

Norma Iglesias Prieto. *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora: Life Histories of Women Workers in Tijuana.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. xv + 115 pp.p. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-73869-0; \$20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-73868-3.



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Taking on the name of the all-popular Mexican beauty pageants for its title, the book by Norma Iglesias Prieto *La Flor mas bella de la maquiladora* now appears in its English version. Originally published in 1985 by the Secretaria de Educacion Publica and by today's El Colegio de la Frontera, it soon turned to be one of the seminal studies on working women of the maquiladora industry in the border city of Tijuana. After three years of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the foreword by Henry Selby provides an excellent context and a valuable update. Michael Stone and Gabrielle Winkler faced—with outstanding success—the most difficult task of transliterating into English the polyphony of the women's voices whose testimonies provided the vital gist of the book.

The purpose of the study of Iglesias Prieto “to examine the significance and meaning of being a female maquiladora worker on the US-Mexico border” (p. xix) is addressed in full. She achieves this by drawing from in-depth field research and thoughtfully conducted personal interviews. All of these materials created an extensive data bank, collected between 1972 and 1982, which provided a solid foundation to the study. The time frame as well is meaningful. It is positioned during the period when the maquiladora activity was taking off as part of the Border Industrialization Program. The maquiladoras,

or assembly plants, were then primarily conceived to replace the bracero program terminated in 1965.

In the 1970s, foreign capital entrepreneurs attracted by far-reaching duty-free incentives, low infrastructure costs, and, above all, cheap labor—what in the language of government economists is called competitively priced labor—installed a platform of assembly plants. The Programa Fronterizo developed swiftly by creating jobs and stimulating the economy of the borderlands. Currently, the maquiladora industry is a vibrant pivot of the Mexican economy and contributes with well over 35 percent of the total output of the export sector. Tijuana is the center of the maquila industry and houses around thirty percent of the more than 3800 assembly plants existent in the country.

The present vitality of the maquiladora business apparently eclipses the characteristics of its inception. In reality, the process was very much akin to the seamy side of the Mexican industrialization process of the 1940s: demographic dislocation, urban and environmental degradation, labor abuses, and trade union leadership manipulation.

The maquiladora spin-off was unique in the sense that, unlike most of the manufactures in central Mexico, the activity introduced a major gender shift in the

labor pool by feminizing its work force. The Tijuana maquiladoras and all those on the border, during the decade studied by the author, had between 80 and 90 percent female workers. Normally, but not necessarily, women were about 25 years as a median age, virtually all had completed their elementary schooling, others had their secondary education or were pursuing it, and the majority were single. However, many maquila women had children and either were heads of their households or the primary contributors to the economic sustenance of their families. The women were mainly migrants, preeminently from the northern and central states of the country. Years later, they started coming from the far south. Of the women interviewed by Iglesias Prieto, the majority who were migrants reported that they went to Tijuana in search of better living conditions, others to “get ahead in life,” and the rest with the hope of obtaining a job in “those industries that were offering work to women like us” (p. 46).

In the late 1980s, following the 1982 economic crisis, the gender proportion of the maquiladora labor force started to change. Currently, women constitute the majority of the workforce, representing 60 percent of the workers in the activity. At the same time, the rate of employment in the assembly plants increased dramatically with the expansion of the sector, which saw in the first part of the present decade yearly average growth rates of above 15 percent. Today it employs more than a million workers.

Of the interviews with maquiladoras, Iglesias Prieto selected ten cases to illustrate working conditions, family backgrounds, perceptions and consciousness of women workers. With an adroit use of the personal accounts, the author weaves the vital edge into her analysis. From the women’s life stories, we learn the internal operations of the maquiladoras and what was, and to a certain extent still is today, the life of a maquiladora worker. In effect, and in spite of the sweeping changes ascertained in the wake of the free-market policies of Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s administration and the NAFTA agreement, many of the variables which characterized female labor in the maquiladora industry, as stated by the author’s interviewees, have remained with impressive resilience.

From the early beginnings of the maquiladora business, women were preferred as workers since they were perceived by the then mostly North American-dominated assembly “empresarios” to be pliable nimble fingers readily available to perform repetitive alienating chores without raising their voices. They were also willing to ac-

cept wages below those demanded across the border or by male laborers, unfettered by the swift pace of the labor turnover, and above all were thought incapable of organizing and developing unions to protect their rights. Years later and with the help of accumulated labor experience, as amply reported by Iglesias Prieto, the maquila women started to modify those perceptions. They organized and mobilized, confronting harassment, threats, and dismissals by the maquila management with strikes and unions. Furthering their demands for respect and better wages and benefits was their struggle to make themselves more visible among the working class.

The author accurately detects signs of change in the cultural behavioral patterns of the maquila workers. As the women started to gain economic independence, they slowly but surely began to demonstrate assertiveness at the workplace, at home, and in the gender relations within their social sphere. This is not to say that the patriarchal relations inside or outside the maquiladora have vanished. Sexual harassment, mandatory pregnancy tests, illegal closings, and unwarranted lay-offs are today daily occurrences in the maquila. Many of those attributes are pervasive in the industry itself and in the society that supports them. However, the acknowledgment, broadcasting of, and will to confront unacceptable working conditions were and are the objective of several maquila organizations and unions that exist today on the border regions and across the frontier line. There is evidence that the organizations have been making inroads in altering those relations and traits.

Scholars interested in tracing the early stages of unionization efforts or reasons for the absence thereof, as well as those looking into women’s actions to defend their labor rights or anyone who is eager to perform comparative analysis, *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora* is a most valuable source.

There are also unforeseen consequences taking place on the border which can be attributed to the three generations of women in the maquila. These refer to changes in cultural mores related to gender relations, which, as can be read in the testimonies included in the book, were already in motion at the time of the author’s study. Labor mobilization, networking and assertiveness contributed to the women’s behavioral changes. In all, these actions refurbished the sense of self-worth and autonomy gained by women with economic independence.

Another theme, central to Iglesias Prieto’s overview, is her critical appreciation of the “ideal muchacha maquiladora: single, young, quiet, apolitical, dexter-

ous and productive,” which emerged as a rather popular paradigm of the maquiladora worker during the early stages of the assembly industry. Especially important is Iglesias Prieto’s assessment of how plant management earnestly sought to recruit young, unattached and childless women. The author went to great lengths to find out for herself how the hiring process worked, applying for a job in a maquiladora in Ciudad Juarez. As it happened, because of the great variability of the assembly plants, women were not all single or childless. In fact, a great number had more than one child and cared for parents and siblings. Still, relentless managerial pursuit for the ideal muchacha maquiladora persisted until fairly recently. According to more current studies, in particular that of Susan Tiano, the model has significantly changed.[1] Now the ideal maquiladora is the married, sensible, and stable mother, but still nimble, silent and non-demanding.

Beautiful Flowers is divided into seven chapters. In all of them, the author uses the women’s accounts to structure the narrative. The first chapter illustrates the production process of the maquiladoras, the daily routines, and the pace of the labor. The women described their work in detail as repetitive activity which was expected to be fast and became wearisome from many hours of performing the same movements in front of conveyor belts or machines. Iglesias Prieto provides her own version as she saw the women labor in their work stations. Seen from the outside, it appeared accurate, simple, and almost “the prestidigitation of a magician” (p. 4). However, in those acts there was more than simply dexterity. The author found the existence of a quota system which coerced workers to raise their productivity with no wage or benefit gain other than keeping the job. At the same time, as the examples abound in the book, maquiladora work is extraordinarily fragmented and alienating. In several cases, particularly in high-tech electronics, many of the women did not know what it exactly was that they were assembling, thus adding to the sense of strangeness they felt in relation to their work.

In the second chapter, Iglesias Prieto focuses on the working conditions of the assembly plants. In it, the reader is able to understand the reasons for the upbraided condemnation the industry has received from environmentalists, workers’ organizations, and policy makers on both sides of the border. In effect, what characterized many maquila plants was the constant existence of unsanitary conditions. Endemic was the absence of health concerns by the management, the lack of safety and security measures or enforcement of regulations concerning

toxic and hazardous materials. Women expressed their persistent fears about accidents waiting to happen or the real possibility of developing a job-related illness lurking in the polluted environment of the work place. The author notes the oppressive atmosphere of the plants and how women responded either by leaving for other jobs in the industry with hopes of bettering the work conditions or simply felt terrorized by unemployment and weathered the situation.

The hiring practices on the part of the industries which targeted young women plus the individual and overall characteristics of this particular labor pool are central to the study. These are the themes of chapters three and four. In them, the author takes a close look at deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about gender. These perceptions, Iglesias Prieto asserts, cross social classes and national identities and imagines the existence of a female nature. According to it, women are more responsible, patient, and skilled when dealing with meticulous and fine chores. In fact, all those perceptions are double-edged ideological constructs. On one side, they worked to the benefit of the industrialists as they convinced women of their biological advantages. On the other, it hindered in women the realization of their status and capabilities as workers inhibiting recognition of their labor rights.

In the following two chapters, the study features workers’ backgrounds, reflects on the impact of changes in the lifestyles of the women, and deals in detail with the mechanisms of control devised by maquila management to control female labor. The testimonies in this section are substantial. Regarding origin, all of the women came from impoverished conditions and a dismal lack of economic opportunities. Hence, the reasons the women were willing to risk it all in the migratory move.

Of the interviewees, the majority shared not only a migratory history, but also the conviction of having achieved definite improvements in their life after they became maquila workers. They possessed as well a unique sense of achievement by being able to enter the labor market regardless of the severe conditions of their working environment. They also experienced a sense of accomplishment by being capable of purchasing a wider variety of goods and, in general, by enjoying the services and amenities of a big city such as Tijuana. Moreover, they jointly thought optimistically of the possibilities they opened for their children and families by resettling and entering the world of the maquiladoras. Regrettably, the women’s testimonies were not set forth within

a more comprehensive historical context. This certainly would have been useful in understanding the extraordinary social plurality and complexity of the border area.

The last chapter recounts the high profile case of the labor struggle of Solidev Mexicana in late 1970s and early 1980s. The episode, as narrated by Gabriela, one of the workers, achieved notoriety not only because of the activities of unionizing and attaining benefits and salary advantages, but also because it acquired international dimensions as it involved workers and labor issues across the border. This account is rich and informative. It is particularly significant as a harbinger of the labor struggles that ensued throughout the border area in later years. In her conclusion, Iglesias Prieto emphasizes the characteristic variability of the maquiladora industry with regard to production, organization, working conditions, and the labor pool. It is remarkable to read, retrospectively after more than ten years, the major gender shifts and accommodations of the Mexican labor market which were inaugurated by these maquiladoras.

This book is very well written in a most enjoying narrative style. The simple and colloquial language of the testimonies runs smoothly and the author did well in maintaining the easy flow of the women's discourses. It is insightful and provides useful information for scholars and students interested in gender studies, labor, and social issues of the Mexican borderlands. Historians will certainly appreciate this book as a reference tool. Given its solid data and spirited use of life stories, *Beautiful Flowers* could be a magnificent book to add to any of the reading lists for Mexican or Latin American classes.

Note

[1]. Susan Tiano. *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender, and Ideology in the Mexican Maquila Industry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

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