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Gender, Globalization and Women's Issues in Panama City: A Comparative Inquiry

Elvia R. Arriola*

I traveled to Panama City for the inaugural Study Space program, an outgrowth of the LatCrit scholarship movement I joined more than a decade ago, with a completely open mind as to what I, a Latina feminist critical scholar, might learn about globalization and its effects in South America.¹ Before this winter 2008 trip, I had been drawn to the studies of the expanding global economy, with a gendered angle in my research and writings that closely examined workplace conditions for women and their families in the NAFTA *maquiladoras*² and towns at the U.S.-Mexico border.³ I felt lucky to join a delegation of progressive scholars interested in looking at life in a South American city apparently undergoing rapid metropolitan urban growth, and one with a unique historical relationship to the United States. Our delegation was to learn about Panama City in the transition from that old occupied territory and peoples, to a country now completely in the hands of all Panamanians under the Carter-Torrijos Treaty of 1979.⁴ As my taxi drove me to my hotel in the downtown area, I could see the look of modernization in an astonishing number of high-rise buildings that could compete with the tallest residential towers of downtown Chicago. Real estate advertisements in one of the

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1. See Study Space Project I, Evaluations of Human Habitats and Habits in the 21st Century, http://www.law.du.edu/latcrit/PortfolioOfProjects/AcadCom/StudySpace/StudySpaceI_panama_2008.pdf (last visited Sept. 14, 2009) (a joint project of the Center for the Comparative Study of Metropolitan Growth, Georgia State University College of Law and LatCrit, Inc.). "LatCrit theory" is a relatively recent genre of critical 'outsider jurisprudence'—a category of contemporary scholarship including critical legal studies, feminist legal theory, critical race theory, critical race feminism, Asian American legal scholarship and queer theory." LatCrit, Inc., <http://www.law.du.edu/latcrit/index.htm> (last visited Sept. 14, 2009).

2. *Maquiladoras* is Spanish for factories.

3. Under the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), American companies outsourced their labor production to Mexican subsidiary factories in cities along the 2,000 mile U.S.-Mexico border. See generally Elvia R. Arriola, *Voices from the Barbed Wires of Despair: Women in the Maquiladoras, Latina Critical Legal Theory, and Gender at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 49 DEPAUL L. REV. 729 (2000) [hereinafter Arriola, *Voices*].

4. Treaty Concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal, U.S.-Pan., Sept. 7, 1977, 33 U.S.T. 1977.

newspapers I brought back⁵ display photo after photo in the English language, by realtors ready to sell or lease foreigners large and picturesque condo apartments along “La Cinta Costera,”⁶ next to the city’s beaches and minutes from the dense and colorful Panamanian rainforests. Yet I had some doubts about a delegation experience that seemed so focused on issues I am less familiar with, such as meetings with specialists on environmental and urban planning policy who have examined the public health and environmental impact of the development craze in Panama in recent decades.

My own work, in contrast, has criticized NAFTA for helping to generate changes in the Mexican political economy that have included heavy industrialization at the border, along with a range of systematic forms of toxicity for workers in the global factories known as *maquiladoras*. I was not sure if the delegation experiences I have had at the border that were aimed at exposing the human face of NAFTA would be similar to a trip where I would learn about Panama’s history, geography and contemporary social and economic concerns. I knew that I, at least, would have questions about this unique country wedged between two oceans⁷ once

5. See generally *Advertisements*, THE PAN. POST, Dec. 10-24, 2007.

6. “La Cinta Costera,” a phrase I heard throughout the week, seemed to describe both the developed coastline and plans made in 1997 to widen Panama City’s coastline Avenida Balboa beginning in 2008. The ambitious plans along the Bay intend to beautify the boulevard by adding a park, bike path and a four lane highway. The construction plan has had supporters and opponents. See, e.g., Posting of Cinta Costera Va! to <http://forumskyscraperpage.com/showthread.php?t=127546> (Mar. 17, 2007) (discussion and photos of the Panama Bay and proposed development plans); see also Rodrigo Mejia-Andrion, *El Atraco de los Parques de Punta Pacifica*, LA PRENSA (Pan.), Mar. 31, 2007 (critical view of the overdevelopment of “Punta Pacifica” and developers’ indifference to social and environmental impact), available at <http://mensual.prensa.com/mensual/contenido/2007/03/31/hoy/negocios/935907.html>.

7. This South American tropical terrain, with a consistently hot and humid climate is famous for the isthmus, the narrow strip of land that joins the North and South American continents, and for the site of the Panama Canal. We were told that December was the “dry season” meaning that rains only occurred daily between two and six p.m. while temperatures rose from the seventies into the high eighties. The Panama Canal, still one of the world’s more important international trade routes, was built and operated by the U.S. from 1903 to 1999, is fifty miles long and connects the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. Panama City’s old quarter, known as Casco Viejo, is the site of the first hispanic city in the Western Hemisphere dating to the early days of Spanish colonization and international trade facilitated through the strategic site of the geographic area known today as the Republic of Panama. Photos and historic data on Casco Viejo are available through the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Center, Archaeological Site of Panamá Viejo and Historic District of Panamá, http://whc.unesco.org/pg_friendly_print.cfm?id_site=790&cid=31& (last visited Aug. 26, 2009).

occupied by the United States for the sole purpose of serving our country's economic and military interests.

Most of this essay is a reflection on the trip, and how I saw Panama's emerging social and economic issues against the backdrop of the global economy. My reflection at times notices sharp differences between the delegation experience that was offered to us, the traveling scholars, and my own travels as a scholar/research/activist on frequent delegations to the Mexican border. I was left with many questions after my trip to Panama in three main areas: the status of working women, the relationship between Panama's changing socioeconomic conditions and the status of the working poor and indigenous populations, and the role of grassroots activism as a hopeful avenue for positive social change.

PANAMA, GLOBALIZATION AND THE NEW PANAMA— WHO IS CALLING THE SHOTS?

"Globalization" has many meanings in current literature. When thinking of the contemporary problems faced by the financial systems of the United States and Europe from the standpoint of globalization, one could say that, despite the differences in governmental systems, that at a global level the financial and banking systems of many nations are interconnected. As a result, when one country's banks fail, the financial systems of other countries are also likely to fail or at least face severe setbacks, depending on the regulatory safety checks in force in a particular country. Yet to many authors globalization means more than understanding the interconnectedness of major financial institutions throughout the world, and the threats to social stability when banks begin to fail or investors begin to sell off their holdings in the global stock market.

No doubt one view of globalization is shared by many—that it is a positive leveling of the economic playing field when there is a freer international flow of money, goods and services to people and countries around the world. Thomas Friedman's view of globalization has centered on the positive effects of the Internet and technological advances.⁸ For example, a small Midwestern company can meet the demands of local customers through quick and effi-

8. Thomas L. Friedman initiated his globalization studies with *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, which he immediately followed with *The World is Flat*. THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE LEXUS AND THE OLIVE TREE* (1999); THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE WORLD IS FLAT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (2005).

cient regular purchases from online dealers based in places like Pakistan, India and China. Theoretically, when that flow of goods and money increases, the poorer countries should rise to new levels of prosperity in the global marketplace that were impossible in the old days of tariffs and protectionism. However, globalization has its grave risks as noted by scholars like Amy Chua, who has forcefully argued that the rapid introduction of market based economic systems at best provides the appearance of the equalization of societies.⁹ Chua argues that whether it is rapid industrialization or too quickly forcing a smaller country to adapt to a laissez-faire type market economy, there is a high risk that globalization and the wealth disparities it tends to produce can unleash dramatic and sometimes violent forms of ethnic and racial conflict.

In the short span of a generation, a part of the world that once represented a quasi-colonial U.S. possession, Panama, ruled then by a dictator friendly to U.S. interests, is now free to embrace participatory democracy and the rule of law. From all appearances the country also embraced capitalism as the path toward prosperity, following the lead of the major global financial institutions that equate global democracy with market-based economies.¹⁰ In less than a generation people who learned to live under the thumb of occupation and military control had the opportunity to participate in government, to vote, to have a voice in the direction of their prosperity in the global marketplace. The most obvious signs of development appeared in the panoramic view of Panama City's coastline that rivals the beaches of South Florida with its hundreds of residential hotels and apartment buildings next to pristine white beaches. But the sight of the construction made me skeptical from the start of a clear relationship between development and prosperity for all Panamanians. My skepticism began the very first day in Panama City as we exited our downtown hotel at seven in the morning for a very hot and humid hike through a section of the rainforest carved out as a city park, the Parque Natural Metropolitano.

After our hike, we walked down a major boulevard lined with

9. *See generally* AMY CHUA, *WORLD ON FIRE: HOW EXPORTING FREE MARKET DEMOCRACY BREEDS ETHNIC HATRED AND GLOBAL INSTABILITY* (2003).

10. There are critics, however, of the policy and practice of such major financial institutions as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), one of the most powerful players in the global economic design to end poverty by helping the poor nation rich in cheap labor and natural resources participate in the global marketplace. *See generally* JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ, *GLOBALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS* (2002).

a dizzying number of foreign banks, and there was an even more dizzying effect from the number of tall buildings we could see from the highest point in the park. All around the park and the rainforest there was concrete development. As we learned later in sessions with Universidad de Panama professors of urban planning, the degree of construction on the tiny spaces of land left available around the rainforest and the Canal Zone had reached ridiculous levels. A major criticism we heard more than once during our meetings was aimed at the City Planning Department which tends to issue building permits hastily, without serious concern for the human and environmental impact. I was reminded of the work of the feminist scientist and scholar Vandana Shiva who has argued forcefully that the lure of "development" is a path to destruction of traditions, cultures and ancient ways of living in harmony with one's natural surroundings.¹¹ One day I took a walk away from our hotel and saw no less than three active construction sites on just one block. On our downtown hike we were invited to see what was left of fishing villages trying to eke out an existence along a coastline now filled with high-rises that daily increase the dumping of wastewater into the sea.¹²

Photographic images of La Cinta Costera looked great in magazine advertisements. At ground level, however, the glass and concrete structures next to the rainforest that feeds the Panama Canal tell another story. Exploitation of beauty has become the norm of public policy somewhere in the development craze of Panama. I returned to those first impressions as I glanced at the Panama Canal Authority's 2004-2005 Social and Environmental Report that we acquired the day of our meeting with the operations officials of the Panama Canal. The mission of the Authority is to operate the canal for the progress of "our people, our country, and our planet."¹³ The canal is key to Panama's progress, but I kept wondering, who really calls the shots in Panama's economy? I was reminded of my visits to several border towns along the 2,000 mile long export processing zone created by NAFTA at the

11. See generally VANDANA SHIVA, *STAYING ALIVE: WOMEN, ECOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT* (1989).

12. Wilfredo S. Jordán & Elizabeth A. Garrido, *Al Rescate de la Bahía*, MARTES FINANCIERO, EL SUPLEMENTO DE LA PRENSA (Pan.), Mar. 16, 2004, available at <http://www.martesfinanciero.com/history/2004/03/16/columna/portada/index.shtml>.

13. PANAMA CANAL AUTHORITY, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT 3 (2004-2005), available at <http://www.pancanal.com/common/general/reports/social-environmental-report-2004-2005.pdf>; see also PANAMA CANAL AUTHORITY, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT (2006), available at <http://www.pancanal.com/eng/general/reports/social-environmental/informe-2006.pdf>.

U.S.-Mexico border. I was inevitably drawn to the signs of the Americanization of the Mexican border in the great number of American banks and U.S. chain stores and fast food restaurants, from Pizza Hut to McDonald's lining the major boulevards of a town whose economy had become dependent on the *maquiladora* industries. So I wondered about the role and influence of foreign investment from the moment I walked down a major boulevard on my first full day in Panama City and saw dozens of foreign banks lining the street. It was early December and a festive Christmas parade marched by. I, however, noticed how often a parade's sponsor bore the name of a familiar product marketed by an American multinational corporation, such as M&M's, a product of Mars, Inc.

In a research seminar I conduct entitled, Women, Law and the Global Economy, I have students read from an anthology of articles called *Whose Trade Organization?*, which is published by the nonprofit citizen research group Public Citizen criticizing World Trade Organization (WTO) policies throughout the world.¹⁴ It opens with a cartoon showing a map of the world and lines drawn around geographic spaces that depict which investor gets what part of the available global resources that are governed under the rules and regulations of the WTO, the World Bank, and other major managers of global finance, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The mission is profitability. The economic theories are popular, even if not entirely successful, as many Lat-Crit scholars learned at the Free Market Fundamentalism Conference in Bogotá, Colombia in 2006.¹⁵ Yet the economic schemes include the concepts of neoliberalism and free trade, privatization, deregulation and elimination of problematic tariff schemes. Of course, the mission has also been challenged by labor, environmentalists, feminists and human rights activists for good reason. The new economic global order speaks the language of freedom and global democracy, but its critics point to conditions and class disparities that evoke historic images of colonization, or at least the propping of government leaders that are willing to sacrifice the human rights of their people in order to secure a place in the global marketplace.

14. LORI WALLACH & PATRICK WOODALL, *WHOSE TRADE ORGANIZATION? A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE WTO* (2004).

15. LatCrit Inc., Annual South-North Exchange on Theory, Culture & Law (SNX), <http://www.law.du.edu/latCrit/SouthNorthExchange.htm> (follow "SNX 2006 Colombia" hyperlink) (last visited Sept. 15, 2009).

THE DELEGATION EXPERIENCE AS RESEARCH
AND ACTIVISM INSPIRATION

My interest as a feminist scholar on globalization emerged from a study that first looked at the intersections between immigration law and policy and the change occurring in the Southwest United States in trade, industry and transportation under the North American Free Trade Agreement. Using gender as a category of analysis, I looked at the Mexican border and the infusion of capital in the form of U.S. companies operating under NAFTA's legal architecture of "free trade" to understand what was happening to working women and their families.

NAFTA opened the border to foreign investor multinational companies and lured rural migrant families from Southern Mexico to work in the factories. A female migrant would be luckier in getting a job because of the systematic sex discrimination in hiring which many *maquiladoras* practice. A male migrant might end up trying to cross the border into the United States in a desperate search for work, rather than return home to regions of Mexico destitute of jobs or opportunities for sustainable farming. Unfortunately, the risk of illegal crossings resulting in death from drowning or heat stroke steadily increased as military-like policing of the border, beginning in the pre-NAFTA years, continued.¹⁶ Based on my several trips to the border to meet workingwomen who are organizing for justice in the NAFTA factories, I have come to believe that globalization presents a double-edged sword—reflected in opportunity as well as danger for workingwomen. On the one hand they receive a regular paycheck, and on the other they have the risk of constant exposure to dangerous and sometimes violent working conditions.¹⁷

16. The militarization of the Mexican border began under a program called Operation Gatekeeper during the Ronald Reagan administration. See TIMOTHY J. DUNN, *THE MILITARIZATION OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER, 1978-1992: LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT DOCTRINE COMES HOME* (Victor J. Guerra ed., 1996). The increased number of deaths of migrants crossing at places in order to avoid detection has been well documented. See Stanley Bailey et al., *The Human Costs of Border Enforcement: Migrant Deaths at the Texas-Mexico Border*, 24:4 *MIGRATION WORLD MAG.* 16 (1996); see also Omar Ontiveros, *2006 Report on Migrant Deaths at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Border Network for Human Rights, http://www.bnhr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4:2006-report-on-migrant-deaths-at-the-us-mexico-border&catid=1:status-of-human-rights&Itemid=7 (regarding deaths of migrants under the post 9-11 policies of the Department of Homeland Security).

17. See Arriola, *Voices*, *supra* note 3, at 739-40. Some women have formed "fair trade" factories as an alternative to the abusive working conditions in the *maquiladoras*. See generally Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO), *Maquiladora*

An outgrowth of my assessment of NAFTA'S impact on Mexican workingwomen's lives has been a commitment to educate the public about the unjust employment practices of American multinational corporations who shut down many U.S. companies and outsourced the costs of labor to places like Mexico, China and India. As Executive Director of a small educational project called Women on the Border, Inc., I have worked closely with various grassroots organizations on both sides of the Mexican border who are interested in educating the broader public about the impact of globalization through the delegation experience. Our delegations involve a weekend field trip from Austin, Texas to Mexican border towns about four to six hours away by car. The group meets activists and visits with *maquiladora* workers in their homes. On each delegation we take away stark impressions of poverty, hard work, and courageous stories of life under NAFTA. We observe the human impact of a legal arrangement for trade that has been complicit in its securing many rights for investors and few, if any, for workers.¹⁸

Women on the Border, together with more established human rights organizations like American Friends Service Committee, gives qualified visitors¹⁹ the unique experience of meeting those who actually work in one of the global factories bearing familiar names of American products like Gateway, LG Electronics, and GE. Sometimes the traveler has sympathized with the oppressed worker in Indonesia earning pennies to make Nike shoes, not realizing that she lives hours by car from a place divided by a chain linked fence, a borderland filled with sharp examples of profit and greed at work. The delegate observes the human face of free trade in the shantytown housing, the naked children running around on unpaved, muddy streets near active railroad tracks. She also hears the horrific stories of workplace accidents and injuries

Dignity & Justice, <http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/dj.en.html> (last visited Sept. 15, 2009) (information on the "fair trade" factories).

18. See Elvia R. Arriola, *Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 5 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 603 (2007) [hereinafter Arriola, *Accountability for Murder*]; see also Monica Schurtman, *Los "Jonkeados" and the NAALC: The AutoTrim/CustomTrim Case and its Implications for Submissions Under the NAFTA Labor Side Agreement*, 22 ARIZ. J. INT'L & COMP. L. 291 (2005) (criticizing the weak labor protections in the NAFTA side agreement).

19. American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an activist arm of the Quakers, produces these delegations through its ongoing project called Austin *Tan Cerca de la Frontera* (Austin So Close to the Border). See generally American Friends Service Committee, Austin Area Program, <http://www.afsc.org/austin/ht/d/sp/i/2106> (last visited Sept. 15, 2009).

because the employers are too cheap to provide adequate health and safety protection. The delegate makes a connection between the human experience and the cheap sweater or gadget she recently bought at Wal-Mart; for she comes to understand through the worker's story just how little the worker earns for their long hours, and that throughout the world, globalization often means a woman or child earning pennies per hour in order to supply the global marketplace.²⁰

This picture of globalization is somewhat gloomy and not far from the thesis of Professor Chua.²¹ However, it explains why some years ago when the G-8²² met to develop plans for extending NAFTA to all of the Western Hemisphere, there was intense, organized protest by labor, human rights and environmentalists.²³ The question to identify the meaning of globalization for the new Panama may be from a strict comparative standpoint: whether the working classes of Panama are caught up in similar experiences with the rapid urban growth? But this was not a question or focus of the Panama City delegation. At best it was implied from the overwhelming evidence that dramatic change has hap-

20. See Arriola, *Voices*, *supra* note 3, at 766-70; Arriola, *Accountability for Murder*, *supra* note 18, at 609-11, 614-16.

21. See generally CHUA, *supra* note 9.

22. The G-8, or Group of 8, is a group of state or government heads representing France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Canada who meet annually to deal with major economic/financial and political issues (macroeconomic management, international trade, international relations), in each individual society as well as all countries as a whole. Key areas of interest include East-West economic relations, energy, counter-terrorism efforts, and microeconomic and transnational issues such as employment, the environment, crime, drugs, and human rights. Representatives known as "sherpas" meet throughout the year to discuss progress, and ministers meet regularly as well at ministerial meetings to deal with issues of immediate concern. See UofT G8 Information Centre, What is the G8?, http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/what_is_g8.html (last visited Sept. 16, 2009). In a recent meeting held in the United States on October 15, 2008, the G-8 set goals "to resolve the current crisis, strengthen financial institutions, restore confidence in the financial system, and provide a sound economic footing for citizens and businesses." International Monetary Fund, G8 Leaders Statement on the Global Economy (Oct. 15, 2008), <http://www.imf.org/external/np/cm/2008/101508.htm>.

23. The Agreement on the Free Trade Area of the Americas never emerged, but in 2005 President Bush signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement. General information on The Central America-Dominican Republic-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) is available at Office of the United States Trade Representative, CAFTA-DR (Dominican Republic-Central America FTA), <http://www.ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/cafta-dr-dominican-republic-central-america-fta> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009) and Office of the United States Trade Representative, Final Text, <http://www.ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/cafta-dr-dominican-republic-central-america-fta/final-text> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009).

pened in Panama and that most of it has taken the form of development targeted at attracting foreign markets, whether as tourists or investors. Who stands to benefit from those attractive images of modernization taking place in Panama? Who is reaping the profits from the obvious signs of global expansion—whether it is the proliferation of foreign banks, the high-rise condos offered to tourists and U.S. retirees,²⁴ or the proposals to expand the width of the Panama Canal even further? Who will profit and who will care that expansion of the Colon Free Trade Zone²⁵ may lead to the destruction of more rainforest and indigenous homelands?

IS PANAMA VULNERABLE TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRITIQUE?

Panama's explosive growth has captured the attention of human rights studies. For example, UNESCO funded a very recent study out of the Universidad de Panama entitled "Youth, Poverty and Human Rights,"²⁶ which confirmed similar and troubling conclusions published in a recent State Department's Country Report on Panama.²⁷ The Country Report states that Panama may be committed to children's rights and welfare, but the government's inadequate resource allocation and training accounts for problems with child labor and trafficking, with the return of too many children to abusive homes, and to exploitation by gangs who turn children into killers.²⁸

24. See DAVID DIXON ET AL., MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE, AMERICA'S EMIGRANTS: U.S. RETIREMENT MIGRATION TO MEXICO AND PANAMA (2006), available at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/americas_emigrants.pdf.

25. The Colon Free Trade Zone is an enormous area at the Atlantic entrance to the Panama Canal used for re-export of merchandise into Latin America and the Caribbean. FOB Colon Free Zone Panama, <http://www.colonfreezone.com> (last visited Sept. 9, 2009).

26. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) funded the investigative report published with Universidad de Panamá, INSTITUTO DE ESTUDIOS NACIONALES, JUVENTUD, POBREZA Y DERECHOS HUMANOS: EN ASENTAMIENTOS URBANOS PERIFÉRICOS DE LA CIUDAD DE PANAMÁ, ARRAJÁN, LA CHORRERA Y SAN MIGUELITO (Instituto de Estudios Nacionales 2007) (Youth, Poverty and Human Rights) [hereinafter INSTITUTO DE ESTUDIOS NACIONALES, JUVENTUD]. The report concludes, *inter alia*, that since 1983 the impact of neoliberal economic policies with the aid of international monetary institutions, produced rapid economic developments that reduced the role of the State's ability to eradicate poverty. *Id.* at 87-88.

27. See BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, COUNTRY REPORTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES: PANAMA (Mar. 6, 2007), available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78900.htm> [hereinafter COUNTRY REPORTS]; BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR, U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, COUNTRY REPORTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES: PANAMA (Feb. 25, 2004), available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27907.htm>.

28. See generally COUNTRY REPORTS, *supra* note 27, at §§ 5, 6.

Upon discovery of this research on Panama, I remembered that our accommodations had been in the heart of the city's business sector. Our hotel was just one of many within walking distance of miles of super high-rise office buildings, many bearing the names of United States and European foreign banks surrounded by a dizzying array of glitzy shopping centers, restaurants, casinos and hotels. And yet, the signs of social and economic class divisions nearby were impossible to miss. Near the hotels, boys begged from tourists, and the children of native indigenous vendors, many from the Kuna, sold handmade traditional crafts and jewelry.

I wondered, new democracy or new playground for the rich or for tourists with enough time and money to play? In a global context, it could be another one of the hundreds of cities in other countries that became participants in the global economic schemes of free trade, massive deregulation and enforcement of financial programs on countries in possession of valuable and much needed resources. Those resources may bring wealth, but they can also bring about the kind of massive reorganization of ways of working and living that risk crossing over into cultural genocide.

INVISIBLE POPULATIONS IN A RAPIDLY DEVELOPING NEW PANAMA

Of all the *recuerdos* (souvenirs) I brought back from Panama City, the two I treasure most are the *mola* panels I bought from a young Kuna man who had a warm broad smile. I bought them from his small stand that was less than a block from the hotel. The Kuna indigenous people have a special place in the story of Panama, which has seen explosive and dramatic growth since the official termination of U.S. occupation and control under the Carter-Torrijos Treaty of 1977.²⁹ Each textile embeds stories and symbols for the Kuna, communicated through intricate reverse appliqué patterns, a unique art form associated with the Kuna woman's traditional costume.

The *mola* textile art form originated as a replacement for the

29. The Panama Canal Treaty of 1977 (passed narrowly in 1978), Treaty Concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal, *supra* note 4, was intended to rectify the contentious relationship between the U.S. and Latin America under the administration of Jimmy Carter. See U.S. Department of State, Panama Canal Treaty, 1977, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/qfp/17454.htm> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009).

body paintings that formed part of the customary dress of this indigenous population before European conquest. The production of the *mola* is a meaningful tradition to the Kuna because of past efforts by Europeans to “westernize” the Kuna and to forbid their traditional dress, language and art.³⁰ As the vendor stated, “much of our history and what we believe is in this art.” A favorite theme is the *mola* that depicts the valiant and successful struggle for independence from European control. Another *mola* piece I was drawn to conveyed a kind of creationism story with its brilliant images of animals and humans sharing the beauty and sustenance of the tropical rainforest. One *mola*, which I eventually bought, made my feminist heart skip a beat with its bright yellow and distinctly female goddess image cast against a rich burgundy background layered with rainbow stitching in the shape of trees and flowers held in perfect balance by the deity’s arms. The vendor said, “this one symbolizes our respect for mother earth’s life giving force.”

The irony of these beautiful messages is that the impact of globalization is an ongoing threat to the preservation of ancient indigenous culture, which for the people of the rainforest is intimately connected to Mother Earth. Is it possible that while Panama and its canal are in the hands of Panamanians, that the hands of foreign investors who must be appeased provide a constant shadow to the writers and enforcers of Panama’s public policies? I left Panama with a strong sense that for now the effort to bridge the gap between rich and poor is either weak or invisible. For example, one night we gathered in a hotel room to view a documentary about the Chorrillo barrio, an example of blatant marginalization within the city that resembles the vast squatter camps that house the poorest of the poor in any city of the world that has pushed for globalization of the economy in the last generation.

If progressive insight is going to be offered to the policymakers, then we need to know more about the status of the working classes. Whether they are the working poor, the transient street vendor or migrating indigenous populations, their voices must be heard, and their concerns must be made relevant to the discussions about quality of life in general for the New Panamanian citi-

30. See generally *Molas: Textile Art of Panama*, <http://anthromuseum.missouri.edu/minigalleries/panamamolas/intro.shtml> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009); *Panama Mola, Mola History*, <http://www.panama-mola.com/history-en.htm> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009).

zen. If not, then Panama is no different from other countries who have been seduced by the WTO to offer up their natural and human resources to multinational corporate investment as a way out of poverty, without evidence showing that there is less poverty or less violent conflict between the haves and the have-nots.³¹

THE WORKING POOR, WHO AND WHERE ARE THEY?

I came to realize from my trip to Panama City that some issues that are prominent in globalization studies around the world, i.e., migration of rural peasants and families, are probably very different in Panama. In Mexico for example, the waves of migration from farming communities indicates more than not being able to survive on subsistence agriculture due to changing climates or global warming. It also marks the changing policies of a government not as committed to the livelihood of small farmers, but instead committed to all that comes with neo-liberal economic policies that have favored free trade forms of economic activity and investment, including supporting larger (global) commercial agricultural ventures at the expense of the needs of the small subsistence farmer. Thus the migration patterns that originate in the *ejidos*³² and mountains of Mexico are part of the globalization of the economy everywhere. Because the government no longer provides the seed or does not subsidize for failed crops, there are people without work, nearly starving, and thus they must leave their villages and homelands to find work. They are forced into new forms of labor while the truly desperate risk their lives in illegal border crossings.³³

During the week in Panama City, one of our more interesting sessions involved a conversation with academic activists challenging the expansion policies that the Panama Canal Authority is designing, as well as the investors whose money will multiply if there is a wider canal that is able to accommodate the largest

31. See generally CHUA, *supra* note 9. The World Bank's most recent reports on poverty show there are more poor people than previously believed around the world, with some progress being made to reduce poverty in general. The World Bank, *World Bank Updates Poverty Estimates for the Developing World*, Aug. 26, 2008, <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:21882162~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469382,00.html>.

32. *Ejidos* are communal agricultural lands that date from the land reform policies following the Mexican Revolution of 1917. Frank Tannenbaum, *Spontaneity and Adaptation in the Mexican Revolution*, in MAN, STATE, AND SOCIETY IN LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY 305, 309 (Sheldon B. Liss & Peggy K. Liss, eds., 1972).

33. See generally Arriola, *Voices*, *supra* note 3.

cargo ships in the world. Indeed, the commitment to financial success means more money for Panama and Panamanians, however, expansion of the Panama Canal also means destruction of the rainforest. The creation of the canal generations ago involved such destruction. In order to make room for the canal, the mountains were carved out, causing the flight of animals because their homes were destroyed. In addition, the native lands of the pre-Columbian human inhabitants of the rainforest were destroyed, much like the Kuna that still live there and who will be affected by such destruction.

The end of the U.S. occupation of Panama did not terminate the influence and power of foreigners in shaping Panamanian public policy.³⁴ The model and framework for “free trade” in the Colon Free Trade Zone as it is known today had been set. Though the U.S. occupation was over, the businesses of the United States did not leave, nor did those of the many other countries of the world who have contact with Panama through the free zone. Development, a word that can mean growth as well as destruction, has set in motion the mechanisms likely to perpetuate social and economic disparities between the wealthy and the poor that have existed since the United States controlled the region. In this regard, the experiences of the working classes in Mexico under NAFTA, and the Panamanians who have taken over the operations of the Panama Canal under the Colon Free Trade Zone, may be similar. Nonetheless, the nature of the investments in Panama is likely to be very different from the nature of investments in Mexico.

Similar to my discoveries about free trade at the Mexican border, I found online advertisements to investors welcoming them to the Colon Free Trade Zone where they might find everything they could possibly want and need to engage in profitable, tariff free, international trade. However, I found nothing suggesting organization of the laboring classes, even though they likely form part of the labor network in Panama that sustains the international trade interests.

34. As the transfer of authority over the canal from the U.S. to Panama was being completed in 1999 Colin Crawford speculated on the effect of the unleashed power to re-design Panama and the role to be played by Panama's elite and their international connections. See Colin Crawford, *Stop the Locks Schlock*, SALON, Oct. 5, 1999, <http://www.salon.com/people/feature/1999/10/05/panama>.

THE WOMEN WILL SAVE PANAMA: THE VALUE
OF WOMEN ORGANIZING

Naturally, I was curious to learn whether the status of women in the working classes and "modernization" in the new urban growth is gender-based or race-based, as well as whether there are safety concerns associated with specific marginalized groups. At the Mexican border, for example, the development of NAFTA factories has set in motion changes that are not good for women. The environment has produced hostility, harassment, and rising numbers of female murders, and yet despite these tragic and awful effects of NAFTA, there are also stories of courage and inspiration that emerge from the struggle of workers who have come together to learn their rights and to have them enforced, no matter how large the corporate employer may be.

Grassroots activism generates a sense of community and fosters hope for change. I was disappointed that we did not see more visible examples of women's activism. I suspect that such examples must exist because one of our academic speakers, a professor of urban planning, made the offhand remark during a question and answer session that "the women will save Panama." I never did find out what exactly he meant. However, we did hear some stories about displacement, one of which involved an indigenous woman's experience. That experience is representative of a larger phenomenon that is developing due to the Panamanian government and canal authority's approval of plans for progress that will result in expanding the width of the canal to accommodate larger cargo ships. The impact of such major development projects, which inevitably involve destruction of animal life, forests and displacement of communities who depend on the land for survival, can often serve as the seeds for the kind of social change that creates communities in search of empowerment. One of the largest and most effective women led border associations, known as the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), first appeared in an old Mexican border town called Piedras Negras in the state of Coahuila at the northern border of Mexico, next to Eagle Pass, Texas. The CFO began organizing two decades ago, to enforce the rule of labor law against abusive or obstinate employers, owned by large American multinational corporations bent on profiting from their investment in offshore production for the U.S. consumer market at the expense of workers. The majority of workers had always been women and this continued into the 1990s.

The women of the CFO have not saved Mexico, but they have

repeatedly helped workers defend their rights by teaching them how to invoke the institutional grievance structure provided by law. They have formed workshops to educate the timid people, many of which have little education and are from rural parts of Mexico. The workshops include learning how to read and understand the laws that are relevant to the workers' problems. The women of the CFO have also used their patient organizing skills to protest militarized borders because they know families who have been torn apart by the crushing economic effects of free trade and life under NAFTA. The concerns are often specific in their impact on a woman and her family, such as sexual harassment, illegal pregnancy testing, denial of maternity leave and benefits, and off time for family medical issues.³⁵ I was unable to find any information about what was involved in the casual comment, "the women will save Panama," but it is a promising note of a future in which the voices of women will have to be heard for a true democracy to unfold.

GLOBALIZATION IS DANGEROUS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

One question I have not answered is whether or not the sophisticated setups for international trade in the Colon Free Trade Zone, which is so close to Colombia, is infiltrated by the powerful networks of organized crime. Although these networks appear legitimate, they control certain social and political realities that contribute to violence against women, such as trafficking, prostitution, and sex tourism. These networks also interfere with criminal investigations of homicides that are directly or indirectly connected to members of drug families. Included in this question would be the question of women's bodies, since bodies are exploited not only for labor, but also for pleasure.

The disappearances of women at the Mexican border, in Juarez, have been linked to trafficking or illegal smuggling. It is likely that the disappearances are connected to organized drug cartels.³⁶ The failure of the government to produce any results in crime investigations has been rationalized through inappropriate stereotypes of the victims. The government officials, indifferent to

35. See generally Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO), *supra* note 17 (discussing the work of the women of the CFO).

36. See the investigative journalism of DIANA WASHINGTON VALDEZ, *COSECHA DE MUJERES: SAFARI EN EL DESIERTO MEXICANO* (Rogelio Carvajal Dávila ed., Editorial Oceano de México 2005), which explores the corrupt networks that include organized crime and politicians who have covered up the evidence surrounding the Juarez murders.

the needs of the poor, or enmeshed with illegality and corruption, unfairly characterize the victims as prostitutes. The indifference and corruption of these officials contribute to their failure to stop crime and find the perpetrators. Throughout all of this the common thread in victimization has been poverty and powerlessness.

A final question I had was about women's overall safety, another area in which the Country Reports revealed a low score for Panama. For poorer countries, globalization has engendered global networks of illegitimate economies that involve sex trafficking and global sex tourism.³⁷ For example, rapid industrialization under NAFTA in the city of Ciudad Juarez, near El Paso, Texas, brought about high levels of illegal drug trafficking and systematic violence against women. It also brought about hostile working and living environments that can be traced to the places chosen by corporations to set up new factories, and to their indifference to the basic shelter and safety needs of the people they employ.³⁸

The nations of Latin America have a reputation that too many poor people are living in substandard conditions.³⁹ Extreme disparities in wealth and intractable problems due to corruption, lack of education, and heavy dependence on foreign investment to boost the economies of societies struggling to create new forms of democracy are also widespread. When Panama was under United States occupation and control, society was divided by race, class, citizenship and occupation. The legacy of the quasi-colonial condition undoubtedly contributes to the dismal status of Panama. It places at the bottom of the list of countries adequately distributing its wealth. This is especially troubling given that Panama owns and operates one of the world's most important trade routes, it owns lands containing the rich and beautiful rainforest, and it

37. My students in the Women, Law and the Global Economy frequently produce new examples of research on the gross levels of sexual exploitation of girls and women in countries that have embraced market-based economies without addressing the problems of education for the poor and sexist ideologies or cultural practices. See, e.g., Nicholas Stavros, Comment, *The Illegal Sexual Exploitation of Women in Cambodia* (Dec. 2008) (unpublished manuscript, on file with the author), available at http://www.womenontheborder.org/niu_seminar.htm (last visited Sept. 16, 2009); Juan Ponce de Leon, Comment, *Globalization of Ukraine: The Development of Organized Criminal Networks and the Exploitation of Women in the Sex Trafficking Industry* (Dec. 2008) (unpublished manuscript, on file with the author), available at http://www.womenontheborder.org/niu_seminar.htm (last visited Sept. 16, 2009).

38. See Arriola, *Accountability for Murder*, supra note 18, at 603-04.

39. Claudio Acioly, Jr., *The Challenge of Slum Formation in the Developing World*, 19:2 LAND LINES 2, 2 (2007), available at http://www.lincolnst.edu/pubs/1220_The-Challenge-of-Slum-Formation-in-the-Developing-World.

has attracted an influx of white retirees from the United States.⁴⁰

IS THERE HOPE FOR ENDING POVERTY IN PANAMA?

On this delegation I cannot say I got a clear picture of hope and progress emerging from an activist struggle among the working poor of Panama, the people likely to have been left behind in the country elite's desperate pace to expand and connect with foreign investors now that they are free of official U.S. occupation and control. Although the evidence is scant and difficult to find, it appears that under the banner of indigenous rights, there are some examples of community-based activism in Panama.

Panama's levels of extreme poverty are well documented. In 2007, the Institute on National Studies of the Universidad de Panamá, in a project funded by the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), published a final report on the status of Youth, Poverty and Human Rights which concluded that a majority of the study participants came from families who earned \$200 and \$299 Balboa per month (or less than \$299.00 U.S. dollars per month).⁴¹ This statistic alone is similar to the income of working families at the U.S.-Mexico border who often live in shantytown housing and report for 10-12 hour workdays where they might earn about 500 pesos per week, or roughly the equivalent of \$200 per month.⁴²

Human rights reports produced by the U.S. State Department for Panama are not specific in linking the problems of poverty with women, migrants or children. Nonetheless, the study by the Universidad de Panamá certainly suggests that poverty might in fact be feminized. The issue of feminized poverty is an old assumption introduced in the early days of the second feminist movement, where there was a high rise in the number of woman headed households living below the poverty line. As noted above, the first UNESCO report focusing exclusively on the status of poor youth found that many children are living in households that are not earning enough money. The U.S. Department of State's 2006 report on Human Rights noted that despite the existence of a law mandating equal pay for women and men in Panama, similar to

40. See DIXON ET AL., *supra* note 24, at 45.

41. INSTITUTO DE ESTUDIOS NACIONALES, JUVENTUD, *supra* note 26, at 55-56.

42. See Arriola, *Voices*, *supra* note 3; see also Women on the Border, Articles & Resources, http://www.womenontheborder.org/articles_resources.htm (follow hyperlinks under "A FEW WORKERS' STORIES") (last visited Sept. 16, 2009) (stories gathered by Women on the Border).

the United States mandate of Equal Pay for Equal Work, and the Mexican prohibition against wage discrimination on account of gender, evidence shows that on average, women earn far less than men, as much as thirty to forty percent less.

The comparison to working women in the Mexican *maquiladoras* is the same. Although NAFTA brought in hundreds of new factories and new jobs and the employment patterns described a kind of "gender liberation" for women who had long lived under the thumb of men, the fact is that women earn significantly less than men in Mexico. In Panama, less than forty percent of the management and executive positions are filled by women. As a culture, there are likely patriarchal values that ultimately account for this lower representation of women in leadership roles. What this means, is that if the UN report already confirmed that a majority of the study participants were coming from households with low incomes, that many of those homes are probably headed by low wage earning Panamanian women. The further connection to make on these economic status issues is the location of the poorest households.

Panama is home not only to the rainforest and its world-renowned flora and fauna, but also to many indigenous groups who have been struggling for cultural preservation rights. Historically, the Kuna have been excluded from the decision-making pertaining to the wealthy, empowered, globalizing economy of Panama. This economy has lured foreign American retirees, investment bankers, and real estate developers in the residential and tourism industries, and in the process, has destroyed and will continue to destroy ancient and precious lands and navigable waters important to native tribes and the world's ecology.

In our meeting with the academic activists working on behalf of indigenous tribes affected by the hydroelectric development projects deemed part of the oncoming Plan Puebla, we learned that the Panamanian government and investors are determined to bring about the expansion of the canal, which is frequently touted as the hope for an even brighter economic future for Panama. An in depth study of the impact of the proposed hydroelectric projects revealed major potential losses to the Ngobe and Naso tribes and to many other indigenous communities. These communities' lives, ways of living, and dependence on the forestlands and river waters is deemed irrelevant in the name of "progress" and development, all done for the sake of modernization, trade and globalization. On the day we met the academic activists, we heard the

story of a woman who had been pressured, harassed and demonized for simply refusing to sell to developers who wanted her land. Such anecdotes illustrate too well the huge divides that arise when "progress" is equated with exploitation of natural resources and the human right to cultural preservation, and identity is equated with ignorance and backwardness.⁴³

POOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN PANAMA: WHERE IS THEIR SOURCE FOR HOPE AND PROGRESS?

It is more difficult to identify the ways in which poverty, indigenous rights, and the status of women in Panama coincide to produce the understanding that the law speaks to the goals of social justice, equality, and human rights, and yet the practice reveals another set of realities. For example, the law prohibits sexual harassment and the penalties may result in prison sentences. Nonetheless, much like the rarity of rape convictions, there are seldom any convictions for sexual harassment. (In fact, it may be an issue of accountability if sexual harassment is confined to the penal process as opposed to the civil process.) There may be a question about these facts and their relationship to the legalization of prostitution, at the same time that the human rights investigators state there is a problem with trafficking of women and children within the country. The belief is that the trafficking is somewhat related to prostitution and to debt bondage, possibly to sex tourism and internet pornography, but again, the existence of laws that prohibit the activities, makes it difficult to gather evidence. In addition, the existence of enforcement agencies seem not to produce much evidence, as in 2006 there were no convictions at all for persons engaged in human trafficking.⁴⁴

When I think of the problems faced by working class or indigenous women in Panama, I am drawn back to the possibilities for change with the empowerment of women. The women I have come to know, support and believe in at the Mexican border, are uniformly from humble backgrounds. Many come from the poorest rural farming lands in Mexico, and they migrated from the interior to the northern border with their families to find work. In Mexico's rural regions, not unlike Panama's communities who are purely Ngobe, or Kuna, or from other native lands such as Chiriqui and Darien, there is often a gross abandonment by the Mexi-

43. See generally SHIVA, *supra* note 11.

44. COUNTRY REPORTS, *supra* note 27, at § 5.

can government of public services and especially of adequate education. Education is compulsory and available only through the sixth grade and extremely limited in rural settings. Consequently illiteracy continues to be widespread while the humblest workers must depend on ancient artisan trades, domestic services or unskilled labor to survive. What I have often admired about the work of the *Comite Fronterizo de Obreras* is their commitment to empower mostly working women who often have limited reading and writing skills, and are extremely timid because they have been accustomed to being treated with disdain for being from small, poor villages. Through popular education techniques they not only learn about their rights as workers, they come to appreciate a gender consciousness that helps them voice their right to dignity and respect not only from abusive employers but from the men in their lives.

In Panama, true gender liberation or equality may be waiting in the wings of an uncertain future. The statistics on representation by gender in government may be indicators of what needs to happen before the social welfare issues of a country with so much wealth and yet so much poverty are addressed. As of 2006, women held only eleven of the seventy-eight seats in the legislature. On the other hand, the Attorney General was a woman, women held three positions in the cabinet, and a black female was appointed Justice of the Supreme Court.

The law is always a wonderful form of the appearance that all is well in terms of gender equality, such as the legal right of women to equal treatment in the workplace, an agency within the Ministry of Social Development dedicated to women's issues and education on their rights, which include rights under family law, property and the judicial penal system. But the Human Rights Report followed up with evidence of Panama saying one thing while doing the opposite. The Panamanian government does not allocate enough resources to enforcing the rights of women. This too is similar to problems for women's safety currently affecting Mexican border cities that became heavily industrialized under NAFTA. The political economy of Ciudad Juarez has engendered a sociopolitical environment in which profitability of foreign investors under NAFTA co-exist with systematic rape, torture and murder of women.

In the early 1900s, the proliferation of NAFTA factories intersected with the expansion of organized crime and drug cartels in the state of Chihuahua. Domestic violence spiked, as did the mur-

der of women, some of it simply bizarre, mysterious acts of violence. Hundreds of women and girls disappeared or were killed, many of them *maquiladora* workers in the factories in Juarez. When international attention was drawn to the problem of the Juarez disappearances and murders, and the gross incompetence of the Chihuahua state government to bring justice, the Mexican government got defensive. By 2006, the Mexican government passed a law prohibiting violence and discrimination against women. This law was celebrated as a tool aimed at reducing the problems that had brought too much negative attention to Mexico, something to be avoided if a country wants to secure future contracts with NAFTA investors. The only problem is the law was not backed up by funding, and the murders have not abated.⁴⁵

FINAL THOUGHTS

I went to Panama not really knowing much about its history or the important role it plays in the global economy. Initially, I did not have much to draw upon in order to make any comparisons regarding the country's equality and social justice. I had mainly examined such issues at the Mexican border in the context of gender, and often by way of the stories of the workers, which helps to demystify the reality of life under free trade law and policy. I left wondering whether there is any kind of women's based activism in Panama, similar to the work I have seen all along the Texas-Mexico border. I was simply unable to find concrete information through web-based research that there are women's groups doing the hard work of educating themselves and each other. However, in the course of this research I did find an informational website for ACEASPA,⁴⁶ a thirty-year old nonprofit organization founded by a Jesuit priest in 1977. It roughly translates into the Center for Panamanian Study and Social Action. ACEASPA's working methodology includes popular education and research, a model which is very similar to that performed by the CFO at the Mexican border, an organization which has always employed the consensus model, education and peace-based activism to accomplish its goals.

In 2007 ACEASPA published a report first confirming the gross inability of the Panamanian government to distribute the wealth more evenly, and then specifically focusing on women and

45. See generally Arriola, *Accountability for Murder*, *supra*, note 18.

46. La Asociación Centro de Estudios y Acción Social Panameño (ACEASPA), <http://www.ceaspa.org.pa> (last visited Aug. 30, 2009).

development. ACEASPA's report stated that overall Panamanian women's status is suffering. While they are close to thirty-seven percent of the working population, women have a higher rate of unemployment and this is even higher for indigenous women. While rates of illiteracy are very high overall, when it comes to indigenous women the rate is over fifty-three percent. The factors contributing to the overall patterns of discrimination rest in the failure to integrate traditional and cultural forms of education into the overall goals of Panamanian society, meaning that indigenous women simply do not have access to the technological and material resources required to improve their lives, while other barriers exist because of discriminatory attitudes based on ethnicity, race, age and class. ACEASPA appears motivated to help women's empowerment through education and support in the affected communities.

A final nonprofit I located online was the Mona Foundation⁴⁷ which launched a new educational project to support the empowerment of women and girls in the Republic of Panama, specifically by opening up the Ngobe-Bukle University in the Chiriqui Province. The origins of the project are in the vision of native educators from this province in the western part of the Republic of Panama whom in partnership with the Mona Foundation will fill the higher education gaps of many women in the region.

Thus, there may be hope in Panama after all, but progress comes with a price. When I encountered these two websites, after much fruitless other research, I understood better the casual remark of our first presenter on the first day of the week long field trip to Panama that "the women will save Panama."

47. Mona Foundation, Supporting Grassroots Educational Initiatives and Raising the Status of Women and Girls, <http://www.monafoundation.org> (last visited Sept. 16, 2009).