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Ciudad Juarez: Heaven City for Femicides

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Ciudad Juarez is the Mexican border city connected to its twin city El Paso, Texas in the US. Its population is estimated between 1.2 and 2 million inhabitants, yet this number is hard to define as the city's slums are not mapped. The city is rapidly growing, particularly since the implementation of the 1994 NAFTA agreement. This agreement has encouraged many international companies to set up shop within the city's borders in their quest for cheap labor at the footsteps of the lucrative US market.

Unfortunately, the city is also known for its sad record of disappeared and murdered women. According to Diana Washington Valdez, a well known reporter pertaining to her investigations on murdered women in Ciudad Juarez, from 1993 to 2009 more than 600 women have been tortured, sexually abused and then killed in Ciudad Juarez(1). Most of these cases are categorized as femicides. The term "femicide" was first introduced by Diana Russel while testifying at the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels in 1976, but without giving a formal definition for the term (2). Then in 2001, Russel defined femicide as "the killing of females by males because they are females." (2). Sadly, Ciudad Juarez seems to be the worst city in the world in term of femicide cases: A total of 494 girls and women have been killed in Ciudad Juarez between 1993 and 2007, representing a serious gender violence phenomenon: these individuals were murdered only because they were females (2).

How has this phenomenon been able to thrive? How and why has the practice of femicide emerged in Ciudad Juarez? Why do femicide practices continue to grow? What factors have allowed its practice?

In order to answer these questions we need to take a look at the social and economic environment of Ciudad Juarez. I will present a socio-economic analysis highlighting the impact NAFTA has had on women, followed by an argument on the role played by patriarchal societies in perpetuating the traditional role of women and excusing femicides. Last but not least, I will explore an argument pertaining to the increasing issue of drug trafficking and a reasoning behind how a corrupt government has modified the dynamics of Juarez' society, thus increasing the use of violence for both men and women.

I. Socio – Economic background of Ciudad Juarez

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico is one of the most important corridors in the US Mexican border both for trade and for human flows. Since the implementation of the NAFTA Agreement in 1994, many international companies such as Nike, Siemens, Delphi, Electrolux and Honeywell have established their assembly plants in Ciudad Juarez, attracted by a cheap labor force and the huge US market(3). As a consequence, the increased industrialization encouraged massive migrations from other Mexican provinces to the border cities. Maquiladoras are offering real job opportunities for families living in severe poverty conditions in Mexico and Central America. The word

“Maquiladora” stems from the Spanish verb “maquilar”, which means “to assemble”.

According to the Business Dictionary, Maquiladora is a Mexican 'twin plant' manufacturing program under which specialized production facilities can import components free of duty for in-bond storage into Mexico, then use them for assembly, and subsequently re-export them as finished products to the United States (4).

According to 2004 figures, Ciudad Juarez is hosting around 275 to 500 assembly plants and employing between 173,642 and 250,000 workers, with another 10,000 workers located across the border in El Paso, Texas(5). Employment rates in Ciudad Juarez are close to 100%; but this figure does not directly impact the decrease in poverty, as it can be illustrated by the slum expansion in the outskirts of the city. Sixty percent of Mexican workers live below the poverty line, which is defined in México as earning less than USD\$1.95 per day. Most *maquila* workers earn only an average of \$24-55 (US dollars) per every 45 to 50 hour work week. These wages are also approximately 5 to 10 times less than the amount earned by workers in neighboring El Paso, Texas (6).

In addition to the above, *maquiladoras* heavily rely on a female workforce. 80% of the workers active in *maquilas* are women, seemingly because women are more docile, laborious and are willing to work for less pay than men. In general terms, women occupy the lowest paid ranks in the *maquila* industry and their superiors are always male individuals (6). Due to an inherent patriarchal social model in Mexico, women are expected to follow orders given by their male counterparts. As such, they are supposed to be less ambitious and hence creates an environment ripe for females being paid less than their male counterparts for equal or similar work.

Whether women have benefited from these *maquilas* or whether they have been exploited is largely debated. Indeed, labor can be considered a process of exploitation when such labor is appropriated without commensurate compensation (5). On the one hand, women benefited from a direct income which could make them feel more independent and helpful for their families in terms of economic input in the household. Some *maquilas* also offer their employees support services, such as access to doctors, free meals and transportation to work. However the transportation options provided is far from efficient, as it leaves women far away from their homes and many of the femicide cases have occurred while the workers were walking on their way home or to the plant (5). On the other hand, the wages are extremely low, as stated before. Those wages can't support a decent living standard, causing many workers to live in slums. Furthermore, working conditions are poor and safety rules exist only in theory. *Maquilas* are for the most part not regulated from an environmental perspective, and it seems that the rate of cancer and birth defect increased since their implantation *maquilas* as an economic model (5). Similarly, the general population is not educated enough to defend or know their own rights when it comes to safe working conditions. Finally, the creation of a unionized working environment is almost impossible due to the lack of regulation and threats by *maquilas'* management (7); since *maquilas* have been built under NAFTA's framework of trade and exchange, no organization or government can enforce national laws to punish work law violations. This situation, places US management above the law and a culture of disposable female workers ripe for exploitation by male

managers is spreading; this situation facilitates cases of sexual harassment and of overtime work at no extra pay in *maquilas*.

In 1994, NAFTA also caused a huge monetary crisis in Mexico. The Mexican Peso had to be devaluated in December 1994 (8) and led to a decrease in real wages. This crisis directly impacted the Mexican macho culture, rendering men unable to economically sustain their families with only their salaries. As such, what traditionally had been a society of male breadwinners and female domestic workers was challenged. Women started working outside their homes, particularly in *maquilas* in cities such as Ciudad Juarez, where more employment were offered to women than men. This unequal access to employment opportunities might have been the reason of the frustration of men losing their traditional status. Moreover, domestic violence is directly correlated with increasing independence of females (9).

Summing up, one could consider that NAFTA, along with the *maquiladora* economy might have created opportunity for women, but weakening and exploiting them, rather than creating real opportunities for personal growth. By breaking the patriarchal societal model, *maquilas* have jeopardized the situation of women by creating a new culture of “disposable women”. Men had to demonstrate their superiority, which in less developed societies can only be shown through demonstrating their sexual superiority. This somehow explains the growing rate of domestic violence since 1994.

II. Influence of the patriarchal role in perpetuating violence against women

Before becoming the first *maquila* city in the world, Juarez was also known for its “public women”. Prostitution, legal in Mexico, flourished in Ciudad Juarez; “the city was famous for the women in its public streets, and squares” (8). With *maquiladoras* employing mainly women, the number of women walking on the streets increased and a social misinterpretation of public women became more and more prevalent; meaning with this that any woman walking on the streets being sex workers or just women going to their workplace and back home were all put in the same basket. The prevalence of women in the street might have become intolerable for men that enforced a negative connotation of public women. On the contrary, a “public man” in Spanish is a synonym of a man on the public sphere, such as politics and an example of being a good citizen.

Rapid economic growth and industrialization in Ciudad Juarez offered women a sense of independence by means of a job in the *maquilas*. However, instead of helping women become stronger, or come closer to a male social status, worker women have been labeled as “public women”, a term directly associated with prostitution. Working outside home, or being outside to go to work was misled with prostitution for women and thus, culturally working outside their houses was not any more rewarding for women. In the context of gendering the public space, femicide erupted in 1993 when a dozen of young women were raped, tortured and killed as if it was something regular, prevailing a sense of a “normal” act.

Due to the city's well known fame of prostitution, the first reaction to this discovery was "normal" as illustrated by the Governor that stated that the murdering of these girls in a city like Juarez was "normal". He assured that "Regular Mexican families, with regular, private women safely at home, had nothing to worry about" (11). This patriarchal speech had two main consequences. First, it normalized the public speech of violence against women. Public women deserved this treatment, based on the patriarchal model. "Taken to its logical extreme, the government's discourse on public women explains that, while unfortunate, the deaths of public women represent a kind of public cleansing, viewed as the removal of troublesome women that restores the moral and political balance of society" (11). Second, these women became responsible for their own murders. Women were guilty of tempting men for not being home during night hours; this could have been interpreted as if they were looking for entertainment away from home, so they had to be punished for their improper behaviour.

The situation seems paradoxical. On the one hand, the city highly relies on female workforce, but on the other women being outside their homes means that they are disobeying socially established rules and provoking men to act the way they do. What is, then, the option for these women on the base of the social pyramid? Are they really guilty for having to work to support their families? The majority of the women killed came from poor families, caught on their way home or to work. At some extent, the public

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