Juarez Femicides: Causes, Challenges, and the Hope for Change

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Introduction

Over the past two decades northern Mexico and the city of Juarez in particular have come under international scrutiny over human rights abuses against women. During this time hundreds of Juarense women have been found murdered on the city's outskirts leading one writer to call the large number of unabated murders "femicide" (Russel & Harmes qtd in Mueller et al 127). Many of the cases remain unsolved (Kahn). This paper is motivated by the story of Lilia Alejandra Garcia Andrade and countless stories like hers,

> *Lilia Alejandra Garcia Andrade was last seen at 7:30PM on February 14, 2001, by her coworkers as she worked in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The seventeen-year-old mother of two crossed this same unlit, empty field every day to catch a bus home after work. That night she never arrived. Her mother reported her missing the next day. Her physically and sexually assaulted body was found in the lot one week later; she had been strangled to death. Those responsible for Lilia's death have not been arrested. (Volk & Schlotterbeck 121)*

Lilia's story is heart-breaking, but perhaps more heart-breaking is the fact that hundreds women in northern Mexico have lived through a similar story. Since 1993 more than 600 women, most of them young, have been murdered—with at minimum a third showing signs of sexual assault (Morales & Bejarano 421; Amnesty International). Lilia's story is a symptom of a larger issue in northern Mexico; it reveals a culture where violence against women is a norm.

This raises several questions. What has made and continues to make this type of violence possible? When did it begin? Who are the perpetuators of this violence? Equally important, is this the only form of violence women face in Ciudad Juarez? To answer these questions, and to open the potential for effective, transformative action, I will examine local understandings of gender and sexuality in Ciudad Juarez, and analyze some of Mexico's economic history. In so doing, I argue the emergence of particular economic policies contributed to a population size too large for Juarez government to manage. Furthermore, I suggest that the maquiladoras industry's employment of women over men challenged a gender ideology binary of women as private and men as public in Mexico. The ideology constructs a narrative of 'public women' as sexualized bodies and consequently lays blame on women for being in public. I suggest the combination of particular economic policies, the maquiladora industry, and a particular gender ideology has been key building blocks in enabling Juarez's femicide problem.

This paper will consist of three key sections. The first section will discuss the role of geography and economic policies in Mexico's development as a nation and how it has shaped Juarez's femicide problem. The following section will discuss local understandings of gender roles. Particular attention will be given to how these power structures have challenged gender roles in northern Mexico. Thirdly, an examination of responses by popular culture and antifemicide groups will take place. Attention will be given to the challenges faced and posed by these groups. This will be followed by a brief foray into some worthwhile responses and concluding thoughts.

Prior to moving into the bulk of this paper some definitions must be offered. Galtung defines violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is" (167). That is, violence takes place when what should be the mental and physical experience

for a human being is not the reality. Gender violence is the "physical and psychological harm that is inflicted on individuals on the basis of their gender or sexual orientation" (Corona & Dominguez-Ruvalcaba 4).

The Building Blocks to Femicide in Ciudad Juarez

Northern Mexico's femicide problem must be understood as part of a broader historical trend related to Mexico's attempt to develop economically. These efforts to development have had unintended consequences for which the city of Juarez was ill prepared.

Mexico does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it exists in a field of international relations where the country is both influenced and an influencer. For this reason acknowledging Mexico's relationship and geographic proximity to the U.S. is prudent. The following economic policies were created in partnership with the U.S. and will be discussed.

The Maquiladoras and the role of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) are fairly recent economic initiatives that has provided a consistent flow of people moving towards northern Mexico for work. While Mexico has been part of NAFTA since the early 1990s, Mexico and the U.S. had held an economic relationship for many years prior. The first agreement to control the movement of cheap labour from Mexico to the U.S. was the Bracero Program, which lasted from 1942 and 1964 (Vogel 4). It regulated the flow of Mexican migrant workers to the U.S. and served to offset the loss of workers drafted for World War II. When it ended hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers were expelled from the U.S., creating a massive pool of unemployed workers on the Mexican side of the border (Morales et al 8). The unemployed totaled 185,000 (8). Soon after this President Diaz Ortiz, influenced by U.S. "dollar diplomacy," enacted the Border Industrialization Program. The program was meant in part to address the problem of unemployment along northern Mexico's border. It established the beginnings of the Maquiladora system in northern Mexico which provided cheap labour for much of the U.S.'s manufacturing industry (Vogel, 6; Morales et al, 6). Overtime, the program would evolve and expand into NAFTA in the 1990s. As a result of NAFTA, the number of maquiladoras and jobs located rose dramatically and, consequently, so did Juarez's population (MacArthur, 2001).

However, before NAFTA could influence the economic structures of Mexico, the global economic crisis of the 1970s caused Mexico to default on its national debt, which led international bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) to step in to assist Mexico. In partnership with the WB and IMF, the U.S. government agreed to take on Mexico's debt in exchange for adopting the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The SAP centered on liberalizing markets, privatizing land and other public resources, and cut backs on social spending. The implementation of the IMF's SAP, and the subsequent implementation of NAFTA, have had dire effects on Mexico's development and economy. Julie Erfani notes,

> Instead of shrinking illicit commerce, the regional integration of Mexico and Spain into global markets has accelerated the rise of smuggling, trafficking, intellectual piracy, counterfeiting, money laundering, official corruption, and organized crime. (71)

The unintended consequences created through the implementation of NAFTAs policy went beyond exacerbating societal problems. As will be discussed later, these policies also served to reinforce asymmetrical power relations between Mexico and the U.S. whereby the U.S. had a greater say in how economic policies between the two would look. Equally noteworthy in this discussion, the Bracero program, BIP, and the implementation of the IMF's SAP were central to creating a steady supply of workers in Juarez.

Examining these respective programs lays a foundation for understanding the presence of workers in Juarez. However, the implementation of NAFTA saw a significant change in the region and complicated things further. NAFTA was touted by local politicians as key to Mexico's economic development and nation-building (Ortiz, 159). It was predicated on regional economic integration and it provided the United States and Canada with access to a ready supply of cheap laborers in a country with fewer environmental and labor regulations. This fit well within the capitalist logic of maximizing a firm's profit.

Between 1987 and 2000 nearly 4,000 maquiladoras were built and about one million jobs were created (MacArthur, 2001). Despite the creation of new employment opportunities through the maquiladoras many men did not find work right away; rather women were seen as the primary source of labor. Indeed, Volk and Schlotterbeck note "maquila-based growth was predicated on a highly gendered economic formula that cast women as...producers charged with bringing modernity to Mexico through their labor..." (127). The characteristics of an ideal maquiladora worker did not correspond with "male" characteristics; instead employers desired workers who were "docile, undemanding, nimble-fingered, nonunion and nonmilitant" (Sklair 172). That is, characteristics that were seen as predominantly "female". Thus, many women emerged as breadwinners for their families in a society where men were supposed to be the breadwinners.

Furthermore, many people were unable to find employment and this high supply of labourers ready to replace previous workers kept wages low. Indeed, Wright notes, the maquiladoras depended on "low-waged women workers, who live[d] in impoverished neighborhoods that lack many basic services, such as drainage, potable water and electricity" (Wright, 285). This is part of what Morales et al note meant when they write, "maquiladoras generate risks that Mexican cities like Juarez are ill-equipped to deal with" (8). The maquiladoras attract more potential labourers and consequently lead a city to grow in population. In Juarez's case, the population grew at a rate that its government could not keep up with.

On top of this, the hiring of women over men produced the conditions for gendered violence. Volk and Schlotterbeck explain,

> . . .[T]he replacement of male with female workers challenged existing patriarchal structures and generated a deep well of male resentment and female vulnerability. In fact maquiladora industrialization ultimately created a gendered and racialized political economy and shaped the city's geography in ways that facilitated, absorbed, and perhaps, promoted femicide. (127)

While it may be a 'stretch' to suggest that maquiladora industrialization promoted femicide, it has certainly been a building block contributing the issue of gendered violence in Juarez. Acknowledging the historical development of industrialization in northern Mexico and the dominant economic logic guiding these processes provides some context and understanding for Juarez's societal woes. This still however does not explain what has allowed this form of violence to continue. How is it that so many women have been murdered?

Part of this can be explained by the Mexican government's justice system, which has failed to adequately find an end to these murders. Journalist Diana Washington Valdez states, "not one of the true murderers [involved in] this long decade of serial sex crimes has been jailed" (qtd in Volk and Schlotterbeck 121). Valdez says 'true murderers' because there have been men who have been arrested, but questions remain as to the veracity of the charges and evidence provided for the arrests (Balli). Celia Balli notes that despite the arrests the "murders continue unabated" (Balli). In the face of little government action to prevent and punish this violence, perpetrators have freedom to act with little fear of the consequences of their actions. The Mexican government has certainly played a role in this issue, however to place the sole blame on it is simplistic. A government is of course made up of people with views on gender roles. These views manifest themselves in policy making and public discourse. Therefore, questions pertaining to the nature of Juarez's patriarchal structure and what the

dominant gender ideology found in Juarez must be pursued.

Gender Ideology in northern Mexico

When it comes to gender ideology French and Bliss are apt to note, "Femininity and masculinity must be understood as relational categories, that is as categories that are constructed at the same time and in relation to each other…" (10). Mexican author Octavio Paz offers an informative perspective. His description of Mexican national character is summarized as the following,

> . . .[Mexican men are seen] as false, egoistic, and violent, and the ideal manliness as never to "crack," never to back down, and never to open oneself—neither in a literal or in a figurative sense. Woman is perceived as inferior to man precisely because she is open—or opened. Life is seen as a battle, and stoicism is a central virtue. A man should face dangers and pain with indifference. Life is to hurt, punish, and offend—or to be hurt, punished, or offended. Society is composed of the strong and the weak—the strong are the "*chingones*." This leads men to feel contempt for women, but also for femininity in men. The origins lie…in the colonial history—in the conquistadors' rape of Indian women, and in the more symbolic rape of Indian civilization. The Mexican complex is to be sons and daughters of the violent man and the raped woman. (qtd in Prieur 220)

From this summary certain gender binaries such as violent/passive and strong/weak arise. It is clear that power rests, literally and figuratively, in the hands of men. While Paz's description divulges some important information regarding gender identities in Mexico, there is one that has been left out: the binary of public/private. To understand how gendered binaries operate within Mexico, I will describe two cases of 'public women' in Mexico. First, I will explore the case of the suffrage movement during the first half of the 20th Century in Mexico. Second, I will analyze in greater depth contemporary anti-femicide protests in Juarez. Together these examples situate the anti-femicide group's struggles within the broader historical processes involved in Mexico.

In the mid 1930s women such as Communist Party militant Choncha Michel pushed for greater rights to be afforded to Mexican women. Women saw a victory in 1937 when President Lazaro Cardenas had Congress change the Mexican constitution to grant women the right to vote and to run in an election (Olcott 2). Despite this victory, women faced resistance and concern over this empowerment and would not vote in a federal election until 1958 (2). Olcott notes, men on both sides of the "woman question" struggled to see how "women" and "politics" could be practiced without creating social ills (4). That is, there was a concern over "whether women would redefine Mexican politics or political involvement would alter women's nature" (4). Would women feminize politics, or would their involvement masculinize them? These concerns highlight the logic inherent in this discourse. If men inhabited the realm of "politics" then women would have to inhabit the private realm. Women entering the public realm of "politics" challenged the gendered norms of the time. It simultaneously threatened the idea of male masculinity and threatened to masculinize women. The idea of what it meant to be a woman in Mexico centered on notions of "self-sacrifice, modesty, piety, and domesticity" (46). This description fits as the appropriate binary to Octavio Paz's description of Mexican men. In summary, Mexican women were expected to be women of "piety and domesticity" (46). Their predominant place of importance was found in the private realm of the family. To step outside of these norms by entering the public realm would put a woman at risk of being perceived as morally 'loose,' abandoning her family, and perhaps even a "public woman". That is, a prostitute. As a result of these binaries women find themselves in a system of relations where men and women share an unequal amount of power; men rest on the highest rung of power and women find themselves on a significantly lower rung. Examining Mexico's suffrage movement provides a helpful background for the problems anti-femicide protestors have faced in Juarez.

The shift in the maquiladora industry to hiring young women instead of men significantly challenged the gender narrative of public/private. For example, Balli notes, "In many cases, because unemployment rates for men were higher, women even took on the role of breadwinner in their families." For many of these women, who had come from rural parts of Mexico, employment in Juarez also afforded them a new found independence from family and relational ties. They could go shopping or dancing at a local club (Balli). But this freedom came at a social cost for the women of Juarez. Melissa Wright notes that during the U.S. prohibition, the city was famous for the "women in its public streets, squares, and markets, who sold sex as 'public women'" (Wright, Necropolitics 713). Then in the early 1970s, the continuous flow of people in search of work saw the consolidation of "two prosperous urban economies," one being the sex industry and other being the maquiladora industry (Wright, From Protests 373). Thus, women who went out in public to get to work (as all people had to) inherited a sexualized label of the 'public woman' in Juarez. Building on the work of Tabuenca Córdoba and Nathan, Melissa Wright explains,

> The public association of *obrera* (worker) with *ramera* (whore) was something that factory workers faced constantly, as women who walked the streets on their way to work and women who walked the streets as part of their work added to the city's fame as a city of public women (see e.g. Nathan 2002). Often portrayed as evidence of the social disintegration of the Mexican family, factory workers were the very people responsible for Mexico's reputation as a hub of global manufacturing (Tabuenca Córdoba, 1995-96). (cited in Necropolitics 713)

This explanation serves to provide an understanding for how and why local government officials have been able to justify the lack of justice or action taken to address the Juarez femicides. Under this logic it is the fault of the women themselves for transgressing the societal norms so vital to maintaining the healthy society. Sadly but not surprisingly blaming and shaming the very women who are in the most precarious of situations becomes the dominant narrative.

It should be noted the Juarez femicides have not been perpetuated solely by men who were strangers to the women. Indeed, Luevano notes "two-thirds of the Juárez-Chihuahua femicides are a result of domestic violence" (74). Brickman's suggestion that acts of violence are "Social statements [which] embody central themes and tensions of the civilization" is fitting in this situation given the fact that these public women have challenged themes central to Mexican gender ideals (16).

A reflection on the responses to femicide in popular culture and feminist rights groups can also provide a venue of a fuller understanding of the gendered ideals of men and women in Juarez.

Responses to Femicides in Popular Culture and "Antifemicide" Groups

Dying Slowly and Desert Blood - Different Perspectives on the Same Issue:

Writer and photographer Julián Cardona is an observer who has taken note of the Juarez Femicides, publishing a powerful photo essay titled, "Morir despacio: Una Mirada dentro de las plantas maquiladoras en la frontera de los Estados Unidos/México" (translated as Dying Slowly: A look inside the maquiladoras on the U.S.-Mexico Border). Through his photo essay Cardona analyzes the lives of women working in the maquiladora industry and their lives are formed on assembly lines (Volk & Schlotterbeck 132). It begins with an image titled, "A Young Girl at Work," and it depicts a very young woman looking upward while working at her station (132). The photo essay ends with another picture of a much younger woman than the first photo; in it her back is turned to the camera while standing next to an empty chair. This picture is titled, "A Young Girl and Her Future" (132). Using these pictures with their titles and subtitles, Cardona argues that these young women "give their lives," to make a "*world class product*" (qtd in Volk & Schlotterbeck 132). Another argument made by Cardona can be found it the second photo of the essay. It shows women putting on make-up in their

preparation of the maquiladora's annual beauty pageant. However, Volk and Schlotterbeck are apt to note that the argument can only be seen in the Spanish title of the photo titled, "Trabajadores se visten y maquillan para participar en el concurso de belleza Señorita RCA". They state, "In Spanish, '*maquillar*' is to put on makeup. Yet, to the extent that Cardona's essay is about maquila's it is hard to avoid his subtle argument that, while female workers are assembling '*world class products*,' they themselves are being made, reassembled" (135). Cardona's intention is to highlight the inherent problems of the maquiladora industry and their ties to femicide in Juarez. To this extent he is effective, but in his attempt to represent these women as innocent he reinforces notions of female docility, which has been central to the maquiladora industry operations (136; Sklair, 172). It also serves to reinforce the Mexican-Catholic binary of whore/virgin (136). In sum, Cardona rightly condemns the role the maquiladoras have played in the femicides, but he fails to condemn the gendered norms that serve to perpetuate the very violence he seeks to condemn. In an effort to challenge these traditional binaries Alicia Gaspar de Alba published her novel titled, "Desert Blood".

She is among a number of artists, be they poets, visual artists, songwriters or singers, or documentary filmmakers who seek to challenge the masculinist interpretations of the Juarez femicides (144). She writes a story of a woman named Ivon Villa who becomes a detective in El Paso after someone close to her is kidnapped and murdered and shortly after has her teenage sister kidnapped as well. Her critique of the Juarez femicides center around the question, "who was allowing these crimes to happen?" (qtd in Volk & Schlotterbeck 145). Throughout the story, rather than portraying the common masculinist virgin/whore dichotomy, she writes of women who are strong and resistant (146). These women, however, are not perfect; they are prone to making mistakes, and at times they are foolish (146). A key theme of de Alba's novel is the agency the female characters practice in the face of threats to their lives. To this extent, de Alba complicates the notion of what it means to be a woman in Juarez, and in doing so she humanizes them.

Antifemicide Protests:

While these artists have brought attention to the Juarez femicides through their respective forms of art, others have sought to do so using a different form of expression: protests. Between 1995 and 2005, Wright notes that Juarez and Chihuahua City were well known for their "antifemicide" protests led by women (Wright, Femicide 212). The movement, among other things, has sought to place pressure on Mexican politicians to pursue justice against the femicides. The movement, a coalition of various organizations, has not gone without its own issues. Wright notes activists face threats and harassment for their work (213). Furthermore, the movement has had to deal with "political disagreements and competition of resources" challenging the coalition's unity (213). However, signs of division are not synonymous with failure; rather they are "part of the on going materialization of social movements" (213). That is, movement is in "constant transformation" (Rojas qtd in Femicide 213). Acknowledging it as such points to the dynamic nature of social movements.

Despite the apparent trend towards conflict among these organizations, some groups have been able to work together to mount pressure on Mexican politicians. Melissa Wright manages to focus on one group called the *Mujeres de Negro* who "succeeded in pulling together a wide and diverse coalition of groups" (Wright, Paradoxes 278). However, in the face of a united stance the group is unable to escape the local discourse regarding public women. At the core of the protestors movement lays a paradox. By stepping out into public to protest for greater justice they are ignored by those politicians because their public presence makes them "public women," and thereby illegitimate. The issue of legitimacy is a key challenge the *Mujeres de Negro* face. Thus, in order to legitimize their public presence the coalition casts itself as mothers looking for their missing daughters. In other words, they cast themselves as private women who come out publicly only because they are doing what a good mother should do. In doing so,

the coalition reinforces the narrative of women's domain existing in the private realm and not the public.

This strategy is not accidental. It has come about as a response to the local government's blaming strategy. On this Wright explains,

> [The] 'blame the victim' strategy is a transparent effort on the part of regional elites and the police to deflect criticism of their responsibility vis-a-vis the violence as they, instead, blame the women who attracted trouble by venturing into the street, by wearing short skirts, by dancing, by not being at home. (281)

Thus, daughters must be portrayed as being innocent, pure victims. But this too is problematic as Debbie Nathan explains,

> Between a rock and a hard place, families are thus loath to deal with the fact that many beloved daughters do go to cantinas, and many do communicate sexuality through their clothing. Yet to acknowledge this is to imply that one's child is a slut undeserving of redress. It's a cruel conundrum that has forced activists in Juarez to use a public rhetoric in which victims are all church-going, girlish innocents. (qtd in Paradoxes, 284)

Despite these challenges the *Mujeres de Negro* did receive a response from Mexican President, at the time Vicente Fox, who declared he would use all his power to capture the criminals, and challenged Chihuahua's governor to address the femicide issue (Vargas cited in Paradoxes 282). While some could argue it was an empty promise, that the Mexican President offered a response points to the fact that the group was heard.

Still, this strategy does carry a great risk with it. Many of the women in *Mujeres de Negro* are middle-class educated women with feminist backgrounds, but young women kidnapped tend to come from poor, uneducated backgrounds. Thus, when presenting themselves as private women—mothers—looking for their children they risk being challenged and exposed as deceptive and fake.

The issues the *Mujeres de Negro* and other coalitions experience externally though the public discourses they must engage in, or internally where political disagreements tend to be common, serve to show the various trials women in northern Mexico face in order to be heard. To assume, however, that *Mujeres de Negro's* work is in vain is to fail to understand the context in which they live in. In the early 2000s unemployment was rising as Juarez was losing at least a quarter of its manufacturing sector to international competitors such as China (288). Because of this, Mexican officials have been sensitive to trying to attract foreign investment to compete against these other markets, but they are also sensitive to the image created by a public protest: resistant women, resistant workers. To this extent, public protests can be seen as threats to economic development.

The *Mujeres de Negro* is an example of how coalitions with varying ideologies can work together and garner some success. They demonstrate the difficult decisions coalitions must make when strategizing, decisions that at times may be contradictory to a larger end goal.

Suggestions For Effective Change

There are other responses that have been offered to issues pertaining to femicide. For example, Staudt and Coronado stress the need for the city of Juarez and Chihuahua to fund battered women's shelters. These are relatively new in the city. The first was established in 2004 (176). They also suggest taking violence against women into account in public safety policy, public health policy and civic coalitions that include both human rights activists and more business minded people (177).

In the Maquiladora industry owners of their respective factories should invest in increasing security through surveillance in and around the work place. Furthermore, investing in self-defense training classes for their employees, while not addressing the macro issues, could empower women in the face of an attack (Staudt & Coronado 177).

Finally, the dominant gender discourses must be strategically and skillfully challenged. A feminist activist in Juarez, Esther Chávez Cano, is one individual who has been doing just that. Together with a group of Juarense women, Cano helped establish the first and, at the time, "only rape crisis and sexual assault center in Juarez" (Wright, Manifesto, 552). It was called "Casa Amiga: Centro de Crisis". As an activist, Cano pushed a different discourse, one that challenges the notion that the countless women murdered and women in general share the trait of disposability. She stated, "We are fighting the idea that women aren't worth anything," and elaborated, "A woman goes to work so she can support her family. She works hard for the company, but when she is killed, people say she was a prostitute that isn't worth anything." (qtd in Manifesto, 563). Cano and the leaders of the Casa Amiga believe "the roots of femicide lie in a vision of Juárez women as worth less than what they offer to their families and to the workplace" (Wright, Manifesto, 563). Challenging the idea of disposability can pressure politicians and maquiladora mangers to take action and demonstrate that they value women.

Conclusion

The femicides in Juarez have spanned just over two decades. An examination of the geographical and historical processes involved in Juarez provides a helpful understanding of the materials that have made the Juarez femicides possible. The development of the maquiladora industry over last three decades in particular has played a contributing role. By taking this into account and studying Mexico's gender ideals in a broad national sense, and more narrowly in Juarez, it becomes clear the development of the maquiladora industry has served to undermine gendered ideals in the area. These same ideals have simultaneously served as a means for justifying the lack of action taken against criminals.

Responses to the femicides have varied in approach. In popular culture Julian Cardona's critique of the maquiladora industry is fair, but his reinforcement of the classical Mexican gender binary is problematic. Others like Alicia Gaspar de Alba have creatively represented women who demonstrate strength, agency, and creativity in the face of societal dangers and pressures. Antifemicide groups like the *Mujeres de Negro* have shown that unity, despite diverse political opinions, is possible.

Problems continue to abound in the northern city of Mexico. The problems indeed remain complicated within the layers of Mexico's economic, political, sexual, and social history. Complexity however should not undermine engagement; rather, acknowledging the complexity surrounding the femicides of Juarez serves to better inform and prepare individuals. By deconstructing the social structures seen in Mexico's gendered ideology and economic policies the opportunity for addressing these problems arises. After all, societies are not static organisms. If ideologies and policies are shaped and constructed by men and women, the possibility and hope remains for future men and women to reconstruct them.

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