

# Violence Against the Women of Juárez

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*Cet article nous parle de "fémicide" (femme criminelle) dans Ciudad Juarez où les modèles culturels de misogynie et de discrimination envers les femmes, où le désespoir et la haine face aux changements des lois du marché du travail et où la récente autonomie gagnée par les femmes ont créé des fractures sociales dans cette ville frontrière.*

*Este artículo presenta el 'femicidio' (homicidio de mujeres) en la ciudad fronteriza de Ciudad Juárez. Entre las causas de dicho femicidio predominan los patrones culturales de desprecio y discriminación contra las mujeres; la desesperación y el odio de los hombres hacia los cambios que ocurren en el mercado de trabajo; y las fracturas sociales por la reciente autonomía obtenida por las mujeres.*

Juarez is not synonymous with violence. It is a city that holds and embraces values of hospitality and creativity. It also has a strong moral compass, as well as many social organizations, especially for those sectors of society that are the most vulnerable, such as women who are victims of violence. The gravity of violence against the women of Juárez, in frequency and depth of cruelty, has created a negative public perception that affects this urban centre at the local and national level.

From 1993 to 2005 (according to official statistics) almost 400 women were murdered in Juárez. Between 2000 and 2006, two specific institutions were created to deal with the murders: The Commission on the City of Juárez and the Special Prosecutorial Department of the Republic, which has jurisdiction at the national level. Within this department, a section called "Investigating Violence Against Women and the Treatment of People" (FEVIMTRA) was established on January 31, 2008. These are federal institutions that collaborate in different ways with the City of Juárez in order to deal with problem of violence against women. As a result, since March 7, 2006, according to information available from local and national agencies, 177 accused individuals have been convicted.<sup>1</sup>

On the 18th of May, 2006, the special commission working on the murder of women published the results of a study performed in ten regions within the country. It states with clarity that the facts and statistics reported speak to the magnitude of the problem and the imperative for the Mexican government to take action. "Femicide" is a term coined by Jill Radford and Diana Russell, and which is used in Mexico by feminists, like Marcela Lagarde and Julia Monárrez, to describe the extent of violence against women in this region. This term relates to the homicide of women within a context of negligence, indolence, or complicity by the State. It is misogynistic murder tolerated by public institutions and society at large. This type of murder is not only committed by serial killers, but is also very common within the domestic and public spheres, where verbal, physical, and psychological abuse against women takes place for the sole reason of being women. It occurs in the home, as well as in the workplace, and within public spaces.

At least one-third of murders committed against women occur in the home and are perpetrated by family members such as husbands or close relatives. Another one-third occurs within a broader social context such as theft, assaults, and stray bullets in a border-city where violence between men is very frequent. Some murders of women are committed as retaliation in order to settle conflicts related to the drug traffic in this region. Juárez is situated along a route chosen by the drug cartels of South America in order to reach the U.S. It is the city with the second highest drug use in Mexico. The remaining one-third of homicides corresponds to what Dr. Julia Monárrez, feminist academic at the *Colegio de la Frontera Norte*, has referred to as "systemic sexual femicide." Prevention of this type of violence requires the involvement of the judicial system. At the same time, there is a need to focus on the socio-economic, cultural, and educational causes. Some of these causes involve cultural patterns of misogyny and discrimination against women; desperation and hate by



*Campaña Juárez*

men towards the changes in the labour market that has taken away the ability to be the sole provider in the home; and the recent autonomy gained by women within a city that perpetuates inequalities which continue to create social fractures in this border city. It is necessary to take into account the implications that the new model of economic development such as the *maquiladoras*, which propagates internal migration, and for decades have employed a disproportionately high number of women. This is where there is a higher level of impunity since it is possible for aggression against women to occur as a result of delinquency, organized or not; sexual exploitation of minors, forced prostitution, and others forms of violence.

The most emblematic murders in Juárez are the ones that occurred in *Campo Algodonero* and at the *Cerro del Cristo Negro*. In *Campo Algodonero*, eight women were found murdered in the span of one week in November 2001. These murders remain unsolved due to the “fabrications” of the alleged perpetrators, which include Víctor García Uribe and Gustavo González Meza. González Meza died on the operating table inside a prison in the state of Chihuahua with no apparent cause of death. Víctor García Uribe, the sole survivor of those charged with the murders, was released following a second trial as the Supreme Court of the state of Chihuahua could not find reasonable grounds on which to convict him. Moreover, the state was suspicious of his guilty confession, which was made under the duress of torture. Currently, the Justice Department in the state of Chihuahua is continuing its investigation in order to determine who is responsible for

the murders. The victims of the *Campo Algodonero* case were identified as eight particular women; however, several years later, following work performed by a forensics team from Argentina (invited to Juárez and Chihuahua by the Commission in charge, as well as human rights organizations), it was determined that the identities assigned to the bodies did not match. In fact, instead of the eight original victims, it was discovered that eleven women had been disposed of in this area. Three of these cases are under investigation by the Commission in charge, as well as by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This has obliged the Mexican government to assist and comply with the resolution that the Court decides upon. In the meantime, there are different sources of support for the families of the victims even though this will not suffice until truth and justice have been served. In the second case, six bodies were found between 2002 and the beginning of 2003 in *Cerro del Cristo Negro*. These murders also remains unresolved. Unlike *Campo Algodonero*, *Cerro del Cristo Negro* is situated outside the City of Juárez.

There are other cases that follow similar patterns, and can also be seen as “systemic sexual femicide” as these crimes do not correspond to other forms of violence against women, such as domestic violence for example. There can be a number of explanations: the presence of organized crime; narcotics trafficking; gang initiations; murders committed to seal pacts of silence between men in different gangs, often with the compliance of state agents (which would also explain why these cases remain unsolved).

During 2003, the Federal Attorney General’s Office con-

ducted an inquiry to find out if these murders were related to organ trafficking; however, this hypothesis could not be proved. Following this inquiry, the records were returned to the state of Chihuahua by then-deputy chief of Human Rights and Victims Services Mario Álvarez Ledezma. To date, the FEVIMTRA has not conducted an investigation regarding the murders of the women in Juárez. FEVIMTRA does, however, keep an office at the border; collaborates with local authorities in the search and rescue of women and girls that have disappeared; offers assistance to victims' families (families of victims of murder or other forms of

information throughout Mexico in order to recognize the problem and the dimension of violence towards women, its distinctive causes, as well as forms of prevention.

From 2003 to 2006, this Commission coordinated a series of federal and local efforts within the City of Juárez. It promoted respect for families of the victims; it pushed for, with the backing of the State, the implementation of human rights recommendations by witnesses and experts; and it recognized the contribution by the civil society. New authorities incorporated a culture that gives a voice to social organizations, far away from the harassment imposed by

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gender-related violence); carries out preventive measures to assure the safety of threatened women; and provides technical assistance to local authorities. The central focus of FEVIMTRA is to implement prevention measures, and eradicate and censure gender-related violence through the coordination of strategies between different judicial agencies within the federal government.

Has the contribution of the Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women in the City of Juárez, or the Commission for Juárez's response to the August 2005 second *Informes de gestión (Report on Management)*, been fruitful? A proposal detailing strategies to eradicate femicides, arising from the experiences gained in this border city,<sup>2</sup> helped raise awareness throughout Mexico of this form of sexist violence, and of the rights of women, including women's right of women to live a life free from violence. It is necessary, however, to develop gendered indicators within the country's federal agencies (one of the agreements of the 1995 Beijing conference on Women was to develop these kinds of statistics) and to analyze the different causes of gender-related violence in order to respond with public policies of prevention and eradication. Moreover, since the Mexican State in all spheres of government has taken part in the omissions, negligence, and compliance of these homicides, it needs to take responsibility within the international community seriously, for example, within conventions on the Human Rights of Women, the CEDAW, and Belem do Pará.

The Commission to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women in the City of Juárez, and the Commission for Juárez began as federal institutions within the Department of Governmental Affairs. Their main duties within the City of Juárez have been to serve truth and justice, to develop a social dialogue, as well as to aid the victims.<sup>3</sup> They have contributed to the dissemination of

the state of Chihuahua in previous times.<sup>4</sup>

Gender-related violence, a result of the inequalities between the armed forces and women and men in the private and public spheres, is above all a human rights and social justice issue. Gender-related violence is a human rights issue because it touches the lives of women in every sphere and prevents them from exercising their other civil liberties. Profound social inequalities continue to exist in everyday life within Juárez; poverty and exclusion have a visible relation with the vulnerable state that women are placed in, not because they are the causes of violence, but because, within a context of poverty, it is difficult for victims to have access to measures of protection.

How has the Mexican government respond? What advancements have been made? What needs to be done?

Mexico is a Federal Republic. The femicides in Juárez must be investigated by the authorities of the state of Chihuahua. However, Mexico, as a signatory country of international human rights conventions, needs to adopt the resolutions that came out of such conventions. It is obligated to intervene with an immediate response to the serious and systematic violence against the rights of women in Juárez; to provide access to justice in every step of the investigation and to impose sanctions on those responsible; to make amends for damages; to adopt measures that stop, and prevent, these crimes; and to know, and reveal, the truth.

The Commission on Juárez has recognized the great value that social organizations bring, especially, the Council of Citizens for Social Development (*Consejo Ciudadano por el Desarrollo Social*), which is a member of the Round-Table on Women that works with women and minors in situations where they find themselves vulnerable. It is also a member of the Movement for a Social Pact on Culture (*Movimiento Pacto por la Cultura*), a citizens' initiative that,

for example, has produced the first of a series of classical music concerts composed by youth and children from marginalized communities. The purpose of this concert series is to help stop violence in different neighborhoods, as has been done in the cities of Caracas and Bogota, where similar programs have been implemented. This series of concerts is possible thanks to the efforts of private citizens and federal and local institutions.

“One cannot do anything alone” says Laura Bonaparte, a member of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires. Working with other organizations and institutions helps initiatives succeed.

Today the Argentinean Anthropological Forensics Team is in Juárez and Chihuahua, and the creation of a special prosecutorial department with a high public profile (EAAF) has been able to identify many of the bodies of women that could not be identified before. This humanitarian work is in its final phase of work within Juárez and Chihuahua.

### **Analysis of Gender-Based Violence and Citizen Safety in Juárez, Chihuahua**

A study of gender-based violence and citizen safety in Juárez was conducted by the Commission on Juárez and the *Colegio de la Frontera Norte* (COLEF), with the collaboration of the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information Technology (INEGI). It is ready for dissemination<sup>5</sup>; it will be published as part of a Social Action Plan coordinated by Clara Jusidman. The funding for this project was made available by the National Institute of Social Development (Indesol). Another study has been sponsored by the National Institute on Women along with the *Colegio de la Frontera Norte* (COLEF).

#### **Prevention Strategies**

- A preliminary study of legislative reform within the State of Chihuahua to incorporate resolutions from the human rights conventions on women and girls (especially from the CEDAW and Belém do Pará) was completed and handed over to the state legislature in October 2005 with the support of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) and the Special Commission of the Mexican Senate.
- A dialogue has begun with civil society in order to support its participation, along with Indesol and Habitat, programs from the Department of Social Development. Also, the presence of the Department of Social Development's program *Oportunidades*, which helps women that are heads of households living in poverty, has been increased. Moreover, 36 families received aid in the form of \$150,000 each with the help of Sedesol via an application made to the President of Mexico.
- A network of public institutions was created within all spheres of the government in order to help victims.

This allowed for the creation of prevention programs in schools, and in private and public hospitals, as well as the development of campaigns in to denunciate and raise awareness of domestic violence.

- Civil servants and members of civil organizations met with female personnel from the *maquiladoras* to raise awareness of human rights.
- Coordination between different law enforcement agencies and public institutions enabled the development of a protocol that demands immediate reaction to the search and rescue of disappeared, lost or missing women and girls. Much of the training was carried out by the *Carabineros* (Chile's police force), who have positive experiences in this kind of work.
- The construction of the hydro-electrical power plant in *Acequia del Pueblo*, which covers 6.5 kilometres<sup>2</sup> (with investment from the Federation, the State, and local authorities), will serve as a memorial for the victims, and a recreational park that will benefit almost 70,000 residents.

The Commission for Juárez has focused on:

- Strengthening the rights of women. This means improving the institutional responses not only at the federal, but also at the local level since they both share the responsibility when it comes to gender-based violence.
- Reparation of the damage that has been done through truth and justice commissions.
- A vision that uses the law to penalize, and also to attend to structural violence against women.
- Achieving (and learning from the experiences in Juárez) a pact with the all levels of the Mexican Government, civil society, and Mexican women.<sup>6</sup>

These programs are associated with the work of the National Institute of Women during the past 20 years, and founded by the feminist movement in this country. Different academic actors such as the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM), and *El Colegio de México* have all contributed to fostering generations of experts in gender theories under the guidance of professors such as Graciela Hierro, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, Laura Salinas Beristáin, Olga Bustos, Graciela Gutiérrez, Martha Torres, María Elena Gutiérrez de Velasco, amongst others. In addition many others have contributed toward raising awareness of gender-based violence, such as members of civil society, public institutions involved in social development, women's institutes that are too many to mention, and all must be acknowledged and recognized for their commitment to eradicating violence against women, making the Mexican government accountable for sanctions against perpetrators, and the development of effective prevention measures.

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<sup>1</sup>This data had changed with the work of Attorney General's office in the Estado de Chihuahua. By November 2006, around 70 more penal processes were concluding with convictions, in addition to those already sentenced, and several others archived because the perpetrators committed suicide. Despite the intensity of the investigations, impunity continues in several cases.

<sup>2</sup>In November of the same year, the Commission presented a third Report on Management. See <[www.comisioncd-juarez.gob.mx](http://www.comisioncd-juarez.gob.mx)>.

<sup>3</sup>María Guadalupe Morfín Otero left the Commission in 2006. In 2008, Sofia Castro was nominated *Comisionada*.

<sup>4</sup>With a different profile, the Commission has worked without interruption.

<sup>5</sup>The study was presented to the highest levels of government. It was disseminated in academia, and among civil society organizations. Additionally, INEGI elaborated an IRIS system with satellite cartographic information on the femicide, which was distributed among *Secretario de Gobernación*, the *Gobernador del Estado de Chihuahua* and the Mayor of the *Municipio de Juárez*.

<sup>6</sup>Many of the actions announced in the 2006 concluded; others are ongoing and can be consulted at: <[www.comisioncdjuarez.gob.mx](http://www.comisioncdjuarez.gob.mx)>. It needs to be clarified that as a result of the ongoing narco-war in Mexico, generalized violence in the northern border and particularly in the City of Juárez has increased to the point that the zone has become militarized.

## References

Radbord, Jill and Diane E. H. Russell, eds. *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992.

## ITZELA SOSA

### Days

Days like a necklace of grey pearls  
that stretch leaving marks and signs on the  
body.

Days of two faces  
where one is the world and nobody at the  
same time.

Nothing there  
no judgement  
no prayer  
accompanies the void  
the multitude that guards this reflection.

Days walled by mystery  
and death ripens in every corner  
in each contraction and redoubling  
as in a fish recently slumbering.

Days in which there is no one offering up a  
surprise  
the desertion  
the coldness of the watch  
days in which chaos resounds and explodes  
in the  
mirror.

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