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Combating Violence in Juarez, Mexico:
Political Opportunities for Women to
Resist Gender, Class, and Labor
Oppression

Dana Kelly
Spring 2004



HONORS THESIS

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"I love to sing, dance, and be in love. Sparkles, sunshine, and bubbles make me happy. I believe that outrage motivates conversation, which motivates change. I want to experience life with people all over the world, be a camp counselor and write books that start something revolutionary."

- J.P. Eckstrom

Acknowledgments

To tell you the truth, I never thought that I would make it. Here I am, ready to graduate six months after my previously carefree and peaceful existence was turned upside down by the death of my best friend and confidant. Gaining the strength that I need to go on without her has taken me through a maze of trails, tears, new friendships, and valuable learning experiences. School has taken a back seat to life lessons, emotional healing, and coping mechanisms. If you had asked me when I began college if I ever questioned whether I would graduate, I would have answered with a resounding "no way." But I have come to realize that life will never take the path that you expect it to. There is power, however, in accepting what life has dealt and a sense of triumph in overcoming challenges that seem impossible. On graduation day I will truly be filled with a sense of accomplishment and solace. Although there is still a long road of healing ahead, I have taken the first step to realizing that life truly does go on even when it seems too painful to endure. To me, this paper represents my triumph. I have completed the largest academic project of my life thus far while dealing with the greatest loss I have ever experienced. There is something to be said for that.

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is evident in my writing. J.P. has provided me with inspiration for a lifetime, which I plan to use to cultivate my skills so that I can reach out to those in need. I know that J.P.'s hopes and dreams for me will be present on graduation day. In a way, I did this for her.

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“We don’t deserve this treatment or the pain we are suffering every day, all I ask is that they find my daughter and for justice to be done.”

- Juarez mother mourning the loss of her daughter¹

“...We went to her workplace, we went to see her friends, we went to see her clients, we went to the Special Prosecutor’s office and they couldn’t find the report I’d logged. I went searching every day and we said to other mothers and relatives of missing persons: What are you going to do?...The case stayed stuck there...They said there were no lines of communication from one prosecutor to another, but no investigation was carried out and they had not begun to search for her either.”

- Evangelina Arce, mother of victim Silvia Arce²

Introduction: Will Tragedy Inspire Change?

February 14, 2004 did not represent a typical Valentines Day for people who gathered in Juarez, Mexico to protest the brutal murders of nearly 400 young women in the last ten years. Walking streets lined with black and pink crosses to commemorate those lost, women, men, activists, artists, and children from all over the world demanded that attention be paid to the conditions in Juarez that have led to the perpetuation of these violent crimes. As family members of victims marched in remembrance of their loved ones, they were aware of the fear that has become a part of their daily existence. Paula Flores Bonilla who lost her daughter Sagrario Gonzales Flores reflects, “I still cannot accept that my daughter is dead. I never saw her body. We have more daughters, and they work at the factories. I am always worrying that they are in danger. I watch them leave and I do not know if they will return” (Bejarano 2002, 134). Protestors march with the hope of diminishing some of the fear of Juarez women by demanding that oppressive political conditions along the border be remedied.

Since the mid 1960s, Juarez, Mexico has undergone a complete transformation that has been influenced by the introduction of international manufacturing facilities called *maquilas*, also known as *maquiladoras* (Fernandez-Kelly 1983, 4). The abundance of

¹ See Amnesty International, 5.

² See Amnesty International, 9.

employment that the introduction of multinational corporations has brought to the area has caused an unprecedented influx of rural Mexicans, particularly women, into border region cities, fleeing a rural sector in Mexico that had been suffering for decades. Juarez's proximity to the US border has provided a stopping point for the thousands of migrants looking for work across the border. This drastic shift in the focus of the Mexican economy has had profound environmental and social affects on those who have come to occupy cities along the border such as Juarez. Today, Juarez is overpopulated and stricken with violence and poverty. Workers in *maquila* factories make \$1.36 an hour on average and live in deplorable shanties in close proximity to thousands of other workers faced with the same bleak reality (Nathan 1999, 25).

Juarez has become a blaring example of the extent to which violence perpetrated against women can be institutionalized and overlooked for more than a decade (Amnesty International 2003, 4). The ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in combination with the government's close ties to capitalist interests has contributed to the lack of attention that has actually been paid to the circumstances in Mexico. However, various groups, mainly composed of families of the disappeared, have organized with the intent of discovering the root causes of such violence and injustice. Local women have joined in protest despite the multitude of risks and obstacles they face under a political system that has been authoritarian for decades. Unfortunately, their efforts towards solving the mystery of the disappearances themselves have been relatively fruitless. Most activists have found that the real causes of the violence are systemic and involve something much deeper than a single serial killer on the loose.

Recently, their efforts have been sustained by international attention that has been attracted to the horrible circumstances these women face. However, current publicity is not enough to make the kind of institutional changes that are necessary to get at the root of

violence against women in Mexico. It is necessary to examine the political and social structures that encourage and constrain mobilization within Mexico to better assess the possibility for the creation of a sustainable social movement.

The “real” problem that has led to the brutality that Juarez women have endured involves the overall conditions of the environment in Juarez where these women live and work. Grassroots women’s organizations of the past, such as *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, have found it effective to forge alliances with other social organizations aimed at increasing women’s overall participation in the politics of their labor and their way of life. Recent democratization within Mexico has opened up opportunities for popular protest and labor organization, which, if exploited, can serve as effective forums for change. Without addressing the entirety of the ill conditions that face women along the border and analyzing the structural opportunities and constraints to political mobilization in Mexico, no real progress will be made towards ending violence against women in all of its forms.

“This job is a terror. The noise. The monotony. The constant danger of the machine...Sometimes I have a nightmare...in which the machine swallows me whole. In the factory, the [assembly] line is the worst, it crushes your fingers and in the end your mind as well.”

- Juana Ortega, Maquiladora Worker (Ciudad Juarez, 1982)³

PART I: The Perfect Murder: A Look Into the Environmental, Social, and System Based Factors Contributing to the Disappearances in Juarez, Mexico

The first documented murders in Juarez began to appear in May of 1993, and since then, 370 women, usually between the ages of 13 and 22, have been found murdered after disappearing without any sign (Amnesty International 2003, 4). Many of the bodies have been discovered in the desert outskirts of the city near Lomas de Poleo. Some women are unrecognizable upon discovery, the only clue to their identity being tattered pieces of clothing left behind. Bodies that are not found as simple skeletons, show signs of sexual assault, stabbing, strangulation, and burning. One woman, Olga Alicia Carillo was found with pieces of her left breast missing, after having been bit off by another human (Amnesty International 2003, 10). Each of the injuries discovered upon the bodies speaks to the overall domination and humiliation of the women during the course of their attack. Triangle or crescent shaped slash markings on the backs of many of the victims make it evident that these murders are far from isolated incidents (Portillo 2001). In addition, the profiles of the victims almost always fit a general description. Most are poor, female teenagers, nearly two thirds of whom both study and work (Amnesty International 2003, 16). This indicates that these murders occur with certain selection criteria in mind.

Family members are left to deal with the nightmare of the brutality that their daughters, sisters, and mothers had to endure. One family member noted, “my life consists

³ See Pena, 3.

of going to bed to sleep for short periods, that is if I can sleep at all since what happened to my daughter, it's very hard" (Amnesty International 2003, 16). Their suffering is compounded by the lack of response that the murders have gotten from both local authorities and the general public. Again, a family member recounts, "when the perpetrators are not held to account, as has generally been the case in Juarez, the impunity confirms that such violence and discrimination is accepted and is fueling its perpetuation" (Amnesty International 2003, 16).

In general, response by authorities and the government has been slow, if not non-existent. Not only have tools such as the media been used to downplay the situation, but police have ignored reports of missing women saying that they must have run off with their boyfriends. There are several explanations for the inefficiency with which these cases have been treated. First, Juarez lacks a sizeable enough police force to begin to confront these problems. Only 1,200 police officers serve 1.5 million residents of the city, with only 300 on duty at one time (Quinones 2002, 148). Additionally, police have taken the attitude that there must be one answer to this perfect crime. After arresting Abdel Latif Sharif in connection with a number of the killings and disappearances, police were sure that they had solved the mystery. To their surprise within a few months of the arrest, three more bodies were found mutilated in the same way. They went on to arrest members of Los Rebeldes, a Juarez gang, in 1996 because of supposed ties with Sharif while in jail. Again, more bodies turned up with all of these men behind bars, numbering nearly fifty (Quinones 2002, 142). In 1999, a bus driver for *Motores Electricos*, a Juarez *maquila*, was arrested after being identified by Nancy Villalba as her kidnapper. Police again tied his involvement to secret correspondences that he had had with Sharif from jail (Portillo 2001). Again, bodies have continuously been uncovered since 1999.

The overall makeup of the city of Juarez has drastically affected the characterization of these murders. Downtown Juarez, which has increasingly become the hangout for overworked *maquila* employees, is lined with bars and dance clubs made for Americans from El Paso. Juarez has come to be known as a “city of vice.” Gang violence and a thriving sex trade control the streets (Nathan 1999, 24). The city’s homicide rate is 250 per year, many of which are gang related and are perpetuated by a highly active drug trade (Quinones 2002, 138). For a long time however, it was assumed that those who did not involve themselves with drugs, gangs, or prostitution were safe. In the last decade the disappearances have proven this assumption wrong. Many women who were last seen coming to and from their jobs at the *maquilas* disappear. They are found days and months later raped, mutilated, and often disfigured (Bejarano 2002).

The context of Juarez as a “city of vice” has led to a great deal of victim blaming. It is highly publicized that the women who have been murdered have been a part of the sinful dance culture and have involved themselves in dangerous activities. *Maquila* women are accused of living a “double life.” The translation for this idea is “la doble vida,” which has been paralleled with the translation for anal and vaginal penetration, which is “por las dos vidas.” Mexican families are constantly asked- “Do you know where your daughter is tonight?” (Nathan 1999, 26). *Maquilas* themselves have become places associated with the same immorality as nightclubs due to the female majority of the workforce (Nathan 1999). The dangerous environment in Juarez has been used as a tool to justify the cruelty that has been inflicted upon these women.

The inability of the police to come up with one concrete answer as to who is committing these atrocities leads to two conclusions. First, there is no such thing as the perfect crime, and second, there is something much deeper within Juarez society that is contributing to the continuation of violence against women. Cynthia Bejarano has witnessed

“mothers and other family members fighting a struggle latent with class oppression that remains hidden behind definitions of the crimes as acts of random violence or as the work of a group of mindless and murderous men” (Bejarano 2002, 131). So much of the situation in Juarez points to the perpetuation of an overall hostile environment towards women that has been developing around the *maquilas*. Following from this institutionalized oppression, there have been accusations that local police and officials are somehow involved or are conspiring in the murders. With family members’ questions being averted or totally ignored, there is little else that most of those affected can be led to believe (Bejarano 2002, 128).

The Creation of a “New” Mexico

Years of industrialization in Mexico caused heavy migration to occur from Mexico’s rural interior because of the transformation of agriculture from family-run to large-scale farms. The influx of foreign capital starting in 1890 drove small-scale farmers (mostly men) to the cities in search of alternative forms of work after being driven off their land or forced off by debt peonage (Cravey 1998, 25). In 1883 foreign land companies were allowed to acquire one-fifth of the total landmass of Mexico. Because they could no longer support themselves on their land, small farmers were now forced to pay rent to a tiny landlord class. Wages earned in manufacturing in the cities were sent home to pay family rent and debt (Cravey 1998, 26). The import substitution industrialization (ISI) policy adopted by Mexico further cemented the manufacturing class in the cities as well as made small scale subsistence farming uncompetitive (Cravey 1998, 29). Towards the end of the 20th century, border towns boasting jobs in the *maquilas* began to attract these displaced workers.

The *maquilas* and the current conditions in Juarez began in 1965 with an effort by the Mexican government to bring Mexico into the international arena and make it a viable competitor in trade. The Border Industrialization Program (BIP), also known as the

“maquiladora program,” urged foreign investment in the field of export manufacturing stimulated by tariff laws and fiscal incentives (Fernandez-Kelly 1983, 25). Companies directly across the border in the United States immediately saw the advantages of cheap labor and looser tax and environmental regulations. This move came nearly simultaneously with the United States’ termination of the Bracero program, which allowed for the legal transfer of Mexican laborers into the United States. Since 1970, the population of the city of Juarez went from 407,000 inhabitants to 1.5 million in 2002 (Quinones 2002, 139). With unemployment rates reaching nearly 50% in some border towns, something was needed to employ the displaced workers (Fernandez-Kelly 1983, 26). The signing of the NAFTA agreement by Canada, Mexico, and the United States in 1993 provided further opportunities for northern companies to invest in Mexico with the intention of producing consumer goods for export at a cheaper cost (Nauman and Hutchinson 1997, 951). The labor market and the influx of multinational-manufacturing corporations allowed the *maquilas* to take a firm hold of the Juarez region.

Maquiladoras: Life, Work and Gender Reconstructed

The attraction of cheap labor and loose governmental regulations has drawn foreign companies to Mexico by the thousands. Between 1993 and 1996, 340 *maquilas* employing 150,000 workers expanded to 2,000 *maquilas* employing 500,000 workers in Juarez alone. The daily wage that these young workers are offered equates to somewhere between \$3.75 and \$4.50, while they labor nearly 25% longer than the average US worker (Russell 1984, 18). Workers are exposed to poor ventilation, extreme temperatures, toxic chemicals and carcinogens, unsafe machinery, and long hours of microscopic assembly work. This, coupled with the stress caused by repetitive tasks and little promotional opportunity, has had damaging physical and psychological effects. Conditions such as gastric disorders,

depression, menstrual problems, mass hysteria, pulmonary and eye problems, dermatitis, hand injuries, and musculoskeletal disorders have all been evident in employees of *maquilas* (Guendelman and Silberg 1993, 37). The immediate conditions within the workplace alone represent specific labor and human rights abuses. Unfortunately inhumane conditions extend far beyond the walls of the factory.

Environmental effects of the *maquilas* perpetuate the already insurmountable poverty in Juarez and other border cities. The rapid influx of people into these border regions has led to a shortage of adequate housing. Because of this, many describe entire neighborhoods of Mexicans looking for work popping up overnight (Portillo 2001). These small towns consist of residents living in shacks without running water, electricity, sanitary waste disposal systems, or paved roads. Workers are exposed to these living conditions while economic resources go toward developing property meant for upscale Mexican real estate interests and the heads of multinational corporations (Nauman and Hutchinson 1997, 951). Certain risks face these squatter communities daily. Most residents are exposed to chemicals that industry has not properly disposed of, lack of hygienic water delivery, unsanitary storage and drainage within the community, flooding, and transportation accidents due to overcrowding (Cravey 1998, 96). In addition, border Mexicans are exposed to toxins in every aspect of their lives including their access water. Most specifically, the practice of “sham recycling,” that involves lead smelting from automobile batteries and the like, has served to severely pollute the already over used Rio Grande (Corliss 2000, 296). The underground water supply feeding these communities is completely contaminated by industrial chemicals used in factories (Cravey 1998, 98). In this respect, workers are not the only ones exposed to the risks of the factories. Rather, living conditions often lead to illnesses in children.

The lack of social support in the *maquilas* has consequences on the entire family unit as well. *Maquila* factories offer no options for childcare, even though in the typical wage

laborer family either both parents work to make ends meet or mothers are single trying to support their children. Also, the loss of a family support system makes childcare more burdensome, causing many to miss out on opportunities for employment (Cravey 1998, 92). Companies wish to ensure that issues such as childcare or maternity leave will not get in the way of employment. Upon hiring, many women are questioned about their sexual experience and are given pregnancy tests to ensure that they will not require maternity leave (Prieto 1985, 40). Conditions relating to the family most directly affect women who have become the largest and most vulnerable source of *maquila* labor.

For *maquila* managers, women have proven to be the most plentiful and reliable source of labor specialized in performing repetitive and menial tasks. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, 80% of the *maquiladora* workforce was female (Nauman and Hutchinson 1997, 951). *Maquilas* attract women by allowing them to believe that their work is valued over that of men because, “women have natural qualities that make them ideal for these positions. Their delicate hands endow them with finesse and precision. Moreover, the female psyche more easily endures the repetitive work” (Prieto 1985, 29). While these qualities may be an advantage, they are not the primary reasons that *maquila* managers prefer to hire women instead of men. Traditional notions of femininity serve to create a work force that is easy to control and manipulate without fear of women organizing or making demands. Another description of the ideal *maquila* worker is a woman who is “docile, undemanding, nimble-fingered, non-union, and unmilitant” (Nauman and Hutchinson 1997, 952).

There are several factors that contribute to the attraction towards female labor in the *maquilas*. First, most women never obtain an education beyond the primary school level. They are raised with the notion that education is unnecessary if they are simply going to get married and have children (Prieto 1985, 29). Without education or wage labor experience, there is little likelihood that women will be able to form a sound union or opposition.

Mexican women are engendered with notions of inferiority to men, which translates easily to the inequality of the female employee in relation to the male manager. Qualities of sexual subordination, submission, self-denial, resignation, modesty, and patience all make women less likely to resist unfair treatment and more likely to work harder (Prieto 1985, 33). Furthermore, female ties to the domestic unit make them less likely to risk the livelihood of their family for improved work conditions.

Maquila managers have also been able to capitalize on women's recent transformation from a life of purely domestic duties to one in which a woman is able to make a living herself. According to Norma Iglesias Prieto, "so many of them are grateful just to have a chance to work. They look right past the oppressive work conditions and the owners abuses" (Prieto 1985, 27). Reflecting upon their previous lives of domestic servitude, women see that under those conditions they would have never been able to free themselves of the unrecognized labor of motherhood and economic dependence on their husbands. In this respect, their new jobs as *maquiladoras* leave them better off than their lives under previous forms of oppression (Prieto 1985, 71). While women find pride in their escape from the traditional domestic role, multinational-corporations take advantage of their empowerment by providing them with exploitative jobs that they are unlikely to complain about. Furthermore, many women are scared by the reality that without their wage, their children might starve. Women are held accountable for both the survival of the family unit and their work. Thus, they are left vulnerable in the hands of their employers.

Every attempt is made to place limits on the possibility of political mobilization of the workforce. Workers are left alienated from the means of production to such an extent that they are unaware of what or for whom they are producing. Workers are not allowed to obtain information on the owner of their operation or the value of the product that they are producing, leaving little leverage with which to organize or negotiate (Prieto 1985, 18).

Also, high turnover rates of nearly 20% every month in Ciudad Juarez make union organization difficult, if not impossible (Cravey 1998, 116). Moreover, when unions are formed in *maquilas*, threats from employers push people to align with the state controlled Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in order to resolve conflict (Prieto 1985, 95). The cooperation between the state controlled party and multinational corporations does little to advance the rights of workers. Rather, large concessions are made to manufacturing in the form of tax incentives and looser labor regulations. *Maquiladoras* are highly influenced by employer threats because employees are well aware of the reality that manufacturing facilities can just pick up and move to a place where labor is cheaper and less risky. Many workers not only lose their jobs, but also whole paychecks and savings plans (Russell 1984, 18).

Outside of the direct affects that manufacturing has had on the lives and work of Mexican men and women, the *maquila* industry has uniquely come to represent complex changes that have occurred within Mexican society since industrialization. Not only is the country no longer agriculturally based, but deeply imbedded notions of gender have been turned upside down by the role that women have played in industrialization. The previous pattern of the household division of labor that existed during the time of rural subsistence farming and into the early industrial period consisted of women laboring within the household while men labored outside. Men benefited from this system by maintaining control of the most valuable resources for survival, while reaping surplus benefits from the abundance of social and reproductive labor performed by women in the home (Cravey 1998, 122). Under the “new” form of industrialization, most specifically marked by the *maquilas*, men play a much more significant role in the home while women work to contribute to the household income. Among border towns, it is common to find that men contribute regularly to the completion of domestic tasks. In Nogales, Sonora, men are active in 60% of the

households (Cravey 1998, 122). There is much speculation that this change in the gendered role of women from housewife and mother to breadwinner has caused gender resentment among Mexican men. This is just one of many factors that is thought to perpetuate violence against women (Quinones 2002).

Juarez Victims: Photographs of Capitalist Oppression

The victims of the disappearances in Juarez all embody the tenuous social and cultural conditions surrounding the capitalist drive of multinational corporations on the border. Women such as Claudia Ivette Gonzalez Banda, who was found missing after being refused entry to her *maquila* job for being two minutes late, face the realities of globalization in every aspect of their lives (Amnesty International 2003, 12). All of the women are young, poor, and lacking any political voice. These women are viewed by both manufacturing corporations and public authorities as a dime a dozen, rendering them invisible and unimportant. The indifference with which the murders have been treated sheds light on the general societal perception that these victims are “only young girls with no particular social status and who are therefore regarded as expendable” (Amnesty International 2003, 6). Authorities are quick to deny that victims found have been sexually assaulted. Public reports simply read “violent death from characteristics of murder” where sexual assault is obvious from autopsy (Amnesty International 2003, 27). Whether this is an effort to deny the serious nature of the murders, or whether authorities see sexual assault as unimportant to the investigation, this lack of regard for the suffering of the victims further renders these young women “invisible.”

It is clear that the violence that these women have been subjected to is a consequence of poverty, traditionalized notions of gender, and the sexual subordination of women. Every Mexican woman is marginalized by these factors to the point that she cannot move freely or

express herself for fear of the consequences. The predominance of domestic and intra family violence in border regions is strongly linked to the propensity to brutally murder women who have become a social threat in the new *maquila* environment (Amnesty International 2003, 15). As capitalism reshapes gender roles in Mexican society, more and more of those threatened by the change turn to violence in an effort to cling to traditional power roles. Violence is a product of subordination and is itself utilized to subordinate women. Therefore, it is clear that the murders of women in Juarez are not isolated acts of violence, but a systemized form of gender warfare.

Families Demand Answers

Various groups within Juarez have come to realize that the murders of these women are far from the simple, solvable matter that they appear on the surface. Mothers, in particular, have been the most vocal in demanding that the government and local officials acknowledge the disappearance of their daughters and take steps toward solving the crimes. Fighting negative stereotypes against female political participation, groups like *Voces sin Echo* (no longer in existence) have attempted to hold the government accountable for the way that women are treated by picketing in front of government buildings, marching, sweeping the desert to uncover more bodies, and painting crosses on light posts in remembrance of the brutalized women (Bejarano 2002, 132). *Voces sin Echo* was successful in establishing a small police station dedicated to handling the disappearances and a special prosecutors office (*Fiscalia Especial Para la Investigacion de Homicidios de Mujeres*) where murder investigations continue 24 hours a day (Bejarano 2002, 132). Recently, *Amigos de Las Mujeres de Juarez* has established a safe house for women and young girls in Juarez who have no other place to go. This safe house is dedicated to providing security to women that might prevent them from becoming targets of violence (Portillo 2001). Other groups such as

Grupo Ocho de Marzo and *El Comité Independiente de Chihuahua Pro Defensa de Derechos Humanos* have also participated in similar forms of grassroots organization.

The most important accomplishment of these groups has been the publicity that they have generated internationally. The situation has caught the attention of Amnesty International and has become the focus of the annual V-Day campaign 2004, which is devoted to ending violence against women everywhere. This has caused government officials on all levels to be responsible for addressing the crimes as serious abuses of human rights (Amnesty International 2003, 1). This serves as an important step for organizations fighting to transform the situation in Juarez; however, it is unclear exactly what specific progress has been made toward improving the overall conditions for women working or living around the *maquilas*.

Localized efforts specifically surrounding the murders have met several large institutional obstacles. First, victims' families are a small coalition of poor activists with little or no political influence; therefore, their grievances are seen as unimportant and are easily ignored by officials (Bejarano 2002, 132). The name of the group *Voces Sin Echo*, meaning, "voices without echo," reflects the refusal of authorities to listen to families' demands for justice. Guillermina Flores Gonzales explains that police do not even have to go so far as to threaten activists and families demanding answers, instead they blatantly ignore their cries for help (Bejarano 2002, 131). Second, police will not hesitate to delegitimize family members' demands for answers to their daughters' murders. Not only do authorities and the media blame the victims for their own kidnappings, but authorities blame mothers for raising "subversive children who act against state control and ideologies" (Bejarano 2002, 129). "Good" mothers are only expected to go so far as to protect their children on the playground or on the streets of their neighborhood. Mothers are not supposed to participate politically with the well being of their children in mind. Mothers refusal to accept the empty

answers given to them by authorities is seen as troublesome and a threat to the authority of the state (Bejarano 2002, 129). In general, women as activists are specifically excluded from the political realm, making it difficult for legitimate claims to be paid any attention.

The largest institutional obstacle faced by activists in Juarez is the involvement, or lack thereof, of local authorities. Whether law enforcement genuinely does not care about the deaths of the women, or whether they are attempting to protect the perpetrators of the crimes, the police have proven to be a hindrance rather than an asset in the search for the guilty. Upon emergency reports of disappeared loved ones, authorities refuse to react for upwards of 72 hours, believing the girls will “turn up.” When 18-year-old Maria Isabel Nava Vazquez turned up missing, the family was told by police to hold on, “it’s only Tuesday.” This is after the family had already waited 24 hours. Almost a month later, her body was found violently murdered (Amnesty International 2003, 21). Police easily get away with such inaction because they are well aware that victims’ families have little resources or influence to demand justice. Recently however, national and international pressure has forced local authorities to respond to kidnappings more immediately (Amnesty International 2003, 19). Regardless, the legacy of ineffective response has fueled the perception that “violence against women is not a serious crime. The lack of an effective official response is part of a larger context of discrimination” (Amnesty International 2003, 6). A broader coalition of women is needed in order to challenge the institutions under which violence is perpetuated. Effective response to the murders requires an all-inclusive form of activism aimed at transforming the gender-biased discrimination that Mexican women face in every aspect of their lives.

“As bases of movements for change broadened, so too did mobilization strategies. Groups turned to new mechanisms of communication, such as the Internet, and to the media once state censorship softened under democratization. As postmodernesque as the movements on occasion appeared in their symbolism and public displays, and as localized as movements often were, they responded to shared underlying conditions, were inspired by one another, and sometimes also coordinated protests.”

- Susan Eckstein commenting on recent Latin American social movements⁴

PART II: Will Things Ever Change? An Examination of Political Opportunity on the Border

While an all-inclusive form of political mobilization aimed at challenging class, race, and gender based discrimination may be necessary, it is unclear whether conditions in Juarez and Mexico as a whole are conducive to sustained protest. Examination of the changes occurring in Mexican culture and politics will aid in assessing whether avenues of political opportunity have opened up. In his groundbreaking work, *Power in Movement*, Sidney Tarrow (1998) asserts that analysis of the “political opportunity structure” in areas where contention is on the rise is an important tool in examining the incentives and constraints that allow for mobilization and protest. Tarrow defines political opportunities as “consistent dimensions of the political structure that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.” Political constraints are political and cultural factors, like repression, that discourage contention (Tarrow 1998, 19). The combination of these two makes up the political opportunity structure for a particular state; an analysis of which can provide “a set of clues for when contentious politics will emerge, setting in motion a chain of causation that may ultimately lead to sustained interactions with authorities and hence to social movements” (Tarrow 1998, 20). The openness of political regimes, and the relationships between political

⁴ See Eckstein, 401.

elites in society make up aspects of the political opportunity structure. As political structures such as these begin to change, more resources become available for organized resistance.

Changes in opportunities and constraints allow for the formation of social movements only when people act collectively under the right conditions and when consensus is mobilized around common claims (Tarrow 1998, 20). Through utilizing resources such as social networks, common cultural identities, and shared bases for contention, the cost of bringing people together into collective action is lowered, and sustained interaction with opponents ensues (Tarrow 1998, 23). The constant interaction with powerful opponents that characterizes social movements gives rise to long-term social and political consequences (Tarrow 1998, 7).

In her work *Power and Popular Protest*, Susan Eckstein similarly believes that only when “conditions are ripe will people publicly protest en masse what they believe to be unjust” (Eckstein 2001, 33). Only through examination of factors including local and national institutional structures, established cultural patterns and mores, and interclass and interracial interactions is it possible to determine whether broad cultural resistance is possible (Eckstein 2001, 33). Rather than using the terminology of political opportunity, Eckstein refers to rational choice theory, which argues that mobilization is based on the calculation of the costs and the benefits of disobedience and protest (Eckstein 2001, 5). She combines this idea with that of resource-mobilization theory, which emphasizes that collective action is dependent upon resources and opportunities as they become available to subordinated groups (Eckstein 2001, 6). In doing so, she echoes Tarrow in his assertion that political change is contingent upon the political context and conditions occurring before, and outside of, political mobilization and not by the process of political mobilization itself.

Both of these theorists provide a basis for examining the potential for formation of a full-scale social movement surrounding the global economic conditions facing women in the

border region. Although the murders of the women in Juarez create clear grounds for social protest, it is important that the political opportunity structure is examined in order to determine the prospects of a social movement with the potential to alter the multitude of class, racial, and gender based factors that contribute to the perpetuation of violence. By looking at the political conditions affecting Mexico as a whole, the potential for generating the kind of broad political movement necessary to fully combat the murders in Juarez will become evident. In doing so, it is important to look at three general factors: corporatist state control in relation to labor, international participation, and common identities of collective groups.

Corporatism: The Future of It's Hold on Mexico

The extent of control exhibited by the state is one of the strongest indicators for social actors considering the costs and the benefits of political mobilization. Often, the state controls, through both repression and incentive, the resources necessary for collective action. A state's balance between repression and inducement, Tarrow argues, is a more influential factor in mobilization than the social and economic patterns affecting a populous. Therefore, mobilization is contingent upon state control in that, "when institutional access opens, rifts appear within the elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims" (Tarrow 1998, 71). The state's recognition of the power that it holds to determine the amount of resources available for dissent has tightened the control that many political systems influence over their polity.

In the Mexican state, the balance between inducements and constraints has taken on an authoritarian, centralized form in the past. State corporatism has emerged as the defining factor in Mexican politics, and has served to legitimize and consolidate post-revolutionary structures of power (Patroni 1998, 108). The Mexican state has confined institutions of organized labor within the state in an effort to control the potential for mobilization of the

working class. In doing so, the corporatist system employed three tactics: the establishment of officially sanctioned labor unions under the supervision and control of the state, the subsidization of sanctioned groups, and the placement of constraints on the power of these groups to mobilize the working class (Collier 1979, 968). By incorporating labor groups into the system the government avoids prohibiting labor organizations, while at the same time ensuring that the state remains the main arbiter and regulator between labor and capital (Patroni 1998, 108).

Under such a system the ability of the working class to mobilize is severely limited since it is difficult for incorporated groups to reject state policy without breaking with the regime (Eckstein 2001, 40). Both inducements and constraints established by the state serve to limit the autonomy of state-approved labor organizations. The state induces labor organizations to agree to certain measures in order to achieve legally approved status; in doing so, they advance the position of the union by limiting competition and providing subsidies. The state enforces its aims by placing constraints on collective bargaining and strikes and by controlling the leadership elected within the union (Collier 1979, 980-981). The benefits to state incorporated groups are frequently too great to risk dissent. Often, due to state subsidization, incorporated labor unions rely more upon the support of the state than on that of their constituency. This is most clearly illustrated by the marriage between the dominant PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and the largest Mexican labor union, the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers), where both rely on each other for legitimacy (Patroni 1998, 112). With the state in control of the means of labor negotiation, the working class has rarely received benefits from their petitions for greater pay, better working conditions, or just treatment.

This corporatist structure has done more than just prevent labor mobilization; it has furthered PRI efforts, through its one-party control, to limit all forms of political mobilization

and participation. The PRI has not hesitated to use coercive measures to consolidate and maintain its control. When threatened, the party has used its military power to suppress popular protest addressing anything from indigenous land rights to opposition to deplorable conditions in crowded shanty communities known as *colonos*. Most notably, since the institution of NAFTA, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion National (EZLN), an indigenous rights group in Chiapas, Mexico, has fought a prolonged battle against the state regarding indigenous land seizures and pervasive poverty in the region. On January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas rebelled against NAFTA and were decisively defeated and massacred by Mexican military authorities (Hathaway 2000, 199). Earlier, in 1968, hundreds of student demonstrators were massacred when armed soldiers fired on a crowd protesting the priorities of the Mexican government that spent millions to furnish the Olympic Games but ignored the deplorable conditions in urban shanty towns (Hathaway 2000, 79).

Electoral access was another way in which The PRI ensured its dominance. From 1929 to 2000, the PRI maintained its hold on nearly every elected position, local, state, and national, of importance in Mexico (Reiss 1999, 27). When a presidential threat came from the FDN (National Democratic Front) in the 1988 elections, the PRI was suspected of tampering with election results that had indicated the early success of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. Although the government declared PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas the winner, the election represented the smallest margin of victory for a PRI candidate in history (Reiss 1999, 28). Although the PRI was successful in using coercive measures to ensure its dominance in the election of 1988, they have since been less able to manipulate the electoral system to their advantage.

In recent years, Mexico has responded the negative effects that such a closed society has produced. A trend towards democratization and pluralism since the 1988 election has called the corporatist power of the Mexican state into question. Opposition parties have

increasingly become a threat to PRI candidates. In 2000, Vicente Fox, a member of the PAN (National Action Party), was elected president, Mexico's highest office (Jordan 2001, 24). The success of the PAN was aided by democratic electoral advances; in 1994, the Federal Electoral Institute, a civil servant run autonomous organization, took over the administration of elections (Reiss 1999, 29). With increased electoral competition, the electorate has been able to hold the PRI accountable, making violent repression incompatible with maintaining power. It is clear that as the effects of democratization become more evident, a once repressed Mexican citizenry will face enhanced political opportunities, making the costs of dissent less and the benefits within reach.

This has become even more apparent in observing the gains that have been made by independent labor organizations in the past decade. It has been central to the independent labor movement that legal provisions legitimizing the power of an official labor union be removed. This has proved most possible under conditions of democracy (Patroni 1998, 112). Since 1960, FAT (Mexico's Authentic Labor Front) has been struggling against the corporatist system to increase wages of workers and help them to achieve a sense of personal efficacy (Hathaway 2000, 11). This independent labor organization has fought to gain legality for unions all over Mexico, including the STIMAHCS union in Tijuana, the first independent union legally recognized in a *maquila* along the border (Hathaway 2000, 18). In addition to legitimizing independent unions, FAT has worked to promote the politicization of the poor and specifically women in the *maquilas*. FAT worked to establish CODIM (the Women's Center for Integral Development and Organization), which offers legal advice; provides training on family, work, and child education; and works to create statutes against sexual abuse and domestic violence. It has also facilitated cooking workshops where women of all ages and professions meet to discuss issues related to female subordination and self-

esteem. FAT recognizes that women must fight harder to become a political force due to deeply ingrained notions of male machismo (Hathaway 2000, 154).

The influence of FAT and the entire independent labor movement have become an integral piece of the emerging political opportunity structure in Mexico. An entire working class of men and women now have the resources necessary to make demands on corporations, and find independent representation that will listen, and demand change at the local, regional, and national levels. As independent unions become legalized and more democratized, it becomes increasingly difficult for the state and capital to repress strikes. In situations where strikes continue to be suppressed, the legal advice, counseling, and education concerning workers rights provided by FAT organizations such as CETLAC in Juarez, have worked to engrain themselves within the working class so that a culture of resistance can emerge (Hathaway 2000, 190). The recent existence of organizations such as this make it clear that new political opportunities have emerged in Mexico.

Mexico Since NAFTA: Constraints and Opportunities of International Intervention

The corporatist relation between state and labor that has characterized Mexican politics is tied directly to the influence that international capital has had on the border region in Mexico. The bond between labor, capital, and the state solidified the Border Industrialization Program and ensured that the Mexican working class would be a reliable source of labor (controlled by the state) for multinational corporations looking to relocate. The so-called “democratization” of Mexico has done little to loosen the hold that international actors have on the Mexican economy. At the same time that the political system was seeing a rise in oppositional parties, NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) went into effect on January 1, 1994, uniting Mexico, Canada, and the United States through trade. Mexico’s interest in NAFTA centered around improving access to the

US market and attracting foreign investment, with a particular concentration in investment along the border in the *maquilas* (Hathaway 2000, 171).

The World Bank attributes stabilization and structural reform efforts in Mexico to the influence that trade liberalization, specifically NAFTA, has had on the political order (Salas 2002, 32). Immediate effects of the agreement have included the creation of 967,000 jobs in fixed establishments between 1993 and 1998. However, the jobs created were in a large part low-paid, low-quality of life jobs in cities (Salas 2002, 34). At the same time, a small minority of the population has reaped the vast monetary benefits of foreign investment, drawing an even more pronounced gap between the haves and have-nots. In addition, trade liberalization has been one of the root causes of the displacement of the southern rural peasant class, who now find it impossible to support themselves and are forced to abandon their ethnic homelands in search of work in the larger cities. The grievances of this increasingly impoverished peasant class was at the heart of the Zapatista rebellion in 1994 (Hathaway 2000, 171). In analyzing the outcomes of foreign investment and trade liberalization in combination with democratization, it is unclear whether the internationalizing of the Mexican economy has created more problems than it has remedied.

Yet, in examining the negative affects that the liberalization of international trade has had on the poorest sectors of Mexican society, it is important to recognize essential political opportunities that can be utilized internationally to combat these ills. In the international realm, cultures, ethnicities, professions, and interests merge across boundaries. Because of news media and cultural knowledge, people as far apart as Mexico City, Beijing, and St. Petersburg can empathize with certain obstacles facing one another (Tarrow 1998, 47). International news media can be a tool in attracting attention to human rights abuses and can help to create international alliances around various issues. Much of the success that the Zapatistas have had in drawing attention to their movement has come from the use of the

media and the internet to appeal to support from other NGOs (Eckstein 2001, 387). With the ability to widely disseminate stories of struggle and oppression, international interclass coalitions can form, linking people that would not normally come into contact into unified collective action (Tarrow 1998, 51).

These “cultures of contention”⁵ have the power to mobilize people of different nationalities affected by the same structural obstacles (Tarrow 1998, 17). This applies to people who are affected by NAFTA on both sides of the US-Mexico border. As is advocated by FAT, “the best way to defend jobs in the United States is to work together to elevate the level of salaries and workplace environmental conditions in Mexico, so that [Mexican] misery stops being the way to compete with fellow workers in the north” (Hathaway 2000, 176). FAT itself was able to establish connections with the UE (United Electrical Workers Union) in the United States. Working together these two labor organizations worked to establish independent unions in Mexican electrical plants that had sister corporations that dealt with the UE in the United States (Hathaway 2000, 175). In this way, American workers worked to improve the livelihood of Mexican workers with the goal of saving their own jobs in America. Workers across borders were able to unite around a common goal in a way that mutually benefited each party. These types of labor connections serve as a political opportunity for *maquiladoras* in Juarez and other border towns, enabling them utilize the power of American labor unions to draw attention to the unjust wages that they receive.

Labor is not the only resource around which international social actors can unite to affect the conditions in Juarez. Gender as an international mobilizing device has proven particularly effective. The Fourth World Conference on Women held in August-September of 1995, exemplified the way in which women from every end of the women’s movement

⁵ “Cultures of contention” are formed when the struggles of people with broad cultural and social backgrounds are brought together through the construction of dense social networks and connective structures that aim at resisting similar social and political oppression (Tarrow 1998, 19).

have come together to discuss their commonalities and differences. Latin American NGOs were able to enlist the support of international feminist organizations and create a dialogue about the specific abuses endured by Latin American women (Alvarez 1998, 293). Of specific importance to the situation in Juarez, The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was discussed. This international declaration asserted that violence constitutes a restriction on women's citizenship, and directly contributes to the perpetuation of a violent and unequal social structure (Alvarez 1998, 300). As feminist discourse has been "NGOized" and absorbed into multinational human rights organizations, women have been elevated to positions where they are able to work within the system to affect policy. This has significantly enhanced the authority that feminist rights advocates have in a traditionally male dominated international system (Alvarez 1998, 311). International feminism provides an arena where women can be heard and can receive the help of women around the world who would not otherwise be aware of their situation.

Although it seems that globalization has exasperated issues of gender and class faced by Mexicans, it is important to look forward and recognize the potential opportunities that some aspects of democratization have opened up. Though Tarrow acknowledges that localized and national solidarity movements provide cohesiveness based upon shared experiences and understanding, activists should not underestimate the power that association and the building of international campaigns can have to extend movements to broad publics (Tarrow 1998, 52). Although international movements do not address all system-based factors perpetuating oppression, it is important to recognize their power to draw attention to a cause and demand political accountability for abuses of power. Juarez women have integrated international coalitions into their struggle by most recently being highlighted as the focus of the International V-Day campaign to end violence against women (Amnesty

International 2003, 1). The hope is that, by utilizing the international community, there will be even stronger pressure demanding justice for the brutalized women in Juarez.

Shared Identities: The Possibility for Class, Race, Gender, and Religious Solidarity

When looking at the array of resources that allow for collective action among large numbers of people, it would seem that a focus on ethnic and cultural identities would be the most effective tool in creating solid bonds between people. While in many cases ethnic identity is successful in organizing people around an effort to challenge oppressive circumstances, often, cultural bonds are not enough to sustain the work of mobilization. Identity-based mobilization faces the challenge of overcoming a lack of flexibility toward the expansion of appeals and a resistance to a growing support base. According to Tarrow, “identity politics often produces insular, sectarian, and divisive movements incapable of expanding membership, broadening appeals, and negotiating with prospective allies (Tarrow 1998, 119). Identity mobilization weakens social movements when increasingly narrow definitions are used to define acceptance. In addition, collective identities are often less cohesive than one would assume. Very few people possess a single unified identity; identity is formed through a combination of socioeconomic, ethnic, regional, situational, political, and social factors, making each individual’s experience unique. In order to be effective, collective identities used by social movements must not simply rely on the power of racial and social identity factors to create cohesion. Rather, successful social movements that utilize identity combine class, race, gender, and religious factors in an effort to unify people around entirely new forms of identity that allow the movement to reach a broader base of people (Tarrow 1998, 107). The Zapatistas provide the clearest example of success in their ability to appeal to the needs of the poor peasant class, the indigenous minority, and international factions resisting global expansion. For identity-based movements to sustain

themselves, they must be willing to combine and reformulate identities to fit a movement's specific needs.

Class:

As described earlier, mobilization around class identity in contemporary Latin American society is inextricably linked to tensions caused by the market economy. Capitalism has changed the way that class relations are looked at. Traditionally, class grievances surrounding the relationship of the proletariat to the modes of production were dealt with through labor union organization and negotiation. Now, the urban working class in Latin America is separated from the product that they produce. They are immersed in the forces of market competition in their work and daily lives. Thus, the working class now finds greater tension in the way their weak earning power affects their purchasing ability. Without any market power, the urban poor do not believe that it is possible to restructure market relations in their favor (Eckstein 2001, 20).

Currently, those using class as a resource for mobilization protest government policies that affect all parts of the economy. International agreements such as NAFTA, which have an enormous impact on the lives of working class people, are created and agreed upon within the state apparatus. Red de Accion Frente al Libre Comercio (Action Network on Free Trade), a class based political action group, directly criticizes the government for involvement in an agreement that fails to consider the distributive affects of economic growth on labor and small and medium sized industry (Pena 1997, 312). This is just one example of how market-oriented class mobilization allows the working poor to target government policies more directly than focusing on the bureaucracy involved in labor management relations (Eckstein 2001, 21). The new focus of class mobilization could provide political

opportunity if it is utilized in such a way that the power of political and economic elites can be lessened.

Class-based parties have declined in Latin America due to a move away from ideological class-based protest, most notably represented by the influence of socialism. Previously, political parties had been a major channel for the participation of the urban lower class (Pratt 1971, 499). For example, the lower and working classes in Chile were initially able to achieve power through the success of socialist leader Salvador Allende in the early 1970s (Eckstein 2001, 11). However, as neoliberalism has become more ingrained in Latin America, classes have become increasingly polarized. Today, subordinate classes make up at least 80% of the Latin American population (Portes 2003, 46). This population of the poor and disadvantaged includes a diverse array of groups ranging from the landless rural class to the urban working poor to those involved in petty commodity production, each of whom possess their own set of needs and grievances. Because of this, singular parties can no longer appeal to the broad needs of the poor. In addition, parties no longer place the same kind of importance on the support of the "proletariat," because it is now so divided (Portes 2003, 58). It seems that "the informal proletariat under neoliberalism has no party that it can call its own" (Portes 2003, 58). The recent democratic reforms that have occurred in Mexico have been lead by populist parties such as the PAN, who aim at attracting multiclass support. In trying to appeal to the needs of all classes, the PAN fails to address the specific needs of the various subordinated classes (Patroni 1998, 111). Thus, the particular grievances of the working class along the border fail to be fully addressed.

Instead of institutional support, subordinated classes in Mexico are left to community based, grass-roots mobilization. Grassroots networks that are often begun in neighborhood associations choose to work completely outside of the control of the state. Often in protest, these associations will illegally obtain urban services such as water and electricity (Eckstein

2001, 23). According to Devon G. Pena, “grassroots citizen organizations are challenging bureaucratic rationality by directly confronting corporate non accountability and resisting the usual governmental complicity” (Pena, 1997, 307). In Mexico’s corporatist regime, class solidarity is strong among politicized workers. When given the chance to mobilize, the alienated working class in Mexico poses more of a threat to the stability of the system than the working class in a more “open” society. Those labor dissidents who have chosen to risk mobilization have been more likely to become radicalized and exhibit less restraint in fighting against repression (Davis 1983, 441). Class-based grassroots organizations, free from the influence of any government based party structure, are likely to pursue a more radical and personalized agenda when any weakness in the system is detected. Rather than relying on class-based parties, poor people have developed grassroots networks to pursue their agenda. As the centralized structure of the Mexican political system changes, there will be more opportunity for radicalized grassroots collective action to occur.

Race:

Mobilization around race in Latin America is uncommon because of the way that race is perceived by society. Rather than being seen as a biological factor, race is considered to be cultural, and is attributed to the behavior of individuals. Indigenous people in Mexico can “pass” as racially elite if they conform to the culture and the socially ideal life of privileged society (Eckstein 2001, 24). Because of this, race has not been seen as a group identity, rather it has been viewed as a trait that people are individually responsible for. This conception of race has been used to the benefit of elites. For example, indigenous groups were only officially recognized as *indigenismo* (tolerated indigenous people), if they agreed to conceal or repress their subaltern identity. These groups were given symbolic representation in the state, but no institutionalized collective rights (Eckstein 2001, 386). By

doing this, authoritarian institutions were able to delegitimize social movements based on race. Thus, ethnic identity only became an effective tool for dissent when coupled with other grievances such as socioeconomic factors. Mobilization around race has encouraged groups of people to take action; but historically, other identity factors have been integrated into ethnic social movements in an effort to create a more powerful group identity.

The uprising under the EZLN in Chiapas provides the most recent illustration of the way in which ethnic identity has been used as a mobilizing resource. For the indigenous Mexicans in Chiapas of Mayan descent, the cultivation of land holds spiritual and cultural importance dating back to the time of their ancestors. After thousands of these indigenous people were driven off their land by more powerful elites, these Indians experienced cultural as well as socioeconomic loss (Eckstein 2001, 387). Indigenous people were united behind their claim of historical and cultural rights to the land of their ancestors. The poverty that faced these indigenous groups, who had been stripped of their land, became an additional force around which to mobilize. These two factors were highly conducive to coalition building, which added strength to the movement. The Zapatistas were successful in creating a multiclass, multiethnic, transterritorial alliance (Eckstein 2001, 388). In mobilizing around material and cultural claims, the Zapatistas were able to create a movement strong enough to attract a broad base of supporters who have been able to withstand over ten years of government repression.

The recent growth of democratic institutions in Mexico has provided an opportunity for indigenous groups to become more politicized. Instead of trying to integrate themselves into mainstream society as *mestizos*, recent movements have encouraged indigenous people to celebrate their differences. Political parties have recognized the viability of these newly organized ethnic groups and have made efforts to appeal to their needs (Eckstein 2001, 394).

This, in combination with international recognition, has served to legitimize these movements and their grievances.

Gender:

Gender relations in Latin America are deeply entrenched with stereotypical notions of womanhood and the opposing male *machismo*. Cultural notions of gender have served as a huge obstacle to legitimizing women's political participation. Dominant Mexican society continues to see the domestic sphere as the proper place for a woman whose dedication is to the family. Men maintain the public sphere outside of the home, where they are given the opportunity to participate in political discussion and action that affects the lives of their families. Women are evaluated solely upon how they conduct themselves within the home, while men are only held accountable for their public actions (Eckstein 2001, 25). In such a dichotomy, women are left with no voice while men are able to manipulate the management of their home to their benefit. Women who find themselves trapped by this arrangement and pushed towards politicization are forced to make a choice between the handling of domestic obligations and the commitment to grassroots mobilization (Diaz-Barriga 1998, 253). Ironically, women feel the need to organize politically to challenge social factors that constrain their ability to provide for their families within the home. Women are faced with the reality that in order to improve conditions within the home they must step outside of the home and challenge their domestic role.

Many women make the choice to defy the gender dichotomy and mobilize to improve conditions that they and their children are forced to endure. In the last 20 years, women have become a strong, yet overlooked, force in urban movements, demanding housing and improved conditions in the *colonias*. Women in Mexico City Campamento 2 de Octubre withstood brutal repression by police culminating in the burning down of their *colonia* as

they attempted to establish a popular kitchen, library, kindergarten, and a cooperative facility for raising livestock (Diaz-Barriga 1998, 263). In fighting for improved living conditions in the *colonias*, women have begun a process of breaking down distinctions between domestic and public spheres. As women in the *colonias* empower themselves to resist oppression surrounding the necessities of their living conditions, they are able to demand that government pay attention to broader female necessities such as access to birth control and abortion (Diaz-Barriga 1998, 271). As women increase their participation in their communities, their domestic roles may change in a way that gives them greater political efficacy.

Women have found that they have also been able to exploit certain aspects of their domestic role in their attempts to bring women together into collective action. Through the experience of motherhood, women share common experience and similar feelings of devotion to their children. Many women focus on providing for their children as the main source of their grassroots mobilization (Diaz-Barriga 1998, 271). The grief that women who have unjustly lost their children experience helps to unite women and mobilize them to challenge gender stereotypes (Eckstein 1998, 26). When women feel threatened in their roles as mothers, they are able to form strong networks of sympathy around their cause. The solidarity of motherhood stands as a political resource that can be used in mobilizing women around the situation in Juarez.

Religion:

Religious solidarity, although it is not taken as seriously as in the past, still provides a viable basis for mobilization, especially in predominately Catholic Latin America. Devout Catholics in Mexico continue to look toward the church as a source of moral authority. The church has a unique ability to motivate peoples' strong personal values and beliefs into

political action. During the early 1970s, “liberation theology” became the officially recognized strategy that the Vatican proposed for Latin America. Liberation theology took up the cause of the lowest classes by advocating a “preferential option for the poor,” which emphasized the church’s role in working for social justice rather than focusing on religious hierarchies (Hathaway 2000, 75). The church established that, “if through necessity or fear of a worse evil, the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer will give him no better, he is the victim of force and injustice” (Hathaway 2000, 76). Liberation theology was successful in mobilizing 100,000 Christian communities throughout Latin America (Hathaway 2000, 75). This success illustrated the cultural power that religion has to inspire people to demand change.

Although liberation theology no longer motivates the amount of participation that it used to, religion is still influential in inspiring change. Religious symbolism that is employed in a wide variety of social movements attracts people with certain values and gives moral standing to a political cause. According to Tarrow, symbols give “emotional valence [to social movements] aimed at converting passivity into social action.” Through the use of religious symbolism, various social movements have been able to unite social actors in solidarity around one cause (Tarrow 1998, 112). Those who have mobilized around the murders in Juarez have been quick to utilize symbolism. Throughout the city of Juarez, black crosses have been painted on pink backgrounds to remind people of the martyrdom of the women who have disappeared (Bejarano 2002, 133). Women have also erected alters for the missing girls, where families can symbolically connect their daughter’s lives with the divine (Bejarano 2002, 134). These religious symbols have given a deeper spiritual emphasis to the struggle for justice in Juarez.

Juarez: A Diagnosis for Mobilization

Recent international attention to the brutality of the murders in Juarez has caused many to attack the status of human rights in Mexico as a whole. After enduring the fear and the horror that these murders have caused for the past ten years, people in Juarez are becoming increasingly politicized and are looking to build coalitions with international human rights groups that may be better able to advocate for their cause. The intensity of the political situation right now leads one to believe that a successful social movement is underway. But, it is important that movement organizers take a step back and separate themselves from the murders. Tragedies, which can serve as “focusing events” have the power to bring people to together in protest immediately. The shock value of a tragedy such as the one in Juarez helps to draw attention to the cause, while at the same time holding those who are responsible accountable (Kingdon 1995, 98). But, focusing events cannot sustain an entire movement. Institutions must be in place that will maintain momentum beyond a simple response to tragedy. Political opportunities and constraints in Juarez must be individually assessed in order to determine whether the current mobilization around the murders in Juarez has what it takes to last.

The slow movement towards democratic reform in Mexico is promising for Juarez activists looking to utilize state institutions to their benefit. As the Mexican state drifts away from one-party control to a more pluralist political system, there is greater likelihood that state actors will be held responsible to the electorate as it institutes policy. The PRI in Mexico “now aims to win elections by earning the vote of the Mexican people, not by manipulating results” (Reiss 1999, 29). When political parties rely on their constituency to remain in power they are less able to use coercive means to maintain control. The changing electoral structure in Juarez provides a political opportunity for activists to publicly protest without the fear of violent repression. Their appeals for change have greater potential for a

response from state actors looking for reelection. The willingness of Juarez authorities to allow for international protest in Juarez on February 14th indicates that the local and national governments are aware that both the Mexican electorate and the international community are watching its response (Amnesty International 2003, 3).

Additionally, increased pluralism of the Mexican political system has begun to enforce a separation between labor unionization and the state. Independent labor unions have made strides to ensure that exclusion clauses are eliminated from the Constitution and that alternative forms of labor contestation are given legitimacy (Patroni 1998, 112). Workers represent a strong voting block; therefore, it is in the interest of those attempting to maintain political control to concede to some of labor's interests. As independent labor organizations infiltrate Juarez and advance education and reform programs, the largest section of the Juarez population, the working poor, will be awakened to the advantages of their political participation. Efforts of FAT, united with organizations such as CETLAC in Juarez, aim at disseminating the message that political participation is effective. CETLAC created a pocket-sized guide entitled "First Aid for Workers," which included information about workers rights and provided contact information for legal advice centers. This is just one example of education promoting worker mobilization (Hathaway 2000, 190). As the community is enlightened, it will be less willing to accept the violence against women that is perpetuated by oppressive working conditions and poverty. Labor activism in Juarez has the potential to decrease the success of the coalition between the state and capital. As labor unions become more powerful, they not only become a threat to the power of the state, but to multinational corporations as well.

Although localized movements of solidarity in Mexico are important in order to address specific needs within certain communities, international publicity can provide movements with momentum needed to survive. While sustaining local efforts, international

organizations can use the murders of the women in Juarez to attract attention to the abuses of the state and multinational corporations in the border region. By doing so, poor and politically subordinate women in Juarez will be able to form coalitions with the most powerful actors possible. These coalitions seem achievable considering that “border citizens live and work transnationally and negotiate differences through the constructions of hybrid identities; thus, activists of Northern Mexico possess a geographical advantage that opens material and cultural opportunities for transnational coalitions” (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 184). By using the media and the Internet to publicize the conditions in Juarez, activists amplify their voices and make it difficult for state authorities to ignore them.

Finally, it seems that the key to advancing the political and social standing of Mexican women is to break down the rigid constraints of the domestic sphere. Work needs to become a place where women are accepted and treated fairly. Now, there exists a masculine resentment towards women who involve themselves in political and economic spaces. As women increasingly associate themselves in the politics of their labor, their neighborhoods, and their homes they will be better able to change the agenda within workplace relations to include a focus on family needs and community based organization (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 183). Experiences of women who participate in strikes and neighborhood programs suggest that, once mobilized, women can remain a unified force.

Even though Juarez is a city filled with poor, displaced migrants who have traditionally had little political influence, there are opportunities for them to participate. Activists in Juarez may achieve lasting success by exploiting cultural and religious symbolism to construct an identity among *maquila* workers. With democratic reforms moving the Mexican state away from authoritarian influence, it seems that now is the time for social movements to solidify themselves in Juarez through organized resistance. Right now, the benefits to resistance on the border are greater than the risks of state coercion.

*“There is no space large enough
to contain your wrath. Like my great aunt
in Normandy who presides over the flocks,
you are smiling and apple cheeked.*

*But you lead demonstrations.
You shake your finger at plainclothesman,
hissing, take your hands off
that kid. In another country,*

*You would be a diminutive grandmother
making preserves. In Argentina,
you tower above the caudillos,
the heroes, and the statues in the squares.”*
- From In Argentina for Juanita⁶

PART III: Juarez Women Find Inspiration in Other Movements

While the potential for the formation of a social movement in Juarez relies on the specific political opportunity structure that exists during the current period of contention, it is beneficial to look towards examples of political mobilization that have occurred in the past in order to gain some perspective on the direction that mobilizing around the disappearances in Juarez might have. In focusing specifically on the experiences of women who have organized around labor and the loss of loved ones, direct comparisons can be made to the conditions facing activists in Juarez. The next two examples focus on the experiences of women participating in the mobilization of *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the *Solidev* labor strike in Mexico.

⁶ See Bouvard, 46.

Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo: Potential for Mobilization Around Motherhood

Many parallels have been drawn between the ignored grievances of family members in Juarez and the uninvestigated disappearances of thousands of Argentineans after the military coup of May 1976. *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, founded on April 30, 1977, consisted of mothers banding together to oppose a military dictatorship that kidnapped, tortured, and killed nearly 9,000 “subversive terrorists,” who included guerrillas, Marxists of varying persuasion, liberals, reform minded Catholics and Jews, and those who knowingly or not aided or abetted terrorists. These sons and daughters disappeared without any sign or explanation of their whereabouts (Navarro 2001, 244).

Uniting around the tragic circumstances of the *desaparecidos*, these mothers formally gathered weekly in the *Plaza de Mayo*, the central square in Buenos Aires, to openly protest the lack of attention that the disappearances of their children had received. Most of the women who gathered were Catholic and working class; however, their primary occupation was that of housewife (Navarro 2001, 249). They united with a common loss, common backgrounds, common religion, and a common determination to receive answers about the whereabouts of their children and relatives. Defying all notions of womanhood, these mothers unlawfully gathered in the Plaza in open defiance of the state. When the protests grew to over 3,000, it was clear that they had transformed their “homes, neighborhoods, and other social spaces into physical locations of change” (Bejarano 2002, 60).

Apart from protests and demonstrations, at which they risked their lives every day, *Las Madres* of Argentina also drew international media attention to the human rights abuses. A continued focus on human rights eventually caused American President Jimmy Carter to withdraw military funding from Argentina in 1977 and block a \$270 million dollar export/import loan in 1978 (Navarro 2001, 254). Also, *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* relied on alliances they were able to make with other groups mobilized around this cause

such as, Movement of Relatives of the Disappeared and *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo* (Navarro 2001, 254). These alliances allowed for the increased militancy of the movement, which prevented the issue of the *desparecidos* from being ignored by the state.

There were a few features specific to the circumstances of this movement that allowed for its success. First of all, the women in Argentina were organizing around the unconfirmed deaths of their loved ones. Death provides a strong opportunity for collective action because it allows for public gatherings of mourning that can be transformed into sites of disruption and protest. It provides immediate commonality and a sense of solidarity between mourners who can relate to each other's experiences (Tarrow 1998, 36). However, death cannot be sustained as the sole force behind social movement because mourning is relatively brief and often turns private as time passes (Tarrow 1998, 36). What makes the situation in Argentina unique however is that many of the children around whom the mothers were organizing had not officially died. There was still hope. Mothers affirmed this hope in their refusal to accept any negotiations declaring their relatives dead. In 1979 the military government announced a law that would permit a relative of a missing person to seek a judicial ruling that would declare a person who disappeared between November 1975 and the date of the law to be dead. *Las Madres* and other human rights organizations refused to allow the government to get away with such an easy solution, especially after uttering what amounts to a confession of wrongdoing (Navarro 2001, 254).

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo provides a clear illustration of the way in which the domestic role of motherhood can be utilized as a mobilizing factor. As the struggle of the mothers in Argentina deepened, the individual focus of the struggle also evolved. Women no longer saw their mobilization as a way of locating their own son or daughter; instead these women came together to fight for all of the children and family members who had disappeared. The transition from the cause being about mourning to a focus on political

dissent, contributed to the survival of the movement, and allowed for political coalitions to form that supported their cause. The women involved in *Las Madres* succeeded in “socializing motherhood” (Bouvard 1994, 175). In doing so, they refused to abandon their maternal role. While involving themselves in political dissent, the mothers continued to maintain traditional values of motherhood and the household (Bouvard 1994, 185). They sought to make room in political discourse for the values associated with motherhood, including compassion, nurture, and care. *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* created a new realm of maternal politics aimed at the cultivation of a just society where health, education, work, and shelter were available to everyone (Bouvard 1994, 192).

The mothers of the victims in Juarez, can adopt a lot from the example of Argentina. Socialized motherhood allows women to work within traditionally female roles in order to improve their quality of life and ensure their safety. This may be the first step for women working to gain political efficacy in Juarez. However, mothers in Juarez cannot follow the exact path taken by the mothers of Argentina due to the differences in their economic and personal situations. Juarez women face a much different economic reality than those in Argentina did at the time of the disappearances. In most of the families of the disappeared in Juarez, the mother goes to work to support her family (Bejarano 2002). She steps outside of the bounds of her domestic role every day. For the most part, women in Argentina were able to maintain their role as housewives throughout the struggle. This was a role that they were proud of; they merely wanted to change the way maternity was viewed politically. The women in Juarez, already having broken from their domestic role, would benefit more from working to break down stereotypes involved with women’s participation outside of the home. It would be beneficial for the women of Juarez to work toward the establishment of a feminine influence in the emerging gendered division of labor.

Expanding the Cause: Mobilizing the Female Workforce

Labor Unions have provided one avenue of response to the social and political conditions that women are faced with. Organization of labor unions among women has often been met with little success due to the powerful coalition of multinational corporations, Mexico's one-party political system, and the masculine-centered/state-controlled labor unions (Nauman and Hutchinson 1997, 153). However, participation in labor unions working to improve conditions for women has done a lot to educate and empower them to become a political force in their daily lives.

The experiences gained by women involved in the *Solidev Independent Labor Union*, formed in 1979, provides an example of a union that was able to achieve some marginal success in the improvement of conditions for women. Facing threats of plant closure and blacklisting, the women went on strike in response to employer sexual harassment and the unjust firing of several *maquila* employees (Prieto 1985). The union's two-year struggle saw early achievements that included salary increases, a forty-hour work week, more egalitarian relations between workers and employers, and greater job security (Prieto 1985, 81). With a solid union behind them, female workers found that work "was more to their liking. It was easier to get personal time away from the job and they worked fewer hours" (Prieto 1985, 86). Unfortunately, as the union gained momentum and became more of a threat, corporate strength out powered the strike. In February 1993 employers closed the Solitron Devices manufacturing facility completely. After a long fight, the workers were compensated only 70% of what they were owed for their labor (Prieto 1985, 95).

Although the money and power of multinational-manufacturing corporations won out in the end, labor activists cannot help but recognize the considerable progress that the *Solidev* strike made towards the empowerment of women. One woman, Gabriela, reflects upon her

participation in the strike saying, “We all learned, and we all made ourselves into politically conscious people. None of us who were in the union are the same as we were before. Now we know how to fight and demand our due” (Prieto 1985, 96). Strategies of resistance and confrontation with owners are skills that these women will be able to take to later employment. There they can pass on the message of the importance of political mobilization (Prieto 1985, 97). The *Solidev* strike stands as an early example of the slow but steady progress of labor mobilization around the *maquilas*. Since the time of this strike, other labor unions and organizations have created broader coalitions aimed at addressing even more aspects of women worker’s rights.

Recently, women’s labor organizations have taken a global approach by linking economic injustice around the border to global capitalism. *Casa de la Mujer/Grupo Factor X* aims at cultivating consciousness about local and international economic injustice and its relation to human rights. Officially, the organization’s goal is to “construct networks of action, empowerment, and solidarity- local, national, and international- between women” (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 175). Additional organizations such as the *Comite Fronterizo de Obras* and the *Comite de Apoyo Fronterizo Obrera Regional* see their success as contingent upon connecting labor and sexual exploitation in the *maquilas* with sexual subordination within the home. They go further to parallel the circumstances of productive and reproductive labor, class and gender, and workplace and community. They have used community forums called *promotoras* as the vehicles by which to accomplish these goals. Under a subtext of shared identity, these groups have created awareness among women and men that land rights, environmental health, and domestic and violent crimes against women are linked to a lack of sufficient labor rights, which is perpetuated by the overall patriarchal structure of industrial capitalism (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 177). In other Latin American countries, successful labor coalitions such as the MEC (*Maria Elena Cuadra*) in Nicaragua

have seen a decrease in floor violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment in manufacturing facilities (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 180). Coalitions and labor organizations such as these have profoundly changed the tide of violence against women.

These coalitions still confront their share of obstacles preventing the mobilization of women. Women's experiences in activism and within the home reveal a significant masculine resentment towards women's politicization and economic independence. Men who feel threatened constantly attempt to reassert traditional gender roles through every avenue possible, including union organization (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 183). Traditionalized divisions of labor form within unions, limiting women's power. Men often assert themselves in more militant public positions that involve speaking at strikes or organizing litigation while women are expected to take on less visible organizational and educational roles (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 178). This limits the visibility of women as a political force. Also, masculine-oriented union organizations often fail to attend to gender specific concerns that women have such as childcare, education, and sexual and physical harassment and violence (Bandy and Mendez 2002, 178). It is essential that unions maintain a feminist perspective in order to address the concerns of an integral proportion of *maquila* labor.

The space that women occupy in labor relations in Juarez, is central to their struggle for safety and dignity. Therefore, it is essential that women utilize this space as the nucleus of their struggle for political legitimacy. The experiences of the women in the *Solidev* strike outline the potential that female labor participation can have for women's overall politicization.

“Workers have often been separated by international borders. That is beginning to change. Yet some of the greatest borders are those constructed within our minds, borders that make an undesirable present seem the only possible model for the future...The new history of international labor that is just beginning, shows that those who dare to make a difference can make all the difference.”

- Dale Hathaway on prospects for the future⁷

Conclusion: Many Problems, One Goal

When addressing the tragedy surrounding the disappearances of the young women in Juarez it is crucial to understand that the conditions surrounding this violence are not isolated. Organizations such as *El Comité Independiente de Chihuahua Pro Defensa de Derechos Humanos* have harnessed this realization by addressing “all human rights violations in Juarez including police brutality, inhumane conditions for workers, poor living conditions for people in the *colonias*, racism and discrimination against indigenous peoples, and violence against women” (Bejarano 2002, 131). The recent attention that has been paid to the situation in Juarez by the international media is illustrative of the effectiveness of coalitions that have been formed that address all of the circumstances facing Mexican women. Because of the efforts of numerous organizations, the international community has become aware of the extent of state violence and control in Mexico (Bejarano 2002, 134). This is an important step towards putting pressure on government to affect change.

This international influence and the deterioration of the corporatist state in Mexico have created political opportunities for activists mobilizing around the murders in Juarez. The combination of ethnic and social identities serves as a resource in the formation of broad solidarity movements. The pluralism that has emerged in the Mexican political system in recent years has brought about electoral reform and has allowed for the legitimization of a variety of independent labor organizations. It is unlikely that authoritarianism will continue

⁷ See Hathaway, 253.

to dominate Mexican politics as it once did prior to recent democratization (Reiss 1999, 29). As political oppressors are held accountable to their electorate, they are unable to use violent repression and other coercive measures to repress dissent. The disintegration of the corporatist regime in Mexico has made the costs of mobilizing around labor, environmental, and social concerns far less burdensome than before.

Since the majority of those who live in Juarez are wage laborers, labor organization has the potential to create the greatest level of solidarity among the working class. Using labor as a forum for educating people about their options for exit and political participation should allow for collective resistance to form among people sharing a common struggle. As opportunities for dissent and protest become more obvious to residents in squatter communities, there is a greater likelihood that basic environmental issues in the *colonias* will be addressed. Efforts to combine identity factors such as class, race, gender, and religion in a way that connects the experiences of a wide range of social actors will strengthen solidarity around the struggles of women along the border. Labor coalitions and feminist NGO's will be able to use these identities to attract the sympathy of the international community. Each of these resources will lead to a sustained social movement that will be able to address the root causes of the violence in Juarez.

The struggle of families and grassroots organizations in Juarez is political and encompasses every aspect of modern Mexican life. The violence in Juarez is part of a broad system of oppression aimed at "subduing the people. A way of scaring women from going out into the streets...a dirty war...this did not begin in 1993 it began in the industry of the *maquiladoras*" (Bejarano 2002, 131). The circumstances of the women in Juarez must be addressed broadly when attempting to put a stop to the murders. Efforts of groups like the disbanded *Voces Sin Echo* or the *Amigos de Las Mujeres de Juarez* to align themselves with labor unions, human rights groups, and government institutions has proved increasingly

effective in addressing the disappearances. By coming together in coalition under the broad goal of political mobilization and the reduction of gender restrictions that subdue women's efficacy, these organizations should begin to witness results. Women will be able to empower themselves through unification, which is an effective step towards the termination of violence against women in Juarez and the entirety of Mexico.

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