

Working to Death: Gender, Labour, and Violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

By Shae Garwood

Abstract

Since 1993, 268 women have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. About a third of the murders fit similar patterns; the victims worked in the *maquiladoras* or assembly factories and their bodies were found raped, disfigured, and decaying in the garbage-strewn desert just beyond the maquila industrial parks on the outskirts of the city. This US-Mexico border town has become an export-processing zone, turned conflict zone, where women workers are devalued and literally discarded. A critical look into the violence is particularly important during a time when increasing trade liberalisation is expanding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)-like conditions of Ciudad Juárez throughout the Americas.

Caroline Moser's framework of gendered violence in *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* provides the basis for my analysis. By applying Moser's model to the Juárez murders, this research sheds light on intersections among gender, labour, and violence and may provide lessons for those interested in fostering development in a way that values peace, human rights, and dignity for workers on the global assembly line.

Shae Garwood is a graduate of the University of Virginia and the London School of Economics, with degrees in commerce, development, and gender studies. She has worked for various non-governmental organizations addressing community-based economic development, civil rights, and gender equity throughout the United States and abroad.

Working to Death: Gender, Labour, and Violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

By Shae Garwood

Introduction

Since 1993, 268 women have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. About a third of the murders fit similar patterns; the victims worked in the *maquiladoras* or assembly factories and their bodies were found raped, disfigured, and decaying in the garbage-strewn desert just beyond the maquila industrial parks on the outskirts of the city.¹ This US-Mexico border town has become an export-processing zone, turned conflict zone, where women workers are devalued and literally discarded. A critical look into the violence is particularly important during a time when increasing trade liberalisation is expanding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)-like conditions of Ciudad Juárez throughout the Americas.

Caroline Moser's framework of gendered violence in *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* provides the basis for my analysis.² By applying Moser's model to the Juárez murders, this research sheds light on intersections among gender, labour, and violence and may provide lessons for

¹ The other two thirds were murdered in different ways; some as part of drug traffickers settling accounts or killed by husbands and boyfriends 'who seem more violent toward their partners than at any previous time in Juárez history' according to Deborah Nathan, 'Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, November, 33, n3, 24 (1999). It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of women killed. Estimates range from 210 to 325. The figure given above is from the Office of the Attorney General for the State of Chihuahua as cited by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (www.iachr.org/Comunicados/English/2002/Press4.02htm).

² Caroline Moser, 'The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict' in C. Moser and F. Clark (eds) *Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

those interested in fostering development in a way that values peace, human rights, and dignity for workers on the global assembly line.

Networks of violence and contributing factors

Violence has emerged as a development issue in recent years. Within development discourse, some argue that violence, like conflict, is an impediment to development by deterring foreign investment and hindering economic growth, while others contend that certain countries regularly commit violent acts (and instigate conflict) under the guise of development. In his World Bank report, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Robert Ayres presupposes development is necessarily benevolent and neglects the ways in which it can also contribute to certain forms of violence by, for example, exacerbating structural inequalities.³ Ayres' analysis fails to address how certain types of violence, such as structural violence may actually contribute to some measurements of development, such as economic growth. Gustavo Esteva's analysis in *The Development Dictionary*, on the other hand, presupposes that all foreign-led development is imperialist, and thus, a form of violence, ignoring the wide array of development practices and outcomes.⁴ The relationship between development and

³ Robert Ayres, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1998)

⁴ Gustavo Esteva, 'Development' in W. Sachs (ed.) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992). Also see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

violence in Juárez is complicated since violence against women takes many forms and may actually be bound up with certain forms of ‘development’ such as those strategies of trade liberalisation and industrialisation pursued in Ciudad Juárez.

Caroline Moser’s framework of violence draws upon both developmental and feminist theories of violence.⁵ Like Ayres, her framework emphasises the costs of violence to human, social, and natural capital. Unlike Ayres, however, her framework is explicitly gendered and does not assume that development is necessarily benevolent. She suggests four parts to an operational framework of gendered violence: (1) a gendered continuum of conflict and violence, categorising gendered violence in terms of a threefold continuum of political, economic, and social violence; (2) gendered causal factors – the causes and motivations – for committing violence; (3) gendered costs and consequences of conflict and violence; and, (4) an integral policy approach. I apply the first two parts of Moser’s framework to the violence in Ciudad Juárez, drawing primarily on US and Mexican newspaper articles. Though the second two parts are important, they are beyond the scope of this paper and should be the subject of further research.

Part one of Moser’s framework represents the interrelatedness of social, economic, and political violence. Moser uses the term ‘continuum’ to signify a non-linear, non-hierarchical set of relationships where reinforcing linkages between different types of violence are ‘complex, context-specific, and interrelated’.⁶ Despite the multidimensionality that the model intends to convey, the term *continuum* implies

⁵ Moser, ‘The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict’.

⁶ Moser, ‘The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict’, p.39.

gradations of violence along a horizontal spectrum. The term *network* provides a clearer image of the complex, multi-dimensional linkages in which the Juárez murders are embedded.

The second part of Moser’s framework articulates the integration of a multitude of causal factors at structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels (See Figure A.). The concentric circles are used to illustrate the underlying structural factors within which interpersonal violence occurs. She claims that, ‘gender cuts across all levels of causality and shapes both women’s and men’s involvement in, and experience of, violence’.

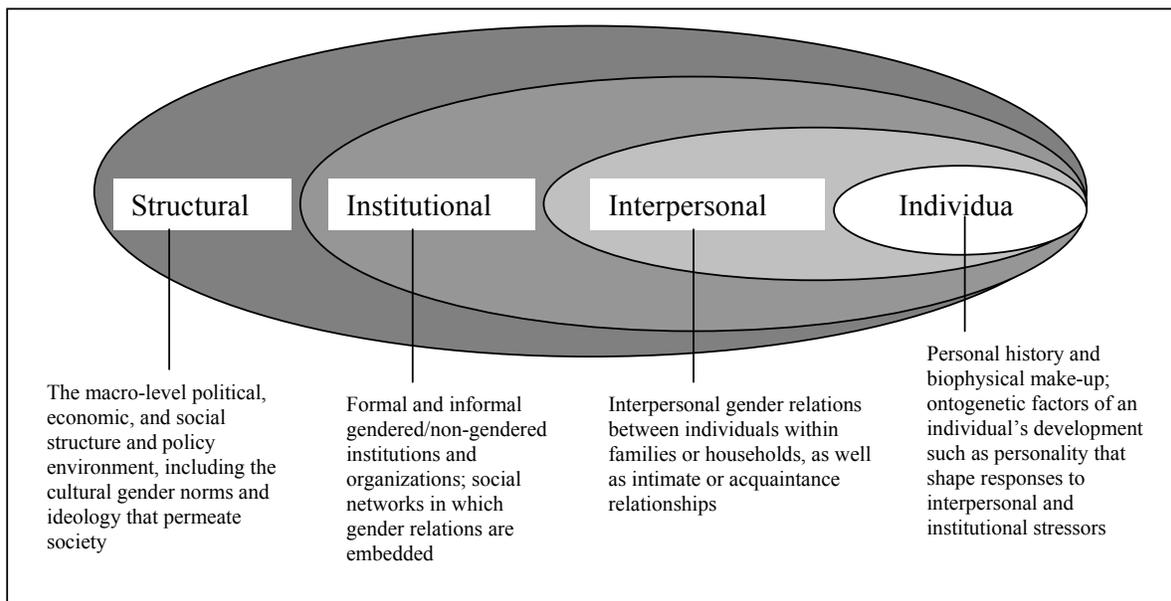


Figure A. Framework for causal levels of gender violence (Moser 2001)

By applying Moser's model to the violence in Ciudad Juárez, it is clear that some of the same forces in conflict zones are at work in this border town. While the model is helpful in conceptualising the causal levels or contributing factors to the violence, it leaves certain aspects of gender violence unexplored and undertheorized.

Defining violence

While Moser's model articulates various causal levels of violence – structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual – taking into account structural and cultural forces that contribute to violence, it does not appear to recognize structural and cultural forces as forms of violence, themselves. Since structural and cultural, as well as representational violence can have very 'real' physical manifestations, it is an important part of defining violence. Violence in the form of physical action may simply be the culmination of other violences. For instance, Matthew Gutmann claims that 'brawls, like wars, begin long before the physical fighting commences'.⁷ The sexual violence in Juárez, too, began long before women's bodies started appearing in the desert. The sexual violence stems from the ways in which maquila women are represented as sexual subjects lacking value, worth, and respectability as a result of their structural position in the global economy.

There are currently over 3,000 maquiladoras in Mexico, employing over 1 million people. As of 1999, Ciudad Juárez was home to 289 maquiladoras,

⁷ Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (London: University of California Press, 1996), p.203.

employing approximately 215,000 people.⁸ Increased population in border cities, downward pressure on real wages, economic insecurity and poverty all contribute to the networks of violence in Ciudad Juárez. Maintaining physical boundaries by the US Border Patrol, as well as discursive ones by the media constructing Mexicans along the border as a source of ‘cheap labour,’ serves to legitimise those boundaries, limiting people’s mobility, while moving goods freely across borders.

Ciudad Juárez sits directly across the US-Mexico border from El Paso, Texas. They are essentially two halves of the same city, with a barbed-wire line drawn down the middle. The combined population is around 2.1 million. While El Paso is considered one of the safest big cities in the US, with 21 murders reported last year, Ciudad Juárez reported ten times that amount.⁹

The relationship among cultural, structural, and physical violence is complex in the case of the sexual violence in Juárez. Maquila workers embody a particular form of structural violence due to their position in the technical and productive order (evidenced by their lack of access to medical care, potable water and sanitation, as well as exposure to dangerous working conditions) and are also subject to cultural violence as maquila managers and politicians ascribe them with particular identities laden with assumptions about their worth, value, and respectability. Construction of these particular and subordinated identities in Ciudad Juárez facilitates and legitimises physical violence, and also constitutes a form of representational violence in and of itself.

⁸ Border Information Outreach Services, Interhemispheric Resource Center (www.us-mex.org), 2001.

Economic and political elements of gender violence

Moser's model acknowledges that gender violence has often been mistakenly considered only a form of social violence, ignoring the economic and political meanings and motivations of that violence. The model highlights certain types of force that 'consciously or unconsciously uses violence to gain or maintain power'.¹⁰ It does not define violence as political, for example, but rather defines violence by the motivation of the perpetrator. In Ciudad Juárez, the murders are a manifestation of social, political, and economic forces unique to this border town.

Trade liberalisation has played a major part in shaping social, economic, and political structures along the US-Mexico border, and in Ciudad Juárez. Since the implementation of NAFTA in January 1994, 'the economy has seen a significant downturn in production, wages, and employment' including devaluations of the peso and 'a 22 percent drop in real wages'.¹¹ It is difficult to isolate the direct effects of NAFTA on wages, though, since it simply extended many of the earlier provisions under the Border Industrialisation Program to the rest of Mexico and intensified a process of trade liberalisation begun thirty years earlier.

According to Leslie Sklair, the advantages of the maquiladora industry to both the Mexican government and US corporations can be summed up as 'jobs, skills, and

⁹ Ginger Thompson, 'Wave of Women's Killings Confounds Juárez', *The New York Times*, 10 December 2000.

¹⁰ Moser, 'The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict', p.36.

¹¹ M.E. Cardero, *The Impact of NAFTA on Female Employment in Mexico* (Mexico City: UNIFEM, 2000), p.40.

dollars'.¹² Some argue that the advantages to workers are minimal and that maquiladoras are centres of exploitation, where workers earn abominably low wages, and are subjected to severe health and safety risks.¹³ Maquila workers are a diverse and heterogeneous group faced with complex and often contradictory ways in which the maquiladoras shape their lives. They gain from wages and new forms of independence, while suffering from multiple forms of exploitation.

Ciudad Juárez, according to Sklair 'contains the dilemma of the maquila industry as a whole.' The dilemma, he says, is that 'foreign investment often does bring economic growth in the sense of increased economic activity, and foreign trade is said to increase, irrespective of the balance between exports and imports, as long as its volume increases'. However, he claims that 'what export-processing zones have failed to do, with few exceptions, is to transform this economic growth into development'.¹⁴ Despite the presence of maquila jobs in Juárez, 40 percent of the population live in poverty, of which 100,000 do not have access to basic water and sewage services.¹⁵ If development is understood as social change and the enhancement of human potential, the developmental potential of the maquiladoras are not only limited, but are causing harm in both material ways and in the particular symbolic and representational lack of value they attribute to workers (evidenced by low wage levels, lack of environmental or worker safety standards, as well as public

¹² Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p.156.

¹³ See Fuentes and Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory* (New York: South End Press, 1981), Devon Peña, *Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender and Ecology on the U.S. – Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), and R. Kamel and A. Hoffman, *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA* (American Friends Service Committee, 1999).

discourse in the media and by the maquiladora industry about workers' value). This economic exploitation contributes to an environment that legitimises murder of women workers.

Julian Cardona, a journalist covering the Juárez murders suggests that, 'You have to ask yourself why there's been this silent war. You have to consider that the transnationals and the governments of both countries have exploited this region for 40 years without paying sufficient salaries to men and women so they can see their children develop. The biggest necessity is money -- a fair wage. As long as Mexico doesn't have an adequate economic system - and it looks like it never will - the violence will continue to expand in concentric circles from the zones of exploitation, like Juárez.'¹⁶ The issues of fair wages is inextricably linked to representations of women working in the maquiladoras, and the violence they face. On average, workers in maquiladoras receive an hourly wage less than those who work in service or commerce and less than those who are self-employed. Elizabeth Fussell suggests that, 'In the drive to compete with other regions specializing in export-oriented manufacturing, the state, the labor unions, and the maquiladora owner's associations have collaborated to maintain low wages in the maquiladoras'.¹⁷

As in other export-processing zones, employers in Ciudad Juárez recruit women to work in the maquiladoras using a narrow concept of women and women

¹⁴ Leslie Sklair, *Capitalism and Development* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.18.

¹⁵ T. Fernández, 'Poverty Affects 40% of Juárez Citizens', *El Diario*, 13 September, 2000.

¹⁶ Jonathan Treat, 'Casa Amiga: Window on Political Economics of Juárez Violence', Americas Program, (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, 3 December 2002).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Fussell, 'Making Labor Flexible: The Recomposition of Tijuana's Maquiladora Female Labor Force', *Feminist Economics*, 6(3), 2000, p.76.

workers based on caricatures of the ‘ideal worker’ embodying ‘nimble fingers’, the ability to perform repetitive tasks, and infinite job flexibility.¹⁸ These characteristics assigned to women workers are often justified using biological, cultural, and racial classifications ignoring the vast diversity among women. The hiring practices in the maquiladoras have changed slightly in recent years, where young women are not the only ones hired. Older women and some men have been able to find work in the maquiladoras as long as they make themselves fit in with the maquiladoras definition of flexible labour.

One Mexican primer for firms locating in the maquiladoras claimed that, ‘from their earliest conditioning women show respect and obedience to authority, especially men. The women follow orders willingly, accept change and adjustments easily and are considerably less demanding’.¹⁹ Regardless of the ways in which the discourse is manipulated, it is used to justify recruiting and hiring women and then also used to justify not training them and relegating them to limited roles as low-paid temporary workers.

¹⁸ Diane Elson, ‘Appraising Recent Developments in the World Market for Nimble Fingers’ in A. Chhachhi and R. Pitten (eds) *Confronting State, Capital and Patriarchy: Women Organising in the Process of Industrialization* (Macmillan Press: Basingstoke, 1996) and Ruth Pearson, ‘Nimble Fingers Revisited: Reflections on Women and Third World Industrialisation in the Late Twentieth Century’ in Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson (eds) *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Meanings and representations

Gender infuses each of the causal levels in Moser's model. However, the model does not provide explanations of the meanings or manifestations of gender norms and ideologies beyond stating their existence as 'cultural gender norms'. One way of enhancing the model to fit Ciudad Juárez is to further the analysis of cultural constructions – meanings and representations – and how they are manifest in various gender identities. Avtar Brah asserts that 'our struggles over meaning are also our struggles over different modes of being: different identities', and those 'identities are inscribed through experiences culturally constructed in social relations'.²⁰ Identities understood in this way are fluid and dynamic and are continually reformulated, negotiated, and contested, unlike the static notion of 'cultural gender norms'.

Amrita Chhachhi and Renée Pittin remind us that identities are not completely ascribed to agent-less individuals. Instead, they assert that identities are 'constantly shifting, historically and contextually' and are selectively mobilised by both men and women in response to economic, political, and social pressures.²¹ In the case of maquila workers in Ciudad Juárez, gendered identities, meanings, and representations are produced by others as well as the women themselves, and are bound up with meanings and representations of worth, value, and respectability. Although gender identities are discursive, they have very real, material consequences in hiring and

¹⁹ Fuentes and Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory*, p.30.

²⁰ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora, Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

employment, forms of resistance, types of surveillance and management, and norms of ‘acceptable’ behaviour. For some maquiladora workers in Juárez, these cultural constructions and identities can mean the difference between life and death.

The sexual murders in Juárez have been presented in the newspapers as public violence, discursively distanced from other, so-called ‘private’ forms of sexual violence. Although the rapes and murders in Ciudad Juárez are widely denounced by politicians and police departments, they are done so in a way as to separate them from the daily violence many women endure in their own homes. Politicians and police have urged women to retreat to their homes under the supposed protection and supervision of men. The mayor of Juárez issued rhetorical pronouncements like, ‘Do you know where your daughter is tonight?’²² These statements imply that women are safe in their homes as opposed to the danger they face in public. Focusing only on public acts of violence allows men who perpetrate gender violence at home (which still constitutes the majority of sexual violence) to distance their own actions from the sexual violence portrayed in the newspapers.²³

In 1999, a group of bus drivers hired by the maquiladoras to transport women to and from work were arrested for several of the murders. Servando Sarabia, the executive director of the city’s maquiladora association, said in response to the bus drivers’ arrest, that ‘no business is responsible for the safety of its workers, except in

²¹ Amrita Chhachhi and Renee Pitten, ‘Multiple Identities: Multiple Strategies’ in Chhachhi and Pitten (eds) *Confronting State, Capital and Patriarchy: Women Organising in the Process of Industrialization* (Macmillan Press: Basingstoke, 1996), p.10.

²² Nathan, ‘Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez’.

²³ K. Soothill and S. Walby, *Sex Crime in the News* (London: Routledge, 1991).

the factory'.²⁴ Interestingly, this is one of the few times that the maquiladoras limit their sphere of influence to within the factory walls. Many maquiladoras are involved in arranging workers' housing, transportation to and from work as well as to bars on Friday nights, controlling fertility and sexuality through forced pregnancy tests, mandatory contraception, and proof of menstruation, and sponsoring company beauty pageants.²⁵ All of these constitute ways in which the maquiladoras employ a particularly gendered and sexualised surveillance of women workers on and off the job.²⁶ Despite all this surveillance though, there is little protection offered to women workers. Many of those who have been killed disappeared while on their way to or from their jobs in the maquiladoras in earlier pre-dawn hours or late at night. 'Many of the women employed in the maquiladoras live up to two hours from their jobs, and have to walk on dark streets in early morning hours en route to and from work.'²⁷ Some suggest that simply by offering safe public transportation and police patrols of the areas where women have regularly been abducted may help prevent future tragedies. According to Ignacio Alvarado Álvarez, 90% of the women murdered

²⁴ M.B. Sheridan, 'The Deaths that Haunt Juarez', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May, 1999.

²⁵ See Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *For We are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), Peña, *Terror of the Machine*, Human Rights Watch, *A Job or Your Rights: Continued Sex Discrimination in Mexico's Maquiladora Sector* (Human Rights Watch, December 1998), Nathan, 'Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez', and S. Tiano and C. Ladino, 'Dating, Mating, and Motherhood: Identity Construction among Mexican Maquila Workers', *Environment and Planning A*, 31. 1999.

²⁶ The maquiladoras often use sub-contractors to provide the above 'services', just as with the bus drivers, in order to minimise any direct liability. The cases against the bus drivers were later dropped when evidence emerged that their confessions had been obtained under torture in police custody. Two other bus drivers were arrested in November 2001. They, too, appeared to have been burned and beaten by police. Later, police, who supposedly mistook him for a fugitive, killed an attorney of one of the bus drivers who was about to file police misconduct charges. This type of shoddy police work has led many to accuse the police of incompetence and misconduct in solving the murders, as well as suggesting a possible police cover-up of the murders.

²⁷ Treat, 'Casa Amiga'.

lived in poor areas lacking police services, and none of the victims owned their own vehicle. One woman who arrived at her factory job three minutes late was turned away; her body was found some time later.²⁸

Salzinger suggests that maquila workers are ‘the apparent embodiments of availability – cheap labor, willing flirtation [with managers] – these young women have become the paradigmatic workers for a transnational political economy in which a highly sexualised form of femininity has become a standard “factor of production”’.²⁹ The maquila industry devalues women workers in several ways, capitalising on the lack of opportunities available to them, paying them lower wages, and creating an environment where women workers are considered untrainable and expendable. Fussell’s analysis of maquiladoras in Tiajuana found that, ‘maquiladora workers earn lower wages than other low-skill women workers. Instead of locally competitive wages they gain a stable alternative to informal employment.’³⁰ The creation of ‘sexual subjects’ in the maquiladoras, Salzinger argues, is not distracting from production (as sexual harassment is often assumed to do), but is rather an integral part of the production process.

Salzinger articulates the ways in which women actively participate in the sexualisation, evident in her use of the term sexual subjects instead of sexual objects. For instance, the Electroworld beauty contest provides a setting in which ‘to claim one’s own desirability becomes an act of courage, independence, loyalty and

²⁸ Evelyn Nieves, ‘To Work and Die in Juárez’, *Mother Jones*, May/June 2002.

²⁹ Leslie Salzinger, ‘Manufacturing Sexual Subjects: “Harassment”, Desire, and Discipline on a Maquiladora Shopfloor’, *Ethnography*, 1(1), 2000, 67-92.

³⁰ Fussell, ‘Making Labor Flexible’, p.63.

solidarity all at once'.³¹ Maquila women's dress and appearance are crucial to their work where, 'most maquila girls don miniskirts, heels, and gobs of lipstick and eye shadow. Their flashiness is hardly incidental to their jobs. Instead, it is a fundamental feature of those maquilas that make a priority of hiring females: the reinforcement and updating of a rigid version of "womanhood"'.³² This particular performance of 'womanhood' is what gets them hired, but is also what is used to justify relegating them to low-level positions.

Women's agency and active resistance to the murders can be seen in the dynamic women's movement in Ciudad Juárez. The murders have galvanized women's organizations locally, nationally, and internationally to demand better working conditions for maquiladora workers, thorough investigations of the murders, and more adequate protection for women and girls in Ciudad Juárez. Casa Amiga, a domestic violence and rape crisis centre has played a vital role in not only providing much needed services, but also raising awareness about gender based violence. Casa Amiga led a campaign last year to defeat a proposed state law that would have reduced jail time for rapists who could prove that they had been 'provoked' by their victims.³³ Over the past year, women on both sides of the border have organized marches, demonstrations, candle light vigils, letter writing campaigns, and showings of the documentary *Señorita Extraviada* by Lourdes Portillo. Mujeres en Red launched a nationwide campaign *A Parar la Lista: Ni Una Mas* (Stop the list: Not One More) comprised of hundreds of activists, scholars, journalists, and human rights

³¹ Salzinger, 'Manufacturing Sexual Subjects', p.83.

³² Nathan, 'Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez', p.28.

groups aimed at raising awareness about the Juárez killings and changing the conditions along the border which allow these murders to take place.³⁴

The discourse surrounding the murders often attempts to link the victims with inappropriate behaviour that would apparently vindicate or at least explain the murders. The federal human rights commission claimed that Chihuahua state authorities moved slowly on the investigations because they initially assumed the murdered women were prostitutes.³⁵ The discursive connection between maquiladora workers and prostitution is an important one. According to Deborah Nathan, 'During the planning stages and early years of the Border Industrialisation Program promoters often claimed that the new factories would rescue border women from prostitution, presumably the only livelihood previously available to them'.³⁶ The continuing discourse equating maquiladora workers with prostitution seems to be consistent with a larger trend equating all poor, wage-earning women with prostitution. Pablo Vila suggests that prostitutes in Ciudad Juárez are considered 'mainly as females who open their bodies to the sexual requirements of US soldiers and tourists. Symbolically, these women's bodies signify the openness of the border to the needs of the "other"'. Vila claims that that openness is characterised not just by 'the continuing pouring of

³³ Treat, 'Casa Amiga'.

³⁴ Mujeres en Red, 'Campaña nacional: A Parar la lista: Ni una Mas,' (<http://www.nodo50.org/mujeresred/mexico-juarez.htm>). In addition to this network, there are groups in the US and Canada as well, such as the Maquila Solidarity Network, Women on the Border, and the Coalition on Violence Against Women and Families on the Border, that support maquila workers. Activists have appealed to the UN, the Organization of American States' Interamerican Commission on Human Rights, and President Vicente Fox to assist prosecutors with solving the crimes. Until recently Fox refused to get involved on the grounds that homicide is a state crime, not a federal one. Fox has now pledged federal assistance, but it has not yet materialised.

³⁵ Sheridan, 'The Deaths that Haunt Juarez'.

³⁶ Nathan, 'Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez', p.7.

American males in Juárez's cantinas', but also by 'the border maquiladora program and its overwhelming use of young Mexican females (bodies) in its labour force'.³⁷ Equating maquila workers with prostitutes serves to condemn them for both rejecting 'traditional' gender roles as mothers and homemakers and also for making themselves accessible to American men and transnational capital.

Those responsible for investigating the cases continue to relentlessly search for clues to the women's deaths in their lack of respectability. José Antonio Parro, a criminologist working on the cases said 'some of these women were in the wrong place at the wrong time by choice'.³⁸ Arturo Gonzalez Rascon, attorney general of the state of Chihuahua said, 'because of their life conditions, the places where they go about their life, they are at risk. It would be very difficult for someone to go out in the street when it's raining...It would be very hard not to get wet'.³⁹ Similarly, Robert Ressler, a retired FBI criminal profiler and consultant to Juárez police said 'the girls themselves have been told to get off the bus and have their families meet them. I observed them jumping off the buses and just disappearing, alone'.⁴⁰ Assumptions about women's behaviour allow the 'experts' to blame the victims, excuse their own inability to solve the crimes, and send the message that wage-earning women are inviting sexual attacks and possibly murder upon themselves by

³⁷ Cited in Nathan, 'Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juarez'.

³⁸ M. Brant, 'A Message in Murder: Who's Killing the Young Women of Juarez? Activists say there's a Backlash Against New Gender Roles', *Newsweek*, 19 October, 1998.

³⁹ T. Madigan, 'A Fight for the Women of Juárez', *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 15 March 1999.

⁴⁰ S. Ferriss, 'Confession by Bus Driver Heightens Probe Into Multiple Murders', *Cox News Service*, 1 April 1999.

not observing 'traditional' domestic roles and staying within the confines of the domestic or private sphere.

Workers' reactions to the violence vary, but they are rarely reported in the newspapers - perhaps due to fear, or perhaps they are not often asked their opinions. One maquila worker, Nati Varona, sums up what many women maquila workers may be feeling in regards to the violence. Simply put, she says, 'we have to work. We have to take the risks'.⁴¹ Women enter the maquiladoras from economic necessity as well as to gain financial independence. Despite the dangers and fears surrounding the sexual violence in Ciudad Juárez, women workers are not retreating. Aureny Cuevas Martínez, an 18-year old maquiladora worker told one reporter, 'We do not like to live this way. But the killings keep happening, and there is no one to protect us, except us.'⁴² The workers are doing what they have done for years – working to death.

Causal levels

Moser's model identifies causal levels as structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual. Theorising how those levels interact may provide insight into the Ciudad Juárez murders. Cultural constructions and identities, as described above, provide some insight into the interplay between causal levels. According to Matthew Gutmann, social actors are 'presented with stages and scripts

⁴¹ Sheridan, 'The Deaths that Haunt Juarez'.

⁴² Thompson, 'Wave of Women's Killings Confounds Juárez'.

not of their own choosing. What they do creatively within these social and cultural constraints, and how originally they perform their roles, however, is not preordained. There is room to maneuver'.⁴³ In other words, maquila women, as well as the perpetrators of violence are products of, but not reducible to, the structures around them. While individual actors have agency, they cannot act completely independent of their social surroundings.

The relationship between violence, cultural constructions, and identities is complex. Henrietta Moore provides a particularly helpful way of understanding the relationship between violence and forms of identity and difference, such as gender, race, and class where violence is understood as the 'sign of a struggle for the maintenance of certain fantasies of identity and power'.⁴⁴ In this sense, interpersonal violence such as the murder of women working in the maquiladoras can be seen as the result of more structural and institutional forces. Moore's analysis forces us to confront the legitimacy of 'gender norms and ideologies' in Moser's framework, as well as to examine the gender identities that make certain people feel entitled to power and resources over others. This is particularly important for the maquiladoras, where women's participation in formal employment (and challenge to 'traditional' gender roles) is often blamed for the violence, rather than men's fantasies of identity and power that contribute to, and legitimise, gender violence in the first place.

The networks of violence in Ciudad Juárez make up a complex web in which various forms of violence and power relations interrelate. These range from violence

⁴³ Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho*, p.245.

perpetrated by border authorities, domestic violence, drug and gang related violence, and poverty and economic insecurity. The sexual violence in Juárez is part of this network, embedded in the various linkages between different types of social, economic, and political violence at various levels.

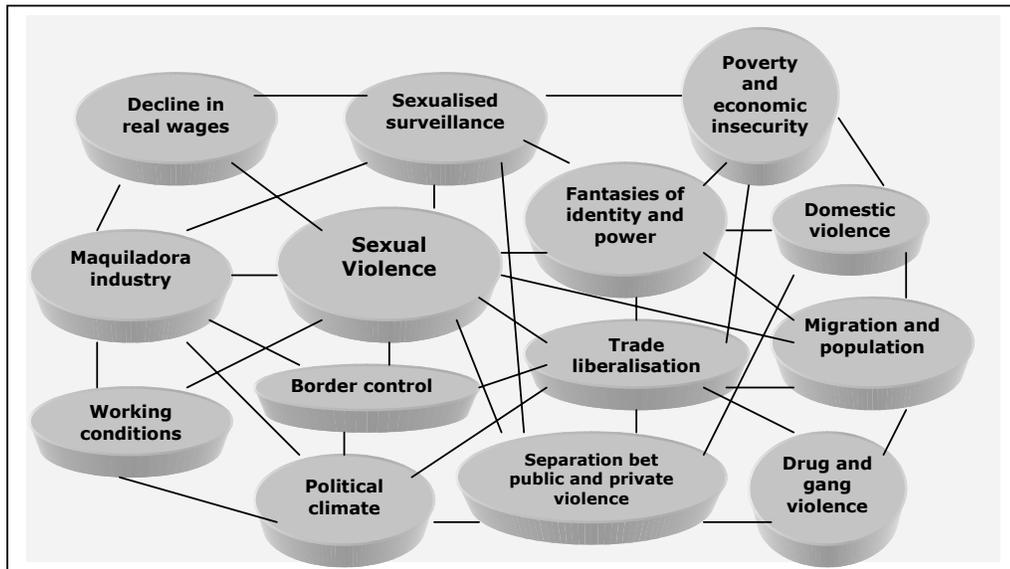


Figure B. Networks of Violence in Ciudad Juárez

Conclusion

In November 2002, world leaders met in Quito, Ecuador for the Seventh Summit of the Free Trade of the Americas Act (FTAA) to develop plans to extend NAFTA-like provisions to 34 countries. Not surprisingly, the murders of maquila women in Juárez were not discussed at the Summit. The sexual violence in Ciudad

⁴⁴ Henrietta Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity

Juárez, though, is linked to the economic policies decided at such meetings. Sexual violence in Juárez is not simply an impediment to economic and political development, but is linked to these processes of change, mandating that the processes themselves undergo gender analysis. The sexual violence in Ciudad Juárez is a brutal illustration of the importance of incorporating gender analysis in trade negotiations and considering the gendered outcomes of economic and political policies and how they affect the lives of women and men on the global assembly line, both in material, as well as discursive or representational ways.

As icons of trade liberalisation, the maquiladoras contribute to the sexual violence in Juárez in several ways. Recruitment and hiring practices, lack of training and decision-making roles assigned to women, and sexualized surveillance create an environment where contributions women make to global production are overlooked and undervalued. Discursively constructing women workers as ‘cheap labour’ and ‘loose women’ effectively maintains low wages and ultimately contributes to the sexual violence.

Gullermina González, whose daughter Sagrario was murdered in 1998, told a reporter, ‘I believe the simple fact of being a woman here is a grave danger’.⁴⁵ However, it is not just ‘being a woman’ that is a danger, but it is all of the unstated, attached constructions and assumptions about women’s value, worth, and respectability that makes ‘being a woman’ dangerous in Juárez. These constructions about ‘being a woman’ are a form of representational violence that often goes

Press, 1994), 70.

⁴⁵ Paterson, ‘Reign of Terror Against Juarez Women Continues’.

unrecognised, but is vitally important since it manifests itself in cultural, structural, and direct acts of violence and conflict.

The sexual violence in Ciudad Juárez is embedded within networks of violence with multiple, multidirectional contributing factors. Although the networks of violence articulated here focus on Ciudad Juárez specifically, the networks extend far beyond the US-Mexico border. Activist Esther Chávez reminds us that ‘as consumers in the global marketplace...the victims of Ciudad Juárez are all of our deaths. They died because they committed the worst sin you can commit in this time of wolves – to be young, to be poor, and to be women’.⁴⁶ Maquila women in Ciudad Juárez are being sacrificed to the global marketplace, which in turn treats them as worthless, temporary, and disposable.

Along with searching for individual killers (and a ‘technical’ solution to the killings), it is important to question the conditions in Ciudad Juárez where women, who contribute significant portions of labour to the global economy, are killed and discarded. As long as the murders are treated as technical problems, simply in need of better police work to solve the crimes, more ‘technical’ problems will turn up dismembered in the desert. In order to stop the sexual violence in Ciudad Juárez, police, politicians, and development policy makers must examine and act upon the multitude of contributing factors that have allowed this export-processing zone to become a conflict zone, all in the name of development.

⁴⁶ M. Hadrill, ‘Women Say Juarez Killings Show System’s Bias’, *Dallas Morning News*, 11 October 1999.