

The right to life: Femicide in Mexico and Guatemala

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Feminists in Mexico and Guatemala working on femicide also use the concept of ‘feminicide’ to draw attention to state complicity in the killings of women.

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La Catrina Indignada (Incensed Catrina) by Mabel Encinas. Catrina collage of the women dead by feminicide.

The word ‘feminicide’ was popularised over twenty years ago to denounce the killing of women due to their gender. The crime is called ‘feminicide’ [1] (*feminicidio*) in Mexico and ‘femicide’ [2] (*femicidio*) in Guatemala. Although there have been some attempts to differentiate the two concepts [3], both terms emerge as a form of resistance: to assert that women’s lives matter, and such crimes should not go unpunished. Impunity contributes to the normalisation of the feminicide machine [4]. This ‘machine’ is supported by gender inequality as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights have suggested [5].

Feminicide is part of a wider issue within cultures of gender inequality; men’s violence against women and girls - violence which attacks their dignity, their integrity and their lives [6] and is part of gender orders which accord little value to the lives of women. In Mexico and Central America murder is often preceded by beating, mutilations, burns, other forms of torture and by sexual violence [7]. Feminicide is an intentional crime, but too often impunity rules, especially when it is women living in poverty, and in the case of Mexico and Guatemala, indigenous women.

In both countries, feminists challenge the indifference and negligence of justice systems, connecting this to institutionalised gender inequality, victim blame, and terror inducing sensationalism. It is this complicity which leads activists to argue that feminicide should be considered a state crime.

Mexico

In 1993, a pattern of woman killing became evident in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, in Chihuahua, Mexico. The first woman in the list of victims was actually a girl, Alma Chavira Farel. That year, the first coalition of organisations, mothers, feminists and academics denounced the systematic violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. A number of civil society organisations have emerged since (Casa Amiga, Nuestras Hijas de Regreso, Justicia para nuestras hijas, Red Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez, and Ni una más). Most of the dead women of Juarez have been adolescents and young adults, many of them workers in maquila factories.

Maquila companies process raw materials from other countries, mainly the US, with products exported back to be branded and commercialised. Multinational companies benefit from the use of cheap labour, usually employing women from small towns and rural areas, who are presumed to be more docile than men. The turnover is extremely high: women workers are squeezed to the last drop and then replaced by others. Their welfare is of little concern and their human rights are violated as a matter of course. Apart from the working conditions, factories are situated in deserted areas. It is this harsh reality, combined with a location on the border with the presence of organised crime, drug trafficking and the presence of the army, that creates a conducive context for the increase of femicide.

In the wake of *the Dead Women of Juarez*, feminist groups highlighted the fact that feminicides happened in many other regions. The first data came from the most populated state (county), the state of Mexico, which surrounds Mexico City, where 840 women were killed between 2011 and 2013. It is unclear how these crimes are classified, and only 145 were investigated as feminicides. Additionally, 1,500 women have disappeared between 2005 and 2013, mainly adolescents between 15 and 17 years old. The pattern both in Ciudad Juarez and the state of Mexico is similar where organised crime, economic power and corruption coincide.

Between 2011 and 2014, the rate of feminicides increased five times, and between 2013 and 2015 6488 women were killed. In 2016, 3,000 women were been killed between January and mid-October, of which 1,185 have been identified as feminicides. In Mexico, a country of 120 million inhabitants, 77% of feminicides are not prosecuted, with a large proportion of bodies never identified.

Community organisations and victim's families have challenged state impunity and raised awareness, which has resulted in law reform. In 2007, the General Law of Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence was passed, and the crime of femicide was specified in the Federal Penal Code in 2011. Currently 49 human rights and women organisations form a coalition – the National Citizen Observatory of Femicide (Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio). This organisation monitors feminicides, the application of the law, and demands accountability from the institutions responsible for preventing and prosecuting violence against women.

Guatemala

Femicide is even more prevalent in Guatemala, possibly the most dangerous place to be a woman. In a country of 15 million people, an estimated 6500 women were murdered between 2000 and 2012 and that number continues to rise. In 2014, 766 women were murdered. An average of 2 women are killed every day and only 2% of femicides are prosecuted. Among the most vulnerable are women living in poverty or women in prostitution, who often have been victims of trafficking and live under the control of organised crime.

The fact that Guatemala has been a pioneer in the recognition of feminicide is the result of the activism of groups of women fighting for their rights, such as Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres, Women for Justice, Education and Awareness (Mujeres por la Justicia, Educación y el Reconocimiento) and CAIMUS (Centros de Apoyo Integral para Mujeres Sobrevivientes de Violencia). Despite having achieved the Law against Femicide and other forms of Violence Against Women, the legacy of the civil war of the 60s has been pervasive. The country has a weak democracy and a corrupt government, which has produced a culture where there is limited accountability of state authorities, which results in impunity for those who kill women.

This combination of impunity and the devaluation of women in a society with ingrained machismo and misogyny is evident in the brutality against the bodies of the victims, which show evidence of rape, torture and mutilation. Almost all (90%) of the indigenous population live below the poverty line. Their marginalisation is evident in the fact that despite indigenous people being half the population, the media still tends to portray European characters.

Legal reforms in Mexico and Guatemala have recognised femicide but this has, so far, made little if any difference. Both countries still need to ensure that the perpetrators are detected and prosecuted. To support this, a manual has been produced to improve evidence gathering and how such cases are approached. It is unclear whether this is having an impact yet. Changes in law enforcement need to be connected to wider engagements on women's equality, including the development of sustainable livelihoods and lifelong learning.

Activism by women, families and communities continues, fighting for women's rights - and literally for the right to life. Supportive links with international organisations are vital: the 'international community' needs to show that it is watching what is happening in Mexico and Guatemala, to bring pressure to bear on those responsible for law enforcement and join the struggle to end impunity.

Mabel Encinas

P.S.

* <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mabel-encinas/femicide-in-mexico-and-guatemala>

* For the integrated links, see the original article.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.dukeupress.edu/terrorizing-women>

[2] http://www.dianarussell.com/origin_of_femicide.html

[3] <https://dlynx.rhodes.edu/jspui/bitstream/10267/27456/1/The%20World%27s%20Most%20Dangerous%20Place%20to%20be%20a%20Woman%20Final.pdf>

[4] https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Pjhq3eGcO4EC&oi=fnd&pg=PA5&dq=femicide+in+ciudad+juarez+unsafe+streets+empty+lots+&ots=K_a_fN_VFf&sig=n5OYE3RCbsvdPV5UHe-x9kMsZvo#v=onepage&q=unsafe%20streets&f=false

[5] <http://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r26767.pdf>

[6] <http://equidadgenero9.blogspot.fr/2015/10/isabel-claudia-martinez-alvarez.html>

[7] <http://observatoriofemicidiodimexico.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Iniciativa-Femicidios-Federal1.pdf>