

War on Want International Partners:

War on Want works in solidarity with some of the most inspiring grassroots organisations in the world, fighting on the front line of the struggle against global poverty and injustice.



Sweatshops and Plantations

Codemuh

The Honduran Women's Collective

War on Want has worked in partnership with Codemuh for over seven years. Our assistance has helped women sweatshop workers to a better understanding of their labour rights, enabling them to defend themselves against the workplace abuses they face on a daily basis. We also support Codemuh's efforts to push for a reform of Honduras' outdated labour codes, which would significantly improve sweatshop working conditions.

The case of export processing zones in Honduras

Honduras is the largest textile manufacturer in the Caribbean Basin and the third largest exporter to the US after China and Mexico. It has 24 export processing zones (EPZs) employing over 133,000 workers, 75% of whom are women. EPZs are industrial compounds designed to attract foreign investment to developing countries through low or non-existent taxes and other incentives. Since the 1970's multinational corporations, particularly in the clothing sector, have taken advantage of these zones, cutting their costs of production and maximising their profits. Many leading clothing brands from Gap to Fruit of the Loom source their clothes from these zones.



Codemuh works in northern Honduras, where the large majority of maquiladoras are found.



Codemuh supporters demand better working conditions in maquiladoras.

Although they have created jobs, it is becoming increasingly apparent that conditions in EPZs violate basic labour rights. Working in factories, or maquiladoras, as they are known in Latin America, Honduran workers face poor health and safety standards and extremely long hours as a result of a quota system under which they must meet unrealistic production targets. Forced to repeat the same motion throughout the day, many workers suffer permanent injury, making them unfit for future employment. Medical care is non-existent at most factories, and those workers who leave their job due to injury rarely receive compensation.

Honduran maquiladora workers earn, on average, 100 lempiras a day (roughly £3), which is not enough to cover basic living costs such as food, health care and education for their children. Workers must also contend with harassment and violence at the hands of managers; women are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Job security is lacking and maternity leave is rarely provided. Because trade unions are actively discouraged, few workers are able to speak out against these and other labour rights violations.

One's health is priceless. What use is money without health? I was healthy when I started to work and now, seven years later, my problems begin. The inhumane production goals, long working days, sometimes up to 24 hours, are the cause of my health problems."

Woman maquiladora worker
San Pedro Sula, Honduras

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Codemuh

The Honduran Women's Collective – shortened to Codemuh in Spanish – has been fighting for workers' rights for over 20 years. It is the only organisation in Honduras that tackles the issue of workers' health, focusing in particular on women, who make up the majority of the maquiladora workforce. Since its founding Codemuh has successfully lobbied for far-reaching improvements in health and safety conditions for female maquiladora workers.

Codemuh believes that the well-being and dignity of workers must be protected at all costs. To reach the greatest possible number of workers, the group has developed women-led networks of labour rights defenders, who lead training sessions in factories and communities. Thanks to these workshops, hundreds of female workers have been able to negotiate directly with their employer.

“Many women workers do not raise their voices because they fear the consequences. Codemuh has helped us to defend ourselves. With Codemuh a woman learns to fend for herself.”

Woman maquiladora worker
Choloma, Honduras



Codemuh supporters attend a talk calling on government officials to improve working conditions.

Codemuh's main policy goal is the reform of the country's outdated health and safety labour legislation, designed in 1959 when the manufacturing sector was undeveloped. After carrying out extensive research on workers' health, Codemuh submitted proposed reforms to the Honduran National Congress in March 2008.



Codemuh helped this worker secure compensation after she lost sight in one eye in a maquiladora

The group is seeking a legal framework that requires factory owners and the government to take measures to protect the health and well-being of maquiladora workers. Below are just some of Codemuh's recent achievements:

- In May 2009 Codemuh became the first women-led social movement to host a roundtable meeting with Honduran government officials on the need for a public policy on health and safety in the workplace.
- On two separate occasions the group met with the Inter-American Court for Human Rights to present evidence on the widespread abuses occurring in the country's maquiladoras.
- At the grassroots level, the collective has set up numerous initiatives to support workers, such as provision of medical and legal advice.
- Last year Codemuh directly negotiated with employers on behalf of over 500 workers to secure social benefits including access to occupational health experts and sick leave.
- Its legal advice network has intervened in over 333 labour cases, enabling workers to hold their employers accountable for their actions.

For more information visit:

<http://codemuh.net/> (in Spanish) and www.waronwant.org