

April 19, 2005

My name is Debbie Leighton. I am a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) as well as the Maine Fair Trade Campaign. I am a long time peace and justice activist from West Bath, Maine.

**The purpose of my testimony tonight is to direct your attention to the impact that U.S. Trade Agreements have on women.**

Under NAFTA, historically and currently, the impact on women on both sides of the North and South American border is that they lose. They lose jobs, benefits and safe working conditions.

**Here are the issues as I see them.**

Many say that NAFTA and free trade have negatively affected society and the environment, but very few have highlighted the particular difficulties that women face. My experience as an employment counselor in Maine, and as a peace activist in El Salvador and Colombia, made me aware that NAFTA did not create the promised jobs and prosperity on either sides of the border. In both instances it has been the women and children that have suffered.

In Maine, many of the garment industries, such as Healthtex and Hathaway, have closed leaving many women without a steady paycheck or the security of a union job and appropriate benefits.

- Their good jobs have gone south or across the border to factories with low-paying jobs and no real protection for workers' rights or safety.
- Many of the Maine women who lost their jobs were single <sup>parents</sup> ~~women~~ raising a family on their own. When they lost their jobs as stitchers, pressers or packers they didn't have the skills or opportunities for comparable jobs.
- For many it was months before they were able to get a job, frequently part time, and at a lower wage than they were accustomed to. This left the women unable to take care of their families without welfare and food stamps and other tax-payer supported general assistance benefits.

In ~~South America~~, while in El Salvador, I had the opportunity to meet with some of the women who had worked in a maquiladora (factory).

- I heard how the women were forced to work long hours for wages that didn't meet the minimum guaranteed by local law. I learned that women are fired if they are pregnant. They are exposed to extremely unsafe working conditions resulting in illness and loss of limbs. I was told that any attempt on the part of the women to organize a union would result in death threats and intimidation.
- Those women working on farms in Colombia and El Salvador can no longer make a living growing corn, rice and beans to feed their families or sell in a local market. They have been undercut by the subsidized farm products brought in from the U.S. They are told to grow "cash crops" for export. As a result 60% to 70% of ~~the women are~~ <sup>those</sup> ~~are~~ <sup>are women</sup> now working on flower farms where they are exposed to poisonous pesticides, and experience headaches, nausea, birth defects and miscarriages.

#### How have U.S. corporations negatively "benefited" from free trade agreements?

- Free trade rules make it easy for U.S. companies such as Monsanto to export hazardous pesticides. These are pesticides that are so potent that they cannot be sold in the U.S. I saw in Colombia the result of the use of Monsanto's Roundup used to spray cocoa. The pesticide ended up on neighboring farms killing all of the food products such as plantains, corn and beans leaving nothing for the families to live on.
- In addition, U.S. corporations stand to benefit from free trade agreements by allowing them to exploit unprotected workers - women and children. U.S. corporations can dump products that could not be sold in the U.S.

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**What are the outcomes you should be working to achieve?**

<sup>ask</sup>  
I ~~want~~ you to consider what would be different for women under agreements created within truly equitable fair trade rules.

- ✓ • human rights are guaranteed
  - countries involved are enriched
- ✓ • workers rights to organize are ensured
- ✓ • safe working conditions prevail
- ✓ • a living wage is guaranteed
  - an environmentally safe community is ensured
- ✓ • discrimination in hiring is addressed
- ✓ • policies against sexual harassment are enforced

**I would propose a framework for assessing trade agreements.**

- Any trade agreement that is meant to benefit people as whole should incorporate a gender analysis.
- Look to see if women and children are affected positively by the agreement.
- Ascertain whether women are impacted differently than men.
- Learn whether the agreement positively affects peoples' access to water, healthcare, education and shelter.
- Assure that women workers are active in helping shape trade agreements as well as workplace policies and practices.

**Thank you for this public forum to give people the opportunity to share their views.**

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