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GLOBAL POVERTY



**CODEMUH**  
COLECTIVA DE MUJERES  
HONDUREÑAS

# Women's rights women's resistance

Lessons from the Honduran Women's Collective



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**Over the past 30 years, hundreds of thousands of young women have spent their lives working day and night in the garment factories of Honduras. While jobs in the production plants of export processing zones, or *maquila*, have offered women the opportunity of work and economic independence, this has often come at a terrible cost. Low wages, forced overtime and inadequate health and safety provisions have taken their toll on the health of thousands of women, many of whom are now unable to work as a result.**

This report presents the work of the Honduran Women's Collective, CODEMUH (Colectiva de Mujeres Hondureñas), in its efforts to challenge the situation faced by women workers in the *maquila* of Honduras. It also charts CODEMUH's development from a successful women's rights group to a political actor in the front line of popular resistance to the 2009 coup in Honduras. As such, it stands as an object lesson of what women's empowerment can achieve, even in the face of the greatest social and political obstacles.

Perhaps CODEMUH's greatest success during the 22 years of its struggle has been its transformation of the way politics is played out in Honduras. Previously it would have been unthinkable for women *maquila* workers to be discussing labour law in the National Congress. As a result of CODEMUH's successes, women have come to believe in their ability to effect change as individuals, not just as parts of a production chain.

The incorporation of women into formal labour markets can be an important route out of poverty. Yet as long as women's employment is characterised by low pay, long hours and poor working conditions, it is more appropriate to talk of exploitation than emancipation. Only when women workers enjoy decent working conditions, full labour rights and women's rights can they hope to overcome poverty for themselves and their families.

War on Want and CODEMUH are proud to work in partnership in the fight for women's rights and political empowerment. We thank GMB, Prospect and Union Solidarity International for demonstrating their solidarity with women workers in the *maquila* of Honduras by supporting the production of this report. We hope that the story it tells will be an inspiration to other women's rights organisations and trade unions across the world.



**Maria Luisa Regalado**  
General Coordinator  
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Executive Director  
War on Want

# The maquila of Honduras

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**Honduras officially opened its doors to foreign investment in 1984, following the implementation of the US Caribbean Basin Initiative and the Honduran Export Processing Zone Law, which provides export incentives to both national and foreign investors. These developments transformed industrial and agricultural production in Honduras into export-oriented economies. The northern areas of the country, strategically located near ports and benefiting from good infrastructure, became home to a thriving textile export industry. Honduras is now the third largest exporter of clothes and textiles to the US market, after China and Mexico.**

The Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the USA, which came into force in Honduras in April 2006, opened up the economy still further. Fully 70% of the Honduran textile industry is now controlled by foreign companies, with US companies alone owning 40% of the industry. Companies operating out of the export processing zones and free trade zones of Honduras enjoy significant benefits such as:

- Paying no income tax, sales tax or corporation tax
- Unrestricted repatriation of profits and capital at any time
- An ample supply of low-cost skilled and unskilled labour
- Unrestricted currency conversion
- Duty-free imports of all production machinery, equipment, fixtures, spare parts, raw materials and supplies

- Import and export shipments cleared in less than one day, with minimal documentation
- 100% foreign ownership permitted
- Availability of a wide range of cheap raw materials

Only 92 factories were registered in Honduras in 1993. By 2007 there were 309 factories operating within the *maquila* employing 134,007 workers, of whom 53% were women. Cheap labour, 10-year tax exemptions and weak or in-existent labour laws make countries such as Honduras ideal for foreign companies. However, with many 10-year deals coming to an end, job creation has started to decline in the Honduran *maquila*. In 2008 a total of 33 textile factories closed down, firing 15,126 workers, of whom 7,070 were women. After 2008, more companies started to declare bankruptcy and close down overnight, leaving workers with outstanding wages unpaid. From 1993 to 2007, the number of jobs in the *maquila* increased from 32,120 to 134,007. In 2008 and 2009, the number of jobs fell to 118,881 and 106,695 respectively.<sup>1</sup>

At the birth of the Honduran textile industry, the minimum wage paid in the *maquila* was higher than in other sectors. However in 2008 this trend changed, as the minimum wage in the *maquila* was frozen for three years – despite this being illegal – while wages in other sectors were adjusted. For its part, the Ministry of Labour has made no attempt to initiate negotiations on the minimum wage. Wages in the *maquila* are calculated and negotiated separately from those in the rest of the economy. Following minor adjustments made in 2010, the minimum wage for workers in the *maquila* is just 3,894 lempiras (approximately £125) a month, while the minimum wage for workers in other sectors is 5,665 lempiras (roughly £180). For *maquila* workers in the new 'regional' category introduced in 2007, the minimum monthly wage is just 2,982 lempiras (roughly £100).<sup>2</sup>



Photo: Natalie Dendy/War on Want

Hundreds of thousands of young women have spent their lives working day and night on the production lines of the garment and textile industry in Honduras. These women have migrated from poor rural and urban areas to the northern cities of Choloma, San Pedro Sula and Villanueva, where the export processing zones housing garment and textile factories are located. Around these *maquila*, shanty towns have mushroomed. Housing is scarce and rooms are expensive, while basic services such as water and electricity are underprovided. Workers have to live in overcrowded conditions to make ends meet.

A third of all households in Honduras are now headed by women, as many men have migrated to the USA in search of work and women have had to take on an ever increasing role in the economy.<sup>3</sup> Although Honduran women have managed to gain employment through the textile industry,

these jobs have come at a high cost. Low wages, forced overtime and inadequate health and safety provisions have taken their toll on the health of thousands of women who are now unable to work. Many more women have lost their jobs due to occupational diseases, often without receiving any compensation or medical care.<sup>4</sup>

Studies carried out by the International Labour Organisation and the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean affirm that women are vital for poverty reduction in Honduras, as elsewhere in the region.<sup>5</sup> Yet women workers are forced to carry a double burden, being responsible for domestic duties and childcare as well as having to work long hours in sub-standard conditions for poverty wages. As long as their fundamental labour rights continue to be ignored in this way, Honduran women will need to continue their fight for emancipation.

# Bullied in the workplace

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Women's rights, women's resistance Lessons from the Honduran Women's Collective

The Honduran Labour Code states that a day of work must last no longer than eight hours. Yet *maquila* workers endure far longer days in order to meet production targets and to earn enough to cover the health and education needs of their families. Flexible shifts of 12 hours are common over four or five consecutive days, including weekends. If buyers require swift deliveries, workers are often obliged to work double shifts with no prior warning, regardless of family commitments. Workers have no choice but to work overtime if they want to keep their jobs.

A compulsory requirement for women before taking on a job is to undergo a medical assessment, in which particular attention is paid to whether a woman is pregnant, has varicose veins or has had a caesarean. In these cases the woman will be rejected. CODEMUH reports that some

factories spend a week checking women's health before they decide whether to offer potential employees a job.

Women who become pregnant are constantly bullied. Sexual harassment towards women is rampant and women are afraid of speaking out, not only through fear of losing their jobs but also in order to avoid being humiliated in public. Although the Honduran Labour Code states that employers must provide childcare facilities in factories with more than 30 workers, this is blatantly ignored.

Long hours undertaking tasks that involve repetitive movements in difficult positions, exposed to noise, chemicals and high temperatures with minimal periods of rest, have injured workers for life. According to CODEMUH's research into occupational diseases suffered by women *maquila* workers, women suffer repetitive strain injuries, skin diseases, deafness, permanent headaches and high levels of stress.<sup>6</sup>



## ELSA'S STORY

Elsa Renderos is 38 years old and has been working in the *maquila* since she was 23. She is solely responsible for her two sons, aged 7 and 13, as a result of her husband being killed in a work accident in the USA. For the last five years she has worked for the US multinational Hanesbrands Inc (HBI), which manufactures a range of globally famous clothing lines for men and women, including Playtex and Wonderbra.

A year ago Elsa started to experience pain in her right arm, which increased day by day until she could no longer work as a machine operator. She soon found out that she was not the only person in the factory with this problem, but that more than 50 women workers in the HBI factories suffered occupational diseases.

The Honduran Institute of Social Security has signed agreements with the *maquila* owners whereby employers take on responsibility for providing factory health services (so-called 'medico de empresa'). This is a private service which provides only primary care. When a person presents symptoms of an occupational disease, they are not referred to a specialist under the national social security service. Instead, they are just prescribed painkillers and made to continue working.

One of the more recent developments in the Honduran *maquila* sector has been the introduction of a new model of 'production in cells', where workers are compelled to meet collective production targets. This model has increased the psychological pressure on workers and created friction between them, as any failure to meet targets now means that they are in danger not only of losing their own jobs but also of letting down their colleagues. Workers who have tried to form a trade union or to become

part of a workers' organisation have been fired. To make matters worse, their names are then shared with other factories, making it extremely difficult for them to find a new job.

As labour standards are weak, unenforced or non-existent, companies can get away with working conditions that generate the highest profits, regardless of workers' rights or health. The outdated Honduran Labour Code, which was introduced in 1959, was designed to suit the demands of medium and small scale enterprises, not the large scale industrialised model of the export processing zones. As a result, labour legislation makes no reference to the textile export industry, and does not deal with occupational diseases that *maquila* workers are now suffering two decades after the industry was set up. Up until 2010 there were still no official statistics from the Honduran Institute of Social Security on occupational diseases or workers' rights violations in the *maquila*.

**As a result of CODEMUH's support, Elsa managed to keep her job, which is vital if workers are to maintain an income or have access to specialised medical attention from the Honduran Institute of Social Security and other social security benefits. The factory moved her to a new position that puts less strain on her arm, but they also decreased her weekly wage from around 1,300 lempiras (approximately £42) to 908 lempiras (just under £30) as she is no longer working in a production cell. Food for Elsa's family alone costs at least 700 lempiras a week, and there are days when she and her children go to sleep without dinner. They are now also facing the risk of eviction, and have recently received a letter from the water**

**company saying that their supply will be cut off.**

**A few months ago Elsa was able to supplement her income by selling tortillas in the local market, but she is now in so much pain that she cannot even do that. She cannot cook, clean the house or even brush her own hair. On top of this, she can no longer perform even the least demanding jobs in the factory, so that the doctor has instructed her to go on sick leave. As long as she is on sick leave, Elsa receives social security payments, but only three months after submitting her claims. This makes her largely dependent on food donations from neighbours and other CODEMUH members.**

# Empowering women workers

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Women's rights, women's resistance Lessons from the Honduran Women's Collective

**The Honduran Women's Collective, CODEMUH, was set up to tackle problems faced by women in Honduran society, and in the process identified women's exploitation in the *maquila* as a particular issue in need of resolution. CODEMUH is a women-led, grassroots organisation dedicated to defending and promoting women's rights, and in particular the rights of women *maquila* workers. In the 22 years of its existence, CODEMUH has changed the lives of thousands of women by means of training, organising and providing legal and medical advice so as to empower them to speak out and challenge both the political system and the cultural values that make them vulnerable.**

CODEMUH is a feminist, people's organisation with long experience of struggling for women workers' rights in the *maquila*. It is the first and only organisation in Honduras to focus on the occupational health and safety conditions of women garment workers. The members of CODEMUH's coordinating team and its outreach workers are themselves former and current workers from the *maquila*. They are organised in 32 groups that operate around the industrial export zones, in poor neighbourhoods and in rural villages across Honduras.

In the early years of its history, CODEMUH focused mainly on developing the skills, knowledge and self-confidence of women *maquila* workers, who had no other means of accessing support or advice. These women often faced domestic violence within their families as well as discrimination at the workplace and in their communities. CODEMUH's leaders recognised that they needed to resolve women's problems in different spheres: the home, the community

and the workplace. The strategic decision to tackle individual needs rather than structural problems that would bring radical change was taken during this early period because it was understood that women needed to deal with these individual constraints first if they were to become active in public life.

As the number of cases of labour rights violations grew, CODEMUH increasingly focused on resolving these cases with the Ministry of Labour and the Honduran Institute of Social Security. By 2002, fully 60% of the 400 cases dealt with each year were resolved through CODEMUH's negotiation with these bodies. The remaining 40% remained unresolved, and as a result CODEMUH also turned to direct negotiation with employers.

While responding to women's individual labour cases, CODEMUH continued to work for the organisation and independence of women. After several years of analysis of the social and political structures in which women workers find themselves, the organisation decided in 2003 to position itself as a political and feminist body. CODEMUH determined at this point that it had a political role to play in changing the structures that marginalise women.

From that point onwards, CODEMUH's organisational strategy has focused on two channels: improving women's individual lives on the one hand, and changing policies and laws on the other. This two-fold strategy has been implemented by building the capacity of women, increasing their organisational strength, conducting training on labour rights, industrial mediation and negotiation, research and policy making, campaigning, lobbying and alliance building at local, national and international levels.





Photo: CODEMUH

The following paragraphs chart CODEMUH's development from an organisation struggling for women workers' rights into an important player on the wider political scene.

### **I. Strengthening women's self-esteem**

Early on it became evident to CODEMUH that Honduran women face not only a lack of knowledge but more importantly a lack of confidence and self-esteem. Discrimination against women was rampant at all levels of their social, political and economic lives as a result of patriarchy, poverty, entrenched cultural values, minimal access to education and a lack of public policy protecting women.

CODEMUH understood that if women were to overcome this discrimination, they needed to have a collective voice – and to have this voice, strong individual consciousness was

required. It was vital that women were able to stand up for themselves, and to do this they needed to build their confidence as women and to develop a stronger sense of gender and class identity. This took the form of emotional and psychological group support sessions, the provision of legal advice and creative activities in which women could share their experiences and work through the historical roots of violence.

In addition to this individual and collective independence, CODEMUH's members believe that it is crucial to change discriminatory attitudes among the general public and to develop solidarity with other social movement actors. For this purpose women have been trained as leaders and equipped with communication skills to publicly denounce cases of domestic and labour violence. Furthermore, educational outreach activities to raise

awareness of women's rights continue at the community level.

## 2. Building women's awareness of their rights

Through women's rights training and analysis of the social and economic context facing Honduran women, CODEMUH helps women to identify their individual abilities and thus to contribute to the collective process. In this way many women have become leaders, community outreach workers, para-legal defenders or organisers, and in this way have expanded the movement of women fighting for their rights.

One of the key elements in the success of CODEMUH's strategy is that those leading the organisation, the training sessions, the negotiations with employers and government officials – as well as those communicating with the media – are themselves women whose rights have been violated. In this way, other workers are empowered through the realisation that they too can take steps to change their own lives. Moreover, this process has given women control and ownership over their political and feminist struggle. Over 60,000 people have been reached through the women workers' rights training and outreach programmes that CODEMUH has run.

## 3. Participatory action research

With the overwhelming number of occupational health cases that CODEMUH was handling (usually over 400 a year), its leaders decided that more research was needed to understand the phenomenon they were facing. There was much debate on how to conduct this research. Women had been led to believe that only highly educated people or scholars could conduct research. On the other hand, they knew that to bring about radical change they would need to involve themselves actively in the process.

## A FEMINIST APPROACH

Understanding the position of women within their families and communities, and the cultural values underlying these, compelled CODEMUH to strengthen its feminist approach. The organisation decided to adopt a strategy that would empower women to strengthen their knowledge, identity and independence as women. This would allow them to change the power relations undermining women's rights within their families and society. Above all, it was felt necessary to eradicate the gender discrimination that women had internalised in their own minds.

In addition, they did not want to produce research which would simply gather dust on a shelf. The research process became a learning process, alongside action to generate structural change.

Although this had already been happening in some form for over seven years, CODEMUH decided to focus more on participative research. CODEMUH members were joined in this research by specialists in social work, sociology and occupational health. The research deepened understanding of the problem but, first and foremost, it drove the political process of changing the reality facing women workers. It was not just the end result of the research that was important. Each step transformed the ways in which workers perceived and related to structures of power, and thereby empowered women to take action. The process became an exercise of individual and collective transformation.

Since 2002, CODEMUH has carried out four pieces of research: *A Comparative Assessment of the Health Conditions of Workers* (2002); *A Study of Occupational Health and Safety in Central America: The case of Honduras* (2004); *Medical Assessment of Women Workers in the Maquila of Honduras* (2006); and *Working Conditions, Stress and Adverse Effects on Women's Health in the Maquila of Honduras* (2006). These four pieces of research provided irrefutable evidence of workers' rights violations in the *maquila*. They also enabled women workers to design and present a bill to the Honduran National Congress to reform Section V of the occupational health and safety chapter of the Labour Code.

#### 4. Mediation and negotiation

CODEMUH also initiated a legal process to assess the possibility of winning compensation for workers, the certification of work-related diseases and the reinstatement of workers unfairly dismissed from their jobs. This was initially carried out through dialogue with civil servants of the Ministry of Labour, as well as the Honduran Institute of Social Security. However, given the minimal regulation of the *maquila* industry, loopholes in the legislation, lack of commitment from the Ministry of Labour and lack of interest from civil servants, there were many administrative and legal barriers that hindered the process.

As a result of these barriers, CODEMUH took the decision to negotiate directly with employers and to include the Ministry of Labour in the negotiation process. Many cases have been resolved through administrative channels, while others – especially the collective cases – require a different course of action. This has been the case with two companies: Gildan Activewear from Canada, and Hanesbrands Inc (HBI) from the USA.

CODEMUH has accused the transnational corporation HBI of being directly responsible for the systematic violation of workers' rights to social security and to adequate health and safety. In 2010 CODEMUH, with War on Want's support, presented the HBI case to the Permanent People's Tribunal in Madrid, Spain in order publicly to condemn the violation of workers' rights by the company.<sup>7</sup>

#### 5. Reform of the Labour Code

In 2002, CODEMUH decided to focus its strategy on changing policies, influencing decision makers and building alliances with the national and international community to defend the struggle of women workers. In particular, CODEMUH presented a proposal to the Honduran National Congress to reform Section V of the Labour Code. This proposal sought to update the code through incorporating advances in medicine, occupational health and safety.

This was the first time in Honduran history that a grassroots women's organisation had presented a legislative reform proposal on labour issues before Congress. Moreover, the reform focused on an issue that had not been regulated or addressed in any of the country's policies to date, and had also not been addressed by the labour movement itself.

CODEMUH's years of experience, training and research dealing with occupational health and safety and violence at work – as well as innovative campaigns such as 'Health is Our Right' and the 'Work, Yes, but with Dignity' campaign – resulted in significant support for changes to the labour law. CODEMUH succeeded in getting the issue of *maquila* workers' health onto the agenda of the Ministry of Labour, the Honduran Institute of Social Security, the employers themselves and into the media. As a result, in 2008 the Honduran Institute of Social

Security decided to reactivate the Technical Commission on Occupational Risk, and CODEMUH became the reference point for the International Labour Organisation on occupational health in Honduras.

Over six years, CODEMUH carried out the following activities in order to develop the proposed reform:

- Campaigns and large scale events with the participation of national celebrities (singers, actors and painters) who raised awareness about human rights violations in the *maquila* and the importance of reforming the Labour Code
- Widespread press coverage and participation in TV and radio programmes; as a result, the media have learned to use the technical language of the reform, helping to raise awareness among the general public
- Handing out summaries of the reform at rallies, public meetings and national demonstrations such as on International Labour Day and International Women's Day
- National and local forums and seminars to debate the reform
- Mapping out political actors who could play a role in pushing for reform, with a particular focus on building alliances with the national trade union confederations of Honduras and with trade unions from the north of the country; it is important to note that while rank and file trade unionists supported the reform proposal, the leadership of the trade union confederations did not
- Maintaining dialogue with members of Congress to win their support for the reform; as a result of CODEMUH's lobbying, a female member of Congress took the lead, and with the support of 37 other members, the reform was officially submitted to Congress in 2008
- Meeting with governmental officials at the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health and the Honduran Institute of Social Security, as well as representatives of the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organisation and private business
- Mass distribution of leaflets and CDs to *maquila* workers and journalists containing relevant information on occupational health and safety, and testimonies of victims of occupational health diseases
- International exchanges with *maquila* workers from Mexico, from other Central American countries and from Asia
- In 2007 and 2009, CODEMUH presented reports to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights denouncing the violation of women workers' rights and calling for approval of its proposed reform of the Labour Code. This was a unique opportunity to raise awareness at the international level of the human rights violations taking place in the *maquila*, as well as to expose the Honduran government's failure to abide by national legislation and to meet international treaties and conventions.

CODEMUH's campaign was successful not only because it resulted in the reform proposal's being submitted to the National Congress, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Ministry of Labour, but also because it was an empowering learning experience for CODEMUH members. Yet any further progress was halted by the coup d'état which rocked Honduras in June 2009. In common with many other civil society organisations, CODEMUH was forced to turn its attention to this most pressing challenge and to play a leading role in the National Front of Popular Resistance, as described in the next section.

# Resistance to the coup

**The coup d'état in June 2009 left Honduras in turmoil. The country faced one of the worst social, political and economic crises in its history as a result of the dictatorship of Roberto Micheletti and the subsequent government of Porfirio Lobo. Hundreds of people were thrown in jail, tortured, disappeared or assassinated because of their participation in the popular resistance that rejected the coup and demanded democracy in Honduras. The political instability resulting from the coup has seen a further increase in workers' rights violations and the denial of people's rights.**

According to CODEMUH and other groups in the Honduran people's movement, the coup was the response of the Honduran economic and political elite to the introduction of progressive economic measures by the government of former president Manuel Zelaya. Although Zelaya had agreed to most of the economic guidelines of the International Monetary Fund, he also remained true to some of the promises he had made during his presidential election campaign. During his first two years in power, the prices of water, electricity and petrol were frozen, as was VAT. In addition, some of the people's demands were met, such as the 2008 increase in the minimum wage for most sectors (though not the *maquila*).

The popular response to the coup was felt throughout the country. CODEMUH has calculated that approximately three million Hondurans out of a total population of seven million mobilised against the coup. CODEMUH joined with other grassroots organisations, trade unions, social movements, women's groups, teachers, youth, peasants as well as some grassroots churches and others under the umbrella of the National Front of Popular Resistance (FNRP). The FNRP's aim

was to organise the people of Honduras in the struggle to overthrow the dictatorship, restore the constitution and realise their rights. The FNRP demanded the convening of the Constitutional Assembly to approve a new social contract.

CODEMUH took the lead in supporting *maquila* workers who had been forced against their will to declare allegiance to the perpetrators of the coup. Factory owners demanded that workers must participate in so-called 'peace marches' organised by the dictator Roberto Micheletti and financed by the business community with the support of the military and the police. Even though the majority of workers opposed the coup, fear of losing their jobs forced them to attend pro-coup rallies two or three times every month. Although workers were told they would be paid the daily minimum wage (around 100 lempiras, or £3) for attending rallies held during working hours, workers did not receive any payment. In fact, after attending the demonstrations workers were forced to make up for the lost time by working an extra day or weekends.

The illegitimate government that took over the country after the coup has introduced a 'Plan Nacional Solidario de Empleo Anticrisis': a temporary or part-time employment law with the stated aim of attracting more foreign investment to Honduras and "creating jobs". This law aims to replace the working day with a system based on hours worked, thus denying workers key rights won over the years such as holiday pay, maternity pay, job security, the right to organise and the right to social security. Workers who suffer occupational injuries or diseases will lose any right to compensation or to work as a result of their physical impairment. Moreover, the right of workers to be unionised will be completely abolished.

# Building alliances

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Women's rights, women's resistance Lessons from the Honduran Women's Collective

One of the key lessons that CODEMUH has learned during the past 10 years has been the importance of building alliances, both nationally and internationally. Such alliances were crucial in getting the concerns of women workers onto the agenda of national and regional trade unions, such as the Confederation of Honduran Workers (CUTH) and the General Workers' Confederation (CGT).

Despite an initial lack of faith in a grassroots women's organisation led by *maquila* workers, the active participation of such workers was key to public recognition of CODEMUH's work. The organisation has also established alliances with other women in the labour movement, especially CUTH members who acknowledged the importance of the role played by CODEMUH and the need to promote the issue of occupational health and safety.

Being a relatively new industry in Honduras – and one in which most workers are women – it was necessary to redefine the policies and strategies required to address women workers' needs. This was something that the labour movement in Honduras had not previously acknowledged, making it even more difficult to set up trade unions in the *maquila*. In addition, occupational health and safety was not recognised as an issue by Honduran society. There was also no history of trade unions fighting for women's rights or

including them in their policies or structures. The traditional agenda of the trade union movement was centred on workers' rights in general, ignoring the specific needs and problems women face in the workplace.

As a result of its alliance with women in the trade union movement and its participation in the popular resistance to the coup, CODEMUH's work has won recognition from the trade union leadership. These alliances also succeeded in winning grassroots trade union support for the proposed reform of the Labour Code. And for the first time, the occupational health problems facing women *maquila* workers have become common knowledge among the general public.

Likewise, CODEMUH has developed alliances with grassroots feminist organisations, other workers' organisations, various churches, legislators and members of the National Congress, as well as the International Labour Organisation and the regional office of the World Health Organisation. There have also been important opportunities to build the international labour movement's solidarity with CODEMUH's struggle. War on Want has developed strong alliances with UK trade unions such as Prospect and GMB, which are now actively promoting *maquila* women workers' rights in Honduras and in the UK. War on Want has provided active support by calling on international governments and trade unions to reject the coup.



**CODEMUH**  
**COLECTIVA DE MUJERES**  
**HONDUREÑAS**

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- The need to build women's confidence and political awareness using a feminist approach in order to eradicate entrenched gender inequalities within society
- The importance of participatory action research to foster individual and collective reflection and analysis of the problems facing women, accompanied by actions that lead to social transformation
- The key importance of training and organising women to develop their own individual capacities, which later become the tools for collective work
- The need to use creative methods, such as art, to enable women to express their full potential
- Radical change is possible when policies, laws and practices are transformed for the benefit of the majority
- Building alliances with like-minded people is vital in order to challenge those that perpetrate injustice

**Structural change in women's lives is achieved when there is awareness of their own capacities and a sense of dignity. These in turn give women the power to challenge injustice in a global context.**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Comportamiento de la Industria de Bienes para Transformación (Maquila) y Actividades Conexas en Honduras: Informe Anual 2009 y Expectativas 2010*, Banco Central de Honduras, Tegucigalpa, 2010; CODEMUH denounced five cases of unpaid wages before the Ministry of Labour in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Acuerdo No STSS-342-2010*, Secretaría de Estado en los Despachos de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, La Gaceta, Tegucigalpa, 2 November 2010; the minimum wage of 5,665 lempiras applies to firms employing 20-50 workers in urban areas, while different levels are set for smaller and larger firms, and for businesses operating in rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> *Honduras: Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, European Commission, Brussels, 2007

<sup>4</sup> *Trabajo y Salud: Situación de las obreras de la maquila en Honduras*, CODEMUH, Choloma, 2006

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the annual *Social Panoramas of Latin America*, available from [www.eclac.org](http://www.eclac.org); also *Género y Mercado de Trabajo, Honduras y Nicaragua*, ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> The research was based on interviews with over 1,250 women, and the results published in *Trabajo y Salud: Situación de las obreras de la maquila en Honduras*, CODEMUH, Choloma, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The Permanent People's Tribunal is an international tribunal, independent of state authorities, whose function is to adjudge crimes against humanity that have not yet been taken up by legal bodies and therefore remain unpunished. For a record of the Tribunal's 2010 session in Madrid, see *The European Union and Transnational Corporations in Latin America: Policies, instruments and actors complicit in the violation of People's Rights*, Enlazando Alternativas, Madrid, May 2010.

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### **War on Want**

War on Want fights poverty in developing countries in partnership and solidarity with people affected by globalisation. We campaign for human rights, especially workers' rights, and against the root causes of global poverty, inequality and injustice.

Cover picture: Women *maquila* workers at a CODEMUH rally calling for reform of the Labour Code.  
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