

## **María Luisa Regalado and the Honduran Women's Collective *Organizing women so they can escape their walled-in world***



*Maria Luisa Regalado and two workers submitting their Labour Code reform to the Legislative Assembly in 2008.*

### **A Rural Start**

Maria Luisa always wanted to be involved in community work in her home province of Ocotepeque in Western Honduras. When she was 15 years old, her father said she couldn't do community work, but her mother secretly gave her permission to participate. When her father found out, however, there were problems – her father was a violent man.

As well, he forbade her from going to a liberation theology church because he said it was a communist organization. At the age of seven, Maria Luisa worked in her home like an adult, instead of going to school. She would slip out of the house to participate in church activities. At 18, when her father and mother died, Maria Luisa had to raise her two sisters and brother, all younger than her. She was able to fully participate in church activities at that time.

So when she wasn't working at home, looking after her younger sisters and brother as well as cooking and cleaning for her older brother, Maria Luisa stayed connected to the church, becoming a base Christian community leader, doing volunteer work. This gave her the opportunity to take literacy courses on the radio. When she moved to Choloma in her twenties, she began her secondary school studies.

### **Women's Organizing**

Maria Luisa Regalado started to work with the Rural Women's Association (*Federación Hondureña de Mujeres Campesinas FEHMUC*) in 1981, and was one of the first activists with a gender focus. Later she helped found the Council for Development of Rural Women (*Consejo para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Campesina CODIMCA*). Rural women began to move into urban areas with the development of the *maquilas*, or piecework factories. Responding to this, with Zoila Madrid and Ana Elsa Mendoza, Maria Luisa founded CODEMUH in 1989. CODEMUH has always been a feminist organization focussed on organizing, holistic

education, and promoting the rights of working women, workers in the informal sector, and youth, to name a few.

Maria Luisa is the General Coordinator of CODEMUH. Presently, the organization conducts political lobbying campaigns, and pressures Honduran society to improve respect for women's rights with an emphasis on gender violence, occupational health and safety for *maquila* workers, ageism, and domestic violence. CODEMUH also provides legal assistance, group psychotherapy and self-help groups for survivors of gender and labour violence.

Maria Luisa describes CODEMUH as an autonomous populist feminist organization with a social commitment to confront the reality women face within the patriarchal and voracious capitalist system.

### **Overcoming *Machismo***

In the first four years of working with *maquila* workers, it was very difficult to get 3 or 4 workers together to talk openly about the abuse they were facing at work, because of the fear they'd be fired. At that time the common practice of the employers was to immediately fire pregnant women, and to physically and verbally abuse both men and women workers. CODEMUH worked undercover, making contact with workers through their mothers or neighbours who were worried about the situation their daughters, sister and friends were confronting in the maquila.

Maria Luisa remembers the crucial moment in CODEMUH'S work in 1993, when they successfully ran a workshop for the first time with a group of 50 workers. At this meeting, they were able to define an educational strategy, and plan a series of workshops. At the beginning, Maria Luisa had to work under cover so that the employer wouldn't fire the workers, and then they had to ask the husbands, older brothers, or fathers' permission.

Now, these same women and many more, who used to be confined to their work and their domestic life, are activists. They formulate strategies, take on campaigns, give interviews to the media and get trained for better jobs. There are still many battles to be fought, but CODEMUH and Maria Luisa have seen obvious changes.

The work was completely independent in the first four years, without any outside financial support. Team meetings happened underneath and avocado tree in the back yard of the little house where Maria Luisa was living with a maquila worker.

### **What Drives Maria Luisa?**

She is driven by taking on this fight: social and gender injustice, violence toward women, discrimination in different spaces, the confinement of women and the lack of opportunities, information, training, organization and especially the powerlessness of having lived her life as a child, adolescent and adult, working for free. She is also aware that if it was possible for her to come from a rural environment, not knowing how to read or write, other women will be able to do even more.

Today, she feels happy to be able to give back to people, and especially to the women of her country... To be able to sit down in front of any member of Honduras' elite and bring the fight for better life and working conditions for women to them, and to question them on their exploitative and discriminatory system.