

Maquilas: Manufacturing Gender and Sexual Based Violence

An Analysis of the Impact Maquilas Have on the Women of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

In the film *Performing the Border* (Ursula Biemann, 1999), the audience is introduced to ‘*maquiladoras*’ or ‘*maquilas*,’ which are foreignly-owned manufacturing plants. Many of these plants outsource their labor in order to achieve high quality work for a lower cost. Maquilas are most evident in Ciudad Juárez, where they have provided one of the main sources of employment since the 1990’s. In her film, Biemann interviews multiple women that work in these maquilas, and a rather dark story begins to unfold; the conditions within the maquilas are far less than adequate and have become a place where violence against the women of Juárez is cultivated. Not only has the labor force in Ciudad Juárez been completely altered with the introduction of maquilas, but the entirety of the city’s culture and society has also been warped. In the following essay, I will be analyzing the way that the culture and society within Ciudad Juárez has changed, and not for the better, since the introduction of maquilas.

Maquilas were first introduced into northern Mexico in the 1980’s, but after NAFTA¹ went into effect, their employment rates skyrocketed. As stated previously, maquilas were a way for (usually) U.S. based industries to increase their profits without increasing the payout to their employees. This was also, at the time, seen as a way to positively increase the economy of cities in financial need. Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, became the most inhabited by maquilas due to its relatively high population and lack of people working. Most of the time employees will work 10 to 12 hours a day, but only bring home about 70 pesos, or \$8.50 (Biemann, 1999). Primarily, the

¹ NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement. This agreement eliminated most tariffs on trade between Mexico, Canada, and the United States when it went into effect on Jan. 1st, 1994. Its goal was to encourage economic activity between the major economic powers of North America.

employees of those maquilas have been mostly female. This was due, not to women being superior workers to men, but to the preferences of the maquila managers. Many women have said that, when being interviewed to work at a maquila, they have been asked about their sexual lives and whether they are/have been/or plan to be pregnant (Biemann, 1999). In an essay written by American author Jessica Livingston (2004), it's revealed that the odd practices don't stop after the women are hired; they are then encouraged to dress femininely and sexually for work, participate in beauty contests, and/or go dancing with the male managers after their shifts are done. This gives the idea that maquilas hire more women because they can manipulate and mold them into being the types of workers that the managers want them to be through fear of losing their low-paying, but consistent jobs. This begs the question; why do women continue to work through these appalling conditions, and why do they not try to fight them? This can be answered relatively simply: these women's ideas of femininity, as well as motherhood, have been reformulated with the introduction of the maquilas, and also because of the clear lack of other opportunities.

Prior to the introduction of the maquilas in the 1980's, many women in Mexico were expected to take the role of the typical housewife and only worry about taking care of the house and the kids. Much like the development of women in the U.S. in the 1960's, the women in Mexico began to develop their independence from men when they were given the chance to work in the maquilas. Although the situation in Mexico wasn't the same as in the U.S., having a job still didn't require women to rely on men for their own financial stability. This newfound independence no longer required for Mexican women to find a man in order to make a living because now they could just work for the money that they needed. And, although the working conditions of them are less than ideal, the women stick around in the maquilas because 1.) their

definition of motherhood and femininity have been redefined through work and money, and 2.) this has begun to give the women of Ciudad Juárez somewhat of an advantage over the men of the city.

In *Performing the Border* (Biemann, 1999), footage of women who work in the maquilas shows how different, yet similar, life is outside of them. The audience is shown women dancing in clubs, and other scantily dressed women on street corners, and then are told that most of the women employees have to resort to prostitution as a “second job” in order to make enough to continue living comfortably. This might seem like a terrible position to be placed in because there are only three options to choose from: work at a maquila, work as a prostitute, or be a housewife. Most citizens of the U.S. would be appalled if these were their only options for financial survival, but it feels different to the women of Ciudad Juárez because it’s all they’ve had since the 1980’s. A few years after women began working, even in the bad conditions, their sexual confidence and independence began to soar. The nightclubs in the city began to play only songs that catered to women, rather than the songs that were geared more towards men. The women of Ciudad Juárez had started to take control of their city by working with what they were given. If they spent 8+ hours a day being sexualized by their superiors at work, why not make their own type of industry out of prostitution?² The women of Ciudad Juárez were claiming their bodies as their own, and owning themselves. The “normal” patriarchal society of Ciudad Juárez had started to crumble, and a more matriarchal one was being built in its place. This continued until a terrifying amount of murders of women began to take place.

² Exact statistics on the percentage of maquila workers that are also prostitutes is unknown, although *Performing the Border* (Biemann, 1999) suggests that a relatively large percentage of the female employees prostitute themselves to supplement their income from the maquilas.

The maquila murders didn't begin until 1993, but since then, over 1,000 women have been *reported* as being murdered or disappeared. In an article written by Mark Ensalaco, an associate professor of political science and head of the international studies program at the University of Dayton, he states that "...public statements of high-placed government officials attest that they simply devalue the lives of the murdered women, and they therefore do not consider the homicides of women to be worthy of serious prosecutorial efforts" (Ensalaco, 9). When the time at which these murders began to occur is taken into consideration, it becomes clearer to see the connection between the maquila women and their murders. The men of Ciudad Juárez couldn't have been pleased with the upset of their *machismo* (a strong, aggressive, masculine pride), so naturally, they decided to try to eliminate the source of this upset: the female maquila workers. Remembering that many of the female maquila workers also prostituted themselves after their shifts and on the weekends, the police of Ciudad Juárez used this to their advantage. In most cases, the police would place the blame on the woman who was murdered because she dressed provocatively and/or was a known prostitute, and that this brazen sexuality was the cause of her death.

The police further reduced the amount of blame that was able to be placed on them by promoting the idea that a single serial murderer was the one killing the female maquila workers. While the idea does sound plausible because many of the women found had similar injuries and causes of death, it gave the police an easy way out. Why should they feel pressured to catch a serial killer now in 2019, after he's been on the loose since 1993? Unfortunately, the issues with the police didn't stop there. When notified of a new murder, their responses were often slow, with their investigations not occurring until days later. Even when they did begin investigating, observers reported that the officers generally didn't do competent work. The crime scenes and

evidence were usually unsecured, allowing the general public to disrupt the scene. Autopsies weren't performed in a timely manner after the body was discovered, sometimes not until days after the body was found. Identification of the victim was usually foregone, because it would have been too difficult and use too many resources to try and identify every woman that was killed. And besides the actual investigations being corrupted, citizens have stated that the police department has reported a significantly lower number of murders and domestic violence cases than actually take place. Since the murders started, fewer families have reported the deaths and disappearances of women due to the way the police have handled the past cases. The department is also accused of having manipulated their high rate of conviction in correspondence to these crimes, according to Mark Ensalcó's article. They did this by pinning the murders on criminals that were already convicted, and by planting evidence within crime scenes to incriminate people who were already serving time, regardless of whether or not they actually killed any of the women. Most times, the criminal that the police were trying to pin a murder on would be tortured and beaten until the police were able to extract a false confession out of them (Ensalcó, 8). In the police department's eyes, that was a case closed.

Currently in Ciudad Juárez, not much has changed. Women still fear for their lives, the sexualized murders continue to happen, and maquilas are still up and running. The actual rate of crime has gone down, but this may be because many citizens refuse to report a crime due to prior mishandling of crime by the police. In an article by Rick Jervis, USA Today (2019), he states that the relatively low rate of crime suddenly skyrocketed after U.S. President Donald Trump held his "Build the Wall!" rally in El Paso, Texas. At this rally, with only the Rio Grande separating it from Ciudad Juárez, the President had led chants of "Finish that wall!" and warned his supporters of the "dangerous people that lurked behind the border." This sent panic through

people of Juárez because they have developed a symbiotic relationship with El Paso over the years; Ciudad Juárez has become one of Texas' major trading partners and a key element in the economy of the whole United States. In a news report by Alison Maloney, *The Sun* (2017), she reports that missing posters still hang on every street light and walls. This violence against the women of Ciudad Juárez is now being deemed a 'femicide' or '*feminicidio*,' which is a killing of women for the sole fact that they are women. Maloney also states that police have been further covering up the continued disappearances and murders of the young women by hiding them under drug trafficking crimes. The reality is, Maloney states, is that the drug traffickers are also human traffickers; they kidnap the young women, force them into prostitution, and then murder them. Women are still going missing and turning up dead to this day.

Even though the horrific events still occur today in Ciudad Juárez, Kate del Castillo is trying to give those women a voice. She is a Mexican actress who is currently working on a play in which she acts as multiple women to tell the stories of the women in Juárez. The play, "The Way She Spoke," is based off of interviews that were conducted by journalist and dramatist Isaac Gomez. Gomez is a native of El Paso, and he knew he wanted to work with del Castillo once he began working on "The Way She Spoke." Gomez says he hopes "'to awaken some kind of change' with the work, and acknowledged that the project is a 'painful' one in which 'you're emotionally impacted' by what these women are facing, but the most important thing is 'for you not to remain unaffected'" (Quintanilla, 1). Through this play, they both hope that they can create an awareness of the conditions in Ciudad Juárez for the people in the United States.

In relation to del Castillo and Gomez's work, a Mexican-American screenwriter Lourdes Portillo has brought more awareness to the crimes occurring in Ciudad Juárez. In her film *Missing Young Woman* (2003), the murders of the maquila women are examined, as well as the

inability (or lack of inclination) to find the murderer. In an interview about this documentary with San Francisco Gate, Portillo states that she went to Ciudad Juárez to “track down ghosts and listen to the mystery that surrounds them” (Guthmann, 1). Portillo also says she “found a system poisoned by corruption, disinformation and a ‘web of complicity’ between police and government officials” and discovered that “on three occasions, police had allegedly forced confessions to create false suspects, then declared an end to the serial killings” (Guthmann, 2). Portillo made this documentary with the hope that it would get people to realize that the situation in Ciudad Juárez was dire, and she did just that. Her film has been shown at many universities and has become a key activist piece of evidence. While the problems in Ciudad Juárez, caused by the maquilas, are far from being solved, actions are being taken to make sure that the rest of the world knows of the atrocities happening in Juárez.

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