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Connecting Personal Biography and Social History: Women Casino Workers and the Global Economy

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Economic globalization has been described as the "most fundamental re-design of the planet's political and economic arrangements since at least the industrial revolution" (Mander, 1996). This article explores its implications in the lives of a group of women casino workers. Based on a qualitative study in which data were collected from key informants, focus groups of community leaders and professionals, and in-depth interviews with women casino workers themselves, the study attempts, in the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1959) and social work's tradition of person-in-environment, to connect "the patterns of [individual] lives and the course of world history."

[Working in a casino], it's the only way I could survive. I had to work for money for food, it's not like I enjoyed it. I wouldn't be cleaning rooms in my country. I was a teacher.

Maria Ortiz, housekeeper originally from El Salvador

What does a casino offer? It doesn't offer much, does it? Because I don't think being a dishwasher you're going to end up being a supervisor or being one of the top. . . . They want you as a dishwasher. They're not going to say, well, this person has been here for many years, let's give [her] a chance doing this and doing that.

Ynez Rodriguez, former casino hostess from El Paso

What part is the worst? It's all the worst.

Hilda Gomez, casino maid for 18 years, also from El Salvador

This article describes the work lives of women like Maria, Ynez, and Hilda who are employed on the lowest rungs of Nevada's gaming industry—as maids, janitors, change people, and hostesses. It explores the connection between their daily struggle for survival and self-realization and the economic and social forces associated with globalization. These are the women of the global labor market, women who are essential to Nevada's booming tourist economy, but are by and large locked into low-paid, low-benefit jobs. Far from passive, they like others have "defied all odds to reinvent themselves and to open up new possibilities for their children" (Arriaza, 1997, p. 6).

These women are at the center of a study we began two years ago on women casino workers in the context of economic globalization. The study proposed three research questions:

1. What is the experience of women who work as maids, cooks, hostesses, change persons, waitresses, and dealers in casinos in northern Nevada?
2. What can their stories and the observations of helping service professionals and other community members who work with them tell us about the social and economic health of Nevada families and our community?
3. Do the women's work experiences reflect factors associated with economic globalization?

Thus, in the spirit of sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) and social work's tradition of person-in-environment, we proposed to connect "the patterns of [individual] lives and the course of world history"—in this case, to understand women casino workers' personal biographies within the context of the enormous economic, political, social, and technological changes occurring at the intersection of two millennia. Our objective was not to establish a causal relationship between globalization and the women's lives, but rather to explore their multiple and complex interconnections, that is, to juxtapose realities and ideas in such a way as to stimulate others to consider the issues and formulate their own conclusions. As social work educators and activists, we also wished to narrow

the divide between academics and the working people of our community—and to challenge the invisibility and stigma that surrounds women's casino work. In this, we sought to revive the legacy of Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Edith Abbott, E. Franklin Frazier and others who—at another time of enormous economic change—devoted considerable effort to studying how working conditions affect the health of individuals, families, and communities, and used their findings in the fight for more just public policies.

Economic Globalization

Globalization, which Mander (1996) argues is the “most fundamental redesign of the planet's political and economic arrangements since at least the industrial revolution” (p. 3), in its simplest terms is the unfettered flow of goods, technology, money, and people across international boundaries. To proponents, it is the key to a robust and resilient global economy, unparalleled prosperity, and world peace (Friedman, 1999; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2000). To facilitate market domination, globalization's principal architects fight for a free global market, hail the elimination of regulatory controls, and oversee a vast machine of consumerism.

But, its critics argue, globalization has not brought the unprecedented prosperity it promised (Barnet and Cavanagh, 1994; Blau, 1999; Mander and Goldsmith, 1996). Poverty, environmental destruction, unemployment, and malnutrition have not only remained but grown. Long-term benefits increasingly accrue to a tiny minority of the population that feels little responsibility to the vast impoverished majority who labor for low wages and few benefits. Massive social aberrations—crime, alcoholism, violence—grow exponentially in societies cut loose from the former meanings of family and community. The old ways of community decision-making are lost and a body politic created in which corporate powers speak incomparably louder than transient workers. Community life suffers further as resources are infused into capital rather than community and social services. Globalized economies shred the life-giving exchanges among citizens as well. The buying and selling of local goods is replaced by purchases at Wal-Mart. Finally, McDonalidization—the

development of a monoculture that delivers the values, music, and consumer desires of the dominant powers—undermines diversity with its healthy exchange of ideas and products (Barnet and Cavanagh, 1994; Berry, 1996; Blau, 1999; Chomsky, 1999; Danaher, 1996; Danaher and Burbach, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Korten, 1995; Mander and Goldsmith, 1996; Shailor, 1998).

Urban scholar Saskia Sassen (1998) offers an especially complex analysis of the forces of economic globalization and one that is central to our own work. She faults most contemporary representations of the global economy as emphasizing only the “technical and abstract economic dynamics and [proceeding] as if these dynamics are inevitably gender neutral” (p. 82). In contrast, she focuses on the role of women workers within the global economy. Central to Sassen’s analysis is the concept that global cities facilitate the transnational flow not only of capital but also of labor. She contends that the structure and processes of the global economy require both well-trained, well-paid professional and technical workers *and* an unlimited supply of low-wage service workers—that is, the janitors, housekeepers, and waitresses who make up a large percentage of those cities’ work force and are disproportionately women, immigrants and people of color. She identifies the transnational flow of labor, along with the internationalization of capital and the “unbundling” of the nation-state, as fundamental aspects of the global economy, and describes global cities as strategic sites for understanding women’s role within the global economy. In her words, they are “strategic instantiations of gendering . . . that make women visible and lead to greater presence and participation” (p. 82).

The Context: Nevada and the Gaming Industry

Economic globalization is most often associated with portable high-tech industries like electronics and clothing manufacture, and studied in locations like the US-Mexico border and in off-shore production sites like Saipan (Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Bonacich, Cheng, Chinchilla, Hamilton and Ong, 1994; Chang, 2000; Cravey, 1998; Faison, 1999; Fernandez-Kelly, 1982; Tiano, 1994; Ward, 1990). But globalization has a strong domestic

impact as well. It clearly drives the capital-rich tourist/entertainment industry in global destinations like Los Angeles whose images of sun and fun are marketed throughout the world and whose workforce is international in every sense (Geron, 1997).

Nevada's economic profile makes it a powerful research site for studying the impact of globalization. At first glance, Nevada and anything global appear an unlikely pairing. Nevada, after all, is famed for its monolithic industry—gaming, its unique policies relative to prostitution, and its incredible isolation. Millions of acres of sagebrush separate Nevadans from each other and the world. But as we studied the literature of globalization and compared it to what we knew of Nevada, we began to regard the state as, if not a global center, then a model for what economic globalization might look like in smaller U.S. cities.

Four characteristics of globalization stand out in Nevada as in other globalized sites:

1. The growth and dominance of megacorporations that direct enormous profit away from the communities that produced it and toward corporate empires;
2. A cheap and unlimited supply of maintenance workers, increasingly immigrants, women and people of color;
3. The decline of democratic political culture; and
4. The growth of social ills and a commensurate inability to address them.

First, control by megacorporations is central to the global economy, and in Nevada economic giants dominate the life of the state. Locally-owned casinos still exist, but for the last decade the big money has been in the hands of transnational corporations like Park Place Entertainment, MGM Mirage, Harrah's, and the Mandalay Resort Group (Young, 2000; Vogel, 1997; Eadington and Cornelius, 1997). There are 300 registered casinos in Nevada, but nearly 80% of statewide gambling profits are earned by the 20 largest casinos on the Las Vegas strip (Henry, 1999). Megacasinos bring in incredible amounts of cash for their corporate owners. Says one writer, "A casino hotel can net more money each week than a plain hotel of similar size might net in a year or even two. Hilton's four Nevada casinos bring in more than twice the

revenues of its 264 franchised hotels combined" (Vogel, 1997, p. 15). Business is booming for the gaming corporations. The total win (collected by Nevada casinos the amount casinos keep after paying all winners) in 2000 exceeded \$10 billion statewide. Stocks of the top three gaming corporations went up an average of 28% from June 1999 to June 2000.

Second, Nevada like other parts of the global economy is characterized by low-wage, no-benefits jobs (in 2000, 85.6% of the state's jobs could be found in the service industry) and a transient work force that includes many women, minorities, and immigrants. The booming casino economy attracts 4,000–6,000 workers to the state each month. This influx makes Nevada the fastest growing state in the union, and the one with the lowest percentage of native-born citizens (Christensen, 1995). The internationalization of the workforce is readily apparent—the Culinary Union estimates 50–80% of the workers in most Nevada casinos are Latino, many of them immigrants.

Third, Nevada's political life is massively impacted by the contradiction between corporate wealth on the one hand and an unempowered transient population on the other. The gaming industry represented by its lobbying arm, the Nevada Resort Association, dominates the state legislature. "Whatever gaming wants, gaming gets," observers say, noting that gaming has a "virtual lock on any tax decision" (Henry, 1999, p. 13). The gaming industry spends enormous sums in lobbying efforts to keep taxation rates low and regulations minimal. Nevada casinos are taxed at the lowest rate in the nation (6.25% compared to 9.25% in New Jersey, 19.5% in Michigan, and 25% in Connecticut). This income, combined with casino-generated sales tax revenue, provides 76% of the state's income (Henry, 1999). In contrast to the massive political presence of gaming interests, the transient workforce votes at the lowest rate in the nation.

Fourth, Nevada suffers from a wide spectrum of social and health ills that characterize other globalized economies (Mander and Goldsmith, 1996; Chang, 2000). For example, divorce rates are high and child abuse ranks second in the nation as do other rates of violence (Sammon, 1999). In substance abuse indicators, Nevada ranks first nationally for all ages in per capita alcohol consumption and fourth in alcohol related deaths. Nevada's legislature is

little inclined to spend state dollars addressing social ills, another parallel with globalized economies. The state ranks 43rd in state funds spent per resident on substance-abuse treatment and prevention and 49th in spending for child care (Christensen, 1995).

There are some crucial differences, however, between Nevada and other globalized work-sites. Las Vegas is the most highly unionized city in the nation, and the 50,000 member Culinary Workers Local 226 is a powerhouse. The history of organized labor in Las Vegas has been a colorful one, and in the early days, mob, entrepreneurial, and casino employee interests often intertwined. (For a long time, the Teamsters Pension Fund was the only place casino operators could go for money; Jimmy Hoffa made loans when banks refused to.) Those days are long gone, but undoubtedly are part of the reason for organized labor's anomalous strength in Las Vegas.

Culinary, like unions around the country, was shaken in the eighties by internal weaknesses, on the one hand, and the fierce assault on workers' right to organize and bargain collectively on the other. Determined to build a fighting and highly conscious local, leaders strengthened the Culinary Workers Health Fund, a benefit everyone was willing to fight for, and began organizing the increasingly immigrant work force—door-to-door. "One More Day" was the rallying cry of the six-year Frontier strike, a critical testing ground for the union. Rank and file workers, grown into experienced leaders, came away from the Frontier strike with a) the conviction that they could hold on " 'til victory," and b) the skills to make it happen. Today, Culinary's strength is credited for driving up casino workers' wages in Las Vegas to a level that allows many of its members to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle, including home ownership and the ability to send their children to college (Christensen, 1995; Miller, 2000; Marsten, 1995).

But while 48% of casino workers in the Las Vegas hotel-casino industry are organized, only 1.5% are organized in Reno. Culinary is working hard to change the Reno situation, and there are some early victories. Nevertheless, Reno's workforce currently looks very much like the unorganized, disempowered workforces characteristic of most global work sites. The sharp contrast in labor's Nevada presence provides analysts with a good ground on which to make assessments of union contributions to workers' wages

and benefits. Jeff Waddoups (1998), professor of economics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, compared casino wages in Las Vegas with those in Reno. Using the state wage survey conducted annually by the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation (NDETR), Waddoups concluded that among highly unionized job categories (for example, maids, baggage porters, and kitchen helpers) Las Vegas workers made 40% more than their counterparts in Reno.

The Study

Saskia Sassen (1998) in her analysis of women workers within the global economy recommends the application of a broad range of critical perspectives to gain understanding of the complexity of women's lived experience. She says of her own work: "[It] is a mere beginning—an analytical stage on which we need to place the details contributed by ethnographic research, cultural critiques, sociological surveys, and legal scholarship on men and women in their many specific conditions and subjectivities" (p. 83).

With this in mind, we designed a phenomenological study (Collaizzi, 1978) that, on the one hand, would produce richly detailed descriptions of the lives of women casino workers (i.e., their "specific conditions and subjectivities") and, on the other, would locate the women's lives within an analysis of economic globalization. In this respect, the study's purpose was both descriptive and analytical. It was also exploratory as women's casino work to our knowledge has not been previously studied, let alone analyzed in terms of its relationship to a larger economic context.

We gathered information in three phases. In the first phase, we interviewed 45 key informants with expertise, experience and/or information relevant to the study. They included current and former casino workers, social service providers, labor organizers, economists, community leaders, and personnel associated with a university-based gaming research institute. These preliminary discussions guided the development of the next two phases of data collection.

In the second phase we conducted focus groups of human service workers, educators, health care workers, and members of

the Latino community who had professional and/or community contact with women casino workers and their families. Focus group members were selected using a snowball sampling technique. We conducted five focus groups with a total of 28 members during this phase of data collection. Information gained from focus groups informed development of interview questions used in the final phase of data collection. Focus group members were also helpful in identifying potential participants for individual interviews.

In the final phase of data collection, still in progress, we conducted 2–4 hour semi-structured interviews with women currently employed in casinos. In interviews of non-English speaking workers, we used a bi-lingual interpreter. Referrals and a snowball sampling technique were used to recruit research participants. Interview questions were open-ended and focused on the women's work history, the nature of their work, and its effect on family and community. (See Table 1 for demographic information about interviewees.) The findings reported in this article are based on interviews with 20 women currently working in casinos. Final sample size will be determined by saturation of data, that is, interviews will be discontinued when no new themes emerge in the women's narratives (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Focus groups and individual interviews were audiotaped in their entirety and transcribed for analysis. Using methods based on grounded theory (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), transcripts from each were coded and their primary themes identified. These themes were then compared across both focus groups and individual interviews in order to identify universal and ideographic content. Identification and refinement of the final list of themes was achieved through a process of constant comparative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). They were then analyzed and interpreted in relationship to the three central research questions guiding the study.

The study's limitations include the possibility of a biased sample and the non-generalizability of its findings. The sample was both self-selected and relatively small, and focus groups members may have had contact with particular sub-populations of workers.

Table 1

Sample Demographics (N = 20)

Age	Range:	31–66
	Mean:	47
Ethnicity	Hispanic	12
	Caucasian	7
	Chinese	1
Immigrant Status	Immigrant	11
	Non-immigrant	9
Education Completed	Grade school	2
	Some High School	1
	High School	2
	Career School	1
	Some College	3
	College	6
	Some Graduate School	3
	NA	2
Marital Status	Married	3
	Divorced	11
	Single	3
	NA	3
Current Income	Range:	\$5,000–9,900 to \$25,000–29,900
	Mean:	\$20,000–24,999
Years Working in Casinos	Range:	1.5–31
	Mean:	15.2

Findings—The Women's Narratives

Women in the casino industry work as housekeepers, janitors, laborers, change persons, buspersons, cooks, hostesses, waitresses, dealers, room clerks, pit bosses, supervisors, secretaries, and once in a great while as middle managers. In this article, we focus on women in the low-end casino jobs: housekeepers, change persons, janitors, and restaurant hostesses. These are the women who make the beds, clean the bathrooms, vacuum, pick up the trash, provide change, and in general make the gaming industry

run. The jobs are low- or no-tip positions and pay little more than minimum wage in Reno's mostly non-unionized casinos. Nearly all of the women who occupy these positions are immigrants, and in Reno they are mainly Latinas.

Becoming a Maid

Women who came to work in Reno from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and border areas like El Paso brought with them grief, despair, hope, and incredible force of will. Maria Ortiz chose Nevada as most did because she knew someone who lived there.

I knew some people [in Reno from a] town [near my home] so I came here. When I came, the [couple] I start living with live in a very small apartment, so I have to sleep on the floor. (Tears) I don't want to remember. I didn't speak much English and I tried to go back. And the next year some of my colleagues were killed. Monsignor Romero got killed so I knew I couldn't go back.

When Maria applied to work in a casino, the only job she could get was cleaning rooms. This is the normal pattern, as a social worker who works with casino families explained:

If you're Latino, you can apply for maid, you can apply for dishwasher, those are the main jobs that you find. You can find [them] quickly. And if you speak some English, you can [be] . . . a change person, but that's not frequent.

For nearly all the women applying to be a casino maid was not a difficult decision; it was a matter of survival. Because of this most women were two-sided in assessing casino work, and though critical of conditions they encountered, were well aware that many families' livelihood depended on it. "I think casinos—well, they provide," is how one Latino focus group member summed it up. Continuing, he said:

Because the first thing we do when we move up here, [we find] a place that provides. And [casinos] do that on a quick basis . . . and no education required. It's just physical labor. . . . It's not as hard as the things that we're used to.

Many had worked at harder jobs, like those in the fields. Another focus group member, a social worker originally from El Salvador, seconded that assessment:

Compared to that back-breaking work, casino work is good. Like workers picking vegetables—sometimes they lose fingers and hands because of the machines. Compared to that kind of work, casino work is heaven. When these families come here, it is a big change for them. They actually have a home, they can live with their families, their kids can go to school—they're normal.

Even though casino jobs might be easier, cleaner and less dangerous than farm work, none of the workers we interviewed described their current work as "heaven." At best, they singled out certain aspects of their jobs as enjoyable (for example, working with other women). Still for many immigrant workers, casino work did represent a welcome opportunity. But in most cases workers considered it only the first step toward gaining economic security—it met immediate needs, but wasn't generally viewed as a long-term solution.

Work Conditions

Casino jobs, the women said, though easy to come by, were mostly hard, physical labor. If they were maids, they pushed heavy carts piled with laundry and were assigned 15 rooms to clean in an 8-hour shift. If they worked on the casino floor as change women, they wore heavy money belts and contended with the overwhelming noise and smoke. A family resource center director, who himself had worked in several casinos, noted:

It's grueling . . . and I've noticed that everything is regimented. Let's say, a dishwasher. It's relentless work for eight hours with two 15 minute breaks and a half hour lunch. And the general management style is punitive. Boy, imagine lugging dishes around all day or bussing tables all day. But in addition you've got the lack of psychological support.

Most women found casino work traumatic; as one said, "The managers think they own you." Corroborating the workers' perspective, a social work family therapist commented:

Women casino workers I work with are depressed, they hate the job. Only one enjoyed the job and [that was because of the] good health insurance. But it's rare. It's an oppressive environment the way they are treated by the employers and also belittled by consumers. Shift work's effect on family life is devastating.

Women often talked about the race and gender discrimination they encountered, carefully distinguishing its nature and whether it came from customers, employees, or management:

Yes, racial remarks are really there. You're not treated with a lot of respect. . . . Agua! Or Hurry up! They're not polite. [In our countries] we [are taught] to treat other people with a lot of respect. It makes it really hard for people working for the casinos. You're nothing, you're . . . a bus person. You're just here.

The most universal complaint, however, was with wages. Wages in Reno's non-unionized casinos are low and back-of-the-house workers begin at minimum wage. "It's absolutely amazing," a social worker observed, "families of five or six who live on \$700 a month." Although health care benefits are available and are cited as a great boon by women in higher categories of employment, many of these families can't afford them.

Listening to the women describe their work and its impact on families and community, we could not help but think of the term alienation. Their vivid and often heart-rending accounts of daily work life echoed classic Marxist descriptions of the alienation of workers and with it a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement.

Contributing to the women's sense of alienation was their feeling of invisibility and the lack of appreciation for a job well done. In addition, little respect was paid to the women themselves, either as workers or as persons. A hostess said:

Well, it's like you would do something nice or you're always on the ball, working hard, not even a thank you. I guess money for me is not a lot, but a thank you is a lot, because I know they're seeing my work. . . . I know I'm being appreciated.

Alienation in the workplace was exacerbated by the fact that the women felt insecure in their jobs and feared being fired for some minor infraction. Casino work is bounded by dozens of regulations and violation of any of them can lead to punishment or termination. This hyper-regulated work environment characterizes other globalized work sites, like off-shore production (Ward, 1990; Lim, 1980; Tiano, 1994; Faison, 1999). A sense of alienation also resulted from the fact that in Reno these women

found themselves in dead-end positions that offer little to their professional or personal development. Nor are they especially rewarding in terms of services offered or products produced. As one casino worker described it,

You're basically [working] in an industry that is taking money from people to make money for the owners. It has no redeeming qualities.

Health and Mental Health Issues

Women casino workers are chronically exhausted, particularly if they have families. Both the women and focus group members commented repeatedly that mothers with families "stay exhausted all the time." As one worker described it:

After they get out, they clean the house, they make the dinner for the husband and the kids, they take care of the kids, and after that they go into the laundry, they iron the clothes, and you can find this woman is still taking care of the house around 11 pm. I don't know what time they get to sleep. It's very amazing. These people are so strong. I feel very sorry for them, because . . . god!

There were also strained backs and sore feet from lifting wet laundry; knee problems from bending over beds to change them and over toilets and bathtubs to clean them; and skin, sinus, and lung problems from using caustic cleaning agents. Frequently, these work-related health problems went unreported. One woman explained, "Why risk losing your job?"

Casino work took its toll in terms of the psychological health of the women workers as well. Depression and despair were most often mentioned by focus group members. A director of a family resource center and a former casino worker himself told us:

[W]orking [in a casino] is an eye-opening experience because—sure I was a college kid—but there was a distinct separation between someone who was upward bound or moving forward and someone who was stagnating. And you could see—whether it's depression or just sadness—every time the work day would be over, I would say, "Thank god I don't have to do this the remainder of my life."

Drug, alcohol, and gambling addictions are a part of the casino environment, and workers as well as customers fall prey to them. A former cocktail waitress commented:

If you're working graveyard, trying to stay awake—you're taking some kind of speed. People who work swing-shift. . . they get drink tokes. So they party until two o'clock in the morning and then go home to the kids.

Different populations of workers experienced these problems in different ways. Young workers—waitresses, hostesses, dealers—were more likely to participate in after-work socializing which included drinking, using drugs, and gambling. In the housekeeping department, however, it was a different story. None of our focus group informants identified immigrant housekeepers as having drug and alcohol problems. As one noted: “Those moms in housekeeping—they’re tired [when they get off work]. They go home to their children.” On the other hand, men in low-paying jobs were described as vulnerable:

The men [say] that after getting off work they want to relax so they hang around their buddies and drink and that's how they get hooked. . . . Some were gambling their entire paychecks. They were afraid to go home because they had a wife and children. . . . But I've only noticed [this] among the men. The women, they either don't have that issue or they haven't said so, but I don't think it's a problem.

Strategies for Survival

Finally, although life was hard, we would be remiss if we did not communicate the strength of will of the women, their laughter, their strong attachment to family and friends, and their many strategies for survival. Global giants' power is great, but as Foucault writes, it is not hegemonic: “In the relations of power, there is necessarily the power of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance—of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation—there would be no relations of power” (quoted in Foote and Frank, 1999, p. 73). One worker commented in a similar vein on powerful institutions: “They touch you here, they touch you there, they touch you everywhere.” We were interested in how women workers resisted that touch and what their strategies for survival were.

First, the women were extraordinarily hard workers and in this way guaranteed their own and others' continued employment. “They know the Latina women, they work hard,” a former change person said, explaining why employers hired them.

Women helped each other out and repeatedly spoke with warmth and concern about their fellow workers:

I was with a group of women who really helped each other and it was really hard work and there was no way anybody would have been able to do it [alone].

They also carefully assessed when and how they could resist. While many women were fearful and kept their heads down, most felt keeping quiet was not always a good strategy. They criticized workers who “don’t realize that there are things they need to be aware of and they have a lot of rights.” As one young worker explained,

I got along with everybody and with the supervisors. I never felt intimidated by the supervisors. I never let them know I was afraid of them. Most of them like to know that they’re in charge, and I never let any of them know that. Yes, they were my supervisors, but they were not going to make me feel less.

We were surprised to find that everyone we spoke with thought favorably of unions. Reno is a strongly anti-union town, but these immigrant workers were aware of the considerably higher wages Las Vegas workers were earning and looked forward to working in union shops themselves. In this way they are representative of a new, more militant U.S. labor force built of women, minorities, and immigrants (Figueroa, 1998; Gordon, 2000; Tiano, 1994; Sassen, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). As one former casino worker commented:

I wasn’t working in [a union casino], but I’ve heard people talk. They say it’s better. . . . they say the union pays better so I think it’s a good idea.

Outside of work immigrant women struggled to find solutions to problems congruent with their deeply held values. Women spoke with pride of how the immigrant community maintained its cohesiveness:

Hispanics [may] live ten or twelve in the same house, but they have a house. They have a refrigerator. They have a stove. They cook. They buy their food together. They have a barbecue. They have fun—listen to music. They live like a family even if they’re not family.

Discussion: Economic globalization
and casino women's experience

Returning to the study's third question—do these women's work narratives provide an example of women's work within a global economy?—perhaps the best way to address this question is to examine the effects of an industry in which profits have become the sole measure of corporate success and workers are viewed as simply a means to that end. This was evident in the stories of both focus group members and the women workers. It helps explain workers' feeling of invisibility to management and their pervasive sense of being "stuck." Several veterans said apologetically that they never intended to stay in casino work, "it just happened." It accounts, too, for the alienation workers experience and the deep-seated depression and despair so often associated with their sense of having no future. It may also explain the rudeness and indifference so many customers show to workers. Why respect workers when it is obvious that management does not?

The casinos' philosophy, "profits over people," to use Noam Chomsky's (1999) apt phrase, is heightened by the growing multinational character of the gaming industry. Reno, formerly known for its locally-owned casinos, whose owners grew rich but also knew their employees, is now dominated by multinational corporations, familiar in name, but faceless in ownership. Instead of investing in the community, absentee owners distribute Nevada casino profits throughout the corporate empire. When they do sponsor community events they are usually designed for profit and public relations rather than community development. This lack of community leadership breeds cynicism, hopelessness, and individualism on the part of citizens who ask themselves, "why invest in a community in which political and corporate powers are only looking out for their own interests?"

Further, northern Nevada casinos' strong anti-union philosophy and their insistence on paying the lowest possible wages jeopardizes both families and local social service programs. Working people, including the job seekers who flow into the state in large numbers, have little or no margin of safety, and in crisis must depend on an overburdened social service system. It is

noteworthy that Reno with low unemployment has a very high utilization of social services (Nassir, 1994).

Sassen's (1998) contention that globalization enables women to have "presence if not power" raises an important question: are there work-related opportunities for women casino workers? Casinos, as our informants noted, do provide jobs. They also provide workers with a social life and contact with other women. Many women identified working with other women as the best part of their job. This camaraderie sometimes extended into their private lives and included cooperative living and childcare arrangements. In addition, casino work by providing women with paychecks contributed to their sense of agency, of being in charge of their own lives, and sometimes gave them the means to escape violent domestic relationships.

Nowhere is women's potential power more apparent than in unions. Immigrant workers are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. working class (Figueroa, 1998). They are building, in labor's language, a new union movement, led not by workers in heavy industry but by low wage service workers—principally minority, immigrant, and female. The experience of the Culinary Union in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the impressive victories of the Service Employees International Union in organizing California home health care workers, and the effective advocacy of immigrant worker centers all speak to the critical role of these workers in rebuilding the labor movement (Gordon, 1998; Figueroa, 1998; Geron, 1997). Although workers in Reno are on the whole unorganized, union activity is increasing and women are playing a central role in it. The president of Culinary Local 86, for example, is an immigrant, a grandmother, and an organizer of surpassing ability.

Conclusion

As feminists, activists, and social work educators, we hope this study investigating large economic processes through the lived experiences of working people sheds light on how women casino workers and their families and communities are affected by both local and global forces. We also hope that it can help strengthen the practice of the profession. We want it to serve

as an example of the value of linking "personal troubles with social issues" (Mills, 1959). We also feel that social workers, who combine front-line experience with social and economic analysis and commitment to change, are in an excellent position to influence public policy. We encourage the profession to join in the public and scholarly debates on globalization and to confront the inequities it has created.

Finally, we want to say that we're greatly inspired by the stories told to us by the women who participated in our study and gained a new appreciation—and indeed, fresh hope—of their and our own potential to bring about positive social change. Through their creative strategies of survival, their courageous resistance to oppressive conditions, their increasing investment in unions, they affirm Noam Chomsky's (1996) belief that human political activity can make the world we live in vastly more humane. In his words, ". . . If [we] act like there is no possibility of change for the better, [we] guarantee that there will be no change for the better" (p. 16).

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