

Inside the World of Latinas

For many Latinas, there is a double burden of racism and sexism. Times staff writers Virginia Escalante, Nancy Rivera and Victor Valle talked with these five women about their experiences, their family relationships, their lives and their concerns.



Cristina Ramirez, center, visits a Los Angeles factory

'The first time we leafleted, you should have seen the people . . . They didn't complain about money, they complained about the treatment.'

Cristina Ramirez

Cristina Ramirez is a 29-year-old organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in Los Angeles, wife of a Chicano lawyer and the mother of one child.

She draws strength from her mother, who raised eight children on her own in Ecuador, and her youthful days in a union hall where she heard Ecuadorean oil workers talk about their aspirations for a better life.

Today, as a union organizer in the garment industry, she sees firsthand the new roles that Latinas take on as they enter the work force. For Latinas who come to this country to escape economic and political oppression, the garment industry often gives them their first job, but in a world of work dominated by men.

To Ramirez this explains the exploitation they suffer—sexual harassment, low wages and forced overtime. Still, she believes that the future belongs to her union and the Latinas who continue to build it.

I was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and lived there till I was 16. I came to this country in 1971 and finished high school here. After that I started working in this garment factory as a (thread) trimmer. My older sister and my mother used to work there, too.

When I was working as a trimmer, I saw a lot, I suffered a lot. The first nine months that I was living in this country I cried every day. Because when I went to work, the guy that used to give the work out, he used to tell me that if I was good to him he would give me the best work. Like if I'd go out with him and stuff like that. It was sexual harassment and I was only 18 years old.

It was real common. Supervisors would get the men together, all the (pattern) cutters, like when they were going to hire a new girl. The men would give the OK to the supervisor if they liked her or not. If the girl who went to apply was good-looking, sure. If it was an old lady, a mature lady, they didn't give her the job.

(And) the way you work here . . . only a half-hour for lunch. Eating on top of your (trimming) machine. It was hard doing the same thing everyday, cutting threads, the same routine. You didn't have time to talk to anybody, not even a friend. I think it was \$1.65 an hour then. I was treated as an animal.

I would like to erase (those memories). But I see a lot of people still go through the same thing.

In 1975, Ramirez set out to organize Latinas working in a medical supplies plant. At first, she worked undercover, as an employee at the plant.

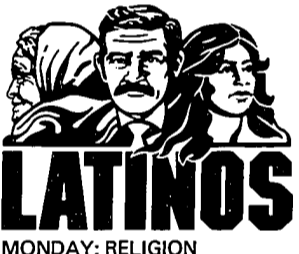
They put me in shipping, and it

was like a concentration camp. I haven't been in a concentration camp, but I think this will be the closest I can get.

So I go back and work all day on my feet in shipping, filling orders. You had to produce so much, a quota. If you didn't do it, you got a warning. I didn't get any; I was a good worker.

There were three men working and three women. The men were making 5 cents more. So I went to the office and I asked them how come they're making 5 cents more and I'm producing the same.

The minute I opened my mouth, there was a problem. They called the vice president, the president. I was there by myself. They were asking me, "Are you sure you do the



same thing?" I said, "Yes. Why are you paying them more? If you keep doing this, I'm going to file suit against you, that's discrimination."

One guy was going to threaten me. "Get rid of her." But the other guy was smarter. He told him, "Shut up, she might file charges." So the other guy said, "Tell her she's going to do the same work the men are doing; if she does that, we'll give her 5 cents more."

I said, "I'm already doing that." After that they really harassed me, and they didn't give me the 5 cents. They told me to go pick up heavy stuff. I had to climb the ladder. They put all the pressure on me, watching every single thing I was doing.

So after that I decided to quit and started organizing from the outside.

Ultimately, the workers joined the union and struck for nine months to win a contract. Ramirez believes the turning point came when a new supervisor was hired a few days after she quit.

People had been there so many years, and nobody had been able to organize them. But they changed supervisors. This lady, she wanted more production, faster, faster. . . . She called the workers *bestias* (beasts), stupid. She would go around the machines: "Can't you work faster? Are you stupid? You have to produce more!"

People started reacting to that because they were not used to that treatment.

Photos by Monica Almeida / Los Angeles Times

As soon as the supervisor started pushing them around, they called us. The first time we leafleted, you should (have) seen the reaction of the people trying to get the cards to sign. They needed a union to stop that woman, because they didn't complain about money, they complained about the treatment.

Cristina says the workers she organized often emerged from the experience more conscious of their rights as women, more willing to confront sexism at home.

After one union campaign, one woman said, "Thank you, because you made me see a lot of things I didn't see before."

"Why? How?" I said. "You're still the same person, you're still working in the same shop."

"Now, I don't keep my mouth shut for anybody. I'm not afraid of the police, of anybody. If they (the police or Immigration and Naturalization Service) stop me for something, I don't know why, but it's something that you taught me how to do, to respond to anything, to argue about anything."

"I'm even divorced now. And I thank you for that."

One time she had brought her husband over to my house. It was my husband, the woman and her husband having dinner. And there was this big discussion of (the woman's responsibility to take part in union activities). Her husband was stopping her from participating.

(I told him that) "something is wrong about this, because she has to participate, she's one of the strongest leaders. If she doesn't participate, everybody is going to get discouraged and nobody is going to show up on the picket line."

(He answered) "Well, yeah, but she has this responsibility (at home), plus I'm taking care of the kids more, and I have to go and play soccer." He couldn't play soccer because she wasn't in the house anymore. They had been married 11 years, they had two kids. They were from Mexico.

But they had all the problems, family problems for years. I think he was going out with other women.

But when she started developing, she started fighting, demanding more in every part of her life. When her husband went out with another woman again, she said, "This is it. I'm moving or you go out."

He begged her, you know. He even went to me to see if I could talk to her, that he was going to leave that woman and all that. But she never went back to him. She's taking English classes at the union now. She's really active in the union, she is still raising her kids. She's about 40, she wants to do something with her life.

Latinas, observes Ramirez, must remember they have the same rights as men.

The woman has to wake up in the morning, feed the kids, take them to the baby sitter, go to work, come back, pick up the kids, cook, serve the food, put the kids to bed, wash dishes, clean the house. And what does the man do? Wake up, go to work, come back, eat, watch TV, go to bed.

But I think that I have the same rights as a man. I'm not competing with men or women. I just think we are all the same, with the same rights. But sometimes we are faced with certain men who think we are not the same. So we have to educate those men. It takes a lot of guts. But you have to be ready to say, "I'm going to put a stop to this."

