

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Points of Departure

Contemporary social science is characterized by an enthusiastic turn of interest toward political economy and world system analysis. Such a concern is at the same time a result of a generalized disenchantment with the explanatory powers of modernization theories and an intellectual counterpart of current economic, political and ideological changes operating at an international scale. Modernization and its anthropological equivalents, assimilation and acculturation, represented a theoretical view associated with a perception of the world in which independent nation-states were identified according to their degree of industrialization in a progress-oriented scale (O'Brien 1975, pp. 7-27). Comparisons arose to examine the forces which accounted for differences in development among the various components of the international mosaic. Within this framework, it was possible to entertain the notion of national autonomy and to initiate inquiries about the reasons that explained different levels of modernization in different countries.

With the appearance of the so-called *dependentista* school of thought and more recent critical structural perspectives which focus on underdevelopment, such a perception was severely shattered. The alternative provided was based on an understanding of the world as a web of historically related political and economic events, in which the underdevelopment of certain areas is viewed in inextricable relation with the development of others (Sunkel 1962; dos Santos 1970; Frank 1970; Cardoso and Faletto 1971; Furtado 1971; Amin 1974b). Modernization ceased to be the ideal to which most nations should aspire in order to be recognized as an ideological construction destined to legitimize the established international social order (Portes 1978; Cardoso 1977).

A point deserving further analysis focuses on the link between the change in perspective outlined above and modifications in the economic and political structure of the contemporary world. Both interpretations have evolved within the realm of monopoly capitalism. But the first one corresponds to a period in which productive processes largely took place within the framework of the nation state. Highly industrialized metropolises competed over the monopoly of internal and foreign markets and for control over raw materials from underdeveloped countries, while administering the flow of technology and expertise (Palloix, 1973; Wallerstein, 1974).

By contrast, since the end of the Second World War and particularly during the last two decades there has been an increasing trend toward the internationalization of capital investments in manufacturing activities which has coincided with the transfer of part of the productive processes (particularly in certain branches of industry) to underdeveloped areas of the world (Nayar, 1977; Frobel, Heinrichs, and Kreye, 1979). Such a trend has been accompanied by a modification of the function of core states vis-à-vis private enterprise in central as well as in peripheral areas, and by the growth of export-processing zones as a symptom of a renewed adaptation of the capitalist sector to prevailing conditions of production (Buckley and Casson, 1976). Increasingly, core countries become administrative and financial headquarters for the management of refined manufacturing activities which bring together in one swift embrace various distant geographical points (Frobel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1976; Nayar 1977). At the same time the impact of multinational investments is felt by large numbers of working people throughout the underdeveloped world.

These changes have influenced the social sciences both as a subject matter for research and as an underlying guide for interpretation: to a tightly woven net of international investment, production, exploitation and profit concentration, corresponds a social-anthropological view in which the preferred unit of analysis has become "world system" rather than "society," "ethnic group" or isolable "culture."

Although the world system perspective offers important refinements to preexisting views, one of its main limitations should not be overlooked; that is, a somewhat mechanical tendency to interpret social phenomena in underdeveloped areas as an automatic effect of the requirements of capital accumulation at a global level, without regard for local diversity particularly among working classes and class fractions (Kay 1975).

For example, the reduction of workers to the notion of "cheap labor" (a concept which has crucial importance for the understanding of this work) may fail to identify variations which have theoretical and practical significance. It is necessary to investigate the meaning of "cheap labor" in concrete circumstances. At the same time, the understanding of the general processes that explain international capitalism should include detailed case studies that examine and underscore the wide spectrum of effects of, and responses to, the international political and economic system at the level of the household and the community, both in central and peripheral areas (Friedman and Sullivan 1974; Schmink 1979).

Anthropological techniques can provide a valuable contribution in this respect. It does not have to be the inexorable fate of ethnography to produce esoteric or anecdotal descriptions. Rather, a collection of ethnographic data informed by the knowledge derived from political economy should illuminate broader analytical efforts and offer guidelines which are difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate when an all-encompassing approach is adopted. The purpose of this work is to illustrate such a proposition, albeit in a limited manner.

I focus upon a growing phenomenon of the contemporary world, that is, offshore production, which has resulted along the Mexican-American border in the expansion of multinational industrialization and the incorporation of large numbers of women into direct production. I adhere to a view which sees the tendency toward the transfer of production centers (mainly in the form of assembly plants) from core countries to underdeveloped areas, as an effect of the requirements of capital accumulation at an international scale (Mandel 1975, pp. 127-128).

Nevertheless, such requirements are fulfilled in many ways depending on the position of various manufacturing branches vis-à-vis the international economy. For example, when comparing the electric/electronic and textile garment industries (which dominate assembly operations along the Mexican-American border) it becomes apparent that the two are characterized by different forms and sizes of capital investment in underdeveloped areas. They also face different constraints in the international market as a result of supply/demand fluctuations and changes in technology.

To a large extent, such variations determine the nature of labor recruitment strategies and the form that control over workers take in each industry (O'Connor 1973, chap. 1). More importantly this means that the characteristics of a specific work force are closely related to the size and type of industry (whether it be electronics or

garment manufacturing). Moreover, the kind of relationship (i.e., directly owned subsidiary or subcontracted firm) between a multinational corporation and its affiliate abroad also plays a significant role in affecting the traits of its labor force.

Therefore, one of the central theoretical assertions in this volume is that differences among the various subgroups that form an otherwise homogeneous labor force reflect more fundamental distinctions in the process of production itself. To understand this relationship it is necessary to give attention to the institutional arrangements governing production, that is, the "social relations of production" (Edwards 1975, p. 85).

Ciudad Juárez, located a few minutes away from El Paso, Texas, across the Mexican-American border, provides a good illustration of this point. As a result of the implementation of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) since 1965 there are currently in that city more than one hundred assembly plants, or *maquiladoras*, which operate as direct subsidiaries or subcontracted firms of multinational corporations (Flamm and Grunwald 1979). More than half of the total number of *maquiladoras* in Ciudad Juárez are of the electric/electronic kind, while the rest are by and large dedicated to the assembly of apparel, with a small number involved in the manufacture of toys, asbestos yarn and other miscellaneous products (Barrera Bassols 1976; Newton and Balli 1979).

While all *maquiladoras* employ an overwhelming majority of women in direct production, significant differences among them surface when those employed in the electric/electronic industry are compared with those working in apparel manufacturing (Fernández Kelly 1982). The former are in general younger and have a higher average level of schooling than the latter. They are predominantly single and tend to contribute more than half of their weekly earnings to their families or orientation (i.e., parents and siblings with whom the majority live). They are an urban population whose members have grown up and been educated in Ciudad Juárez.

By contrast, women working in the apparel industry tend to be older and less educated. A large number of them have lived in Ciudad Juárez five or less years, a finding that probably indicates the presence of a greater number of recent migrants from the interior of Mexico in this group. One out of every three women in the Ciudad Juárez apparel industry provides the only means of support for their family. More often than not, these women support their own children rather than parents or siblings.

In sum, although a similarity of gender is shared by both groups or

workers—all of whom are sought by international capital as sources of cheap labor—there are palpable differences among them which merit explanation. Such an explanatory effort (attempted in these pages) should take into consideration two levels of theoretical analysis. At one level we must account for the general process that governs the demand of labor in consonance with the requirements of capital accumulation at a global scale (Frank 1970; Bukharin 1972; Weeks and Dore 1979). At a more concrete level we must examine the structure of labor markets and the form that smaller reproductive units such as the family and the household take within them (Schmink 1979; Safa 1980).

Four complementary themes overlap in this work. First I will draw a sketch of the general and particular circumstances that enabled the implementation of the BIP, both as a profitable investment strategy for foreign business and as a government-sponsored project for development. Second, the impact of multinational investments on local labor markets will be underscored. In Ciudad Juárez (as well as in other Mexican border cities) this impact has entailed the fracture of the local labor force by gender (Pearson and Elson 1978) and real differences in employment alternatives for men and women and for various fractions of the working class (Doeringer and Piore 1971).

Third, the correspondence between the local labor market in Ciudad Juárez and the position of the two manufacturing branches that dominate maquiladora activities (i.e., electronics and apparel manufacturing) in the international market will be examined. Finally, the function of household structure as a necessary precondition that determines labor supply vis-à-vis the requirements of international capital will be illustrated with a basis of ethnographic materials.

Methodology and Data Collection

The data which guide this study were collected during 1978 and 1979 in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Research was divided into four complementary stages.

1. The author had the opportunity to seek employment and work at an apparel manufacturing plant for almost two months. Participant observation was used as an exploratory technique. Its objective was to deepen familiarity with the nature of operations performed by maquiladoras, increase knowledge of production quotas, working

conditions and rhythms, hiring policies and time/resources invested by potential workers when trying to gain access to jobs. This technique was also used to initiate contacts with working women whose acquaintance was maintained in the later stages of research.

2. This initial facet of the investigation was followed by a survey of 510 women working as direct production operators in fourteen different assembly plants. With a basis on background information available to this author and taking into consideration the experience of work at a maquiladora, a questionnaire was designed which included more than one hundred items on migration, household composition and income distribution.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this research, a survey of limited scope as the one described above was used to gather aggregate data complementary to the ethnographic descriptions. All of the women in this sample were interviewed during work shifts and at the place of their employment. In part thanks to this, it was possible to exert a high level of control over the process of research and over the quality of the sample.

3. Participant observation and the interviewing of a large sample was complemented by the compilation of approximately fifty-five hours of ethnographic recordings derived from conversations between this author and working women. With a basis on the information afforded by the survey, a group of women (prototypical of the various subgroups into which the maquiladora work force is divided) was selected for in-depth interviewing.

After initial contact with these women, they were visited at their homes, and extensive conversations with them and the members of their families were recorded. These conversations are a rich reservoir of perceptions, attitudes and descriptions, many of which are incorporated into the present work.

4. Although this research was centered primarily on the characteristics of the maquiladora work force, limited ethnographic materials were also collected from government officials, private enterprise representatives, promoters of the maquiladora industry, members of upper- and middle-level management at many plants, and trade union leaders. This was necessary to form a context in which to place and contrast the narrations of workers, as well as to gain insights from those who have been involved in the development of the maquiladora program in Mexico.

Before describing the empirical information yielded by this investigation, it is useful to prepare a context on the basis of recent writings that focus on working women.

Women and Work: A Review of Literature

Although there were isolated works stressing the importance of women's social participation written in the last two centuries, only recently have social scientists given systematic attention to the way in which gender is related to political and economic life. As a consequence, a stimulating literature has emerged exploring the connection between gender and work in both highly industrialized and developing countries. Besides providing us with profuse empirical information, these works have also generated significant theoretical issues. They offer a portrayal of mothers, daughters and companions whose labor in the household is crucial to the maintenance and renewal of society. Women have also been characterized as food producers, artisans, entrepreneurs and wage earners. Contrary to a narrow interpretation of women's socioeconomic functions prevalent in the past, these works outline a rich profile marked by diversity rather than by uniformity of experience (Myrdal and Klein 1968; Tilly and Scott 1978).

In part, the emergence of scholarly interest on women's socioeconomic activities has been prompted by the rebirth of feminism as a viable political trend. This has induced recognition that the position of women within the private and public spheres is not derived from immutable biological factors but from material constraints and socialization processes (Rowbotham 1974; Sacks 1975; Hartmann 1979). In the United States and Western Europe, the attempts of women to gain access to employment have paralleled intellectual efforts to explain their economic and political disfranchisement in various cultural settings and at different points in time. Explanations of the role of gender, sexism, female subordination and the roots of a prevailing androcentric bias in cultural productions have been among the areas approached by this current (see articles in Reiter 1975; Nash and Safa 1976; Rosaldo 1976).

The close interconnection between political activism and intellectual concerns has, to a large extent, determined the nature of scholarly questions and priorities. Among these, the compound issue of women's work and class has gained increased importance (Safa 1976). As growing numbers of women claim jobs in nontraditional sectors and demand equal pay to men in similar kinds of occupations, the interest of researchers on the history of women's participation in the labor force has expanded (Tinker 1975*a*). Their findings have discredited some commonly held assumptions. For example, women's gainful employment—portrayed by the media

and by some academic works as an unprecedented phenomenon caused by industrialization, the automation of house chores and the propagation of birth control—has been found to be a common experience rather than the exception in past generations (Scott and Tilly 1975, p. 38). Women have always had to work, although their work has often been belittled or ignored.

Many studies now indicate that for certain groups of women both in metropolitan and peripheral countries, earnings by comparison to those of men employed in similar kinds of occupations have declined rather than increased in the last years (International Labour Organisation 1976). In a similar vein other scholars have pointed to the fact that for the majority of women remunerated employment is not the result of emancipation but of economic need (Nash 1975; Beechey 1977). Thus, the most systematic approaches to this subject have stressed the importance of examining women's participation in the workforce as a fluctuating phenomenon with respect to which class membership plays a definitive role. Two corollaries of this proposition follow. First, women's gainful employment has not been the unilineal effect of technological progress and modernization (for a differing view, see Goode 1963). Second, despite disclaimers, the assumption that women's incorporation into remunerated activities indicates a furthering of individual autonomy and emancipation is not self-evident (Safa 1976).

In making the relationship between gender and labor problematic, new paths for systematic investigation have been opened. Research into the particulars of women's labor history entails the possibility of qualification of feminist generalizations based upon the experience of the middle and upper classes. It also establishes the conditions for judging concrete circumstances that prompt the incorporation or exclusion of women from certain sectors of economic activity. To reach this objective authors have alternately adopted a historical and structural perspective. They have looked at the changes in the mode of insertion of different groups of women into the local and international division of labor over time.

Ester Boserup's pioneer work, *Women and Economic Development* (1970) is generally recognized as a pathbreaking contribution in this respect. Benería and Sen (1980) have adeptly discussed some of the merits of this work by underscoring four points. First, Boserup was the first to show with a basis on empirical evidence collected in distant parts of the world that women's participation in local, regional and national economies is far from insignificant. Although not recognized by most census data and conventional economic

indicators, women's labor accounts for the generation of much social wealth.

For example, in some African and Latin American Indian communities women are customarily responsible for up to 85% of food production by weight (see also Gough 1975). Thus, as gatherers, horticulturalists and farmers, women actively contribute to the maintenance of their groups' lives. However, this simple fact has been generally neglected given the emphasis of anthropologists on predominantly male economic activities such as hunting (Leacock 1972).

In the same vein, although it varies in content with culture and geography, domestic labor, a predominantly female occupation, also has economic significance. In hunting gathering societies and in many agricultural communities, the household operates as both a productive and a reproductive unit. By this it is meant that, within the home, individuals perform activities that ensure subsistence on a daily basis as well as those that guarantee the renewal and maintenance of their work force (for a discussion of the concepts of "renewal" and "maintenance" see Burawoy, 1978). Food production and consumption, alternate with the bearing, caring and raising of children as part of the flow of life. Thus, under these circumstances the modern distinction between domestic and nondomestic labor is tenuous, if even present.

Similarly, in a manner akin to Margaret Mead, Boserup underscores the widespread existence of a division of labor by gender throughout the world. Women tend to be universally responsible for the care of infants, but the degree to which individuals of both sexes participate in domestic activities has varied considerably. While it is true that in many cases women's labor tends to be undervalued, in many other cases women's economic contributions are readily recognized (Leacock 1972). Boserup and others have suggested that frequently women's status and level of socially recognized power are directly related to their food producing capacities (Leacock 1972; Gough 1975). Although it is not possible to generalize without qualification, many of these cases suggest that women's active contributions as food producers (rather than as transformers only) parallel higher degrees of female autonomy and participation in decision-making processes on a par with men.

Second, Boserup also noted, for the first time, that modernization and development policies have (more often than not) resulted in a deterioration of women's status which has paralleled their exclusion from "productive" economic activities. With this Boserup set

the basis for further research (Manzoor Ahmad 1972; Nash 1975; Rubbo 1975; Aguiar 1976) whose conclusions have exposed a commonly held myth: that modernization, technification and capitalist development in general have been advantageous to women.

On the contrary, most authors now agree that "development" has generally placed women in a position of greater dependency upon men by preventing the former from gaining full access to remunerated employment and by encouraging the latter to become the sole supporters of their families. Thus, the formation of a predominantly male working class has coincided with the rise of ideological constructs that see the proper role of women as housewives. Nash (1975) notes that in areas of the world where women had been active as horticulturalists and small farmers, the penetration of capitalist developmental policies drastically reduced women's access to land, credit and other resources:

The overall effect of the green revolution and similar development programs has been a vast increase in yields, but at the expense of the displacement of the small farmers, regional inequalities, and the accentuation of income differences. . . . The displacement of labour from a family-based context limits the ability of women to enter the productive process and thus assume a share of productivity for themselves and their children . . . commercial agriculture has often discouraged initiative for women's subsistence activities that provided a varied diet and some surplus for cash income. [pp. 31,32]

Chaney and Schmink (1976) have extended this argument to explore the relationship between technification and female employment. They point to the fact that higher levels of mechanization and technological expertise are consistently related with male employment even in those sectors of economic activity originally considered as women's domain (Baker 1964). In environments where subsistence agriculture was replaced by commercial crop production, the most profitable occupations, that is, those related to the handling of machinery, irrigation and transportation, went to men to the almost total exclusion of women. In a similar vein female employment in industry has been restricted to occupations requiring the intensive use of manual, poorly paid labor. When some of these occupations have been reshaped in order to incorporate the use of sophisticated technology, women have been replaced by men.

Thus, in the apparel manufacturing industries, cutting, now a highly mechanized operation, has become a male and comparatively well-paid job, while sewing, still requiring intensive use of manual labor, remains a low-paying female occupation (see Madden 1973; Huntington 1975; Safa 1979).

Other authors have turned their attention to the relationship between women and work under conditions of rapid industrialization and, especially, to the role that families and households play in the supply of labor differentiated by gender (Lloyd 1975; Young 1978). Among these studies, those accomplished by Tilly and Scott deserve further attention. As a historian Tilly has looked at the particulars in the participation of European women in the industrial work force during the nineteenth century. Her contribution is equally significant for historians, economists, sociologists and anthropologists as it places emphasis upon the concept of *family strategies*, which affect not only the immediate survival of kin groups but the participation of their members in wage employment.

According to Tilly (1978) the analysis of family strategy

tries to uncover the principles which lead to observable regularities or patterns of behavior among households. It asks who bears the costs or benefits from strategies in which individual interests or needs are often subordinated It moves away from, on the one hand, any implicit acceptance of the powerlessness of people caught up in a process of large scale structural change, or, on the other hand, the attempt to see into people's minds, to study mentality or attitude, which is often tautological. [P. 3]

The point of view that has developed around this concept has added a necessary corrective to overly deterministic conceptions (including certain Marxist and neo-Marxist trends) which view individuals and groups as the creatures of structural economic and political forces entirely beyond their control.

While Tilly does not deny the importance of structural forces at play, she also observes that there are family strategies about migration, fertility, schooling and labor force participation, about the coresidence of children and the age of marriage. Thus,

the concept of family strategies works as a series of hypotheses about . . . implicit principles, less rigid or articulated than

decision rules, by which the household, not the individual, not the society as a whole, acts as the unit of decision making. [Ibid., p. 3]

The important point to be stressed here is the following. When observations about family strategies and broad political, economic and ideological forces are combined, the participation of women in the labor force acquires its full meaning. Such a phenomenon is not the unmitigated effect of capitalist requirements for cheap labor, nor is it the result of free choices made by individuals. Rather it is a complex phenomenon influenced by both levels of social activity and mediated by the household as the locus where conscious or unconscious strategies are enacted.

In several recent articles, Tilly suggests that just as there were variations of proletarianization in nineteenth-century France, so in turn there were differences in family strategies and patterns of behavior among working-class families. Although in the first instance these strategies may be seen as adaptations to wider structural constraints, they also affect the nature of labor supply, and the constitution of society in general—whence the dialectical relationship between family organization and labor market requirements.

The changing role of women in the wage labor market has also received attention recently. Lamphere, Hauser and Michel (1978), for example, have studied the conditions surrounding women's employment in the New England textile industry. They notice that although during the early decades of the twentieth century most women employed outside the home were young and single, those who were married worked within the home both to provide services, attend to the needs of their families and frequently to supplement family income by taking in boarders. This was the case among migrant women, especially Polish women.

Using historical data she argues that although there may be important ethnic differences in women's work experiences, many can be explained in terms of the moment when a particular ethnic group immigrated to the United States and in terms of the characteristics of the local niche into which a group was pushed.

Echoing some of the insights present in Tilly's use of family strategies. Lamphere underscores the differences among Polish and French immigrants in New England:

The high percentage of boarding and women's labor force participation among Poles could be mainly a product of the young

population in 1915, the lack of housing in the neighborhoods available to them, and the low wages which Polish men earned in the textile mills. Though there may be cultural values which encouraged French women to leave paid work at marriage, it is also true that French husbands had access to a wider and better range of jobs which may have made it possible for French women to follow a strategy of having larger families whose children could provide added support after they reached adolescence. [P. 43]

Thus Lamphere underscores economic factors rather than ethnic differences affecting women's employment after migration. Simultaneously, family organization and needs are incorporated in this perspective as an important explanatory variable. As are other authors, Lamphere is cognizant of the fact that decisions regarding employment and occurring at the level of the household are determined by the costs of reproducing the daily and long-term existence of its members. Among most working-class peoples, such costs cannot be paid by the wage of only one provider. Therefore choices must be made about the number of household members that need to work outside of the home to enable family subsistence. The pooling of resources maximizes the chances for survival of both individuals and households. In these circumstances, personal autonomy is subsumed under the constraints imposed by family needs.

The interplay between individual and family needs as well as the manner in which they have affected and been affected by labor market conditions is another point recently examined by anthropologists and historians. Minge-Klevana (1978,1980), for example, has studied the changes in the concept of childhood during the transition from peasant to industrial society. Following concepts present in the work of Aries (1965) and Shorter (1975), Minge-Klevana points to the fact that the definition of childhood as a social institution varied over time in response to the fluctuations of economic and political factors. In peasant communities where the labor of youngsters was incorporated as part of family productive activity, childhood was recognized as a brief period in human development. Privacy and personal life and needs were subordinated to family requirements. Industrialization brought about the conditions for a redefinition of childhood in terms of duration and psychological content. In these circumstances children lost value as home laborers. Increasing restrictions over the use of child labor and the implementation of compulsory education, as well as the expan-

sion of clerical work, imposed limitations upon the value of young sons and daughters as wage earners. Increasingly children became fully dependent for survival upon their parents. Women, in particular, were held responsible for the educational and psychological well-being of children, while men acted primarily (although not exclusively) as material providers.

As Minge-Klevana notices, this process had a multifaceted impact upon the life of families and households. First, it had an effect on birth rates and fertility. As children became dependents rather than young workers, the economic advantages of bearing a large number of offspring decreased. Couples had smaller families to dedicate more time, energy and resources to a few children, maximizing their chances for success at a later age in an increasingly restricted, demanding and competitive labor market.

Second, besides its demographic impact, this process was also attached to an increase in importance given to motherhood. Gradually women specialized in nonremunerated domestic chores, which in turn were redefined in order to consume more time and energy. Ehrenreich and English (1976) have noted that as women reduce their participation in productive and/or paid work, they take over many new and complex functions within the home. The increase of time, energy and resources required to adequately fulfill the role of housewife effectively diminishes the possibility of success of entry by women into the labor market. On the other hand, new household needs and a continuous reshaping of standards of living generate a growing market for material goods and services. Consequently, the family is transformed into a primarily consumptive unit.

Third, the same development has had political significance insofar as families become growingly dependent on wages earned by male workers. The permanence of men in the labor force is often insured by their familial responsibilities which make women and children entirely dependent on them for survival. At the same time women's economic and political autonomy is significantly reduced by their impossibility to gain access to paid employment and by their characterization as supplementary earners; housewives and mothers dependent on men (see also Hartmann, 1979).

But while this description is helpful for understanding general historical developments particularly in Europe and in the United States, it must be qualified by observations of national and class background. Class in many ways determines the kinds of economic and political options available to men and women. Nationality (and

very often ethnic background) have considerable impact in this respect, as they indicate the particular position of individuals and groups in the social division of labor. While women belonging to the middle and upper classes may have been able in the past and in the present to fully dedicate their attention to home responsibilities (this being at the same time a luxury and the source of severe economic and political subordination), working-class women have often had to work for a wage, while at the same time attending to domestic labor. This circumstance has inevitably placed women in what may rightfully be called a "double bind."

In response to this observation many scholars have focused attention upon the situation of women in third world countries, modifying commonly held assumptions on the subject. For example, the stereotypical notion of Latin American women as conservative, apathetic and totally dependent individuals has been questioned on the basis of empirical research. Works by Saffioti (1969), Arizpe (1975), Jelin (1976), Deere (1977, 1978), Lomnitz (1978), Young (1978), Nash (1979), Safa (1980) and others have pointed to the range of methods by which women (particularly poverty-stricken women) actively contribute to the maintenance of their dependents.

Contrary to what some have assumed in the past, the majority of migrants in Latin America are women rather than men (Jelin 1976). Deere and de Leal (1980) have assessed the economic contribution of peasant women in Andean communities. Lomnitz, Nash and Safa have stressed the role that women play in Mexican, Puerto Rican and Bolivian communities as active generators of informal kin and friendship networks within which vital resources are produced, shared and exchanged. Finally, Young and others have stressed the participation of women in rural communities as artisans and merchants.

A general summary of the contributions of this literature to the study of women and work is offered by Moser (1980) through observation of poor urban women in Guayaquil, Ecuador:

In peripheral economies such as Ecuador the abundance of available labor is sufficient to insure that wages are kept below the value of labor power. The value of labor power determines the extent to which women must work both in domestic labor . . . and also the extent to which they are forced to look for wage work. A variety of strategies are adopted. At the household level, for example, the decision of rural migrants to squat and

invade on a peripheral city swamp . . . is designed to lower the cost of living, while sending out other members of the family to work for a wage. [P. 19]

Thus,

the strategies women adopt depend on their age, marital status and skills. Nevertheless, in slum communities . . . the majority of low-income women are involved in different domestic-related activities (in all of which there are low rates of pay, no security of work and exploitative labor relations) throughout their adult lives, providing a significant input to the "family wage." [P. 21]

A review on the literature on women and work leads to five central conclusions.

1. An abundance of historical and recent empirical information demonstrates the significance of gender as a category which has powerful analytical and explanatory value in the study of social, political and economic processes. The theoretical meaning of this assertion has been clouded by two factors. On the one hand, there is reluctance on the part of certain sectors of the academic community to acknowledge studies focused on women as more than a reflection of "trendy" group interests. On the other hand, ongoing political debates (among Marxists, feminists and a combination of both) about the superiority or inferiority of gender with respect to class as sources of oppression have often confused rather than clarified issues about women and work (see Sokoloff 1979).

Nevertheless it should be clear that as with ethnicity, national background and class, gender plays a fundamental part in clarifying past and contemporary history. In the majority of cases social, economic and political developments have had a differential impact upon men and women. At the same time these have been influenced by individuals whose behavior is shaped by gender-specific socialization processes. Thus generalizations about classes, groups or nations remain partial unless qualifications by gender are effected. Here lies a fruitful path for future research not only on the part of ethnographers (whose attention generally focuses on the minute details of human existence) but also by those who wish to refine and expand the explanatory potential of social theory.

2. This literature also shows that the term "women" is an elusive abstraction. It escapes all sorts of generalizations unless questions

of class, ethnicity, culture and national background are taken into consideration. The history of women and their participation in paid and unpaid labor is the history of individuals of a particular gender, immersed in a world bounded by numerous social and economic factors. Although gender may provide the basis for commonality of experience among women of different backgrounds, often these similarities are dramatically modified by class position. The importance of this consideration has not been ignored by the authors mentioned above.

3. The available research tends to confirm the idea that a division of labor by gender has existed universally both in past and present times. However the degree to which this division inevitably causes the political and economic subordination of women is a question subjected to ongoing debate. In general authors agree that capitalist development has had as a consequence the deterioration of the status of women (especially working-class women) in many parts of the world. Moreover the issue of women's economic and political autonomy has not followed an unilinear development. It has varied according to particular historical moments and in relation to broad structural parameters.

4. In agreement with the last observation, this literature also suggests the economic importance of women's labor in the domestic and public spheres. A recent accomplishment of the social sciences in this respect is that women cannot be conceptualized only as the tenets of biological and social reproduction. At every stage of their lives most women participate in productive economic activities, either within or outside of their home even though this fact has been seldom acknowledged by official economic indicators. This opens the possibility for a rich assessment of households as the locus where domestic labor subsidizes the generation of capitalistic profits. Moreover, it indicates that women's contribution to the creation of social wealth cannot be measured only in terms of their participation in the wage labor force (see Larguía and Dumoulin 1975).

5. Finally, this literature underscores the importance of family strategies as effects of decision-making processes that take place at the level of the household. These strategies (conscious or subconscious, tacit or deliberate) mediate between the choices perceived by individuals and the constraints imposed by larger labor markets. In other words, the authors mentioned above have called our attention to the importance of household organization and needs as factors which influence the supply of labor. With this they have added an

FOR WE ARE SOLD, I AND MY PEOPLE

important qualification to views that see the fate of working peoples as the fatal result of capital's requirements and demands. If the notion of *dialectics* ingrained in social and historical processes is to have any meaning at all, it should take a thoughtful account of this point.

This volume aims at providing a limited contribution to the literature on women and work by examining the birth of new groups of workers formed by women under conditions of rapid and planned industrialization along the U.S.-Mexico border. As will be seen, the five points listed above have had importance as guidelines orienting my study. Before assessing the position of women employed as assembly workers in Ciudad Juárez's offshore production plants, a description of the social and economic conditions that characterize Mexico's northern frontier and of the process that has led to its industrialization is necessary. This is the purpose of the following chapter.