

**BLACK
ROSE
BOOKS**

TRANSFORMATIVE PLANNING

**RADICAL ALTERNATIVES
TO NEOLIBERAL URBANISM**

**EDITED BY
TOM ANGOTTI**



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Femicide in Ciudad Juárez

María Teresa Vázquez-Castillo

Femicide is a word whose definition women in Ciudad Juárez can explain very well. They learned and appropriated the word in the process of trying to make sense of the more than 400 murders of women that have taken place in this Mexican border city since 1993. In the last thirteen years, mothers, friends, activists, students, academics and other sectors inside and outside Ciudad Juárez have organized what is now an international movement of women. Their main concerns have been to find the murderers and to claim justice, to find *who* is committing these heinous crimes against women. This article, however, urges progressive planners to focus on *what* needs to be done to stop the femicide in Ciudad Juárez. In this fast-growing region characterized by uneven urbanization processes, the *maquiladora* industry, the narco-economy and corrupt police, women's lives are endangered as they move through unsafe public space that lacks protective urban infrastructure.

Many different hypotheses have emerged about the femicide. Public officials have been appointed to "investigate" the cases, only to then be removed. None of these public officials was awarded decision-making power to act or prosecute. Researchers and journalists have even denounced and publicized the names of the culprits supposedly involved in the femicide, but the Mexican government has neither taken any legal action nor initiated a serious investigation. After thirteen years the gender violence continues, and it is now spreading to other urban areas, such as Chihuahua City.

Meanwhile, some people are in jail, accused of being the murderers even though they claim they are innocent. The mothers of the victims have denounced that some of those in jail are scapegoats, there to placate the public's outrage. Yet even with these people behind bars, the murders have continued. Two lawyers of the jailed have been killed and the lives of two journalists who have written books about the femicide in Juárez—*Huesos en el Desierto* (*Bones in the Desert*) and *Harvest of Women*—have been threatened, too. One of them was even kidnapped, severely beaten and hospitalized for several months.

In order to understand this femicide, it must be put in the context—of the characteristics of the city, the urbanization that has taken place here, the profile of the women who've been murdered, and the responses that have emerged both to protest the femicide and to claim justice.

Ciudad Juárez

Ciudad Juárez is a border city of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants located across from El Paso, Texas. About 60 percent of the population is immigrants who are unable to cross the border into the United States and therefore stay in Ciudad Juárez. The city has become one of the fastest growing in Mexico, not only because of the immigration, but also because of the investment made here. In the 1960s the Border Industrialization Program started promoting assembly plants, or *maquiladoras*. In 1992, with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), favorable conditions for foreign capital permitted the siting of further *maquiladoras*. According to the *Instituto de Estadística, Geografía e Informática* (INEGI), by 2000, about 308 *maquiladoras* employing 250,000 workers existed in Ciudad Juárez. Many of those employed are single young women migrating from other states. Sexist men in border states who resent the increasing presence of working females in public spaces call these women *maquilocas*, meaning flirtatious women who work in *maquiladoras*.

Race and Class of the Femicide

It is not difficult to infer the class and racial implications of the atrocious murders of the more than 400 women who have been reported kidnapped, raped, tortured, mutilated and killed. The murderers have been killing only young working-class women of a certain profile: short and thin with long, dark hair and brown skin. The victims have been between fifteen to thirty-nine years old, and many were originally from other Mexican states.

While the murderers enjoy impunity, public officials and the local police have accused the victims of being prostitutes, of leading double lives and of being the provokers of the assaults. The records, however, show that many of the victims were *maquiladora* workers, while others were students, housewives or workers in another economic sector.

Roles of the Urbanization, Maquiladoras, and the Narco-Economy

Many explanations for the femicide have been advanced. From a planning perspective, it is important to understand the urbanization of Ciudad Juárez and the roles of the *maquiladora* industry and the criminal economy. First, as new waves of immigrants, attracted by the possibility of crossing the border and by the jobs available in the *maquiladora* industry, have arrived in Ciudad Juárez, the pressures on housing and urban services have increased. As has been the case in

other Mexican and Latin American cities, the new arrivals tended to relocate to the edge of city, where land was cheaper but infrastructure and urban services were lacking. The layout of Ciudad Juárez is sprawling, and many of the women kidnapped and murdered either lived in the "new" settlements on the edges of the city or their bodies were found in these newly urbanized areas.

The murderers have attacked women who are most vulnerable in the urban space of Ciudad Juárez—those who use public transportation, who do not have a car and who, in many cases, walk long distances in order to take a bus or a collective taxi. Thus, the rapid urbanization process prompted by the relocation of global capital to the border area has created an unsafe city that lacks urban infrastructure, some of the most important of which are affordable housing, appropriate transportation and public lighting.

Impunity in the city is rampant in this border area that is now known as one of the most dangerous cities for women. The criminal narco-economy has free rein and has taken the lives of both men and women in the region. Some of the names denounced as possible culprits have been identified as men belonging to the high society of Ciudad Juárez and to the business and economic elites in the region. In addition, some local journalists affirm that those potential murderers might be linked to the criminal economy in the area.

A Planning Point of View

From a gendered planning perspective, the built environment of this city contributes to the violation of human rights. You might ask: How can a city reproduce human rights violations of young low-income women? I recently saw the answer in one of the latest European documentaries about the murders in Ciudad Juárez. In this film, the filmmaker follows the routine of a young woman from the time she leaves home to the time she comes back home from work. The woman leaves home late at night to go to her job in the *maquiladora*. *Maquiladoras* have different shifts and her shift starts at midnight. In order to catch the bus, she needs to walk in the dark, with no sidewalks or streetlights to guide her way. She carries a flashlight to see where she is walking. Like many other people who go to Ciudad Juárez either looking for a job in the *maquiladoras* or trying to cross the border, this young woman lives in the informal settlements of Ciudad Juárez, many of which lack access to urban services. This lack of urban services has a gender component, that of not providing safety to women in Ciudad Juárez.

The work of the mothers, relatives, activists, academics, students

and other men and women in the region and around the world has created a growing global movement of women protesting the femicide in Juárez. At the local level, the light posts in Ciudad Juárez, painted in pink with a black cross in the middle, serve as memorials for the murdered women. In some cases, those post have the legend: ¡Ni Una Más! Not one more!

Big crosses have been planted around the city as if the city itself had become a huge cemetery as well as a huge memorial site for the murdered women. In addition to crosses, the residents of Juárez witness the visits of women from around the globe who travel to take back the streets and participate in international demonstrations in Ciudad Juárez. In 2004, the US portion of a demonstration gathered in El Paso, Texas, the twin city of Ciudad Juárez, and marched, crossing the border to meet the women in Ciudad Juárez.

Different local and bi-national organizations have emerged to respond to the femicide. Some have survived the threats, intimidation and lack of resources for many years, while others have not. These organizations include: Justicia para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters); Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Our Daughter Come Back Home); Comité Independiente de Derechos Humanos de Chihuahua (Independent Committee for Human Rights in Chihuahua); Casa Amiga (Friendly House); Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez (Friends of the Women of Juárez); El Paso Coalition Against Violence on Women and Children at the Border; and other human rights organizations and NGOs.

These groups have organized conferences and meetings and presented two films about the femicide: *Señorita Extraviada* or *Missing Young Woman* (Lourdes Portillo) and *La Batalla de las Cruces* (Patricia Ravelo). The Mexico Solidarity Network organizes groups in the United States to periodically visit the mothers of the victims and learn about Juárez so as to serve as constant witness to the violence.

What Remains to Be Done?

The question always remains for progressive planners and planning academics as to what needs to be done by different social actors in the city and in the world to stop this femicide and to make both private and public spaces safer for the women of Juárez. The response needs to be informed by the twelfth demand of the Resolutions of the International Conference on the Killings of Women of Juárez hosted by the Chicano Studies Department at UCLA on November 1, 2003. The mothers and activists who attended the conference wrote these resolutions, the twelfth demand of which reads:

We demand that the government of Ciudad Juárez, its planning entities and major employers in the region work jointly to provide the necessary infrastructure that will make Ciudad Juárez a safer place for everybody, in which women can have the freedom of movement, as any other human being, without fearing for their lives and their safety.

After the failure of the political and legal entities to bring justice to the murders of the women of Juárez, women participating in this transnational and international women's movement have started pointing out some solutions, very basic in appearance: adequate street lighting, transportation provided for the *maquiladora* workers and affordable housing close to jobs. These solutions target the provision of safer urban infrastructure. This war against women is affecting all residents of the city as the impact of the tragedy has resulted in the disintegration of families, the departure of families from Juárez and, in some cases, the suicide of men close to the victims.

The call then is for progressive planners to get involved and support the women of Juárez. Through a participatory approach, and in conjunction with different community organizations inside and outside Juárez, progressive planners could help develop a city plan from the grassroots, a plan that includes elements to be implemented at both the individual and group levels in order to end the violence. This is a call for Planners Network to establish a relationship with the groups supporting the movement of the Women of Juárez in order to jointly organize a bilateral/international meeting to work out a grassroots plan for Ciudad Juárez. This plan, the purpose of which would be to make Juárez a safer city and to stop the femicide and the terror, could effectively be carried out by grassroots organizations and civil society actors in Juárez.

Conclusion

Roads, housing and other urban services are not in place to support the labor force that has emerged as a result of the infusion of global capital in the form of the *maquiladoras*. Therefore, men and women working in the *maquiladoras* look for shelter in areas that were previously undeveloped, but these areas lack services. Globalization, which has manifested itself in the movement of firms to other countries, has prompted an unplanned urbanization in Mexico for which the planning offices have not made the *maquiladoras* accountable. I am not saying that we need to take away our eyes from the murderers, but I am saying that, in addition to finding *who* is responsible, we need to think about *what* can be done to

create an infrastructure that makes Ciudad Juárez a safer city for all women and men. Although new infrastructure, an improved urban form and community development will not stop the femicide, these are powerful tools for creating safer urban spaces. In addition, women and men in Ciudad Juárez deserve a democratic, grassroots planning process led by their voices and their demands.

For socially responsible planners, to ignore the femicide in Ciudad Juárez is to ignore justice in cities, especially now that the femicide has spread to other countries like Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. These countries have also opened their doors to the *maquiladoras*, and the women murdered have been mostly indigenous women.

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