

Latin American Perspectives

<http://lap.sagepub.com/>

Violencia Femicida: Violence Against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis

Mercedes Olivera

Latin American Perspectives 2006 33: 104

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X05286092

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://lap.sagepub.com/content/33/2/104>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Latin American Perspectives, Inc.

Additional services and information for *Latin American Perspectives* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://lap.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://lap.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://lap.sagepub.com/content/33/2/104.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 9, 2006

[What is This?](#)

Violencia Femicida
Violence Against Women and
Mexico's Structural Crisis

by
Mercedes Olivera
Translated by ***Victoria J. Furio***

An extreme expression of violence and sadism against women in Mexico is the increase in murders of women throughout the country. The causes of this violence are associated with the increase in extreme poverty, unemployment, the disintegration of the peasant economy, and social polarization imposed on the poor by neoliberal policies. Femicide and violence may therefore be considered components of the current structural crisis of the capitalist system.

Keywords: *femicide, violence, structural crisis, Mexico*

The World Bank and IMF, two grindstones of the same mill, imposed the violence of the free market on us. . . . In such a "democracy," who's really in charge?

—Eduardo Galeano

Women are being murdered in Mexico at an alarming rate. Since the 1990s this rate has increased so dramatically—in direct relation to the expansion of neoliberalism—that, under pressure from feminists, the government has finally had to recognize it as a national problem. It can be viewed as an expression of the country's current crises of governability, internal security, and respect for human rights.

Although there have been episodes of multiple murders of women, femicides, linked to particular regions, as in the case of Ciudad Juárez, for example, at this point it is a pathology that has spread throughout Mexico. In 2002 there were more than 5,000 cases nationally (Lagarde, 2005), and the

Mercedes Olivera is a researcher at the Center for Higher Studies of Mexico and Central America of the Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas and a member of the Center for Women's Rights and the Independent Women's Movement. She has recently published *De cambios sumisiones y rebeldías: Mujeres indígenas de Chiapas* (2004). Victoria Furio is a Latin Americanist as well as a translator and confluence interpreter currently living in New York.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 147, Vol. 33 No. 2, March 2006 104-114
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X05286092
© 2006 Latin American Perspectives

number may reach 8,000 by the end of 2005. For the most part, the victims are women of childbearing age murdered with guns or knives, but many are also beaten, burned, or poisoned. The fact that the perpetrators are so rarely punished and that the number and the viciousness of crimes against women continue to increase reveals the government's political incapacity to deal with this kind of crime.

Many of these killings are carried out by unknown assailants. Others occur in public security actions. In the majority of cases, however, women are murdered by someone known to them or related through work, family, or romantic involvement. According to the World Health Organization, 70 percent of the women murdered throughout the world in 2002 were victims of their husbands or lovers (Urías, 2005). Their bodies, often found on the street, show the brutality carried out against them: a large percentage are beaten and tortured before their deaths.

With the Mexican congressional representative Marcela Lagarde, I view femicide as but 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.¹ Much of this generalized violence is exerted against women for being women—that is, it is misogynous.

Violence against women, an expression of male power, is present in various forms and degrees throughout their lives. As a naturalized part of the culture, symbols, institutional functioning, and cultural prescriptions, it shapes identities and internalizes subjectivities. In all societies the cultural models for being a woman assign positions to women that subordinate them to the personal and institutionalized power of men, creating real and symbolic inequalities. These inequalities are expressed in direct or hidden messages, discriminatory actions and excluding omissions, lack of resources, limits on freedom and coercion, objectification, exploitation, self-depreciation, feelings of guilt and shame, deception, and false justifications. In all these situations violence against women progressively develops from insinuations, offensive comparisons, harassment, threats, verbal intimidation, abuse, irresponsibility, betrayals, and abandonment to beatings, forced sex, rape, and persecution. It even appears in other realms such as counterinsurgency and war.

From this perspective, femicide and femicidal violence can be identified as specific forms of gender violence, which is defined by the United Nations as a mechanism of domination, control, oppression, and power over women (UN, 1979). Although gender violence does not always result in murder, it does increase the possibility of it. Gender violence is a constant violation of the human rights of women and girls. Its presence in the home, on the street, in the community, in the workplace, in government, church, and organiza-

tions and within couples allows tension and hatred to build up and reaffirms and reproduces gender relations of domination/subordination. In this article, I analyze briefly some of the structural causes of recent violence against women in Mexico. Taken together, they demonstrate the failure of the neoliberal system to provide either development or a model of democracy in our country.

Having defined femicide and femicidal violence as a direct expression of the structural violence of the neoliberal social system, we could pursue its causes in the political realm or in the ways in which individuals have been divided and battered by the violent dynamics of social transformation. Putting the neoliberal mandates into practice through institutionalized patriarchal power, Mexico's so-called political class and its business and financial sectors have undermined and violated both society's and individuals' rights, interests, and needs. In the case of women, one outcome of the processes on both levels has been murder.

At the same time as we consider the increase in violence against women, we must also take into account the increase of violence within families and personal violence in general. These are the other side of the systemic violence of the neoliberal social structure, which creates a social ecology in which men are driven to hypermasculinity, exaggerating the violent, authoritarian, aggressive aspects of male identity in an attempt to preserve that identity. The counterpart of these attitudes is found in the subordinate positions of women in relation both to men and to institutionalized masculine power. In the face of neoliberalism's increasing demands, the dysfunction and obsolescence of these stereotypes is ever more evident. The disturbances they have always produced in personal relations are inflamed by the current social violence. Conflicts within couples and families as masculine domination is brought into question and delegitimized steadily increase the levels of violence and, of course, the risk of murder. These conflicts are multiplied under the pressure produced by unemployment, poverty, social polarization, alcoholism, and insecurity, among the many other problems that fill daily life with tension.

NEOLIBERAL DYNAMIC, ECONOMIC-POLITICAL CRISIS, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The United Nations committee that recently investigated the murders and disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua concluded that they had to be seen not as isolated cases but as a product of a "situation of violence in a structurally violent society" (UN, 2003). It therefore recommended

“combating criminality concurrently with the structural causes of gender violence, including domestic, intrafamilial and public incidents such as sexual abuse, homicides, kidnapping and disappearances.” Its report associates these cases with the high density of the cities bordering the United States and with the establishment of maquilas and the predominance in them of poorly paid female workers. The lack of job opportunities for men, the report states, “has changed the traditional dynamics of relations between the sexes . . . creating a situation of conflict towards women because [the changes in employment patterns] have not been accompanied by a change in either traditional patriarchal attitudes and mentalities or the stereotyped vision of the social roles of men and women” (CEDAW, 2005: 7–11).

Indeed, poverty, unemployment, the disintegration of the peasant economy, and migration—all more acute since the Salinas government (1988–1994) accelerated neoliberal policies—are, along with the national crisis of governability, the most important structural causes of the increase in violence against women. Boltvinik and Hernández Laos (2000; Boltvinik, 2000) maintain that in 2000 more than 75 percent of the country’s population was poor or extremely poor. According to a recent survey, this figure now exceeds 80 percent (Boltvinik, 2005). Although official sources recognize only between 45 percent and 52 percent as poor, a survey by the Organization of American States (OAS) concludes that Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia form a “triangle of extreme poverty” in Latin America because, in addition to high rates of poverty, they demonstrate insufficient progress with regard to the “reduction of maternal mortality (which is as high as Africa’s) and unemployment, the provision of universal primary education and sanitation, and environmental sustainability.” This situation is the result of the intense social polarization brought about by neoliberalism, which has deepened historical inequality and fostered corruption and inefficiency in governments that maintain oligarchic, authoritarian, and patriarchal social structures even though they are now disguised as democracies (OAS, 2005).

In Mexico, where neoliberal policies are applied dogmatically, favoring national and transnational companies and financial institutions at all costs, President Vicente Fox has adopted a discourse that systematically denies the exasperating social realities experienced by the population, among them marginalization, social, legal, and political exclusion in both urban and rural areas, and a critical absence of human rights. The government reports that the economy has grown by 3.4 percent a year and that poverty has been reduced in this six-year period by 6.1 percent. This is something of an illusion, however, because in fact we have barely returned to the levels of poverty that existed before the crash of 1995. Moreover, the growth described refers only to the macroeconomic level. What poverty reduction there is in rural areas is

actually due to the transfer of resources by government assistance programs and to remittances from the United States, both of which are used more for consumption than for investment.² Consequently, according to the United Nations Development Program, Mexico is among the countries in Latin America with the *least* improvement in human development in recent years, with barely 1.3 percent growth in per capita income between 1990 and 2003 (UNDP, 2005). During this same period real salaries remained stagnant, while unemployment increased from 600,000 in 2000 to 1,027,000 in 2005 and inequality increased to the point that “5 percent of the income from the richest households would be enough to pull 12 million Mexicans out of poverty, reducing the national poverty rate from 16 percent to 4 percent” (González and Vargas, 2005).³ And, of course, bad as inequality and marginalization are in central and northern Mexico, they are much more severe in the south, where there is a high percentage of indigenous people and peasants.

Growth in industrial production and exports is also somewhat fictitious, since most of it comes from the maquiladoras, with little value added, minimal technology transfer, and volatile capital investment. Meanwhile, petroleum production is on the point of collapsing, both because of the rapid exhaustion of reserves accelerated by demand from the United States and because of the use of the profits to cover the country’s current expenditures rather than for reinvestment (González and Vargas, 2005).

The widespread poverty that results from these conditions has forced women to join the labor market under conditions of great inequality and vulnerability, basically because of their lack of training⁴ and freedom of movement and because the jobs to which they have access are in services and the informal economy, with low and unreliable incomes.⁵ Many women work 10- to 12-hour days in domestic service, restaurants, and small factories without any guarantees or benefits. The flexibilization of labor—the growth of temporary, informal work—throughout the economy has facilitated an increase in the exploitation of women, in the process feminizing poverty, access to jobs, and exploitation. According to a national survey, in 2005 95.38 percent of women considered economically active were employed in informal jobs in services and sales or some combination of the two. One-fourth of those in sales were self-employed in small establishments and the rest worked for others, although not all received salaries (INEGI, 2005). Poverty and marginalization have also forced women into prostitution or criminal gangs.

The massive integration of women into the labor force in search of a wage has effectively destroyed the traditional model of a sexual division of labor without changing the collective imaginary that women are dependent on men

and that their obligations are in the home. In addition to working for wages, women continue to bear the responsibility of domestic chores, child care, and the organization of daily life, forcing them into double and triple work days. But women are also questioned and made to feel guilty on the neighborhood and the community level and through the discourse of the right-wing government, which, for example, holds them responsible for juvenile delinquency. Supposedly, by “opting” to work outside the home, women are “neglecting their maternal obligations.” Beyond ignoring men’s responsibilities, this discourse deflects attention from the fact that violence and unemployment are a failure of government.⁶

The contradictions between the vision and the reality of being a woman not only affect the situation and subjectivity of women but cause a crisis in the images men have of themselves. The reason for this is that the changes in women’s situations often lead them both to become fuller citizens and to develop gender consciousness. The fact that women acquire and manage their own resources troubles many men, especially in cases in which a woman’s income is greater than that of her partner or in which the woman has decided on separation. For many men the stereotypical self-image of the *macho* makes it difficult to accept roles that are inferior either objectively or symbolically to those of their mates. It is not uncommon in this situation for men to direct their aggression against their wives and children. Men’s insecurity under these circumstances is often the cause of abandonment, divorce, and murder.

One symptom of the breakdown in traditional families and the increase in women’s responsibilities and work outside of the home is the large and growing percentage of households headed by women, almost 40 percent in 2005. This one figure brings together the employment crisis, the absence of fathers in the lives of children, and the redefinition of feminine roles. At the same time, changes in women’s economic situation, while they may increase individual women’s possibilities of self-determination, do not thereby lead to the elimination of subordinate gender and class status. The reason for this is that the cultural and economic contexts in which these changes are occurring are not yet themselves changing. These contexts are deeply embedded in our individual and social ways of being (what Bourdieu [1999] calls *habitus*), and altering them will involve a more profound transformation.

Meanwhile, in addition to the economic distress of the middle class and the poor, there is the fact that the peasant model of production is breaking down, forcing a wave of rural workers to migrate to the United States. Several factors have contributed to this, almost all of them related to the implementation of neoliberal policies. The privatization of communal lands (*propiedad*

social), which became possible only with the changes to Article 27 of the Constitution in 1992, has been promoted in recent years through the Programa de Certificación Agraria (Agrarian Certification Program—PROCEDE), particularly in the north and central regions of the country, where large tracts of arable land have been urbanized or rented for agro-industrial production. In addition to defining boundaries and dividing the land of each *ejido* or community, PROCEDE has permitted placing individual titles for plots in the names of family heads, mostly men. Women have in general been excluded despite the fact that most of them work the land and that under the *ejido* regimen the plots were considered family property.

Nationally, women with personal rights to land constituted only 16.31 percent of holders of *ejido* and communal land in 2001 (INEGI, 2001). Most were widows who were holding the land until their eldest sons, heirs to the title, came of age. The women recognized by PROCEDE, however, are even fewer. According to the 2005 *Registro Agrario Nacional* (2005), in Chiapas, for example, between January 1993 and May 2005, women held land rights in only 14.25 percent of the communal units and 11.74 percent of the *ejidos*. In all, barely 0.7 percent of communal landowners and 3.4 percent of *ejido* owners are women.

Despite the fact that they have no rights as title-holders, in general women manage family plots when their husbands migrate. This of course adds to their burdens, because even though they may hire others to help work the land, they remain responsible for cultivating and harvesting it. Even worse, many migrants sell their family plots to pay for their travel and the services of a “coyote” to get them to the United States. Women and children in these cases are even more dependent on men’s remittances, which are, of course, always at risk as men are captured and expelled from the United States, lose their lives in the attempt to cross the border, or after months or years of absence start new families in the “States.” With migrants now tending to stay two years or more in the United States, wives left behind essentially become single mothers, which places great stress on them and their children (Bartra, 2005).⁷

Finally, privatization has extended to public services. Reduction in health services is felt in the quality of life of most Mexicans and is statistically detectable in, for instance, the relative increase in maternal and infant mortality (UNDP, 2005). Given lack of resources and prenatal care, population growth, which continues to be high in rural sectors (3.6 percent), occurs at the expense of women’s health, evidenced by their rapid aging and high morbidity rates. Public education has also suffered, and even public higher education has ever fewer resources for scientific and technological development.

VIOLENCE AND UNGOVERNABILITY

The economic crisis has given rise to various types of social violence. One of these arises from the existence of guerrillas whose movements have repeatedly been violently repressed. The massacre that most tragically illustrates this official violence without occurred in 1997 in Acteal, Chiapas, where a paramilitary force trained by the army attacked a group of more than 50 people, most of them women and children, suspected of supporting the Zapatistas. Refugees from surrounding hamlets, the victims were trapped and murdered in a Catholic chapel. After the slaughter, the assassins mocked the symbols of maternity by hacking the women's breasts with machetes and extracting the fetuses from those who were pregnant (Olivera and Cárdenas, 1998).

Beyond Chiapas, terror is also the objective of the army's permanent militarization of Guerrero and Oaxaca, typically in close coordination with state police. The destruction of villages, cornfields, and harvests, as well as harassment, the threat of sexual violence, jailings, disappearances, and the killing of men and women—all almost always unpunished—have served to generate and perpetuate a climate of fear. In the face of such terror, thousands of campesinos have fled their land, poverty, illness, and intrafamilial violence have increased, and women have seen their freedom of movement curtailed (SIPAZ, 2005). But, surprisingly, official violence has also stimulated women as well as men to defend their villages, even blocking the army's entrance to their communities with their bodies on occasion, as recently happened in Xo'yep, Chiapas (Speed, 2000). Counterinsurgency strategies have also taken the form of development programs competing for adherents with the organized resistance groups, predictably leading to internal divisions and confrontations within communities.

Meanwhile, so-called organized social violence has also become a crisis for the government despite the significant expenditure to combat it. Much is spent, for instance, in fighting the drug cartels, which in recent years have been at war among themselves over distribution zones and control of points of entry into the United States. Thousands of deaths have resulted. Narcocorruption is so great that official security structures have had to be continually replaced as gang members penetrate or bribe the police. Recently (September 2005) several top police officials, including the federal director of Public Security, died in a suspicious helicopter crash that many in the media and the public believe to have been caused by drug gangs. Some researchers and journalists now believe that Mexico has become like Colombia in the sense that the narcos have practically become a parallel power. President Fox

and the government have tried to conceal the extent of the violence, but it has surpassed all their efforts. Indeed, the murders of women that first attracted attention to femicide as a national problem were those of Ciudad Juárez, which many journalists and activists believe may be related to the powerful drug cartels along the U.S.-Mexican border.

The proliferation of violent youth gangs is also associated with poverty, unemployment, narco-trafficking, and the lack of prospects for young people. Such gangs have become a permanent threat to young women in particular, especially on the borders and in the larger urban centers. The increase in rapes, robberies, and kidnappings puts young women at constant risk, with very little institutional protection. Misogyny is a recurrent trait of the gangs' violations of women's human rights. In Chiapas, for example, the state with the second-highest rate of murders of women after Chihuahua, many of the bodies found exhibit the marking "MST" or just "S" carved somewhere on the body as a terrifying insignia of the border gang Mara Salvatrucha.

In recent years, one of the pretexts for direct U.S. intervention in Mexico has been the struggle against insecurity and violence, which always employs violent means in return. President Fox was recently pressured to broaden the scope of Mexico's own border patrols and accept a program of joint activity with U.S. officers in the border areas of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Tamaulipas. However, in addition to the serious crime problems that were used to justify these actions, these are also the crossing points for undocumented migrants, men and women who are almost as often victims of institutional crime as of offenses committed by common criminals.

The last element that contributes to insecurity and impunity throughout the country is a nonfunctional justice system. NGOs and government institutions alike report that murders of women, wherever they occur, are rarely treated with professionalism by prosecutors and judges. Not only are most cases inadequately investigated and documented but the justice system's treatment of the families affected is truly inhuman (Lagarde, 2005). While punishing those who commit these murders might not stop them from occurring, it might serve as a deterrent.

The justice system's deficiencies in this regard have forced us to recognize that no one is even sure of the number of murders in Mexico in general. This recognition has led Congress to establish the Special Commission on Femicide, chaired by the feminist Representative Marcela Lagarde. Over the past several months this commission has brought together a significant number of feminists from around the country to conduct an investigation in the 11 states with the highest incidence of murders of women. The results, along with proposals for public policies to resolve the problem, are expected by the end of 2005 (for preliminary data, see Comisión Especial, 2005). The problem

is so deep, however, that in order to make progress the women of Mexico need to participate in building a different world, one without violence, sexism, or oppression, and to do that we must struggle against the neoliberal system that has invaded our lives.

NOTES

1. Gender violence against women is considered here to be any act directed at the feminine sex that may result in injury or physical, sexual, or psychological suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty either in public or in private life. These acts constitute violence even when their origin lies in custom or the personal characteristics of those who commit them (Feministas de Chiapas, 2004).

2. More than 8 million Mexican migrants work in the United States and, despite the existing salary discrimination, send remittances to Mexico that will approach US\$20 billion in 2005 (Bartra, 2005).

3. The report suggests that one of the reasons that neoliberalism has had less success than expected in Mexico is that the last three governments lowered trade barriers too quickly.

4. On a national level in 2000, 11.7 percent of women 15 and older had no education. A little more than 50 percent of women had some schooling, but only 9.4 percent had managed to get higher education. The poorest states had much lower rates. For example, in Chiapas 28 percent of the women have had no education, and only 4.5 percent have had higher education (INEGI, 2005).

5. Such discrimination strongly affects peasant and indigenous women in particular. In Chiapas, for example, many indigenous women make craft products that they may sell directly to consumers but more typically sell through middlemen who retail them in tourist markets in Mexico or even abroad. Although there are some cooperatives that export in the solidarity market, most artisans barely recover their investment in materials, much less the value of their labor.

6. See the conclusions of the Congreso Mundial de la Familia, held in Mexico City in 2004 with government sponsorship (*La Jornada*, February 4, 2004).

7. See the articles in this issue by Delgado Wise, Ruiz, and Barkin for more on the causes and effects of the changes in the rural economy.

REFERENCES

- Bartra, Armando
2005 "Cuando los hijos se van: Dilapidando el 'bono demográfico.'" *Masiosare: Suplemento de La Jornada*, no. 402, August 4.
- Boltvinik, Julio
2000 "Debate, desigualdad y pobreza." *La Jornada*, April 28.
2005 "Aumentó la pobreza en la actual administración." *La Jornada*, September 18.
- Boltvinik, Julio and E. Hernández Laos
2000 *Pobreza y distribución del ingreso en México*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1999 *Razones prácticas: Sobre la teoría de la acción*. Barcelona: Ed. Anagrama.

- CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)
2005 *Informe de México*. New York: United Nations. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw32/CEDAW-C-2005-OP.8-MEXICO-S.pdf>.
- Comisión Especial sobre los Femicidios en la República Mexicana
2005 "Documentos para la investigación, elaborados por el Comité Científico, Congreso de la Unión." MS, Mexico City.
- Feministas de Chiapas
2004 "Posicionamiento contra la violencia en SCLC." San Cristóbal: Centro de Derechos de la Mujer/Mujer Centroamericana/Kinal/Mujeres Independientes.
- González, Roberto and Rosa Vargas
2005 "Baja pobreza rural, pero crece la desigualdad." *La Jornada*, August 25.
- INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática)
2001 *Propiedades sociales y ejidatarios, según disposición de parcelas y sexo: VIII Censo Ejidat, Resumen Nacional por Entidad*. Aguascalientes, Mexico.
2005 *Encuesta nacional de ocupación y empleo 2005*. Aguascalientes.
- Lagarde, Marcela
2005 *Por la vida y la libertad de las mujeres: Primer informe sustantivo de las actividades de la Comisión Especial para Conocer y Dar Seguimiento a las Investigaciones Relacionadas con los Femicidios en la República Mexicana y a la Procuración de Justicia Vinculada*. Mexico City: Cámara de Diputados, Congreso de la Unión, LIX Legislatura.
- OAS (Organization of American States)
2005 *Objetivos del desarrollo del milenio: Una mirada desde América Latina y el Caribe*. Mexico City: Comisión Económica para América y el Caribe.
- Olivera, Mercedes and Guadalupe Cárdenas
1998 "Violencia estructural hacia las mujeres," in *Reclamo de las mujeres ante la violencia, la impunidad y la guerra*. San Cristóbal.
- Registro Agrario Nacional
2005 *Documentos y superficie certificada y/o titulada del 01/01/2005 al 18/05/05*. Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
- SIPAZ
2005 "Guerrero: Un mosaico de esperanza sobre un muro de impunidad." *Informe SIPAZ* 10 (2).
- Speed, Shannon
2000 "Mujeres indígenas y resistencia de género a raíz de Acteal: Las acciones dicen más que las palabras," in Mercedes Olivera (ed.), *Identidades indígenas y género*. Tuxtla Gutiérrez: Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas.
- UN (United Nations)
1979 *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women. General Assembly Resolution no. 48/104*. Geneva.
2003 *Diagnóstico sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en México*. Mexico City.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Program)
2005 *Informe sobre el desarrollo humano*. New York.
- Urías, Tania
2005 "El Salvador: Las mujeres también son víctimas." <http://www.elsalvador.com/hablemos/2005>.