



MEC WINS APHA AWARD FOR DEFENDING WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS' RIGHTS

MEC's annual colloquium for women's day.

By Garrett Brown,
Coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network, and OHS Section member
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The membership and leaders of Nicaragua's Movement of Working and Unemployed Women – Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC) received a standing ovation at the awards lunch of the Occupational Health and Safety Section (OHS Section) of the American Public Health Association (APHA) in Boston on November 8, 2022.

The 15,000-member MEC was selected to receive the 2022 Leslie Nichols International Award by the OHS Section for its outstanding work in defense of women garment workers in the free trade zones of Nicaragua and agricultural workers in the nation's countryside. The international award has been given annually since 1993 by the OHS Section, which is part of the 150-year-old APHA, the largest public health association in the world.

The Awards Committee of the OHS Section particularly noted MEC's work in the following areas:

- Capacity-building trainings with women workers on a wide range of topics, including OHS, labor law, gender issues, and negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution skills;
- Development of a national network of facilitators and peer trainers;
- Development of a legal clinic and social programs for working women and their families;
- Publishing detailed investigative reports about the workplace and social hazards facing women workers, including the recent "Surviving the maquila – The impact on Nicaraguan women's bodies," with a detailed analysis of the ergonomic and repetitive motion hazards faced by workers in the free trade zones.

MEC, founded in May 1994, was also one of the few civil society organizations providing life-saving education on disease prevention and treatment to women workers and their families during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nicaragua.

The OHS Section Awards Committee also took note of MEC's annual meetings with over 1,100 women and supporters organized on March 8th, International Women's Day, in furtherance of MEC's goal of the emancipation of Nicaraguan working women.

The prestigious award was presented at the awards luncheon by longtime OHS Section member Garrett Brown, who noted that MEC is a victim of the erosion of democratic rights and civil liberties under the current Nicaraguan government. In February 2022, MEC's offices were confiscated when the organization was outlawed by the government, joining more than 1,100 human rights and development organizations, professional associations, including medical associations, universities and entities linked to the Catholic Church which have been stripped of their legal status.

In spite of these obstacles, MEC has vowed to continue its work in defense of working women in Nicaragua, a promise that sparked the standing ovation from the 125 participants in the OHS Section awards event at the APHA conference.



MEC members engaged in popular education workshops prior to the confiscation of the MEC office.