



# La Mujer Obrera

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## La Mujer Obrera and Centro Mayapan: Bridging the Development Abyss for Women Workers on the Border

July 2010

### Overview of Women's Conditions on the Border

Founded in 1981, La Mujer Obrera is located in the U.S./Mexico border city of El Paso, Texas, which with its sister city, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, forms the largest borderplex in the world. Despite the rich potential such an international intersection could offer the region and the nation, the borderplex has one of the highest rates of poverty in North America. Its social and economic structure is akin to a colonized region, in which the wealth embedded in the natural resources and the people's labor has gone to benefit an elite few individuals and corporations, most recently U.S. multinationals. It is an overpowering example of "underdevelopment" for most of the region's populace.

Women have especially borne the brunt of this underdevelopment. They have served as the principal source for the border region's factory workers, domestic help, cooks and shop clerks for more than a century, and the results of their labor have been vital to El Paso's economic growth. Yet, the women were viewed solely as "laborers" --who didn't need any investment to become more than that—as evidenced by testimony presented in 1914, in which a community leader stated, "Mexican women didn't need to be paid as much as white women—because they are used to living in lower standards, and wouldn't know what to do with more money or schooling".

Thus, throughout the past century, there were virtually no efforts to develop alternative employment, educational and/or social opportunities, for women to gain the knowledge, skills, and experience that they needed to become more than laborers. There was little effort to involve them in the political process, beyond the call to vote once that right was gained, nor was there the development of schools, clinics, housing or other social infrastructure in support of the women and their families.

Yet through the garment manufacturing jobs, during the 1960s and 70s, the women achieved a level of middle class security. They bought homes and cars, sent their children to college, had health insurance and helped El Paso thrive as the "Jeans Capital of the World".

But in the past two decades, El Paso has been devastated by global economic integration, which catalyzed the closure of the factories and the loss of the livelihood and identity of the women workers. More than 35,000 jobs moved to countries with lower wages, yet no plan for the women's future was developed. With women as the hub and determining force in the families, a total of four generations (the women, their parents, their children and their grandchildren) have been affected.

Yet El Paso clearly has the capacity to create development plans. Five years ago, El Paso's elected leadership secured the future of Fort Bliss, with a federal commitment to expand it from 9,500 troops to nearly 35,000 by November 2012, and the infusion of more than \$6 billion for facilities and a \$3 billion/year increase in the complex's annual operating budget. In the intervening years, an entire city's infrastructure has been created on the base including: five brigade complexes of housing, offices and eating facilities, a PX, a dental clinic, a USO center, gyms and a child-care facility, and in the works are a new hospital, a 400,000sqft mall, and a 10 screen movie theater.

At the same time, in the past decade local elected officials pushed for the development of a medical school complex in El Paso. To-date, nearly \$140 million in state funding has been committed and invested in



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facilities, planning, curriculum and faculty development, with the first class of 60 students beginning September 2009.

And most recently elected officials launched this month a planning process for the EPA Superfund site, ASARCO smelter. It has been estimated that it will take more than \$250 million to clean up the 350 acre site, and now the city proposes to have the site's development serve as a hub and driver for its plans for rapid transit.

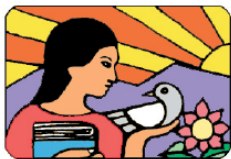
Yet the loss of 35,000 jobs for women workers has not generated any development response. Despite an estimated economic impact of \$78,000 per job lost (University of Texas Pan American 2002), which equates to a more than \$2.7 billion total economic loss, no development response was created. It is a disaster—man-made by the international policies of economic integration, yet invisible to policy makers and the media.

Instead, the women were tracked into dead end English classes or bilingual vocational training. Annually more than \$44 million comes to El Paso for workforce training through the local workforce board, and the community college has an annual budget of more than \$50 million. In other communities, these dollars enabled displaced workers to go to college to earn academic degrees, but Texas laws mandate the teaching of credit courses in English. Thus women are ghettoized in mediocre vocational training programs in very limited entry level positions such as computer office procedures. In addition, basically no dollars were allocated to enable women to develop as entrepreneurs—again, they were tracked as only being capable of working as laborers.

In part this is the result of U.S. Department of Labor's policies and programs that were developed at the federal level, with virtually no ability to adapt the rules and regulations to the actual realities of the border and the women. Then what little flexibility there is from DOL was impeded by the lack of flexibility and creativity of the Texas and local workforce systems. The failure of the strategies of all three systems (the DOL , Texas and local) were documented in a court case brought by El Paso displaced women workers in 2000, and settled with funding and acknowledgement of the past errors.

This economic abandonment has been coupled with growing anti-immigrant/anti-Mexican public sentiment and policies which have impacted women in particular. Although the most common image projected for undocumented immigrants is that of a man, the reality is:

*The super majority of both documented and undocumented immigrants - whether newly arrived or resident in this country - are women and children. Many female immigrants are fleeing domestic violence and other human rights abuses against females in their own countries. Of the immigrants who endure this broken system long enough to become permanent legal U.S. residents, 54.6% are women. Female immigrants suffer even more workplace wage discrimination than do their male counterparts. The threat of deportation makes them fearful of reporting sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence and other punishments that are overwhelmingly female. The average immigrant woman is better educated than her male counterpart, even when both are in low-paying jobs. Women are also more likely to be students in English language classes – many classrooms are as much as 70% female – because they want to instruct or to keep up with their children.- Though immigrants who are permanent legal residents pay the same taxes as do citizens, they are not allowed to receive Medicaid for five years. This punishes women disproportionately because they are child bearers and caregivers It also endangers the public in general by reducing the level of health in schools and workplaces. Nonetheless, this prohibition was*



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*enshrined in the recent healthcare reform bill. (EXCLUSIVE: Surprise! Immigration Is A Woman's Issue! – Women's Media Center Blog.mht)*<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the Obama administration continues to pour funds into border control. Since coming into office, the number of staff for border enforcement tasks has increased two to three fold, and an additional \$500 million in supplemental funds for enhanced border protection and law enforcement activities has been requested, along with plans to deploy up to 1,200 National Guard troops to the border.

At the same time, the public discussion and policy debate regarding the status of immigrants in the United States is focusing on “what to do with undocumented immigrants”. Yet the question of legal status is only the beginning of the immigrant's journey in the United States. The experience of the women workers in El Paso, who went through the amnesty program of the late 1980s, demonstrates that, beyond “getting their papers”, the immigrant community's struggle to overcome its poverty and marginalization requires a strategy of development.

The violence in Ciudad Juarez also is having a profound impact on the women workers and their families on the border. Nearly a dozen other members/employees of the organization have lost one or more family members to the violence in the past few years. Yet El Paso is touted as one of the safest communities in the United States, and therefore the trauma and suffering of the women workers and their families is ignored and made invisible.

Thus, the dynamics on the border are male-driven, both the problems and the solutions (violence, military, border control, toxic clean up), yet the focal point of the impact has been and continues to be women and their families. Yet the women workers have no voice or visibility; they are in an “abyss”—a profound development chasm, made deeper by its invisibility.

## **La Mujer Obrera and Centro Mayapan: Creating a Development Model for Women Workers on the Border**

To climb out of the abyss, to bridge the profound development chasm, the women have had to fight for their economic rights, for their human rights, to create a development plan that leads to a future with justice and dignity, for themselves and their families, their community. There is no road map or blue print, and against the yardstick of the mainstream development system, which does not include a women's point of view, the women and their efforts could be judged “inconsequential”.

But the bottom line is that we are creating a **space for women's development from the bottom up**, a space to allow women to make mistakes while they learn.

To do so, the women need to have access to, use of and control of:

***Financial Capital***

***Technology (tools)***

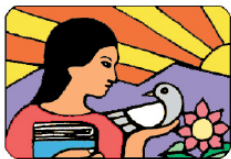
***Capacity Building (skills)***

***Space to learn through practice***

For this reason, La Mujer Obrera has renovated 4 abandoned garment factory buildings to create the initial facilities for a women workers' development program on the US Mexico border. Within these four buildings, La Mujer Obrera is creating the practice of the model: ***building a sustainable economic base, based on human***

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<sup>1</sup> <http://womensmediacenter.com/blog/2010/06/exclusive-surprise-immigration-is-a-womans-issue/>



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**needs—things people can create and consume, set in a community, with permanent employment to better the conditions.**

The core of the program is the organization's four social purpose businesses—a daycare, a restaurant, a housing complex and a festival marketplace. Individually and collectively, these four businesses serve as centers/schools for **teaching, learning, planning, practicing, evaluating and promoting respect for, and pursuit of, the universal human rights to:**

- cultural development**
- human development**
- economic development**
- community/neighborhood revitalization**
- intellectual property of the women**

The development model is also based on the creative, flexible and integrated use of the tools, financial resources, capacity building and space. In financial resources this means **cost-sharing**; in capacity building this means **cross-training**; in the development of space and acquisition of tools, this means **multi-purpose**, and in program design and implementation, this means **cross-border**.

This integrated strategy is necessary because mainstream strategies focus on delivery of individual services and the impact on individuals. This is an extremely costly approach, especially when working with marginalized populations, and for that reason development is not really pursued—usually at best, a few “superstars” are pointed out as the example, when they are really the exception to the rule.

As an alternative, La Mujer Obrera's development model is based on using each source of funds, each space, and each set of tools, to assist in achieving multiple goals **towards creating a community in which individuals and families can live with justice and dignity**. For instance, Rayito de Sol Daycare provides daycare services and charges fees for those services. Those fees and the daycare building and equipment in which Rayito operates then also support the other objectives of the daycare: creating jobs for low-income women; providing on-the-job training in the childcare field; immersing the children in a bilingual bicultural experience, and promoting culturally appropriate food and nutrition with the children.

Another example of this integrated strategy is **“capturing and recapturing”** dollars by working to create a comprehensive community development strategy in which our community's dollars circulate several times before “escaping” to the “outside” economy. Thus, the children living in our housing units are in our daycare, while their parents are employed with our organization, and the whole family shops at Mercado Mayapan. Therefore the wages that we pay then convert into the payment of rent and daycare fees and income for the Mercado, which all generates revenues for the organization and its social purpose businesses to employ and train more people and catalyze more development efforts. We employ the same strategy within our businesses—Café Mayapan and Rayito de Sol purchase a significant amount of their groceries from the Mercado, and the Mercado tries to contract with local farmers and vendors, while La Mujer Obrera contracts with the Café for catering services for its events, etc.

And in terms of **cross training**, our development model focuses on structuring work and participation to accommodate women's multiple roles as breadwinners, care-givers and community members. In doing so we provide women with the opportunity to combine work experience, classroom time, personal/family support and community service in:

- Bilingual Communication and Language (Public speaking, writing, multi-media, graphic design)



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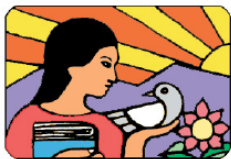
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- Technology
  - Entrepreneurism and Business Management
  - Vocational
  - Basic skills (reading, writing, math)
  - Planning and Evaluation
  - Community Analysis and Civic Engagement
  - Cultural Heritage
  - Family Issues

This cross-training strategy is also taken to a second level through our strategy of ***aggressive promotion***. As Dr. Kalyn Culler Cohen quoted the women in describing our model in the 2002 edition of *Making Waves Journal on Women and Development*, “*This organization is about moving, learning, growing...Every time we change to a different job, it’s a different experience,*” where the women don’t just learn to do something, they are also responsible for teaching other women, and developing themselves as members (and managers) of a team, as hubs of their extended families and as developers and agents of change in the community.

In terms of **cross-border**, our development model is based on understanding that the women and their families as well as our entire community live in a cross-border context, and therefore our development program has to embrace and leverage this reality. At the family level, we provide “ayuda mutual” (peer-to-peer support) as well as try to connect women with available community resources as they deal with the trauma of not only the violence in Ciudad Juarez on their families, but also the major difficulties in managing extended families living on both sides of the border, and the frequent personal and bureaucratic nightmares that emerge. At the economic level, we have helped to establish a network of indigenous and women’s cooperatives in 7 states in Mexico, who supply authentic handmade goods, to Mercado Mayapan, and eventually an e-commerce strategy. This network also serves as a significant source of the cultural exchanges created by Mercado Mayapan’s programming, which showcases authentic indigenous dance, music, art and food presentations, from communities throughout Mexico.

Thus, the “campus” for La Mujer Obrera’s Women Workers’ Development Program includes:

- *Rayito de Sol Daycare and Learning Center*, nurturing the whole family--the women, their children and grandchildren—as they learn, grow and work together in the creation of community, economy and culture
- *Café Mayapan*, the first initiative by the women workers to combine economy, food, culture, training and women’s empowerment
- *Mercado Central*, the marketplace and warehouse for creating community and an economy while promoting health and wellness through supplying and selling diverse food staples and promoting the development of a Farmers Market
- *Plaza Cultural*, developing the process of teaching/learning and creation/transformation of culture, community and economy by immersing the women and their families as well as the general community in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the diverse aspects of Mexican cultural heritage
- *Lum Metik Trading Company*, working to link the women of Mexico and the United States, as they learn and build together a cross-border exchange rooted in fair trade and defense of a common cultural heritage
- *Mercado Popular*, providing the space and creating the support for women to explore and experiment with entrepreneurialism and microenterprises
- *Media Center*, helping to bridge the “digital divide”, enabling women and their families to learn, explore and use the multitude of multimedia technology, for their own development as well as to create for the community



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- *Museo Mayachén*, working to provide the space for women to explore, learn, dialogue and present about the community's history of struggle, accumulated wisdom and identity, as vital foundations for defining their future
- *Center for Bilingual Development and Social Enterprise (CDBES)*, developing a "community-centered" educational program rooted in respect for the women's "life based" skills and wisdom, and support for their multiple roles as breadwinners, caregivers and community members
- *Uxmal Apartments*, striving to model how to create dignified living space for families within a nurturing community and cultural context
- *Semillas*, seeking to nurture youth's creativity and achievements while promoting family unity, community and cultural heritage
- *Comite de Barrio*, engaging the neighborhood residents in the development of a vibrant community
- *Milpa Mayapan*, working to create and model urban-based natural produce growing strategies in support of the women's efforts to learn how to defend the community's cultural heritage, promote health and wellness and create community and economy
- *Finacial Development and Administration*, manages the financing of a creative blend of non-profit structures and social enterprises, ensuring compliance with regulatory and funding bodies while building community capacity
- *IT and Property Management*, sustains the equipment and facilities essential to our development program while offering women non-traditional workforce opportunities

***In short, La Mujer Obrera is developing a women-driven model on how women defend themselves in the midst of a system of profound discrimination and violence, on the U.S Mexico border.*** It is a beachhead of women-controlled development—a critical mass of resources, facilities, people and practice **centered in low-income women workers**, virtually unparalleled in the region's history, or anywhere else in the US.

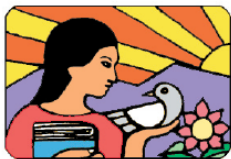
## **Next Stage for Defending Women's Economic Rights to Women Centered Development on the Border**

Although it would seem that the women "have made it", what they have achieved, through their hard work, sacrifice and determination, is nothing short of a miracle, in the face of profoundly destructive discrimination. And it is only the initial steps towards long-term viability and sustainability. The women's efforts are still profoundly vulnerable.

And without a sustainable women's development program, there is little hope for growing a working women's movement on the border. There is the occasional conference or protest—but that's not a movement. La Mujer Obrera and Centro Mayapan are key to establishing a viable movement that can address the profound conditions of women on the border.

So how do women build such a movement? There has to be writers and artists; there has to be space and resources that support the women to think, learn, write, create, plan and implement. There has to be an effort to build the resources needed for a movement: training local leadership, developing the diverse infrastructure needed (the beginnings of which we have in La Mujer Obrera and Centro Mayapan), and pulling together the resources to support of all of this.

This movement building is the next major step in the development program which the women are ready to take. But we cannot do it without the help of other women who can provide resources and help fight against the opposition to the women's development.



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*To get to this historic point we have* already committed all of our internal and local resources, which historically have always been very limited because of the discrimination against working women's development . So we urgently need resources from other women, from across the country, to take the next step.

For this reason, we seek support from women and institutions across the country who share our determination to end this injustice and create genuine development with low income women workers of Mexican heritage. To break the blockade of financial resources and national media attention, we seek to build national resources for this ground breaking and profoundly significant struggle by women workers to forge a future for themselves, rooted in the dignity of their heritage and lives and enabling them to provide inspiration, leadership, resources for a working women's movement.

We need women to join with us to fight for resources at the foundation level, the government level, and at the individual level, in support of women workers on the border. Our work still is in a precarious state—with the Mercado only having operated for 18 months, *we are on the road* to being self-sufficient, but resources beyond revenues are still needed to support the full development investment and costs of the model. Currently we project needing substantial funding for at least the first six months of 2011.

With these resources, we will not only continue to develop our current programs as a campus of women's development on the border, we will take specific steps towards the advancement of our efforts including:

1. Strengthening and Expanding the Media Center as an Independent Media Center (access to technology)
2. Women's Economic Rights Training Program within CDBES (capacity building)
3. Entrepreneurial Training and Support through a collaboration between CDBES and Mercado Popular (capacity building and access to financial resources)
4. Creating a Sustainable Healthy Culturally Appropriate Food System (space to learn through practice, capacity building and access to technology)
5. Sustaining our History and Cultural Heritage through Transnational Exchange
6. Developing ***Mercado Gardens***, a mixed use development, using green design and construction, to create 22 commercial units and 55 affordable housing units as well as green space and parking, in two city blocks adjacent to Mercado Mayapan
7. Detailing ***Plan Mayachen***, La Mujer Obrera's comprehensive development plan for the Chamizal/South Central neighborhood as a healthy sustainable community and the hub of a grassroots regional development plan linking Southern New Mexico and West Texas based on the economic motors of Mexican cultural heritage, culturally appropriate food security, and green community design and construction.



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Details of each of these initiatives are included in the briefing packet.

## Conclusion

***As Gloria Steinem has said: "There is no women's nation. There is no safe space for women. We have to create that space. We have to build that community".***

***This is the mission of La Mujer Obrera's work. Please help us to achieve that mission. Please donate today.***