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Our Mission Statement

Cultivate is an inclusive feminist journal led by the postgraduate community within the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. The journal champions feminist voices and aims to build and share knowledge by forging dialogues between the academic, activist, creative, verbal, and visual. Cultivate is politically and socially engaged to challenge institutions, transform power-dynamics, promote justice, and strengthen feminist movements.



Eras of Feminism

Cultivate

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The Feminist Struggle in Ciudad Juarez: Diverse Voices and External Pressures

by Asma Mehan & Natalia Dominguez



In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the border city across from El Paso, TX, the intersection of "Machismo" (EntreMundos 2019), micro-machismo (EntreMundos 2019), the manufacturing industry—maquilas—and the Narco War has brought immense suffering to women. The Feminist Movement, born from gender violence intensified by the Narco War and entrenched cultural norms, is a response to these issues. Borderland women have raised their voices through protests on Women's International Day, advocating for legal reforms like nationwide abortion legalization and using social media to spotlight these tragic realities. Despite facing violence and adversity, Juarenses women persist in their unwavering pursuit of societal change. This article explores the driving forces behind this uprising and the resilient efforts of Juarez women to instigate meaningful societal shifts in their region.

In the Borderland, the enduring plight of women is deeply rooted in the historical development of "Machismo" stemming from the Mexican Revolution in the early 1900s. Zayda Rodriguez Morales (EntreMundos 2019), in her research, explores how the term "Macho" emerged during this revolutionary period (EntreMundos 2019), initially categorizing members of the revolutionary movement. This concept traces its roots to the colonial period, where notions of colonization contributed significantly to the later evolution of machismo (Alizadeh et al., 2024). In addition, this approach highlights the differences formed during colonization, associating whites and mestizos with purity, goodness, order, and the city contrasted against conflict, violence, and the countryside, which represent the indigenous people already found in Mexico.

This idea then evolved through the years as a concept for excessive masculinity or "Machismo" in our contemporary era. This idea of being super masculine or "Machismo" has caused problems for women for a long time. It leads to men behaving aggressively and dominating women. Sometimes it's as simple as men belittling women for their feelings, and other times it's much worse, even leading to the killing of women just because they are women, also known as the crime of Femicide (CNN 2021).

Making things worse, there are smaller acts called "micro-machismos" (EntreMundos 2019) that add up to hurt women. These acts come in different categories: the way women are seen as only useful for household chores, conducted by men making them invisible when decisions are made, unfairly blaming them in relationships, and using power to control them (EntreMundos 2019). Words and phrases that put women down, like saying someone fights "like a girl" or assuming a woman got a promotion by doing something unfair, make these problems worse. These ideas are deeply rooted in society, not just in Juarez but in all of Mexico and

even in other parts of Latin America. Women in this area face these problems every day (Mehan 2024a; 2024b). It's not just a problem in Mexico; it's a big issue across Latin America. Changing these beliefs and behaviors is crucial to making life better for women in this part of the world.

To provide a broader range of viewpoints within the feminist movements in Ciudad Juarez, it is important to highlight the internal debates and differing strategies that these groups employ. For instance, the Luxembourg Pink Women Collective focuses on improving labor conditions for women in maquiladoras by advocating for policy changes and supporting unionization efforts. Meanwhile, other grassroots organizations may emphasize direct action, such as organizing protests and community outreach programs to raise awareness about gender-based violence. This diversity of approaches reflects the dynamism within the movement and underscores the complexity of addressing gender inequality in a multifaceted social landscape.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women across Latin America mobilized for various social issues like labor laws, education, and political rights (Oup 2020). This movement embraced diverse backgrounds and encompassed different political ideologies, involving women from various social classes (Mehan 2024c). Women expressed discontent through academic writings, magazines, and protests, highlighting concerns about education and civil status (Oup 2020). Simultaneously, labor movements emerged advocating for fair wages and better conditions. Despite these efforts, women's suffrage was only universally addressed in Latin American countries by 1961. Today, despite ongoing fights for rights and safety, Juarenses women still grapple with labor controversies and safety concerns.

Ciudad Juarez relies heavily on its factories, called maquiladoras, which are crucial for the city's economy. These factories employ lots of people, with many being women. This industry is in the entirety of the country, providing more than 300,000 jobs and employing a significant portion of the city's workforce (American Industries 2020). Because of this, a constant mobilization of people from all over the Mexican country seek job opportunities in the borderscape in Juarez. But there are big problems. These factories are far from where people live, making the trip to work unsafe, especially for women. Some have disappeared or even been killed on their way to or from work. Just like the case of Anabel Montañez Lopez, who was found dead days after seeing her last getting out of the location of the Maquiladora where she worked (debate 2019). Despite this, the big companies that own these factories don't take responsibility.

Furthermore, the intersection of external pressures with local feminist efforts is crucial to understanding the broader context in which these movements operate. The economic reliance on maquiladoras creates a precarious situation for women, who often face exploitation and unsafe working conditions. This economic backdrop is compounded by the Narco War, which exacerbates violence and instability in the region. The militarization of Ciudad Juarez under President Felipe Calderon's administration, intended to combat drug cartels, inadvertently heightened civilian casualties and further marginalized women. These

intersecting pressures illustrate the compounded challenges that feminist movements must navigate in their pursuit of justice and equality.

Juarese women play a crucial role in Ciudad Juarez's economy, occupying 4 out of 10 jobs (El Diario 2022), but they still face workplace inequalities compared to men. Despite making up nearly half the workforce, women encounter various issues. The Luxembourg Pink Women Collective (JASS 2023) works to address these concerns, focusing on improving labor conditions for women. While progress is happening thanks to women and organizations, workplace inequalities continue to affect women's overall health and safety (JASS 2023). There's hope for a better future, but these challenges remain significant for women in Ciudad Juarez's workplaces.

In the borderland, the workplace can be challenging, especially for mothers and young women. An interview with a former maquiladora worker revealed disparities in treatment based on gender (Dominguez, 2023). Women faced pressure to not miss work for personal reasons, unlike their male peers who had an easier time getting time-off. This unequal treatment risked their job security (8). Most women in these jobs are family providers and face unfair treatment. The interviewee highlighted the vast difference in roles and expectations between men and women. She, as the only female supervisor among 12, faced longer hours and higher demands, impacting her mental and physical well-being. "All those reasons to miss part of their shifts would make us less reliable in the company's eyes, which also means that that made us good candidates to lose the job. Most of my female peers did not take that risk" (Dominguez, 2023), the interviewee said. Balancing work and family responsibilities proved overwhelming, leading to personal struggles and even divorce for many women in similar positions. "It was super tough for me and my family. I was not able to attend various family events such as school meetings, school presentations, doctor's appointments and even spending time with my kids... I had to juggle all the pressure at work while still being a provider for my family and a full-time mom" (Dominguez, 2023), she stated. This unfair treatment due to gender norms and expectations deeply affects women's lives. Juarese feminists, many from the maquiladora industry, demand fair pay, better conditions, and equal opportunities. However, gender inequality remains a significant battle. These challenges faced by women in Ciudad Juarez are part of a broader fight against injustice in Mexico, urging for fair treatment and opportunities for women in all kinds of environments.

In the early 1990's, a communal grave appeared in the Juarese landscape, suggesting a serial killer or satanic cult (Guillen, 2022). Sadly, this reality persists for borderland women, drawing global attention. Juarez ranked highest for femicides among 100 municipalities in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua (Gallegos, 2020), a chilling statistic. Humanizing victims like Tania and Nohemi, dismembered and left on a highway (Gallegos, 2020), reminds us of their humanity and dignity. Countless women suffer similar fates, their names and lives often forgotten, lost in abandoned fields or roadsides, a tragic reality that must not be

taken with a grain of salt. Because of this, women's groups, radical feminists, and activists rally for change in Ciudad Juarez, condemning the macho culture ingrained in the system. Marisela Escobedo Ortiz became a pivotal figure after her daughter Rubi Frayre's brutal murder by her former boyfriend Rafael Barraza Bocanegra (Osorio, 2020). Escobedo relentlessly fought for justice, dissatisfied with the authorities' dismissive response, and took on the investigation herself. Her unwavering determination from Rubi's disappearance until her tragic death gained immense support from the feminist community. She symbolizes the struggle against femicides, inspiring future activists. "The Three Deaths of Marisela Escobedo" documentary portrays her year-long fight. The "deaths" signify Rubi's murder, the court's impunity for her perpetrator, and Marisela's own murder during a peaceful protest (Osorio, 2020). The documentary captures her grief, anger, and resilience, engaging audiences deeply in her emotional journey. Unfortunately, Rubi is not the only case in which the perpetrator has been left unpunished.

Additionally, the political landscape plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Juarenses women. The persistent machismo culture within political institutions often results in inadequate responses to gender-based violence and a lack of support for women's rights initiatives (Mehan 2024d). Activists like Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, who took on investigative and advocacy roles following the murder of her daughter, highlight the personal stakes and relentless dedication required to push for systemic change. These stories of resilience and determination not only humanize the struggle but also inspire broader support and solidarity, both locally and internationally. By exploring these external pressures and diverse strategies, the article aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the ongoing feminist struggle in Ciudad Juarez.

The early 2000s saw chaos in Mexico's drug trade as Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman's escape triggered a power struggle (Reuters, 2010). Law enforcement captured the Tijuana cartel's leaders, weakening their influence but sparking violent battles between armed forces and cartels (Reuters, 2010). President Felipe Calderon's 2006 initiative aimed to end the drug war by militarizing Juarez, targeting cartel operations (Reuters, 2010). This intensified violence affected civilians, especially women, left vulnerable without the protection they needed. Calderon's term overlooked the plea of women, failing to address their suffering amidst a flawed justice system. Laura Carson's study highlighted the system's inefficiency, with only 2% of crimes leading to convictions (openDemocracy, 2010), dissolving trust in the system. Women, often mothers, endured the aftermath of cartel clashes, searching for missing loved ones in a war they didn't choose (openDemocracy, 2010). Throughout these decades, Juarenses women experienced immense suffering that has not been addressed by the authorities.

Fourteen years ago, Esmeralda Castillo vanished in downtown Juarez, raising her parents' relentless search. Luis Castillo, her father, stands out in feminist marches (Infobae 2022), his image bearing Esmeralda's face gaining national attention.

Amidst predominantly female protests, Luis leads, demanding answers from authorities about his daughter's whereabouts (Infobae 2022). His unparalleled dedication made him a legend in Ciudad Juarez's feminist movement. Despite approaching various government levels, bribery attempts to silence him failed (Infobae 2022). Authorities fear his growing influence, worried about Esmeralda's case gaining widespread attention. Tragically, her case isn't unique, as records show ten women are killed daily in Mexico (Infobae 2022), with Juarez bearing a significant share. Activists like Marisela Escobedo, Luis Castillo, and the rest of Esmeralda's family offer hope in the battle for women's safety, inspiring change not just in Juarez but worldwide.

In Ciudad Juarez, women face constant fear and distress for their safety. But there's some hope ahead. New laws like "Ley Olimpia" (Yucatan Times, 2021) came from determined work by feminists. This law, named after Olimpia, who had her private content shared without permission, is now in effect in 19 out of 32 Mexican states (Gallegos, 2022). While the fight for women's safety continues, these laws bring hope for a better and safer future in the city.

Women in Ciudad Juarez and across Mexico have long struggled for reproductive rights, facing government indifference. Many have had to travel far for safe abortion procedures or rely on clandestine methods due to the lack of official support (Gallegos, 2021). An anonymous interviewee, CC, assists women in Juarez by providing Misoprostol, a medication often used for ulcers but also utilized for early-stage, clandestine abortions (Gallegos, 2021). This help is shared through social media, highlighting the community's support when official aid is not there. Other defense organizations and online resources work to provide access to necessary medications (Gallegos, 2021). Despite the challenges, the sense of solidarity among Juarenses is growing.

In 2023, strides have been made. Reproductive rights, a long-standing demand of Latin American women, gained attention and legal recognition as a human right by the national government. This movement began in Argentina in the early 2000s, with feminists advocating for abortion legalization and reproductive rights (La Nueva Mañana, 2020). Their persistent efforts led to the legalization of safe and healthy interrupted pregnancies, now a national law in Mexico as of September 6th this year (DEPOR, 2023). It marks a victory for Juarenses and Mexican women, demonstrating that ongoing mobilization, perseverance, and hope shows results in their struggle.

The feminist movement in Ciudad Juarez is crucial in challenging social injustices faced by women. Despite the city's troubled history with the Narco War, immigration, and gender-based constructs like Machismo, feminists strive for change. Their activism, through protests and suggestions for laws, demonstrates unparalleled unity and determination. Figures like Marisela Escobedo Ortiz and Luis Castillo, a grieving father, offer hope and inspire future generations. These

social issues mustn't be ignored; they highlight the potential for a better future for our loved ones. It's time to understand and address these challenges for the well-being of women in Juarez.

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