



Joe Raedle/Getty Images

**Maquiladora worker in Mexico**

## The Women of the Maquiladoras

BY MELINDA HARDEN

When we crossed the border in April 2008, the United States Department of State had just issued a warning to U.S. citizens advising that they not travel to Ciudad Juárez. The continued violence of the Juárez Cartel forced the Mexican National Guard to send troops to the city to prevent violence between drug gangs. Our group arrived safely, however, and we were able to visit various organizations dealing with women’s issues on the Mexican side of the border.

We were warmly welcomed by our sister Presbyterians of Northern Mexico. On our second night in Juárez, we gathered to listen to women talk about their lives as workers in the *maquiladoras*. The *maquiladoras* are foreign-owned assembly plants that take advantage of cheap labor in host countries, thereby enabling corporations to outsource jobs and keep production costs low. Women of all ages came to spend time with us that night. We managed to have devotional time, mingle and get acquainted in spite of the language barrier.

The first woman (between 18 and 25 years old) told us that from 8:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M. each day, she assembles medical supplies to be used in the United States.

She likes her job, but says it is stressful and the food served at the plant is not good. She knows her work will help sick people, so she is proud to do it. Production quotas keep her very busy as she tries to be efficient and not make mistakes. On Fridays, her pay is 50 dollars for five days of work. If she is late or misses a day, her wages are docked by 20 dollars.

Another young woman told us about making parts for cell phones. Because her job involves handling hazardous materials, she receives a higher wage—60 dollars per week. We wondered how hazardous the materials are and whether the protective gear is adequate. There are not a lot of regulations or restrictions within the *maquiladoras*.

That night, and throughout our visit to the border region, we asked ourselves, “Are *maquiladoras* a good thing for host countries?” The women who spoke to us were glad to have their jobs and seemed proud of their work, but their wages are not enough to support a family, even in a developing country. And the cities along the border, like Juárez, have a higher cost of living because many residents spend their wages on goods from the United States, at U.S. prices.

The women who are working for 50 dollars per week are producing goods that will be shipped across the U.S.–Mexico border. These goods will be sold for developed-world prices and will earn huge profits for the corporations that are paying these women extremely low wages. If these workers were to demand higher wages, there is a very real chance that the corporations would relocate to a poorer region and start again, paying the same low wages. When I think about what a teenager can earn with a summer job in the United States, and think of the minimum wage law, 50 dollars per week seems unbelievable.

I contemplated all this as we applauded the young women who spoke to us. As we drove past the huge industrial buildings of Juárez, we read familiar names—names of U.S. companies. We came home to products that we are able to buy because of the hard work of our neighbors to the south.

The Latinos and Latinas crossing the border seek wages better than 50 dollars per week. They are in search of the land of opportunity and the American Dream that every other group of immigrants to the United States has sought. They seek opportunity and they seek *justicia*—justice.

## Crossing the Border to Ciudad Juárez

BY ALICE KOERNER

**M**y reflections on crossing the border and experiencing what life is like for residents in Ciudad Juárez and immigrants in El Paso can be summed up in one word—*faith*! From the thousands who cross the border every day with work cards, to the beggars on the streets; from the fantastically rich to the poverty-stricken—there is faith. There is faith that the gunfighting will stop; faith that work will be found; faith that spousal beatings will end; faith that children will be fed; faith that not everyone in the United States wants to stereotype immigrants; faith that in running from violence, help will be there; faith that the missing family member will be found; faith that through all these struggles, God was, is and always will be. We saw signs of faith, but we needed to feel and hear them as well—the



Sherry Flyr

**Children from Project Vida**

smiles and greetings; the cleanliness and bright colors in the poorest cardboard shacks; the laughter of hungry children as they played in the dust, and hugs from new-found friends. Faith is a wonderful thing and the faith of the oppressed and impoverished inspired me. Everyone should visit the border, knowing it will strengthen their own faith in the almighty I Am.

## Center Against Family Violence— A Safe Place

BY C.J. CLAPP AND JUDY KEMPER

**W**hat can you do? You and your children are being abused. Your lives are in danger. You have no money. You have no papers. Where can you go? In El Paso you can go to the Center Against Family Violence. The Center Against Family Violence is the only domestic violence center in the Texas counties of El Paso, Hudspeth and Culbertson. There you can find emergency shelter, individual and family therapy for domestic violence, legal assistance, support groups, employment programs, and food and hospitality, regardless of your immigration or financial status.

We were impressed with the wide variety of services offered at the center. A woman seeking help has available to her in this one place all the services she needs. The center provides advocacy, crisis intervention, children's programs, safety planning, education and 24-hour emergency care for those in crisis. Its motto, "Learn to



Judy Kemper

**Jody and Cynthia, workers at the Center Against Family Violence**

Live Again," defines its mission. This truly is a wonderful program.

Learn more about the Center Against Family Violence at [www.cafv.org](http://www.cafv.org).