

2022 Leslie Nichols International Awardee: Movement of Working and Unemployed Women (“Maria Elena Cuadra”), Nicaragua



The Movement of Working and Unemployed Women “Maria Elena Cuadra” (MEC) was founded in 1994. For close to three decades, and with over 15,000 members across the country, MEC has been the most influential, grassroots organization advocating for the rights of women maquiladora workers in Nicaragua, and a vital defender for thousands of women workers experiencing labor rights abuses, poverty-level wages, gender-based violence, and exposure to health and safety hazards.

Focusing on women workers’ first-hand experiences and through in-depth analyses, MEC produces annual reports on the exploitative labor and health and safety conditions in garment factories. Their most recent report, *Surviving the Maquila: The impacts on Nicaraguan women’s bodies*, highlights how the intensive and physically demanding pace of

production, high production targets and short deadlines has left many workers with chronic musculoskeletal injuries.

MEC’s capacity building program has developed a national network of facilitators in workplaces and communities providing training on workers’ rights, occupational health and safety, and gender-based violence. They also operated a legal clinic providing services to individual workers and on cases where factories evaded their legal responsibilities. On International Women’s Day every year, MEC holds annual colloquiums by 1,000+ members to develop proposals to government and industry for protecting workers’ rights. During the pandemic, MEC was one of the only Nicaraguan labor organizations reporting on worker suspensions, factory closures, and health and safety conditions at factories in the Nicaraguan free trade zone, and assisted hundreds of workers as they navigated increased economic precarity and insecurity.

In February 2022, the Ortega government revoked MEC’s legal status and recently confiscated their office. The government has closed nearly 400 civil society organizations under a new law which requires organizations receiving funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents.” Sandra Ramos, MEC’s founder and director, has vowed to continue their work.