In November 2001, the bodies of eight women were discovered in a cotton field in Ciudad Juárez, all showing evidence of extreme sexual violence. The discovery brought sudden international media attention to the issue of femicide in Juárez, a tragedy which has been “accruing bones since 1993,” when the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) brought rapid industrial growth to this once small border town. Following this wave of global concern, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) ruled in the landmark “Cotton Field” ruling that the Mexican government had an obligation to take an active role in confronting the social and structural conditions causing extreme gender based violence in Mexico. Despite this, the number of women killed in Ciudad Juárez has continued to grow. This has not only indicated a level of failure on the part of the Mexican government to implement changes, but also discouraged other countries in the region from addressing this problem. Even without an extensive examination for change, an in-depth consideration of the root causes of femicide in Ciudad Juárez and of the failed reforms can inform countries elsewhere on the necessity of persistence and structural modifications. These causes include unregulated free trade and drug trafficking, both of which stem from a culture of female “second class citizenship.” Ultimately, this culture passively accepts femicide and obstructs successful implementation of reform.

Before addressing the severity of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, along with its specific causes, it is important to first establish a general understanding of femicide and gender based violence. In her article “Violencia Feminicida,” Mercedes Olivera offers a comprehensive definition of femicide (also known as feminicide) explaining that it is, “the extreme end of a range of violations of women’s human rights—a direct and extreme expression of economic, political, social, and gender violence that is structural in nature.” Critical to her definition is that gender based violence is a misogynistic expression of domination and control over women. This expression has intensified, as widespread poverty has driven more women into the workforce, and thus challenged “institutionalized masculine power.”

Turning towards Ciudad Juárez, its importance in the dialogue surrounding femicide becomes clear. One of the first
uses of the term was in 1993 to describe the sexual murders in Ciudad Juárez, thus bringing “femicide” into the international human rights lexicon and placing Ciudad Juárez at the center of subsequent dialogue. Officials estimate the number of femicides in Ciudad Juárez exceeds 500 women as of 2010; however, there is a widespread consensus that this official number is far lower than the actual body count. Furthermore, the official number only includes the “found bodies,” not the missing ones, which “number in the thousands.” Scholar William Paul Simmons highlights the gravity of the situation. He notes that although more men are killed than women, the number of women killed has been increasing at a rate twice that of men. In addition, femicides in Ciudad Juárez greatly exceed both average rates for Mexico and comparable border cities. The rate at which homicide has continued to rise in Ciudad Juárez has made it “longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history.” This longstanding centrality of Ciudad Juárez in the discourse on femicide is especially significant, as Ciudad Juárez has become an important test case for change and reform.

An understanding of why femicides occur is first informed by who is most affected. In the article “No More Killings! Women Respond to Femicides in Central America,” Marina Prieto-Carrón, Marilyn Thomson and Mandy Macdonald note that there is a prominent misconception that most victims are the maquila workers of Ciudad Juárez. Maquila workers are women who work at manufacturing plants owned by large multinational companies and are hired because of a distorted belief that they are “cheap and supposedly docile workers.” Though these women do make up almost a third of femicide victims in Ciudad Juárez, such misconception manifests itself in the notion that all victims are maquila workers living “la vida loca…coded language for prostitution.” This title serves to ‘justify’ their death by devaluing their life with misdirected standards of morality. The most important and telling commonalities lie in the fact that most victims are from “the most marginalized sectors of society,” and that all victims are denied first class citizenship and the right to life on the basis of their gender. This is made especially apparent in that some women are “killed as an act of revenge against a close male relative of the women,” making their bodies into no more than an object of vengeance. Further concerning, more than 60% of femicides in the region are committed in the victim’s own home by a partner or family member.

In her article “Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras,” Elvia Arriola makes a compelling argument that connects unregulated free trade, especially post-NAFTA, to the environment of hostility towards women. She further asserts that the Ciudad Juárez femicides are an extreme manifestation of this environment. Currently, under NAFTA, transnational corporations are protected from being held accountable for any harm done to workers in Mexico. This has lead to both “fatal indifference” towards the lives of workers and an accepted environment of physical, emotional, and mental abuse. In her article, “Poor Brown Female,” Alicia Gaspar De Alba paints this brutal picture of the gendered abuse at maquiladora assembly plants. At such plants, women are not only subjected to ten to twelve hour work days in dangerous conditions for little pay, but also to pregnancy testing at the time of hiring, enforced birth control, and even “monthly menstruation tests.” Outside of the factory, the safety and security of the maquila workers is even further disregarded. Workers frequently walk between their shantytowns and bus stops in the pitch-black of the early morning or late night to be picked up by an unlicensed and unscreened bus driver and driven to work. If they arrive late, they are commonly sent home, regardless of whether or not it is still dark out or if they have reliable transportation home.

Such unregulated labor conditions more broadly create an environment in Ciudad Juárez that is both hostile and exploitative to the lives of workingwomen. As previously noted, murders of maquila workers account for about a third of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, making this a largely incomplete explanation. If viewed through a wider lens, though, it becomes clear that the exploitative environment created and reinforced by the maquiladoras, has far-reaching and detrimental effects on the attitudes towards workingwomen in the whole of Ciudad Juárez.

Any consideration of Ciudad Juárez would be incomplete without an exploration of the effects of the drug war and organized crime in the city on femicide rates. Drug violence has been rising at alarming rates, with more than 6,000 dead since 2006. The problems with the rise in drug violence as it relates to femicide are numerous. First, the...
“principal target” of drug cartels is the “working poor,” whose “productive labor established Ciudad Juárez’s reputation as a profitable hub of global industrialization.” Workingwomen, then, are more at risk because of a sort of violent “second class citizen” double jeopardy, wherein they are targeted not only for their gender but also targeted by cartels because of their social class. The second problem is the violent military response that has been adopted by the government, making Ciudad Juárez one of the most violent cities in the world. This has both normalized violence and diverted attention from what the government considers lesser priorities in Ciudad Juárez, like eliminating violence towards women. Furthermore, there is a failure on the part of the government to acknowledge that the war on drugs is affecting civilians. Melissa Wright, department head of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies at Pennsylvania State University, explains that, similar to the “victim blaming” that is common justification for femicide, the government puts forth a similar narrative that those who have died from the intensified “war on drugs” are similarly “responsible” for their own fate. This ultimately ignores the deadly effect these issues are having on the whole community and avoids taking steps to redress the problem. Finally, organized crime in Ciudad Juárez contributes to widespread corruption in state security structures, creating a climate of insecurity and impunity for women. Further scrutiny of free trade and the war on drugs reveals a common element, which underlies not only these two factors but can also be universally applied to explain femicide in Mexico and beyond. This is a deeply ingrained ideology that treats women as inferior, thus justifying their exploitation in the free trade driven public sphere and their lack of protection in an ever-broadening war on drugs. Most fundamentally, the status of “second class citizen” manifests itself in a climate of impunity for perpetrators, blame for the victims, and a wholesale devaluing of female lives. First, this widespread impunity is well documented. Between 2010 and 2011, of femicide cases registered by the National Centre Against Femicide, only 4% of the cases had been sentenced, some of which led to acquittals. The majority of cases go without an investigation—and even when cases are formally investigated and brought to trial, institutional prejudices lead to very few sentences. This impunity makes the cost of femicide low for perpetrators, who are likely to get away with murder.

Pervasive victim blaming bolsters the climate of impunity, wherein women are held responsible for their own deaths over the perpetrators themselves. As femicides in Ciudad Juárez continued to rise starting in the early 1990’s, investigators stuck by the explanation that the victims were “hookers, or that they were heroin-users,” as if even this would make women responsible for their own deaths. Poet Marjorie Agosín wrote a collection of poems called Secrets In The Sand: The Young Women of Juárez, several of which speak to this problem. One in particular that stands out is entitled “Before Death Justice,” in which she writes:

Justice forgets about the dead women of Juárez
The Police yawn
Some say they walked around wearing dresses
Much too short
Provoking the murderers who
After all, were good men

In her article “Ghost Dance in Ciudad Juárez,” Maria Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba also colors the highly prevalent victim blaming by describing the first “prevention campaign” in 1995. One particularly troubling campaign ad featured an attractive young man and text that read:

Single man looking for young woman, hard-working, who likes to go to parties on the weekend until dawn. INTERESTED WOMEN please approach any dark street or alley. Priority given to young women who arrive alone and make the least noise.

This ad was problematic in many ways, contributing to stereotypes that depicted victims as party going, “loose” workingwomen—and then functionally blaming them for their own death. It fortified the notion that women were at fault if they “dare take to public spaces, which are reserved for men” by working, going out dancing, or walking on the streets. Further, it disregarded the realities of domestic violence, discounting the idea that women are more often than not victims of gendered abuse within their own homes.
Even more telling than the culture of victim blaming and impunity is the context of the murders themselves. Revealing a gross disregard for the basic humanity of these women, bodies have been found inside trash dumpsters, on train tracks, at busy intersections, and in landfills, brick ovens, and vats of acid. They have been found “strangled, mutilated, dismembered, raped, stabbed, torched, or so badly beaten, disfigured, or decomposed that the remains have never been identified.” With this gruesome context, it becomes even more dismaying that a state of impunity and victim blaming precludes the conviction of the perpetrators.

It was within this hostile environment that the landmark “Cotton Field” case took place. Three mothers of the “Cotton Field” victims chose to bring a case before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) and then to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR). These women argued that their daughters were “denied the right to life, integrity and personal freedom” and that the government had “violated the right of the victims’ families to access justice and judicial protection.” The Court’s ruling was a breakthrough in international human rights norms. Most notable were the court’s decisions: the crimes had not been investigated with “due diligence,” the Mexican government was complicit in the perpetuation of a “culture of discrimination against women,” the government was obligated to pay “integral compensation” to address the context in which discrimination occurred, and the Mexican government must institute new protocols to investigate disappearances of women from a gendered perspective.

Though the Court’s ruling demanded extensive reform of the Mexican justice system and security apparatus, the continued rise in the rates of femicide indicates a failure in the implementation of reform. Despite the rise in the number of femicides, it is important to recognize what progress has been made, with an understanding that even small changes are still important. In an article by Caroline Bettinger-López, White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, recognizes that even with challenges, “limited but notable progress has been made.” This progress includes the government’s public apology and acceptance of international responsibility, a newly accessible list of disappeared women and girls on the Chihuahua Prosecutor’s Office website, and a reinforcement of the “40-point Program of Action,” which includes advancements like the creation of a Specialized Office for Female Homicide Investigation in the State Prosecutor’s Office.

Unfortunately, the implementation of other ostensive “reforms” remains unconvincing. The functionality of the new DNA database to match samples found at crime scenes is dubious, victims’ families argue that monetary reparations have fallen short, and the program to incorporate a gendered perspective into investigations is tenuous. Furthermore, some have asserted that the “Women of Ciudad Juárez Center for Justice,” a center meant to provide wraparound support for victims’ families, operates without guidelines “and with the sole purpose of falsely demonstrating compliance with the court’s ruling.” Amnesty International’s Annual Report goes further to highlight failures. Criticisms include an ineffective enforcement of legislation to prevent and punish violence, inadequate training of officials to appropriately deal with gender based crimes, inoperative protection orders in many states, a lack of new investigative protocols, and, most importantly, a continued climate of impunity for perpetrators.

While many factors inhibit success, it is important to note that reform efforts tend to lose strength in the implementation stage where there is less public pressure to comply and thus less cost in noncompliance. Obstacles like a lack of institutional capacity, funding, and political motivation arise because “second class citizens” are not prioritized, and thus these all-important mechanisms for successful implementation are diverted to other priorities. Again, when entering the demanding stage, institutional actors are willing to confront the challenge insofar as the cost of noncompliance stays high. With regards to femicide, not only does international attention and pressure diminish immediately after reforms have passed, but also the ideological “second class” status of women in Mexico further reduces the political will to institute reforms.
Even without a highly successful model for change, then, there is still much to be learned from Ciudad Juárez, both in better combating femicide in Ciudad Juárez and in addressing femicide elsewhere. In this climate, the lives of women are devalued, the victims of femicide are blamed, and the perpetrators go unpunished. While an acknowledgment that the root of the problem is an ingrained culture of female “second class citizenship” may reveal a daunting task, the importance of such an understanding cannot be understated. In both Ciudad Juárez and beyond, a problem of such depth and intensity can only be addressed with international and domestic pressure that is both far-reaching and persistent. It must continue well into the implementation process to ensure that the cost of noncompliance remains high for government institutions. After decades lacking consistent reform paralleling decades of ever increasing rates of femicide, it is unclear how many more bodies must Ciudad Juárez find in a cotton field before enough is enough.

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Femicide in Ciudad Juárez
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