

Femicide

Femicide is on the extreme end of a continuum of anti female terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse, such as rape, torture, sexual slavery (particularly in prostitution), incestuous and extrafamilial child sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment (on the phone, in the streets, at the office, and in the classroom), genital mutilation (clitoridectomies, excision, infibulations), unnecessary gynecological operations (gratuitous hysterectomies), forced heterosexuality, forced sterilization, forced motherhood (by criminalizing contraception and abortion), psychosurgery, denial of food to women in some cultures, cosmetic surgery, and other mutilations in the name of beautification. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides.



Misogyny not only motivates violence against women, but distorts the press coverage of such crimes as well. Femicide, rape, and battery are variously ignored or sensationalized in the media, depending of the victim's race, class, and attractiveness (by male standards). The police, media and public response to crimes against women of color, poor women, lesbians, women prostitutes, and women drug users is particularly abysmal -- generally apathy laced with pejorative stereotyping and victim-blaming (for example, "All women of color are drug addicts and/or prostitutes who put themselves in danger"). Moreover, public interest is disproportionately focused on cases involving non white assailants and white middle-class victims, such as the uproar in Boston over the 1989 murder of Carol Stuart, a pregnant white woman who, her husband falsely claimed, was shot by an African-American robber. Carol Stuart was not murdered by a Willie-Horton-like phantasm of her husband's concoction, but by her affluent, white husband.

Violent crimes against women have escalated in recent decades. Some believe this increase is due to increased reporting. But Russell's research on (largely unreported) rape, for example, establishes a dramatic escalation during the last 50 years. Although it is not yet possible to assess the number of sex murders in any given year, virtually all experts agree that there has been a substantial rise in such killings since the early 1960s. A surge in serial murder (when one perpetrator kills a number of victims in separate incidents) is recognized by criminologists to have begun in the 1950s and has become a characteristic phenomenon of the late twentieth century in the United States.



Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

Capitalism and Anti-Woman Terror

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In the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez, hundreds of women have suffered a violent death over the past years. Most of the killings have not been solved. Victims have in

The Border Zone: Imperialist Superexploitation

In 1960 Ciudad Juárez was a small town of 250,000 inhabitants on the border with the U.S. Today, it has a population of over 1.2 million people, attracted by the possibility of *maquiladora* factory jobs. After the end of the U.S. *bracero* program, which functioned as an escape valve for the unemployment crisis in Mexico, the Mexican government opened the first free-trade zone in 1965. Foreign investors who set up a factory in Mexico near the U.S. border were exempt from tariffs (for the parts they imported) and didn't have to pay other taxes. This was extended in 1994 with NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], which converted all of Mexico into a source of enormous imperialist profits based on the miserably paid labor of Mexican

most cases been young women between the ages of **17 and 22**.

Anyone who knows something about Mexico knows that male chauvinism rules in this country of capitalist exploitation and oppression. The church inculcates the subservient role of women; there is no democratic right of abortion; violence against women happens in *six out of every ten* homes. Working-class and peasant women are doubly oppressed, as the slaves of slaves.

Víctor Ronquillo, in his book *Las muertas de Juárez* (1999) [The Dead Women of Juárez], describes the hatred against women and notes that the murders represent a threat to every woman:

“The way in which the bodies are abandoned, the traces of torture, the vestiges of a personal rite: the right breast cut off and the left nipple bitten off. Fire immolates the victim. All this reveals a message whose designated recipients are the next victims.

workers. The Mexican, American and Canadian sections of the International Communist League wrote in a joint statement in 1991: "While strengthening the U.S. bourgeoisie against imperialist trade rivals, an FTA [Free Trade Agreement] will also subject the working masses of the Americas to greater exploitation. We call on Mexican, U.S. and Canadian workers to join in opposing this anti-labor pact" (see "Stop U.S. 'Free Trade' Rape of Mexico," WV No. 530, 5 July 1991).

Guatemala

by Risa Grais-Targow

The violence that ravaged Latin America during the 1980s is not over. A wave of violence is taking place at this moment in Guatemala that is unknown to most of the world. The targets are young women between the ages of **15 and 26**, and the murders are taking place primarily in or around the nation's capital, Guatemala City.

In the past three years nearly 1,500 young women in Guatemala have been murdered. Already this year, 257 women have been murdered, with the perpetrators going unpunished.¹

The violence against women is reflective of a broader **Cold War legacy** that haunts the region. After a CIA-backed coup removed democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz from office in 1954, the nation experienced a succession of highly repressive dictatorships, all of which were financially backed by the United States. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. gave millions of dollars to the Guatemalan right in an effort to suppress the leftist guerrillas, whom the U.S. considered to be Communist. President Ronald Reagan feared that if one Latin American nation fell to Communism then the surrounding nations would become Communist. Therefore, a great deal of foreign aid was given to the Latin American right in an effort to stop such a "domino effect" from occurring.

The murder of Guatemalan women is tied to the racism, paternalism, and corruption that has taken root in Guatemalan culture. Professor Marcia Esparza of John Jay College was part of the 1998 UN Truth Commission on Guatemala, and since then has devoted much of her time to working with indigenous female communities in Guatemala and Mexico. Esparza suggests that levels of impunity are connected to the corrupt hidden powers in Guatemala. In her opinion, these cases are not being resolved because there is no political will. It is simply not in the interests of the Guatemalan oligarchy to investigate these crimes and punish the perpetrators.

One of the most popular destinations for urban workers is Guatemala City, where factory jobs are available, particularly in *maquilladora* factories that are notorious for hiring only young women. Not coincidentally, Ciudad Juarez in Mexico is also the home of *maquilladora* factories. Professor Esparza suggests that the "femicide" is tied to the movement of indigenous labor into the city. "Many women are uprooted from the rural areas, their communities, and families and migrate to urban areas for work. Once they migrate, they have no support network, and they become even more open and vulnerable to violence."⁴

When the crimes first began, the police simply blamed the usual suspects: the youth gangs, known as the *Maras*. While it is highly probable that some of the murders are gang-related, new investigations are pointing to state actors as well. It is only recently that the widespread corruption of the National Civilian Police (PNC) has begun to be considered part of the problem. The Human Rights Ombudsman, Sergio Morales, affirmed in March 2004 that many of the crimes are connected to organized crime circles that include the PNC and the army.⁶

In a recent report issued by the Guatemalan Mutual Support Group (GAM), a Guatemalan human rights organization, Director Mario Polanco suggests that not only are the police and army responsible for these crimes, but that the social cleansing is an attempt to "create chaos in the country and generate more ingovernability and fear."⁷ The murders have created an environment of fear, with many women scared to leave their homes. Maintaining an environment of fear gives those in power an excuse to exert more control. UN Special Envoy Yakin Erturk came to similar conclusions after her February 2004 visit to the country. In a press conference, she suggested, "When these levels of impunity exist, it seems that there is violence being committed by authorities."⁸

****The phenomenon of the *maquiladoras* clearly shows the potential power of the unity of workers in the U.S. and Mexico. They are part of a common industry with the same bosses. Conscious of the social power that the proletariat would attain through unification of its struggles, the American and Mexican bourgeoisies apply "divide and conquer" strategies. This obstacle to joint struggle of all the oppressed against their common oppressor comes in different forms in different countries, and one of the principal tasks of revolutionary parties is to combat these ideas that only serve the bourgeoisie.****