

Reyna Ramírez
Between Blue Waters, A History of Violence
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It has not been easy to make violence against women a visible issue. Neither the Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor international agreements have succeeded in eradicating the patriarchal culture that still prevails in our societies. Today, the International Day Against Violence Against Women, it's important to remember the brave women, who -- even under the most difficult circumstances -- have fought to reclaim our dignity as human beings and as citizens

While we must acknowledge that some progress has been made, violence against women still persists, and that violence is not confined to women's domestic life. There is an urgent need to speak out about other types of violence.

Violence at Work

Reyna Ramirez's history is one shared by many. It is a story worth telling, because the eradication of workplace violence -- like all violence against women -- requires courage. Women must take incredible risks to speak out against violence, just as Reyna has.

Reyna's small stature is in stark contrast to her strength of spirit. Her voice, although weakened by a chronic health problem (the accumulation of lint, breathed in through her nose and throat) is sharp and exact.

I first met Reyna in Tehuacán, Puebla when she was 24 years old. Now she is 26, but neither her heart problem (as she calls it) nor the threats and violence she has encountered in her struggles, have made her back down.

From a Náhuatl background¹, Reyna Ramírez Salce was born in the Zoquitlán community in the Sierra Negra region of Puebla. She is the fourth of six siblings, four girls and two boys. One of her brothers died of cancer at the age of 20; the other at the age of 12 as a result of blood clots.

Because her mother was unable to care for all her children, Reyna was raised by her grandmother, far away from her parents and the rest of the family. When she was about 10 years old she returned home. A short while later her father passed away, and in order to survive, Reyna, her mother and her sisters had to start working. At the age of 11, Reyna stopped going to school and started working as a maid. She was 13 when she was first hired to work in a maquila.

“First my sister started working there, and then me. It was the only type of work where they didn't require that you had an education and where they accepted minors,” she comments. “At that time, jobs were abundant, and there were factories everywhere, so the first job that I got was in a factory close to my home.”

Being very young, Reyna wasn't aware of her labour rights, but in her work at one of the Tarrant garment factory in Tehuacan she experienced things that would mark her for the rest of her life.

¹ One of Mexico's principal indigenous groups.

Reyna's first job was as a manual labourer (work which was assigned to those with no experience). Her duties were to unpack, check and mark the trousers. She earned \$M350 (US\$35) per week, working ten hours a day. A year later, her bosses said she was fit to be transferred to another operation, in front of a machine.

Reyna remembers that when there were social audits at the factory management would hide her in the washroom because the Mexico Federal Labour Law prohibits child labour (under age 14). It's no wonder that the rest of her labour rights were violated as well, as tends to happen with girls and boys who are easy prey for unscrupulous employers.

“When I was working in the maquila you had to get permission to go to the washroom, and then they monitor how long you take. This practice is still very common. Usually no more than five minutes are allowed because, as the managers say, “time is money” and production gets delayed.

At some point water coolers were introduced in the factory and workers were told that the water was purified, although Reyna was sure that it wasn't. “The taste was different, even though they thought we wouldn't notice. We preferred to bring our own.”

Loosing her health: the high price of negligence

Even two years after leaving her work in the maquila, Reyna continued secreting lint from her nose and throat. While she was still working at the factory, she had consulted with social security (IMSS - Mexico's government medical service for workers) and had been told that her problem was probably just an infection of the throat or a mere irritation. Without taking any tests that would have ruled out other problems and despite her relapses, they prescribed her ibuprofen.

Neither the medical clinic at the maquila where Reyna was working nor the IMSS ever warned her that her symptoms might be caused by her work in the maquila. It was a private doctor that told Reyna that all her suffering was work related and that she should leave the environment that was causing her so much harm, before it killed her.

And she developed other problems. An intense pain in the joints of her hands led to an arthritic problem that paralysed her hands. Her mother explained that this health problem was probably due to the constant exposure to the cold of Tehuacán contrasting with her muscles being warmed up by excessive repetitive movements without rest.

Her voice has never recovered and nor has her health, despite years away from the maquila. Reyna continues to suffer from respiratory problems, headaches, and muscle aches. And the heart problem which she had before entering the maquila has worsened.

When asked about her illnesses and why they were not adequately taken care of, she answers that the health care provided by some maquilas is very poor. Tests are never taken and workers are only given temporary remedies so that they can continue producing. The truth is that doctors employed by the companies have very little interest in the illnesses of the workers or in their recovery. “I think that the purpose of having medical clinics inside the factories is only so that they don't have to register us with the IMSS.” Frequently she heard management personnel say, “Why give them insurance if we have doctors right here?”

Things are not much different, however, when workers manage to register with Mexico's social security system, since, according to Reyna, there appears to be a directive for the IMSS not to

register work-related illnesses, let alone deaths. “I am sure that is the reason why they never take the tests that we need.”

Although it is probably not seen as such, one of the most reprehensible acts of workplace violence against women is without a doubt the negligence of employers, institutions (IMSS) and governments that hinder or prevent women from accessing adequate health services to avoid preventable diseases and even death.

The lack of reliable records of the magnitude of work-related diseases by medical institutions also invites institutional violence. Illnesses are hidden, statistics don't show the problems and appropriate public policies are never put in place or enforced.

Other labour rights violations

For Reyna, the list of violations continues: sexual and other forms of harassment are problems frequently encountered in maquilas, although for the most part these violations are not reported by the workers for fear of losing their jobs.

“The violence that is committed against us takes many forms: We are treated badly for not speaking good Spanish, for not knowing how to read and write, for being indigenous, for the way we dress or because we are not able to express ourselves well in Spanish. For these reasons we sometimes feel embarrassed and prefer not to say anything.”

Modes of production or destruction?

When Reyna began her work in the maquila, she was required to produce 1,000 pieces per day. Soon after, the daily quota was increased to 3,000. By the time she left the factory – after they had purchased state-of-the-art machines – the quota had risen to 6,000 pieces. “Anyone would think that with these new machines the work would be easier, but no, they didn't even train us to use them. I ask myself now, how was I able to operate them?”

At the Tarrant plant where Reyna worked they introduced the modular system, where the workers are organized into small production teams and required to coordinate their work within the team. Reyna thinks that this system was the best way to increase production without increasing wages, because it created a model where the workers themselves exerted pressure on their fellow team members to meet the production targets set by their bosses. Subtly, the workers were transformed into their own supervisors, even managing to triple production with fewer staff.

Impunity

Reyna believes that government (regardless of who's in power) and business interests are essentially the same: to obtain profits and to protect their own interests at the expense workers. “They tell us that we should be grateful to them for giving us work, for attracting jobs and looking out for the progress of the citizens. But what they don't tell people is at what cost, but the cost is something that we now know well.”

“They say they are looking out for the welfare and progress of our community and trying to meet the needs of its people. But then we get sick in the maquila. Does that make sense? We workers give years of our lives to the companies, and then they leave without paying the compensation we

are legally entitled to. People want jobs and, yes, we need them too, but not under these conditions.”

The workers feel helpless. They don't trust their government or their employers, and even less the labour authorities. In fact, in Tehuacán, just a few years ago, a local Conciliation and Arbitration Board was set up, because of the pressure from the workers themselves. Previously, workers had to travel two hours by bus to the City of Puebla to register a grievance. Most would choose to abandon the process rather than travelling the long distance.

The Human Rights Commission of the Tehuacán Valley

Four years ago, Reyna began volunteering with the Human and Labour Rights Commission of the Tehuacán Valley (La Comisión de Derechos Humanos y Laborales del Valle de Tehuacán), an organization which has been defending workers and indigenous rights for over 10 years.

Just a few years ago in December of 2005, Martin Barrios, the Commission's president, was arrested and imprisoned as a result of threats and pressure placed by the Fernandez family which owns Grupo Navarra, one of the large garment consortiums in the state of Puebla, and from the Puebla state governor who is renowned for his corruption.

Recently, Reyna also became a victim of those whose interests were threatened. A Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) union leader physically attacked her right in the office of the local Conciliation Board while she and her colleagues were assisting a worker during his hearing.

In one of its most recent struggles, the Commission provided assistance to the workers at the Vaqueros Navarra factory who were attempting to gain recognition of a democratic union. The workers supporting the democratic union won the vote, but the owners of the factory chose to close the factory rather than accepting the results.

Blue Waters

Labour problems in the factories are not limited to worker-management relations. Sometimes problems are barely visible and, in the worst cases, are hidden by the governments themselves. Environmental pollution is one of these problems, since multinational companies invest in countries where laws are lax or governments submissive to foreign investors.

It is perhaps not surprising that we see the effects of pollutants and toxins in our communities, caused by the greed of factory owners, who prefer not to invest in cleaning up the blue waters (produced by the process of washing jeans) in order to increase profits, even at the expense of the health and lives of people.

The Human and Labour Rights Commission of the Tehuacán Valley has denounced this situation repeatedly, but, not surprisingly, neither the state nor federal authorities intervene to solve the problem. On this point, Reyna Ramirez says that in Tehuacán, as in many other parts of Mexico, factories use toxic substances (usually in the process of washing and softening jeans) that are banned in the United States. The substances are dumped from the factories to a canal, and the contaminated water ends up in the fields of Tehuacán, where farmers grow vegetables that are consumed by the community. This problem, she says, does not only affect those who work in the maquilas. It is a problem that should concern everyone in the community.

"We know about several cases of leukemia in children living near the canal where the toxic waste is dumped."

Reyna points out that her organization entered into talks with Levi's and Gap, asking them to implement their codes of conduct with the companies that are polluting. However, they only received proposals that did not solve the problem, such as how to help a community without potable water obtain access to it.

Finally, after a strong public campaign, the government, attempting to put a band-aid on a broken limb, ordered a pipeline built in place of the canal that carries the contaminated water, yet the water still continues to reach the fields.

One woman – the story of a generation

This story is not only about Reyna Ramirez. It is the story of thousands of workers in Mexico, who are facing corruption, corporate greed, the negligence of governments that seek foreign investment to generate jobs, but do not care about the lives it costs. It is the story of many multinational companies that, in a climate of impunity, are free to violate labour rights and environmental laws.