



Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 2009, 475-484

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## **Review / Reseña**

Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border. Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

### ***Beyond feminicidio?***

## **Violence Against Women in Ciudad Juárez and Beyond**

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The border town of Ciudad Juárez, in the Northern state of Chihuahua, has become a paradigm of gendered violence in Mexico and beyond.<sup>1</sup> It was in the early nineties, just as Mexico embarked on a process

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<sup>1</sup> Violence against women in Juárez has been eclipsed by the gruesome violence of drug cartels. Despite military and federal police presence, Juárez remains an area rigged with organized crime violence: according to media sources, almost 3000 people were murdered in 2008 and 2009 in the state of Chihuahua.

of democratization, that the bodies of raped, tortured, and murdered young women began to emerge in the city and its outskirts.<sup>2</sup> The state, both at the federal, state, and local levels, initially did not take a stance against this violence, deploying a “blame the victim” strategy that yielded civil society mobilization and international outrage. A transnational movement against women’s murders (known as *feminicidio* or femicide) took hold during late 1990s and the early 2000s. This movement, together with international “shaming” of the Mexican state, resulted in some measure of institutional response to violence against women, even if ineffective.

Democratization processes arguably render the state and its institutions more responsive to citizen’s demands. Juárez—today the center stage of the Mexican government’s war on drugs—is one of the most economically thriving cities in Mexico, and electoral democracy took hold there already in the early nineties.<sup>3</sup> However, electoral democracy, civil

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See *El País*, “México refuerza la ofensiva contra el narco en Ciudad Juárez,” June 22, 2009. *The New York Times* reports 1550 deaths during 2008. See, “Two Sides of a Border: One Violent, One Safe,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> According to different sources, official and unofficial, between 300 and 500 women and girls have been killed since 1993. In its last report, the now extinct Special Prosecutor Office for Crimes Against Women Perpetrated in Juárez (Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Relacionados con los Homicidios en el Municipio de Juárez) stated that, until 2006, 47 women remain missing, although NGOs report higher numbers. The disparities in the figures—a disparity found even among official sources—attests to the lack of a systematic methodology to efficiently account for, and follow up on, the reported cases of murdered and missing women. Between one-third and one-fifth of the victims were subjected to what appears to be a systematic pattern of abduction, torture, and rape, followed by murder. The women were abducted in a public place (ironically, with few witnesses), held captive during days or even months, their bodies then dumped, bearing signs of rape and torture. The perpetrators remain largely anonymous, the majority of the murders unsolved and unpunished, the minority unsatisfactorily closed. According to official and independent reports, impunity remains a significant problem. For more information, see the report by the Citizen *Feminicidio* Observatory (Observatorio Ciudadano para Monitorear la Impartición de Justicia en los Casos de Feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez y Chihuahua), available at <http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/cofcjch2006.htm>. See also *Informe final de la Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Relacionados con los Homicidios en el Municipio de Juárez*, at <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/Temas%20Relevantes/Casos%20de%20Interes/Muertas%20de%20Juarez/Informe%20Final.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Chihuahua was among the first states to be ruled by an opposition party. In 1992, the candidate of the right-wing party Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), Francisco Barrios Terrazas, won the elections at the state level. The governorship of the state went back to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolution Party, PRI) during the 1998 elections, and has remained on *priista* hands since then. At the city-municipal level, the PAN

society mobilization, and economic progress neither prevented, nor stopped, the murders of hundreds of women. Early democratization and economic growth have thus run parallel to a violently exclusionary process. How can this phenomenon be explained?

Kathleen Staudt's *Violence and Activism at the Border* tackles this very question, attempting to make sense of the situation by focusing on the border as a space in which state institutions and actors, and national, binational and transnational social movements act and interact by mobilizing "gender performances." Staudt's book aims at offering a comprehensive view of violence against women in Juárez, intending to counter the city's reputation as a "symbolic place of women-killing." (xi) After reading the book, it seems that Juárez is not such an exceptional place, but rather a city where social movements were successful in framing violence against women as a political issue, progressively moving from a "narrow" discourse on "femicide" to a "broader" discourse about "violence against women."

The gendered interaction of external constituencies, or "outsiders" (social movements, the private sector, political parties, and the media), and state "insiders" (politicians, women's machineries, federal budget incentives), Staudt argues, explains state responsiveness to violence prevention (25). During the late 1990s, a local movement against gender violence formed by NGOs and organizations of victim's families catalyzed a national, binational, and eventually transnational network of activism against violence in Juárez, a network that, as Staudt narrates, later became a site of conflict and disagreement over the movement's portrayals and conceptualizations of gendered violence.

In this review, I will focus on two themes. First, the question, addressed by Staudt throughout her book, of whether femicide (*feminicidio*) can be subsumed under—and explained by—the wider phenomenon of violence against women or, conversely, if there is something specific to this phenomenon in terms of its political meaning

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governed from 1992 to 2004, except for a brief interruption during 2001-2002, at which time a PRI-led Council ruled as the 2001 elections were annulled. The PRI has governed Ciudad Juárez again from 2004 onwards. There will be municipal elections in 2010.

and significations that demands disaggregating the conceptualization of and policy responses to violence against women. Second, I will address the adequacy of her model for explaining, on the one hand, the phenomenon of violence against women in Juárez and, on the other, state responsiveness to said violence.

### *Beyond Feminicidio?*

One of Staudt's main arguments is that "femicide" is just the most "spectacular" face of violence against women. She writes that "[...] the murders and everyday violence should be understood as interconnected. Violence against women is the overarching problem, whether by partners or strangers, serial killers or opportunistic predators." (30) To sum, the umbrella problem in Juárez is the normalization and tacit acceptance of all types of violence against women.<sup>4</sup> The violence that results in the death of a woman, femicide, is to be taken as a subset of this wider, normalized, violence.

Staudt seems to be arguing that in order to truly understand the dynamics of gendered violence we should not focus on its exceptional manifestations, but rather on its ordinariness and everydayness (29). With this, she follows an approach that we can call the turn to the ordinary": the first conceptual and strategic step, it seems, should be to make visible the invisible, but nevertheless widespread, manifestations of violence. By tackling and bringing to light the pervasiveness of the problem, instead of focusing on highly charged exceptional or extreme situations such as femicide, social movements would be more effective in their fight to make governments more responsive to gendered violence.

Border movements, however, initially chose to frame, conceptualize, and mobilize around events of femicide, and thus prioritized them over other manifestations of violence against women. For Staudt, a risk involved in this framing strategy is losing steam and public support once the

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<sup>4</sup> Generalizing from a representative sample drawn up by Staudt in the context of a project with the Federación Mexicana de Asociaciones Privadas (FEMAP) and Salud y Desarrollo Comunitario de Ciudad Juárez (SADEC), Staudt concludes that as many as 100,000 Juarencense women are survivors of violence (domestic, physical, and sexual). Of these, up to 73,000 might have suffered domestic violence, and 26,000 would be rape victims (51, 65).

murders become “less common” or when another, more urgent, problem jumps into public attention—i.e., drug-related violence. Her worry is that “[...] the public will become immune to shock, surrounded as it is with a culture of fear, unless stories get worse and larger death numbers are dramatically conveyed. Another danger [...] is that people will turn to more dramatic events in other places [...]” (150) Staudt is right on this point after all, mainstream national media hardly ever covers femicide in Juárez anymore, as public attention has been grabbed by drug related violence. However, given the lack of effective closure to femicide cases, it is still vital to explore the particular meaning of femicide and the effects this violence has had on the community.

The fact that the killings are not targeted at “just any woman,” but rather at victims with a certain profile (namely, socio-economically underprivileged and politically powerless women), distinguishes, I believe, domestic, partner or interpersonal violence—whose targets/victims are women from all walks of life—from femicide.<sup>5</sup> The peculiar pattern of abduction, torture and rape, murder and disposal of the body present in between one-fifth and one-third of the crimes is not, to my knowledge, to be found in other parts of Mexico, at least not to the extent present in Juárez. The resources needed to carry out such an endeavor—securing a place where the woman is to be held captive, a vehicle to transport the body, the confidence that neither the police nor bystander civilians will notice what is being carried out—signal towards a premeditated and organized nature of the deeds in question that, in fact, functions as a strategy of exclusion.

As Victoria Sanford has argued for the Guatemalan case, beyond being an expression of violence against women, Juárez femicides can be regarded as a “social cleansing” of sorts. Sanford writes, “The cause of death, the location of the cadavers, and the profile of the victims can serve

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<sup>5</sup> Statistical research on the prevalence of femicide concluded that urban inhabitants that live in areas with an infrastructure deficit (i.e. poor access to water, electricity, and sewage) have a higher probability of experiencing femicidal violence. Thus, femicidal violence has a specific spatial-geographical pattern, and its incidence is located in the Western, and poorest, part of the city (Monárrez Fragoso 2006: 47-49).

as indicators of the existence of social cleansing. Likewise, signs of torture can indicate social cleansing [...] Social cleansing seeks to generate terror by leaving signs of torture in order to warn others close to the victim of what could happen to them” (Sanford 2008: 111-112). In this regard, Staudt’s assertion that in Juárez, two out of three women report feeling fear either occasionally or always (55) signals towards the ‘effectiveness’ of femicide to communicate the message of exclusion and potential victimhood.

Femicide is not a spectacular manifestation of violence against women that obscures everyday violence, as Staudt argues. Rather, it could be argued that femicide discloses a communitarian dynamic of exclusion and “social cleansing.” As such, the adequate way of dealing with it is not to subsume femicide under the wider category of violence against women or domestic violence, but to fight from numerous and varied fronts each and every manifestation of violence against women. Indeed, sexual violence, domestic violence, economic violence, and fatal violence (femicide) adhere to different logics and, as such, should be addressed by specific policy interventions. While it might be true that violence against women arises out of a generalized disregard for “the feminine” that prevents women from fully exercising their citizenship and enjoying their rights, the different manifestation of violence cannot, and should not, be translated into a single logic. A question remains whether we can trace the essential connections between phenomena (the varied manifestations of violence against women) without thereby subsuming them under a single, indistinct, essence (e.g., “violence results from a patriarchal logic”).

The framing of women’s murders as femicide cannot be discarded in Juárez until the state brings to justice each and every single murder, a fact that begs for local as well as federal and even international intervention.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In fact the NGO Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (Center for Justice and International Law) has taken up three femicide cases to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, arguing that the 25 public officials signaled by the victims’ families as obstructing justice have not been sanctioned by the Mexican state and other irregularities in the investigations. The state is awaiting the Court’s sentence. See CIMAC Noticias, “Estado mexicano espera sentencia por feminicidio en Juárez, May 04, 2009. Online: <http://www.cimacnoticias.com/site/09050401-REPORTAJE-Estado-me.37570.0.html>

Government officials that may have tampered with the investigations must be brought to trial, and human rights abuses must be fully addressed and repaired. Those held as perpetrators must have a fair trial and the use of torture eradicated. Until the impunity that has characterized the crimes is not transcended, and until the state stops being complicit, either by omission or commission, shifting attention from femicide to violence against women will not be a viable political option.

*Explaining Violence in Juárez*

Staudt deploys a tripartite explanatory framework. Violence against women in Juárez, she argues, is explained by the relationship between three variables: the global economy, gendered institutions, and culture. In turn, Staudt analyzes this set of variables by making recourse to the concept of “gender performance.” Gender performance is both “literal and concrete” (street theater, films, plays, demonstrations) and can be understood “in figurative, less concrete terms” (18). Staudt’s deployment of performance thus brings together drama and theatricality on the part of social movements, which deploy “symbols, icons, colors wrenching and emotional testimonies, and stories” in order to win support and expand constituencies (18), with an understanding of gender as a historically and socially constructed, and thus contingent, “doing.” She argues, “Interactive performances occurred among NGOs and governments with the use of numbers, maximized and counted over a decade, while the Mexican government responded with minimizing and contesting numeric accounts.” (18-19) Although Staudt does not mention this explicitly, it seems that the deployment of the femicide approach to violence in Juárez is easier to “perform” and dramatize than a “less emotional” approach based on wider, but not as noticeable, violence against women.

Through her understanding of gender performance, Staudt proceeds to analyze women’s responses to and perceptions of gendered violence (Chapter 3), social movements strategies and framings (Chapter 4), and government responses to violence and activism (Chapter 5), and to

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explain how a certain articulation of global economic processes, institutions, and culture at the border may have been the catalyst for the intensification of gendered violence in Juárez. Staudt writes, “extensive violence against women is attributable to changing power relations, especially backlash in the border economic context. But I also attribute high female murder rates to institutional flaws in political and criminal justice institutions [...]” (4). Although her multilayered approach to explaining violence and government responsiveness is interesting, Staudt’s analysis of the articulation of culture, economics, and institutions remains overly reductive.

Let’s review her take on male “backlash” against women’s economic empowerment: “Through the 1980s, the maquila workforce was overwhelmingly female [...]. Women, mostly very young women, earned money and spent money, nudging at the gender system of men as household breadwinners exercising authorities in the home. Resentment in many walks of life built up in Juárez, fostered by widespread media coverage and public unease of women as assertive, productive, and sexualized workers displacing men as workers” (45). Culture enters into the equation because the construction of masculinity has not “caught up with change among women who resolutely denounce violence” (17) and because “women’s paid work threatens some men” (70). As a result, the narrative goes, “Changes in gender power relations produce selective male backlash as a desperate and flawed strategy to regain power” (49).

This argument renders violence an instrumental tool men use in order to “regain power.” The deployment of violence is merely reactive, an expression of impotence on the part of men, an effort to take things back to what they once were. But, as mentioned in the previous section, the manifold manifestations of violence against women cannot be subsumed under a single logic of “revenge,” unless we are willing to back up the claim that murder, rape, economic control, and emotional abuse all equally express “male backlash.” A more careful explanation of the origins and meanings of, on the one hand, femicidal, murderous violence and, on the other, domestic or partner violence would be necessary in order to render the argument more persuasive.



Along the same line, a more careful examination of the role institutions (both governmental and non-governmental) play is needed. Staudt's framework for explaining government responsiveness to violence against women in the border may be capable of explaining responsiveness, but not the *quality* of responsiveness nor its *scope* or *comprehensiveness*. What factors explain effective government responsiveness—one that goes beyond symbolic pronouncements and appointments (as has been the case in Juárez<sup>7</sup>)? From Staudt's framework, there is no way of answering this question. What criteria can be employed in order to judge whether the pressure enacted by “external constituencies” (i.e. social movements) and by “insiders” (i.e. politicians, women's machineries) is effective? S. Lauren Weldon has argued that a strong, autonomous women's movement might have a greater impact than a co-opted or weak movement. On the same line, Weldon argues that women's machineries with positional authority, clear mandates, and adequate resources can function as an avenue for representing women's concerns (Weldon 2002). What are the policy areas favored by the state? Are these the adequate policy areas? These are important questions that beg for scholarly attention and that are not clearly answered.

The main virtue of Staudt's book is its attention to the local level. Indeed, Mexico's different regions experience diverse realities, which makes it impossible to generalize an analysis of policy responses at the national level and transpose them into the local. The analysis of the interactions between the local and the federal remains rare among political science scholarship on Mexico, and Staudt's book is an important contribution in that respect. Staudt's research is indeed informative and offers a long needed overview of the situation in Juárez. However, *Violence and Activism at the Border* ultimately fails at delivering what it promises: a convincing explanation of state responses (or lack thereof) to violence against women in the border (22).

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<sup>7</sup> In her words, “Symbolic politics produces gender performances that involve officials' numeric challenges to NGO and movement femicide figures and a steady supply of female appointees. During the decade-long attention to femicide, Mexican authorities spent more time challenging the number of female homicides than reporting on the progress of searching for the killers” (121).

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