

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Martha Ojeda
Interviewer: Jayati Lal**

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Martha Ojeda, born in 1956, has been the Executive Director of the Tri-National Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras since 1996. Originally from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, she worked for 20 years in the Free Trade Zone factories or maquiladoras. While a factory worker, she studied law in Monterrey, Mexico. In 1994, she led the Nuevo Laredo Sony Movement, where more than a thousand women workers held a wildcat strike to form an independent union to improve their working and living conditions. As director of CJM, Ojeda coordinates the Maquiladora Worker Empowerment Project, a popular education program that conducts workshops for maquiladora workers on labor law, the constitutional wage, health and safety, reproductive rights, and fund-raising with an emphasis on training the workers. 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 has been one of the most outspoken voices in women's forums at international gatherings. In June 2001, she received the Petra Foundation Award for her work championing Mexican workers' rights to independent unions, fair wages and safe working conditions in the face of corporate reprisals and government hostility. And in 1999, Ojeda was named "Troublemaker of the Year" by *Mother Jones*.

Jayati Lal is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies and received her Ph.D. in sociology from Cornell University. She is interested in the forms of work and quotidian life worlds in postcolonial and peripheral late capitalism, class formations and the cultural politics of class and gender inequalities in global capitalism, and the forms of subjectivity and politics that are produced in and through these new cultural formations and political economies. Her first book project examines the production of working class femininity in India in the context of neo-liberal reform and industrial restructuring since the 1980s. It is a historical and ethnographic study of women workers in Delhi's garment and television factories, two industries that have been affected by the globalization of production and the global feminization of work. She is currently embarking on a new project on middle class identity and consumerism in India that will examine how the work of consumption reshapes the spheres of domesticity, and the gendered public and private spaces of modernity. This research will undertake a multi-sited global ethnography through a case study of a single multinational direct marketing firm. Her other research projects and interests include global feminisms, labor internationalisms, and cross-border organizing.

Transcript of Martha Ojeda

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*¹

Jayati Lal: Hello. I'm Jayati Lal, and I'm here today at the University of Michigan with Martha Ojeda. Thank you, Martha, for agreeing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project.

Martha Ojeda: Thank you.

Jayati: Welcome. So, um, what I'm going to do today is basically talk to you about your life and work and we'd love to hear about your history, the work that you've done with CJM, and have you sort of tell us, um, how you see the future of both the women's movement and the labor movement. I'd like to start by asking you about your personal history. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Martha: I was born in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. That is the border with Laredo, Texas and I grew up in my home town by there, and my heritage was to work in the maquilas². That was the only life that I was having over there. So just...I thought that we were a teeny town on the map, nothing else was beyond that.

Jayati: Um, you were telling me last night that your mother also worked in the maquiladoras? How did you come to work in the factories?

Martha: Well, more in this in the '65³, this industrialization border program start on the border. Mexico and United States was having one program—that was the Bracero Program⁴—and this Bracero Program was from 1942 to 1964...was when all the Mexicans men where able to come and work in United States. But they sent all these Mexicans back and everything was over. So in order to stop immigration, they started this industrialized border program⁵ in 1965. But really, was in the beginning just a change of

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

² *Maquiladoras* or maquilas are usually garment factories producing for export and are what most people envision when they think of sweatshops with poverty-level wages, long hours, and no unions. While not all maquilas are dark and dirty factories, many violate internationally-recognized worker rights and almost all maquilas in the region of Mexico export to U.S. companies.

³ 1965

⁴ The *Bracero Program* (1942 -1964) was an agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments that permitted Mexican citizens to take temporary agricultural work in the United States.

⁵ The maquiladora program, or Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was established in 1965 during the administration of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz. One of the objectives of the program was to stimulate the economies of the border states in northern Mexico which for most of Mexico's history had been isolated, both politically, and economically, from the rest of Mexico. A second objective of the maquiladora program was to provide employment for the thousands of unemployed Mexican workers who were returning from the US after the Bracero program was canceled in 1964.

machines and they were exploring...how can we work this program? And really in the '70s, 1970, was the inbond plant⁶ that was one of the maquiladora's twin plants start from one side, one plant, and the other side the other one. So therefore were called the Twin Plants Program. And my mom was the first generation. She started to work on the maquilas. And then I was trying to go to school... and I was in middle school when the management was arriving to look for workers. Most of the labor force were women at that time. So I start to work with my mom - same company - and was a huge company. We were doing TVs. Don't ask me what brand because we were trying to understand what's...what's all the pieces that we were working on? Cables and some electronic stuff...soldering, my mom was soldering. And then...so I think ...I remember that saw just GE. So now I know that was General Electric. But at that time was...one department was doing pieces of TVs and other department was doing Christmas lights and so and so. So we were working in the same company, same chief and everything. But suddenly, one time when we arrived the company run away. Was closed—everything. They were not paying anything including salaries—forget about our benefits and all those things. So then all the womens were guarding the machines⁷. That night I was with my mom and many womens in front of the company, and complaining about the union - why this union was not doing anything in favor of workers? So then we learned that the union was dealing with the company and they were giving the opportunity to the company to take all the machines that we supposed were be guarding right there⁸. Was a lot of disappointment between us workers, when find out that suppose the union has to help us, and they were agreeing with the company and they took the machines. The only way that we can get our payment and everything. So that was the first instance that I was hearing about 'union'. I was angry, upset, I was not understanding because I was having other ideas about union. Ninety percent of us were women, 95 percent of us were women. So we were in the street, right there with no job, with anything. And was a big mobilization against these... these leaders, these charros⁹, leaders, unions, who were the CTM¹⁰, the national confederation of workers, that was tied with the government PRI¹¹ and they were in the power for 70 years. So it was like a paralysis for the labor movement, because they were not allowing the workers to organize.

Jayati: So how old were you when you first started to work?

Martha: I think I was between thirteen and fourteen, more or less.

Jayati: And when did you decide to go to law school and how did that happen? Could you tell us about that?

⁶ The maquila is also known as an *inbond* plant or inbond assembly. Mexican assembly plants are located near the US-Mexican border where most production is exported to the USA.

⁷ The women were guarding the machines in a sense as ransom until they were paid their wages.

⁸ The union had negotiated with the company to allow the company to retrieve the machines from the site.

⁹ *Charros* is Spanish for "cowboys," but is also used to denote that someone is unsophisticated.

¹⁰ *CTM* is an acronym Confederación de Trabajadores de México (Confederation of Mexican Workers)

¹¹ *PRI* is an acronym Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), Mexico's "official" party was the country's preeminent political organization from 1929 until the early 1990s. Until the early 1980s, the PRI's position in the Mexican political system was hegemonic, with opposition parties posing little or no threat to its power base or its monopoly of public office.

Martha: Well, it's a long story, because after...after this work...that was at Transitron Mexicana¹²... then I start to work at Johnson and Johnson¹³. That was a garment company. And we were doing all the medical supplies, all the environmental was...the environment right there was blue¹⁴. We were sewing these gowns and shoes covers and mask and caps for all the doctors. And when we were asking to have some mask that was protector because of the environment that was so blue they were saying that...that it was not possible because we...they were needing to deliver all the production in the same numbers that they were receiving. But also my supervisor was my union leader at the same time. And I was saying, no way, so you cannot represent workers and defend the company at the same time. The conditions were terrible. So we were not allowed to go to the restroom. So I was facing her—the supervisor—and saying “No way, so if you want to fire me, do it, but I'm not going to pee here. I need to go to the restroom.” When we were having injuries, they would not allow us to go to the health programs, social program that we have. And they were saying, “No, the production, it should be first,” and so and so, and so we were having a lot of problems with her...that she was not representing workers and the only thing that they were wanting was production and every day were more and more production growing. So I remember that my back was hurting me so much...when I was arriving, was dark. When I was leaving, was dark. Always when we get enough of the...of the transportation¹⁵, we have to go across one field so always were...were guys who were following us. Some compañeras¹⁶ were raped. So it was really hard. But also all the level of exploitation was not just in the production, also our conditions as women because of...and...and for example, in Manhattan¹⁷, mens... just were about five guys who were in the warehouse, but the rest of the floor we were womens, doing everything -- packing, assembling, all the...all the production there and the operations. So then the first thing is when we have...we were needing to have this pregnancy test¹⁸, and I was saying “why?” “No, you need to prove that you are not pregnant.” So what...what's wrong to be pregnant, or what's wrong to be a mother? So why do we have to have this pregnancy test? But with our law—it's really progressive and we have maternity leave—it's 45 days before, and 45 days after of the delivery time. So then therefore, first there was the thing that they were trying to abort, and second that we do not produce if you are pregnant. In our law, you have to have light work and don't get this hard things and being pressured and so and so. So in order to avoid all those things, well, we need to go through the pregnancy test, and there were many, many things. But the...the main issue was the salary. Was not enough. The quota was now

¹² Transitron Mexicana, a division of Transitron Electronic Corporation, is located in Nuevo Laredo on the U.S.-Mexico border.

¹³ Johnson & Johnson is a manufacturer of health care products as well as a provider of related services for the consumer, pharmaceutical, medical devices and diagnostics markets. Johnson & Johnson has more than 200 operating companies in 57 countries and sell products throughout the world.

¹⁴ The work environment was polluted with the debris from the materials with which the women were working.

¹⁵ Most likely due to insufficient roads, the bus could only transport the women so far, after which the women would have to walk across a field to their work site.

¹⁶ *Compañeras* translates to “female companions,” but used in the vernacular it indicates friends.

¹⁷ *Manhattan* is company located in this region.

¹⁸ The company was mandating that the women take pregnancy tests to ensure that they were not pregnant. If their tests showed they were pregnant, the women were pressured to have an abortion.

thousands, and we were making the same amount¹⁹, and they...they were asking for more, so we were asking for better salary, better conditions, environment. Your eyes were blue, your nose was blue, your mouth was...mouth was blue. And also was one department that was...to coat all the...the material...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So it was...there was a part where you have be cutting off the gown and everything. And...and right there was not any protection is...like I was...I remember I was so short...was a table...was so high. And you were having the electricals, all buzz-zz-zz. Really wasn't a moment that you were like this. [Martha gestures here to simulate holding a piece of machinery with two hands in front of her].

Jayati: You were doing the cutting.

Martha: Yeah.

Jayati: Oh, my God.

Martha: So the cutting all the material, the buzz-zz-zz-zz. And I wasn't strong and, and was not any kind of protection of any way. Were many injuries, many accidents, so we were saying, "Hey, someone can be killed, can be dead. You can...right now you are losing a finger or a hand, but then you...you're going to lose your life." On the beginning that was the concern—the salary, health conditions—that we were having. And we were not paying so much attention to the discrimination in the beginning. The beginning was really concerned salaries, and...and working conditions. So was when I decide to face the company and of course the union. Because we were unionized there. And my fellow worker was saying, you talk, you're going to be fired. And we were saying, "So we cannot live like this. So it should be better condition." Was when we faced the union leader and we were asking to change her²⁰ but we don't want that the supervisor...to be our representative and we want one of the workers be representing the company in order to get more benefits, and so on, so on. That time was when the workers choose me to be the representative in the union. So then realizing "now what?"...now I'm in this union that I hate.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And what's supposed do I have to do? But if I don't want the happen...the same thing that happen with Transitron²¹...that they don't pay anything...they just run away...and the Union was, you know, representing and defending worker. So then we have to do something. But I don't know. And I was afraid. We were afraid, because we say "what about they...they have a beautiful rhetoric." They really convinced everyone to

¹⁹ Same amount of money; their salaries had not been increased to reflect the increase in demands for productivity.

²⁰ The workers were requesting to have a replacement for the current union leader.

²¹ *Transitron* is high-tech company and one of the most successful early semiconductor companies.

stay to work overtime when it's...it's illegal when they do mandatory overtime. So...and we were trying to find a way how we can really get the benefits for all of us and not just for the company. So was when...we say we need to learn about the labor law. We need to learn about our rights in order to defend ourself. And I thought that the only way to learn the labor law was going to the law school. But I was not having any penny²² and it was impossible.

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Martha: So then was when all our compañeras...so we decide that one way to be...try to do a collective way and every Friday...so they start to save some money in order that I can finish the law school. So first I was going to Saltillo, Coahuila²³ but it was five hours from...from the border. So I was working in the maquila during the day...I was trying to do my homework and reading during the nights. I was going to school on the weekends. So Friday, Saturday and Sunday, or so and so...tried to make my classes. And then when we learned that in Monterrey was the other one²⁴...so I move from Saltillo to Monterrey and I was able to keep going to...to the school—to the law school - and learn about the law in order to be negotiating with the company and get more benefits for the workers. When I was in the law school, I was really focused on the labor law. I learn about the criminal, civil and so and so, but my biggest interest and priority was the labor law in order to understand why companies always were getting the major benefits for everything and if we—the workers—were the one who were working so hard for that. So after that...after all...so we were able to improve a little bit our conditions. But when we learned and when I start to demand the contract and benefits...was the first time that I hear about “competitive.” They were telling...telling me that they cannot give us more salary because they were needing to be competitive with Proctor and Gamble²⁵, and they were needing...if we insist in asking benefits, they were shutting down. And they did. So Manhattan shut down and they moved to Ciudad Juarez. They were saying in Ciudad Juarez no unions, no culture of union—anything. So it's paradise. So let's move there. It's more cheaper so they were moving to Ciudad Juarez. So then arrived Sony, and I start to work on Sony.

Jayati: Oh, well, that leads into my next question, because I was going to ask about the Sony case. But how long did it take you just to finish that? How long did it take you finish law school, going to law school the way that you did, at nights and on weekends?

Martha: About, say, six years.

Jayati: My goodness.

²² She did not have any money.

²³ *Saltillo* is the capital of the Mexican state of Coahuila.

²⁴ Another law school.

²⁵ *Proctor & Gamble* is an American based company that began in 1837. The company now has a broad range of production, including personal hygiene products such as soap and shampoo, household cleaning supplies such as laundry detergent and paper towels, as well as snack foods.

Martha: More or less.

Jayati: So you were able to finish that while you were still working in Manhattan, the law degree?

Martha: Yes. Yes...no. I finish at Sony.

Jayati: So how did you move from Manhattan to Sony. That's when...when...when you left?

Martha: When, when Manhattan run away...and this was a big difference...and we really improved it²⁶, because when I...I learned something in the law school and we learn about our benefits. And they say, "No benefits, we are going to shut down, we need to be competitive," and so and so, then we were able to make them respect the law.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And they paid the severance payment²⁷ to everyone and one extra month of salaries for everyone when they were moving to Ciudad Juarez. So therefore at least at that time we have a case. So now we enforce it with law. We were able to get this severance payment for everyone. And then in 1979...was when Sony arrive and they started with 25 workers. And at the beginning was the man—manual assembling from audiocassette. Then by '82, it was the first special evaluation.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Big special evaluation was when all these products were arriving -- the VHS and then Beta. VHS and then floppy disk and all these products were growing, and by that time we became seven plants with 2,000 workers.

Jayati: So could you tell us a bit about the Sony case and how it developed? And what the strike was about, and the outcome of the strike. Because that was a very signal event in using NAFTA labor law through the NAO.

Martha: Well, yeah.

Jayati: So what was the strike about and how long did it last because it was something that was in the papers a lot, and...

²⁶ She is referring to how her knowledge of the labor laws made it possible for the workers to demand better working conditions.

²⁷ *Severance* is a payment is made to an employee in the case of an involuntary work separation such as in the case of discharge, termination, or layoff. Severance pay is generally defined to be a payment the employer has obligated itself to make which is based upon a length of service formula. For example, an employer may have a company policy that a terminating employee is entitled to one month's wages for every year of service. Martha only specifies that the employees were given a month's pay but does not indicate what the official policies of the company were regarding severance pay.

Martha: Well, basically the thing is that I think it was the symbol of what really was meaning...this free trade and labor and gender. Because all of us...we were womens - the majority of the labor force but also was all this exploitation because Sony was having a really good facility and everybody can say, "Wow." Was really good building and they are having really good conditions. But was the same - the production was the same. The exploitation was the same. The salary was not enough. And also in the '80s was when you start...these children with birth defects.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: I was in painting department when was the first children with the brain open²⁸. So...no hair and just brain there. And when I was there, my comadre,²⁹ Mari...she was asking me to be the godmother. Everybody was happy. And when the children was born like that, we were asking, so what's...what's...what's wrong? If something was wrong in the work or why? And they were saying there was a genetic problem...because between them...or because my compadre was alcoholic and therefore the kid was born like that. But when we were on that machine that was painting automatic...because was slow...no transformation from manual to semiautomatic onto automatic...and all the models were changing in the production. Every time they were more sophisticate to produce. Looking the way that we can produce more, and trying to get the same amount...amount of production with less workers. And...but we always were making the same, with the same money and the only...the agreement with the government to increase salary was almost nothing. And we...we were watching how all this environment - at least myself - how strong was to be from the sunrise to the sunset in that world of noise, assembly line - four walls. And in the beginning I remember, I thought that I was angry against my supervisor. I was angry about the manager and I thought that they were the enemies because that was the thing that I was having right there in front of me, exploiting me, and asking me more production, and "you cannot do this," and like that. We were slaves. But then after that...after a year and after...from electronic to garment to electronic again...and all those things...so we were thinking how really can organize the union. They were not really representing workers. They were saying during all these troubles the company...because they are giving you jobs...so forget about it. But also because most of us were women so they were harassing the workers. And we...we were disappointed with them. Our law is really progressive and they said that we have the right to have a profit sharing. So the company has to pay 10 percent of the profit sharing. But the company was saying "we are not making profit here, because it's for export." For all of us, was really weird. You are working in a Mexican company or in a grocery store, in a gas station - whatever that will be Mexican - you will receive whatever that will be...one extra month of your salary every year because of that 10 percent of profits. And the maquilas, they were refusing to do it. They were saying, "No, we're no making profit,"

²⁸ Martha is making a connection between pregnant women being routinely exposed to the paint at work and their children being born with birth defects. She refers to the first child being born with its brain exposed as "the first children with the brain open."

²⁹ *Comadre* is Spanish for godmother. It is also a vernacular term used to indicate intimate friendship between two women.

but they were growing and growing another plant, another plant, another plant, and I was saying if you're not making profit, why all these buildings? Seven plants...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ... and all those things, oh, we were facing...and the Union...so forget it, they were not doing anything.

Jayati: So was CTM there?

Martha: There was a CTM. So Tamaulipas—the place where I was born is...was really strong—the CTM. Well, first was in the whole country, okay? They were in the power for 70 years. And therefore we decide that we really need to do something. And when we learned that suppose NAFTA³⁰ was passed...and they tell us that now we will be working all around the clock because they cannot stop the machines...and we are going to be working Saturday and Sundays and so and so the...the overtime, according with our law is not mandatory. So they were saying “enough.” So we were saying “Enough. It's enough.” So all the childrens with birth defects, all this exploitation and the codes, the salary the same, so and so...we say “No. We want to organize the union.” And was when I went to Mexico City...I travel and I faced the national leader of the CTM...like Swinney at that time was Fidel Velazquez³¹ and I told him that I want to enforce our law that give us a right to organize and we want to form our own union. And he told me that if I will do that—was October 1993—I will get fired. Well, okay, so we were ready. So I don't think that will be worse than...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...the situation that we're living. So we return to Mexico - I'm telling you about 24 hours distance that we were traveling. We were doing activities and raising money...fundraising in order to pay a bus to travel over there and talk with him and return. And when we return, we start to organize all the maquilas.

Jayati: Not just Sony.

Martha: Not just Sony. We start to organize all the maquilas. And... in order to have an election against this CTM...so, to tell the secretary general that he was just looking for a political position. He was in the Congress, he was a Senator, he was in Mexico City, he

³⁰ *North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)* .In January 1994, Canada, the United States and Mexico launched NAFTA and formed the world's largest free trade area. NAFTA has been controversial since it was first proposed. [Transnational corporations](#) have tended to support NAFTA in the belief that lower tariffs would increase their profits. Labor unions in Canada and the United States have opposed NAFTA for fear that jobs would move out of the country due to lower labor costs in Mexico. Opposition to NAFTA also comes from environmental, social justice, and other advocacy organizations that believe NAFTA has detrimental non-economic impacts to public health, the environment, etc. In Mexico, poverty has risen considerably since the signing of NAFTA. Wages there have decreased by as much as 20 percent in some sectors.

³¹ *Fidel Velazquez* was of the Administration party candidates.

was in the States, he was in all the political position and workers were by themselves. So we decide to organize the maquilas and try to win elections. So then I went to the capital of the states when I learned that the national leader was visiting on January 12th. So I was demanding that I was...that I wanted a public debate with the leader of the CTM—demanding the right to organize. And because I did in front of the media...so they were not having any choice...so we have this debate and so fortunately with all the things that I learned where I live...so we won the debate and we won in public the decision that we will have elections.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Supposed democratic election. And we were so happy. We return and we were organizing and getting ready when they sent these people of Congress for the PRI to be the one to do the elections of the city...and please tell me who is going to be election from people of Congress. He was sending these representatives of them to do the election. The election that they did...they was saying just on this side those who wants the CTM, and this side those who wants the independent union [Martha gestures as though directing people to take their place on the side of the party they support]. So those who were on that side for the independent election, that was hundred percent. Then they say anyway...the CTM won.³² So we took the streets, and we said “No way we are not going to work until we have democratic election.” That’s not an election—any ballot, anything—even if a hundred percent was supposed...so no way. So when Sony was...when really we were taking to the streets we were blocking the bridge, calling attention because the mayor...when we were with the mayor they were saying that the mayor was not in town. But when we were blocking downtown and the bridge, immediately the mayor appeared. He was there. And then he was saying “you need to return to work and I...I will call the national leader and I will ask him for election” and I say “Okay, we will return but we are not going to be working.” So we returned to the plant because we were marching all in the cities and everything and all the people was joining us and we were demonstrating for one week. And those were...was great because we were involving all the community. That week that we were in Planton, that was a demonstration, permanent demonstration, 24 hours a day, 2,000 workers there. The first day the mayor instead of called the national leader—or probably they did but they agree what they do, what they will do. So he sent the fire workers³³ and the first thing that they did was giving a shower all the teenagers, womens working there, trying to break our strike. The second day they were sending all the big trailers because we were having to change in them...and the gates...and don’t let the trucks take inside or outside production³⁴. No way. So it’s closed—the plant. So then they were trying to roll over against the workers but no one’s moved from there. No one’s moved from there³⁵. So then they thought that, oh, if we chase the truck they will break and we will enter. But no,

³² Martha is describing the motions of an election that were carried out to pacify the workers when in fact there was not a democratic election held.

³³ Firefighters.

³⁴ The women created a human barricade so that the no company traffic could pass through the gates of the work site.

³⁵ The women would not move despite attempts to run them over with cars or trucks.

we said, “You want to kill us? We’re ready.” So the third day, they sent the police to arrest me because Sony was presenting a complaint against me saying that they were losing millions of dollar of production with all the plants closed in those days. And...but at that time, all the workers were...and say “No. All of us are leaders. It’s not just Martha. If you want to arrest one, you have to arrest everyone because all of us were there.” And then the police were trying to put one against other, they weren’t asking to Fela³⁶ “Fela, like you have to confess.”

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Because Lupe said that Martha is the leader. And Fela say “I don’t know why she say that, because all of us...we are here and you will have to arrest me.” And Lupe: “Fela already confess.” Lupe: “I don’t know why Fela say that...”

Jayati: (laughs)

Martha: ...so it’s not true, all of us, we are here. So then we are all the women there.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...saying we’re ready to be in jail with the kids and everything. So and they...okay. So they released me. And we were there...we were doing committees. So many womens were asking support with the community. Then the community start to respond bringing coffee, blankets, food, medicines for those who were fainting and...because even many of them were pregnant, and they were...

Jayati: So you were doing a hunger strike.

Martha: Yeah.

Jayati: Yeah?

Martha: Yeah, hunger strike.

Jayati: How many participated in the hunger strike?

Martha: We were almost all the workers, more than...

Jayati: Wow.

Martha: ...a thousand workers...but we were there. But then on Thursday they sent the police and they really beat the workers. And we were in commissions...we were talking in the radio because the CTM and the company were giving a wrong image about the movement. So we were visiting the workers from the other companies and...and then

³⁶ Martha makes reference to another striker and coworker who confesses to being the leader to try and deter the police from arresting Martha.

when the police arrived they...they start to beat the workers and arrest many of them. But many of them were in the hospital. So when that happened...I was lucky that at least one of the guys - the reporter of the newspaper - they were with us, and he was wearing a cap like he was in the warehouse of Sony³⁷. So he was able to take pictures and video exactly in the moment of the operation. And then the media arrived and everything. So was a big, big...was the first repression like that was happened against the workers in my...in my town. And the only crime was that we were asking for better conditions.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: For a salary...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...for have a union. So then we were...to the media and say “what is our crime? To organize? To have a union? If, suppose it’s in our law, what is wrong here?” So then the next day on Friday, all the workers for all the maquilas were joining us in the strike. So then the 2,000 became 10,000 workers.

Jayati: God.

Martha: So when all the workers were there. And here is a beautiful video that workers were arriving with signs saying “workers from Bolsas de Laredo is with Sony,” “workers from Del Red,” “workers from Red, ...we are supporting Sony workers.” So all the workers start to arrive, and by Saturday was when the governor said that I was destabilizing the maquiladora industry. And they sent, like, soldiers for all those towns. And by five in the morning, everybody was sleeping in the street, all the womens. And they...at the parking lot...and they arrive and they start to hit womens with the machine guns and arresting them, and breaking our strike. So in that time, three workers - that was Celia, Lilia, and Victor - they went and they...I was in the backside...they push me in a car and they say “You have to go” and I say “Why?” “You have to run.” And they...when they...when they were...they were driving me, they passed just fast and we saw all the trucks...like that they were in war...something like that. All the soldiers in beating the womens and I say why? Why they need machine guns and all this weapons just to break down our strike, and what did we did wrong? So then they cross me at the border. And when I was there was early morning I was in the main plaza. And I was trying to find out what we did wrong...why the police, the governor is there to defend us...is there to enforce our law were supporting the company. Even there is a video where you can see the police coming from inside the company to outside the women’s, old ladies, and...

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: ...and beating from the back.

³⁷ The reporter wore a Sony company hat that gave the impression he was an employee who worked in the warehouse of Sony.

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: And was really brutal. And when I was watching the video...one time another time and I was getting angry and angry. I was saying “how is possible that our government is doing this?” So in the beginning I thought that my enemy just was the supervisor or the manager. But then I...I learned about the system, and how all the system of my country was really tied with this capital...with this free trade agreement. So for us in 1994 when we learned that the Zapatistas³⁸ were raising up and we were raising up just three months after...really it was...was something beyond...that has to go beyond the four walls of exploitation, beyond the four walls of starving, beyond...than your own country. In that time I thought that everything was over and when the union delegate and the government was saying that—“don’t pay attention to Martha because she’s crazy, and you’re going to be in troubles” —and the fight for justice was overseas for them. And when I cross and I was here, I say “So now what? What’s next?” Nothing. How we’re going to survive here in one country that I don’t know absolutely anything³⁹. Language, culture or anything. What are going to do? I don’t want to be living here. I want to go back and be in my country and keep fighting back. So when I saw my compañeros and compañeras crossing the bridge...all of them and say so encouraged for all the things that were happening and said “now we need to keep fighting. Now we need to make sure they really paid for all this. Now we need to go beyond this and we need to find a way to make them responsible for this.” Right there in the streets we were having meetings...just crossing the bridge...no infrastructure, no anything. But everything...we were meeting and trying to strategize what we can do. Was when I...when the...my fellow workers was telling me about...it was one reporter who was looking for me and he was trying to interview me to learn about the struggle. And I thought that was from the CIA and I say “no way. I don’t want anything for...any American, any gringo⁴⁰, no way. I don’t want to give an interview to no one.” But he was insist and he was so persistent, persistent. So finally I accept and he got all the story testimonies workers a month after I met with him. And he was telling me about all these groups in the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras⁴¹...that it was possible to present this international complaint under NAFTA. For us, was hope. For us, was a teeny light that probably we can make this corporation responsible. Because next day it was on the first page of the newspaper...the...a letter from the company thanking...thanking for the government...“thank you governor, because you really bring the peace to the company now we are working and everything is nice” and whatever. And for look, Martha. So the Secretary General of the CTM—he was in charge of the police department. So therefore all the police was looking for me. The governor was looking for me. So I...I say “Why? So what’s wrong?” And then when I was meeting with the organizations from the

³⁸ *Zapatistas* a group of indigenous Mexicans, started a movement in 1994 in opposition to NAFTA. The forcefully took over parts of Southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas. They oppose neo-liberal economic policies that negatively impact indigenous people.

³⁹ She is referring to having crossed the border into the United States.

⁴⁰ *Gringo* is disparaging Latin American term for white Americans.

⁴¹ The *Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras* is a tri-national coalition of religious, environmental, labor, Latino and women’s organizations that seek to pressure U.S. transnational corporations to adopt socially responsible practices within the maquiladora industry.

Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras...was when I learned about solidarity because they were crazy like me, they were believing...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...in social justice.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: They were fighting for something and was really when started - this cross border organizing.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Many organizations were joining together...international labor rights forum trying to present this research and everything in the international law. The democratic lawyers from Mexico City and so and so, many groups start to come together and try to help and present this complaint against Sony. We spent two years and during those two years...so I was sending letters to the Mexican government demanding return to my country, asking what I did wrong? If in my constitution is a right to speech, the right to freedom of association, if my labor right is a right to organize, so what was wrong? I want to return, and so and so. So three times they were responding. First time they were saying, okay, it's not any crime against Martha Ojeda Rodriduez. And I say, "No way, I am Martha Ojeda Dominguez." So they are changing my last name. So I reply and I say "it's wrong, this last name, da-da-da, so please look in your record." Then they reply six months after or a year after that it's not any crime against Martha Ojeda Hernandez. And always they were changing my last name. And I say so it's like they are blocking their ears. Then I was writing to Mexico City, to the Human Rights Department, and they answer and they say that the labor rights does not belongs to the human rights. So therefore...so I was knocking in the wrong door and they cannot do anything. So I spent two years...I spent two years trying to return to my country. Meantime, the lawyer of some university, Monica Sheuman, she was helping me right here with all the immigration issues and everything. And meantime, I was looking for a job. So I start to work in Coca-Cola right here in the United States. I went to one company and I start to work. And it was weird for me because, oh, yeah, was better condition, sure, the building and everything. But was really weird to me that when they were giving salaries they were paying more to white people...they were paying more mens. And all those who were Afro-Americans or Latinos or...they started to call me Latina and I'd say "My name is Martha." "No, she's Latina, come on here." So then I was not speaking English. I was trying to understand what it's about. When they were translating... you get five cents increased salary and they got 25 cents. And I say "Why? You were doing the same thing?" And even I was producing more than him.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Why he's making more than me? So for me was weird because in Mexico we were having suppose the minimum wage and other systems. So it was the first thing that I start to find out weird here. And the second thing was that they would start to close some departments here and...and moving to the other side—even to Piedras Negras⁴². And then those that they were closing here was all those that were...they were using chemicals and whatever. And I asked them why...why they were moving those lines? "Oh, it's because...why...those lines we are soldering with lead and we are moving over there." And I say, "So what? The other side of the river the lead is not poisoning anyone, or what?" They were saying, "Oh, no." So we can give them a glass of milk to the workers and there is not going to be any problem? All right. Okay. And why not here? So I was trying to compare what...what's going on and what was happening right there. So I was finding many things still in this year I was working here. We were following this trail. Many people was asking me to share my experience. So was the first time when were the three hearings—one in Mexico, one in the United States and one in Canada⁴³. So when I was...have to testify in all those hearings it was a challenge because one was the hearing in Mexico...the fellow workers were saying, "If you go over there you are going to be arrested." And I say, "If I don't go, the case is going to be over."

Jayati: This is for the Sony case.

Martha: For the Sony case. So then what we can do? So the case take two years. During two years I start to work in this place...and I was organizing anyway at the same time...the weekends and everything...the evenings. So then we decide that I had to go to the Sony case. So I went to Mexico and when I arrived in Mexico City, was the first time that I found many people from my own country who learn about those because Mexico is so far...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...so big.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So the hearing was in the capital of the state. The problem happened in the border with the United States. So I found many people from my own country that they knew about our case...they were waiting for me...they were guarding me, protecting me. That was really amazing. I feel that we were not alone...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...in our own country. We really gave the evidence and the Mexican panel were cornered--they were lost. It was really the truth of all these violation. Even one of the

⁴² Across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, *Piedras Negras* is a crossing point for raw materials into Mexico for the plants in Monclova, Saltillo and Torreon areas and manufactured goods exported back to the US from these plants.

⁴³ She is referring to the NAFTA hearings.

guys of the writers of NAFTA that he was testifying on the Mexican side say, “Okay, was some violations, but nobody wants to be sitting here in this chair and feeling as guilty. So think about the sovereignty.” So then they forget the labor rights and they start to talk about sovereignty of the country—what is possible, what cannot...isn’t possible, da-da-da. So after two years, they just recommend Mexico to respect the labor rights.

Jayati: Right.

Martha: You say, “Shit, so we were waiting more than two years for this? So is this was the side agreement that supposed will guarantee that the labor rights be respected? Forget it!” So does not have any enforcement, does not have anything. So we felt that we were wasting our time over there. We felt really deception because we believe we were having one hope...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...that probably Mexico will have all their elections with us...will be responsible. You know? Just recommended in the future when in case the workers did this, hundred of workers were fire. Hundred of them were fired. Not just one or two. And they would replace us like anything. So the company was with all the impunity and Mexican government just respect the labor rights and bye. And the workers and the families and the reparation and all this, what? What is just throw away like nothing happened and change the history? So what is this? So for all of us it was really a big deception and that way. So then the last hearing was in 1996—that March 1st of 1996 - when the Canadian panel they were having the last meeting and they were saying “okay, so about this case,” the Canadian guys said “Supposed I have to talk for whatever, anytime. But for me it’s obvious that it’s not going to be any change. So at least I want to give my word to the workers. They have the last word!⁴⁴” And was when I give a speech telling them all our frustration, our anger and how this mechanism really wasn’t worth it for labor rights. So after that, the Coalition for Justice was offering me this position and so...In the beginning was really hard for me because I said “I don’t speak English.”

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: I don’t know what is 1) NGO⁴⁵. The only word that I know is “worker,” “union,” “companies.”

Jayati: Can I just go back for a second. You really already describe really well how the focus of your activism shifted based on, you know, when you were a worker and from shop floor specific agitations, to more of a sort of global focus and trying...you know, because of NAFTA, you know, with the labor-side agreements. So before we go into more CJM, just so we understand what is the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, how is it different from a union that’s usually tied to, you know, an

⁴⁴ The Canadian representatives forfeited their speaking time so that the workers could speak during the last minutes of the meeting.

⁴⁵ An *NGO* is a Non-Governmental Organization.

industry or sometimes an enterprise. And so what is special, different about the approach for CJM? You've been working with CJM now since 1994, so...

Martha: No. Well...

Jayati: Yeah?

Martha: 1994, I was a worker, I was involved in this...but officially I start to work with them I think 1996 or '97, something, yeah.

Jayati: Okay.

Martha: Yeah, well, first time I met them as organization and I was supporting them...they were having a...one meeting and they invited me. And when I was there I met a lot of people—religious groups, women, unions, grassroots⁴⁶, many people from United States and from Canada. And they were really committed to help the workers in Mexico was...when it was happen, all these things. So for me was really interesting how this organization was different of the world that I was learning the traditional union and this...this vertical leadership that they used to have. So that was a thing that we were trying to switch in our union...to be collective leadership and all those things. So when I arrived to this organization and I found these collective groups... that they were trying to work together and trying to pull all their talents and efforts and tried to mobilize, and educate and do something...was when I start to learn about them. In 1989, when NAFTA debates start with Canada and United States, so sure, then at the beginning the unions were concern about they are going to be losing jobs and all those things. But basically the religious groups were the driving force in the Coalition for the Justice in the Maquiladora. They were knocking the door in all the social sectors in trying to form some alliance and try to do something. When they learned that Mexico would be included in 1990 in the negotiations of NAFTA was when they were really focusing in one environmental campaign. And one video was produced—that was a Stephan chemical⁴⁷ - — the poison of one Mexican community. And it was the really...the true story about how these corporations were killing my people, polluting the environment and everything. So was a big campaign. Many people of Congress went and they were learning that this free trade really was open to pollute the environment a hundred percent, to regulate the law, to not respect the law and all those things. That was the first issues that were raised. And the Coalition for Justice...when NAFTA was passed they say it's okay. So now first was try to bring everyone right here to have a debate, to give arguments to bring people from all the social sector and be opposed to this. But now it's passed. So now what we can do? So then was when they really formed this social platform that this...the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras...bring them together...organizations. In the beginning, as I told you, was just people from the United States so then when I start to work with them...that was the thing that I was

⁴⁶ *Grassroots* is often used to refer to organizations based on community leadership, particularly poor and marginalized members of society. This is contrasted to large bureaucratic organizations.

⁴⁷ Stephan Chemical is a U.S.-based company that produces chemicals.

saying...okay, since right now it's a coalition, it's a alliance with many organizations trying to help Mexico, but where are the Mexicans...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...okay? So Mexicans, they should be also here, and was when everybody start to think “trinational label” in order to form this platform against NAFTA. So they pass a resolution that 50 percent of the board it should be Mexican organizations and from those 15 at least 8 should be from maquiladora workers leadership. So that was the way that in the board is reflected all the social sector from United States and Mexico and Canada with all the visions try to be...everyone at the table and try to work together to face this “model.”

Jayati: Could you tell me a little bit about how the relationship between academic scholarship and activism works in CJM, as a coalition. What is the role that you see for academics in research.

Martha: I think that it's all this year...this year we are celebrating 15 anniversary of the Coalition for Justice. And probably I can have half of those years with them⁴⁸. But I think that has been a long process of learning each other. And when you are with really...on the table trying to work together with all your vision with common goals is when you try to find a way to develop some strategies, tactics, whatever. And we thought that the academic relationship was beyond the university, beyond the school. That it should be one, an interaction between the field, the university, the research...how your potential research can be helping not just to the academic level of all people, also how can be used for the workers? So we were...been doing different research in different ways that has been interact—interactive, for example, the research of Purchasing Power Index that was with Rosenberg⁴⁹. She went down there. She was in 15 years years, but all those years was workers involved. The workers were the one who were taking the prices, taking the pay stubs, taking everything, bring it all together, giving their view...giving their vision. So right there you see, in her research you see, not just the pictures or not just the numbers.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Also you can see how really the workers vision was involved. And the last little thing that we do is for example, UUP Union—the Universal Professional Union workers from New York State—they developed these ties with the Duro⁵⁰ workers and they build the center with Duro workers...that the workers can keep organizing. And everything just was born when one academic was attending the union election and they saw the guns, the

⁴⁸ Martha has been a part of the Coalition for Justice for at least half of the 15 years it has been in existence.

⁴⁹ *Rosenberg* may have been a representative who collaborated with the workers.

⁵⁰ *Duro Bag Company* workers assemble shopping bags in factories in the border town of Rio Bravo. The bags are used by giant corporations such as Hallmark and Nieman Marcus. In 2001, workers attempted to establish an independent union, but lost after fraudulent elections and the firing of 150 workers. Many others were threatened and beaten. The fired workers refused to stop organizing, and formed a worker's center.

repression, how the leaders were chasing they saw that was so strong. And after that they were committed in bringing all this unit together and try to work in the field. They were doing research there and they start this common project in trying to...working together.

Jayati: Very briefly, because I want to also move on to issues of feminism and get you to reflect on that. Another point of intersection is also codes of conduct, right?

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: Could you explain some of the work that CJM does around the codes of conduct that are being primarily instigated and instituted through the universities?

Martha: Well, in the code of conduct, as I was saying yesterday, it's for me...it's a tool but it's not the solution...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...or the only solution that can be resolve all the problems here. I think that is just one tactic. I think that for us it's been really hard. We have been having many experience with Philips, with Hallmark, with Gap, with Alcoa—all the corporations have code of conducts. And they looks beautiful on paper. They looks beautiful in the wall that they have because Alcoa—they have in the whole wall a beautiful code of conducts - and they have a hundred awards and ISO 9000 and ISO here and ISO there⁵¹. And they are the best in the world, and they have a beautiful rhetoric everywhere. But unfortunately - at least most of them - for example, they have the right to organize but at this time the company's been able to have or to allow the workers to have their own independent union. For example, Hallmark, they have sexual harassment and the big case of Duro was a strong...and right to organization in sexual harassment. And they were saying that they would be sending someone of them and I was asking them "how you going to be doing the money for it? How it's going to be independent? How it's going to be translating the workers? How you are going to be management?" At the end was the management who translated...was the management who choose the workers, so at the end just Hallmark find out that just some church were blocking or...

Jayati: Right.

Martha: ...were not superficial things. But not those things that go beyond this⁵². I know that all of the corporations have in the code of conduct the right to organize. But it's so easy...I just want to know one. One—in these ten years that...when all the workers are been organizing - if these companies have their code of conduct, why they don't enforce

⁵¹ The International Standards Organization coordinates an optional program that many businesses worldwide comply with to receive certification to show that their product meets an international standard of quality regarding manufacturing and safety.

⁵² Martha is saying that the superficial nature of the codes of conduct posted on the walls of these company sites did not necessarily reflect being able to exercise the right to demonstrate or protest against a company's practices.

them? Does not have any mechanism of enforcement. And even if you saying one independent monitoring...so I just want to be careful. Because in our law, it's so strong. Our law describe what is the minimum wage. Our constitution...what is living wage, what is the right to organize...it's right there. And if I want to bring the code of conducts, you are asking me to replace...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...to replace the law with the code of conducts. You are asking me to replace the workers with the code of conducts and it's going to be independent monitoring. Where are the workers in that picture? Are the workers involved? Are the workers participating? It's not the same...when it's one independent monitoring even for the same community, there is one human right organization what is not contact with the workers...they can have really beautiful good intention. They can be the best priest of the world. They can be the best people in the world. But if they don't know the exploitation in the assembly line, and if they don't bring the workers right here on table⁵³ and ask them what they want and how we can work together, how these code of conducts can help *them*, and what is *their* priority? You can think that it can be one thing or living wage or the restroom or the dinner room or whatever, but what is *their* priority in what they want to fight for, and how we can work together? So I think that it should be coordinated with the field, with the workers. I've been filling many chairs, for example, there was a union from Central America, that they were saying...they were complaining. They were saying "these codes of conduct are replacing the leader of the union. Right now we have the union, but the company does not want to negotiate with us, because they want to negotiate with this community that is in the independent union, the independent monitoring, so what about those?" So I been listening workers' concern about this, about how really is being replacing in this⁵⁴, and I think that there should be another way. I think that it should be including workers, asking them, it should be in a coordinated...it's a tool.

Jayati: Right.

Martha: It's a tool as the shareholder, as all this, but all of these tools, it should be in power of workers. And the workers have to be the one who has to drive that force.

Jayati: Thank you. I'm going to shift focus a bit now and ask you to reflect a little bit about feminism and its importance in your work or relevance to your work, if at all. I just want to start off asking, how do you understand the term feminism, and what do you...what does it mean to you, and in your work?

Martha: Well I think is that...is not easy question. Is not easy question because now that I been so lucky having all these opportunity to be traveling and learning, I was finding how some womens understand feminism. When I been learning that some of them has tried to fight for women's rights, or is tried to improve the social condition between women and right, all those things I been a little bit concerned because with us it's all the...the way

⁵³ She is referring to the negotiation process.

⁵⁴ This is a reference to how the codes of conduct were being treated as a higher order than the law.

that we were living in the border is different. It's about...for us it's like, how is the labor force and what is the role of the women? How the capital, with all these flows, coming here, is being...really labeling the women, gender issues in the labor force, and how is this division is a system who really...put this stereotypes and transfer to the laborers?

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And that's the way that we are trying to teach the workers in a way - in this gender and the global economy workshops - in order that they understand that these stereotypes or whatever is not one war between men and women. It's frame it in the system, frame it in the capital, and how it's transfer, the divisions of labor. So, if it is in that way, yes, I because I'm working with the womens. But if it's in the way that try to just lead the womens like the only ones who are suffering this...they are suffering more, but I think it's not in that way. It's not an issue that womens against mens, or whatever. It's...frame it in labor and capital and how we are producing all these goods that we are not able to...to really afford it, and why we are paying or more exploiting them. And then, so it should be in that frame⁵⁵.

Jayati: So would you call yourself a feminist?

Martha: If it's framed like this, yes.

Jayati: Okay.

Martha: If it's in the other way, no.

Jayati: Okay. Now, almost 70 percent of maquila workers are women, and much of your work also in these workshops as you've talked about focuses on training about sexual harassment and employer sexual discrimination. You've talked about pregnancy tests, the forcible use of contraceptives in factories. Would you...how does CJM attend to these issues, and would you characterize CJM as a feminist collect—organization or umbrella group?

Martha: Well, if it's an issue that you cannot separate gender of this frame because it's not separate, it's tied in this context, I think that we are because we are focused in this struggle. We are focused on empowering womens in that way - but in the frame of labor. And even in our constituency, for example, in our board, 15 percent are womens.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And our executive committee are womens. So the executive director is woman.

⁵⁵ Martha is explaining that depending on how "feminism" is framed, she may consider herself a feminist. Within one framework she does consider herself a feminist because she does work for labor rights particular to women, but within another framework that advocates for the division of women's and men's rights, she does not.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: Most of the groups in the border are women. So we cannot deny that gender is really important factor in the context of labor.

Jayati: And you let these issues come up organically from what the workers want? So sexual orientation or harassment.

Martha: Oh, sure.

Jayati: If the workers bring them up, what sort of issues tend to come up? That they want...

Martha: The way that we work is that we have in our meeting...in our meeting once a year. In that meeting, we try to analyze all the challenge that we have, political challenge, with free trade, whatever, since the top to the bottom. And everyone's breakdown and roundtable discussions by sector, by vision, by whatever, and then come out with the road plan. And that's the way that we identify what is the priorities for the workers -- what they want to be doing...focus in the training. And when they say "we want gender, we don't know what is gender, so we want to learn, how is gender?" Okay, so gender in the global economy, that is one of the things. I was surprised just last year, after ten years of NAFTA, just last year in the road plan show up...like all our workshops is focused on sexual harassment and sexual discrimination and gender, but what about sexual identity? So we are not really having any workshop...

Jayati: Hm.

Martha: ...on sexual identity and we don't know anything. So now also, are gays and lesbians in the maquilas, nobody talk about them.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So just until last year. So right now it's one of their priorities that they asking for, that they are identified in, and we...we always are trying to respect everythings. So the workers are asking the time and the issues that they want.

Jayati: Could you talk about issues of culture and race? Because one of the difficulties of CJM is not only are you a tri-national organization, you're across industry, you cross over gender lines, you cross over race lines. How does that impact the actual work of CJM or hinder it? You talked about an example of the Robert's rules which I think is really interesting. But can you talk about race and culture and how it might pose special difficulties in the work that you do?

Martha: Sure. It's not been easy. It's not been easy because as I told you, in the beginning was first just focus on debate. Then was focus on target some corporations. In 2000...and it's been growing and has been switching the focus that we...the work that we

want to do, according with the political context that is appearing. But also is a lot of challenge in language and culture and strategies, and everything. So therefore we are trying to put altogether one integral...integral work, map, action plan, whatever you want to call. As I told you, it's not been easy. Someone's work...having experience from the top to the bottom leaderships. Now the leadership that we want to build is a collective that we have been building. We became a coalition of organizations, not just individuals...and try to be more collective - not just a corporation. And one of the challenge of cultures that we were having was when we start the meetings, for example, the people of the United State, they were saying, "Okay, so let's start the meeting, okay. So proposal, second motion, whatever, it's approve" and...and all the workers that...they are at the table but they are in the leadership⁵⁶. And also the Mexican was saying, "What they are talking about? I don't know. So, okay, so let's see what's it about." Okay, second motion, approve it. They say "What is that?" Well, we are in the meeting. So we are in the Robert rules⁵⁷ and we can teach you. Okay. Right, here is all the system, right here is all the book, this is the Robert rules that all the meetings has to be process. We say "You know, we don't know Robert, okay, and we don't want Robert. Robert can stay in home." [laughter] So right here we are three cultures so let's develop one system that will be accorder...according with all these three cultures and we can work together. So when you give up to all your process, your system, about the Robert rules, okay, "Let's do it, let's put it on the table, and let's start." And it's when you start to define, okay, do you want to do something different, then you have to start on a common ground, altogether, with a different vision. And you start from zero, taking the best things from the lesson that you have been taking, of course...

Jayati: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Martha: ...no? But moving in a different vision. And that was the way that you start to construct the goals and in and short and medium and long term.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: So now building and power on the workers is one of the key things, because that's the way that you are going to be building the social movement, empowering the workers. That is the long-term goal. When you can have short and medium term...certain campaigns or whatever...but really, what is the driving force for the organization? It's not just to improve day- by-day salary or to improve day-by-day standard of living. What really is the meaning going to a social movement?

Jayati: So in effect, actually it's not only impacted the focus and...that, you know, the issues that you focus on, but also the day-to-day operations and the way in which you deal with each other and the way in which you have your meetings...

⁵⁶ She is saying that although they were part of the leadership, they did not feel empowered due to their unfamiliarity with American meeting protocol.

⁵⁷ *Robert's Rules of Order* is a popular book that provides guidelines on using parliamentary procedure to facilitate meetings.

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...as well. Um, it's interesting. Um, I wanted to ask you if you could speak to what relationship if any CJM has because it's an umbrella organization that has 250 member organizations, what intersection is there with the women's movement? So, for example, are there any specifically feminist organizations that are members of CJM, and if so, could you give us some examples of these?

Martha: Well, there are women organizations in Mexico that have the maquiladora workers also in South Mexico. That is, Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas⁵⁸ ...

Jayati: They had...um-hum.

Martha: ...women's unions network. That is great, because that's the way that we want to really move from gender, union and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...labor...all this work that we do. We are trying to make links between north, south. We are being working with a Hemispheric Social Alliance⁵⁹ ...women of the hemispheric label. In United States, we have been in contact with women coalition that is based in San Antonio, Texas when they...and Washington, DC. When they need some research or something about the impact of women's and so and so...and more or less that's the work that we do.

Jayati: Um-hum. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that CJM has done and how you've participated in activism around the murders of women maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez? Because that's been another point, sort of a flashpoint where the issue of gender has sort of erupted in a way that it can't be ignored, right? In...among the maquiladora workers and labor groups that work on the border area.

Martha: That has been a really huge and big issue. And that is my concern. I've been having some debates and some people try to label it just femicide⁶⁰, and these just womens⁶¹...and trying to ignore what is the role of capital in the industrialization, and explain...

Jayati: Um-hum.

⁵⁸ *Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas* (Mexican Network of Union Women) is a network of labor organizations, NGOs, and feminist groups that strive to analyze the social condition of women, specifically in times of economic crisis.

⁵⁹ The *Hemispheric Social Alliance* is a coalition of citizen's groups opposed to the Free Trade of Americas Agreement. Claiming 50 million members, the group works primarily in North America and Latin America.

⁶⁰ *Femicide* is female genocide

⁶¹ She is stating that the response to this issue is such that "Who care? These are just women."

Martha: ...here because many of them are from...from maquiladoras and...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...corporations are not doing anything, and so on and so. And there have been many years, ten years that all these murders have been happening in...and we are being working in many ways with many organization. It's not...I will not say that it's one job that some organization has been doing⁶². I think that with the pass of the years, some organizations arriving, other ones who are to and forth, other one just arrived, take a picture and bye. So it's been an issue that many people have been involved. The only thing that I can tell you is that it's just through the women's work that are been doing in the local area with relatives that are...they are being really so brave, try to face this, and that was possible that we can open these to the international labor. And you can see just international labor can have all the attention. The United Nation was there; International Human Rights Committee was there. So International Amnesty was there. So everybody was there, everybody has been showing up...the impunity, the actors who have been involved⁶³...and unfortunately at this time the government is not going to be accountable in any way, and corporations either, even if...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...many of them are being...dying like that. So we are being supported in many ways. It was one organization that is "Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa" – "Our Daughters Come Home"—that were members of CJM and we were doing a lot of work. And the last meeting that we have in Torreon Coahuila, we did a big march and we find out that many people from the community, from Torreon Coahuila, were immigrating and some of the daughters were on the list of those disappear or dead. And we are being mobilizing and we are being announcing, bringing them here, trying to raise awareness. Well, we are being doing many, many, many things. And making pressure on the government, doing all this march against violence against women. So we are being doing many...many ways.

Jayati: So you've already mentioned in this context that you have links with other international groups, and I want to talk a little bit more about your global alliances, that you forge. Obviously, CJM is sort of already internationalist in its constitution as a tri-national organization. But what about, what do you do to foster the relationship of border women workers to workers in other parts of the world outside the Americas?

Martha: We are trying to develop links of global labor, because it's the only way that we will face this model. They talk about global economy, so we need to go beyond borders and beyond space and geography in order to be united. I think that we have been so lucky, in order to be participating, mobilizing against all these institutions all around the

⁶² She is touching upon one theory that the murders have been the work of one corporation or one group.

⁶³ Martha is referring to the actors from the U.S. who have participated in raising awareness about this issue.

world. I think that the fact that workers of the maquilas have been able to be taking part in those mobilizations and try to do some contracts with them and we do the follow up. So we take two, three...for example, one maquiladora worker was in Mumbai, India right now. So for them was amazed, try to learn how the people in India is raising now, how they are fighting back, and...as well, when we were in Cancun, many of Korea, huge delegation from Korea was there, so now that we have this program...this problem with LG Electronics⁶⁴, that is a Korean company...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...so we were calling our colleagues, they were mobilizing right there, they were pressuring the headquarters over there in Korea, and immediately it was obvious that they have to make pressure on the Mexican and American management in order to try to solve the problem. So I think that this global alliance is making us more strong.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: And we will be able to mobilize. If it's in Amsterdam with Philips, if it's in Korea with LG, if it's in Japón, Japan with Sony...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...if it's in all those places, all these alliance, yes, so I told you that this has been a process.

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: When NAFTA was in three country, we were trying to do tri-national labor. When they were trying to extend NAFTA and the FTAA⁶⁵ so we have to be an hemispheric labor and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras was one of the organizations who were participating and funding this hemispheric social alliance... alliance in hemispheric labor. But also if this exploitation of the capital is moving all around the globe, we need to do it on a global level. We need to really be united in order to fight them.

Jayati: So if you could just give me an example of how this worked in the LG case, you were able to get Samsung workers from Korea to pressure Samsung or Hansung in...

Martha: Hansung.

⁶⁴ *Lucky Goldstar (LG) Electronics* is a Korean-based company with 76 subsidiaries in 39 countries.

⁶⁵ The *Free Trade Area of the Americas* (FTAA) is a proposed agreement to eliminate or reduce trade barriers among all nations in the [American](#) continents (except [Cuba](#)). The proposed agreement is modeled after the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) (NAFTA) between [Canada](#), [Mexico](#) and the [United States](#).

Jayati: ..Hansung...

Martha: Um-hum.

Jayati: ...in Korea? Or did they write letters of support for the workers in...

Martha: In Korea.

Jayati: In Mexico. How did that work?

Martha: No, in Korea. First we...we stay in contact with them, and they did research and they find out what was the union who was in Korea, with that company. So then the union start to talk with that company. That company said that it's not true, they were lying⁶⁶. So, but because we were in touch, immediately we were sending the list of the workers who were fired, we were...been sending...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...everything. So then they were with the headquarters, and they were mobilizing their workers from Korea...

Jayati: Um-hum.

Martha: ...from Hansung⁶⁷, that supposed Hansung was doing all this problem here with the LG. So was true the union with NGO's in Korea in the same company, in the same...in the headquarters that they were doing demonstration and they were first meeting and threatening to go to strike supporting these workers.

Jayati: In support.

Martha: And that was...for me that's been amaze...

Jayati: Amazing.

Martha: ...because at least in United States, any workers have been able to say "We will go on strike to support that worker, or to do something, okay?" They can send letters, but that's it. They don't want...and I understand. That is really to say, you are asking me to put in risk my job as...

Jayati: Sure.

Martha: ...the first time that I come, they say we cannot talk about solidarity because we are losing our jobs, so...But it's amazing, this other context, these other conditions, these other regions. And everybody tried to help according with their...possibilities.

⁶⁶ The union was told by the company that the grievances reported by the workers were fabricated.

⁶⁷ Hansung is a Korean-based company that produces electronic components.

Jayati: That's great. I wonder if you could sort of reflect a bit now on where you're at. And just a few questions about that. What honor, award or achievement that you've received are you most proud of? And you've got several. So I know this might be difficult, so it doesn't have to be one.

Martha: Yeah. Well, I think that probably for some people, awards or accomplishments has other meanings. But for me, I think that when the workers were willing to help me to go to the law school and to support me during all these years, not just with money, just encouragement, because many times I was ready to give up, try to really say "we are with you." And how we were together during all this time was really a big accomplishment for me. Not just to get...to be able to go to the law school or...it's also the way that we were in a collective way, without planning any strategy to do anything...how strong we were in that time. And I think that the answer for that also was the big accomplishment now is every day I give thanks to have this life...but also to have this light here and this fire here. In order to have this consciousness and this love for my people. And when I was giving...having this gift to understand that the struggle was beyond four walls or one country, or one people, that gift, it be possible in all these people that we are being working on and involved, to empower these people, to give them these tools, but now once you give them information and they get many...the knowledge, immediately they move to...transform and fight for, I think that that is the biggest accomplish that can exist.

Jayati: That's right. Okay. Is there anything you want to add to what you've said?

Martha: Well, the only thing is that I just want to say that's it not about...egos...it's not about heroes. It's not about one person. It's about people. It's about this world. Always I thought, I don't think that the world will be in this way. It should be something else outside of this world, outside of this exploitation. And that dream that I used to have, that be a world with justice, that at least we be able to work...be more complement of our life, not the meaning for our life, not that you have to live just to work without having one life. So when I been going through all this process in my life I been learning so much and thanking my fellow workers every day, because they were teaching me so much. They were giving me strength. Martha is not Martha...Martha is...million of workers in the maquilas and million of womens in the world. And just together we can change this system and make a better world for us.

Jayati: Thank you, Martha. Thank you so much for sharing all this with us today.

The End