

This background paper has been produced for a workshop on "Peacebuilding in Latin America", convened by Peacebuild in Ottawa on May 31, 2011 with the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

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Contact:
info@peacebuild.ca



Background paper Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: Ever-Present and Worsening

Sophia Koutsoyannis

Femicide, the killing of women by men *because* they are women, is a worldwide phenomenon. Victims of femicide are often mutilated, raped and tortured before their deaths. These acts of extreme violence are most likely to occur in environments where every day forms of violence are accepted, and impunity is facilitated by the government's refusal to deal with the problem. Femicide is considered to be the most extreme form of misogynistic violence, one which stems from the violation of human rights of women in the public and private sphere. In Mexico, particularly on the Mexico-US border, the killing of women first made international headlines in 1993, as a growing number of female bodies started to emerge at the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez. Since then, the number of femicides continues to rise despite international pressure and government-led initiatives. In 2007, for example, the federal government promulgated a law that sought to prevent all forms of violence against women, *La Ley General de Acceso a las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*. Four years after the passing of the law, the levels of gender-based

Sophia Koutsoyannis

Sophia Koutsoyannis defended her Ph.D. in History at York University in December 2010. Her work deals with gender, prostitution and urban spaces of leisure in Mexico City throughout the twentieth century. More specifically she looks at how urban dwellers, especially the urban and poor women, participate in the reproduction of urban spaces. She also has a Masters in History, with a specialization in Central American modern history.

violence remain the same, while the number of femicides continues to increase, rendering the law inoperable.¹ From 1993 to 2005, approximately 370 women were killed in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City.² According to INEGI (The National Institute of Statistics Geography and Information Technology), the rate of female murders in Juárez tripled from 2005 to 2009, from 3.6 assassinations to 13.09.³ These studies do not include the number of women who continue to disappear; for example, two dozen women vanished from Ciudad Juárez between 2007 and the first half of 2009.⁴ According to the umbrella organization, *Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional de Femicidio* (The National Civic Observatory of Femicide), at least 1700 have been killed since

2009.⁵

The facts behind these criminal acts, however, remain a source of contention between government authorities, NGOs and feminist organizations. Mexican government authorities and security forces are largely to blame for the lack of criminal investigations, as they have consistently botched forensic evidence, downplayed the severity of the crisis and protected the perpetrators of the crimes.⁶ Consequently, very few people have been convicted, hampering investigations and denying justice to the victims and their families. Some of the convicted murderers were also tortured into confessing, underlining how Mexican authorities have been protecting the killers rather than the victims. That said, criminologists and journalists have deduced that serial killers, drug gangs and corrupt officials are implicated in a large number of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez. At the same

¹ "Falla ley contra feminicidio" in *El Universal*, January 31, 2011.

<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/741199.html>

² Mexico: Justice fails in Ciudad Juárez and the city of Chihuahua, *Amnesty International*, February 28, 2005

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/007/2005/en/08e8f901-d518-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/amr410072005en.html>

³ "En cuatros años se triplicaron feminicidios en Juárez, Inegi" in *El Proceso*.

<http://proceso.com.mx/rv/modHome/detalleExclusiva/88926>

⁴ "In Ciudad Juárez Young Women Are Vanishing," in *L.A. Times*, March 9, 2009; "Fear Descends on Ciudad Juárez as Girls Go Missing," in *NPR*, March 6, 2009.

⁵ "Mas de 1700 mujeres fueron asesinadas en Mexico desde 2009," March 10, 2011. *Infobae*.

<http://america.infobae.com/notas/20536-Mexico-1700-mujeres-asesinadas-desde-2009>

⁶ For a close study of the role of government and police corruption in the dealing of femicide cases on the Mexico-US border, see Sergio González, *Des os dans le désert*. trans. Vincent Raynaud (Passage du Nord-Ouest, 2007); and Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killings Fields, Harvest of Women. The Truth about Mexico's Bloody Border Legacy* (Burbank, California: Peace at the Border, 2006).

time, femicide is closely linked to domestic violence throughout Mexico, with the majority of women murdered by someone known to them.⁷

The unprecedented level of violence spurred by Mexico's Drug War, especially since the federal government's deployment of 50,000 soldiers in 2006, has caused both an increase of femicides and a decrease in media coverage of gender-based murders. Drug gangs have posed a significant threat to women throughout Latin America. Human trafficking, robbery and rape are particular risks to young girls in urban areas; and the insignia of gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha has been found on the body of female victims throughout Mexico and Central America.⁸ The killers are rarely convicted because narco gangs have established a parallel power in Mexico. Employees of security structures are continually replaced due to the murder of and threats against officials. At least 12 mayors were killed in 2010 alone. Drug gangs often intimidate judges to rule in their favor, and police officers and prison guards often have to choose between death or taking bribes. Recently, the decapitated body of a prison deputy in Durango was found on May 11, 2011.

In February of 2011, the body of another security chief was found in a plastic container inside a car near the prison where he worked.⁹ Thus, government officials and security forces often work for drug cartels rather than against them, fomenting a sense of collective terror in the regions marked by the drug violence.¹⁰ The escalation of the Mexican Drug War has overshadowed anti-femicide movements, as over 35,000 people have died in drug-related violence in the past five years. As a result, press coverage on femicide has waned despite the enduring violence against women. Since 2004, municipal and state-wide elections in the state of Chihuahua have revealed "that it is no longer the campaign issue that it was from 1995-2004."¹¹ This lack of media coverage combined with the growing number of femicides, makes it ever more urgent for the Canadian government and organizations to provide support.

This paper investigates femicide in Mexico against the backdrop of drug-related violence to underscore the major obstacles faced by anti-femicide organizations today. I look at the socioeconomic causes of femicide, and the recent challenges faced by activists in the region to underline both the strengths and weaknesses of anti-femicide movements.

⁷ Mercedes Oliveira and Victoria J. Furio "Violencia Femicida: Violence against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis," *Latin American Perspective* 33 (2) (Mar. 2006): 104-114, 104.

⁸ Oliveira and Furio "Violencia Femicida," 112.

⁹ "Mexico Deputy Prison Governor Decapitation in Durango" in *BBC*, May 12, 2011. Cited from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-13383662>

¹⁰ See González, *Des os dans le désert*.

¹¹ Melissa W. Wright, "Urban Geography Plenary Lecture- Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico." *Urban Geography* 28 (5) (2007): 401-425, 402.

The aim is to delineate the most favorable –and least dangerous– strategies to combat femicide, and more broadly, gender-based violence (GBV) in Mexico. This work also provides a brief overview of Canadian organizations that support human rights programs in Mexico, as well as the Canadian government’s policies in Mexico, such as the imposition of a visa requirement in 2009 and the RCMP’s police training program, to highlight the importance of forging stronger Canada-Mexican relations. Finally, I provide further recommendations based on recent studies of gender-based violence prevention programs worldwide.

The Roots of Femicide: Gender-based Violence, Neoliberal Economic Policies, Government Corruption and Narco-Corruption

Scholars and activists have repeatedly underlined the structural inequalities that account for femicide and widespread violence in northern Mexico, such as government corruption, the intensification of neoliberal economic policies, and widespread domestic violence. These factors have led to the naturalization of violence against women throughout Mexico, with femicide representing the extreme result of this naturalization. The following section briefly discusses the aforementioned socioeconomic factors and their relationship to each other to better understand the causes of femicide.

The murder of women because they are women occurs where gender-based structural inequalities are rampant and naturalized. Although drug cartels and corrupt government officials are largely to blame for femicide, Mexico suffers from a long tradition of domestic violence against women. According to feminist activists, femicide is the tip of the iceberg, illuminating how everyday forms of GBV are necessary preconditions for the occurrence of femicide. In Mexico, violence against women is endemic, and manifests itself in multiple forms, from physical, psychological and sexual abuse to economic inequalities that impoverish and disempower women. Research shows that 60% of women killed by their partners had already reported domestic violence to police authorities.¹² As noted earlier, government-led initiatives to protect women from domestic violence have done nothing to reduce the incidence of such violence.

Since the eighties, Mexico’s economic crises have accelerated neoliberal policies and worsened the living conditions of the poor. According to the CIA 2011, asset-based

¹² Marina Prieto-Carrón, Marylin Thomson, Many Macdonald. “No More Killings! Women Respond to Femicides in Central America,” *Gender and Development* 15 (1) Gender- Based Violence (Mar. 2007): 25-40, 28.

poverty amounted to 47% in 2008.¹³ The collapse of the Mexican economy in 1982 following the debt crisis, the 1994 peso devaluation, Mexico's entry into the General Agreement of Tariff and Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) intensified the course of denationalization, reduction and privatization of health services in Mexico. To attract foreign investment, the Mexican government invited multinational companies to expand their business on the Mexican border with the promise of exemptions from taxes and from environmental regulations. These policies also entailed the feminization of cheap labor, with women from rural areas flocking to the border town in search of better wages. The increased industrialization of Ciudad Juárez also brought forth the proliferation of cheap leisure entertainment and commercial sex, further damaging the image of women living near the border.

Dominant discourses in Mexico deprecate maquiladora workers by equating them with sex workers, arguably the most marginalized profession in Mexican culture, thereby reinforcing their disposability and status as non-citizens. Alicia Schmidt Camacho explains that “the dual economy of the sex trade and maquiladoras produced a popular discourse that conflates women's sale of their labor with the sale of their bodies for sex.”¹⁴ This equation of working class women with the stigma of commercial sex has served to denigrate their status as workers and to curtail them from any form of political economic mobilization. More pressingly, it has contributed to the continuing violence against women. With regards to femicide, the Government of Chihuahua and corporate elite have countered anti-femicide activism by accusing the victims of leading ‘double lives’ as prostitutes, thus blaming them for their rape and murder.¹⁵ The continuing murder of women, combined to their exploitative working conditions and the state's inability to protect them has served to not only deny women of their human rights but to normalize gender-based violence as the result of female promiscuity.

The discursive tactic of blaming the victim points to the federal and Chihuahua state governments' unwillingness to protect female victims of femicide. By blaming women for their gruesome murder, they distract public criticism away from the police forces for their failure to protect victims of violence or bring their aggressors to justice.

¹³ Mexico Economy 2011, *CIA World Factbook and other Sources*.

http://www.theodora.com/wfbcurrent/mexico/mexico_economy.html (last updated January 12)

¹⁴ Alicia Schmidt Camacho. “Ciudadana X. Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.” *The New Centennial Review* 5 (1) (Spring 2005): 255-292.

¹⁵ Melissa W. Wright. “From Protests to Politics: Sex Work, Women's Worth, and Ciudad Juárez Modernity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (2) (June, 2004): 369-386, 377.

The dealings of police officers with families of victims have lacked both in professionalism and compassion, often asking the family whether the victim was a prostitute.¹⁶ They have also botched forensic evidence to deter family members for seeking answers and pursuing the perpetrator; DNA evidence is often contaminated.¹⁷ The blatant unwillingness of police officials to protect poor women from violence reinforces the disposability of female sex and factory workers. Although the wages in maquiladoras are higher than in the interior of Mexico, they do not come close to covering living expenses. The Taylorization of production, grueling hours, unlivable wages, absence of labor rights and invasive surveillance practices, such as the mandatory proof of menstruations, have promoted the female maquiladora workers' disposability in the market economy.

Melissa Wright explains:

“She is distilled down to two arms and two hands, whose movements are monitored by the supervisor as factors of time. Moreover, as this ergonomic design reveals, the worker’s own knowledge of her body is not only useless but also considered irrelevant... if a worker chooses to move a wrist in such a way as not laid out in the engineering diagram, the entire process can be thrown off kilter.”¹⁸

This mistreatment of female workers reflects and facilitates violence against women outside the factory, especially since dominant discourses continue to devalue women’s economic contribution to the household and the nation. Traditional gender norms that elevate Mexican women exclusively in the realm of motherhood and the domestic sphere increased in the mid-nineties. While the conservative party PAN (National Action Party) intensified its application of neoliberal policies in the state of Chihuahua, which entailed the feminization of cheap labor, it also strengthened traditional patriarchal discourses that limit and exalt the role of Mexican women to the domestic sphere. Scholars and activists further argue that the constant influx of migrants

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Global Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

in search of better wages and the dehumanizing working and living conditions deprive urban dwellers of a sense of community, encouraging violence.

The constant flux of migrants since the mid-1970s contributes to a sense of collective alienation. Most urban dwellers living in Ciudad Juárez come from other parts of Mexico, especially Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán and Veracruz. These migrants have been largely blamed for the femicides “and related problems, both as victims and as perpetrators.”¹⁹ What is more, neoliberal industrial developments have not coincided with the building of adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of newly arrived migrants. The majority of maquiladora laborers live in shantytowns at the outskirts of the Ciudad Juárez. The lack of infrastructure, such as paved roads and lighting, and of decent housing, drinking water and public health services largely contributes to the growth of crime rates in poor neighborhoods. A large number of the kidnappings that led to femicide occurred on the victim’s daily route from work to work and/or school. On average, female maquiladora workers commute 2 hours a day, often on unpaved roads that lack proper lighting.

Since 1993, NGOs have been urging maquiladora companies to provide better lighting and transportation systems to their workers, but the latter have largely reject any accountability on the basis that the murders did not take place on their property.

The feminization of cheap labor has also contributed to the increasing position of women as primary breadwinners in Northern Mexico, i.e., 40% of Mexican women were head of their households in 2005.²⁰ By earning their own income, which often exceeds that of their male partners, women have more control over their lives and the ways they wish to spend their leisure time. Despite these cultural changes, however, women must still fulfill their domestic obligations and serve as primary educators to their children. Concomitantly, the feminization of labor combined with the rise of unemployment has contributed to a crisis in masculine identity. The breakdown of traditional gender roles has increased aggressive behavior toward women by men incapable of accepting their partner’s superior economic position in the household. Feminist activists argue that the feminization of cheap labor has also stripped women of their primary roles as family leaders and educators. The maquiladora workers’ inability to serve as ‘caretaker’ along with the lack of prospects for men has not only contributed to the increase of violence

¹⁹ Joanna Swanger, “Feminist Building in Ciudad Juárez. “A Local Cultural Alternative to the Structural Violence of Globalization,” *Latin American Perspectives* 34 (2) Globalizing Resistance: the New Politics of Social Movements in Latin America (Mar. 2007): 108-123, 112.

²⁰ Oliveira and Furio “Violencia Femicida”, 108.

against women, but facilitated the entrance of their children into gangs.²¹ Since women cannot afford to provide supervision for their children while they work, they have been blamed for the increase of crime rates and drug-related violence. By pointing the blame to the maquiladora workers, the government also deflects its responsibilities toward the curtailing crime and creation of jobs.

In all, the issue of femicide underscores deeply rooted misogynist tendencies that pervade all levels of Mexican society, from the federal and state government to the home. The mistreatment of maquiladora workers by corporate leaders and politicians as disposable non-citizens against the backdrop of severe poverty and an inept security system has enabled the problem to thrive. Since the early nineties, anti-femicide organizations have sought to prevent further violence by attempting to bring perpetrators to justice and bring national and international attention to the cause. They have also been providing local assistance, judicial and psychological, to families and communities through therapy sessions and workshops aimed toward providing both men and women alternative notions of gender relations. Concomitantly, labor organizations such as the *Frente Unico del Trabajo* (FAT) have sought to empower female maquiladora workers by means of educational workshops on labor rights to improve their conditions, both in the factories and their communities. The following section looks at how local and international organizations have mobilized against femicide since 1993 to underscore their major challenges since the escalation of the drug war, and delineate their most propitious strategies.

The Current State of the Anti-Femicide Movement in Mexico: Obstacles and Achievements and Recommendations

The Anti-femicide movement has suffered some setbacks in the recent years. The escalation of the drug war has cost the lives of journalists and activists, thus weakening anti-femicide movements. According to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers and Reporters without Borders, Mexico has been ranked as the most dangerous country in the world for journalists in 2010.²² Although Mexican authorities have consistently failed to provide protection to threatened activists and their families

²¹ Swanger. "Feminist Building in Ciudad Juárez," 112.

²² Press Release. "Mexico, Pakistan, Most Deadliest for Journalists in 2010,"

http://www.editorsweblog.org/newsrooms_and_journalism/2011/01/press_release_mexico_pakistan_most_deadl.php

since 1993, the conditions for anti-femicide have recently worsened, with two prominent activists, Marisela Escobedo Ortiz and Susana Chavez, found dead in December 2010 and January 2011, respectively. Escobedo was shot while collecting signatures and campaigning in front of the Governor's Palace in Chihuahua City. She was fighting for years to bring her daughter's killer, her son-in-law, to justice, but his ties with organized crime exempted him from serving time, underlining how belonging to a drug gang can increase incidents of domestic violence and femicide. Family members associated with anti-femicide activists are equally targeted. On the night of Escobedo's murder, her partner's lumber store was burnt down, and her brother-in-law was kidnapped and killed.²³ Public death threats by crime organization toward anti-femicide activists have also proliferated in the past months; a large banner containing a death threat toward the activist Marisela Ortiz and her son was hung at the school where she teaches. She and Maria Luisa García Andrade, the founders of the non-profit organization *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Daughters Return Home), recently fled from Ciudad Juárez.²⁴

Strife amongst local anti-femicide organizations has further contributed to the weakening of the movement. Local coalitions have dissolved due to a wide range of disagreements between non-profit organizations. According to the scholar Melissa Wright, who has worked closely with anti-femicide organizations for over ten years, the quarrels are "based on a range of issues from politics, class and regional orientation to difficult personalities among key participants."²⁵ These divisions have had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, the weakening of domestic coalitions has led to transformations of anti-femicide activism, with different organizations focusing on various aspects of the problem and affiliating themselves to feminist organizations abroad. On the other hand, public accusations between non-profit domestic organizations have inevitably fragmented their efforts and may have weakened public support of their movements.

Despite the serious obstacles faced by anti-feminist organizations, local activist groups and international organizations have also effectively brought legitimacy and international awareness to the cause. The coalition of feminist NGOs in the early nineties

²³ "New Threats Target Anti-Femicide Activists" in *South Notes*, March 10, 2011. Available: <http://www.southnotes.org/2011/03/10/new-threats-target-anti-femicide-activists/>. See also "What happens When the Brave Women of Chihuahua are All Gone", Melissa del Bosque in the *Texas Observer*, March 9, 2011. Available: <http://www.texasobserver.org/lalinea/what-happens-when-the-brave-women-of-chihuahua-are-all-gone>

²⁴ "Mexican Women Activists at Risk after Fleeing Death Threats," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/mexican-women-activists-risk-after-fleeing-death-threats-2011-03-17>

²⁵ Wright, "Femicide, Mother-Activism", 403.

triggered public protests within Mexico, which provided a counter-discourse to the “double life” argument deployed by political leaders. They did so by stepping into the media and giving a name to the violence against women, *femicidio*. As noted by feminist scholar Sarah Stillman: “This act of naming the violence, born of grassroots protests movements, had a powerful impact on national and international news coverage.”²⁶ Naming the crime, and (re) producing the stories that led to the death of these young women is an important form of media activism that has put pressure on the government to change its discourse vis-a-vis the death of marginalized women. Anti-femicide organizations have effectively strengthened their relationship to feminist movements in other countries as well as international organizations, such as Amnesty International, the United Nations and the Organization of American States. By doing so, they have also made headway in generating international political pressure on the Mexican government. For example, Amnesty International has written biting reports to the Mexican government for its inability to bring the murderers to justice and prevent gender-driven homicides.²⁷

Currently, two grassroots organizations that work on behalf of the families of the victims, *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Ciudad Juárez) and *La Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos*, are seeking to present their cases to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights under the Organization of American States. With the decrease of media coverage and killing of leading anti-femicide activists since the escalation of the drug war, it has become even more urgent to raise and strengthen awareness of the issue.

A powerful strategy deployed by anti-femicide organizations to raise awareness in Mexico and abroad is based on the sanctity of motherhood and the family in Mexican (and Latin American) culture.²⁸ Anti-femicide activists have employed the same conservative values of their opponents to counter them: they have portrayed the victims as daughters, and their decision to enter the public sphere as a motherly duty. This strategy, widespread

²⁶ Sarah Stillman, “‘The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism,” *Gender and Development* 15 (3) Media (Nov. 2007): 491-502, 494.

²⁷ “Intolerable Killings: 10 years of abductions and murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua: Summary Report and Appeals Cases,” *Amnesty International*, August 10, 2003, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/027/2003/en/ec84829e-d6b3-11dd-ab95-a13b602c0642/amr410272003en.html> Mexico: Justice fails in Ciudad Juárez and the city of Chihuahua, *Amnesty International*, February 28, 2005 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/007/2005/en/08e8f901-d518-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/amr410072005en.html>;

²⁸ See Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press: 1997).

amongst feminist organizations throughout Latin America, has enabled them to justify their political presence in the public sphere by forging a connection with their national and international audiences versus the collective experience of motherhood. One of the strengths of this approach is that it insists on the remembrance and great value—as opposed to disposability—of the victims by repetitively telling stories of their lives from the standpoint of their grieving mothers. This discourse, as noted by Wright, enables them to take a radical stance against government corruption and provide a counter-argument to the ‘public woman’ discourse.

Despite its success in attracting international support, mother-activism has several weaknesses. The elevation of motherhood suggests their eventual return to the domestic sphere once justice is served, thus reinforcing traditional gender norms. Moreover, anti-femicide leaders have deployed the motherhood discourse against each other. Activists have accused some anti-femicide organizations of profiting from their loss as mothers to profit from the cause. These activists claim that several organizations lack legitimacy because they are not mothers, but use the motherhood discourse to justify their cause.²⁹ Mother-activism is also particularly grueling for the mothers, as they have to retell the story of their children’s death to audiences in Mexico and abroad to garner support. Finally, public threats toward anti-femicide activists have turned deadly in the recent months, further undermining the cause and intimidating important leaders. Their positions as mothers did not protect them, suggesting the escalation of violence has undermined the cultural sanctity of motherhood as a tool for anti-femicide activism.

Local-based organizations who work closely on behalf of the families of the deceased further provide both therapeutic and educational workshops on gender-based violence. *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (NHRC) arguably the most visible organization in Ciudad Juárez, has been the most involved with international organizations to bring awareness to the cause, but also works closely with families coping with the loss of their daughters. They offer judicial and legal guidance to families of the disappeared, workshops on issues of gender, self-esteem building and human rights. They also offer diverse forms of therapy and training to mothers who want to take an active stance toward the injustices committed against their daughters.

Justicia Para Nuestra Hijas, based in Chihuahua City, also works with the relatives of disappeared and assassinated women. Since 2010, they have also been

²⁹ See Clara Eugenia Rojas, “‘The V-Day’ March in Mexico: Appropriation and Misuse of Local Women’s Activism,” *NWSA Journal* 17 (2) (Summer 2005): 217-227.

developing a database with the names of femicide victims in the state of Chihuahua. Similar to NHRC, they promote public awareness via mother-activism and the distribution of material on femicide. In addition, the group has been working with an Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team since 2005 in the analysis of forensic data and writing of reports. The state of Chihuahua and international foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, The Open Society Institute and the John Mercker Fund, have helped to fund this research. The team has recovered the remains of at least 83 women from 2005 to 2009, and has positively identified 33 assassinated women.³⁰ Most of the remains have come from forensic and medical facilities, but the team has also succeeded in recovering remains from 'narco-tombs'. This kind of activism is crucial for many reasons. First, it serves to remind the public and the perpetrators of the crimes, that these women are not forgotten, nor are they disposable. Second, it provides families of the assassinated women with some form of closure.

The organization *Casa Amiga*, which was one of the first crisis centers of the city, attempts to change the culture of violence and impunity by rebuilding a sense of community. Their goal is to de-naturalize gender-based violence through a wide range of educational tactics. They start from the premise that rampant violence and high levels of poverty on the border have created a sense of alienation and fragmentation amongst communities. To combat these dual processes, they practice feminist therapy in small workshops that seek to make men and women aware of rampant misogynist tendencies in all forms of popular culture in order to dispel them. They also provide psychological, medical and legal support to the victim's families, as well as support lines to victims of domestic abuse. Aware of the impossibility of eradicating the economic policies that have exacerbated their living conditions, *Casa Amiga's* small-scale workshops concentrate on healing victims and restoring a sense of community. The umbrella organization, *Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional de Femicidio* (OCNF) works on gender-based violence in Mexico and Central America. With regards to femicide, it works primarily in the documentation and analysis of information regarding the crisis. For Mexico, the organization monitors and analyzes trends concerning the assassination of women throughout the nation. The group comprises 43 human, and gender, rights organizations throughout 19 states, which share information regarding the killings in each region.³¹

³⁰ Annual Country Report: Mexico 2007. Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)
http://eaaf.typepad.com/annual_report_2007/An07_Mexico-3.pdf

³¹ OCNF works with the following organizations throughout Mexico: In Baja California: Mujeres Unidas; Olympia de Gouges; Chiapas: Red de Mujeres del Sur; Red de Mujeres por la Igualdad, Desarrollo, Género, Ciudadanía; Red nacional de asesoras y promotoras rurales. Chihuahua: Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres; Mujeres por

Such research is crucial as it has increased the exposure and understanding of femicide on a national level.³² OCNF also works toward enforcing anti-femicide laws through several strategies, such as: providing seminars to security officials to ensure that criminal investigations are not hampered by the mishandling of evidence; inviting diverse international human rights organizations to examine the problems in the areas with the highest number of femicides; and developing and improving the protocol of criminal investigations by means of the close study of existing protocols in other countries to increase the victim and her family's access to the justice system.³³

Other non-governmental organizations in Mexico work on corporate responsibility to strengthen both labor and women's rights. This approach targets corporations as one of the prime culprits in the proliferation of gender-based violence and femicide. The aforementioned *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo* (FAT), an independent organization of cooperative members, union, farm workers, and political party representatives, has been advocating for the rights of female workers since the 1960s, particularly female maquiladoras. FAT works closely with other anti-femicide organizations in northern Mexico by providing legal and institutional support. FAT also raises awareness of gender issues, sexual harassment and labor rights by holding training sessions that also focus on building self-esteem.

Moreover, FAT has established the Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral (CETLAC- Center of Studies and Labor Workshops) in Ciudad Juárez. CETLAC provides technical guidance and training to maquila workers, as well as residents and

México en Chihuahua; "Casa Amiga" Centro de Crisis; Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa; Justicia para nuestras hijas; Red Mesa de Mujeres de Juárez. Coahuila: Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos "Fray Juan de Larios" Colima: Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Colima No Gubernamental Distrito Federal: Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos; Arte contra el Femicidio; Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir; Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos; Red Mujer Siglo XXI; la Red Contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres y los Hombres Jóvenes; Red de Investigadoras "Por la Vida y la Libertad de las Mujeres" Red nacional de asesoras y promotoras rurales.

³² OCNF works with the following organizations throughout Mexico: In Baja California: Mujeres Unidas: Olympia de Gouges; Chiapas: Red de Mujeres del Sur; Red de Mujeres por la Igualdad, Desarrollo, Género, Ciudadanía; Red nacional de asesoras y promotoras rurales. Chihuahua: Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres; Mujeres por México en Chihuahua; "Casa Amiga" Centro de Crisis; Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa; Justicia para nuestras hijas; Red Mesa de Mujeres de Juárez. Coahuila: Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos "Fray Juan de Larios" Colima: Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Colima No Gubernamental Distrito Federal: Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos; Arte contra el Femicidio; Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir; Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos; Red Mujer Siglo XXI; la Red Contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres y los Hombres Jóvenes; Red de Investigadoras "Por la Vida y la Libertad de las Mujeres" Red nacional de asesoras y promotoras rurales.

³³ For more information on their work, consult OCNF's website:

<http://observatoriofemicidiomexico.com/contenidocampanaregional.html>

workers of informal sectors. Their main goals are to educate workers about their rights and promote the development of workers' organizations. CETLAC also focuses on the rights of female workers by organizing marches and conducting surveys on human, and labor, rights violations of maquilas. Similar to the above-mentioned organizations, they raise awareness of femicide by working with international organizations such as the UN. FAT has created two more centers in the City of Chihuahua and Monterey, both industrial cities near the border, to further address the issues of female maquiladora workers in these neighboring regions. FAT, however, is suffering from substantial budget cuts, as their funding from OXFAM, which provided one third of their funding, will finish at the end of 2011. Until last year, the Canadian-based organization, *Centre International de Solidarité Ouvrière* (CISO) provided one third of FAT's funding, but its application for further funding was rejected in 2011.³⁴ CISO worked on a two-year project, beginning in 2007, to increase the formation of independent worker associations in the three CETLAC centers in northern Mexico. The organization also contributed financially to the training and information sessions at CETLAC centers. As one of the few labor organizations that works on corporate responsibility from a gendered perspective in northern Mexico, the survival of CETLAC is extremely important for the bettering of labor and human rights conditions of female maquiladora workers and their communities.

The Mexican Federal government has recently taken steps to reduce violence in Ciudad Juárez in ways that can help prevent gender-based violence. *Todos Somos Juárez* (We are all Juárez), a 160-point plan inaugurated in 2010, aims to rehabilitate urban spaces, such as parks, community centers, sports fields and schools. By doing this, these initiatives hope to restore security and diminish the sense of terror experienced by urban dwellers, enabling them to participate in public activities without fear. The plan also seeks to increase measures to prevent youth from entering gangs. As noted earlier, the feminization of cheap labor has undermined women's roles as primary caregivers. The combination of unlivable wages and lack of daycare centers forces children to grow up without parental supervision. To solve this problem, the plan called for the opening of 40 new daycare facilities; by October 2010, twenty one had been built. *Todos Somos Juárez* also aims to provide grants to children over 4 years old that will enable them to stay in daycares after that age; and is working toward implementing cultural, sport-based and artistic programs in 30 high schools with a specific emphasis on teaching children how to

³⁴For more information, see website: <http://www.ciso.qc.ca/>

prevent violence as well as gender-based violence in their communities. As of October 2010, 82 of these actions were completed. At the same time, however, violence in Ciudad Juárez has increased, putting into question the effectiveness of the project.

Finally, in March 2011, the state of Mexico passed a law that recognizes femicide as an ‘independent crime category’, with a prison sentence of forty to seventy years.³⁵ The new law also toughens penalties against sexual harassment, and has called for the creation of an office to deal specifically with cases of femicide. This law is important in that it demonstrates the state government’s public acknowledgement of the widespread killing of women, one that has only come to surface in recent years— thanks to the sharing of information between anti-femicide organizations throughout Mexico. The problem with the law, however, is that it does not confront the police system’s continuing inability in apprehending the killers; very few men who have killed their spouses, ex-partners, friends or colleagues are arrested, thus creating a question of the efficacy of the new regulations. That said, the law’s codification of femicide as separate crime category is a promising step in the right direction.

Canada-Mexico Relations: How to Provide Better Support to Mexico’s Human Rights Crisis

Canadian organizations have also been working toward strengthening labor and human rights in Mexico, but they must do more, especially with regards to the conditions of marginalized women. As noted earlier, the labor organization CISO can no longer provide financial aid to FAT-CETLAC due to lack of funding. The Canadian-based *Maquila Solidarity Network’s* (MSN) support of workers’ rights has yielded positive results, thus providing a promising route for anti-femicide groups. The organization works primarily on improving wages and labor conditions in textile maquiladoras by “strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations in the North and South to challenge the negative impacts of industry restructuring in the global garment industry.”³⁶ In particular, MSN aims to establish fair wages and better working conditions by undercutting the prevalence of “protection contracts” between employers and company controlled unions that protect corporations from the potential emergence of representative trade unions. Although MSN’s work does not deal with female maquila workers in

³⁵“Salen reformas para castigar feminicidios en Edomex” *Milenio*, March 17, 2011.

³⁶ For more information on their current work in Mexico, see <http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/about?SESS89c5db41a82abcd7da7c9ac60e04ca5f=iuh34j3neoc8eofv36o143d765>

Ciudad Juárez, they raise the issue in their newsletters, and discuss maquila rights developments in other parts of Mexico.

More importantly, MSN's work in other regions, such as Puebla and Aguascalientes, has yielded some positive results. On April 8, 2011, the corporation Johnson Controls Interiors (JCI) reneged its "protection union" contract and signed a legitimate collective bargaining agreement with Mexico's mineworkers' union. The agreement includes a 7.5% wage increase and better benefits for the 800 workers at the factory. With the support of MSN and international trade union organizations, the Worker Support Center in Puebla (CAT) was able to push for the abolition of "protection contracts". This recent feat provides an example of how Canadian NGOs can participate in the defense of labor rights, which in turn, can lead to the financial and social empowerment of female maquila workers.

The Canadian Government has also been working against urban crime in Mexico, mainly through the training of police forces on the US-Mexican border by RCMP officials, and through the International Development Research Centre (IRDC). With regards to the former, the IRDC has been working on a comparative analysis of urban violence in Argentina, Colombia, Brazil and Mexico. The research looks at the relationships between youth crime, the police and access to justice, to provide recommendations on how to develop policies that can strengthen access to the justice system and preventative measures aimed toward youth at risk of entering organized crime. The study also pays close attention to gender-based violence as a product of urban violence, police brutality and narco-trafficking.

The Anti-Crime Capacity Building Program (ACCPB), which was announced in August 2009, provides up to 15 million dollars per year to strengthen Mexican security forces. It largely consists of Spanish-speaking RCMP instructors that provide training to Mexico's federal police force as part of a joint project with the United States and other international partners. The program also entails the training of 32 police commanding officers in "police management, decision-making, investigation and intelligence skills at the Canadian Police College"³⁷. Although this program provides important training and technical assistance to Mexico's federal police, it is questionable whether it contributes to any positive change. As noted earlier, one of the prime factors hampering police

³⁷ "Canada Provides Basic Training for Federal Police Recruits," Prime Minister of Canada, April 9, 2009. <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2722>

investigations is the threat posed to police officers by the drug cartels. Officers with sound training are still faced with choosing between death by decapitation or collaborating with criminal organizations, though the latter has been established as a parallel power. With the ever-increasing murder of police officers, prison guards and security officials, the relevance of such a program must be questioned. That said, a gendered component to the RCMP's training of police officials may help to improve their dealings with victims of gender-based violence and the families of assassinated women.

Another problem with the ACCPB program is that it was largely triggered by the rising tension caused by Prime Minister Harper's decision to impose a visa requirement on Mexican tourists, traveling in Canada, in July 2009. Activists have argued that the ACCPB program served to deflect attention away from the visa issue. This decision emerged from the growing number of refugee claims from Mexico, which increased from 1100 in 1999 to 9500 in 2008.³⁸ According to Kim Richard Nossal, the decision is consistent with Canada's refugee policies: "when the 'market' produces a large number of claimants from a particular country, the government simply imposes stiff visa requirements that are designed to purposely make it difficult to travel to Canada."³⁹ Although Canadian authorities rejected the majority of refugee claims on the grounds that they lacked merit, the imposition of a visa requirement could not have come at a worse time, especially for Mexican woman living on the US-Mexico border, as it precludes victims of endemic and institutionalized gender-based violence from making refugee claims. Providing asylum to women of marginalized communities on the border, in conjunction with police training, could save lives.

Additional Recommendations: Working with Men and Women's Safety Audits

Recent studies on safety audits and social programs geared toward changing male behavior toward women, offer additional approaches to help prevent femicide and gender-based violence. Studies confirm that gender-based programs aiming to change the behaviors of men can yield positive results with regards to the safety and well-being of their partners, children and communities. One study, funded by World Health Organization and Promundo, analyzed 58 programs focused on men and boys throughout

³⁸ Kim Richard Nossal, "Canadian Policy Towards Mexico: Pastor's Puzzle Reconsidered," North American Dialogue Series 13 (January-June 2010): 2-25 Available: http://cedan.ccm.itesm.mx/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/north_american_dialogue_no13_kim_richard_nossal.pdf

³⁹ Ibid, 13-14.

the world, and concluded that the most effective programs combined community outreach, mobilization, mass-media campaigns and group education.⁴⁰ The study further underlined that the most effective programs lasted between 4-6 months. These programs demonstrate the ability to change perceptions of masculinity that elevate violence, and specifically gender-based violence, as a form of power. Concomitantly, the programs teach men how to deal with their emotions in less violent ways, and acknowledge their ability to bring positive changes to their community. Anti-femicide and feminist organizations may greatly benefit from the implementation of such programs in Mexico.

A program geared toward transforming notions of masculinity in El Salvador, composed of seven organizations since 2005, provides a promising example of this form of support.⁴¹ The approach differs from previous campaigns in the region that have mainly approached violence against women by denouncing it. Instead, at the Centre Bartolomé de las Casas, men are invited to participate in discussions about masculinity, their role as fathers and spouses and the social pressures that incite them to engage in acts of violence against women. On the whole, men have responded positively to these workshops, with a drop-out rate of only 5 out of 120 participants. According to the study, participants have also “shown greater recognition of women as individuals with rights, and have begun to show more respect towards others in work at the community level.”⁴² This small scale approach to changing notions of masculinity has had a positive effect on a personal level. However, there are several risks to this approach. Some men and women have mocked these workshops, and have deterred participants from continuing with the program. More importantly, the project’s success must not overshadow feminist organizations that seek to prevent domestic violence via female awareness and empowerment. The authors emphasize the importance of forging a close network between anti-femicide organizations within El Salvador and across the region to prevent obscuring any aspects of the issue.

With regards to urban planning, the Canadian-based organization, *Women in the Cities International*, offers various tools in mainstreaming gender in the management of cities and communities. Their extensive research on the relationship between

⁴⁰ Gary Barker, Christine Ricardo and Marcos Nascimento, “Engaging Men and Boys in Changing Gender-Based Inequity in Health: Evidence from Programme Interventions,” (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2007).

⁴¹ Susan Bird, Rutilio Delgado, Larry Madrigal, John Bayron Ochoa Alberto Tejeda. “Constructing an Alternative Masculine Identity: The Experience of the Centro Bartolomé de Las Casas and Oxfam in El Salvador,” *Gender and Development* 15 (1) Gender-Based Violence (Mar. 2007): 111-121

⁴² Ibid., 118.

urbanization and violence against women offers important insight on how to make cities less dangerous for women by building awareness on the unequal usage of space between men and women, and turning this awareness into policies. In particular, the women's safety audit tool identifies the factors that make women feel unsafe in their surroundings.⁴³ Based on these results, recommendations are made to increase the safety of women in public spaces by means of physical changes to the environment such as lighting and signal amendments, the installation of emergency phones, and the redesign and relocation of transportation and subway stops. The safety audits seek to engage local women with government agencies, especially on the municipal level, to ensure the implementation of gendered initiatives and policies. Research on the usefulness of audits suggest that this tool helps increase awareness of unequal gender norms, give women a public forum from which to express their viewpoints on urban insecurity and violence. Audits may also increase participatory interest in communities, and help generate new relationships between various levels of government, service providers and communities.⁴⁴

Some obstacles that may hinder female audits work are insufficiently trained personnel, information and funds to support the research, and a deficient representation of marginalized women. Communities that do not deem the security of women in their cities an important issue also deter the implementation of new policies, changes in the environment and community solidarity. Despite the relentless killing of women because they are women in Mexico, safety audits provide a potential way to forge solidarity between municipal officials, anti-femicide organizations and security forces. More importantly, safety audits can provide anti-femicide organizations with the tools to fight against femicide by promoting "good urban governance", an aspect of the problem that has not been focused upon by these organizations.

Conclusion

Anti-femicide organizations have made significant headway in bringing international concern to the cause of femicide. Local anti-femicide movements have significantly countered the discourse of the sexual promiscuity deployed by corporate and political elites to delegitimize the victims. They also provide much needed psychological, moral and legal support to families of assassinated women. Mexican and Canadian labor

⁴³ "Women's Safety Audits, What Works and Where?" by *Women in Cities International* (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) 2008): 1-57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

organizations working on corporate responsibility have tackled the problem of gender-based violence and lack of labor rights by pressuring corporations to provide basic human rights and appropriate working conditions. In particular, the MSN's support of unions seeking to abolish "protection contracts", have helped to achieve this goal in the case of the multinational corporation Johnson Controls Utility in Puebla. By fighting for the labor rights of female maquiladora, these workers may provide better supervision to their children, provide better transportation to and from work, and increase the overall quality of living within marginalized communities.

These ongoing efforts, however, have yielded minimal results with regards to the prevention of femicide and the imprisonment of femicide perpetrators. Currently, the Mexican drug wars show no sign of improvement. 2010 was the bloodiest year since the militarization of the drug wars in 2006. Ciudad Juárez suffered the most murders: the number of deaths grew 1,800% between 2007 and 2010, from 244 deaths to 4,427. On April 4, 2011, thousands of people rallied in cities across Mexico, and to a smaller extent in the United States and Spain, to condemn the government of Felipe Calderón. In May 2011, a four-day march that gathered 85,000 people in Mexico City called for the government to change its strategies and rid itself of corrupt officials. According to a nationwide survey, more than 70% of respondents believe that security conditions worsened in 2010; 30% believe that violence will further escalate in 2011.⁴⁵

The increasing levels of violence spurred by the militarization of the drug wars in Mexico has eclipsed the anti-femicide movement, augmented the number of femicides, and worsened the security situation for Mexicans as a whole. Because of the high level of threats toward activists and journalists, the efforts to prevent femicide and promote international awareness of the cause have decreased substantially. For these reasons, it seems that the least dangerous routes available to local and international organizations are to practice local, day-to-day feminist therapy to uproot enduring sexist gender codes of behavior, promote solidarity and female empowerment amongst community members, assist in the healing process of those afflicted by the crisis and provide judicial counsel. It is equally important to work on preventative measures amongst Mexico's youth by providing widespread after-school programs and increasing the number of daycares.

⁴⁵ "Crunching Numbers in Mexico's Drug Conflict," *BBC News Latin America and Caribbean*, January 14, 2011.

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