

Experiences of Female Workers: Protagonists of (A Lack of) Care, in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico

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Summary

The paid work of women in the Maquiladora Export Industry, in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, has been a cause of serious physical and emotional distress that they suffer. This has fostered in the women – as working women – a lack of care towards those they commonly cared for – children, grandchildren, parents – as well as the omission of self-care. Having to perform double and triple working days on a daily basis, has led them to develop not only physical-biological-bodily pain, but also guilt and conflicting emotions as a result of not meeting their socially assigned role based on the sexual division of labor, the care of children, and therefore, having to delegate this responsibility. The entry of women into the production market, added to activities that multiplied, while working time was extended, thereby generating a visible deterioration in their quality of life, and in that of those who they looked after. Hence the importance of addressing this problem and being able to detect what have been and/or what are the physical and emotional costs that these women navigate, and that hinder the care that they owe themselves.

Key words: women, work, care, costs and gains

INTRODUCTION

Ciudad Juarez is spatially divided by activities and economic dynamics that were introduced by the installation of the Maquiladora Export Industry (MEI). This industrial activity, at the local level, becomes the productive activity that detonates the economy due to its multiplier effects, since employment in the MEI represents more than 40% of the Economically Active Population (EAP) in this city (Almada, 1990).

The work and demographic growth that the MEI brought with it has created new needs, both objective and subjective, among the local inhabitants. There is a new network of relationships that becomes visible and evident in the daily and social activities of men and women. But it is the entry of women to the production market in the locality (1966-1970) that changed the economic structure at the same time as it led to a substantive socio-cultural change, which had its strongest impact on the family structure. Since it was basically women who were hired (seven women for every three men), women had an income (Zermeño, cited in Robles, 2013: 20).

However, as women left the household to join the production market, both women and children were placed in new situations and circumstances of risk because of the lack of care they had to have for others in their charge, as well as of themselves, with new workloads (Robles, 2010). The gender role that is socially assigned to women, and on which the functionality of androcentric societies such as ours rested to a large extent, changed. Now, with women in production, the work of caring for others is abandoned in the hands of

subcontracted persons, or in the 'best' of cases, in the family network – grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings – but especially, in other women with a higher level of precariousness.

BRIEF FRAME OF REFERENCE

In the last 50 years, in Ciudad Juarez, there has been a transgression of the public by those who had only been active in the private sector – women – which means that, only being considered as reproducers, today they are also producers. This is a substantive change since in patriarchal societies such as ours, men have been considered the main providers of the household, which through history has given them the prestige and social prerogative that they still enjoy today (Otner and Whitehead, 2000). The traditional nuclear family model that was present in the households of Ciudad Juarez has undergone great transformation. Part of this process is directly related to the new workloads acquired by women, and the effects of the lack of care that the double and triple working days in this city have brought with them. But who now takes care of the children, the elderly, the sick, the disabled?

Garcia-Calvente (2004), in her study on the care and health of women, mentions how this work of caring for children, spouses, parents, among others, has historically fallen on women because this is considered part of the gender role which a woman must fulfill and states: "Caregivers have been, because of these same characteristics, an 'invisible' social group and particularly weak in society" (2004: 85). In this way, the work of caring for others, performed by women, has also been made invisible until they left the home and entered the workforce.

Another of Garcia-Calvente's observations on caregivers is the fact that it is women who perform "more intensive and complex forms of care" (2004: 86), so that this work involves extra effort to be able to balance the work of care with the range of responsibilities, both family and work, that they now have to undertake. Therefore, the same author affirms that: "Care interferes in the daily lives of women much more than of men and puts them at greater risk of suffering negative consequences because of this" (2004: 86). Some of these consequences are physiological, emotional and organic illnesses.

There are factors, such as the fact of having moved from the private to the public sphere and now being producers as well as reproducers, that interact with the new labor-personal situation of women in terms that care, as part of the domestic work performed by them, takes on importance as both covering and abandoning it represents part of their health and quality of life. In these terms, Cristina Carrasco (2005) asserts that: "the incorporation of middle-class women into the labor market as a permanent situation in their lives and the change of family model – at least, at the symbolic level – means that women's time takes on new dimensions and one thinks in terms of substitution and valuation based on salaried work" (2006: 42).

There is, therefore, an economic-industrial transformation that developed at an accelerated pace, but without a link between these processes and an effective modernization of public policy that addressed what now represents for women a double work day: care. As a consequence, the actresses of this economic modernization, women who fell and left in neglect the most vulnerable sectors of society, were not integrated. It is women who move from motherhood and home, to work and community, which provokes a continuous debate between what they 'must be' and what they 'really are' (Muraro, cited in Robles, 2013: 24).

In this sense, Carrasco (2006) states: "Assuming the work of caring and participating in other social areas has meant moving in a continuous to and fro between the different spaces of

relationships (double presence, but also double absence) between paid work, unpaid work, public services, family relationships, etc. This has required the establishment of a wide variety of networks of women (mothers/daughters/grandmothers, daughters-in-law/mothers-in-law, friends, neighbors, sisters-in-law, school mothers) who have made it possible to participate in different spaces while they undertook the necessary care activities for daily life to continue" (2005: 47). As Osorio explains (2015), the work of care is still thought of as a 'gift' or 'essence' of the soul and not as an experience or constructed knowledge. But undoubtedly, daily female life today has changed drastically for working women and here, this is understood.

METHODOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION AND APPLICATION

The workshops planned and carried out by the civil organization 'Las Hormigas, A.C.', entitled Women Workers. Strong women had the purpose of being able to work on and detect through the workshops the different damages – physical, emotional and biological – that occur and affect the health of maquiladora women workers in the south-west zone of Ciudad Juarez. This, as part of a project that has prioritized the fact that they are mostly women who work in these companies, and therefore it is them who see their health diminished depending on the different activities they have to perform inside and outside of the home under various situations, generating what is known as double and triple working days. Hence, the questions that guided this work are: What are some physical and emotional costs that women that undertake paid work have to navigate? And, how do these costs hamper self-care and the future care of others that women have been socially responsible for?

Based on the above, two participatory workshops were held. These were designed to cater to the same population groups – all women – but different shifts. For this reason one workshop was programmed in the morning for those who work in the second (evening) shift and another in the afternoon for those who work the first (morning) shift. With each of these groups, we worked for two days, for two hours each day. That is, each workshop comprised two sessions of two hours or a little more, and the first group was made up of six participants, while the second had seven collaborators.

The methodological justification for the work done with these groups, comes from the constructivist frameworks, as already mentioned, since Alvarez-Gayou (2003) asserts that constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning that describes knowledge, but also how to arrive at it. This is why we are firmly interested in learning about some of the damage caused by working in this type of maquiladora industry, as well as investigating the lessons women have learned from their work experience, how they describe them and the conclusions they reach. This is because in this theory, the fundamental idea exists that knowledge is not intended to create representations of a single reality, but to understand that its function is mainly that of knowing how to adapt that knowledge to said reality.

In this way, the work carried out allowed us to understand the conceptual structures – ideas – of each of the women participants, the use they give them to give meaning to reality through acquired knowledge, and which each of them generates, and builds on herself from her very personal experience. It is important to mention that the material provided in the workshops by the participants themselves can also be considered a situated knowledge, since this is an existing vision of the world around them, but also because those who experience and express – whether men or women – speak of their own approximations and thus generate new knowledge, other epistemologies (Haraway, 1995).

DESCRIPTION OF THE CORE THEMES AND FINDINGS

The objective of holding participatory workshops under the focus group technique is focused on gathering information from three basic aspects: a) to carry out certain joint reflection exercises; b) to experiment and share feelings, thoughts and work practices among women; and c) the need for the women themselves to identify, name and share their work and personal experience. All of this allowed us to work from the perspective of social constructivism, which transcends the understanding of the mind and individual cognitive processes, in addition to focusing on the world of meaning and knowledge that are subjectively shared. That is, the social construction that is made of lived experiences, which in this case is that of these maquiladora women workers and their bodies (Alvarez-Gayou, 2003: 50).

Three themes are defined:

1. gains and costs they have experienced by working in the maquiladora;
2. perceptions and/or emotional-physical deteriorations of mind and body; and
3. alternatives that I identify or propose to improve my life and that of those around me.

From the development of these themes, what Alvarez-Gayou expresses makes sense when he affirms that there is concern that the collective generation of meaning – a group of working women, in this case – is central, at the same time as being nuanced by language and other social processes such as interaction at work and personal relationships. Hence, in this specific work, the feminist perspective that is concerned with and is used to provide an image of that reality that the women experience takes relevance (2003: 51), so that based on these same themes, we define what is discovered, creating a matrix that is titled analytical for each one of the themes.

In this proposed matrix, and which is presented below, the work of the workshops has been synthesized, assigning a concept or an idea from which we begin the reflection on what the women undertake daily, inside and outside of the factory. This is followed by the situation with which they identify the concept and the meaning that they give it by adapting it to their reality. The observation is to indicate which group said what.

First Analytical Matrix: Gains And Costs

Concepts-Ideas	Identification of the situation of the factory	Observation
Gains from working in the factory	Salary; certainty for children; taking money home; being independent; feed children; savings; having something from my own efforts.	Group 1
Costs of working in the factory	Few hours of sleep; problems with my children and spouse; many hours away from home; leaving my child alone; not playing with my children or having fun; not having enough time for my children and home; my health; wear and tear on my body; having little time with my spouse.	Group 1
Gains from working in the factory	Salary; yearly bonus; food; end-of-year holidays; work experience; living modestly; social security; having money.	Group 2
Costs of working in the factory	Late nights; neglecting my family and home; neglecting my health; not paying enough attention to my children; not going to Sunday School with my son; not spending time with parents and siblings; illness; not doing homework with my children; ending up alone as a woman; not having time for myself.	Group 2

In this first matrix, we can observe the advantages that these working women identify as the 'gains' they get from leaving their homes to perform work that takes them an average time of twelve hours a day, counting the nine that are at the maquiladora plus the time they spend in preparing and travelling to the workplace. Undoubtedly, both groups agree on the identification of earnings when they say that the most important thing is that they have a salary, social security for their children, that there are savings or an end-of-year bonus that they have access to for their expenses and that they can enjoy some vacation time.

These things, no doubt material, provide these women with a series of tangible 'gains' or advantages, which they identify with concrete realities such as being able to feed their children, pay for a house or rent, buy or pay for services such as electricity, water, gas, school enrolments, having clothing and shoes. It is important to mention that at this point the manifestations or expressions about the maquiladora are of recognition for the opportunity offered by being an employee.

However, from the identification of 'gains' to the identification of 'costs', a substantial change occurred since they had to stop and think, consider the other side of the coin. Although it was something that required a greater explanation and more time, the women began a characterization of these 'costs' from the very meaning they give to the same event - their work in the factory - which they have constructed or adapted according to the reality that they

live. Even so, they expressed some concrete and common 'costs', such as the fact that they sleep very little, spend many hours outside their home, leave their children alone, do not spend enough time with their children or spouse, do not have time for fun or recreation for themselves, as well as the gradual wear and tear on the body, their bodies.

In the case of costs, it is relevant to mention that although these are not expressed in the same material form that the gains acquired, their effect is delayed so that it will have a clear reflection on that material that constitutes the body. We cannot think that sleeping little or badly does not wreak havoc on our health, or that worry and anxiety do not cause some emotional and physical deterioration, or that a lack of fun and disagreements with our spouse do not affect us. The difference is that these are damages, 'costs' that take effect later and in parts, on a highly devalued material, the human material.

Second Analytical Matrix: Perceptions And Deterioration

Concepts-Ideas	Identification of the situation from a personal point of view	Observation
<i>Positive emotional perceptions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I feel useful, I like to be working and to be busy. -I feel happy to be useful because at my age my movements are fast and I am independent. -I am happy because I am going to be ok. -With pride and love. -Happy because I am the pillar of my house and for my daughter. -I want to demonstrate that I can have something from my own effort. -I feel fulfilled and I keep myself busy. -Able to be involved with other people. -Experience new ways of thinking and acting. 	Group 1
<i>Emotional deterioration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I feel sad because of all the effort I make and in the end I earn nothing. -I feel strong despite my problems at home. -Mentally angry, bored and very rarely happy. -I feel tired and humiliated because of the treatment they give us at work. -I don't like going to work because I leave my son alone and that scares me. -I always feel stressed. 	Group 1
<i>Physical</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tired, exhausted from all the hours on my feet. 	Group 1

<p>deterioration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -My knees are always physically tired. -Exhausted because I use my eyes a lot and I spend a lot of hours sitting down. -I work with my right hand and for this reason it hurts. -The damage to my body. <p>Other pains present are hip, foot and nose pain.</p>	
<p>Positive emotional perceptions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not being near my spouse and having some time for myself and to be 'me'. -Talking and joking with my colleagues, getting out of the daily routine. -Just being 'me' that I can't be at home -Making good friends or good colleagues. -I de-stress, share and learn from other people. -I forget my worries and/or problems. -Sharing with people that have already experienced certain problems helps me to resolve mine. -Meet new faces, make new friendships. -I feel free, myself. -Get to know myself, what I am capable of handling. -Put patience in practice. -Be able to better myself as a person. -Be able to talk about my problems with my breakfast friend. -Feel like they listen to me and help me with their advice. 	<p>Group 2</p>
<p>Emotional deterioration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -I feel that it is a sacrifice. -Not going to church on Sundays and always being in a rush. -Being in a bad mood and at times sad and at others, angry. -Not having enough time to do the things I like. -Disagreements with my spouse because I am always in a rush. -Feeling a lack of trust in colleagues that are 	<p>Group 2</p>

	<p>problematic.</p> <p>-It's as if I am fleeing, running from myself.</p>	
<i>Physical deterioration</i>	<p>-My legs hurt from standing up.</p> <p>-My back hurts from bending down.</p> <p>-With the work I do, my back hurts.</p> <p>-I always have backache and a headache.</p> <p>Other pains present are hand and leg pain.</p>	Group 2

This second matrix contains the perceptions that both groups reveal as the positive aspects that they visualize of their work in the maquiladora. Such as, the fact of being able to relate with other people, the continuous interaction outside their homes, the feeling of being useful and productive, thinking about the personal challenge that this work represents to them, being able to talk about their problems with other people, being proud and independent because of developing another activity, in addition to the household, feeling that they better themselves as human beings, and even not being close to their spouse and forgetting their concerns, which makes them feel free or to be themselves in another area outside the home.

But there are also counterparts to these positive perceptions and they are the things that they identify as 'deteriorations' from a more personal perspective; some are emotional and others are physical. The emotional deterioration has some link to the 'costs' identified above, however, these are statements from a structure of feeling that take on importance because they harbor dissimilar emotions that coexist in the same body. This is where we find those feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, sadness and distrust, annoyance, fear, boredom, fatigue and humiliation, moodiness or anger, because deep down, although they know they are strong, the constant haste makes them feel that they are fleeing from themselves. All this is a constant learning to name something that had no name.

In the identification of physical deterioration, exercise becomes more important because the body is more a tool of work than a space of joy or enjoyment. For this reason, the women soon identify the parts of the body that begin to hurt or bother them or that are undermined by the many hours of continuous activity that they undertake, so that the right arm, back, hip, legs, head, knees, are the result of working for eight hours standing or sitting, or lifting things, or soldering with one hand. In short, the excessive time in a permanent position deteriorates certain parts of the body that in turn affect the deterioration of others.

Third Analytical Matrix: Alternatives

Concepts-Ideas	Identification of the situation	Observation
Personal alternatives	-Start or continue expressing my say and believe in my strength. -I want to scare away my fear of the unknown, to open the way for me, myself. -Look for therapeutic help or a group that gives me fresh air.	Group 1
Personal alternatives	-‘Negotiate’ solutions with my spouse or family. - Look for therapeutic help. -Socialize, don’t live alone or isolated. -Look for options, don’t get down.	Group 2
Work alternatives	-Consider changes when an operation causes problems for the operator. -Permission to drink water. -Permission to go to the bathroom as many times as is required. -Being allowed to help colleagues when they have accidents or suffer health problems due to illness. -Have a respectful environment for women, in which we aren’t harassed, made fun of or humiliated.	Groups 1 and 2

This third matrix contains the alternatives raised by the women from their own work experience, but also from what they could reveal to themselves from the exercise undertaken over two days, as their basic or pressing needs for the recovery of their self. Hence their expressions give an indication of wanting to continue with reflection or therapy that allows them to keep naming what they feel, what they perceive and have. Something that allows them to continue unveiling the different layers of nested fear, anguish that sinks, the lack of confidence that does not let them believe in themselves and their strength to keep going. At the same time, the proposals they make of certain alternatives that could improve their status as maquiladora workers are more than anything else elemental needs of the human condition such as: being able to drink water whenever they are thirsty, or go to the bathroom when required, or change the position in which they have been for a certain time, or assisting someone who has had an accident, or not feeling that they are harassed, humiliated or mocked for the fact of being women. All of the aforementioned are human and labor rights that have been and are violated by other workers like them, but especially by employers.

CONCLUSIONS

The relevance of carrying out this kind of participatory workshops is to be able to observe the different learnings that these working women generate, as well as the meaning that they give to these learning to adapt them to their daily lives. However, it is clear that from this work experience, in addition to obtaining a job, a salary, certain social security benefits and they get the satisfaction of knowing that they are not only reproducers but also are within the scope of labor production. There are serious health problems that need to be addressed, not only for the women’s self-care, but also for the future care of others who depend on them as caregivers and

who are even more vulnerable groups of people – children, the elderly, the sick. Therefore, addressing these health problems should be a priority for employers, as well as through social programs or policies that can be established as part of the social security of a municipality, a state, a country.

Therefore, part of the suggested alternatives are: First, the labor conditions that persist in many of the maquiladoras are subhuman conditions if we consider the salary paid, the hours worked, and the work that is performed. This does not allow the women, in this case, to have access to a certain quality of life, in which they can enjoy an income that allows them to live in dignity. But also this is a strenuous job and not just because of the operating functions that they undertake, but due to the number of hours they have to be in these workplaces and the hours of travel that implies.

This is a complex problem, if we consider that to change some things such as salary, activities and working hours, it is necessary to undertake a detailed revision of article 123 of the Mexican Constitution to change and make restitution to workers of more dignified wages, less tiring hours and changes in activities that allow them to rehabilitate the wear on tear on their bodies.

However, for the moment there is no intention on the part of the State to effect these changes that would favor a large part of the population, as they do not plan to put pressure on employers. It is necessary that workers know their labor rights as a first way of exercising them. It is also appropriate that they are informed about what kind of labor organizations exist and where they are so they can go to them when their labor rights are violated.

Second, there is a widespread and permanent clamor on the part of these women that becomes a serious conflict when it changes from a labor problem to an emotional and social damage. This is related to the fact that they are all mothers and all live with a constant concern that their children are alone, or that they do not spend the necessary time to be with them and to help them. This, which in them becomes a constant feeling of guilt for the 'abandonment' and the lack care they give to those children in order to go to work, is reflected in a childhood devoid of maternal-paternal figures, educational failure for a large part of these children, as well as young people with only elementary school education, who then enter the same kind of precarious work that the women undertake, among other things.

What is described is nothing more than the reflection of the differentiated power relations in which domestic and care work has been marked by the sexual division of labor, making women responsible for this as part of the gender condition, but also in "the persistence of the current order of care (which has been more a lack of care) that represents a framework of discrimination and exclusion for women" (Osorio 2015: 17). Hence, it is a serious problem that the municipal, state and national social agenda does not contemplate, on the part of employers, the provision to the female working population of nurseries and care homes near their home or their work where they can leave children, but also adolescents, to be properly cared for, so that day by day these social sectors do not become the permanent lament of their mothers and social conflict that chains them to poverty.

Third, it is important to note that all the women are asking for and wanting gender equity as part of the social justice that has excluded women and has made us socially responsible for children, the home and the care of the elderly. According to Osorio, it would be necessary to

devise mechanisms for the recognition of the work of care, which allow an ethics of care that is not associated with women exclusively and that shows that these are activities that respond to a common vulnerability and not to an affection singular to women (2015: 20). In this way, women themselves could exercise self-care, which prevents them from persisting in a lack of care.

But as if this were not enough, they also have to live with sexism that makes them victims of multiple violence such as harassment and sexual harassment, looks, pranks and grotesque jokes on the part of men, and especially, those that are hierarchically better positioned are those who denigrate and objectify them. This is without including the differentiated treatment given to men – situations that they are becoming aware of and that places them in a condition of vulnerability. To change this situation, it is necessary that, increasingly, the State and civil society join efforts to implement and seek gender education alternatives where women can take time for the reflection that this requires, not only to raise awareness but to promote the change of their condition of oppression.

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Note: The workshops operated as focus groups (two) and took place at 'Las Hormigas' civil society organization.