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Femicide in Latin America

A Tale of Two Cities

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"Femicide" is the new word in Latin America. A new word for an old crisis. It refers to an epidemic of rapes and murders of women in the region that for years have gone unsolved and unpunished. Violence and sexual abuse against women remain rife across Latin America. But they have reached horrific extremes in Guatemala City and in Mexico's bleak, free trade town of Ciudad Juarez across the border from the US. In these two notorious centres of femicide the abduction and brutal killings of women have become almost routine.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/alto_al.jpg]

In Ciudad Juarez, according to human rights organizations, over 400 women have met violent deaths since 1993. Hardly a week goes by without another body being discovered dumped in the desert or on waste ground behind the town. The murdered women are nearly all young and poor - students, domestics, or factory workers from the local foreign-owned assembly plants known as maquiladoras. Most have been raped and tortured to death.

The picture is almost identical in Guatemala City. Guatemala's femicide has claimed the lives of nearly 2,200 women and girls since 2001. In the lawless capital women live in constant fear of being snatched from the streets by gangs or forced off buses at gunpoint into empty lots.

A dawn police patrol regularly recovers from alleyways and rubbish dumps bodies often unrecognizable due to torture and sexual mutilation. In the killers' methods there are strong echoes of ferocious attacks on women used by US-backed government troops and death squads in Guatemala's long civil war that ended in 1996. Most of the perpetrators of those wartime crimes are still at large.

In both Guatemala City and Ciudad Juarez the dead women's families and advocacy groups have themselves been threatened as they have tried to seek justice. Says Amnesty International: "Turning to the police is often not a safe option as so many officers have themselves been implicated in corruption and violent crimes."

The Juarez outrages have provoked national and international protests, a stream of human rights reports, condemnation by the UN Human Rights Commission and delegations to the Mexican President. Actors Jane Fonda and Sally Field are among the celebrities who have made solidarity visits. Hollywood, it seems, even plans a film starring Jennifer Lopez as a reporter investigating the murders.

NGOs and human rights activists have helped distraught relatives of the slain Guatemalan women to publicise their cases. The mother of Maria Isabel Véliz, murdered in 2001 at the age of 15, brought her case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in January 2005. And in March this year the Organization of American States heard testimonies from a number of families.

The Guatemalan government set up a National Commission on Femicide with senior officials and politicians. In Mexico too the chamber of deputies created a Special Commission on Femicide and the attorney general established a prosecutor's office for violent crimes against women.

Yet there have been few arrests and even fewer convictions. The women go on dying.

The Mexican and Guatemalan governments blame gang violence, drug-trafficking and corruption. These problems of lawlessness affect everyone, they argue, not just women.

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But while acknowledging that the number of men killed is much higher than women in Guatemala, the UN Special Rapporteur Yakin Erturk concluded after a 2004 investigation there that the female cases “have a different dimension”. This, she said, was due to the way in which women are being killed. “They are raped, mutilated, and this has a terrible impact on women and society in general.”

Some Mexican women's groups argue that the sight of young single women migrants from the poor south of the country working in Juarez factories and living independently may have made them a particular target in a profoundly misogynist society.

Women's lives come cheap suggests Yanette Bautista, Amnesty International's investigator of violence against women. Last year, at a presentation of Amnesty's investigation of the killings of women in Guatemala, she argued: “The atmosphere of tolerance by the (Guatemalan) state and societal indifference toward all forms of violence against women contribute to the femicide”.

Clearly in these neo-liberal metropolitan wastelands with their social disintegration and, in the case of Guatemala, a recent history of war, there are few brakes on the most ferocious expressions of machismo. By contrast in Venezuela, Bolivia, and parts of Brazil, where the left has not been defeated and class solidarity is strong, women are helping to lead inspiring struggles. Violence against them may not have been eliminated but where they are respected and valued as equals by men and able to organize themselves to articulate their demands, they are in a much stronger position to pursue their liberation.

See more details [here](#) and [here](#)