

# Transnational sexual and gendered violence: an application of border sexual conquest at a Mexico–US border

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***Abstract** Drawing on transnational and postcolonial feminism, we discuss the phenomenon of border sexual conquest to highlight structural sexual and gendered violence that is exacerbated by the subjugation of local place and by the global political economy. While we have gained important insights from the literature on gender and transnationalism, the processes of sexual violence and gendered violence are underdeveloped. We focus our analysis on the Mexico–US border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, USA. We argue that what we call border sexual conquest confronts the feminicides in Juárez and the female proletariats on both sides of the border. Moreover, while structural violence approaches under theorize struggles over power, the perspective of border sexual conquest highlights how processes of conquest intertwine with women's resistance.*

**Keywords** BORDER SEXUAL CONQUEST, US–MEXICO BORDER, TRANSNATIONALISM, VIOLENCE, GENDER

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At Juárez–El Paso along the Mexico–United States border, there is a connection between sexual and gendered violence against young, impoverished women and the global political economy. Historically, this border experienced the legacies of violence against women physically, economically, socially and culturally. In this article, we argue that violence surfaces as a form of *border sexual conquest*. We draw on colonialism to describe how global neoliberalism – defined as the unobstructed flow of traded goods through the elimination of import and export quotas and tariffs, private ownership of economic resources and diminishing welfare responsibility by nation-states (Jagger 2001) – represents a form of contemporary

conquest that routinizes sexual and gendered violence in everyday activities at transnational locations (Morales and Bejarano 2008). Yet, conquest is not a linear or unidirectional process. Actual conquest and attempts to conquer are ongoing and continue to be met by strong opposition from women. Therefore, rather than depicting border women as victims of male control and slaves to global neoliberalism, we follow insights from Mohanty (1991), who argues that women are subjects in historically and culturally specific ways, but are also active agents of resistance in their own self-empowerment and within their communities.

In this article, we concentrate our analysis on the border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, USA to examine the complexities of sexual violence (femicides, subjugation of women's bodies for economic development, and sexualization in the workplace) and gendered violence (inequalities between men and women that compromise security, civil and criminal justice, and economic parity). Specifically, we highlight two widespread cases. The first is the 'femicides' in Juárez where over 600 women have been murdered since 1993; depending on the source, approximately 90 to 187 of these cases were serial sexual murders. Not counted in these statistics are murders after 2004 and the girls and women who are still missing in Juárez. Estimates of these range from 40 cases acknowledged by *La Fiscalía Mixta* (Mixed Prosecutor for Attention to Women's Homicides) to 4587 cases reported by the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (Commission for National Human Rights) (*Comisión para Prevenir y Eradicar la Violencia Contra Las Mujeres en Ciudad Juárez* 2006). Some call this criminal pattern 'femicide' (Wright 2001); we prefer what Latin American researchers and activists call 'feminicide' (Lagarde y de los Ríos 1994), which adds the examination of state-tolerated violence.<sup>1</sup> Our second example illustrates the exploitation of the 'female proletariat' (Sassen 1998) as a form of sexual and gendered violence. In Juárez, the economic development of the Mexican nation-state is dependent on an exploitable female workforce subjected to sexualization on the shop floor while producing products for the global market rather than for Mexican co-nationals. Similarly, in El Paso, while political-economic elites sell economic restructuring as progress and prosperity, Mexican immigrant women suffer violence via their transformation into disposable labourers.

Our work draws on the transnational feminist perspective first introduced by Kaplan and Grewal (1994), which is rooted in the work of Spivak, who described 'transnational' as the context in which it is unfeasible for nation-states to resist the constraints of neoliberal economics (Spivak 1996). Authors writing from a feminist cultural studies perspective have utilized this concept to examine how global capital and geopolitics produce and sustain inequalities (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Kaplan and Grewal 1994; Kim-Puri 2005). We particularly follow Kim-Puri's (2005) approach to bringing material structures to the forefront of transnationalism. Despite gaining valuable insights into the proliferation of neoliberalism and, particularly, border-control initiatives on the US–Mexico border (Dunn 2001; Heyman 1998; Nevins 2002), transnational feminist analyses are largely missing. Few scholars have studied structural sexual and gendered violence within the literal peripheries between the Mexico and US border.

We begin by discussing the contributions and limitations of scholarship on maquiladoras (export processing firms) on global forms of sexual and gendered violence. Then, we discuss the interlocking factors that facilitate border sexual conquest – political and economic structures, subjugation of local place, gender and class inequality and women’s resistance. Finally, we discuss how the feminicides in Juárez and the female proletariats on both sides of this border materialize into border sexual conquest.

### **Neoliberal globalization, gender and violence**

Regardless of the official or unofficial incentives that lure corporations to periphery countries for economic development, these global processes link in with the feminization of low-wage employment in various parts of the globe (Larner 2002).<sup>2</sup> At the Mexico–US border, an export-processing zone, maquiladoras produce goods for the global market. When investigating material outcomes, scholars examine how women as the model workers of these firms shape gender roles and statuses along two opposing lines – exploitation or integration (Tiano 1994). Most maquiladora studies are aligned with the exploitation thesis, stating that the history of women’s industrial participation reflects a dialectic between capitalism and patriarchy. To maximize profits, corporations employ workers from the most vulnerable and inexpensive sectors of the labour force – women and children (Cravey 1998; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Kopinak 1996) – although others argue that maquiladoras offer economic integration, which benefits women (Iglesias Prieto 1985; Villarreal and Yu 2007).

Aligned with the exploitation thesis is literature on the use of women’s bodies in maquiladoras. Debates on globalization address the body, particularly women’s bodies, as a vehicle of production that is often devalued or undervalued, and is a perspective that some scholars see as stretching beyond the walls of the workplace (Salzinger 2003). Similarly, Wright (2006) incorporates Marx’s capitalist labour theory of value and Butler’s poststructuralist materialistic perspective by arguing that the social construction of the Mexican woman as ‘cheap labour’ is not isolated but intersects with a productive continuum in which she is both the producer and product.

Although we have gained important insights from scholars studying the relationship between neoliberalism and gender in maquiladoras, violence has not been a significant focus of this scholarship. It thus lacks the conceptual framework in which to study processes of sexual and gendered violence as a condition of transnationalism. We argue that some researchers stop short of conceptualizing the inequality and utilization of women’s bodies for economic aims as violence, and those who do address this issue present it as a self-explanatory process. Second, the authors of this literature conceptualize geopolitics along a continuum of ‘First World’–‘Third World’ or developed–developing nations, a characterization that treats developed and developing nations as homogeneous spaces where residents of the developed countries have power and those from developing countries lack power. In such analyses, the marginality of local place, borders and transnational spaces do not fit neatly.

A distinct but related literature urges us to examine the dialectical relationship between local and global structures and the perpetuation of sexual and gendered violence. While most theoretical explanations of sexual and gendered violence have focused on domestic dimensions, others have focused on wars and ethno-religious conflicts in Bosnia, Iraq, India, Rwanda, Sierra Leon and Yugoslavia (Adomako Ampofo et al. 2004; Gangoli 2006; Peterson and Runyan 1999). In such situations, women's bodies symbolically represent community, territory or race, which subjects them to rape (Gangoli 2006; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

While the literature on the connections between globalization and sexual and gender structures illustrates the various constructions of violence and the multiplicity of its effects, the theoretical underpinnings of these occurrences are vague and inconclusive. As a result, scholars frequently use structural violence approaches to contextualize violence that occurs under transnational relationships. Structural violence is an approach used to explain how violence is a consequence of a society's macro-level inequalities (Chasin 2004; Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969) and that it occurs when one group of people suffers from avoidable conditions while others do not. One can relegate these adverse effects of structural violence to indirect or unintentional injury when committed without clear subject–action–object relations.

Structural violence differs from interpersonal violence by highlighting that not only individuals but also entire systems can be violent. To gain a broader understanding of the dangers people face in society, Chasin (2004) differentiated between different types of violence. First, while society has largely focused on interpersonal violence the impact of structural violence is much more severe. Interpersonal violence usually has fewer victims per occurrence, while structural violence is more pervasive. Second, structural violence is less obvious than interpersonal violence and is an outcome of years of decision making by those in positions of power. As such, violence becomes a personal matter with no societal significance outside the private realm reinforcing public/private dichotomies and violence against women (Bejarano 2002; Tellez 2008). Third, interpersonal violence usually occurs between people of similar economic groupings and members of the same community or household. Those who are economically and politically powerful, however, perpetuate structural violence. Fourth, victims of interpersonal violence can usually identify their perpetrator while the victims of structural violence are rarely aware of who is responsible for their injuries and those who are responsible rarely see the suffering resulting from their actions. Fifth, people feel the effects of interpersonal violence almost immediately, but structural violence can take months or years to surface. Sixth, one or a few people can take a decision to commit an act of interpersonal violence, whereas structural violence stems from diffuse sources.

While structural violence is a breakthrough perspective, it needs some analytical clarity. Structural violence perspectives suggest that when there is no clear actor involved in the infliction of harm then violence is indirect. We argue that the decision-making strategies of elites who inflict injury are not 'unintentional', as structural violence approaches posit, but are strategically designed to preserve the elites' power at the expense of vulnerable populations and local geographies. In the case of sexual and gendered violence, a desire to attain or keep power largely

motivates injurious behaviour, which is gender based and linked to constructions of masculinities and femininities (Moser and McIlwaine 2006).

Structural violence under-theorizes struggles over power and violence also. An exception is Parsons (2007) who argued that power over another to benefit one's self interest is not structural violence, for the generation of harm is contingent on the agency of the 'subordinate' group. Victims can in fact identify who their perpetrators are and thus recognize when neoliberal policies are implemented at their expense. Drawing on Foucault (1988), power has the potential to provoke revolts, which provides us with a more nuanced examination of structural violence that involves the complex interplay between structures, power and vulnerability, and the gendered dimensions and responses of each.

### **Border sexual conquest**

Border sexual conquest occurs when nation-states, along with transnational corporations, exacerbate sexual and gendered violence through the exploitation of local places and their people (particularly women), whom they perceive as marginalized (Juárez-El Paso border) and 'marginalizable'. We traced border sexual conquest as part of our ongoing research and activism on both sides of this border since the 1990s. Specifically, throughout this study we incorporated data from activist efforts and participant observation with the families of the murdered women and disappeared girls and women and the organizations they represent. We also include labour groups rallying around the issue of violence against women in Juárez, the Centro de Estudios Talleres (Centre for Labour Studies) (primarily in 2000–04), and Centro de Derechos Humanos Paso del Norte (Paso del Norte Centre for Human Rights). Moreover, observations from a series of Labour Day mobilization events in 2007 spearheaded by La Mujer Obrera (The Woman Labourer) are also incorporated. Thus, data from these events helped us trace border sexual conquest through the interlocking of four components – political-economic structures, the subjugation of local place, gender and class inequality, and women's resistance. To examine these components we borrow from Razack's (2005: 343) interlocking approach 'where multiple systems of oppression come into existence through each other' over using the term intersectionality where systems cross paths but do not reflect how they lock and give content to each other. Below we address each of the four interlocking components that create border sexual conquest.

#### *Conquest as multiple waves of globalization*

At the root of border sexual conquest is its evolution from colonization to neo-colonialism, which is now embedded in neoliberalism. The examination of sexual and gendered violence requires close observation of the politico-economic structures that allow capitalists' interests to prevail over women's vulnerability as objects of violence. At this border, contemporary politico-economic arrangements between the Mexican and US governments began with the Emergency Farm Labor Program, also known as the Bracero Program (1942–64). To alleviate labour shortages in the USA during the Second World War, this treaty recruited and granted temporary work status

to Mexican labourers or ‘braceros’ (Calavita 1992; Cravey 1998). The ending of the programme abruptly displaced approximately 200,000 braceros in the USA, who were then pushed into Mexico’s northern region, which caused social and economic turmoil (Martínez 1975). Simultaneously, a growing number of Mexican workers began to migrate to this northern border (Fernández-Kelly 1983), which ultimately stimulated Mexico’s industrialization (Cravey 1998).

This was the context for the first wave of globalization at this border, though Mexico’s economic development strategies promoted foreign investment in the early twentieth century during the Porfiriato (Massey et al. 2002). In 1965, the Border Industrial Program (BIP), also known as the Maquiladora Program, adopted the concept of ‘twin plants’ (tandem operations on both sides of the border) (Martínez 1975). The BIP originally sought to alleviate the high unemployment in border cities created by migrant labourers (almost all male) who could not enter the USA because of the growing restrictions initiated by US labour unions and the termination of the Bracero Program. However, maquiladoras did not reduce unemployment rates because, as in other free trade zones around the world, young women from undeveloped countries became the export workers (Cravey 1998; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Salzinger 1997, 2003; Wright 2001). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund encouraged further liberalization of Mexico’s economy, which led to the second wave of globalization with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.

### *Subjugation of local place*

A premise of border sexual conquest is that the success of neoliberalism depends on the exploitation of local places. While geopolitics highlights the global as the producer of privilege and social constructions, there is disagreement on how it interacts with local places. Massey (2004) argued that places intersect with wider power geometrics so that local places are not always the victims of the global, yet globalization does not subject all local places equally. Secor’s (2001) *feminist counter-geopolitics*, or how ‘global’ phenomena are constructed, experienced and challenged in local and national gendered ways, is fruitful here. In Juárez-El Paso, its status as a geopolitical division is heightened and shapes the construction of women political subjects at the local-level (Wright 2006). Thus, local place is more than social contexts or time and space positionality, for it interlocks with systems of oppression (like class and gender), which can in turn perpetuate conditions for sexual and gendered violence that also ignite agency. In this section, we shall discuss how local place interacts with global powers at the Juárez-El Paso border.

While sexual and gendered violence is universal, it takes different forms in marginal local places within nation-states because they are among the first to be stripped of their resources by transnational economic forces. As such, while neoliberalism shapes certain individuals’ exposure to sexual and gendered violence, it does not equally subject all local places to these forms of violence. We argue that the socio-historical aspects of local places persist under neoliberalism and reinforce the experiences and actions of individuals.

The depiction of the Mexico–US border as ‘morally bankrupt’, for instance, has helped to sustain the kind of sexual violence experienced there. Historically, transnational actors, such as US citizens or illicit businesses and corporations, have constructed this border as a frontier where ‘everything is for sale’ and ‘anything goes’ (Morales and Bejarano 2008). According to Bowman (1994), this script of a morally corrupt place has justified US citizens crossing into Mexico to participate in illegal and semi-legal activities such as prostitution, gambling, drug use and underage drinking. *Zona rosas* (red light districts) like the *Mariscal* has popularized Juárez as a lurid place of ‘whores’ who ‘accommodate customers with solely upper-torso fixations right at the bar’ (Langley 1988: 32). With such seedy depictions, women’s sexualized bodies become a common script woven into the local reputation of red-light districts, which transcends into other venues like the workplace where women are sexualized and commoditized. These discourses about Juárez as a ‘city of vice’ continue to resonate in Mexican (Vila 2000) and US popular cultures.

The US side of this border is also at the transnational margins. While the northern Mexican border is relatively prosperous in comparison with the rest of the country, the US side is largely occupied by society’s unwanted – racial minorities and impoverished communities (Mora and Dávila 2006; Saenz et al. 2009). As the marginalized local place of a powerful nation-state, it became an experimental site for globalization. Some firms that originally intended to participate in the Maquiladora Program decided to locate solely on the US side, which they saw as another exploitable local place with large surpluses of workers, low wages by US standards and virtually no effective unions (Hansen 1983).

The militarization of the US–Mexico border is another indicator of subjugation of place. Like no other region in the USA, it is a pseudo war zone in which civilians on both sides have daily confrontations with armed federal agents from the National Guard, Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement – now all compartmentalized under the Department of Homeland Security. Border control operations have expanded from the apprehension and prevention of entry of undocumented immigrants to drug enforcement and anti-terrorism (Andreas and Nadelmann 2006; Dunn 2001). Although drug trafficking is a normal activity for economic survival in El Paso/Juárez (Campbell 2005), the increase in armed agents raised the number of border deaths (Dunn 2001) and border rapes go under reported (Falcón 2006). Moreover, race as a basis for immigration-related questioning has led to constitutional violations against documented immigrants and US citizens, which might include wrongful detentions, searches, confiscation of property, and physical and psychological abuse (Border Network for Human Rights 2003). These vulnerabilities tend to create state-sanctioned border violence, even acknowledged by former Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, who stated that violence along this border is likely to increase with the intensification of border control measures (Gauette 2008).

### *Gender and interlocking violence*

The violence that neoliberalism exacerbates in this marginal local place is gendered. Under the phenomenon of border sexual conquest, gender interlocks with neo-

liberalism and local place, which reinforces and shapes gendered forms of violence. The differential positions of women and men in the global economy lead to gendered disparities in violence. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recognized that women remain vulnerable to sexual violence and that this pattern is likely to continue with unequal access to property and employment, positions of power and education (Milani et al. 2004). While cultural variations influence gender hierarchies or the privileging of traits and activities that define masculinity over femininity, it is also important to stress their political nature (Peterson and Runyan 1999).

While vulnerability to sexual and gendered violence is an illustration of gender oppression, it is also connected to women's statuses as 'third-world', 'underdeveloped', 'poor', and 'brown'. Feminists of colour, Chicana feminists, women from the Global South or post-colonial feminists provide the basis for discussions on the intersectionality (Collins 2000; Fregoso 2003; hooks 1995; Mohanram 1999; Mohanty 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1984; Segura and Pesquera 1999)<sup>3</sup> and interlocking (Razack 2005) of discrimination. The history of racism and imperialism illustrates how sexual conquest permeated the cultures of European and US expansion as a form of eroticized power (Bhattacharyya et al. 2002; Falcón 2006). Sexual violence is then not only a tool for patriarchal control but also an instrument of racism and colonialism (Smith 2005).

The female body in Mexican history is associated with a national discourse on the role of 'open female bodies' (Vila 2003), which continues to inform contemporary acts of sexual violence (Falcón 2006). For instance, at the centre of Mexico's colonization history is the controversial story of *La Malinche*, Cortes's mistress who became the medium for conquest and for some is symbolic of the betrayal and rape of the indigenous people. Therefore, while both women and men experience conquest, they do so differently in the context of gender and expectations of 'proper' gendering (Bhattacharyya et al. 2002).

#### *Contested space where resistance emerges*

From a structural violence perspective, the vulnerability that neoliberalism creates makes individuals unable to cope with global threats (Kirby 2006). However, individuals not only confront structural barriers, but they also shape those structures through individual or collective action (Parsons 2007). Historically, the relationship between those in power and those subjected to hegemonic power has been one of ongoing struggles (see Sanchez 2006), including prosaic everyday ones, as well as constant forms of resistance (Scott 1985). Illustrations of global resistance then come to represent what de Sousa Santos (2002) calls *counter-hegemonic globalization* or globalization from below that challenges hegemonic conceptions of global development. Local places are not always defenceless against the global (Massey 2004). Secor's (2001: 208) *feminist counter-geopolitics* 'challenges the notion that politics or knowledge is produced most "authoritatively" at the global scale', but is manifest across multiple scales via gendered political outlets.

Given that conquest is not unidirectional and is met with opposition to sexual and gender violence, we argue that border sexual conquest rather than standard structural violence more suitably describes the processes of sexual and gendered violence and movements against it. In this border transnational place, resistance counteracts oppression, creating an ongoing struggle against conquest. As Tellez (2008: 547) explained: 'The unique socio-political experience of the border region creates the necessary conditions for the emergence of a woman-centred subjectivity that incites actions.' For instance, women confront sexual and gendered violence by navigating transnational conditions through strengthening their autonomy and shifting their subjective identities, as documented in other places (Williams 2005).

The women at this border refuse to be seen or treated as ignorant or passive. Contrary to structural violence perspectives that argue that victims are rarely aware of the structural cause of their oppression and thus lack the power to combat it, we emphasize that women recognize the oppressive structures working against them. Moreover, they not only advocate for their individual needs, but also defend their communities (Coronado 2006). As such, at the forefront of resistance to border sexual conquest we find women's resilience confronting ongoing struggles against neoliberal conquest, forming what Pérez (1999) calls a border diasporic subjectivity that is oppositional and transformative.

### **The materialization of border sexual conquest**

#### *The feminicides*

The most brutal and obvious form of border sexual conquest is 'femicide'. It is not viable to discuss violence on this border without acknowledging that the feminicides continue. Although sexual violence has always existed, systemic patterns of sexual violence have moved to the forefront in Juárez since the early 1990s, after BIP and during NAFTA. Below, we discuss how the feminicides are an example of border sexual conquest.

The violence against women in this place is sexual and gendered. In 2008, violence in Juárez escalated to approximately 1600 murders; 86 of which were women. While male homicide rates are about 16 times higher than female ones (Martínez Canizales and Howard 2006), girls and women are subjected to sexualized violence through rape and/or the dismemberment of their feminine body parts. In December 2008, the body of a 31-year-old woman found on the streets of Juárez had two messages inscribed on it. One written on her abdomen stated 'the devil is on the loose in Juárez. Don't go out sexy or alone. We will continue to inform.' The authorities did not disclose the content of the second message on her breast. Despite the sexual normative messages written on her body, the authorities ascribed her death to alcohol poisoning. The sexualized aspects of the feminicides are also evident in the 'popular' theories suggesting that the victims were leading double lives as prostitutes. The police frequently drive the mothers of those who have gone missing around the red light district in search of their daughters, even if they had disappeared elsewhere and in broad daylight. In such an environment, politicians tend to blame the victim if

there is any suggestion that she may have overstepped sexual norms (Staudt and Campbell 2008) and their disposability becomes integrated into the social fabric. This form of violence is an expression of sexual politics and power by which oppression takes the sexual form of dead nude or semi-nude female bodies (Monárrez Fragoso, 2005; Segato 2006).

When the feminicides were first documented, some of the victims were *en route* to or from their work at mostly American-owned maquiladoras. Consequently, international coverage and activists made the connection between the feminicides and transnational corporations (Arriola 2007; Fregoso 2003; Wright 2001). However, Monárrez Fragoso (2005) found that, between 1993 and 2003, only 20.8 per cent of the women killed worked at a maquiladora or had previously worked at one.

Regardless of the number of victims associated with maquiladoras, the adverse effects of neoliberalism created a climate of violence. This politico-economic transformation has lured thousands of young women, mostly from southern Mexico and Central America, to this border (Salzinger 2003), along with men and women who migrate to Juárez with intentions of crossing into the USA. The social and physical infrastructure of Juárez could not sustain such excessive urban growth, which created a climate of a 'city spinning out of control' (Portillo 2002). The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) strengthens this argument by stating that neoliberalism intensifies insecurity (Kirby 2006). In other words, neoliberalism exacerbates inequality, which in turn perpetuates violence (Briceño León and Zubillaga 2002; Moser and McIlwaine 2006; Sanchez 2006), including sexual violence (Adomako Ampofo et al. 2004; Hawthorne 2004). Furthermore, the differential positioning of women, through the global connection between cheap labour and cheap products, devalues women from the poorer areas of the world (Bhattacharyya et al. 2002). Along with this devaluation of women in Juárez are daily confrontations with threats of and actual encounters with sexual aggression.

For well over a decade, women from the shop floors of maquiladoras to the streets of Juárez have been actively confronting this oppression by protesting against the deaths of murdered women and girls. While women's campaigns for governmental accountability have succeeded in placing violence against women on the political agenda (Staudt and Campbell 2008), with each year's passing, the city has attempted to silence, ridicule or strip these women of their freedom to protest and assert their rights. In November 2007, for instance, a campaign by the former mayor of Juárez was underway to 'clean up' the city's image to portray it as a beacon for tourism and further cross-border industry. The mayor threatened to arrest anyone caught painting crosses on telephone poles. Despite these threats, painted crosses as symbols of their protest, mourning and remembrance continue.

In July 2007, the families of some murdered and disappeared women started a campaign called '*Movimiento de Familiares Fortalecidas para Exigir Justicia*' (Movement of Fortified Families Demanding Justice). For nearly a year, on the first Thursday of each month, they held a silent protest in front of the *Oficinas del Gobierno*, the government offices, as a way of demanding justice despite the closing of murder cases due to statutes of limitations or authorities claiming a lack of case evidence.

**Figure 1: Symbol of the feminicides photographed during cross-painting mobilizations in Juárez. Photograph by one of the authors. 7 October 2007.**



This was not the first act of protest by families of murdered or missing women and girls. Families have been trying to seek accountability for their daughters' murder investigations or disappearances since the early 1990s. The following organizations have been involved in organized efforts: *Voces Sin Eco* (Voices Without Echo) from 1998–2001; *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, initiated in 2001 and still actively accepting cases of feminicides and missing women and girls; *Integración de Madres por Juárez*, set up in 2002 but disbanded after a few years; and *Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas*, from 2002 to the present in Chihuahua City. Collaborative efforts with other women's organizations like the *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* in Juarez have fortified the movement to address and end the feminicides. For example, the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Mujer* established in 2006 in Chihuahua works closely with *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas*. These groups followed other organizations established in the early 1990s, such as *Ocho de Marzo* (a feminist group) and *Casa Amiga* (a rape crisis centre).

Women's activism is also transnational. *Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez* from Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA has been working closely in advocacy, educational awareness, fundraising and organizing with the above-mentioned organizations in Juárez and Chihuahua City since 2001. The *Coalition against Violence toward Women and Families at the Border* in El Paso has also raised awareness about the feminicides. Activists from Juárez and Chihuahua City have increased their mobilization efforts through meetings with Amnesty International and other national or international organizations and government officials. These networks led national conferences, bi-national protests, USA Congressional resolutions, United Nations (UN) reports and several other networking activities worldwide to end the feminicides (Staudt 2008).

The women have continued to request support from the UN; in February 2008 representatives of Juárez and Chihuahua met the then high commissioner of the UN, Louise Arbor, to provide updates and ask for assistance with their cases. Although the international spotlight on these murders has diminished, local grassroots feminist and family-based organizations continue their resistance to revitalize the memories of these girls and women, and to hold accountable the authorities that have failed to bring them justice.

In summary, the Juárez feminicides are more than forms of structural violence; they are examples of border sexual conquest. First, at the centre of border sexual conquest are sexual and gender aspects of violence. Rape, murder, attacks on feminine body parts, and theories surrounding their deaths that characterize the victims as socially insignificant or even deserving of the violence, all sexualize the violence that girls and women experience. Second, a national history of sexual exploitation as a colonizing tool that surfaces today through the expansion of neoliberalism has an impact on the feminicides. In particular, neoliberalism has encouraged the collapse of the infrastructure that accompanied accelerated population growth and heightened global and local inequalities, both of which increase violence. Third, the depiction of this border as a region in which 'anything goes' made it an ideal site for transnational corporations to experiment with globalization and not be accountable for the structural vulnerabilities that subjected women to sexual violence. Cynthia Morales, former programme director of the Center against Family Violence, states that male partners forcibly transport women from El Paso to Juárez with the intention of killing them. Sexual and gender violence is then rooted in the different structural factors applying to women residing in local places perceived to be marginal, which their counterparts in other places do not face. Fourth, women confront conquest through protests, civil disobedience and outreach to international governmental and non-governmental organizations. As such, although conquest is ongoing, women's resilience and resistance continues in part because conquest is constantly at work, aiming to strip this transnational community of its social, economic and political resources.

### *The female proletariat*

Exploiting the 'female proletariat' is a form of border sexual conquest. In Juárez, women's bodies serve as a remedy for a collapsed political economy. Economic

development in Mexico depends on an exploitable female workforce to produce products for the global market. In Juárez, the average pay for a maquiladora worker is about 64.48 pesos a *day* (approximately US\$ 6), close to the minimum wage in Texas for an *hour*. Juárez wages are well below subsistence level given that the average cost of feeding a family of four is around US\$ 50 a week (FIDH 2006). The meagre pay is a form of gendered violence that contributes to the feminization of poverty. Indeed, dependency on the informal economy did not subside with maquiladora employment, but rather added strain to women forced to work in both formal and informal sectors.

Another form of violence is the blatant sexualization of women workers in maquiladoras. Men see female sexuality as a problem on the shop floor and even call their women co-workers prostitutes (Salzinger 1997). This double discourse is not surprising given that maquiladoras have historically practised forms of sexual subjugation through various beauty contests (Peña 1997). Sexualized violence also arises in the monthly pregnancy checks required of women employees or women applying for maquiladora jobs, thus tying productivity to control of the women's reproductive functions and pregnancy leading to dismissal (Biemann 2002).

Violence is also manifest through deskilling female workers, with workers typically given repetitive tasks that promote a Fordist assembly line model (Biemann 2002; Peña 1997). The women are not taught work dexterity and techniques, and monotonous physical movements characterize most of their duties. These repetitive motions for long shifts often lead to physical ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis, or even skin diseases due to irritants with toxic chemicals.

Mexican workers, especially women, also become as disposable and interchangeable as the parts they assemble. Biemann (2002), for example, describes flesh-tone prostheses that workers wear around their wrists as protection from excessive electromagnetic charges that run through their bodies. Biemann's point is well illustrated in *Juárez, the laboratory of our future*, in which photographer Jaime Bailleres photographed a female maquiladora worker standing at a machine with a coiled plastic cord attached to her wrist. In the picture, she literally appears to be part of the machinery (Bowden 1998).

The disposability of women in the factories is also apparent with their high turnover rates. Wright (2001: 561) finds 'managerial discourse of turnover functions as a technology for shaping a homogenous subject, referred to as the Mexican women, into the form of waste making'. The ample supply of available labourers leads to high turnover rates, which helps to frame perceptions of disposable humans. Even more disheartening are the maquiladora workers who merely wear themselves out and become obsolete. Wright (2006) described this sort of mobility between one workplace and another as a form of 'corporate death', in which there is a cycle of consuming and discarding women.

Similar patterns of women's disposability also besiege the women in El Paso, Texas, where the history of the border economy mirrors Juárez. While border wages are generally lower along the US–Mexico border than in the US interior, they are particularly detrimental for Mexican immigrant women (Saenz et al. 2009). The

large numbers of female Mexican labourers along the US–Mexico border represents a ‘buyers market’ for employers seeking cheap labour, and this labour surplus creates an environment in which women are considered disposable (Saenz et al. 2009).

The garment industry, for instance, relied heavily on the labour of Mexican women. Between 1997 and 1999, a large portion of the garments purchased in the USA were being produced by 349,000 Mexican workers, 224,000 of them working on the Mexican side of the border, and 125,000 Mexican immigrants on the US side of the border (Spener and Capps 2001). One example is the Farah Manufacturing Company, a clothing textile firm operating in El Paso since the 1920s. After BIP, Farah adopted the twin-plant concept with maquiladoras in Juárez and plants in El Paso assembling different parts of the merchandise (Fero 1986). The Mexican workers earned less than \$5 a day while their El Paso counterparts made more than that in an hour (Fero 1986). In 1985, Farah began shutting down its El Paso plants, reducing its workforce from 10,000 in 1974 to only 500–600 in 1992 (Honig 1996). Farah, along with other garment manufacturers in El Paso, laid off a significant percentage of its workers in order to move its operations to Mexico (Spener and Capps 2001). The neoliberal agenda motivated about 320 transnational corporations, mostly from the USA and Canada, to move to Juárez to take advantage of even lower wages and weakened unions (FIDH 2006; Navarro 2002). State Senator Eliot Shapleigh of El Paso described the situation as follows: ‘El Paso has cheap, willing labour. But Juárez has cheaper, more willing labour. And so the older American workers, particularly from the immigrant classes, are the throwaways in the new economic order’ (LeDuff 2004: 14).

As in Juárez, female workers in El Paso are disposable. El Paso had the highest number of workers displaced by NAFTA (Staudt and Coronado 2002). The federal government certified that NAFTA displaced 24,000 workers in El Paso County between 1994 and 2001 (Romero and Yellen 2004) and an additional 7800 after 2001 (LeDuff 2004). Ironically, the women who lost their jobs in El Paso were often first-generation Mexicans who had moved to the USA from Mexico between 1960 and 1980 to work in these factories.

In El Paso, deskilling also beleaguered women workers. At a hunger strike led by La Mujer Obrera (The Woman Labourer, LMO), the women talked about factory employment and their experiences post-NAFTA. To provide some remedy for these displaced women, LMO effectively lobbied in Washington, DC to get some areas of El Paso recognized as empowerment zones (Navarro 2002). However, the discourse of disposability continued when the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) misappropriated those federal funds. Women from LMO described how the administrator of the funds deemed them unskilled and therefore unsuitable beneficiaries of the funds.

The training of labourers displaced by NAFTA also contributed to a deskilling that left some women psychologically and economically wounded. Numerous women workers were unaware of the time constraints of registering for unemployment and for educational training, and thus missed these opportunities. Participants in the

training reported that they received only two years to learn English and attain a General Equivalency Diploma. The instructors frequently humiliated them by telling the other students to work hard so that they would not end up like the displaced workers in the class. Perhaps the most painful aspect is that many of the women blamed themselves for not learning the material, often remarking, '*es que estoy menga*' (it is because I am dumb). Consequently, the USA not only negotiated global economic treaties that displaced these Mexican immigrant women workers, but also covertly revictimized them by implementing ineffective programmes that made the women question their self-worth and intelligence.

Despite their socio-economic displacement and psychological wounds, women have been fighting to transform their structural opportunities. In El Paso, for more than 26 years La Mujer Obrera (LMO) has been trying to transform conditions for Mexican immigrant women by staging protests and establishing income-generating businesses (Staudt and Coronado 2002). In September 2007, despite labour-day weekend celebrations, nine women, mostly displaced NAFTA workers, organized by LMO, undertook a weeklong hunger strike to protest against the effects of NAFTA. The women hunger strikers were active agents in creating cultural and structural transformations for Mexican women and their communities.

The anti-NAFTA efforts of such grassroots organizations illuminated strategies of cultural citizenship that stressed the importance of culture for marginalized groups as a tool to claim rights in civil society (Rosaldo 1994). For example, Flor Carmona states, 'I have deep roots in my community and my culture, which is why I am trying to promote a positive cultural identity among the community.'<sup>4</sup> Creating a Mexican cultural space has long been a mobilization strategy used by LMO (Navarro 2002). Such women are active agents seeking to bring about structural transformations and to promote the economic development of their communities, women's educational and leadership skills, and transnational community building.

In sum, sexualized gendered violence against the female proletariat turns into border sexual conquest. First, in that nation-states and transnational corporations use women's bodies as tools with which to achieve their politico-economic aims, the violence is sexualized and gendered. As a result, the politics of work and sexuality both feed into how different groups (for example, women versus men; poor versus affluent; white versus brown) experience violence. Second, drawing on the legacy of violence that accompanied conquest, we examined the forms of sexual conquest and/or attempts at conquest that continue today under neoliberalism. The excesses of globalization, BIP and NAFTA marked women as recyclable, deskilled and disposable. Third, this border region has been converted into a transnational space in which its reputation as a colonized region and its depiction as a place in which 'everything is for sale' have given nation-states and corporate elites a licence to engage in forms of neocolonialism in which sexual and gendered violence constitute the 'collateral damage' of capitalism. Fourth, despite years of state-tolerated violence, the women at this border continue to resist through grassroots organizations such as LMO and refuse to limit themselves to oppressive conditions in work settings and their communities.

**Figure 2: Mujer Obrera hunger strike press conference. Photograph courtesy of Leo Defrank, September 2007**



## **Conclusion**

While we value scholarship on transnationalism, neoliberalism and the intersecting of these processes with sexualized and gendered violence, broad conceptualizations of power or structural violence often hide the real explanations for these processes. We suggest that it is helpful to describe sexual and gendered violence as border sexual conquest. Although our analysis focuses on the Juárez–El Paso border, our examination of border sexual conquest foreshadows evaluations of sexual and gendered violence in other contested marginalized local places. We build on structural violence perspectives by arguing that sexual and gendered violence do not occur unintentionally, but rather represent the costs of strengthening the economies of nation-states and transnational corporations. Furthermore, we also expand on the literature on sexual and gendered violence by highlighting the structural processes that interlock – political-economic structures, subjugation of local place, gender and class inequality, and women's resistance – and that materialize into border sexual conquest.

With the concept of border sexual conquest, we examine sexual and gendered violence based not only on the unequal power relations between the sexes but also on the subjugation of local place and global politico-economic structures. While violence is not new, the subjugation of this place involves politico-economic transformations that exacerbate the conditions for border sexual conquest, which surface as eroticized forms of power – rape, sexualization and claims to women's bodies. Yet, embedded in border sexual conquest is resistance from feminist leaders on both sides of this border who protect not only themselves but also their communities. Neoliberalism does not have full power because women criticize and oppose it. For these reasons, the border has become a transnational place in which the forces of conquest in the form of sexual and gendered violence and women's resistance are in daily struggle.

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## Notes

1. There are numerous terms to describe sexual violence. Russell (1977) coined the concept of 'femicide' and later Caputi and Russell (1992) referred to femicide as the most extreme form of sexual terrorism. Legal scholars used 'sexual terrorism' to move beyond the concept of 'rape' to other forms of sexual violence (Ray 1997).
2. There is a rich body of literature on globalization and gender. However, due to page constraints we focused on the scholarship relevant to the Mexico–US border.
3. We recognize that this is not an exhaustive list and do not intend to devalue the work of other feminists, but we had to confine the list to references cited in our article.
4. See [www.mujerobrera.org](http://www.mujerobrera.org) for testimonies of the hunger strikers.

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