



TIMOTHY FADEK/POLARIS/EVYNE

Since 1993, hundreds – perhaps thousands – of women have been murdered in the desert city of Ciudad Juárez. There is no clear motive for the killings and the police seem reluctant to investigate. What is going on?

Mexico's macho blood sport

By Girish Gupta

On 6 January, the poet and activist Susana Chávez was found murdered outside an abandoned house in the city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Her left hand had been sawn off. In the late 1990s, Chávez coined the slogan “*Ni una muerta más*” (“Not one more death”) to protest against the incompetence of the Ciudad Juárez authorities in finding the killers of the hundreds of women who had been murdered there since 1993. The killings continue. The victims are usually from poor families. Before being murdered, they are raped and tortured, then their bodies are left in the desert surrounding what has become one of the world's most violent cities.

Before it was dumped, Chávez's body had been dragged 20 metres. A trail of blood led police to the missing hand and the murder site. Her parents identified the body of their daughter in a morgue after several days of searching. According to the local media, the authorities had attempted to conceal her identity, fearing public outrage and protests.

No one is certain of the motives for the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez. Some say that the killings are a form of blood sport for the city's elite, but there are also stories of satanic

cults, snuff films and organ thieves looking for easy prey. Perfunctory investigations by the Mexican authorities have yielded nothing. The killers are not relenting.

It is hard to come by an accurate number of victims. One estimate by the city's *El Diario* newspaper has 878 women in total killed between 1993 and 2010; some locals put the figure in the thousands. It can take months for bodies to be discovered – if they ever are – because the desert surrounding the city is so vast. Often by the time the remains are found, the heat has mummified them. Many more women are reported missing than are confirmed dead.

Mexico's main fight is with the drug cartels. This war has been going on for decades but it intensified following the demise of the Cali and Medellín cartels in Colombia in the 1990s. After President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, the crisis grew even worse. He believes that Mexico can beat the drug barons by waging an all-out war and is unwilling to enter into negotiations, at least in public. Since he came to power, nearly 35,000 people have died in drug-related violence, and the figure increases rapidly each year – more than 15,000

of those deaths occurred in 2010. Many blame Calderón's strategy for the culture of violence. They would rather have a president who engages in back-door negotiations with the cartels than one who has no control over them.

As the largest city in Chihuahua State, and located on the border with El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez is a prime spot for the trafficking of narcotics into the US. The drug war in Mexico has both overshadowed the “femicides” and become intertwined with them: it fuels the lawlessness apparent on every street here. Ciudad Juárez is the site of a feud between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels, waged by gangs battling for control of a lucrative gateway into the world's largest consumer of recreational drugs.

As US businesses opened assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, in the city in the 1960s, it began to grow and develop. The new factories took advantage of the cheap labour that could be found south of the border, especially from the 1980s onwards. Then, as now, they would hire mostly women to work long hours for low wages, far away from home.

The maquiladoras boomed in 1994, and so did the killings. That year, more factories were

opened as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which offered strong incentives to US businesses. “Maquiladoras are the cause of all our social ills in Juárez because of the problems they have generated in the family,” says Marisela Ortíz, a former teacher and activist against the femicides.

I meet Ortíz in the kind of shopping centre one would expect to find in any flourishing western country. However, the mood is uneasy: a day earlier, a police officer was killed at a nearby mall as he attempted to prevent a robbery. A bystander was filmed punching and kicking a wounded gunman as he lay dying in the mall’s entrance – an expression of the anger that many residents feel towards the criminals who they believe have destroyed their city.

Ortíz became involved in the anti-femicide campaign when one of her students, Lilia Alejandra García Andrade, went missing ten years ago. She helped the Garcías search for their daughter until her body was found, a week later, in late February 2001. Since then, Ortíz has been campaigning against the killings; she also co-founded *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (“may our daughters return home”), a charity that helps the families of victims. “There are many different reasons why Ciudad Juárez has become the most violent place in the world,” she tells me. “There’s bad government and corruption. We are the biggest port of entry to the US and we have a state that is very *machista* and does not give women their proper rights.”

Machista – or male-chauvinist – culture is dominant in Mexico and is particularly pronounced in Ciudad Juárez, which has the highest levels of domestic violence in the country. It allows men to blame women for their struggles and misfortunes. Some local officials have denounced the murdered women as prostitutes, responsible for their own deaths for the simple reason that they were out alone on the streets. The maquiladoras, too, perpetuate the *machista* culture by hiring mainly women: one worker described the bosses as “players”.

Among the companies running factories in Chihuahua are some of the most powerful in the US. Ford, General Electric, General Motors, RCA and Chrysler all run maquiladoras in the state. They have created an abundance of jobs. The opportunity to work and the proximity to the US have attracted ever more arrivals in the state, and in Ciudad Juárez in particular. “There has been some tearing of the social fabric by the workplace conditions and the desire to have young women working at the maquiladoras,” William Simmons, a political scientist from Arizona State University, tells me. “But I think that the social fabric would have been torn at anyway by the movement of people. The maquiladora is just one more factor.”

The authorities have been accused of ignoring the impact that maquiladoras and the huge population growth since the 1960s have had on the city. “No one builds schools or parks for the kids,” says Judith Torrea, a journalist who



“It’s mothers who do the investigating”: Olga Esparza shows clippings about her daughter, missing since 2009

runs the blog *Ciudad Juárez, en la sombra del narcotráfico* (“...in the shadow of the drug trafficker”), for which she won an Ortega y Gasset prize – the Spanish-language equivalent of the Pulitzer – in 2010. “These kids are now members of drug cartels, so they don’t have any future. The cartels are providing the jobs that the authorities are not creating.”

Joining a cartel leads to a life of spiralling violence for the youngsters, who begin by running drugs but can end up as hit men, or even higher up in the chain, as commanders.

Not only are maquiladoras implicated in the city’s broader problems, but often their own staff are victims of kidnapping and murder. The factories operate 24 hours a day. White buses move around the suburbs, collecting women for their long shifts. The lack of security on these routes has been blamed for many of the disappearances. The buses leave the women near their homes, not at or outside them. This obliges them to walk the unlit streets, where many are kidnapped.

Some officials have denounced the murdered women as prostitutes

Anapra, home to many of the maquiladora workers, is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Ciudad Juárez. Its houses are makeshift and there is no running water. The electricity supply is less than a decade old. The sandy streets of this area terminate at a ten-foot-high green fence: the border with El Paso.

Beatriz Contreras Rojas has worked in the maquiladoras for 20 years. Her jobs have included putting together capacitors and sewing up quilts. “Just last week, I was waiting for the bus

at around half past four in the morning when I saw someone kidnapped,” she tells me, sitting in one of the more precarious *cantinas*. “They just picked her up and left.”

The woman has not been found. “I felt very bad, witnessing that. I usually leave my house at 5.15am and the bus gets there at 5.35am, so there’s 20 minutes of being on the lookout. When you’re waiting for a bus, you hide from every car that passes by. We are in fear.”

The *machista* culture is pervasive in the factories, with their high female-to-male staff ratio. “The bosses hit on the women,” Rojas says. The women are subservient to the male staff, who have cars and do not travel on the buses. “The women don’t have cars. Because of this, relationships start. People become lovers so the woman doesn’t have to ride the bus. I’d rather [a male factory worker] do something to me than a hit man. At least I already know him!”

Jorge Pedroza Serrano, who has been executive director of the Maquiladoras’ Association of Juárez for six years, is rather defensive when we speak. “The killings are on the street, not on the buses,” he says. “The transportation here is very secure.” This is not true: on 28 October last year, gunmen opened fire on three buses carrying maquiladora workers, killing three women and a man and injuring 15 others. No motive has been found for the attack.

Not all of the female victims in Ciudad Juárez work in maquiladoras or are from the poorer neighbourhoods. Mónica Janeth Alanís went missing in March 2009 when she was 18. She was taking a university course in business administration at the nearby Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez when, one Thursday evening, she failed to return home.

I meet Mónica's mother, Olga Esparza, at her comfortable house in a middle-class quarter of the city. Her husband and 17-year-old son join us, as well as friends who have also lost daughters. "I live in fear in Juárez," Esparza says. "I feel insecure because of the war that is going on here and because public safety does not exist for us. We have everything: insecurity, violence, homicides, unemployment and disappearances."

Esparza blames the police and politicians – as well as the kidnappers – for what has happened to her daughter. Like many family members of the vanished women, she has been forced to investigate her daughter's disappearance herself because of the indifference of the authorities. "They see these cases as numbers, but they are our lives and we need them back. The authorities know where this problem is coming from and there are people who know the places where these girls are being tortured."

These "places" are thought to be the strip clubs and brothels that can be found throughout Mexico. Esparza was told by another young girl who had been kidnapped (but who later escaped) that her daughter was alive and working in Puebla, just east of Mexico City, which is more than a day's bus ride away from Ciudad Juárez. She and her husband went to Puebla to search for Mónica; they are convinced that she is being sexually exploited.

Esparza has received little assistance from the police. "The authorities have not the slightest interest in finding our daughters," she tells me. "Everybody's scared to speak up."

Norma Laguna Cabral's daughter disappeared in February 2009. The family is poor and lives in a notoriously dangerous part of Ciudad Juárez known as Altavista. Her daughter, Idali Juache, worked in a laundrette and went missing when she was 19. "It's the mothers who do the investigating," Cabral tells me.

The climate of impunity encourages these crimes. The culprits know that there will be few repercussions, if any. Many have accused the authorities of failing to look into the murders and disappearances, especially when the offences bear the hallmarks of the drug trade.

Organisations such as Amnesty International have challenged the Mexican government to do more to intervene; so has the United Nations.

"An environment has been created that is extremely conducive to committing crime and it allows many of the perpetrators to go free or to avoid being held to account," says Rupert Knox, Amnesty International's leading researcher into Mexico. "The quality of the police and prosecutor investigations in 2003 was terrible," he adds. "It is hard to conceive of how bad they were and how reliant they were on torture and other abuses. The worst aspects of this seem to have declined."

"There are people who know where these girls are being tortured"

Knox suggests that the quality of forensic work and the effort being put into probing the crimes have improved. "But this has all come to nothing," he says, "in part because the violence and related institutional weaknesses have mushroomed, and in part because much of the state apparatus only ever responded to the issue of violence against women because of pressure, not because there was a profound commitment to address the issue."

"As everything has become dominated by gang-related violence, the limited changes that were made have been exposed, leaving in place the same culture in which misogyny and violence against women can flourish."

Marisela Escobedo Ortiz was killed outside a government building on 17 December. She had been campaigning against crime in the city following the murder of her 16-year-old daughter, Rubí Frayre Escobedo, whose burned and dismembered remains were found in a rubbish bin in Ciudad Juárez on 18 June 2009. She had been missing for nearly a year. Her mother, despairing of the inept official investigation, had said three days before her own death that she would not move from outside the office of the state governor, César Duarte, until investigators

showed some progress in her daughter's case. In a video circulating on the internet, masked men pull up in a car in front of Ortiz and begin talking to her. She flees across the street but is pursued and shot in the head.

Just before her death, Ortiz had told *El Diario* that her daughter's ex-boyfriend, Sergio Barraza, had threatened to have her killed. Barraza is the prime suspect in the murders of both mother and daughter. He was arrested in 2009, and prosecutors say that he admitted to killing Frayre and led the police to her body. But during his trial, he insisted on his innocence and claimed to have been tortured into confessing. Judges ruled in April last year that the prosecutors had failed to present material evidence against him. The case was thrown out.

Judges in Mexico must follow the letter of the law. Often an unwitting or corrupt official makes a trivial error in some paperwork and this leads to the case being dismissed.

Few are optimistic about the future of Ciudad Juárez and its women. "The issue is lost in the Mexican congress," says William Simmons. "The president is not giving it priority and the murders are overshadowed by the drug war. You have this sense that the women [in the city] feel abandoned. I don't see much progress. I see the structural violence and the conditions that have fuelled all of this growing worse."

Wherever you go in Ciudad Juárez, you see photographs of the missing women pasted on storefronts, house walls and lamp posts. You also see the words of Susana Chávez, "*Ni una más*", emblazoned on pink crosses commemorating the women who have died.

Many people in the city see life as pointless and worthless. Gangs of teenagers drive around, waiting for instructions about their next hit, for which they are paid as little as £10. Calderón's term as president will finish next year. When he goes, however, he will leave little behind to combat the rising crime that afflicts Ciudad Juárez and the whole of Mexico. ¹

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