

Agents, Victims, or Both?

Ideology and Scholarship on Women Workers in Mexico's *Maquiladoras*

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Since the 1970s, the global economy has been characterized by the restructuring of processes on a massive and unprecedented scale. The growth of transnational corporations and the ascendance of neoliberal economic agenda has led to the “new international division of labour” (NIDL).² The NIDL has been characterized by the relocation of production sites to developing countries, enticed by favourable state policies and cheap, flexible labour. The Mexican *maquiladora* (or *maquila*) industry is a perfect example of both the NIDL and the accompanying switch to export-oriented industrialization (EOI) as the dominant model of development. Scholarship on *maquiladoras* has been divided between two positions: socialist feminist theory and pro-*maquiladora* theories, including liberal pro-globalization approaches and the gender and development framework. Pro-*maquiladora* positions stress the benefits accrued by *maquiladora* workers and the opportunities available to them, while socialist feminist theory

focuses on the exploitativeness of the mutually-reinforcing structures of global capitalism and patriarchy, especially for the unusually high numbers of women who work in *maquiladoras*. Problematically, neither body of literature engages with the other more than superficially; worse still, inquiry from one perspective or the other will lead to radically different findings, even when similar methodologies are employed. Indeed, Sargent and Matthews state that “ideological biases clouding research findings are a well recognized problem in *maquila* research”; Kopinak refers to the body of *maquiladora* research as “divided between apologists and critics, for the most part engaged in a ‘dialogue of the deaf.’”³ While some scholars have identified this as a shortcoming of their research, no attempt has been made to rectify this issue.⁴ Employing Robert Cox’s critical political economic perspective,⁵ this paper will compare and contrast the major perspectives on *maquiladoras* and demonstrates that they are inadequate for assessing the effects of *maquiladora* employment on working women’s lives. Like Cox, I argue that knowledge production is not an objective process, but is rather a product of knowledge producers’ social locations and power relations. Therefore, the massive disparities in findings between scholars operating from different theoretical backgrounds is a product of social location, and

^{1*} The author thanks Richard Baker, Daphne Rodzinyak, and five anonymous peer-reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

² M. Patricia Connelly, Tanya Murray Li, Martha MacDonald, and Jane L. Parpart, “Feminism and Development: Theoretical Perspectives,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*, ed. Jane L. Parpart, M. Patricia Connelly, and V. Eudine Barriteau (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000), 64–66; Robert O’Brien and Marc Williams, *Global Political Economy*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 263–264; Ruth Pearson, “Latin American Women and the New International Division of Labour: A Reassessment,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 5, no. 2 (1986): 67–68; Christopher R. Tamborini, “Work, Wages and Gender in Export-Oriented Cities: Global Assembly Versus International Tourism in Mexico,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, no. 1 (2007): 24–49.

³ Kathryn Kopinak, “Gender as a Vehicle for the Subordination of Women *Maquiladora* Workers in Mexico,” *Latin American Perspectives* 22, no. 1 (1995): 31; John Sargent and Linda Matthews, “Exploitation or Choice? Exploring the Relative Attractiveness of Employment in the *Maquiladoras*,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 18, no. 2 (1999): 216.

⁴ Andrés Villarreal and Wei-hsin Yu, “Economic Globalization and Women’s Employment: The Case of Manufacturing in Mexico,” *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 3 (2007): 386.

⁵ For some examples of this perspective, see Robert Cox, “Ideologies and the New International Economic Order: Reflections on Some Recent Literature,” *International Organization* 33, no. 2 (1979): 257–302; Robert Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Robert Cox, “The Crisis in World Order and the Challenge to International Organization,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 29, no. 2 (1994): 99–113.

not necessarily a result of flawed scholarship.⁶

DEFINITIONS

The term *maquiladora* refers to any one of the approximately three thousand plants participating in Mexico's Border Industrialization Program (BIP), employing a total of approximately 1.2 million people.⁷ As the Mexican version of export-processing zones (EPZs), they are foreign-owned and are required to export all of the goods they produce for foreign consumption in exchange for duty-free imports and relaxed enforcement of labour laws.⁸ Confined to the region along the US–Mexico border until the early 1970s, *maquiladoras* can now be found all over Mexico.⁹ The majority, however, remain in the border region, and are principally concentrated in cities such as Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, and Reynosa.¹⁰ *Maquiladoras* produce a wide range of goods, including textiles, electronics, automobiles and chemicals.¹¹ Until the end of the 1980s, *maquiladora* labourers were generally female and concentrated in low-skilled, and therefore low-paying, jobs on the labour-intensive assembly line.¹² However, by 1999, men had overtaken women by a small margin as

the majority of *maquiladora* workers.¹³

Maquiladoras are considered by many political economists and development experts to be one of the best examples of the new international division of labour. NIDL is a term used to summarize a collection of major shifts in production patterns in the period following the 1970s, when third-world countries were seeking new ways to attract foreign direct investment and transnational corporations were seeking to lower production costs.¹⁴ Labour-intensive production has largely moved to industrializing countries where wages are lower. Some capital-intensive industries have moved as well.¹⁵ Feminization and flexibilization of labour are also attributes of NIDL: increasing the size of the labour force, such as by hiring including women, and favouring short-term contracts over long-term labour can lower production costs.¹⁶ The NIDL attracted the attentions of feminist scholars because of its almost exclusive preference for female labour: women represent up to 90% of the labour forces in EPZs worldwide.¹⁷

The definitions of empowerment and exploitation are variable within and between theoretical perspectives. Kabeer defines empowerment as “the ability to make choices,” as well as “the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability.”¹⁸ She qualifies her conceptualization of choice by adding that there must be multiple

⁶ “Bad theory” should be interpreted to mean theory that rests on false or problematic assumptions. The problem is the social relations that give rise to the theories, not the theories themselves.

⁷ C. Daniel Dillman, “Assembly Industries in Mexico: Contexts of Development,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1983): 32–33; Ruth Melkonian-Hoover, “Gendered Pathways to the Political: The Political Participation of Women in Factory Workers in Mexico,” *Social Science Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2008): 351.

⁸ Paul Cooney, “The Mexican Crisis and the *Maquiladora* Boom: A Paradox of Development or the Logic of Neoliberalism?,” *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 3 (2001): 55–83; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 368.

⁹ Dillman, 1983, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34; Melkonian-Hoover, 2008, 355.

¹¹ Cooney, 2001, 80; Dillman, 1983, 37; Robert Fiala and Susan Tiano, “The World Views of Export Processing Workers in Northern Mexico: A Study of Women, Consciousness, and the New International Division of Labour,” *Studies in Comparative Development* 26, no. 3 (1991): 3–27; Leticia Peña, “Retaining a Mexican Labour Force,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 26, no. 2 (2000): 123–131; Melkonian-Hoover, 2008, 356.

¹² Kopinak, 1995, 38.

¹³ Susan Tiano, “The Changing Gender Composition of the *Maquiladora* Workforce Along the U.S.–Mexico Border,” in *Women and Change at the U.S.–Mexico Border: Mobility, Labour, and Activism*, ed. Doreen J. Mattingly and Ellen R. Hansen (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006), 84.

¹⁴ Fiala and Tiano, 1991, 5; Pearson, 1986, 67.

¹⁵ Fiala and Tiano, 1991, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ M. Patricia Fernández-Kelly, “International Development and Women's Employment: Issues for a Feminist Agenda,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3/4 (1986): 3; Fiala and Tiano, 1991, 5; Kopinak, 1995, 31.

¹⁸ Naila Kabeer, “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal,” *Gender and Development* 13, no. 1 (2005): 13.

options available and that these options “must be seen to exist.”¹⁹ Young identifies the relational exercise of power as central to empowerment and argues that women’s empowerment means “challenging and changing hierarchical relationships beginning with gender relations but including all other relations of class and race, as well as North-South relations.”²⁰ Exploitation is a less flexible term. Collins English Dictionary defines it as: “[taking] advantage of a person ... unethically or unjustly for one’s own ends.”²¹ Liberal pro-globalization scholars prefer this definition, although Sargent and Matthews clarify it by stating that “as long as the *maquilas* have comparable benefits and working conditions to local firms, they are acting in an ethically defensible way.”²² On the other hand, socialist feminists view exploitation and women’s subordination as one and the same—the product of hierarchical social relations under capitalism and patriarchy.²³

GENDER-BASED EXPLOITATION: SOCIALIST FEMINIST TREATMENTS OF *MAQUILADORAS*

The first major body of literature on *maquiladoras* was created by scholars working from a socialist feminist perspective.²⁴ This body of work focuses on the high proportion of women in the *maquiladora* labour force and the environment in which these women worked. The three main categories of this body of work relevant to this study are material compensation, the conscious and deliberate feminization of the labour force, and the use of patriarchal discipline techniques on the shop floor.

Socialist feminism draws on both Marxist feminism and radical feminism to inform its approach to the social relations of production.²⁵ It affirms the Marxist feminist conceptualization of the female “reserve army of labour” and combines it with the radical feminist interpretation of patriarchal social relations.²⁶ Connelly et al. define socialist feminism as combining critiques of patriarchy, defined as “a set of hierarchical relations with a material base in men’s control over women’s sexuality, procreation and labour power” and an expanded Marxist definition of economic activity, “[including] both productive and reproductive work.”²⁷ Fiala and Tiano argue that, for socialist feminists, “a capitalist system takes advantage of preexisting structures of male domination (patriarchy) to create a marginal and easily exploitable labour force.”²⁸ Some theorists working within the socialist feminist framework have identified women’s bodies as the most basic colonies, and the role of the state in reinforcing the exploitation of women.²⁹ Finally, socialist feminism acknowledges the social construction of gender as a part of these processes.³⁰

For socialist feminists, compensation for workers in *maquiladoras* is firmly exploitative. Fernández-Kelly identifies the high growth rate of the *maquiladora* industry in the early 1980s and the rapid corresponding decline in real wages for *maquiladora* workers as particularly problematic.³¹ She states that, in 1978, *maquiladora* workers in Ciudad Juárez earned 59 cents an hour; in 1986, they earned 51 cents an hour, and inflation had rapidly increased as a result of the peso devaluation

²⁵ Connelly et al., 2000, 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121–123.

²⁷ Connelly et al., 2000, 127.

²⁸ Fiala and Tiano, 1991, 11.

²⁹ Edna Acosta-Belen and Christine E. Bose, “From Structural Subordination to Empowerment: Women and Development in Third World Contexts,” *Gender and Society* 4, no. 3 (1990): 310–312; Shirin M. Rai, *Gender and the Political Economy of Development* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 80.

³⁰ Connelly et al., 2000, 127.

³¹ Fernández-Kelly, 1986.

¹⁹ Kabeer, 2005 14.

²⁰ Gay Young, “Claiming Empowerment at Home: Outcomes of Export-led Development for Working Women (Conference Paper)” (Philadelphia: American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, 2005), 3–4.

²¹ Collins English Dictionary, 7th ed., s.v. “exploit.”

²² Sargent and Matthews, 1999, 215.

²³ Connelly et al., 2000, 126–127.

²⁴ Sargent and Matthews, 1999, 216.

by the Mexican government.³² Writing on the effects of the 1994 Mexican peso crisis, Cooney argues that since the value of the peso declined rapidly with no corresponding increase in wages for *maquiladora* workers, the transnational corporations which own the *maquiladoras* were able to exploit both the Mexican depression and the feminized labour force and rapidly augment the flow of surplus value out of Mexico.³³ Similarly, Kopinak states that wages declined 45 percent for *maquiladora* workers between 1982 and 1991. She argues that since average household basic needs can only be met by earning between two and five minimum wages, the effect of the wage decline has been to force women into *maquiladora* labour as a household survival strategy.³⁴ These findings suggest that for many women in Mexico, the decision to enter the *maquiladora* workforce is a Hobson's choice.³⁵ If this is the case, then the women of *maquiladoras* are not empowered, as they do not have agency with which to make choices about employment.

Until the late 1990s, Mexico's *maquiladoras* overwhelmingly favoured female employees; this was consistent with employment patterns in other export-processing zones throughout the developing world.³⁶ Commenting on this preference for female workers, Kopinak states that "of the jobs counted in advertisements placed by *maquilas* in the Spanish-language daily, *La Voz del Norte*, throughout the 1980s, 39% specified the gender of the person to be hired. In over two-thirds of these cases women were preferred."³⁷ The socialist feminist perspective tends to explain this preference for women as a consequence of ideas of about gender held by *maquiladora* managers and, more broadly, as a

symptom of Mexican patriarchy more broadly.. The justifications for these hiring practices can be divided into biological rationales and socialization rationales. In one example of the a biological rationale, Fernández-Kelly states that one *maquiladora* manager "noted the differential distribution of fatty tissue in men's and women's posteriors make the latter more adept at sitting for hours on end without discomfort," and another manager identified women workers as more "nimble and meticulous."³⁸ Villarreal and Yu, while not writing from a socialist feminist perspective, identified a large proportion of managers who preferred women assembly workers for their "special abilities," which men ostensibly do not possess.³⁹ Bank Muñoz reports that both managers and workers in a tortilla factory agree that tortilla making is women's work.⁴⁰ Similarly, Livingston argues that managers prefer women "because of their manual dexterity and their ability to tolerate tedious and repetitive work."⁴¹

Most managerial justifications for preferring women workers that have appeared in *maquiladora* scholarship focus on the assumed "biological differences" outlined above; nevertheless, some scholars have identified patriarchal social norms held by managers for this preference instead. For example, in a discussion of the gendered hiring practices of *maquiladora* managers, Tiano states that "while employers continued the patriarchal practice of defining women in terms of their reproductive roles ... the content of their patriarchal images had shifted to accommodate the changing nature of the *maquiladora* workforce and the hiring practices

³² Fernández-Kelly, 1986, 4.

³³ Cooney, 2001.

³⁴ Kopinak, 1995, 36–40.

³⁵ A Hobson's choice is the presentation of a single option as a choice, obscuring the domination of agency by structure.

³⁶ Dillman, 1983, 45; Fernández-Kelly, 1986, 3; Kopinak, 1995, 31; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 368.

³⁷ Kopinak, 1995, 41.

³⁸ Fernández-Kelly, 1986, 3; M. Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Broadening the Scope: Gender and International Economic Development," *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4 (1989): 624–625.

³⁹ Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 376.

⁴⁰ Carolina Bank Muñoz, *Transnational Tortillas: Race, Gender and Shop-Floor Politics in Mexico and the United States* (ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2008), 101–102.

⁴¹ Jessica Livingston, "Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line," *Feminist Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 25, no. 1 (2004): 61.

that had shaped its composition.”⁴² Thus, managers are able to justify their preferences for female assembly-line workers both in terms of perceived biological differences as well as in terms of and appropriate social roles. The conclusion drawn by socialist feminists is that these perceived differences provide the rationale for labeling assembly jobs as “unskilled”, as women are assumed to possess the innate ability to do these jobs—and paying lower wages, as women are not assumed to be primary wage earners and require little training.⁴³ There is a reasonable amount of empirical evidence to support this conclusion: only recently have men and women begun performing the same work in *maquiladoras*, and men continue to dominate positions with higher pay.⁴⁴

While patriarchal hiring practices and compensation have broad implications for Mexico’s political economy, special attention should be reserved for what happens inside the factories. Scholars working within the socialist feminist framework have identified control over sexuality and the use of sexuality as a disciplinary tool by some managers.⁴⁵ Bank Muñoz labels this phenomenon as the “gender regime”—the coercive control exercised by managers through the use of sexual harassment in a sexualized atmosphere.⁴⁶ In her case study of a Mexican tortillafactory, Bank Muñoz reports “[witnessing] managers and supervisors routinely walking around the shop floor, where they would often stand behind the women, hug them, tickle them, and kiss them on the cheek.” According to the interviews she conducted with line workers, such behaviour is accepted unquestioningly as

a cost of employment.⁴⁷ Livingston supports these findings, stating that “supervisors often stalk the assembly lines, playing favourites and asking for dates.”⁴⁸ Both Livingston and Bank Muñoz report that the incentives for wearing sexualized outfits and make-up to work are high for many *maquiladora* workers—promotions, if available at all, are frequently based on an employee’s “attractiveness.”⁴⁹ Despite writing from a pro-*maquiladora* position, Villarreal and Yu state that “women [working in *maquiladoras*] are routinely subjected to hostile work environments, abuse from bosses, and demands of sexual favours as conditions for employment.”⁵⁰ These coercive strategies do not necessarily end on the shop floor: Bank Muñoz states that managers at the factory in her case study were known to harass women at home.⁵¹ Additionally, company-administered pregnancy tests and even the inspection of sanitary napkins have been documented as common practice in *maquiladoras*, with harassment, work denial, and termination as possible consequences for pregnancy.⁵² Such behaviour is rendered acceptable by both the institutional weakness of the Mexican state, and attitudes held by both Mexicans and non-Mexicans picturing *maquiladora* labour as the best available opportunity for many Mexicans, male and female alike.⁵³

Problems arise with the socialist feminist view of *maquiladora* labour when the key premises of the perspective are deconstructed. First, socialist feminism is a synthesis between Marxist feminism and radical feminism, both of which are rooted in applying the feminist insight of patriarchy to Marx’s conception of

⁴² Tiano, 2006, 80.

⁴³ Dillman, 1983, 46; Fernández-Kelly, 1986, 626; Livingston, 2004, 61–62; David L. Richards and Ronald Gelleny, “Women’s Status and Economic Globalization,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007): 863; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 385.

⁴⁴ Tiano, 2006; Villarreal and Yu, 2007.

⁴⁵ Bank Muñoz, 2008; Livingston, 2004, 62; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 386.

⁴⁶ Bank Muñoz, 2008, 97.

⁴⁷ Bank Muñoz, 2008, 109–110.

⁴⁸ Livingston, 2004, 62.

⁴⁹ Bank Muñoz, 2008, 109–111; Livingston, 2004, 62.

⁵⁰ Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 386.

⁵¹ Bank Muñoz, 2008, 112.

⁵² Cooney, 2001, 72; Livingston, 2004, 62; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 386.

⁵³ Kopinak, 1995, 35–37; Sargent and Matthews, 1999; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 385–386.

capitalist social relations.⁵⁴ Since a Marxian interpretation of capitalist social relations (the relationships between the labourers and the owners of capital) must be exploitative, it should come as no surprise that the writers working within the socialist feminist framework find *maquiladora* labour economically exploitative.⁵⁵ Second, the conceptualization of “patriarchy” for socialist feminists is broadly inclusive and flexible. Connelly et al. define the socialist feminist concept of patriarchy as “a set of hierarchical relations with a material base in men’s control over women’s sexuality, procreation, and labour power,” that varies in its expression across space and time.⁵⁶ Instances of sexual harassment on *maquiladora* shop floors are undoubtedly expressions of patriarchy, but what about instances of female workers with male managers, or female workers operating production machinery owned by men? By defining patriarchy so broadly and vaguely, the concept loses power as a theoretical tool.

Socialist feminism lends key insight into the gendered practices that allow *maquiladoras* to operate. A feminized and flexible workforce keeps costs low; patriarchal practices are evident throughout the trajectory of a woman’s employment in a *maquiladora*, from advertisements specifying a preference for female labour, to sexual harassment as a form of discipline on the shop floor, to pregnancy tests, which may result in a the termination of a woman’s employment at a firm.⁵⁷ Only from a socialist feminist perspective can one adequately explore and explain the collusion between capitalist and patriarchal social relations in *maquiladoras*. However, the predisposition of socialist feminism to interpret both relationships between workers and capital and women and men as exclusively exploitative renders the

framework and its findings problematic.

MAQUILADORA LABOUR AS OPPORTUNITY FOR EMPOWERMENT?

In the 1990s, scholarly work critical of the socialist feminist treatment of *maquiladoras* began to emerge. While this body of work draws on a range of theoretical bases, including other feminisms, it is primarily united by its skepticism for the purely exploitative image drawn by socialist feminism of *maquiladoras*. It casts women *maquiladora* workers as agents in their own right, interacting with an ambivalent economic and social structure. In addition to stressing the positive aspect of remunerated work in *maquiladoras*, this body of scholarship identifies the ways in which *maquiladora* labour can empower women at home, in their communities, and in the workplace.

Much of the work contesting the socialist feminist work on *maquiladoras* has been based in on two conflicting theoretical orientations. The first is the liberal approach. These works are united by their positive interpretations of globalizing processes as providing opportunities for women to improve their social locations. This approach stems from liberal capitalism, and assumes that investment, export-oriented production, and market liberalization will result in higher wages for impoverished workers.⁵⁸ Fernández-Kelly identifies this as the “orthodox discourse” and states that “its proponents emphasized the need for transferring economic, political, and cultural guidelines from industrialized to poor countries, expecting that transposition to lead the latter to levels of economic growth commensurate to those found in the former.”⁵⁹ The proponents of globalization continue to debate about the specifics of this process, but the key assumption—that globalization will

⁵⁴ Connelly et al., 2000, 126–127.

⁵⁵ Sargent and Matthews, 1999, 214.

⁵⁶ Connelly et al., 2000, 127.

⁵⁷ Bank Muñoz, 2008; Cooney, 2001, 72; Kopinak, 1995, 41; Livingston, 2004, 62; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 386.

⁵⁸ Connelly et al., 2000, 56–58; Fernández-Kelly, 1989, 613–614; Rai, 2002, 50–51.

⁵⁹ Fernández-Kelly, 1989, 613–614.

bring emancipation—is constant.

The second approach is gender and development (GAD), which emerged from socialist feminism as a critique of the shortcomings of the women in development (WID) approach. Connelly et al. define WID as “a merging of modernization and liberal-feminist theories ... [WID’s] innovation was to begin to ask how to include women in the development process.”⁶⁰ Women’s economic participation is seen as inherently emancipating, and a precondition for empowerment.⁶¹ WID is not without its flaws: Connelly et al. argue that it privileges Western knowledge over local knowledge and prefers top-down development models, while Rai has identified the failure of the WID approach to locate women in their historical, geographical and cultural contexts in its prescriptions.⁶² The GAD approach is best understood as an attempt to rectify the shortcomings of WID. Like socialist feminism, GAD assumes capitalism and patriarchy to be mutually reinforcing structures. However, in their definition of GAD, Connelly et al. state that GAD goes further, arguing, “gender relations ... can be changed if this is desired.”⁶³ This is possible because GAD stresses the role of women as active agents within the structure.⁶⁴

GAD and pro-globalization approaches are dissimilar; however, these perspectives both tend to emphasize the positive, empowering aspects of *maquiladora* employment for women (and often for the assembly-line men of *maquiladoras* as well). Pro-globalization approaches tend to focus on the comparatively advantageous material benefits of *maquiladora* labour, whereas scholars working within the GAD framework emphasize the possibilities for networking, community organizing, and renegotiation of patriarchal social relations

within the home.

Pro-globalization scholars have contested some of the findings of socialist feminist *maquiladora* researchers. This has been accomplished by comparing *maquiladora* labour to other available employment in Mexico, as well as through attitudinal studies of workers. Their findings suggest that *maquiladoras* provide relatively stable and comparatively well-compensated employment. As Young argues, if *maquiladoras* offer “the best opportunities for ordinary women workers ... it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the general effect on women’s women’s empowerment is positive.”⁶⁵ In this body of research, workers are assumed to possess agency and the ability to evaluate their work conditions for themselves. Sargent and Matthews performed a small-N survey of *maquiladora* workers and managers, and their findings suggest that, for workers with low educational achievement, *maquiladora* labour is attractive.⁶⁶ Its material benefits compare favourably with other opportunities for unskilled workers, such as construction or working as domestics, and *maquiladora* jobs are consistently available.⁶⁷ Tamborini finds that export-oriented industries in Mexico are, for whatever reason, more willing or able than domestic-oriented firms to provide women with jobs.⁶⁸ Given the pressures for women to find paid employment, *maquiladoras* offer a positive opportunity more opportunities for women, at least compared to domestic firms. Villarreal and Yu provide a national-level analysis of gender- inequality in Mexican manufacturing firms, and their findings clearly indicate that foreign-owned and export-oriented firms—in other words, *maquiladoras*—discriminate less against women in terms of employment opportunities and compensation than did do

⁶⁰ Connelly et al., 2000, 57.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; Rai, 2002, 61.

⁶² Connelly et al., 2000, 58; Rai, 2002, 61.

⁶³ Connelly et al., 2000, 63.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Young, 2005, 12.

⁶⁶ Sargent and Matthews, 1999.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Tamborini, 2007.

other types of manufacturing firms.⁶⁹ Finally, concerned broadly with globalization processes and women's empowerment, Gelleny and Richards find that a country's trade-openness is a reliable indicator of women's social status.⁷⁰ While they recognize a range of other factors that impact women's status, both those associated with the globalization process and those found domestically, the correlation between openness to trade and improved women's status was uniform.⁷¹ Since the growth of the *maquiladora* industry has facilitated, and is facilitated by, openness to trade, these findings support the notion that *maquiladoras* can be empowering for women.

Writers operating from the GAD perspective are concerned with the impact of *maquiladora* employment on social relations. While these findings tend to be ambivalent toward the factories themselves, research in this area stresses the unequivocally empowering aspects of women's attitudinal shifts following *maquiladora* employment, and women's improved capacity to exercise agency in terms of community and political involvement, as well as the contesting of social relations at home.

Numerous studies have correlated linked *maquiladora* work to gender-based empowerment. To use Bergareche's words, "the jobs that provide women with the possibility of developing support networks are the most effective as a means toward autonomy."⁷² Since these jobs are available in *maquiladoras*, and since *maquiladoras* are the most available type of employment, it follows that *maquiladoras* are instrumental for empowering women.⁷³

⁶⁹ Villarreal and Yu, 2007.

⁷⁰ Richards and Gelleny, "Women's Status and Economic Globalization," 871–872.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ana Bergareche, "The Roots of Autonomy Through Work Participation in the Northern Mexico Border Region," in *Women and Change at the U.S.—Mexico Border: Mobility, Labour, and Activism*, ed. Doreen J. Mattingly and Ellen R. Hansen (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006), 96.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Sargent and Matthews, 1999, 218.

Since many female factory workers in *maquiladoras* are migrants from poorer interior areas, *maquiladoras* are crucial in providing initial support networks for migrant women. Bergareche states that 90% of the migrant women cited in her study cited work with the possibility of support network formation as key in confronting gender-based violence.⁷⁴

Kabeer argues that factory employment can be very empowering for women, changing their perceptions of themselves and helping them renegotiate their social relations at home.⁷⁵ Fiala and Tiano support these findings with an empirical study in Mexicali, Mexico. Their study found that women who worked in Mexicali in service industries and in *maquiladoras* felt that they controlled their own lives, favoured gender equality, and were moderately involved in politics.⁷⁶ While there was a positive correlation between the "modernity" of the products manufactured in a *maquiladora*—Fiala and Tiano compared electronics and textiles factories in their study—and the proliferation of "empowered" attitudes, there remains a correlation between the amply available factory employment in *maquiladoras* and women's empowerment.⁷⁷

Political participation, whether formally, as in voting or campaigning, and/or informally, as in participating in community organizations on local issues, is an important measure of empowerment; participation can usually be assumed to indicate suggests a belief in one's own political efficacy. Melkonian-Hoover's survey of male and female *maquiladora* workers shows that while both groups have similar levels of formal political participation, women have a slightly greater tendency than men to become involved in informal political activity.⁷⁸ She

⁷⁴ Bergareche, 2006, 96.

⁷⁵ Kabeer, 2005, 19–20.

⁷⁶ Fiala and Tiano, 1991.

⁷⁷ Fiala and Tiano, 1991, 19.

⁷⁸ Melkonian-Hoover, 2008, 362.

concludes that “employment in *maquilas* has the potential to contribute to the development of civic and political skills and to increase participation in political life.”⁷⁹ Her findings indicate that certain types of work experience, such as teamwork, are correlated with increased political participation. However, for women *maquiladora* workers, there was an inverse correlation between a sense of political efficacy and political involvement. Melkonian-Hoover states that “frustration, in these women’s hands, may be a resource for participation rather than an impediment.”⁸⁰ Socialist feminists have provided a number of reasons explaining why women might be frustrated with their employment in *maquiladoras*. But even if the reasons for increased participation are negative, if we consider political engagement itself as an end, then *maquiladoras* are fostering women’s political participation and, by extension, their empowerment.

Young’s review of *maquiladora* employment in Ciudad Juárez is negative compared to the findings of other scholars working within the GAD framework. She argues that, despite formal labour force participation, the women *maquiladora* workers in her study were most successful in renegotiating household economic control, whereas gender empowerment appeared to be inaccessible.⁸¹ Worse, in comparison to women in other forms of formal employment, *maquiladora* women were less successful at renegotiating household social relations. She links the feminization of *maquiladora* labour in the workplace to the seemingly low valuation of economic contributions from these factories.⁸² However, success in renegotiation appeared to depend somewhat on the type of relationship between the woman worker and her family:

adult daughters were less successful negotiators than wives. Furthermore, Young states that the more women challenge subjugating social relations, “the stronger are their assertions of power to change gender relations that subjugate them.”⁸³

The pro-globalization and GAD perspectives on *maquiladoras* are nevertheless flawed. While it celebrates the incorporation of women into the formal sector, the pro-globalization perspective tends to gloss over the importance of the patriarchal social relations at all levels, which is integral to the socialist feminist and GAD approaches. For pro-globalization scholars, one problem is that, despite rapid increases in the number of women participating in the formal sector, upward mobility in the workplace is not occurring. Furthermore, recent studies suggest that women are being replaced by men are replacing women as *maquiladora* labourers.⁸⁴ Worse, some research suggests that the value added by workers in EPZs tends

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to be accumulated as profits and is rarely reinvested in the workers’ communities.⁸⁵ Scholars working within the GAD framework are influenced by both an ambivalent view of development and the socialist feminist concerns towards the capitalism-

patriarchy interplay. However, the GAD framework tends to ignore the factory as a site of patriarchal social relations, as Bergareche does, or does not fully explain how patriarchal social relations at the factory level would support patriarchal social relations in the home, as Young

⁷⁹Melkonian-Hoover, 2008, 369.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 365.

⁸¹Young, 2005, 16–18. Like Young, I distinguish between economic empowerment (power to control economic resources) and gender empowerment (power over the body). See Young, 2005, 9.

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³Young, 2005, 18.

⁸⁴Tiano, 2006.; Villarreal and Yu, 2007, 368.

⁸⁵Cooney, 2001.

does.⁸⁶ Both the pro-globalization and the GAD perspective ignore the factory floor as a site of social relations. If socialist feminism fetishizes the collusion of capitalism and patriarchy, then both the pro-globalization and GAD frameworks are guilty of ignoring it.

The liberal, pro-globalization and GAD approaches to *maquiladoras* are valuable. Both stress the ways in which women's lives can be improved through *maquiladora* employment. Pro-globalization approaches point to the comparatively good compensation offered by *maquiladoras*, while GAD scholars explore on the ways in which *maquiladora* employment can lead to the formation of social support networks and challenges to, and encourage women to challenge patriarchy at home. While neither perspective is free from the trap of Sargent and Matthews' "ideological bias,"⁸⁷ both offer meaningful insights into the life conditions of women *maquiladora* workers, insights that is are absent from socialist feminism.

SQUARING THE CIRCLE: ENTER IDEOLOGY

In an attempt to explain differences between theoretical approaches to political economy, Cox argues that:

The debate becomes one about the form of knowledge appropriate to understanding these issues [...] for its critics, economics is an ideology derived from a particular historically determined set of power relations, not a science with absolute and universal scope [...] any general organization of power not only generates institutions and policy mechanisms but also sustains ideas which legitimate it.⁸⁸

Theory determines what is studied and how it is studied. Certain theories emphasize

certain parts of the social world; in. In order to emphasize these parts, these theories discard other aspects of that same world.⁸⁹ While philosophy may dictate the content of a theory, ideology dictates adherence to philosophy. As Cox argues, ideological positions are determined by one's "place" in the complex of power relations.⁹⁰ He argues that "specific social groups tend to evolve a collective mentality, that is, a typical way of perceiving and interpreting the world that provides orientations to action for members of the group."⁹¹ These ideologies are rational for their collective holders, as they serve as a framework to pursue a group's social interests. It follows that social groups with disparate interests will be inclined to see the other's frameworks as irrational.⁹² Since ways of knowing are grounded in social location, knowledge cannot be neutral.

Socialist feminists, such as Fernández-Kelly, who argue argues against the *maquiladoras* in the context of liberating women from the dual oppressions of patriarchy and capitalism, can be located within the system of power relations in a place that presupposes their resistance to the hegemonic ideology. For example, many of the socialist feminist scholars whom I cite writing from the socialist feminist perspective are united by gender and backgrounds in the "Global south." These social locations are subaltern; it should not be surprising that this scholarship would contest the hegemonic ideology which excludes them from power.

This same process can be applied to scholars operating within the liberal economic paradigm, as well as to the paradigm itself. For example, Sargent and Matthews promote *maquiladora* labour as a positive opportunity in the pages of the *Journal of Business Ethics*, and are both

⁸⁶ Bergareche, 2006.; Young, 2005.

⁸⁷ Sargent and Matthews, 1999.

⁸⁸ Cox, 1979, 259.

⁸⁹ Barbara Bailey, Elsa Leo-Rhynie, and Jeanette Morris, "Why Theory?," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*, ed. Jane L. Parpart, M. Patricia Connolly, and V. Eudine Barribeau (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000).

⁹⁰ Cox, 1979.

⁹¹ Cox, 1987, 25.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 25–26.

employed in business schools. Cox expects that “such a dominant ideology [e.g., liberal economics] justifies the existing order of power relations by indicating the benefits accruing (or accruable) to all the principal parties, including in particular the subordinate or less favoured.”⁹³ Thus, it is natural that liberal research programmes do not identify *maquiladora* labour as oppressive.

The ontological disagreement in *maquiladora* research is directly related to the ideological divides separating the branches in the field. Cox argues that “where there is a general challenge to the prevailing structure of power, then the articulation of counter-ideologies becomes a part of the action.”⁹⁴ Since the hegemony of economic liberalism was called into question following the ascent of WID (and its successors), feminist scholars and practitioners have been able to challenge liberalism more visibly. However, consensus between paradigms is prevented because the fundamental logics and goals of the paradigms are irreconcilable. The discourse of liberal capitalism is concerned with productive efficiency (and is without an “emancipatory project”) because such traits serve the interests of those who promote it. After all, there is no incentive to cede power to the powerless.⁹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The radically divergent findings of *maquiladora* researchers are rooted in ideological disagreements, not paradigmatic shortcomings per se. No paradigm is capable of explaining the parts of *maquiladora* labour that do not fit with its underpinning ideology. These problems are further complicated by the absence of any meaningful exchanges between proponents and detractors of *maquiladoras*; scholarship remains locked in to the “dialogue of the deaf.”⁹⁶ Engagement between theoretical perspectives is

limited, in many cases, to a paragraph or even a single sentence or footnote—and that is when it occurs at all. For example, writing in from the socialist feminist perspective, Fernández-Kelly identifies *maquiladora* sector growth as predicated on conditions which that allow *maquiladoras* to pay their workers very little. Her argument omits the fact that *maquiladora* wages have consistently been comparable to the wages paid by domestically-owned firms, and *maquiladoras* often provide a range of benefits to their employees, which domestic firms do not.⁹⁷ From the pro-globalization perspective, Villarreal and Yu provide ample evidence that economic globalization is benefiting Mexican women, assigning just three paragraphs at the end of their paper to qualifying their argument with socialist feminist critiques.⁹⁸

The *Maquiladoras* can be as exploitative as much as they can be empowering; however, few scholars seem willing to attend to the complicated reality of women *maquiladora* workers’ lived lives. The socialist feminist focus on the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy leads authors to discard any notions of how *maquiladoras* might be a step up from informal or domestically-owned employment. Pro-globalization scholars sweep patriarchy under the rug in their celebration of women’s formal economic participation. Gender and development scholars ignore factory social relations altogether in favour of examining what wages mean for empowerment vis-à-vis husbands and fathers. The existing body of scholarship is a product of ideological battles, not objective social science. These theories have led to research findings that are compatible with the social locations of the researchers that produce them; as a result, a holistic picture of women *maquiladora* workers’ complex lived lives remains beyond the reach of these theories, and perhaps scholarship as a whole.

⁹³ Cox, 1979, 259. Emphasis added.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁹⁶ Kopinak, 1995, 31.

⁹⁷ Fernández-Kelly, 1986.

⁹⁸ Villarreal and Yu, 2007.