

GENDERED VIOLENCE: MURDER IN THE MAQUILADORAS

Katie Pantaleo*

California University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The research presented here examines the relationship between violence towards women and participation in work in the maquiladoras along the United States-Mexico border. I have found that women and young girls who work in the maquiladoras are subjected to sexual harassment at work and the threat of murder when they leave work. The first part of this paper discusses the background of the maquiladoras and gives a detailed description of the associated violence. The second part of this paper discusses possible motives and explanations for the violence. Therefore this paper addresses two questions: First, why are the maquiladoras the site of such gender based violence? Second, why do the murders continue? The use of sociological gender theory, more specifically intersectionality theory, determines the answers to these questions.

Introduction

Inequality in gender and work exists all over the world (Charles and Grusky 2004), but it is not always accompanied by violence both inside and outside the workplace. Yet, the women who work in the maquiladoras along the United States – Mexico border have been victims of both. Along the border, especially in Ciudad Juarez, close to four hundred women have suffered from torture, rape, and then murder. These murders began around 1993, and continue to the present day. They may be closely related to the maquiladora industry.

This paper discusses the sexual harassment associated with working in the maquiladoras and the violence which often leads to murder. An understanding of the dynamics of intersectionality theory, based on the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, helps to explain why and how this violence occurs both inside and outside the maquiladoras.

** Katie Pantaleo graduated with honors from California University of Pennsylvania in 2006. She was also the president of the Sociology Club. Katie is currently pursuing a master's degree in social policy at Duquesne University.*

What is a Maquiladora?

The official name for sweatshops in Mexico is “maquiladoras,” which can be defined as “foreign-owned assembly plants in Mexico [where] companies import machinery and materials duty free and export finished products around the world” (CorpWatch 1999). Eighty percent of the billion dollar maquiladora industry is owned by the United States and lies along the U.S.-Mexico border (Portillo 2001). Beginning in the mid-1970’s, the maquiladoras were designed not only to bring more wealth and employment to northern Mexican cities, but also to provide inexpensive labor to multi-national companies out of the country. In the words of Sheryl Lindsley (1999), “the maquiladora industry is representative of the international liaisons prevalent in today’s global economy.” Essentially the maquiladoras are a product of globalization and have solidified the relationship not only between Mexico and the United States but also between Mexico and the rest of the world. Ciudad Juarez, a city in the state of Chihuahua, has become one of the major locations for the maquiladoras (Amnesty International 2003). This is due mainly to the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, also a product of globalization.

The products manufactured in the maquiladoras vary. The major industries are the garment and textile business (28%), and the electrical/electronic business (16%). Other areas of production are furniture (11%), transportation equipment (7%), service establishments (6%), assembly of machinery (5%), chemical products (4%), food products (3%), leather products (2%), toys and sporting goods (2%), assembly and repair (1%), and other manufacturing (15%) (CorpWatch 1999).

Maquiladora Workers

While maquiladoras employ both men and women, the number of women working in maquiladoras has increased in recent years. Mexico presently has over 4,000 maquiladoras with around one million workers. Out of these workers, greater than half are women (Mexican Labor News and Analysis 1999) who are typically between the ages of 16 and 28, although some have been as young as 12 and older than 28. Those who work in the maquiladoras usually come from a family of 6 or more members, with one or more of the women work in the maquiladoras (Young 1994). These women are also poor and since they are unable to find work near their rural homes, they travel long distances to work in the maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez. Wages may vary, but the typical wage that women workers in maquiladoras earn is between \$25 and \$50 per week (Kamel and Hoffman 1999).

Customarily, the management of the maquiladoras chooses to hire women and young girls. One of the reasons for this is the belief that females possess better talent, hand eye coordination, and endurance for manual work as opposed to men. Also, women tend to put up with poor working conditions more readily than do men.

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Additionally, in comparison to men, women are believed to be cheap labor (Abell 1999). For most women, work in the maquiladoras is the only choice of paid labor available. Most have little education and no training in the more skilled positions needed in factory work. Since women are preferred over men for the unskilled work, one cannot argue that there is discrimination against women in hiring practices. Rather, there may be discrimination against males in hiring. The exploitation then is not in hiring practices but in how the women are treated within the workplace.

Sexual Harassment in the Maquiladoras

Demearing Practices

One of the problems that many Mexican women face while working in maquiladoras has less to do with discrimination in hiring and more to do with discriminating practices in the workplace. While there is no discrimination against women working in maquiladoras, there is pregnancy discrimination in the workplace. Women who are pregnant are turned away immediately, while those who are hired can be subject to established practices designed to discourage and prevent pregnancy. These practices are as follows: pregnancy testing, proof of menstruation, and physical harm. First of all, women can be forced to undergo pregnancy testing throughout their work term (Abell 1999). This occurs randomly and without notice and usually consists of a urine test. A second practice is more painful for the women, psychologically and emotionally. Each month, women may be mandated to demonstrate proof of their menstruation by showing sanitary napkins to managers. Also a series of intrusive questions are asked to each female employee, such as the date of her last period, what kind of contraception she uses, and when the last time was she had sex (Koerner 1999). The third practice adds physical harm to the existing emotional and psychological stress. Women may be deliberately punched in the stomach and abdomen by managers to make sure that they are not pregnant or to damage any unborn child. Because of these practices, female maquiladora workers suffer numerous consequences. In relation to reproduction in general, maquiladora workers are likely to have irregular menstruation, miscarriages, fertility problems, and to bear children with birth defects such as premature births or low birth weight (Abell 1999).

The maquiladora management justify these practices because they fear that pregnant women will disrupt the flow of work within the maquiladoras especially in the later stages in pregnancy when the women will leave work to return home to care for their child. By turning away women who are already pregnant and controlling the pregnancy status of current employees, maquiladora owners are preventing future disruptions within the workplace. Also, a law exists in Mexico that insists on paid maternity leave, which employers find to be expensive (Abell 1999). According to Koerner (1999), the management of the maquiladoras or the Mexican Institute of Social Security is responsible for paying maternity benefits, depending on the length

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of employment of the women. If she has made social security payments for at least thirty weeks during the preceding twelve months prior to receiving benefits, the Mexican Institute of Social Security pays for maternity leave. Otherwise, the maquiladora management must pay the benefits. Therefore, maquiladora employers rationalize these demeaning practices by arguing that they do not want to pay the legally granted maternity leave to workers not only because it is expensive but also because it would mean possibly losing full-time employees.

Other forms of sexual harassment of women workers are also used by male coworkers and managers. In some instances sexual harassment is used to intimidate; in others, sexual favors means less work (Abell 1999). Additionally, a woman's appearance often receives more attention than her actual work skills, particularly at the time of hiring. Women employees are then encouraged to wear sexy, revealing clothing to work and to "utilize [their] sexuality" (Livingston 2004). Clothing such as miniskirts, low cut shirts, high heels, and makeup are common accessories to women who work in the maquiladoras. Livingston describes this process in the following way.

"Supervisors often stalk assembly lines playing favorites and asking for dates. Maquiladoras persuade workers to participate in beauty contests, [and other contests in dance clubs, such as] 'Most Daring Bra' and 'Wet String Bikini' contents with cash prizes..."

Salzinger (1997), details the part that managers and supervisors often play within the maquiladoras.

"[The supervisor] circles behind seated workers, monitoring efficiency and legs simultaneously ... Often he will stop by a favorite operator, chatting, checking quality, flirting. His approval marks 'good worker' and 'desirable woman' in a single gesture."

Salzinger also proposes the concept of sexualization of factory life, which suggests that sex plays an important part within the maquiladoras. A seemingly boring and tedious workplace turns into a fantasy-like world. Talk about who is dating who, who is wearing what clothes, and which manager is interested in which employee dominates the conversation within the maquiladoras. Because of this, most maquiladora workers develop relationships, whether sexual, romantic, or platonic, more with managers and supervisors than with other employees. Tensions between employees for this reason may affect women's attitudes and force them into more sexual behavior. In addition to the sexualization of the maquiladoras, photographs are also taken of women workers on Fridays, where the women are encouraged to act as models. One documentary addressing this behavior suggests that practices such as these help and motivate murderers to select their victims (Portillo 2001). But whether this is true or not has yet to be determined.

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Murder

Murder, torture, and rape are three things that many women today might fear. However, for the women working in the maquiladora industry around Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua City in Mexico, this is a nightmare that becomes a frequent reality. It has been suggested that the demeaning practices and activities emphasizing women's bodies that take place in the maquiladoras are closely related to the murders. Female sexuality, which is encouraged within the maquiladoras, becomes a precursor to violence towards women. Since some of the girls who work in the maquiladoras sometimes attend bars after work for fun or prostitution, a stigma is attributed to all women who work in the maquiladoras. These girls are considered to be living a "double life" of assembly work in the day and prostitution at night (Nathan 1997). Because of this, Mexican society feels that young maquiladora workers are "bad girls" who are asking for trouble. However, those girls who are not involved in prostitution still do not return home until late at night. After working their shift, women workers leave the sweatshops very late at night and it is then that they sometimes disappear, never to be seen alive again. While walking through dimly lit areas in order to get home or to the nearest bus stop, many young women and girls are attacked, raped, and frequently murdered. The description of a typical female victim varies, although most are poor, slim, and have dark shoulder length hair. According to Diego Cevallos (2003), a reporter for CorpWatch,

"[The average fatality is a] woman between the ages of 15 and 30 [who works in a maquiladora]. Most of the victims' bodies have been found in outlying areas of the city and usually bear signs of torture and rape. In some cases they have been burned, and many have had their nipples bitten off. The murder victims have been found 'semi-nude, their panties twisted around their ankles, mouth open in a scream, eyes protruding...'"

After being subjected to such torture, the lifeless bodies of the young women are discarded in deserts where they are left to decompose. By the time they are found, sometimes weeks later, the bodies are unidentifiable (Livingston 2004). Despite the rising number of murders, few investigations have been completed and most requests to do so are ignored.

Why does this violence and harassment of women continue?

The sexual harassment and violence towards women who work in the maquiladoras and the reason why it continues can be explained using sociological theory. The intersection of two major sociological theories, patriarchy and capitalism, produce a theory known as intersectionality theory. Evaluating these theories leads to an understanding of how social and cultural characteristics of Mexico influence the violence towards women and affect the responses of officials to this violence.

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Patriarchy

Patriarchy functions as a significant part of Mexican society, especially because Mexican culture is structured within a patriarchal order. Traditionally, men not only control the home where they have all the power, but also the workplace. Women's role in the home focuses on the care of children, attending to the needs to the husband, and socializing children to honor their families. According to Heidi Hartmann (1981), patriarchy is a form of class domination by males over females. Two types of patriarchy exist in Mexican society: individual and collective. Individual types of patriarchy occur in the home where the male has sole, private control over the women. Collective types of patriarchy occur in the workplace where larger numbers of men can publicly exert control over the women (Ruiz 1987). Patriarchy then becomes a double-edged sword for the women, but a powerful tool for the men. There is no escaping the pain and suffering of being female and being controlled, since it is experienced both in the home and at work.

Under the view of patriarchy, two expressions are commonly used in Mexico to show the difference in status of males and females; these expressions are machismo and marianismo. Machismo symbolizes male power and aggression while marianismo symbolizes work of the Virgin Mary and the domestic nature of women. Women, as mothers and wives, are expected to center their lives around taking care of their family and to not be involved in paid labor (Livingston 2004). Marianismo is important because it "promotes self-sacrifice for family" (Fuller 2004). Also, marianismo is a key part to a woman's femininity, and whether she chooses to accept or deny the ideals that it is associated with, marianismo will always affect her. It requires that women become self-sacrificing martyrs who accept violence and abuse from men because of their inferiority to them (Dreby 2005). Being a woman in Mexican society forces a woman to deal with her marianismo, and to be judged on the basis of her morals as opposed to being a man who gets honored for his machismo.

Similar to the ideologies created by marianismo and machismo, there is a belief that Western tradition creates a dichotomy between males and females. It is as follows: "man/woman, public/private, knowledge/experience, culture/nature, and rational/emotional" (Wright 1997). The first term in each pair refers to men and the second term refers to women. These reflect the attitudes towards men and women in Mexican society: the male terms are considered to be dominant and respectable while the female terms are degrading and inferior.

Capitalism

Capitalist theory also plays an important part in gender issues in the maquiladoras (Ruiz 1987). Karl Marx observed that capitalist enterprises operate in order to generate a profit. One of the ways to increase profit is to cut labor costs.

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Therefore, capitalist enterprises seek sources of less expensive labor, which explains the placement of the maquiladoras in an area where a supply of unskilled, uneducated workers reside. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has a capitalist approach to the maquiladoras. Sweatshops are not a recent development in the world; the idea of cheap labor has been used many times by sweatshops. The maquiladoras in Mexico began around 1965, but it was the result of globalization, which created the free trade agreement on imports and exports between the United States and Mexico, that fueled the growth of the maquiladoras. The low wages and poor working conditions of the maquiladoras are the consequence of capitalism because it is the major transnational corporations who ultimately control the maquiladora industry and the wages that women receive (Quintero-Ramirez 2002).

Capitalism works with patriarchy to force women into doing more work in the home than work in the labor market. But then it also forces them into the secondary labor market where female stereotypes prevail and where they have to work for lower wages. According to Jessica Livingston (2004), "For capitalism to benefit maximally from women's participation in both capitalistic and domestic modes of production, the gender-based division of labor and the patriarchal relations that support it must be maintained." When capitalism and patriarchy come together, they form patriarchal capitalism, where the males control the means to production and control the women themselves. The combination of the two provides a major disability for the women of the Mexican society. Basically, some men feel that the women should be doing the majority of the work at home, but also outside of the home. This causes conflict for women between home and work. However, they are still under the control of men in each sphere of their life. In her book Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras, Altha Cravey (1998) uses the concept of social reproduction to describe the work women do in the home. Social reproduction refers to domestic work, such as laundry, preparing meals, and cleaning, and also biological reproduction and caring for children. Cravey also believes that even though this area of work is not compensated for, it is vital to society. While this may be true, it can be concluded that the concept of social reproduction, since it mainly pertains to women, is a result of patriarchal capitalism.

Capitalism helps to explain the significance of the maquiladoras. First, the maquiladoras benefit the United States because they provide cheap labor combined with advanced technology. This translates into more profit, but for the United States, not necessarily for Mexico. Maquiladoras are "the U.S. gateway to cheap labor" (Livingston 2004). Second, use and control of maquiladoras gives the United States more access to the markets in Mexico and Latin America (International Trade Data System 2004). It seems as though the United States is just using their power to control worldly markets, and having Mexico under their belt opens the door to more possibilities. Finally, Mexico does seem to benefit from the maquiladoras because they provide more jobs to individuals in the country. However, no matter how many

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jobs the maquiladoras provide, the workers are still overworked and underpaid and many of the women are taken advantage of and abused.

In relation to the maquiladoras, some feminists view capitalism as a form of prostitution. The maquiladoras signify a “commodity exchange relationship” similar to the exchange relationship between a prostitute and her client (Livingston 2004). Women are forced to work under the control of men to make certain goods for a low price. Therefore, patriarchy also plays a part in this act of “prostitution.”

Intersectionality Theory

The intersection of patriarchy and capitalism leads to intersectionality theory. This theory states that all women experience discrimination because of their gender and that they are oppressed on the basis of other intersections of inequality (Anderson and Collins 1997). Patriarchy and capitalism are the two strongest forms of oppression against women primarily because of their emphasis on power. As was mentioned previously, the ideology of patriarchal capitalism has a tremendous effect on the lives of women in Mexico. This offers explanations on the violence surrounding the maquiladoras.

Because Mexico is a patriarchal society and gender relations are structured by it in both the home and the workplace, any reversal of roles is viewed as unwelcome change. One author notes that the changes in gender roles initiate the violence towards women (Alpizar 2003). For a good number of years, women in Mexico did not work outside the home, but instead learned the skills associated with the home. But the creation of the maquiladoras allowed primarily women to work in that area, sometimes allowing the women to become principal providers of the family despite the low wages. With the women possessing an increased power in the family, the gendered role of *marianismo* became reversed. Women who work in the maquiladoras are no longer just mothers; they are now involved in paid labor, the opposite of what *marianismo* dictates. This reversal causes men to react more violently towards the women in order to restore their original gender role of being in power and the women being subordinate.

Another repercussion of this change in gender roles is the fact that many of the murders or disappearances of young maquiladora workers are not investigated completely or at all. An ongoing report of the murders surrounding the maquiladora workers by Amnesty International (2003) has found that there is a constant tendency of disillusionment to the public and denial of access of family members to case files of missing and murdered girls. The overall responses of the Mexican criminal justice system to the violence that occurs are a product of the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism. First of all, many individuals consider the missing and/or murdered girls to be prostitutes, and therefore feel that there is no need to investigate further (Portillo 2001). The reason for this is the fact that maquiladora workers often

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work long shifts, leaving work late at night. A belief exists that only prostitutes are out late at night and well behaved girls and women are home with their families. Therefore, in the eyes of Mexican society, any female wandering the streets late at night is a prostitute. Second, criminal policies towards women who are arrested on the basis of being a prostitute or any other charge are also violent. Police officers who guard the local jails often rape and beat women who are put in jail. Their justification for this is that all women are whores (Portillo 2001). Third, the Mexican police tend to suggest to the family of the missing girl that she left with her boyfriend and that she is at fault for anything that happens to her (Livingston 2004). It is almost always looked upon that the girls are to blame. Sometimes authorities will not respond to questions regarding the missing or murdered women because they feel that the girls may have run away from their family to escape various family problems. Finally, while around 400 young girls and women have been abducted and murdered, few arrests and convictions have resulted. Still, a great deal of controversy surrounds the small number of convictions. Those who have been accused have claimed that they had been tortured in order to get a confession. Therefore, the legitimacy of the individuals who have been arrested is difficult to determine based on the way the investigations and convictions have been completed (Amnesty International 2003). Clearly the influence of patriarchy and capitalism can be seen in how authorities deal with the murders.

While gender ideologies clearly play an important part in Mexican culture, politics are also critical to understanding the violence that follows maquiladora workers. It is the capitalist nature of the maquiladoras that helps to explain one of the main reasons why nothing is done regarding the murdered women. This is because the maquiladoras are the one of the most important investments for the Mexican government (Portillo 2001). The money and production that are generated by the maquiladoras brings more people to Mexico and therefore helps the economy. The maquiladoras along the northern Mexico border offer a moderately higher wage than other sweatshops throughout the country. The promise of these wages brings many people to the border cities and towns and influences the economics of northern Mexico. If the murders of the young girls are found to be closely related to the maquiladoras, this could ultimately destroy the money making industry, which would be a detrimental blow to the economy of Mexico. In this way, patriarchy and capitalism work together to support the ideals of Mexican society.

Conclusion

In summary, the maquiladoras along the northern Mexico border are not only sites of gender inequality but also violence towards women. The murders of young women in Mexico are closely tied to their jobs within the maquiladoras. After evaluating various socio-cultural and economic theories, it can be concluded that it is the intersection of Mexican patriarchy and U.S. capitalism, also known as

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intersectionality theory, which explains the violence along the northern Mexico border. These theories also provide an explanation as to why there is such little involvement in the murders and the subsequent investigations. The patriarchal and capitalistic environment that the maquiladoras are part of has allowed machismo to preside. Elite male members of society, principally the government and those with influence have encouraged the ideology that the murders are by fault of the women themselves. Therefore, changing the societal views of men and women, i.e. Mexico's machismo and marianismo, may be the key to ending and preventing the murders of women who work in the maquiladoras.

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