

**Sociedad Mexicana pro Derechos de la Mujer, A.C.  
Semillas**

**Women murdered in Cd. Juárez: how to achieve justice?  
A civil society strengthening process**

By Emilienne de Leon<sup>1</sup>

For more than a decade (12 years) almost 400 women have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, in serial and sexual crimes not elucidated, associated with drug trafficking and organised crime. Most of the victims were younger than 19 years old, in a culture of impunity and violent socialisation.

The femicide of Cd. Juárez can be taken as a paradigmatic case in all over the world. One of the main problems for women that suffer violence is the lack of access to justice in many countries in the world. Specially in the Third World or in the South. There are many circumstances that do not permit women to be able to get justice. Some of them are cultural but other's as in the case of Cd. Juárez, the main problem is that the government do not take the case. It is only through the Mexican civil society and the international pressure that Mexican government at the local, state and federal level are beginning to work on the investigation of the different patrons that these crimes have been occurred.

This frontier city is characterized by wide gaps in gender relationships. The maquila industry has contributed that in most cases women are the ones who exclusively or to a large extent provide for their families, due to the fact that most of the maquilas' working force are women who earn better wages than their spouses. Many men perceive themselves under threat and superseded in their traditional role as family heads and as a consequence, they act in a violent way against women. A generalisation of violence against women can be observed.

Ciudad Juárez is the Mexican metropolis that has one of the highest child abuse and family violence rates. The weak social security system, the omission of care and family violence indicate a system of family and gender relationship characterized by excessive imbalance and exclusions, in a society of growing fragmentation.

Over 65,000 children under the age of four, children of working mothers in formal jobs, do not have access to the nursery system in Ciudad Juárez, since there exists a lack of coverage for 95 per cent of the population. Twenty five per cent of the families from Juárez are mono-parental headed by a woman with more than one child, on average.<sup>2 3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Emilienne de Leon is the Executive Director of Sociedad Mexicana Pro Derechos de la Mujer, A.C., known as Semillas which means Seeds, since it is a women's fund in Mexico that gave seed grants to women's organizations in the field of human rights.

<sup>2</sup> Instituto Municipal de Investigación y Planeación. Plan Parcial del Poniente, Ciudad Juárez, 2000. Ayuntamiento de Juárez. Ajo, Mirna, Maternidad y relaciones filiales en Ciudad Juárez 2000. Tesis de Maestría en Ciencias Sociales para el diseño de políticas públicas [Maternity and Filial Relationships in Ciudad Juárez 2000. Master's Degree Thesis in Social Science for the Design of Public Policies] Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, September, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Limas Hernández, Alfredo, Pobreza Urbana, Familia y Femenidades en Riesgo en Ciudad Juárez Globalizado. Tesis de Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales [Urban Poverty, Families and Female Identities Under Risk in Globalized Ciudad Juárez. Doctoral thesis in Social Sciences], Universidad de Colima, 2003.

Governmental response to address the problem of violence has been rather weak. Regarding prevention which falls within the Municipality's responsibilities no clear policies are set up, despite of the alarming security conditions the city has been experiencing over the last 12 years when the serial assassinations of women commenced.

Civil society organisations have been very active over the past years requesting governmental action against violence and against impunity. You can find more than 500 initiatives from civil society in this period in order to stop the crimes and to get justice. Some of the most important have been: The Citizenship Network of NO Violence and Human Dignity (Red Ciudadana de NO Violencia y Dignidad Humana), Our Daughters Back Home (Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa), and the national campaign Not One More (NI UNA MAS), demanded the participation of Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAC) of the Organisation of American States, presenting four cases of assassinated women. More recently the work that the anthropological-medical group from Argentina is doing to get the truth around the bones of the murdered women is a critical piece to look forward justice.

All the actions made by civil society organizations, more specifically women's organizations has been doing a lot of pressure and gain visibility at the national and international level to look for justice. It has been a tremendous effort and the answer from the local government and even from the state level has been to diminish the problem and made a lots of critics to civil society.

Public opinion and the role of mass media is very significant in this situation. It can be seen that part of the media ignores or minimises this problematic or even cause polarisation amongst civil society organisations. Parts of the private sector try to avoid a wider dissemination of the crime situation fearing of investment losses. As a result media has not been favouring a culture of violence prevention or conflict resolution.

State and federal intervention has been not very well coordinated characterized by low levels of accessibility to judicial justice. Only recently the National Human Rights Committee and the General Attorney's Office established offices at local level.

However, since, UNIFEM Mexico brought a group of international specialists in law and justice that gave, at the end of 2003, a strong recommendation to the government, the coordination between the state and federal level has initiated. From that, the federal government created the Special Commission to Eradicate Violence in Juarez was created as well as a Special Fiscal Attorney to solve the cases.

The action of these two instances has been done in different ways. While the fiscal attorney, Maria Urbina, came with the results of a research telling about 90 officers were responsables of negligence, at least, nothing happened after that. The Special Commissioner, Guadalupe Morfin, has done a very good work around prevention of violence, building community network and trying to get close to civil society initiatives at the local and national level. Also at the Federal level the Minister of Social Development have put a lot of effort and resources to solve the economic situation of many of the families of the murdered women, and also in bringing courses and seminars in order to create a better environment among the civil society organizations.

### **The Trust Fund award**

In 2004, Semillas received an award from the Trust Fund in order to strengthen some of the women's organizations more active in the field of prevention of VAW and justice. The final objective of the project has been to achieve an Action Plan between the four organizations

selected to be supported in Cd. Juárez: Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, Casa Amiga, Las Hormigas and Compañeros.

### **Who is Semillas and Why Semillas?**

Semillas is the unique national wide women's fund in Mexico who gives grants to women's organizations in the past 15 years in all over the country. Semillas is an independent fund who receives its funds from the international cooperation and from the Mexican society and the corporation with a social responsibility vision. Semillas not only provide financial resources to the women's organizations, but also gives institutional strengthening support through its wide experience in the field in with the help of experts. Semillas leads special projects as a medium and large process to look for social change. In the case of Cd. Juárez Semillas has been present since 1994 giving the first grant to Esther Chavez to raise the voices against the women's assassinations, we also made a diagnostic in 2003 in order to understand better the best way to support the action of civil society in that border city. We decided that the institutional strengthening of some of the key organizations in Juárez will give them the opportunity to build together joint actions. That is why we decide to begin a process of supporting organizations in Cd. Juárez.

### **What are the fields of the process?**

The organizations selected were working of three main fields:

1. Prevention of violence against women and children
2. Access to justice to the cases of murdered women
3. Building community in the poorest areas of Cd. Juárez.

### **What we found when the project begun?**

A lack of trust among these organizations; many negative situations, misunderstandings had occurred and they were even angry among them and with no intention to work together. Each organization had different necessities to improve their work and their strategic vision.

Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa needed more attention and support than the others because many mothers left the organization and they even had a legal status.

Semillas decided to initiate the project as part of a medium term strengthening process and begun to work one by one with the four organizations selected. The project included the interventions of experts with the organizations in: strategic planning, conflict resolution and institutional strengthening and strategic and effective communication techniques.

### **The achievements of the project**

Semillas has done all the work around strategic planning and the following of the different activities the organizations. Semillas also contracted experts to work in conflict resolution and more specifically making direct interventions in order to strengthen Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (NHRC).

In all the areas the organizations made the following actions:

- A series of workshops and seminars (more than 60) within the poorest population in Juárez around the education to prevent violence and abuse to women and children.
- Participation in joint actions with other organizations like marches, demonstrations and solicitations of justice.
- NHRC has a legal status and they learned how to prepare a case to be presented to the justice authorities in Mexico and into the IAC.

- Preparation of 6 cases to be presented in the Inter-American Commission that some of them had already being accepted and others are now accepted, as a second phase, in the Inter-American Court.
- Follow up of 2 cases that had already been accepted in the IAC and one of them is now accepted in the Inter-American Court.
- Intervention during 8 months to strengthen NHRC achieving a new relationship with other organizations and beginning to make joint actions.
- Strategic planning process for Casa Amiga during 10 months with the result of a new strategic plan and the possibility to make joint actions and a better relationship with NHRC.
- Strategic planning process Las Hormigas and a women's group of the community in a period of 6 months.
- Workshops on effective communication a how to deal with conflicts among the four organizations facilitated by an expert and led by Compañeros as part of their strengthening process.

But more important is the fact that all these four organizations has been strengthened in their capacity to act with the authorities, with other organizations, to be more visible and more strategic. Finally, after more than one year of working with them separately, Semillas could gather them in a special workshop on effective communication that gave them the opportunity to learn more from the others and to look on the common issues they can raise together. Now, the acknowledge that they can do joint actions, they believe again in each other, they begun to trust again on the work of that the others are doing and also mentioned the strong and strategic capacity they can achieve being together.

### **The continuity of the process**

In the near future it is quite possible that an attempt will be made to promote a greater incidence and articulation of those, who in a joint form, come out in the formulation and later in the implementation of said Plan, that could serve as an effective, efficient and legitimate instrument and as a reference document to plan, design and implement concrete public policies that will have an impact in the medium and long term against femicide and violence against women. Likewise, it will serve for the elaboration of concrete and efficient proposals that may be taken later and supported by relevant authorities.

Semillas has now a grant from the Ford Foundation to make a continuity of the strengthening process with Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa. They believe that it is necessary to strengthen civil society and that this organization is a key actor in the problematic. Semillas is also mapping the other initiatives that other actors, like civil society organizations, government, international cooperation are doing to push for a solution in this problem.

Eradicate violence against women in Cd. Juárez is not an easy solution to achieve, the problem is quite complex and many of the hard aspects are related with criminal networks of drugs and trafficking and also with the negligence and corruption of the authorities. It is outstanding the action of civil society in the local and national level and the great awareness they have bring to this paradigmatic case at the international level. It is quite important to acknowledge the governmental efforts done until now, but it seems that this will continue to be a big topic for the next federal government since in 2005 we will elect a new President for Mexico.

Our commitment is to continue raising our voices, supporting women's organizations in Juarez and trying to do the more strategic and joint actions in order to go forward the solution. No more impunity, justice for the victims and stop violence against women.

---

## **Annex**

### **Las Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez: Acceso a la justicia y alto a la impunidad son la solución**

En Ciudad Juárez cerca de 400 mujeres han sido asesinadas en 12 años, en crímenes sexuales y seriales no esclarecidos, asociados al narcotráfico y de la delincuencia organizada. La mayoría de las víctimas eran menores de 19 años de edad, en una cultura de impunidad y socialización de la violencia.

En esta ciudad fronteriza existen desfases de relaciones de género. La industria maquiladora ha contribuido, en la mayoría de los casos que las mujeres sean las que mantienen sus familias exclusivamente o en gran parte, dado que la mayoría de la fuerza de trabajo de las maquilas es femenina ganando mejores salarios que sus cónyuges. Muchos hombres se ven amenazados y desplazados en su rol tradicional como jefes de familia y como consecuencia actúan de forma violenta contra las mujeres. Se observa una generalización de violencia a las mujeres.

Cd. Juárez es la urbe mexicana que tiene uno de los mayores índices de maltrato infantil y violencia familiar. El débil sistema de seguridad social, la omisión de cuidados y la violencia familiar indican un sistema de relaciones familiares y de género con un alto nivel de asimetrías y exclusiones, en una sociedad de fragmentación creciente.

En Ciudad Juárez más de 65.000 menores de cuatro años de edad, hijos de madres trabajadoras en empleos formales, no tienen acceso al sistema de guarderías, ya que existe una falta de cobertura para 95% de la población. El 25% de las familias juarenses son monoparentales con jefatura femenina con más de un hijo en promedio.<sup>4</sup>

Las muertas de Juárez, como se les llama comúnmente, incluyen asesinatos de mujeres víctimas de violencia intra-familiar y mujeres asesinadas en un patrón de tortura y mutilación del cuerpo antes de la muerte. De éstas últimas, cerca de 100, no hay resultados en cuanto al sistema judicial mexicano. Eso ha llevado a las organizaciones de madres de víctimas<sup>5</sup> a llevar sus casos a la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos<sup>6</sup> para buscar recomendaciones de dicho organismo internacional y presionar al gobierno mexicano a nivel local, estatal y federal para que de la respuesta adecuada. La ausencia de justicia provoca impunidad y no es de extrañarse que sigan apareciendo cadáveres de mujeres en Juárez casi todos los meses.

---

<sup>4</sup> Instituto Municipal de Investigación y Planeación. Plan Parcial del Poniente, Cd. Juárez, 2000. Ayuntamiento de Juárez. Jo, Mirna, Maternidad y Relaciones Filiales en Cd. Juárez 2000. Tesis de maestría en Ciencias Sociales para el Diseño de Políticas Públicas, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, Septiembre, 2001. Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática. Censo General de Población y Vivienda 2000. Cd. de México, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa en Ciudad Juárez y Justicia para Nuestras Hijas en Chihuahua.

<sup>6</sup> Organismo dependiente de la organización de Estados Americanos (OEA) parte del Sistema de Naciones Unidas.

Las asesinadas de Juárez son un caso paradigmático de por la impunidad imperante y la falta de justicia. Si se resuelve en Juárez es posible resolverlo en el resto del país. La importancia de Juárez radica en lograr la justicia, este es el punto nodal.

### **La acción de la sociedad civil**

Para contrarrestar la descomposición social que vive Ciudad Juárez, que se expresa en el fenómeno de femicidio<sup>7</sup> de ya cerca de 400 mujeres y cientos de desaparecidas, se han buscado diversas estrategias para abordar la problemática desde la sociedad civil organizada, tanto la local como la nacional e internacional. Ha habido más de 500 iniciativas de la sociedad civil nacional e internacional. Mencionaré solo algunas de ellas para dar una idea del enorme esfuerzo desplegado en la búsqueda de justicia.

La primera que lanzó la voz de protesta y un llamado de atención a las autoridades en 1994 fue Esther Chávez, activista de los derechos humanos y feminista, hoy directora de Casa Amiga, centro de atención en crisis. Esther sigue siendo una vocera de la causa y su organización trabaja arduamente, con un equipo muy profesional, en la atención de casos de mujeres y niñas y niños víctimas de violencia y en la prevención de la violencia en la niñez en las escuelas y centros de reunión en Cd. Juárez.

Cerca del año 2000 un grupo nutrido de madres de víctimas creó la organización “Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa” (NHRC) que incansablemente ha dado seguimiento a ciertos casos apoyadas por organizaciones de derechos humanos y abogados especializados.

La Red Ciudadana de NO Violencia y Dignidad Humana ha sido otro de los intentos de la sociedad civil juarenses por lograr justicia y disminuir la violencia hacia las mujeres. Sus logros fueron significativos en su momento ya que las autoridades estatales trataron de minimizar las cifras pero este colectivo logro hacer presión sobre órganos legislativos locales y federales para que se promoviera una mayor acciones de investigación sobre los casos.

Las Universidades también han acompañado este proceso y destacan a nivel nacional la UNAM, a nivel local el Colegio de la Frontera y la Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, así como del otro lado de la frontera, en Estados Unidos, la Universidad El Paso Texas. Todas ellas han desplegado un sinnúmero de investigaciones y estudios sobre el caso de Juárez. Entre las investigadoras más conocedoras tenemos a Julia Monarrez del Colegio de la Frontera.

Más recientemente, la campaña “Ni una muerta mas” que se difundió entre 2003 y 2004 tuvo efectos positivos en términos de llamar la atención de opinión pública nacional e internacional y generar una mayor presión sobre las autoridades.

Desde 2004, llegó un equipo de antropólogas forenses con una visión de derechos humanos y con una gran experiencia no sólo en Argentina con las madres de la Plaza de Mayo, sino en otros países donde se han dado situaciones de muertos y desaparecidos que era muy difícil su identificación. Su trabajo es muy profesional desde el análisis riguroso de los restos de los cuerpos pero con un enfoque de derechos humanos y colaboración con las propios familiares de las víctimas y de interlocución con las autoridades correspondientes.

---

<sup>7</sup> Por feminicidio consideramos el fenómeno de asesinatos continuos de mujeres por el hecho de ser mujeres, sin ninguna otra razón para cuasar su muerte.

El caso de las muertas de Juárez es un problema de Estado, aunque el gobierno no haya querido intervenir a profundidad; es un problema técnico porque implica la investigación a fondo y bien realizada de una multiplicidad de casos sin resolver que están archivados y mal investigados; y además es un problema muy complejizado por la muy posible acción del crimen organizado. Adicionalmente, existe en la sociedad juarense una dicotomía en cuanto al problema: por un lado están las organizaciones de la sociedad civil organizada, fundamentalmente ONG's de mujeres, quienes luchan desde hace más de 10 años por obtener la verdad y la justicia y esa franja amplia de la población muy marginada que vive en zonas sin la básica infraestructura y de donde provienen la mayoría de las mujeres asesinadas; por el otro, están los grupos de empresarios e industriales que niegan que la problemática sea tan grave y a los que buena parte de la opinión pública se adhiere y también la clase media y alta de Juárez, quienes prefieren negar el problema.

Las organizaciones no gubernamentales nacionales e internacionales han hecho un trabajo conjunto para organizar visitas de congresistas mexicanos y norteamericanos para promover sanciones.

A su vez, Naciones Unidas ha enviado relatoras especiales de Martha Altolaquirre de parte de Naciones Unidas para generar reportes y recomendaciones UNIFEM México ha invitado a juristas especializados para que revisaran