the best strategy for gaining an understanding of organizers' perspectives, and the artificial format of the interview contributed to its clumsiness as a methodological tool in this case.

Eventually, I discontinued conducting formal interviews in favor of engaging almost exclusively in participant observation, in which I concentrated on listening to MEC participants when they talked to me and to each other about their work and their experiences as political actors; later I would record this information in detailed field notes. These informal dialogues occurred while participants were in the midst of their daily routines, rather than in interviews, which are a space created outside of everyday activities (Snow and Andersen 1993). I would sometimes ask clarifying questions or engage in long informal conversations about some

subject, but I opted to continue interviewing only maquila workers as part of MEC's study on working conditions in order to obtain testimonials about workers' experiences for use in MEC's campaigns.

Participant observation with MEC and the Network comprised the main component of my research and involved my working nearly seven days a week as a volunteer or international cooperante in MEC's Managua office and, less frequently, in the Granada office. In 1994 I proposed to MEC organizers that I seek funding both to volunteer for and to study the organization, and I worked closely with the organization during the summer of 1995 and for the eleven month stay in 1996–97.

Like the other two cooperantes who worked with MEC during the time of my research, I acted as a kind of consultant and participated in strategy-planning meetings, wrote grant proposals, collaborated on reports and media releases, translated documents, and did general office work. I also gradually became MEC's "official" interpreter as the organization began to receive increasing numbers of English-speaking delegations of church and student groups. I regularly attended all of the organization's meetings and strategy-planning sessions. I observed and participated in workshops and activities for participants in MEC's programs, and I accompanied MEC organizers to events and activities organized by other groups and held outside the office.

My daily presence as a researcher and cooperante involved continual interactions and discussions with MEC organizers and program participants that often carried over into informal social settings. I spent a great deal of time with MEC organizers, moving to the daily rhythms of the office with them. We spent countless hours talking informally about issues in the organization, current events in Managua, international politics, and our families. Every morning we sat at conference tables and read the daily newspapers together, and a few of us often gathered next door at Doña Cecilia's makeshift cafeteria for lunch. We would sit at the tables in front of her house and *pulperia* (small grocery store) and chat about the day's events as we waited for steaming bowls of *sopa de albondigas* (chicken dumpling soup) to cool enough to eat.

I developed relationships with all the women of the Managua and Granada offices; some remained that of cordial co-workers, while others became longer-lasting friendships. I visited the homes of different MEC organizers and spent the night on more than one occasion. I traveled