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Echoes Of Silence: Femicidio And Gender Terrorism

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ECHOES OF SILENCE: *FEMINICIDIO* AND GENDER TERRORISM

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Abstract

Amnesty International reports that in 2020 alone, of the 3,723 killings of women reported in Mexico, only 940 of them were investigated as *feminicidios*.¹ Since 1993, Ciudad Juárez—a border town just below El Paso, Texas and in Mexico’s northern state of Chihuahua— has become a city of lost girls, where hundreds of young women have disappeared. The mutilated bodies of these women often appear in the deserts of the US/Mexico border, where such acts of violence have become the norm. Impunity and corruption prevent justice to be brought for these victims. While this study seeks to understand this violence against women, there is clearly a human rights problem that needs to be further explored.

My approach will follow an analysis of the historiography and policies in place that have led up to the present moment, where an emphasis on machismo and hegemonic masculinity within gender-based violence will be placed. Specific attention will be given to cases in Juárez, and major cities across Mexico. A cross-examination of sources (peer reviewed articles, gubernatorial publications, interviews) will provide an epistemological framework to understand the social and political circumstances that lead to this violence against women. In addition to deconstructing the social attitudes and policies that make women predominantly vulnerable, particular emphasis will be placed on the consideration of sexual violence and rape as a form of gender terrorism. Through this investigative framework, I intend to bring awareness to this global human rights crisis that threatens women’s rights to safety, justice, and an elevated quality of life.

¹ This refers to the intentional killing of women, simply because they are women. *Feminicidio* can take a systemic form, where women are specifically targeted and assassinated at an unprecedented rate. This can be the result of a single perpetrator or a group, where the assassin(s) can have a possible familiar or intimate relationship with the victim, but it is not necessary. This concept will further be discussed in the study.

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I would like to thank my faculty mentor, Dra. Alicia Arrizón for trusting in my ability and motivation to report on such a sensitive topic. Her expertise and background served to further supplement my knowledge and research.

Secondly, I would like to express gratitude for the connections I have created in the four years as a University Honors student. I will carry the lessons learned here wherever my career may take me.

This is for my dear sisters, whose tender love and friendship I would not trade for the world. For my mother, whose concern and prayers allowed me to keep pushing through the most tumultuous times of my undergraduate journey. These are the women who inspire me to be unapologetic yet graceful every single day: they will continue to be my source of strength. *Esto es para las que se fueron, y para las que vendrán.*

Lastly, this is for the young women and girls who are killed every day without mercy, and their voices now lost. I listen to their cries and mourn with their families, even if I only know their names through articles and *testimonios*. *Esto es para ellas. ¡Ni una más, ni una menos!*

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Introduction

Humillante y abusiva

La intocable impunidad

Los huesos en el desierto

Muestran la cruda verdad

Las muertas de Ciudad Juárez

Son vergüenza nacional

Humiliating and abusive

The untouchable impunity

The bones in the desert

Demonstrate the cruel reality

The dead women of Ciudad Juárez

Are a national shame

The above passage is taken from a song by the infamous Mexican folk band *Los Tigres del Norte*, whose *narcocorridos* highlight the social and political woes of the Mexican people.²

This song, titled “Las mujeres de Juárez,” narrates a critical time in the nation’s history of *feminicidio*— where the bodies of young women were frequently turning up in the desert outskirts of the city. These girls were abducted, sexually assaulted, and raped. If fresh cadavers

² *Narcocorridos* or drug ballads are a sub-genre of the traditional Mexican ballad. This style of song originates from the sixteenth century Spanish romance that has arguably become an integral part of the Mexican identity following the revolutionary struggle. It is comparable to gangsta rap, or other genres popular in subaltern communities. McDowell, John H. “The Ballad of Narcomexico.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 49, no. 3 (2012): 249–74. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.49.3.249>.

were discovered, signs of torture and genital mutilation demarcated the body. But as the song suggests, all that is left are the skeletons of these victims, serving as violent reminders of the country's sociopolitical environment. Humiliating and abusive is Mexico's state of impunity, where the government's capability to maintain rule of law is non-existent. The "cruel reality" is that drug cartels control Juárez and Mexico, where the forces in place to maintain justice and order often are pawns to the nation's underworld of organized crime.

Power, personified by the ruthless nature of the gangs and cartels present in Juárez, is one held by the male sex. This indescribable violence reflects the unequal power dynamics at two levels: the inability of a citizen to find justice in their own country, but also the imbalance of power among heteronormative gender identities. The hierarchies of gender cannot be escaped and are instead entrenched in the deepest and darkest aspects of everyday life. This is true in Mexico and across Latin America. Songs such "Las mujeres de Juárez" only serve to bolster the widely accepted gender norms of the country and restates what is most obvious in terms of justice in Mexico: impunity is a curse that has yet to be expunged.

However, this is only the tip of the iceberg, as impunity is part of a larger discussion over violence against women across Mexico and Latin America. Impunity relinquishes the authors of this violence from any form of punishment or culpability, as often those responsible are men. Due to established social attitudes surrounding the male sex wielding more power over the female sex is a phenomenon that can be observed in almost every society. These hegemonic social values are causing greater harm than good—giving rise to generations of men who believe in the submission of women to a varying degree. The intricacies of this relationship are evident in everyday life for most women in Mexico. In the case of the murdered women of Juárez, it is a scathing reminder of the violence women are subject to daily.

Background

Femicide, as defined by the World Health Organization, is the intentional murder of a woman because she is a female. In addition, femicide is typically perpetrated by men, and differs from homicide in that it is usually “committed by ex-partners or members at home, often involving threats, intimidation and abuse.”³ When discussing the wave of violence against women in Mexico and the increased incidence of women killed, many human rights activists have favored the term *feminicidio*. This term, which translates to “feminicide” is one that prominent gender scholars in Latin America have been using since the late twentieth century, where it first serves as a more accurate translation of femicide in the Spanish language. Feminist theoretical and political thinkers such as Julia Monárrez Fragozo have used this term to represent the murders of women in non-war scenarios, to separate the term from its more analogous meaning of the “homicide of women.”⁴ This is beyond the act of killing women, as these cases are crimes against humanity, in that the overarching historical conditions in our society generate social practices that allow violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women.⁵

Oftentimes the terms femicide and feminicide are used interchangeably in research and literature done on gender-based violence. Many scholars and activists in Latin America, however, have taken the initiative to transform this term into something that is beyond a Western notion of gender violence, as it combines prominent Latin American feminist theories to map the power dynamics of gender, sexuality, race, and class.⁶ With this shift in the overall analytic focus

³ “Femicide ,” World Health Organization, accessed February 15, 2023, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/WHO_RHR_12.38_eng.pdf;sequence=1.

⁴ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), preface XV.

⁵ *Ibid*, preface XVI.

⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

from the term femicide to *feminicidio* then can scholarship place close attention to how gender norms, its inequalities, and power relations combine to increase the vulnerability of women.⁷

Feminicidio over femicide is entirely political as well, where it creates a transborder perspective and places a relevance on theories and pedagogies originating in the Global South. Scholars like Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano argue that violence against women requires a new conceptualization, one that changes and evolves as our current understanding of *feminicidio* also changes. In adapting *feminicidio*, it is also an act of resistance as Latin American thinkers dismantle the “colonist formulation” of the region and transform it into more than just a field of study but a place where theory is produced.⁸

There are layers to what *feminicidio* means for scholars and the families affected. In any event, this term is all encompassing, as it denotes the killing of women and girls founded on a gender power structure. This gender power structure relates the idea that one gender is dominant over another, and often it is the male that prevails over the woman. Gender is intricately bound to power, where the formation of this status is formed in antiquity and the formation culture. *Feminicidio*, as it is, can occur in both the public and private sphere, where both the state and individual perpetrators can have just as much fault. Lastly, *feminicidio* is an issue of systemic violence as it has roots in political, economic, and cultural inequalities, and therefore is a genocide against women.⁹ Women are immediate targets not because of a particular race or religion, but because they are women.

In this work, I will also refer to the murder and disappearance of women and girls as *feminicidio* because it is all-inclusive and non-heteronormative. Also, because it confronts this

⁷ “Femicide ,” World Health Organization, accessed February 15, 2023, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/WHO_RHR_12.38_eng.pdf;sequence=1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

type of violence from beyond the private forms, as it suggests that it is a problem rooted in patriarchy. To further understand this conceptualization of male domination, the patriarchy is defined as a system of social stratification that reinforces the superior position of the male and the subordinate status of women. This system of social structure is historical, in that early traditions denoted patriarchy as a rule by male heads of extended families.¹⁰ Etymologically, patriarchy means a structure of rulership in which power is distributed unequally in favor of fathers, where the symbolism of male principle expresses their control over women's sexuality and fertility.¹¹ Even in modern society, patriarchy still influences all aspects of social life, from religion, education, economics to politics. My hope is that through this work, a greater conversation can be sparked, one in which solutions to the problem of *femicidio* can be formulated and solutions to these archaic traditions of domination discussed.

¹⁰ Waters, Malcolm. "Patriarchy and Viriarchy: An Exploration and Reconstruction of Concepts of Masculine Domination." *Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1989): 193–211. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42853920>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The Perfect Storm

In 1993, Ciudad Juárez was one of the most populous border cities in Mexico, as it was attractive to many migrants because of its accessibility to the United States border and the *maquila* industry. These *maquiladoras* or manufacturing plants form an integral part of northern Mexico's industrialization and efforts to follow along this neo-liberal trend of globalization. These manufacturing plants have headquarters based in the United States, where these companies are given the opportunity to capitalize on a less expensive labor force in Mexico.¹² Originating in 1965 as a joint venture from the US and Mexico, the maquiladora industry is advantageous because it generates jobs for many of the cities of Northern Mexico, all while saving these US corporations close to one million a year in lower wages and manufacturing costs. With the signing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and coming into effect in January of 1994, *maquilas* were the driving force of Juárez, as many unskilled laborers flocked into this border town in hopes of gaining new opportunities and a better chance of improving their economic situation.

For many, Juárez is an opportunity for a better life, away from the poverty of Mexico's rural southern states and regions. According to the World Bank, nearly forty-two percent of Mexico's population still live in relative poverty, or classified as "multidimensionally poor" in 2018.¹³ This is still over fifty two million people of the estimated one-hundred twenty million residing in Mexico.¹⁴ The reason for this particular discussion of poverty and population is

¹² "Maquiladoras/Twin Plants," The City of San Diego, <https://www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/sandiego/trade/mexico/maquiladoras>.

¹³ World Bank. "Poverty and Equity Brief: Mexico." The World Bank Group. Accessed March 10, 2023. https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_MEX.pdf.

¹⁴ "Mexico," Mexico - Place Explorer - Data Commons, https://datacommons.org/place/country/MEX?utm_medium=explore&mprop=count&popt=Person&hl=en.

necessary in order to contextualize the overall disparity and motivation for frequenting and beginning a life anew in a city that has been dubbed “the capital of murdered woman,” as drugs, organized crime and corruption also define the this border town’s reputation.¹⁵

A large part of Juárez reputation is also due in part to its connection to local cartels and organized crime. Mexico is no stranger to corruption networks, established originally in the 1950s by local *plazas* or gangs composed of drug producers and smugglers who worked to service the greater US markets.¹⁶ These corruption networks, with deep ties to the dominant PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) worked together to make such lucrative business profitable, where *mordidas* or bribes facilitated the overall production, storage, and transport of illegal drugs into the United States. Many Mexican officials, from local policemen to state governors to the highest-ranking military agents participated in this “live and let live” ethos where they simply turn the other way and traffickers operate autonomously within the constraints of its established territories.¹⁷

This is the way in which the Juárez Cartel operated, where it was easy to corrupt local bureaucrats and police forces, as it is in fact the norm. Cartels like that of Juárez rose to its violent dominance that is known today in the late 1980s, where after the dismantling of the infamous Guadalajara Cartel and the capture of its kingpin, other movers ascended the throne, and the alliance of plazas was no more. It was not until the rise of a kingpin by the name of Vicente Carrillo Fuentes that the legacy of the cartel took a dramatic shift. This kingpin conducted his business in such a manner that brought absorbent amounts of attention to him as he enjoyed executing his foes, excessively consuming drugs and alcohol, and carousing with

¹⁵ Coha, “Femicides of Juárez: Violence Against Women in Mexico,” Council on Hemispheric Affairs , April 8, 2014, <https://www.coha.org/femicides-of-juarez-violence-against-women-in-mexico/>.

¹⁶ George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (Routledge, n.d.), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 30.

women at bars and strip clubs.¹⁸ Narco-culture consisted of just that: drugs, death, and sex. In attempts to show off their wealth and power, men involved in this business take after Carrillo-Fuentes and display their violent capability for all to cower and see.

It is important to understand the reverence yet fear the local common-folk have of men like Carrillo-Fuentes, because they are the movers and shakers of cities like Juárez, and their lawlessness *is* law. For the poverty-stricken working class, these high profiler killers are no better than the local bureaucrats elected to maintain order. In fact, it is common for local governments to be in collusion with the cartels because it is a lucrative business, and the avarice for money always draws in lowly mayors or police chiefs. It is because of these conditions that corruption and impunity are so common in Juárez and all throughout Mexico. Mexican society is riddled with an overall lack of coordination among authorities, and often the collusion with the underworld of organized crime stalls all progression of justice.

In assessing Ciudad Juárez at the local level, indeed does it have the reputation of being one of the most problematic municipalities along the US/Mexico border. Local police reactions to the discoveries of bodies since 1993 have been historically weak, often failing to even find a culprit after months of supposed investigation.¹⁹ Often, local authorities primarily act via inaction, where this paradox is the most concrete manner to describe the investigation of these killings.

In a 2003 report, Amnesty International details the events leading up to the discoveries of bodies late in 2001, where police logs are used as evidence of a general lack of alarm when the city's emergency line was called late one evening. The call was made by a passerby to report

¹⁸ Ibid, 78.

¹⁹ "Mexico: Intolerable Killings: 10 Years of Abductions and Murder of Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua," Amnesty International, June 4, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/026/2003/en/>.

a woman being beaten and raped by two men in a car. The log for that night read “*nada que reportar*” or “nothing to report.”²⁰ There is a sort of cognitive dissonance related to the policemen of Ciudad Juárez, where they are meant to protect the vulnerable and innocent, yet they continue to perpetuate this continual state of violence by ignoring signs that might lead them to find a culprit or *the* culprits. Or perhaps this ignorance is intentional, because they were given a *mordida* or some other form of extortion to keep quiet and turn a blind eye.

Authorities who choose to ignore that violence against women exists outside of the private realm pose the greatest threat, where patterns such as the one in Juárez are systematic and organized. However, addressing *feminicidio* as a human rights crisis is necessary to differentiate it from intimate partner violence. In the case of Juárez, gender inequality and the power men hold has manifested even in moments of death, where violent acts are justified because there is a possibility that there was a familiar relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

This, however, is not the case, as *feminicidio* can be distinguished into categories ranging from intimate to organized systemic *feminicidio*. Intimate *feminicidio* can be further subdivided into child and familial *feminicidio*, where the assassination of women is committed by men whom the victim had a past intimate, household, or other similar relationship to.²¹ *Feminicidio* is often mistaken to be a result of stigmatized occupations, or because women seek employment in places like bars, nightclubs, or are sex workers. But *feminicidio* is beyond this line of work, where unequal gender relations create this othering of women who work in spaces like this, dehumanizing them even further.

²⁰ “Mexico: Intolerable Killings: 10 Years of Abductions and Murder of Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua,” Amnesty International, June 4, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/026/2003/en/>.

²¹ Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 158.

In places like Ciudad Juárez and across Latin American, there is consistent failure to publicly denounce *feminicidio*, where state inaction in investigating and prosecuting is a specific condition that fosters violence against women. The public often lacks proper education and knowledge over the subject, and ambiguity surrounds news laws and legal terms designed to identify gender-based violence.²² In assessing how government policies construct social problems, often there is room for misinterpretation and silences, and legislative success is thus relatively weak. Therefore, feminist, and legal scholars urge countries to clearly define femicide/feminicide/*feminicidio* so that killings of this nature can be properly identified as such.²³ Creating this distinction is a critical step in increasing this phenomenon's visibility. This, however, will not put an end to centuries of normalization and overall social desensitization, as like academics, governments need to acknowledge that by allowing discrepancies in their prescriptions and perceptions of this phenomenon is the exact reason why it is so uncontrollably prevalent. There must be a universal definition of this "problem" to assess and apply a course of action, where freedom from punishment is not acceptable and justice is served.²⁴

²² Michelle Carrigan and Myrna Dawson, "Problem Representations of Femicide/Feminicide Legislation in Latin America," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9, no. 2 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v9i2.1354>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Gender/Sex Relations

Between the parallels and paradoxes that is Juárez as a border town and Mexico with the potential to become a global superpower, lies a greater secret to Mexican society. Underneath the violence that haunts daily life in Mexico is a silent killer. This silent killer is the set of social attitudes that have been the hallmark of Mexican society since the creation of the new republic in 1917. As the country reformulated and created a new national identity after the Revolution, gender structures within the country were stirred, but not entirely forgotten. Despite many women participating in the war effort as *soldaderas* and joining their men on the battlefields, Mexico was still certainly a man's world.²⁵

For many citizens of the new Mexican republic, war memory consisted of men recalling the compelling urge to fight in this struggle against dictatorship, simply because there was a certain "manliness" that attracted them.²⁶ This peculiarity of the Mexican man's attraction to fight for independence was first introduced by Vicente Mendoza, an early scholar on *machismo* in Mexico. He argues that the earliest and most authentic forms of this idea are present in *corridos*—an anthology to the preserved memory of the "guerrilleros [who never gave up, rebelling against those who represented law and order, fighting for sport, or for pleasure..]"²⁷ It is

²⁵Anna Macias, "Women and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920," *The Americas* 37, no. 1 (1980): 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/981040>.

Soldaderas refers to "lady soldiers" or the women who followed their male partners into the front lines of the Mexican Revolution. The *soldadera* followed her man when he left home and joined the fighting force against the Diaz regime. Often, they served as nurses and caretakers to the wounded, but also marched in the front lines carrying ammunition when needed, often aiding their men however they could.

²⁶ Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 137-45.

²⁷ Vicente T. Mendoza, "El Machismo En México: Al Través de Las Canciones, Corridos y Cantares," Cuadernos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano, <https://revistas.inapl.gob.ar/index.php/cuadernos/article/view/298#.ZDXHuvbS64g.link.h>

in this sense that the origins of machismo as a social attitude and phenomenon are born, where this “cult of virility” has its origins.²⁸

It is important to note that *machismo* is much more than an ideology or consciousness, as it represents a set of structural relations present in Mexican society. In this gender hierarchy, exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence are the hallmark of the macho, where his manliness is defined by his fertility and potency to produce offspring.²⁹ The macho behaves callously and coldly, especially in his relationships with women who are not his mother. This behavior manifests in the form of verbal and physical abuse, where he often displays an overall lack of concern for the effect his actions may have over his wife or concubines.³⁰ He does this so as to seek approval or admiration from male counterparts or friends, where excessive alcohol consumption and dare-devil antics might also serve to impress.³¹ In addition, the man must never display vulnerability, as qualities of personal belligerence are also closely tied to his social image amongst other men.³²

Mendoza, however, emphasizes a distinction in the formulation of the term *machismo* and its application into everyday life. He notes a particular national idiosyncrasy, where one type of *machismo* is defined by courage, generosity, and stoicism.³³ Whereas the second type is false, based on appearances and empty boasts.³⁴ Whatever the case may be, this term carries a heavy

²⁸ Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 235-39.

²⁹ Evelyn P. Stevens, “Machismo and Marianismo,” *Society* 10, no. 6 (September 1973): 57–63, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02695282>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 240.

³² *Ibid.*, 240.

³³ Vicente T. Mendoza, “El Machismo En México: Al Través de Las Canciones, Corridos y Cantares,” *Cuadernos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano*, <https://revistas.inapl.gov.ar/index.php/cuadernos/article/view/298#.ZDXHuvbS64g.link.h>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

male accent, and throughout its history has taken prominence as a form of Mexican nationalism. Essentially, to be macho was to be *Mexicano*, as the formation of the Mexican national identity relied heavily on the androcentrism of the common folk. The working class, composed mostly of indigenous and mestizo peoples, were the true *machos* or hardworking backbone of the Mexican state. The elites, mostly white Mexicans, could no longer be trusted, because by the late 1990s it was clear they had sold out the country for their own financial gain.³⁵ This peculiar entanglement of race and status presents a greater dimension to the codification of *machismo*, as it became a characteristic to the national and racial character of the Mexican man.

Personified almost perfectly, machismo truly became part of Mexican culture, both ideologically and materially, in its golden age of cinema. The male leads of these movies took to the silver screen to embody the restlessness and explosivity of the *macho*: generous yet cruel, womanizing yet romantic, untamed, and authoritative. Their counterpart, the damsel in distress, so to speak, appeared to complement them. On screen, women were to form the second half of a single entity, but this was not the reality. Here is the birth of another notion of sexuality, a phenomenon that many scholars often refer to as *marianismo*.

Marianismo, the term derived from the Catholic idol, the Virgin Mary, is an idea separate from theology. The term, first coined in 1973 by sociologist Evelyn Stevens, establishes an accurate description of this phenomenon, namely in Latin cultures, with deep roots in the development of post-colonial Latin America societies. Women, who most commonly play a subordinate role in Latin American society, adhere to these rigid norms and behaviors because they are expected to behave like Mary, emulating her virtues and hoping to reach semi-divine

³⁵ Ibid.

status.³⁶ Morally superior and spiritually stronger than men, women are expected to be humble and submit to the wills of the men in her life—that be her father, brother, or husband.³⁷

Although the *macho* is supposed to never be wrong, if he is, the woman is expected to bear the indignities of his hypersexuality, temperaments, and the overall maltreatment he brings upon them.³⁸ For to serve as “mediatrices,” just as Mary continually intercedes for all of humanity, then can these men be absolved. Conversely, can women only reach their full potential of “spiritual stature” until she surrenders to her circumstance of male-inflicted suffering.³⁹ So then, is male wickedness a necessary condition for women to reach their full potential as caretakers, who can withstand extreme sacrifices for the sake of her family.

Womanhood and motherhood are warped into this ascribed gender norm, where the socialization of young girls in Latin America is built around the male ego, catering to him and making excuses to ameliorate his mistakes. In the family structure, another important aspect of Latino cultural values, *machismo* and *marianismo* play out over and over, in a never-ending cycle. These two gender theories complement each other in a manner that is rather ironic, as the man must physically and emotionally break down the woman to build her up. A toxic interdependence is generated at the inception of the familial structure, where man and woman are symbiotic yet play distinctive roles; a good woman exerts power within her home, where the man displays his dominance in public.

Deconstructing these attitudes is necessary to further understand the occurrence of *feminicidio* not only in Mexico, but across Latin America. In the case of Juárez, many of the

³⁶ Evelyn P. Stevens, “Machismo and Marianismo,” *Society* 10, no. 6 (September 1973): 57–63, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02695282>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

victims were young girls and women seeking to make a living wage to keep their families afloat by working in a *maquila*. As a result, an opponent might say that they disrupted a social order already predetermined, and they knew what was to come when they left the comforts of their home. Many of these girls often have no option but to seek work in a *maquila*, however, because their families depend on their income.

It is the familiarity that often draws the uneducated or unconscious Latina into the endless cycle of *marianismo*; this can be a certain subservience simply because they are afraid of the unknown. Those who choose to challenge it are met with the brutality of the male-dominated world, where they are not even allowed to function or serve as beneficial members of the greater economic scheme because they are seen as disposable—objects to be used and abused.

This definition of femininity also normalizes intimate partner violence, as *marianismo* is often associated with “keeping things inside.”⁴⁰ Internalizing physical and emotional trauma is endured at the cost of maintaining a harmonious balance among herself and her family. This is necessary to follow the footsteps of Mary. A woman cannot hope to attain her full spiritual stature until her abnegation has been tried by fire, which in this case is male-inflicted suffering.⁴¹ Only then can women reach their semi-divine status and flaunt their moral superiority as the ideal mother and partner they are meant to be. Striving to reach semi-divinity is a dangerous pursuit, where often a man’s physically violent outbursts or bouts of verbal abuse are compulsory to build the character of the saint. This is problematic, as it places women directly in the face of danger, where one volatile interaction with a macho can potentially lead to her death.

⁴⁰ Nicole Da Silva et al., “Marianismo Beliefs, Intimate Partner Violence, and Psychological Distress among Recently Immigrated, Young Adult Latinas,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 7–8 (2018): 3755–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518778263>.

⁴¹ Evelyn P. Stevens, “Machismo and Marianismo,” *Society* 10, no. 6 (September 1973): 57–63, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02695282>.

Just as women do not choose to be raped or sexually assaulted, many girls do not choose to fall into the cycle of socialization that is *marianismo*, yet it still is present in everyday life in Latin America. It is a symptom of unequal power dimensions and gender repression that many young girls in *Juarez* and beyond cannot escape. It is inescapable because these unideal gender norms are entrenched in the very institutions that are meant to protect them, which often are headed by men. Procedural failures are rooted in this gender discrimination, and these murders are the product of centuries old practices that are in desperate need of progressive transformation.

Gender Terrorism

The political and social biases surrounding women's equality are rooted in social mores like those described above and require an immense amount of pressure to undo. Since the initial bodies in Juárez were found in the fall of 1993, the families of the victims have moved mountains to achieve some form of recognition by state authorities, or at least to grant some form of relief as these murders continue to go unsolved.

The Mexican state, after years of pressure, enacted a law in 2007 with the intention of protecting women, titled the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence. Article 15 of said law states that the all entities of the state, in exercising their power, shall establish public policies that guarantee women's right to life free of violence in public, strengthen the criminal/civil framework to ensure punishment, and promote discussion and education programs for sexual harassment and persecution.⁴² Later in the document, it details the responsibilities the federation, the states, and the municipalities carry in the language, policies, and services offered to prevent, treat, punish, and eradicate all violence against women.⁴³ Although legislation such as this sounds promising, it is how it is applied that makes the overall difference. Unfortunately, since 2007 there has been a lack of state commitment to prioritize and oversee the implementation of the measures proposed.

What is worse, the municipal and state governments' lack of commitment is scathingly evident in the process of re-victimization that they submit the mourning families of the women who initially go missing and later turn up in a shallow grave. Gender perspectives are lacking, where in cases that should be investigated as *feminicidio* are done incorrectly. That is to say, in relation to examining the dead bodies, nail scrapings or vaginal discharge are not considered in

⁴² Assistant General Director for Global Affairs and Ministry for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence § (2007), 10.

⁴³Ibid, 16.

the overall killing of that woman, as Amnesty International reports.⁴⁴ There is no political will to deal with the situation, where there are even delays in opening criminal investigations for girls who have been missing for more than forty-eight hours.⁴⁵ These gaps in gender perspective, then, only serve to further supplement stereotypes and enhance victim blaming. Both the victims and the families alike are left to fend for themselves, “hostage” to a culture that encourages and justifies men’s violence.⁴⁶

There is an integral link between gendered violence and terrorism, as one cannot exist without the other. Or at least that is what some scholars argue, in recent efforts to reconceptualize violence against women. Cases like that of Juárez indicate the immense amount of frustration families undergo and pressure that needs to be placed on authorities to move them out of their offices and into the streets to investigate. The bureaucracy of complicity needs to be shaken up, and academics like Carole J. Sheffield are doing just that. In turning old conceptualizations of terrorism on its head, she discusses the varying levels of terror women, young women in particular, must experience as a “coming of age” reality.⁴⁷ By closely relating the female sexual identity to the notions of terrorism one may have, does she highlight a complex system of social control that can range from nonviolent sexual intimidation to overt sexual violence.⁴⁸ A woman’s experiences can vary given the type of society or country they live in—as gender terrorism can vary from catcalling or date rape, to genital cutting or honor killings. So

⁴⁴ “Mexico: Justice on Trial: Failures in Criminal Investigations of Femicides Preceded by Disappearance in the State of Mexico,” Amnesty International, September 24, 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/4556/2021/en/?utm_source=annual_report&utm_medium=epub&utm_campaign=2021&utm_term=english, 4.

⁴⁵ Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and Centro Para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer, “Alternative Report on Violence against Women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico,” European Country of Origin Information Network, June 11, 2018, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1439671/1930_1533114006_int-cedaw-ngo-mex-31432-e.pdf, 5-7.

⁴⁶ Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism in the Twenty- First Century,” *Gender Violence, 3rd Edition*, 2020, 190–211, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479801794.003.0026>, 190.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 192.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 193.

then, is gender terrorism a global phenomenon, as the agents committing these deplorable acts are men and the plurality within these forms of violence highlight the stark contrast among the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” in a woman's experience with sexual violence throughout her lifetime.⁴⁹

Gender terrorism acts in the similar fashion as does mainstream terrorism, where the components that define these phenomena seem to agree with one another. To label a system of violence as terrorism there must be some form of ideology present, where articulated to produce propaganda, results in amoral violence via voluntary compliance.⁵⁰ Even so, there is no real or accurate description of terrorism, where even international organizations such as the United Nations create ad-hoc definitions as needed. The ambiguity of the term thus allows it to be used in the context of sexual violence: women are subjects of criminal acts, whereby a state of terror is provoked, and thus the female-identifying population is under constant intimidation.⁵¹

In addition, it is important to note that the ideology needed to initiate gender terrorism is present in norms such as *machismo* and *marianismo*, where these curated archetypes of gender normalize the occurrence of violence, so much so that women are seen as dispensable objects in a backwards scheme for power. The simple fact that any woman at any given time in her life is exposed to some form of sexual violence makes this claim of gender terrorism more plausible, where the indiscriminateness, unpredictability, and overall volatility of terrorism also applies.⁵²

Discussion

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰ Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism in the Twenty- First Century,” *Gender Violence, 3rd Edition*, 2020, 190–211, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479801794.003.0026,197-98>.

⁵¹ “Defining Terrorism,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime , July 2018, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-4/key-issues/defining-terrorism.html>.

⁵² Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism in the Twenty- First Century,” *Gender Violence, 3rd Edition*, 2020, 190–211, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479801794.003.0026,198>.

Statistics on the ongoing *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juárez and beyond are difficult to come by, where this highlights the overall refusal of authorities to investigate and acknowledge the killing of these women. There has been substantial effort, however, by the families of the Juárez victims to codify into Mexican law the murder of women as *feminicidios*. It is because of their agonizing dedication and steadfast demands activists in Juárez were able to achieve a significant victory in 2009, with a landmark ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Here, the government of Mexico was found responsible for the deaths of women whose bodies were dumped at *Campo Algodonero*, one of the largest mass graves in Juárez's *feminicidio* history.⁵³

The emblematic ruling found federal authorities in violation of the rights of access to justice, judicial guarantees, and due process for victims of violence against women.⁵⁴ This would not have been made to one of the highest courts of human rights if it were not for the grassroots approach many mothers held to take matters into their own hands. Finding a means to investigate and advocate for their lost or assassinated daughters, these mothers partnered with local human rights leaders to form coalitions such as *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* and *Comité Independiente de Derechos Humanos de Chihuahua*, whom are still in operation today. One of the mission statements of these organizations' states: "*Dejemos de ser cómplices de esta situación. Ha[gamos] un llamado desesperado... Ustedes pongan los limites, la violencia en esta ciudad parece no conocer fronteras.*"⁵⁵ This reads: let us stop being complacent, it is time to make one last desperate call [for justice]...you can place the limits, but violence in this city seems

⁵³ "Mexico: Justice on Trial: Failures in Criminal Investigations of Femicides Preceded by Disappearance in the State of Mexico," Amnesty International, September 24, 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/4556/2021/en/?utm_source=annual_report&utm_medium=epub&utm_campaign=2021&utm_term=english.

⁵⁴ Resumen Ejecutivo: González y Otras ("Campo algodonero") vs. México Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, November 16, 2009, <https://www.sev.gob.mx/unidad-genero/files/2020/02/Resumen-Sentencia-Campo-Algodonero.pdf>.

⁵⁵ "Quiénes Somos," Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, <https://nuestrashijasderegresoacasa.blogspot.com/p/quienes-somos.html>.

to know no borders. Here can the solemn nature of these coalitions be observed, where even as impunity has proven to be their greatest opposition, somehow, they keep pushing for justice. It is this persistence that can be admired, where it is testament to the greater work of philanthropy these mothers, activists, lawyers, and concerned citizens are undertaking.

Perhaps one of the most symbolic forms of persistence and resilience are the pink crosses used to commemorate *feminicidio* victims. In the Christian tradition, the cross is meant to commemorate the crucifixion of Christ, embodying the suffering of the son of God for the world.⁵⁶ But in associating the memory of these women with the cross now painted pink—a color synonymous with the female gender—is the male centered imagery turned on its head. Arguably, it is a new imagination of the crucifix created, where the victim and her family’s struggle for justice is now linked to that of Jesus.⁵⁷ These pink crosses are an extension of art, where personalizing these once dull crosses, tell the story of a beautiful life. These lives should still be remembered, but also understood are testament to the most heinous acts of cruelty man is capable of. These are memorials to the horrific crimes these women have endured, but also serve as a form of consolation, as the religious undertones echo comfort and a glimmer of hope.

And hope is not yet lost, although it has been thirty years since the initial Juárez victims were found and fourteen years since the landmark *Campo Algodonero* motion was passed. There is some head way in understanding trends in *feminicidio*, but it has unfortunately reached epidemic levels in Mexico.⁵⁸ In the most recent efforts of the United Nations Gender Equality

⁵⁶Carpenter, Colleen, "Art that Silences and Art that Speaks: Approaches to Memorializing Femicide in Ciudad Juarez" (2017). *Theology Faculty Scholarship*. 24. https://sophia.stkate.edu/theology_fac/24

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸ Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, and Centro Para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer. "Alternative Report on Violence against Women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico." European Country of Origin Information Network, June 11, 2018. https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1439671/1930_1533114006_int-cedaw-ngo-mex-31432-e.pdf.

Observatory, it is estimated that in Mexico alone, there were 1.6 deaths per 100,000 women related to femicide or *feminicidio*.⁵⁹ The statistics continue to become more grim as countries like the Dominican Republic or Honduras are discussed, where their rates of *feminicidio* range from 2.7 to 4.6 per 100,000 women.⁶⁰ Another striking figure is evidence collected by national surveys in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, where roughly between 63-76% of women and girls have experienced gender based violence at different points in their lives.⁶¹ Statistics such as these are otherwise surprising, but it is also important to note that certain organizations like the United Nations and World Health Organizations are viable to the data provided by national surveyors, who may be constrained methodically because of their particular political competency.

Feminicidio, then, is the most violent and visceral embodiment of structural economic, political, social, and gender violence.⁶² This violence is directed toward women because they are women, as this can often be an expression of men's power. But this is a natural symptom of culture, as most societies have models of behaviors and identities that by default are submissive and subordinate to men in both the personal and institutional sense. This creates a series of problematic and symbolic inequalities because they can be overt or hidden, ranging from discriminatory actions, limits on freedom, coercion, to objectification, exploitation, guilt, and shame.⁶³ As these inequalities become more volatile, they manifest in the forms of harassment,

⁵⁹ "Poner Fin a La Violencia Contra Las Mujeres y Niñas y Al Femicidio o Feminicidio: Reto Clave Para La Construcción de Una Sociedad Del Cuidado." Observatorio de Igualdad de Género, December 12, 2022. <https://oig.cepal.org/es/documentos/poner-fin-la-violencia-mujeres-ninas-al-femicidio-o-feminicidio-reto-clave-la>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Information based on national surveys of family relationships or gender-based violence: Mexico, 2016; Dominican Republic, 2018; Ecuador, 2019; Peru, 2019; Uruguay, 2019. https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/22-01012_end_violence_ing_web.pdf

⁶² Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia L. Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 50.

⁶³ Ibid, 50.

threats, intimidation, beatings, forced sex, or rape. The most severe of these manifestations, but so not to belittle other forms of violence, is *feminicidio*.

In creating a cohesive conceptualization of *feminicidio* that deals with the social, political, and economic aspects of this discrimination, can the patriarchal system be “exposed” as mode of punishment and regulation of women’s bodies, as demonstrated by the insurmountable killing of women.⁶⁴ Moreover, in shifting the manner in which *feminicidio* is articulated can broaden the concept to include all forms of sexist killing, where killing motivated by a hatred of women, by a sense of entitlement, or perception of ownership can all be included in the rhetoric of anti-female terrorism.⁶⁵ In an even more radical formulation of the killing of women in Juárez and beyond, because they take no particular form in terms of individual women, but instead attack a particular group, much like genocide is a general attack against an ethnicity or race. The categorization of identity, then, allows for these crimes to be closer to crimes of State or crimes against humanity, where there is no active subject or individual acting against a specific victim.⁶⁶ Femi-genocide, then, can also refer to the systemic and impersonal killings of women because they are women, where a war is declared against this specific group of gender identities.

Conclusion

⁶⁴ América Latina y El Caribe | ONU mujeres – américa latina y el caribe, [https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documentos/Publicaciones/2021/11/Hacia ConstruccionSistemaCuidados_15Nov21-v04.pdf](https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documentos/Publicaciones/2021/11/Hacia%20ConstruccionSistemaCuidados_15Nov21-v04.pdf), 12.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 13.

The aim of this study was to highlight the manifestations of femicide and killing of women in Ciudad Juárez and beyond. The increased incidence of civil insecurity and impunity were the motivating factors of such a theoretical approach in an effort to understand the socialization of male and female in the context of Latin America, but more specifically in Mexico. By understanding these devastating social norms can the conditions for this specific articulation of violence against women be discussed.

An approach to possible solutions for this problem cannot be linear, where the structural causes of this violence against women can vary from region to region. This is one of the limitations of this study, where structural violence perpetuated by the neoliberal social system requires an in-depth country by country approach, as some Latin American countries operate under different political regimes. In addition, contending racial and ethnic identities vary across different states, but nonetheless play a role in the targeting of women, as intersectional identities make women of color much more vulnerable.

In any effect, it is through work such as this that a greater understanding of *femicidio* is gained, and universally comprehensive laws for the prevention and protection of women be passed. Although advocacy and social organization is proven to be an effective form of spreading awareness, it is ultimately the courage of individuals that will mark the catalyst for change.

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