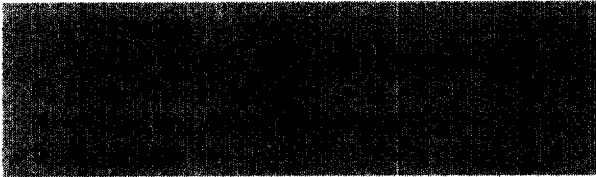


## **Female Maquila Workers and Urban Neighborhood Movement In a Border City of Mexico\***

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### **I . Introduction**

Mexico is a patriarchal, capitalistic society, which has driven for economic growth based on industrialization in recent decades. Under the crisis of the global capitalism, however, Mexican people, begin to lose their confidence in industrialization policies of the government, which have promised them progress and development. And, urban residents begin to demand for the provision of basic social services such as water, drainage, electricity, garbage collection, paved streets and schools through social movements.

This study is about the female maquila workers and their involvement

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in urban neighborhood movement occurring in the city of Nuevo Laredo, a Mexico-U.S. border city. It will examine how female maquila workers relate their labor experiences with urban neighborhood movements, and how Mexico's industrialization and urbanization processes are represented in those movements. In contrast with previous studies on social movements, which often concentrate on their political-economic implications in a macro level, this study will pay a special attention to daily lives of individual participants, and will attempt to explore cultural meanings of the social change brought by the macro process such as industrialization and urbanization. For this study, I collected the life histories of female maquila workers and representatives of poor urban neighborhoods through participant observation and intensive interviews and analyzed secondary reference materials related to the research subject.

Border cities such as Nuevo Laredo are concentrated with maquila industries mainly due to the geographical proximity to the U. S. and are often described as a typical example where unequal distribution of resources created by Mexican industrialization processes prevails (Martinez 1996).<sup>1)</sup> The majority of maquila workers are immigrants from the countryside as well as other southern cities of Mexico, and live in poor neighborhoods (often called squatter settlements, colonias humildes or fraccionamientos populares) located in the outskirts of the city. This study is based on three out of eighteen poor neighborhoods existing in the city.

Women are main actors in Mexican urban movements, especially in those occurring in poor neighborhoods, demanding for the improvement of living conditions (de la Rocha 1994, Velez-Ibanez 1983). Nevertheless many of the previous studies on social movements in Latin America ignore gender as an important variable, and focus on the aspect of social

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1) For the detailed discussion on the development history and characteristics of maquila industries in Mexico-U. S. border cities, refer to Kim(1998).

class(Peterson 1995). They tend to accept the public-private dichotomy, and exclude women from public activities such as participation in social movements(Rapold 1986). This study emphasizes that the public area is not clearly demarcated from the private area, and that women actively manipulate the relationship between the areas for their survival. This study analyzes how women relate their labor experiences in maquila industries with their daily lives around the family and neighborhoods, and how labor relations in the public sector are intertwined with private family relations as well gender relations. It explores how women changes their gender identities and politicize their individual life experiences through participation in social movements. It examines the meaning of "the personal is political"(Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996) among female maquila workers and residents of poor neighborhoods.

## **II. Maquila Industry and Urban Social Movements**

Social movements, which occur in various parts of the world including Mexico in recent years, derives from so called the crisis of modernity(Yudice 1992). Since the Mexico Revolution(1910-1917), the concept of modernization along with that of marginalization has become the basis of economic and political reform in Mexico. Mexican government has exercised hegemony by defining itself as a modern subject contrasted with marginalized people. The government has emphasized that Mexican people need a civilized nation, which actively carry out policies for progress and development in order to narrow the gap from those in liberalistic Europe. The nation has established the concept of urban-oriented, modern government contrasted with that of poor and dependent people living in marginal areas of the city through political processes for the distribution of space and various services required for urban

life(Morris 1995). Mexico, however, encounters a crisis in carrying out these modernization policies, reflected by a massive migration from the countryside to the city and a formation of large-scale squatter settlements of migrants where basic social services are not provided(Weeks and Ham- Chande 1995).

The massive migration and large-scale squatter settlements are especially noticeable in border cities where its existence is closely related with the development of maquila industries. The city of Nuevo Laredo, for example, is one of the most rapidly growing border cities where multi-national corporations gather to form industrial parks in order to utilize cheap Mexican labor and other favorable business conditions.<sup>2)</sup> It is relatively in recent years when maquila industries begin to develop in the city, and many families of maquila workers live in squatter settlements which expand in the outskirts of the city. Maquila industrial parks are often located in abandoned, marginal sections of the city, and maquila workers and other poor migrants invade the abandoned land close to or adjacent to the industrial parks and form large-scale squatter settlements(Kim 1998).

In the squatter settlements, which were not originally developed as residential areas, lack basic social services such as water, drainage, electricity, garbage collection, paved streets and schools, even after many years of their formation. After the squatters occupy the land whether they invade the land or pay for it, they begin to collect construction materials and build their own houses over many years(it is called auto-construction). Since many of them lack a sum of money required for the construction of a house, they start with simple materials often collected from garbage dumps, such as plastic curtains, wooden pieces, palettes, stones, and broken bricks. They add and remodel their houses as they can afford construction expenses through years. Even when the

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2) Refer to footnote #3.

squatters have finished building their own houses, they often have to struggle to get the ownership of their houses approved by the government. And they suffer from the lack of basic social services. Representatives of the squatter settlements frequently visit local government offices or mobilize residents for street demonstrations, appealing for the improvement of living conditions. Ex- or current female maquila workers actively support squatters or join them in social protests. I will discuss about this in detail in the later sections.

Residents in poor urban neighborhoods question modernization policies of the government and their marginal positions in the society as they organize themselves for the basic social services in urban life and as they demand for the expansion of public services. Urban social movements are a protest of the urban poor against the concept of progress and development emphasized by the government, their challenge to the justice of the government, and their attempt to take a meaningful role in political participation(Peterson 1995). Without committing themselves to a certain political party or government-led labor union, people try to form democratic organizations of their own and define themselves in their own ways rather than accepting the definition of the government as being marginal or uncivilized.

In order to explore the dynamics of urban movements occurring in poor neighborhoods, we need to pay attention to the recent theories, which focus on how individual participants establish their own world through group activities such as social movements(Escobar 1992). Protest is an individual decision yet has social characteristics at the same time when it is carried out as a group. And, protest derives from the participant's counter-discourse against hegemonic discourse and experiences of daily lives(de Lauretis 1987). Social movements are political group activities, yet get their momentum from life experiences of the individual. People create a possibility of developing group identities

alternative to hegemonic discourses and political practices as they participate in social movements. They create alternative frames of reference about their lives and experience them through daily social interactions(Laclau 1985, Melucci 1988).

The neighborhood movements which occur in my research area in the city of Nuevo Laredo, are based on the alliance between residents and female maquila workers. The maquila workers include the ones who used to work in maquila industries but got laid off 5 years ago due to their involvement in labor protest, in addition to the ones who currently work in maquila industries. These two groups of female maquila workers are old-time co-workers who used to work for the same maquila company. The latter group were sympathizers of the former group, who supported their protest, yet have managed to keep their jobs. Most of these female maquila workers are members of CETRAC (Centro de Trabajadores y Comunidades) established by Sandra whom I will introduce in the following section. The female maquila workers do not live in squatter settlements but engage with various community activities in relation to the three colonias, regularly visiting the squatter settlements, meeting with residents or their representatives, participating in regular resident meetings, joining residents in their protest for better living conditions and social services, and distributing donated goods to the residents. Representatives of the communities or the residents who maintain close relationships with the maquila workers report on "whatever happens in the community" to them, so that they can be mobilized for material as well as psychological help and support when they are in need.

Although the most of maquila workers are migrants from different parts of Mexico(Kim 1998), they have built close ties with each other as they worked for the same company for many years under difficult working conditions. They also share experiences of living in squatter

settlements or in a condition similar to them. Many of them have friends and relatives who now work in maquila industries and live in squatter settlements. It seems natural for them to have a sympathy with squatters and maquila workers, and attempt to help them with their limited resources. Through their previous experiences of labor protest they have realized how important it is to have voices together in demand for better working conditions to the company or for better living conditions to the government. They put an effort to build trust and closeness with residents of the communities, and show commitment and dedication in helping them out.

In the following section, I will introduce life experiences of ex- and current maquila workers and representatives of the communities, and elaborate on the worker-squatter alliance existing in the three neighborhoods that I studied in Nuevo Laredo in 1998.

### **■. Female Social Activists<sup>3)</sup>**

#### **1) Sandra, a charismatic leader**

Sandra became a maquila worker when she was 16 years old and worked for in a Sony subcontracting company for about twenty years. She started her maquila career as an assembly line worker with the credential from a junior high school, but enrolled in a high school and then studied law at a college while she worked at the factory. Learning the law enabled her to defend the rights of her fellow workers, most of whom are women. In 1994 she led the Nuevo Laredo Sony Movement where more than a thousand female workers held a wildcat strike trying to form an independent union to improve their working and living

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3) All the names of female social activists introduced in this paper are pseudonyms.

conditions.

After the labor protest led by her was crushed by the police in 1994, her name was listed on the top of the "black list", and she was sought after by the police. She managed to escape to the U. S. and joined a human rights organization run by a catholic nun in 1996. She is now an executive director of the organization, coordinating the Maquila Worker Empowerment Project, a popular education program that conducts workshops for maquila workers on labor law, the Constitutional wage, health and safety, reproductive rights, and fundraising with an emphasis on training the trainers. In 1997 she wrote a Manual on the Mexican Federal Labor Law, using popular language and graphics to educate workers about their rights and leadership development. She is also the founder of CETRAC as I mentioned earlier.

Sandra travels throughout the world to provide testimony about the devastating effects of corporate greed on women who work in free trade communities. She also visits her hometown, Nuevo Laredo, regularly and keep close ties with friends, relatives, and ex-coworkers from the maquila factory. Her visits to the city are characterized as both official and private. During her stay in the city she spends most of her time in exchanging information with her friends and ex-coworkers, most of whom are active in social movements in their work places or in their communities. Her pleasant gathering with friends often turns into serious meetings where she gets reports on the latest news on maquila plants and colonias humildes, and discusses about strategies and projects to help maquila workers and people living in poor neighborhoods.

Sandra helps maquila workers to organize study groups where about 10 workers get together to share their labor experiences, study the labor law of Mexico, and raise consciousness on their working conditions and workers' rights. She accompanies maquila workers, who participated in labor dispute and were forced to quit their job, and helps them submit

their complaints to a mediation office of the Department of Justice (Departamento de Justicia) as a witness.

Sandra takes the information that she gathers from the meetings to the U.S. with her and tries to find resources to support maquila workers and poor people in Nuevo Laredo as well as other border cities. She collects funds through her organization in the U.S. and send money to the colonias humildes to build a school or social infrastructure. She also receives donations of everyday necessities such as used clothes, toys and blankets from church organizations or citizens of the U. S. and delivers them to the poor. When she contributes money or donated goods from the U.S. to the colonos, she emphasizes that they are not simply a form of charity but that of solidarity. She says that she helps people with the belief that workers need a support from people, and vice versa.

Sandra makes frequent use of the media to educate the public and to raise consciousness about the impact of NAFTA and the global economy on workers lives. She utilizes her close relationship with the owner of one of the two major local newspaper companies, in pressing her to publish "on the reality of workers and everything about their lives". Sandra has been successful in convincing the owner that "workers are the future" and in establishing her image as a godmother of workers, who takes care of their material as well as psychological difficulties. One of Sandra's ex-coworkers, Fela, says, "when Sandra was our leader, we[maquila workers] had everything. We had the company- supported trips to beaches for vacation, shuttle buses for commuting to work, etc. When Sandra went to the U.S. after being laid off, everything stopped." Even after Sandra quit working at a maquila plant, she has continued to help her ex-coworkers find jobs or houses. The social activists, whom I will introduce in the following sections, are Sandra's ex- coworkers and colonos who have received various forms of favors and help from Sandra and are eager to return them to her, by participating in the social

movements that Sandra envisions.

## 2) Martita, an information dispatcher

Martita was a coworker of Sandra until 1994 when she was laid off for participating in the workers' protest organized by Sandra. She was able to find a job at a local newspaper company as a phone receptionist, with a help from Sandra. As a return, Martita helps Sandra as if she were a Sandra's secretary. When Sandra visits the newspaper company, Martita serves coffee to her, hands over newspaper articles on maquila industries and colonias which she cut out for Sandra, and locates and makes a copy of the documents which Sandra needs for her social activism. When Martita can not locate the documents or newspaper articles that Sandra needs during her visit, she mails them later. Martita also supports and participates in social movements in other ways. She generously offers a part of her living room to CETRAC as its office where piles of CETRAC documents are housed and regular meetings are held. Martita goes to the "mesa protest" with her friend Queta at 5 p. m. almost everyday after her work. The "mesa protest" is against a fraud of the last mayor election in Nuevo Laredo. Martita and her two or three friends set up a table(mesa) and a protest banner in a plaza across the city hall for one hour, and explain passers-by about the election fraud.

Martita is a widow in her mid-40s. Her husband was drowned in the Rio Bravo a few years ago, as he attempted to swim to the U. S. side. Although Martita owns a house in the workers' residential area called Infonavit, yet her 3 children, married or unmarried, live in her mother's house. Martita visits her mother's house for dinner everyday, and tries to contribute her mother for the living expenses with her wage and moonlighting.<sup>4)</sup> She rents out a room of her house, makes tacos for sale

on weekends with her mother, and utilizes a credit system for the purchase of daily necessities. However, Martita is always short of money. Her wage is not enough to cover her personal expenses and a purchase of 2 Kg tortillas(MN\$12.70/Kg) every evening for her family. She gets paid about MN\$250 a week, which is less than an average weekly pay of maquila workers, MN\$350.<sup>5)</sup>

Although Martita does not earn enough money to support the family, she tries not to lose a dignity as a worker. She does not beg her better-off friends or relatives, but tries to utilize them and "share their resources" as much as they can when it is possible. For example, Martita volunteers to help with shopping of her better-off acquaintances, and has the latter pay for her own shopping. She frequently borrows a small sum of money(about MN\$20 or MN\$30) from her friends and constantly breaks her promises of paying it back by a certain due date. She buys clothes with a credit, and postpones a pay for them many times. She throws parties for her better-off friend for various reasons, has her friends pay for the expenses, invites her friends and relatives for the parties, feed them and give them leftover foods generously without asking a permission from her friends.

Martita is generous to her worse-off friend and relatives. She lends her couch to her poor friend for a month or two, who does not have a place to sleep, without a charge. She allows her friend to search through her closet for a clothes to wear for a party. Martita believes that "everything will be even at the end" in any exchanges among people. Her understanding of exchange goes beyond the "pooling resources"

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4) Matrifocal living arrangements are often found in Mexico, especially among the poor.

5) The wage difference between uneducated, unprofessional workers like Martita and educated, professional workers such as a school teacher, is large. For example, Beronica, who is a half-time teacher at a special school(a school for the disabled children) with a credential from a college, gets paid MN\$15,000 in every 15 days. In other words, Beronica's income is about 20 times more than the average income of maquila workers and 30 times more than Martita's.

which Stack(1974) discusses about poor Afro-American families in the U. S. as a survival strategy, and encompasses “sharing” among different social classes.

### 3) Fela, a down-to-earth activist

Fela also worked in the same maquila plant as Sandra and Martita, and lost her job because she participated in workers' protest with them in 1994. After she lost her job, she tried many jobs including a housemaid in San Antonio, Texas. Now she runs a cafeteria of the local newspaper company where her friend and ex-coworker, Martita, works as a phone receptionist. While she works for the cafeteria, she maintains friendship and comradery with maquila workers, and actively participates in social movements in various ways. She helps Sandra carry out her tasks smoothly as a leading social activist when she is on her visit to Nuevo Laredo, mobilizes her friends to join maquila workers' protest, and works as a volunteer when extra hands are needed for community work at the colonias.

Laid-off maquila workers(trabajadores despedidos) such as Fela and Martita attempt to be re-employed in maquila industries in vain, because their names are in the black list. They end up with being underemployed, trying many unstable jobs. Fela and Martita are lucky, compared with other laid-off workers because they were able to get a relatively stable job such as a phone receptionist or a manger of a cafeteria. They were able to get such jobs with a help from Sandra who has a wide social network with people in various social strata. However, Fela as well as Martita, have a fear of losing their jobs again, and think about alternatives for more stable and better paying employment. It is not easy though for women, who do not have much human capital to get a decent-paying, stable job in Mexico. The alternative that they can

have is to work as a housemaid. The other realistic one would be a street vendor, but none of the ex-maquila workers that I interviewed expressed their desire to be the one. They try to maintain their pride of factory workers and are reluctant to engage in informal economic activities such as street vending.

Fela, who has a difficult time in running a cafeteria business at the newspaper company, has a plan to go back to San Antonio and start to look for a housemaid job again in near future. But she is torn between the family in Nuevo Laredo and the employability in San Antonio. Although she envisions a better chance to be a housemaid and a better pay for that job in San Antonio than in Nuevo Laredo, she is hesitant in making a decision on her new job. She takes her role as a mother of four children seriously. She says that she will resent if she gives up helping her married daughter with her new baby, or helping her son with his homework.

Fela is encouraged to find a job of housemaid from her friend, Elsa, to a certain extent. Elsa, who was also laid off from a maquila plant, works as a housemaid in "otro lado" meaning in the U. S. side.<sup>6)</sup> Fela wants to move into the interior of Texas, San Antonio where she used to work as a housemaid and believes that she will be able to use her old ties in finding a job there.

#### 4) Queta, a go-getter, and Lupe, a responsible worker

Queta is a widow in her 50's. She was a coworker of Sandra, Martita, and Fela at the same maquila company, but worked in a different plant

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6) She crosses "Puente Uno"(a crossing bridge #1 between Mexico and the U. S.) to Laredo every Monday, works as a maid for an American family for a week, and comes back to Nuevo Laredo for the weekends. She would prefer to commuting to the "otro lado" everyday, but she is afraid that the immigration office at the border would discover about her illegal employment in the U. S.

from them. Queta was involved in the labor protest with her friends in 1994, yet has managed to keep her job in the plant until now. According to her, her company does not like her outspoken attitudes, and has not promoted her from an "operatora" at the assembly line since the 1995 incident.

Queta gets out of work, feeling exhausted from standing in front of the assembly line all day long from 7 a. m. to 3 p. m. She goes home and greets one of the two married children and their families who visit her everyday, cooks for them and takes care of various house chores. She leaves home for the Plaza de Hidalgo at 4:45 p. m. in order to set up a table for the protest against a fraud of the last major election everyday with Martita. She goes to a lawyer's office where they store a table and chairs, brings them to the plaza, and sets up them up. She hangs a protest banner, connects speakers to her barely running car for a loud music, and waits for passers-by, who would be sympathetic with her protest. Three or four of her friends such as Martita join her at 5 p. m. At 6 p. m. Queta folds the table and chairs, takes down the banner, disconnect the speakers, loads them on her car and drives to the lawyer's office to re-store them. She has done this "mesa" protest on every weekdays for the last three years. Queta is enthusiastic about the "mesa" protest, with the belief that the candidate whom she supported did not win the election because of the fraud. The candidate is the owner of the local newspaper company where her friends, Martita and Fela work.

Queta is a director of the CETRAC while Sandra makes actual decisions and suggestions for the center. Queta is especially in charge of the communication between workers and colonos. She drives her half-broken car on unpaved roads to the colonias in order to gather information on the colonias to report to Sandra and to deliver messages, plans and ideas suggested from Sandra. Even when she feels tired after work at the maquila plant or when her pregnant daughter is sick at her

house, Queta is dedicated to her role as a chair of the CETRAC and an organizer for the alliance between workers and people. She even says that the work with the colonias is more important than her family matters. And her strong commitment with CETRAC activities is based on the belief that she does not want for other people to experience difficulties that she had experienced as a poor worker.

For the alliance of workers and people, Queta works closely with Lupe. Lupe who is a divorcee in her mid-30's, has been working at a plant of the Sony company for 18 years. She is now a treasurer of the CETRAC. She is one of the few maquila workers who won the lottery for the right to buy a house in the Infonavit<sup>7)</sup> and was able to keep her job even though she was involved in the labor dispute with her friends like Sandra, Martita and Fela. She is a dedicated worker, who is always punctual at work, and has won various prizes for her hard work in the company.

Lupe is also a responsible mother of two children and tries her best to provide decent living conditions for them and support their education. She always keeps her house clean and equipped with modern facilities and appliances. In addition to engaging in social movements and carrying out a role of mother, Lupe takes time to enjoy herself, dating with a boy friend, shopping for (often used) clothes, and going to a dancing club on weekends. She has a strong motivation and self-confidence for achieving a middle-class life style.

#### 5) Luisa, a devoted leader, and Marta, a respected leader

Luisa is a representative of the neighborhood called S.M.B. She is a widow in her 30's, and works as a cook at a school cafeteria. She

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7) The selling price of her house, which she bought for MN\$3,000 in 1990, now is over MN\$100,000.

works on weekdays until 3 p. m. at the cafeteria, and goes for grocery shopping after work everyday to procure cooking ingredients for the next day.

Luisa presides regular residents' meetings and discuss about various community matters with residents. She organizes a work group of residents for the construction of a primary school, and cooks for them. The fund for school construction, which CETRAC overlooks, was collected by Sandra through her organization in San Antonio. Luisa also offers a lottery party (loteria) almost every Saturday for the residents of her neighborhood to get together, have conversations with each other, have fun together, and buy tacos as snacks. The residents who win a lottery get plastic utensils, clothes, toys, bags etc. Luisa makes about MN\$300 from every lottery, by selling lottery tickets and tacos to residents. She saves the money to pay for the expenses of installing water pipes in the neighborhood. Lupe prepares for everything for the lottery party, from purchasing goods to cooking tacos.

Marta is a representative of another colonia, called D. H. She presides a regular community meeting on every Sunday, and collects opinions from the residents. She sometimes invites social activists such as Sandra to give a speech to the residents. She firmly believes that "things will not change unless people speak up. Therefore, people should exchange their opinions with each other through meetings and make strong demands to the government.

#### **IV. Women and Social Movements**

Low-class women in Nuevo Laredo actively participate in social movements through the alliance between workers and urban residents. They include women who used to work or currently work in maquila

industries as well as representatives or residents of the squatter settlements located in the outskirts of the city. Workers are familiar with poor living conditions of squatter settlements, and squatters with poor working conditions of maquila industries. Many of the maquila workers are migrants who came from other parts of Mexico and live in squatter settlements. Some of the squatters "fortunately" got a "regular" job like maquila work, while others suffer from unstable employment for many years. It seems natural that the workers and the poor are sympathetic with each other, establish reciprocal relationships, and develop them into the alliance for social change.

The female ex- and current-maquila workers interviewed for this study emphasize the importance of the alliance between workers and people, and actively participate in urban neighborhood movement. They also support other maquila workers in labor disputes and demonstrations. When maquila workers and the owner of company have a discord and cannot come to an agreement, they visit a mediation office of the Department of Justice with their prepared documents and explain workers' situations to mediators. The female ex-maquila workers often accompany workers, who filed complaints against their companies regarding working hours, wage, working conditions, lay-offs, etc., to the mediation office and take a role of witness in disguise to support them. They participate in demonstrations with other workers who demand for workers' rights in front of the mediation office. They collect information on workers' movements in other parts of Mexico and share it with workers in the city of Nuevo Laredo so that workers can get enlightened about their own situations and get encouraged to speak up for their rights. They even travel to other cities in order to join social demonstrations or participate in workshops where they share experiences of social movements and discuss on strategies for the improvement of working and living conditions of workers and people.

In Mexican culture the difference between femininity and masculinity is emphasized, and hierarchical inequality between women and men is experienced in daily lives. And, the hegemonic ideology and practices of the Mexican society associate women with the private sector, not with public activities such as the participation in urban neighborhood movements (Peterson 1995). Thus, previous studies on urban social movements neglect the issues such as gender and formation of gender subjectivities.

This study finds that women ignore the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere, and expand the concept of the latter beyond the family and kins into the neighborhood where family members struggle to survive and attempt to accomplish a certain level of quality of life. Women utilize the existing definition of femininity in order to redefine it by actively participating in the urban popular movements based on the alliance among themselves. When they participate in urban popular movements, women accept a traditional, patriarchal image of women and take a role of "mother who speaks only about the truth" rather than emphasizing the role of citizens who speak up for civil rights. At the same time, many women challenge an image of passive, docile mother/housewife, and raise the consciousness about unequal positions that they occupy in the society as well as in the family. They attempt to accomplish democratization in both the public sphere and the private sphere.

Women who participate in urban popular movements are citizens and mothers/housewives at the same time, and can experience contradictions between the role of citizens who demand for just distribution of wealth and power and the traditional image of women including that of passive and subservient mothers who are not interested in politics. And, some women get frustrated when they attempt to challenge the social structure of gender inequality which prevails in every corner of the Mexican

society, including the family, the city, and the nation. Many women, however, manage to maintain alliance with each other, and influence on social change with the sense of responsibility as a mother/woman who need to survive through difficult working/living conditions and support the family members. How much women can contribute in bringing social justice in the Mexican society is then dependent upon how social movements can embrace women who think "survival before social consciousness" and make their voices heard.

## **V. Conclusion**

Women are main actors of the social movements occurring in Mexican cities. Especially women who live in poor colonias have been actively participating in social movements, demanding for the improvement of living conditions(Velez-Ibanez 1983). Women engage in the urban social movements based on the alliance between workers and people not simply for the provision of basic social services for survival, but as a protest against injustice and corruption of the government and demand for equal distribution for wealth and power(Peterson 1995). Women organize themselves in order to protest against the Mexican government which has maintained modernization policies with the name of progress and development. Women's participation in social movements means a challenge to the corrupted government and greedy capitalists.

This study is contrasted with the previous studies on social movements in Latin America, especially on urban neighborhood movements, which are based on the public-private dichotomy and view them mainly as political activities occurring in the masculine public sector(Kirkwood 1985). The latter are gender-blind, ignoring gender as an important variable, and define the politics in a narrow sense, including voting patterns, theories

of the government, and studies of political parties. Emphasizing the fact that women are the main actors in Mexican popular movements, this study attempts to explore how they negotiate, reproduce, protest against, and carry out gender relations, gender roles, and gender identities, which are complex and contradictory in their daily lives.

This study expands the previous studies, by emphasizing that the ways in which the government engages in creating its subjectivity is not perfect, and that power is not a phenomenon occurring only in the public sector related to the politics. Power is found in every practices and creates protests. This study examines these phenomena by analyzing the ways in which female maquila workers participate in neighborhood movements in the city of Nuevo Laredo. It is critical to view gender as cultural constructs in understanding the social movements against hegemonic discourses and practices. Women change their gender identities and images of themselves, as well as relationships with family members. And, these changes that women make about themselves are closely related with traditional definition of femininity. As Moghadam (1994) and Siegel and Kibbey(1995) emphasize, gender relations are not static, but are constantly made, create resistance, and provoke negotiation in everyday practices. It is necessary to analyze gender relations in these aspects, especially in urban neighborhood movements where tensions and conflicts are clearly revealed as women challenge masculine authority.

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## **Abstract**

### **Female Maquila Workers and Urban Neighborhood Movement In a Border City of Mexico**

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This study focuses on the relationship between female maquila workers and residents of squatter settlements in Nuevo Laredo, a border city of Mexico. It examines the ways in which female maquila workers interpret their labor experiences into community lives, and the ways in which they participate in urban neighborhood movement. Unlike previous studies which analyze maquila workers mainly as a labor issue, this study notices the fact that the majority of maquila workers live in squatter settlements and that they are actively engaged in urban neighborhood movement. Especially ex-female maquila workers, who were laid-off due to their involvement in labor dispute, take an important role in facilitating the communication between maquila workers and residents of squatter settlements. In their view "labor problems" of the maquila industry critically influence on the daily lives of workers in their communities. Moreover, the development history of the squatter settlements, which are close to or adjacent to maquila industrial parks, and, in which many maquila workers live, is much associated with that of maquila industrial parks themselves.

Mexico is a patriarchal, capitalistic society like Korea, and has been driven for "economic development" since mid-90's. In recent years, however, Mexican government has experienced economic crises, and has

lost much of the support from people(especially gente humilde) in its globalization policies represented in the NAFTA agreement, for example. People began to organize themselves and demand for the provision of basic social services in their neighborhoods, such as water, drainage, electricity, paved streets and schools.

Women are the majority of representatives of squatter settlements as well as the majority of participants in urban neighborhood movements. The study explores how and why Mexican women, many of whom still maintain the traditional image of marianismo, manage to establish alliances among themselves and dedicate themselves to be outspoken in the public sector. It examines how capitalism and patriarchal ideology shape women's labor experiences in the maquila industry and how they are represented in urban neighborhood movements.

**Key words :** Mexico(멕시코), Maquila Industry(마킬라산업), Female Workers(여성노동자), Urban Movement(도시운동), Squatter Settlements(빈민촌)