

Mother Jones

To Work and Die in Juarez

By Evelyn Nieves | Wed May 1, 2002 12:00 AM PST

Early last fall, authorities in the gray-brown factory city of Ciudad Juarez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, were prepared to declare a triumph. For nine months, no women's bodies had been found dumped in a field or ditch or along the side of a road. Officials were ready to say that Ciudad Juarez's eight-year series of rape-murders was finally over.

True, about two dozen women were still missing, their photos and descriptions ("tan skin, long brown hair") taped to the windows of the discount stores along Avenida Juarez, downtown's main drag. But there were no bodies. No proof the women hadn't simply up and left. There was certainly no hard evidence to investigate, despite the warnings from women's rights groups that the young women who had vanished fit the profile of scores of others who have been raped, mutilated, and tossed like garbage throughout Ciudad Juarez since 1993.

Then, on November 6, a construction worker stumbled onto the body of a slim, long-haired young woman in a ditch between two major intersections. Hours later, police searching the ditch found the skeletal remains of two more young women. The next day, bulldozers uncovered five more. Police quickly arrested two suspects, drivers for the factory buses that shuttle workers between the city's shantytown colonias and its sprawling industrial district. Authorities soon announced that the drivers had confessed to 11 murders of women over the previous 15 months. But after years of false starts and dubious arrests, few in Ciudad Juarez -- including the families of the victims -- were willing to believe that police had caught the real killers.

A week later, another body -- another slim, long-haired young woman, dead less than a day -- was found tossed in the middle of a street in a quiet residential neighborhood. And a week after that, another one.

And so Mexico's fourth-largest city retains its nickname as "the capital of murdered women." The city of 1.5 million, where an acrid haze of factory smoke and car exhaust hangs in the air, is known for having one of the highest crime rates in Mexico; in 2001 alone, drug traffickers were blamed for more than 60 execution-style murders. But Juarez is most notorious as a place that draws tens of thousands of young women from small, poor towns to take \$55-a-week jobs in assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, operated by some of the wealthiest corporations in the world -- companies like General Electric, Alcoa, and DuPont. More than 60 percent of maquiladora workers are women and girls, many as young as 13 or 14.

At least 75 young women, many of them factory workers and most fitting the same description -- slim, pretty, long dark hair -- have been raped and murdered here since 1993, according to most accounts. Scores more are missing. Yet young women keep arriving, even as the city remains seemingly unable to protect them.

But while the murders have scarred Ciudad Juarez and exposed its law-enforcement officials as either incompetent or corrupt, they have also sparked the creation of more than a dozen women's rights groups in the city. Born of desperation and outrage, many of the groups are made up largely of housewives, mothers, and grandmothers, some of them relatives and friends of the murdered. Most have few means and little time, given the demands of tending to their families.

Still, the women have become a force in Juarez. Taking on the powers that be, much as civil rights marchers in the United States did in the segregated South, they have marched time and again to the state attorney general's office demanding more aggressive investigations. They have held vigils, erected crosses throughout the city in the victims' memories, and scoured fields and ditches for evidence. They have kept the murders in the news, drawn attention from human-rights groups in Mexico and the United States, and pressured President Vicente Fox to send federal investigators to look into the cases. (He finally promised to do so in January, but by early spring no federal help had arrived.)

Mostly, the groups have demanded more attention to violence against women in a city where, they charge, the lives of young, poor women haven't counted for much. "The killings continue," says Esther Chávez, who is considered a pioneer in Juarez's women's movement. "So not much has changed."

On the surface, it does seem that little has changed in Juarez in response to the killings. Women still wait for the rickety green factory buses well before the sun is up, on lonely, unlit corners where no one would see them if they were dragged into a car and driven away, never to be seen alive again. The owners of the more than 300 factories that have flocked here in search of low tariffs and cheap labor have said little on the subject of the abductions, rapes, and murders. Though companies have vowed to improve security in the city's industrial areas, there has been no coordinated campaign to protect the young women workers -- even though the eight bodies found in November were discovered in a field directly across the road from the office of the foreign companies' trade organization, Asociación de Maquiladoras.

Nor have the plants changed policies that may be endangering their employees. Workers are still turned away at many factories if they are as little as three minutes late, leaving them to return home alone and vulnerable -- as was the case with several of the women who were later found dead. Workers still begin and end their late-night shifts with no police or security patrols in sight.

Throughout Ciudad Juarez, fear is palpable. Crosses and messages of remembrance have been nailed to signposts all over town, a constant reminder of the dead. Billboards and bus advertisements warn: "Be careful -- watch for your life." Women are on edge. On a visit after the bodies were found in November, women factory workers who were waiting, alone, for buses at 5 a.m. all recoiled when I approached them for interviews with a male photographer and a male guide. Two ran away, and one shouted out that her boyfriend would be along shortly.

Yet the women's groups have won a few victories -- and by all accounts, no one has done more to advance their cause than Esther Chávez. A tiny, fine-boned woman in her 60s, Chávez worked as a financial manager for Kraft Foods in Mexico City before moving to Ciudad Juarez 20 years ago. Today, she is the executive director of Casa Amiga, the city's first and only rape crisis center and one of only six such centers in Mexico.

Chávez founded Casa Amiga in 1998 after hearing horrific stories of domestic abuse, rape, and incest from factory workers she had met while operating a local dress shop. Located in a storefront on a busy thoroughfare, the center now has five staff members and hundreds of volunteers, who have been among the most visible advocates for the city's murdered women.

Long before the killings attracted attention beyond Ciudad Juarez, Chávez was organizing rallies on behalf of the murder victims and writing about their lives in her column in the city's newspaper, *El Diario de Juarez*. She and her allies in the city's women's movement have spurred the creation of a special commission on the murders in Mexico's Congress and the appointment of a special state prosecutor -- though the latter proved to be a mixed victory: Since the office was created in 1998, two successive special prosecutors have quit, the second this March after only eight months on the job.

The groups' most successful lobbying effort came last fall, when hundreds of women mobilized to scuttle a new state law in Chihuahua -- the state where Juarez is located -- that would have reduced sentences from four years to one for rapists who could convince a court that their victims had "provoked" them. The women appealed to activists, politicians, and the media throughout the country to help them defeat the proposal, which proponents said would protect men from false claims of rape by women who feared telling their parents that they had had sex. Mexico's Congress finally threatened to intervene if Chihuahua legislators did not repeal the law.

The controversy over the rape law, Chávez and her allies argue, shows the root problem behind the Ciudad Juarez murders -- that, in a society where men cannot be charged with raping their wives and domestic abuse is rarely prosecuted, authorities simply do not take violence against women seriously enough. As recently as 1999, then-Chihuahua Attorney General Arturo González Rascón blamed murder victims for dressing provocatively and thus encouraging men's baser instincts.

Others have offered more thoughtful theories about the killings. In 1998, state prosecutors requested assistance from one of the FBI's top serial-crime profilers, Robert Ressler. He concluded that a serial killer could have committed some of the murders, but that many more were probably random crimes. Other investigators have suggested that women might be falling prey to killers as they wait for buses or walk home from work past a downtown district full of cantinas and discos. Chávez believes that many of the murders are the work of copycats who rape, torture, and murder women simply because they have discovered that they can do so with impunity.

"We say, 'Ni una más -- not one more,'" Chávez says. "I want that to be true."

It is a hope that over the past nine years has been frustrated again and again. There have been at least three instances when police announced that they had solved the crimes and arrested the perpetrators -- only to see the killings continue, often within days. In 1995, an Egyptian-born engineer who had worked at one of the maquiladora plants, Abdel Latif Sharif, was charged with raping and murdering an 18-year-old, and police claimed to have proved that he had killed dozens of other women. When more women were found dead after Sharif's arrest, police argued that he had orchestrated the killings from behind bars; but the suspects they arrested were later freed for lack of evidence. Sharif's own murder conviction was overturned in 2000 after his lawyer proved that the alleged victim's description didn't match the body that authorities produced as evidence. He remains in

custody pending further appeals.

In 1999, police announced another break-through, after arresting four maquiladora shuttle-bus drivers who they said had confessed to committing 20 murders on orders from Sharif. The bus drivers contend that they were tortured and beaten into confessing; their cases are pending.

Last November, once again, the two men arrested were bus drivers, and once again the suspects claimed that they had been tortured. After police broadcast videotapes of the drivers' confessions, defense lawyers showed the press photos of their clients with cigarette burns and welts all over their bodies. The following month, the Juarez prison director released a doctor's report suggesting that the suspects had been tortured with electric prods; he resigned two days later. Police have yet to produce any physical evidence connecting the drivers to the murders.

Women's groups joined the suspects' families in protests at police headquarters, urging authorities to find the real killers. In response, José Ortega Aceves, a deputy attorney general in charge of the case, told reporters that the men had probably burned themselves in order to claim that they were tortured.

In February, state police inadvertently brought the November cases back to the limelight when they shot and killed a lawyer for one of the drivers, saying they had mistaken him for a fugitive. Just days earlier the attorney, Mario Escobedo Jr., had announced plans to file a criminal complaint against state police officials for allegedly kidnapping and torturing his client.

After Escobedo's killing, the demonstrations that began after the drivers were arrested last fall intensified. Activists, who believe that the drivers were framed, charge that police killed the attorney to silence criticism. Officials dismiss the accusations, saying the protests are politically motivated. Authorities "are not interested in fabricating suspects," insists Rascón, the former attorney general.

But Victoria Caraveo, a local attorney who leads a consortium of 13 women's groups that have been holding weekly protest marches, says the facts in the case speak for themselves. "We do not attack just to attack," says Caraveo. "We want the killings to stop. This is not political; it's human."

The controversy over Escobedo's killing, and the increasingly vocal complaints from women's groups, have once again drawn national -- and even international -- attention to Ciudad Juarez. Mexico's independent human-rights commission has launched an investigation into the situation in Juarez, including the conduct of police and prosecutors; during an initial visit in February, a spokeswoman for the commission called authorities' response to the killings "markedly insufficient."

And in El Paso, local legislators, labor-union members, and students recently launched a group, called the Coalition on Violence Against Women and Families on the Border, that plans to hold a series of demonstrations on both sides of the border and along the Rio Grande bridges that connect the two cities. "When people say this is Mexico's business and we should stay out of it, they don't recognize that there are binational relationships when it comes to trade and commerce," says one of the coalition's founders, Emma Perez, who chairs the history department at the University of Texas at El Paso.

"Of the border factories in Juarez, 80 percent are U.S.-owned. NAFTA had a lot to do with them coming here. So we also have to take responsibility for the workers in those factories that are being killed."

In one of their first public events, members of the binational organization recently joined a Juarez group, Voces Sin Eco, or Voices Without Echo, on a trip to the spot where the eight bodies were found in November. Twice a month, Voces Sin Eco searches such places, looking for clues that might lead to the missing.

On a clear, cold day in February, the volunteers gathered in a field where eight crosses and thousands of candles had been placed during more than a dozen vigils. The spots where the bodies had been found were still marked by red cord, wooden stakes, and signs numbering the corpses ("Cuerpo Uno," "Cuerpo Dos," "Cuerpo Tres," ...).

Soon, the volunteers located more reminders of the dead. Two boys discovered a pair of tan overalls in the weeds at the edge of a ditch, and Josefina González -- one of three mothers of murder victims who had joined the search -- recognized them as the ones her 20-year-old daughter, Claudia Ivette, had worn to her factory job on October 10 last year. That day, Claudia Ivette had been turned away for being three minutes late for her 3:30 p.m. shift. She had disappeared on her walk home.

In the ditch, the volunteers also discovered ripped and cut women's underwear, four pairs of shoes, a dress, and strands of human hair -- none of which had apparently been noted by police during their search of the area three months earlier. A state investigator was called in to examine the finds. As mothers of the murdered women wept, he scolded the volunteers for contaminating possible evidence.