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# The Killing Machine of Juarez: A Literature Review on the Maquiladora Industry and Femicide in the City

Karla Kinzie Munoz  
*Portland State University*

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The Killing Machine of Juarez: A Literature Review On The Maquiladora Industry and

Femicide In The City.

By

Karla Kinzie Munoz

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Dr. Kacy McKinney

Portland State University

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### **Abstract**

In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, since 1993, more than 400 women have been killed, a conservative estimate due to the hundreds more that are still missing (Fernández et al., 2008). These women were often employees at tariff and duty-free factories in the area. The factories, also known as maquiladoras, contribute to the economy of the city after they were implemented in the Border Industrialization Program. Case studies and news articles reveal the connection between the maquilas and the growing number of femicides in the city. The working conditions and constant harassment of female employees contribute to the abuses the predominantly young women suffer. With the growing economy and implementation of NAFTA, these changes were exacerbated after 1994. The need for programs that protect women from these environments as well as proper investigations is urgent. Femicide is a pressing issue in Ciudad Juarez and there is a need for immediate action.

*Keywords:* femicide, feminicide, Ciudad Juárez, maquiladoras, North American Free Trade Agreement

## **Introduction**

In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, since 1993, more than 400 women have been killed, a conservative estimate due to the hundreds more that are still missing (Fernández et al., 2008). Many of these women were from low-income communities and were employed in the maquilas, tariff, and duty-free factories in the area (Cacho, 2020). Despite the hazardous conditions, harassment, and sexualization, maquilas remained a prominent profession for women after their rise in the 1980s. This research will explore the history of feminism and femicide in the city as well as the social and industrial norms concerning gender in the maquiladoras. The rise of the maquiladora industry and its relation to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is studied to answer the question: What is the relationship between the maquiladora industry and femicide in Ciudad Juarez?

This research is important because it exposes some of the pressing issues that surround the maquiladora industry. Mexican women die every day from gender violence and the people who are committing the crimes often do not receive punishment (Pantaleo, 2010). Women are losing their lives in their place of employment and many of these cases remain unsolved (Livingston, 2004). These women are often beaten until they are unrecognizable and their bodies are dumped, many of them near the maquilas they are employed in (Pantaleo, 2010). Many of them are also vulnerable targets since they are often lower-income immigrants who have families to raise or younger women in search of employment. These women are only living on a few dollars a day and rely on the maquilas for their income even if they consider some of the practices unethical (Funari, 2006).

This research will analyze past literature regarding the prevalence of femicide and unethical practices in the maquiladoras to exemplify the issue and find patterns in the larger discourse that indicate that employment in these zones exacerbates the rate of femicide in the city. By analyzing research on femicide and the link to the place of employment, the paper addresses the findings in the research that can explain the unfair treatment of women at their job and how this treatment can lead to their death. The history of feminism, femicide, gender norms, and economic process in export processing zones are analyzed and used to draw a connection between the maquiladora industry and femicide in Ciudad Juarez and the social impact the feminicides carry.

### **Methodological Approach**

A literature review was conducted to understand the context and the ties between the maquiladora industry and the rampant femicides in the city. To understand the rise of the maquila industry and the connection between the gender violence that it has fostered, the review contains multiple scholarly articles, films, news articles, podcasts, book chapters as well as case studies. The literature review used the political and social response to the murders as a way to understand the impact of the femicides in the city.

A multitude of sources are used to fully understand the importance of femicide, what it is defined as, and how it is presented in the city as well as other practices in the maquila that have had extreme impacts on women. The violence against women and the lack of response to the issue will also be mentioned to understand the impunity and lack of social support in these spaces. Using various forms of literature, socioeconomic factors are explained and the full effect of the maquilas in Mexican society as well as how since the North American Free Trade Agreement was enacted, Mexico underwent enormous changes. The goal is to understand how

the changes in the Mexican economy fueled the creation of more maquilas that sought unskilled labor and placed women in hazardous conditions and the consequences that these conditions led to.

### **A brief history of feminism and femicide**

Ciudad Juarez is located in the state of Chihuahua in the region of Northern Mexico, next to the Rio Grande. It connects Mexico and the United States through El Paso and it is considered a business hub with a large sum of the maquilas being concentrated in the area (Figure 1) (Livingston, 2004). Ciudad Juarez became known for its relation to violence during the 1990s when the bodies of two hundred women were found in the desert, with many of them showing signs of rape and torture. Ciudad Juarez is also known for its industrial park that is lined with low-waged factories where people from all over the country migrate to work (Livingston, 2004). In 2010, Ciudad Juarez was considered one of the most violent cities in the world (Vulliamy, 2020). Corruption and the drug trade have run rampant across the city and local politicians and police forces have been found to have ties with the local cartels (Camacho, 2006). Impunity is the norm in the city where thousands have gone missing over the years (Vulliamy, 2020).



Figure 1. Map of Mexico with a star pointing at Ciudad Juarez. (Linnert et al.)

The term femicide was coined by Diana E. H. Russell in 1976 and it refers to the murder of women because they are women (World Health Organization, 2012). The word femicide and feminicide are used interchangeably in the literature review. There are multiple types of femicide, this paper will focus on the non-intimate type. This type is characterized by the killing being perpetrated by someone who does not have an intimate relationship with the victim (World Health Organization, 2012). Most non-intimate femicide affects working women, especially in stigmatized professions such as sex work or working in bars or nightclubs. Non-intimate femicide is less common but still poses a large threat to young working women, which maquiladoras are known for having a younger unmarried workforce.

Multiple cases of femicide have been reported in Juarez after 1993 reports found shallow graves where bodies were dumped across multiple locations in the city (Pantaleo, 2010). These corpses were often unidentifiable or showed signs of brutal violence (Wright, 2001). The bodies would often show signs of sexual assault; their nipple would be bitten off, and their bottoms

would show lacerations or forms of branding. The women would be penetrated with objects and would show signs of rape during the investigations conducted (Livingston, 2004). It was determined in 1999 that 30 percent of the victims found were employed at maquilas around Ciudad Juarez (Wright, 2001). Many of these young girls would be abducted/kidnapped during their transit to and from work. The maquiladoras denied having any connection to the rising rate of victims found (Wright, 2001).

In 1995, mass protests erupted when Esther Chavez Cano revealed the reports of the murdered and missing women in the city, in *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, a local newspaper (Wright, 2001). The publication exposed that since 1993, over 50 corpses of women had been found. Chavez took the initiative on March 8th, international women's day, to storm political conferences, paint wooden crosses that were placed around the city pink, create mass searches in areas where bodies had been previously found, and try to make agreements with maquila workers to change the conditions of the factories (Wright, 2001). This act was seen as one of the biggest protests Ciudad Juarez has held and it was the beginning of the many more to come over the next years (Uribe, 2020). Esther Chavez Cano was a prominent activist who sought justice throughout her life to stop the violence and change the image of women within the maquilas. She was a core piece in the mobilization of the feminist movement in Ciudad Juarez (Wright, 2001). Cano created safe spaces for women to live in if they were being abused.

The maquiladora industry is rife with gender-based disparities connected to the idea of females being subservient and belonging to work in the maquiladoras. Women were selected to work in the maquilas because of the belief they are more willing to work the long hours and endure the repetitive process in the assembly line compared to men (Livingston, 2004). There have been various reports of maquila employers sexually harassing employees as well as



performing routine pregnancy tests, proof of menstruation, and not providing adequate working conditions (Garwood, 2002). These women are later forced to resign if they decide to start a family or are not hired if they are pregnant or want to start a family (Human Rights Watch, 1996). The image of working women is tarnished in the city. They have often been regarded as prostitutes or bad girls who live a double life for desiring financial independence (Livingston, 2004).

### **NAFTA and other factors that can affect maquiladoras**

Maquiladoras began their rise in the Mexican economy during the eighties after President Salinas de Gortari advocated for the deregulation of the industry in an attempt to raise the Mexican economy (Kopinak, 1995). They were established in 1965 as part of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) and were labeled as “Fordist assembly plants” that mostly employ women (Kelly, 2001). During the creation of maquilas, they were limited to the border region but have since expanded to the interior of the country. Maquiladoras are tariff and duty-free assembling plants owned by transnational companies (Kopinak, 1995). Maquilas allowed for the most labor-intensive parts of production to be located in the factories where they do not meet the regulations the United States must adhere to. They are known for their arduous labor, low wages, and failure to meet health and safety standards (Kelly, 2001).

The rapid growth of maquilas began in 1982 when during his presidency, de la Madrid created programs that encouraged foreign companies to invest in and expand the maquilas. These programs made maquilas the centerpiece of Mexican exports (Kelly, 2001). Under president Salinas de Gortari, there was a push for industrialization, various regulations were dropped and the gender gap and rate of employment grew even further (Kopinak, 1995). By 1996 about one-third of the labor force in Mexico was employed at maquiladoras. That was a

five percent increase compared to numbers from 1982 (Kelly, 2001). Maquiladoras attracted women who moved from all over the country, wanting financial independence that only the maquilas could offer (Livingston, 2004).

The gender gap in the maquiladora industry is also widely acknowledged. During the beginning of maquilas, female employment had a rate of approximately 85 percent and while in 1988 the figure had dropped to 64 percent, maquilas continue to mostly employ women typically between 16-24 years of age (Kelly, 2001). Women were hired because it was believed that they would be better at assembling the pieces due to their nimble fingers (Wright, 1997). Despite women dominating the maquilas, they are paid lower salaries than men and rarely hold higher positions. Women are also viewed as subservient and a group that cannot be trained and learn new profitable skills (Wright, 1997). Maquila employees often do not earn salaries that allow them to live comfortably (Funari, 2006). Wages have remained stagnant and are usually calculated as net pay per day instead of the usual hourly wage when compared to the United States (Staudt, 2018). Women workers are often placed in colonias, which are small communities where many of the maquiladora workers can afford to live (Kelly, 2001). These small communities often do not have high standards of living and homes are made out of substandard materials and often have to take public transportation into the city to make it to the maquiladoras (Sánchez, 2014).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was enacted in 1994 and included Canada, The United States, and Mexico. This agreement allowed for all tariff and non-tariff barriers between the three countries to be eliminated (Federal Register, n.d.). It resulted in the economy moving towards an export-oriented trend (Kelly, 2001). NAFTA changed Mexico and fostered a dependency on the United States of America for exporting most of its goods (Staudt, 2018). NAFTA's purpose was to reduce the tariffs and break down some of

the barriers between countries to export and import goods between them (Camacho, 2006).

Despite the reports of the dangers in the maquiladoras, the industry did not show a decrease in employment after NAFTA was enacted (Staudt, 2018).

One of the ways NAFTA changed the maquiladora industry was by implementing a “speed-up process”. This process consists of selecting an employee and assigning them to do the work that was usually performed by multiple employees. That was shown to increase productivity despite creating more stressful conditions for various employees who have to undertake the work of others (Staudt, 2018). The North American Free Trade Agreement was created to boost the production of service goods with the United States using the low-skilled labor of mostly women to export those products. It valued the production of material goods while ignoring the basic needs of the workers (Camacho, 2006).

The regulations previously stated in NAFTA changed during 2016 under Donald Trump’s presidency after his many criticisms of the trade deal. These changes are not studied in this review since the effects were seen in the years after 2016 and there is a lack of recent data and a full comprehension of how the trade agreement has changed the industry. The main focus of this review is the changes the low-wage manufacturers underwent, however, it is still important to mention how NAFTA showed changes to the environment by creating associations that would protect it from the labor industry, promoted the growth of the middle class in Mexico, and privatized a large portion of the agricultural sector (Staudt, 2018).

### **Reported Cases of Femicide from Maquiladora Workers**

The case of Nancy Villalba-Gonzalez exemplifies some of the dangers these young women encounter (Cacho, 2020). In 1999, 13-year-old Nancy reported the bus driver who drove her home from the Motores Electricos maquila raped her and left her to die in a ditch under a pile of

concrete (Amnesty International, 2003). She was found in the desert a few days after she managed to free herself from underneath the pile of concrete and drag herself to a nearby home where they alerted the authorities. She testified against the driver Jesús Manuel Guardado Márquez, alias el Tolteca; he was linked to another 12 feminicides similar to what Nancy lived through (Cacho, 2020). The driver belonged to a group of men who called themselves Los Ruterros. It was suspected they were paid by El Sharif also to kill the young women for money. It was revealed they would get paid between one to twenty thousand dollars per victim (Cacho, 2020). They would wait for the last girl on the bus and take her to a designated spot in the desert where they would not be found until weeks or months later and often were not recognized. However, there was insufficient evidence to prove that El Sharif had any connection with the murders in Lote Bravo, and the disappearances and femicides in the city continued after his imprisonment (Cacho, 2020).

Two more murders that were linked to maquila employees are those of Coral Arrieta Medina, and Rocio Paola Marin in 2005 (Wola, 2007). Coral was 17 and was found in March, where her body was dumped in Lote Bravo, where there had been 18 other victims found in previous years. Lote Bravo was near the place where Nancy Villalba's body was found. Coral was a maquila employee and student. She was found raped and strangled. Another body that was found was Rocio. She was found in an irrigation ditch in the city. She was 19 and her body showed she had been raped, tortured, and stabbed more than 15 times in the back, stomach, and neck (Wola, 2007).

Other cases include the 2001 finding of 17-year-old Lilia Alejandra Garcia, a maquila employee who was found wrapped in a blanket. It was concluded she died from asphyxia due to strangulation (Amnesty International, 2003). That same year, Claudia Ivette Gonzalez Banda, a

worker at the LEAR 173 maquiladora was reported missing after being refused entry to the maquila for being two minutes late (Amnesty International, 2003). In 2002, the body of Merced Ramírez Morales, a worker at the Admeco maquila, was found by a group of children on the Cerro Bola. Her body showed signs of sexual assault. A few months later a skeleton wearing blue overalls was found at the entrance to the Juarez Industrial Park. The overalls belonged to the FASCO maquiladora and it was reported that the death occurred about twelve months before the finding of the remains.

Similarly, in 2001, in a field located in front of the Asociación de Maquiladoras de la Entidad which is the association linked to the oversight of maquilas in the area, the bodies of eight young women were found. Due to the state the bodies were in, only one of them was to be identified as Claudia Ivette (La Redaccion, 2005). The people who confessed to these crimes were two bus drivers nicknamed El Cerillo (The Match) and La Foca (The Seal). However, they later claimed they were harassed and coerced by the authorities to make a statement that would incriminate them. El Cerillo was released from prison three years after his sentence because of the lack of evidence from prosecutors. Both drivers confirmed they were pushed by the state to confess because of the pressure the local government was receiving after finding the eight bodies (La Redaccion, 2005). The finding of the eight bodies shocked the locals and sparked protests around the city. Women demanded justice for the eight girls by painting pink crosses and placing them in the field where the bodies were found hoping this would attract the attention of local authorities and the press (Amnesty International, 2003).



Figure 2. Eight crosses are placed on the field by the Maquiladora Association to demand justice for the victims (Amnesty International, 2003).

Another case is that of the Three Reyes maquila in which multiple women reported being harassed by the male upper management and those same factory women rarely hold management positions. Those who do often feel inadequate and like they are not being respected in their position (Wright, 1997). Complaints like this are not exclusive to the Three Reyes maquila, multiple others in the city have similar claims of young women being harassed and exploited by their male coworkers. Human Rights Watch created an investigation when it was found that many women were routinely given pregnancy tests and asked in their interviews if they desired to become pregnant within the next few months (Human Rights Watch, 1996). To keep costs lower and avoid the mandatory maternity leave under Mexican law, the management at the maquilas would perform the pregnancy tests or ask female workers to track their menstrual cycles by showing their used feminine products (Livingston, 2004). If a woman became pregnant she would be immediately fired if applicable or intimidated until she resigned from her position (Livingston, 2004 ). Similar reports were found in multiple maquiladoras in

the state of Chihuahua (Wright, 1997).

News articles and published reports since 1993 started to raise awareness on the topic by showcasing some of the horrors of these crimes. More recent articles have called attention to the femicides across the city beyond the maquila industry. Most people become aware of the femicides after there is a mass protest like Esther Cano's 1993 International Women's Day march where she met with maquiladora workers to demand action and protection for the young women (Osborn, 2004). Through protests like the one Cano executed and, through the news articles, femicides began to gain momentum (Vulliamy, 2020). Protests all around the country have erupted with the biggest day being March 8th, known as international women's day in response to Cano's. The alarming rate of femicide in the country has attracted international attention in recent years since Mexico began these protests (Chin, C., & Schultz, E.,2020). Current protests are similar to Cano's in Juarez after the reports of feminicide in maquilas during the 1990s were released since they march in the streets and use art to express their frustrations (Vulliamy, 2020).

The direct impact of maquilas goes beyond the femicides in the city. Even if the women do not fall victims to it there are other harassment claims and unequal pay. Many women who worked in the maquilas reported being subjected to routine pregnancy tests and if they became pregnant they were forced to resign (Kelly, 2001). These women also reported being controlled by male plant managers and supervisors. These women work long hours and the wages are often not sufficient (Kelly, 2001). These women often have to choose between food and transport money with many of them being young single women who have to take care of their families (Kelly, 2001). The harassment suffered by these women is considered an extension of the patriarchal authority beyond the home.

## **Discussion**

Being employed at the maquilas endangers the lives of women. Not only are the working conditions unsafe and the environmental and labor regulations often ignored, but their safety is compromised daily. Women are suffering harassment from their employers or during their transit to their workplace inserts these women in precarious situations (Pantaleo, 2010). The exclusion of Mexican workers and the existing hierarchy in the maquilas have placed women at the bottom. The existing patriarchal values of Mexican society are exacerbated in their place of employment and it is presented in gender violence (Pantaleo, 2010). This violence targets the emotional and physical well-being of these young women.

The existence of maquiladoras and the relaxed regulations that accompany them have created a space focused on the profit of foreign companies that own the maquilas at the expense of women's safety and sometimes their lives (Sánchez, 2014). Protests and awareness of the issue have not shown the needed results and the lack of follow-through from local authorities allows for the dangers to continue. Between the sexual harassment suffered by their employers, the relaxed labor laws, and low pay the epitome of the violence against women presents itself in the murder and disposal of their bodies in the desert. Many of the bodies are dumped half-dressed with signs of rape and torture (Pantaleo, 2010). Ciudad Juarez is a city that does not protect its women and endangers their lives at their place of employment. Cases often do not get resolved and there is not a lot of attention given to the women who become victims of femicide.

Authorities go as far as to blame some of the victims for their own disappearance (Driver, 2016). City officials often butcher the investigations and do not follow proper procedures during the investigations by not following the leads or taking shortcuts to end them quickly (Cacho, 2020).

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

One of the limitations of this research is the lack of reporting or accurate reporting when



there are cases of femicide or missing women. Gathering the numbers and accurate data was one of the most challenging aspects of the research since many articles estimated figures and periods (Chin & Schultz, 2020). The missing number of women is unknown and the lack of accountability by local officials makes it hard to obtain accurate data (OHCHR, 2012). Many women having to walk to the maquilas has also made them prone to human trafficking which is another heavily underreported issue that could be linked to the maquiladora industry (Eagan, 2020). Another limitation is the impact of NAFTA changes after 2016 and their effect on the rate of femicide if any. Data from after 2016 has not been published or yet become easily accessible, but could be an area for further research.

Femicide and gender violence is an issue that affects the country. Cases like the ones mentioned in earlier sections can be found all across the country. Nationwide data on the femicides and gender abuses in the maquilas, and institutions that protect labor and women's rights is another area that should be researched. This would hopefully allow people to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and how it affects a large portion of the population. Providing resources allows for women to be aware of the help they can receive and how there are places that protect their rights. Another area for analysis is the role of the United States in exacerbating the effects of cheap labor and gendered professions. To what extent is Mexico responsible for the murders and inequalities found in these factories? Because of trade agreements and ownership of the factories, the United States and Mexico's economies are deeply intertwined and their overlaps and differences would be another important aspect to note in further research (Staudt, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Organizations like Casa Amiga have raised awareness against femicide for various

decades, large NGOs like Amnesty International have addressed the problem in the maquilas, and Humans Rights Watch has launched investigations to learn more about routine pregnancy testing since they do consider these intrusions on human rights violations. Despite the growing efforts to address the issues, ten women are victims of femicide every day in the country (Agren, 2021). Even with the growing awareness, and the rise in feminist groups in the country, there are still many women murdered every day. Non-intimate femicide still occurs and the maquilas are still exporting their goods without the proper regulations. Some programs that have been implemented are those of Casa Amiga in 1999, where they help women and children who have suffered from domestic violence get a safe place for them to recover and move away from the place they are experiencing violence. Casa Amiga was founded by Cano. It worked as a rape and sexual assault crisis center in Juarez (Wright, 2001). There have been other successful organizations that have been founded in Ciudad Juarez and are still active today. These organizations have applied for the help of international agents and the Mexican government to continue protecting the local women (Castañeda Salgado, 2016). The growing Mexican feminist groups and associations have now picked up the fight in demanding justice for the women in the city (Agren, 2021).

Since the case studies in the 1990s, the murders in Ciudad Juarez have continued to rise with the main peak occurring in 2010 (Vulliamy, 2020). These issues have not been resolved and there is still a lot of work being done by activists to change the ongoing situation. These problems as stated by other scholars are deeply ingrained in the patriarchal values of Mexican society where the exploitation of women is seen as the norm (Wright, 1997). The sexualization and harassment of women in their place of employment contribute to the alarming rate of femicide. Women in the maquilas are devalued and seen as expendable and have become the embodiment of cheap labor (Garwood, 2002). Despite the demands for change, maquilas are

still producing material goods and paying very low wages to their employees. NAFTA was created to reduce obstacles between the exporting process in the countries and this has taken a toll on the Mexican laborers who have suffered from the relaxed regulation the trade deal offered (Wright, 2001). However, NAFTA only exacerbated the already growing disparities in the country and created dependence of Mexico on the United States (Saudt, 2018). Overall, the conditions in Ciudad Juarez are those of violence. The existence of women is threatened just because they are women. Gender is a determining factor in the quality and standard of living in the city. Being a maquila worker exposes women to a dangerous profession where they will have to endure multiple forms of harassment (Pantaleo, 2010). This review's purpose was to shed light on the issue and show some of the steps that have been taken to address the abuses in the maquiladoras and the lack of protection they provide for the women who work in the factories. This will hopefully show the importance of the problem and urge others to take action and become more informed of the femicide crisis happening all over Mexico.

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