

Fruits of Injustice:
Women in the Post-Nafta Food System
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Inequality in Canada

A Reader on the Intersections
of Gender, Race, and Class

Second Edition



Valerie Zawilski

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Precious Human Cargo

As we approached the Toronto airport in the still-dark dawn, I asked Irena which terminal her plane was leaving from. I expected her to say Terminal Three, which is the main departure point for international flights and by far the most elegant, with sky-lit boutiques and chic restaurants. When she said 'Terminal One', I questioned her, especially as the sign for Terminal One said 'Cargo'. 'But I'm going as cargo!' she jokingly explained.

I was well aware of the Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services, known as the FARMS program, established in 1974, that brings Jamaican and Mexican farm workers such as Irena to Canada every summer to pick our fruit and vegetables.

I knew it was considered the 'crème de la crème' of migrant worker schemes, selecting the heartiest who tolerate a few months of backbreaking work in our fields, twelve hours a day, six and half days a week, because they can make more in an hour here than they make in Mexico in a day. And while I knew that they are brought en masse by plane in the spring and sent home en masse in the fall, no reading or interviews prepared me for the sight I faced as we entered Terminal One that day: a sea of brown and black bodies, primarily men, in massive line-ups, pushing carts bursting with boxes of appliances they were taking home. Security guards surrounded this precious human cargo, moving less freely than goods now move across borders in the post-NAFTA context. I imagined lighter-skinned Mexican professionals boarding planes in Terminal Three, briefcases in hand, having just completed a new trade deal with Canadian-based companies, or even

middle-class and upper-class students now availing themselves of increased exchanges among North American universities.

For the past seven years, I have been involved in a unique cross-border research program involving feminist academics and activists in Mexico, the United States, and Canada, that has taken advantage of this deepening economic and cultural integration of the continent, and the privilege of university research monies to move academics and graduate students across borders much more easily than Irena can move. We have been mapping the journey of the corporate tomato from a Mexican agribusiness to a Canadian supermarket and US-based fast-food restaurant as a device for examining globalization from above (the corporate agendas) and globalization from below (the stories of lowest-waged women workers in these sectors). We met Irena during this tracing of the tomato's trail, discovering a piece of the story that did not fit into any straight line or simple South-North axis. While most people are aware that our winter tomatoes are planted, picked, and packed by Mexican workers, few realize that locally produced summer tomatoes are also brought to us by Mexican hands, borrowed for the summer as cheap labour. This is one of the less visible stories of trade within the new global economy.

One of the environmental activists advocating for the human rights of Indigenous migrant workers in the Mexican fields calls the tomatoes they pick the 'fruits of injustice'. We began to realize that not only have the tomatoes become increasingly commodified in the neo-liberal industrialized food system, but the most marginalized workers are also commodities in this new trade game. In fact, tomatoes—a highly perishable,

delicate fruit and one of the winners for Mexico in the NAFTA reshuffle—are often treated better than the workers.

In this article, I will focus exclusively on the Mexican women workers in the tomato food chain,¹ and primarily those who would never dream of boarding a plane for Canada, but move in and out of seasonal production processes, key actors in the deepening agro-export economy of post-NAFTA Mexico. Their stories will reveal the increasing participation of young women, the deepening exploitation of Indigenous women, the worsening working and living conditions among workers in chemically-dependent agribusinesses, and the triple workloads of women who combine salaried work, subsistence farming, and domestic labour to meet the survival needs of their families. While Canadian women workers in the tomato chain also experience increasing inequities, Mexican women are clearly the most marginalized and invisibilized.

Interlocking Analysis of Power

The increasingly **globalized food system** builds on and perpetuates deeply rooted inequalities of race and ethnicity, class, gender, age, urban-rural, and marital status. As we followed the tangled routes of women workers along the tomato trail, we evolved an interlocking analysis that took into account five key dimensions of power that emerged as the most salient to understanding hierarchies within this food chain.

Figure 1 locates our gender analysis first within a context of *North/South* asymmetries, and in the case of the food system, the dynamic that the South (ever more dependent on agro-exports for foreign exchange) increasingly produces for consumption in the North. We do not want to perpetuate a simplistic *North/South* analysis. We recognize its limitations by revealing the dynamics within Mexico whereby southern impoverished regions feed cheap migrant labour to the richer industrial North of that country. As a result disintegrating rural communities are sucked into

the demands of an increasingly urban Mexico. Poor Indigenous *campesinos* are now salaried labour serving the food needs of a wealthier *mestizo* population as well as consumers in the North. In the continental food system, this North–South axis has allowed us to compare the similarities and differences between women who plant, pick, and pack tomatoes in Mexico and those who scan and bag, or slice and serve tomatoes in Canadian retail and fast-food industries.

Class: There are clearly different socio-economic statuses among women in the food system, even among the lower-waged workers in each sector that we are studying here and in each of the three NAFTA countries. Each company constructs its own hierarchy of workers, sometimes though not always related to educational level, but usually defined by skill levels, disparate wage levels, and working conditions.

Race/ethnicity: Also interacting with class and gender are race and ethnicity, shifting in meaning from one place and time to another. In Mexico ethnic differences are perhaps most pronounced between the Indigenous workers that the agribusiness brings by truck to pick tomatoes under

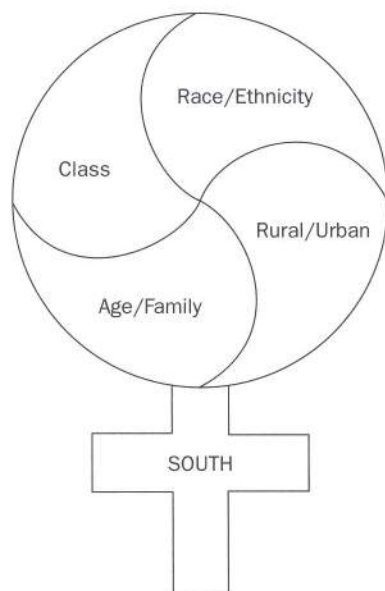


Figure 1

the hot sun and the more skilled and privileged *mestiza* women they bring in buses to pack tomatoes in the more protected packing plant.

Age and family status: The interrelated factors of age, marital status, and generational family roles are clearly significant in the Mexican agricultural context, where the workforce is predominantly young and female (a relatively recent phenomenon based on necessity but challenging patriarchal practices). The family wage has become critical, too, as family members combine their salaries as well as unsalaried work for subsistence production to survive a deepening economic crisis.

Rural/urban: In the context of food and agriculture, the rural–urban dynamic is central. Development strategies in both Mexico and Canada have favoured urban dwellers, but still depend on rural workers to feed populations of the burgeoning cities. Mexican *campesinos* are migrating to both rural and urban areas in Mexico, and the survival of most families depends on the migration of some family members(s) to the US or Canada, even if temporarily as in the case of Irena.

It is almost impossible to describe the above dimensions of power in isolation. The stories of the women in the tomato chain reveal the complex interaction between these categories of identity and power and thus enrich our understanding of gender and women's experience as plural, diverse, and constantly changing.

The Tomasita project is by definition a feminist and an ecological project. First, it is a feminist act to make visible the women workers in the food system, redressing their invisibility in other studies of global agriculture and trade regimes as well as in the public consciousness. Beyond filling in the gaps left by male-dominated perspectives, this study benefits from the rich development of diverse feminist theories over the past decade. I have drawn from a wide array of fields, ranging from political economic labour studies to feminist ecological economics, from socialist feminism to feminist environmentalism, from gender and sustainable development to social ecofeminism.² My own positions have also been shaped

by three decades of research and activism in the US and Canada, as well as in Peru, Nicaragua, and Mexico.

The complexity of the work and home lives of the women workers in the tomato food chain can only be understood, I believe, by considering particular social constructions of their relationship with nature, and, in Donna Haraway's terms, their situated knowledges (1995). These are inevitably contradictory given that the women workers featured here are immersed in diverse contexts where competing notions of development and globalization are at play. My analysis attempts to weave, like tangled roots and routes, an ecology of women and tomatoes that respects local contexts while acknowledging broader social and historical processes in constant interaction with them.

Profiles of Women in Three Contexts

I will introduce six women who work for Empaque Santa Rosa, the Mexican agribusiness at the production end of the tomato chain. The differences among the Indigenous and *mestiza* workers, the pickers and the packers, will challenge any notion we might harbour in the North of a singular or monolithic Mexican woman worker.

Picking and Packing for the North: Mexican Women Agricultural Workers

Job categories and divisions of tasks within tomato production have evolved over decades (indeed centuries) to reflect and reinforce institutionalized classism, sexism, racism, and ageism. According to Sara Lara the restructuring and technologization of tomato production during the 1990s—promoted by **neo-liberal trade policies**—has not changed the sexual division of labour, but has, in fact, exploited it even further. By employing greater numbers of women, com-

panies contract skilled but devalued labour that is not only qualitatively but quantitatively flexible (Lara 1998b).

A Moving Maquila: The 'Company Girls'

The packing plant is one of the places where entrenched gender ideologies clearly reign. Women are considered both more responsible and more delicate in their handling of the tomatoes; and because the appearance of the product is so critical to tomato exporters, there is at least some recognition of this work as a skill, even if managers consider it innate rather than part of female socialization, as Lara argues it is (Lara 1998b).

Women who sort and pack tomatoes for Santa Rosa are drawn from two sources: local girls living in the town and mostly young women hired permanently by the company and moved from site to site, harvest to harvest. The latter are the most privileged, and are clearly 'company girls', a kind of 'moving maquila'. They provide the flexible labour and the skills needed by Santa Rosa at the important stage of sorting and packing tomatoes for export.

Juana, Packer

I'm 37 years old now, I've been following the harvests for 23 years. We go from here to the Santa Rosa plant in Sinaloa, and from there we go to San Quintin, Baja California, and then back to Sinaloa—every year we make the round.

We are brought from Sinaloa with all expenses paid, the company covers the costs of transport, food, and once here, we get a house with a stove, beds, mattresses. Our house is close to the plant, and we share it with 16 other workers. In the end, we're all a family.

Yolanda, Sorter

I'm 21, and have been working for Santa Rosa for six years. My father was a manager at the

packing plant in Sinaloa, and I began working there during school vacations. I liked packing work better than school. The atmosphere is different, it's more fun and you can make money.

I came here from Sinaloa, and share an apartment with my mother, sister, and brother-in-law. He works in the Santa Rosa office and gets special living expenses. I earn almost 1,000 pesos (\$200) a week. I'm saving money for a house I'm building back in Sinaloa.

Many young women Yolanda's age see this as temporary work, a good way to make some money, travel, and perhaps find a husband, so that they can then get on to the 'real' business of settling down and raising their own families. Older women like Juana, who do not marry and leave the job, have become virtually wedded to the company, with no time or space for creating their own lives. They move from harvest to harvest, like swallows, returning annually to their hometown.

None of the sorters or packers are Indigenous but rather are lighter-skinned *mestizas*. They are the women who are in greatest contact with the company management. The most privileged, in fact, seem to be women with close connections to men who have administrative jobs with Santa Rosa, such as Yolanda's brother.

There is, however, a hierarchy of skills and of treatment between the two main jobs of sorting and packing, with the packers being the more privileged in several senses.

The sorters have to sign in, but we packers don't. The sorters have to stand all the time. Packers can sit on wooden boxes.

The sorters start at 9:00 am, the packers at 10:00 am. Perhaps the biggest and most crucial difference is the wage level and the form of payment. Sorters are paid by the hour, while the box pays packers. At 33 cents a box, a packer might average 200–500 boxes a day, earning 66–150 pesos, or 13–30 dollars a day; a sorter, earning 5 pesos an hour, would average 35–60 pesos, or

7–12 dollars a day. Both of these far surpass the fieldworker's wage of 28 pesos (5–6 dollars) a day for backbreaking work under a hot sun.

Male workers in the packing plant are still the most privileged, however. Most *cargadores* or carriers (who move boxes), make up to 1,200 pesos a week, or 240 dollars, while packers average 600–900 pesos a week (120–180 dollars).

On Saturdays, when workers go to the office to get their weekly pay, the queues themselves reveal the ultimate divisions. In the words of one of the packers:

When we go to get our money, there are three lines: one for sorters, one for packers, and one for the men.

Factories in the Fields: Hi-Tech Greenhouse Production

The future of tomato production in Mexico appears to be in greenhouses, which allow year-round production and almost total control of key factors like climate, technology, and labour.

Greenhouse production can be seen as the epitome of the 'maquila' model, which since NAFTA has now moved from the northern border to be applied to businesses throughout Mexico. Maquila industries are characterized by four dimensions: feminizing the labour force, highly segmenting skill categories (majority unskilled), lowering real wages, and introducing a non-union orientation (Carillo cited in Kopinak 1997). The only Mexican inputs are the land, the sun (the company saves on electricity and heating), and the workers. And like most maquilas, 100 per cent of the produce is for export (10 per cent going to Canada but most to the US).

Only in recent years has it become culturally acceptable for young women in patriarchal rural communities to enter the paid labour force at all, and then only out of necessity. Most young people have taken these jobs because there is nothing else available and because their income is needed for the family wage.

Greenhouse work offers a new form of employment that combines planting and packing, and in terms of wages and status, falls somewhere between the fieldworkers and the packers at the larger plants. For women, there are basically two different kinds of roles: working in the greenhouses planting and picking tomatoes, or working in the packing house in a more sophisticated process that combines selecting and packing. The next two profiles feature one in each area: Soledad who works in the greenhouse and Yvonne in the packing house.

Soledad, Greenhouse Planter

While Soledad is a very feisty and social 15-year-old, her name means 'loneliness or solitude'. Ironically, when she was three years old, her parents moved to Los Angeles, and she hasn't seen them since. They have had five more kids there and they send home money, about \$500 every two weeks, to support Soledad, her sister and brother, and grandparents, with whom she lives. This is not an uncommon family configuration, as relatives share childrearing on both sides of the notorious border, and those who remain in Mexico are tied both emotionally and financially to their families in the North. Soledad has been working at the greenhouse since she was 13. She makes 180 pesos (26 US dollars) a week, 30 pesos (4–5 US dollars) a day for six days, or 4 pesos (under 1 dollar) an hour—only slightly more than fieldworkers.

Yvonne, Greenhouse Packer

Yvonne undertakes the other major task assigned to young women, work in the enormous packing house. In her three years working at the greenhouse, the 20-year-old has witnessed the move into hi-tech packing. The pressure that the computerized process on the lines creates within and among the workers is palpable. The French manager's strategy has worked on people like Yvonne who has succumbed to the competitive dynamic:

I was depressed at first because they would tell me 'you're below the quota'. I would be ashamed, because this means you're not worth anything. So I was very tense, concerned about getting faster, so they'd have a better impression of me.

Yvonne's efforts to keep up with the new technology and to prove herself a productive worker also reveal the internalization of new work values. 'Good workers' are being shaped in Mexico by the combination of controlling technology and foreign management. Yet sexism reigns as once again the male workers are paid more: 'If we make 100, men make 175', explains Yvonne.

Into the Fields

The women workers who are closest to the land, the plants, and the tomatoes themselves are also the lowest paid and least skilled in the hierarchy outlined here. They are the most exposed to the hot sun and the rain, as well as the pesticides sprayed incessantly in the fields. Two stories here will reveal two major sources of tomato fieldworkers: local *campesinos* and Indigenous migrants from the south.

Tomasa, Local Fieldworker

As an older woman (68 years old), Tomasa is perhaps not a typical fieldworker. But her story reflects many important characteristics of migrant labour in Mexico. First her personal history growing up as a *mestizo campesino* girl in the countryside reveals the deeply rooted sexism that produces and reproduces the gendered division of labour in the agricultural sector. Second, like many other peasant families, she and her husband combine subsistence farming with salaried work for agribusiness. Finally, her story reveals the **family wage economy**, which is the major strategy of survival for poor Mexicans.

We raised ourselves, that is, my father died when I was two and so my mother was left

alone to raise us. She had to work to feed us. As a child, I played around the house, but when I was eight or nine, my mother put me to work—sweeping, fetching water from a far-away stream. When I became older, I helped grind and mix the corn meal to make tortillas.

My kids helped me with the housework and they still help. Two of my sons have gone to work in the US and send money back. My other sons work in the lumber business, cutting pine trees nearby. The women don't work in the field, they stay at home with their family. I'm the only one who runs around like a fried chile, picking tomatoes! My youngest daughter stays at home, and has food ready for us when we return from the fields.

The unpaid domestic work that keeps Mexican *campesino* families alive is not accounted for in any of the official calculations. Tomasa, in fact, works a triple day: as a salaried worker for agribusiness, as a subsistence farmer on their family *milpa* (literally, cornfield or family plot), and as the cook and caretaker of her family.

In either case, they remain dependent on capitalist agribusiness, whether owned by Mexicans or foreigners; both are taking advantage of their cheap labour. And the companies benefit not only from their low wages, but from the family wage economy which incorporates family remittances, subsistence farming, and Tomasa's domestic labour. While they may represent a triple burden for Tomasa, not even these options are open to most Indigenous migrant women, the most exploited in the hierarchy of workers.

If gender discrimination is entrenched in the tasks offered women workers and in their double or triple days, racism is manifested particularly against the Indigenous migrant workers who are brought in packed trucks by contractors, without certainty of getting work, and with even worse living and working conditions than local *campesinos*. Housed in deplorable huts, without water, electricity, stores, or transport, they come as families to work in the fields and move from harvest to harvest. The women bear the brunt of this lack of infrastructure—cooking and washing, taking

care of kids (even while working in the field), and dealing with their own exhaustion and the poor health engendered by the conditions of extreme poverty. Because their own regions offer even less opportunity, they are forced to suffer these jobs and the racist treatment built into them (Lara 1994).

Reyna, Indigenous Migrant Farm Worker

We're from Guerrero. Contractors came to our town to find people to work here. After we finish our contract, they take us back in trucks.

Some women carry their children on their backs while they're working, because they don't have anyone who can take care of them.

We earn 28 pesos a day. It's never enough to save anything. Sometimes the children need shoes and it's not enough. They give us some clothes, because 28 pesos is nothing. There is no union and no vacations.

While children are paid the daily rate, it is often the case that their parents, especially mothers, will rush to fill their own quota, so they can help their children complete theirs. This dynamic makes the fieldwork much more intense and more like piece work (Barrón 1999). Mothers must also carry their babies on their backs as they work in the fields. In breastfeeding her child, Reyna passed the pesticides from the plants on her hands which then got into his mouth, and almost poisoned him. Indigenous women, as well as men and children, are clearly in the most precarious position of all who bring us the corporate tomato.

In the six stories above, the multiple strategies for survival become clearer. Women are key protagonists for their families, in their triple functions: as salaried workers (with varying status and wage levels), as subsistence farmers (where they have access to land), and as domestic labourers (with a wide, range of living conditions, from the horrific camps of Indigenous migrants to the better-equipped but transient homes of the

mobile packers). But no one woman's story can be understood in isolation from her family's story, nor separately from her ethnicity, age, marital status, and experience. Globalizing agribusinesses such as Santa Rosa have built their workforces on these historically entrenched inequalities and differences.

Tangled Roots and Routes

The interlocking dimensions of power are even more complex than I was able to reveal here, however, and are constantly changing. The cases of Canadian supermarket cashiers and fast-food workers also demonstrate the growing phenomenon of flexible labour strategies with women bearing the brunt of part-time work schedules. One shift in the Mexican labour force, for example, has been toward younger and younger workers; in a context of oversupply, 15–24 is the new ideal age, so a woman's career as a salaried agricultural worker may be finished before she reaches the age of 30. Deepening impoverishment in the countryside has meant that a *campesino* family now needs five rather than three members of the family working in order to eke out their collective subsistence.

Epilogue

The continental economic integration promoted by neo-liberal trade policies and agreements such as NAFTA has also pushed groups working for social and environmental justice to consider the connections between workers in the border-crossing production of food and other goods. There have been spaces within our collaborative research project that women workers have read each other's stories and expressed solidarity with their sisters responsible for moving the tomato along its trail from South to North.

In one example of this growing exchange, Irena, the Mexican farm worker introduced at the start of this essay, extended her stay in Canada in

order to spend a week working at the Field to Table Centre, an initiative of FoodShare, which works with low-income communities in Toronto to improve access to affordable and healthy food. Ironically, a woman who knew more about agriculture from her own practice both in Mexico and in Ontario fields, wanted to learn from the

urban agricultural experiments on rooftops, greenhouses, and community gardens in this northern city. These are the stories of resistance, of the creation of alternatives, of the building of links of solidarity that have also been invisible in both academic works as well as in the public consciousness.

Notes

1. The stories of women in three different sectors—the agribusiness workers as well as Canadian supermarket cashiers and fast-food workers are featured in my book, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail*.
2. Feminist theorists I have drawn upon include Jacqui

Alexander, Kirsten Appendini, Bina Agarwal, Isabella Bakker, Antonieta Barron, Rosi Braidotti, Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Kathy Kopinac, Sara Lara, Elga Martinez Sakazar, Swasti Mitter, Chandra Mohanty, Ellie Perkins, Carolyn Sachs, Catriona Sandilands, Vandana Shiva, and Dorothy Smith.

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Questions for Critical Thought

1. How do gender, race, and class intersect in the oppression of Mexican workers in the tomato trade? Of Canadian workers in the supermarket? What hierarchies are established in the various workplaces linked to the corporate tomato?
2. How does the directive for efficiency and competitiveness affect workers in the supermarket? How does it affect consumers? How does it affect the food industry?
3. How does agribusiness in Mexico affect traditional cultures?
4. What are some alternatives to agribusiness and globalization? How could its consequences of exploitation, environmental harm, threats to health, and control over women's labour be rectified? Would this require changes by the producers? Consumers? Unions? Marketers? Food chains? Do social movements to heighten consumer awareness and change the conditions for workers have an effect?

Conclusion

The emancipation of all people in the spirit of justice and egalitarianism is the general objective of the feminist movement. In its attempts to eradicate social inequality the feminist movement stands in opposition to globalization, which embodies the principles of neo-liberalism, advocates a free market economy, and limits social and/or moral obligations to regulate the labour practices and the working conditions of its international supply of workers. Economic restructuring, downsizing, shifts from manufacturing to service sectors, and factory closures have been part of this process, which seeks to homogenize and normalize trade relations between large international corporations. In this section each chapter has examined how economic restructuring has affected the lives of not only Canadian women but also women and men throughout the world. Each author raises questions about the global increase in social inequality, and proposes that the future is uncertain for women who work as home-workers, manual and skilled labourers, and caregivers. Women, and particularly racialized women living and working in the global North and South, have been the most severely affected by economic restructuring and have had to become, out of necessity, a more flexible labour force—often causing themselves great physical, psychological, and social distress.

Recommended Readings

Kevin Bales and Becky Cornell. 2009. *Slavery Today: A Groundwork Guide*. Toronto: Groundwood.

- Most people think that slavery is a social system that no longer exists. Kevin Bales and Becky Cornell trace the global social and political origins of bondage that enslaves 27 million people—men, women, and children—throughout the world