A young girl is about to enter the street after a long day at work. Although only 16 years old, she has spent the entire day in an airless factory with hundreds of girls like herself. On her way home, she is captured and held in captivity where she is raped, tortured, and eventually murdered. Her body is disposed of in an empty field. She is among the hundreds—possibly thousands—of young Mexican women who have mysteriously disappeared in the last 18 years. The police add her name to the ever-growing list of missing victims, leaving her family to grieve and hope she will return home soon. Since 1993, an estimated 800 young women and teenage girls have been killed in Juárez, Mexico, a city just across the Río Grande from El Paso, Texas. Hundreds of other girls have gone missing, their bodies never found or identified. Most of the victims were young, slender, dark-haired girls with indigenous features who worked in large American-owned factories, or maquiladoras. Many came to Juárez from the countryside, seeking to escape from poverty. After 18 years, the cause of these femicides, or feminicidios (systematic killings of women, or killings based on gender hatred) is still unknown. What is most disturbing is that rather than being treated as a national tragedy, this mass disappearance of women and girls has been largely ignored by police, government authorities, and the media.

The Mystery

It all started when Alma Chavira Farel, a 13-year-old girl, was raped, beaten, and strangled in Ciudad Juárez on January 23, 1993. She was the first of 16 girls found murdered that year. Since then, hundreds more have died in a similar way. Many of the bodies have been found in the fields surrounding the maquiladoras—raped, mutilated, and strangled. Increasingly, these cases are surrounded by controversy, with disagreement about the exact number of victims. Local activist organizations tend to report much higher numbers than the government or the media; some insist that as many as 5,000 girls have been abducted and killed since 1993. There is also a great deal of speculation, but no clear answers, about the reason for these mysterious deaths. Some believe that the women are victims of gang violence, while others believe that they were witnesses to the illegal drug trade. Some theories suggest that sons of wealthy, powerful people committed the crimes, while others say that the women were killed for their organs. An increasing number of people blame the American-run factories, which have thrived and expanded since the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement. The Mexican factories have permitted large American corporations like Dell and General Motors to pay far less than the American minimum wage and to reduce the taxes the companies pay. The factories, which mainly produce goods for export to the U.S. (e.g., computer and car parts), provide little security for their vulnerable workers. While theories are plentiful, the truth is very difficult to discern.

How the Police “Take Care of Business”

One of the most troubling aspects of this tragedy is the lack of response from local law enforcement. In 2000, Maria Isabel Nava’s father reported to an officer that his daughter was missing. The response he received was that not enough time had passed; the officer justified her disappearance by saying that she might have gone off with her boyfriend. Similarly, police did not fully investigate the reported disappearance of Silvia Arce, a street
Femicides of Juarez Fact Sheet

For more than a decade, the city of Juarez, near the US-Mexico border, has been a killing field for young women, the site of nearly 400 unsolved murders and many more abductions. Despite the horrific nature of these crimes, authorities at all levels exhibit indifference, and there is strong evidence that some officials may be involved in the crimes. Impunity and corruption has permitted the criminals, whoever they are, to continue committing these acts, knowing there will be no consequences.

A significant number of victims work in maquiladoras — sweatshops that produce items for export, with 90 percent of the products destined for the United States. The maquiladoras employ mainly young women at poverty-level wages. In combination with lax environmental regulations and low tariffs under the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the maquiladoras are amassing tremendous wealth. Yet despite the crime wave, they offer almost no protection for their workers. High profile government campaigns such as Ponte Vista (Be Aware), a self defense program, and supplying women with whistles have proven to be ineffective and are carried out mainly for public relations purposes.

Small advances in the struggle for justice are due to the perseverance of victims' families who cannot be silenced despite the efforts of state and federal authorities to keep them quiet. Campaigns by local, national and international non-governmental organizations have been very important in the efforts for justice. Often grassroots groups in Juarez work in a climate of threats and defamation by government officials for making one simple demand — STOP THE FEMICIDE!

Femicide definition

Femicide is the mass murder of women simply because they are women. It is the term that has been coined in response to the murders of nearly 400 young women on the U.S.-Mexico border in the city of Juarez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas.

http://www.now.org/issues/global/juarez/femicide.html